
Chair's Report 2015

Overview

This year has seen the co-op install more solar panels, deepen relationships with other groups and engage in a number of exciting initiatives.

New Installations

Having raised £120,000 in our second share offer, we have been very busy bringing several community solar PV installations to completion. We installed a total of 80 kWp capacity on the roofs of the Folk House, the Mill (formerly Mill Youth Centre) and South Bristol Sports Centre. This has increased our total installed capacity by 227%! We have also created a surplus, allowing us to donate £2000 in community benefit (in addition to the benefit of free/cheap electricity to our community building partners).

Improved Monitoring and Management

Our original installations were monitored by means of monthly visits by our dedicated team of volunteers. As our portfolio of roofs increases, this becomes cumbersome, and so we have collaborated with a local Bristol firm, Clean Energy Prospector, to install remote monitoring of our PV installations.

This brings several benefits:

- We will be alerted immediately if there is any interruption or degradation of the generation from the panels;
- We can charge for the electricity provided to the community building on the basis of their actual usage rather than a flat rate;
- We can display information about the energy we are generating, both on-site and online (we are working on integrating this into our website – watch this space!).

Financial management of the coop has been tightened up, both by defining new polices and by implementing an online accounting system.

Wind Farm

When the long-awaited and repeatedly postponed planning decision finally came, it was a great disappointment, as the application was rejected! This was a heavy blow both for us and REG Windpower (not to mention South Gloucestershire's chances of meeting their renewable energy targets!). The final nail in the coffin of this project was the election of a new government that has turned out to be very hostile to renewable energy in general and onshore wind (the most cost-effect form of renewable energy) in particular; although REG filed an appeal against the planning decision, when it became clear which way the political winds were blowing they threw in the towel. We had a very friendly and constructive relationship with REG and hope to have an opportunity to work with them again at some point when conditions are more favourable.

Third Share Offer

With the wind farm no longer a possibility, we returned our full attention to solar PV. Bristol City Council, which owns many of the community buildings in the city, issued a tender for community organisations to install PV on three parcels of such buildings, and we bid successfully for all three. Not all of the buildings turned out to be suitable, for a variety of reasons, but intense hard work by a dedicated team has brought the remainder (together with several schools and other community buildings) to the point where we can look to raise money for installations in a third share offer.

The council also has land, a parcel of which has been made available for the development of a solar farm near Lawrence Weston. We have been working closely with both the council and Ambition Lawrence Weston, a local community group dedicated to improving economic and social conditions in the area, to create a viable project that will benefit the local community. This required overcoming a variety of obstacles, often on an extremely tight deadline, but we are now ready to raise money for this large project as well.

In the meantime, regulatory changes instigated by the previous government have worked in our favour, in particular the requirement for large commercial solar installations to offer some form of shared ownership to community groups. This can take the form of a 'split site', where one part of a site is developed commercially and another part is developed by a community group such as ourselves, sharing the planning and grid connection costs. Several such opportunities have been pursued, one of which has come to fruition, again with the help of the council.

Other, adverse, regulatory changes (elaborated below), make this the last opportunity to apply our current business model to projects such as these, and so we have made every effort to bring as many projects through as possible. I am very proud to say that we have been very successful in doing so, and as a result we have launched our third share offer with a target of raising £5 million!

Challenges

Despite our tremendous progress, we (and all other community groups) now face considerable challenges in repeating this success in the future, because the government has decided to make very substantial cuts to the subsidy regime on which we have been relying. This will not affect our previous installations, nor the current set of projects we are raising money for, due to the system of Feed-in-Tariff (FiT) pre-registration/pre-accreditation. However this system has now been discontinued, which would make the level of subsidy highly uncertain for any further projects, particularly since the government has also stated an intention to cut the FiT by up to 87% in the near future! This move has attracted considerable criticism, but it remains to be seen whether this will cause any change of heart. We have plenty to do for the next few months, after which it should be clearer what the medium-term position will be; we will then re-assess our business model for new projects, which may have to take a very different form.

Resources

We have expanded our resources by:

- Recruiting and effectively managing a dedicated team of volunteers (particular credit goes to Mike Simpson for his efforts as volunteer coordinator);
- Employing Andy O'Brien as a full-time project development manager. We are expanding our paid staff as we scale up the organisation via Share Offer 3;
- Engaging an external bookkeeper to free up effort for project development.

Conclusions

Despite significant challenges, a tremendous amount has been achieved, and we look forward to a successful third fund-raising event.