

The title of the document, "Community Engagement Good Practice Guidance", is displayed in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. The text is contained within two stacked yellow rectangular boxes. The background of the entire page is a photograph of a solar farm at sunset, with rows of solar panels and the silhouettes of people in the foreground.

**Community Engagement
Good Practice Guidance**

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www.solarenergyuk.org



About Us

As an established trade association working for and representing the entire solar and energy storage value chain, Solar Energy UK represents a thriving member-led community of over 400+ businesses and associates, including installers, manufacturers, distributors, large-scale developers, investors, and law firms.

Our underlying ethos has remained the same since our foundation in 1978 – to be a powerful voice for our members by catalysing their collective strengths to build a clean energy system for everyone's benefit.

Our mission is to empower the UK solar transformation. Together with our members, we are paving the way for solar to deliver 70GW by 2035 by enabling a bigger and better solar industry.

Acknowledgements

Solar Energy UK would like to thank the many individuals who have contributed to the creation of this guidance.

Special thanks to members of Solar Energy UK's Planning and Land Use Steering Group and the Solar Taskforce's Communications subgroup who have been instrumental in the production of this guidance.

Please note that the report and its contents do not necessarily represent the views of any of these organisations.

Glossary

Community – A group of people who have a common place in which they live, work, visit, or for some other reason spend their time.

Considerate Constructors Scheme (CCS) – A voluntary scheme that looks to improve the behaviour of constructors and reduce the impact of construction-based activities. The CCS has a code of conduct to deliver projects that are considerate to the community, environment and workforce.

Development Consent Order (DCO) – An order granted by the Secretary of State permitting (amongst other things) the development of a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP). DCO applications are made to the Secretary of State via the Planning Inspectorate. One or more Planning Inspectors (known as the Examining Authority) considers the application and makes a recommendation to the Secretary of State who will approve or reject the proposal.

Development of National Significance (DNS) – In Wales, a planning application for a large infrastructure project. In the case of a solar project, the thresholds are a generating capacity of 10–350MW. Applications are made to the Welsh Ministers via Planning and Environment Decisions Wales (PEDW). An appointed Planning Inspector considers the application and makes a recommendation to the Welsh Ministers who will approve or reject the proposal.

Good Practice – A set of working methods which are accepted by the solar industry as being appropriate to use, in the majority cases, when building a solar project. These are practices (methods, techniques, designs, skills and due diligence) that have already been shown to work effectively in producing successful projects and ‘support’ the industry to be compliant with the law.

Gigawatts (GW) – A unit of electrical output equal to one billion watts.

Local Planning Authority (LPA) – A local government body that is responsible for all the public services and facilities in that jurisdiction.

MWac – A megawatt of alternating current.

National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) – the National Spatial Strategy for Scotland that sets out spatial and regional priorities, national developments and national planning policy.

National Policy Statements (NPS) – The government’s policy for the delivery of energy infrastructure. NPS EN1 sets out the overarching policy statement for energy. NPS EN3 sets out policies for renewable energy infrastructure. This applies to England and Wales.

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) – Sets out governments planning policies for England and how these are expected to be applied. This applies to England.

Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) – Energy projects over a specified generating capacity (being 50MWac and above in England and 350MWac and above in Wales) which are of national significance and are determined at a national level.

Planning and Environment Decisions Wales (PEDW) – A Welsh Government organisation which manages caseloads relating to land use and public interest in Wales.

Planning Act 2008 – The Act which established the DCO consenting regime for NSIPs.

Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 – The consenting regime for granting planning of projects for major or regional developments in Northern Ireland.

Planning Inspectorate (PINS) – The organisation which deals with planning appeals, national infrastructure / DCO applications, examinations of local plans and other planning-related and specialist casework in England.

Planning Policy Wales (PPW) – the Welsh government’s national spatial policy used in the determination of planning applications.

Red Line Boundary – The boundary of an area to be developed.

Repowering – Replacing existing solar energy generating equipment with newer equipment to increase efficiency, improve performance and increase the lifespan of the project.

Shared ownership – Any structure which involves a community group as a financial partner.

Strategic Planning Policy Statement – The government’s national policy guidance for determining planning decisions in Northern Ireland.

Statement of Community Consultation (SoCC) – A document produced by an applicant to establish the way it will consult with the local community at the pre-application stage of a NSIP project.

Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) – A document which explains how a local authority will consult with local communities, businesses and wider interested parties when determining planning applications; also, a document submitted by a developer as part of a planning application explaining the same.

Statutory Consultee – An individual, organisation or body, defined by statute to consult on relevant planning applications.

Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997 (TCPA) – Legislation that governs development in Scotland.

Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (TCPA) – The legislation that governs development in England and Wales. These projects are classed as projects 49.9MWac and below.

Zone of Theoretical Visibility – The projected areas where a development could be seen, as identified by a computer program, which does not take account of intervening vegetation or buildings.

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Summary and Key Messages

If the UK is to reach net zero by 2050, a step change is required in the way we power our homes, businesses and communities.

Solar energy is an exciting opportunity to produce homegrown, clean and affordable energy.

As the solar industry scales up to meet the UK's climate and environmental targets, a greater number of communities could be affected by projects near them. Delivering good community engagement will thus become increasingly important.

Developers* are encouraged to engage with communities early in the development and planning phase of a project and maintain and develop relationships throughout the project's lifespan. Getting to know the community is essential in helping ensure the success of any project. This helps developers to understand their views and address any concerns and, work with them to develop solar projects which communities can live alongside.

If developers don't engage well with communities at all stages of a project's lifecycle, then the project, the industry and the UK's net zero ambitions could be negatively impacted.

The solar industry is committed to being a good neighbour, ensuring that community engagement is positive and proactive. Communities should be brought along from the beginning, so that they can benefit from the UK's solar journey.

* The guidance refers to 'developers', although this can also include operators of projects, asset managers and others in the solar development chain.

1

Purpose of this guidance

This guidance has been produced to promote effective engagement with people local to solar farms developments, from design through construction, operation and decommissioning. It seeks to support developers, operators and those in the supply chain in the sustainable delivery of ground-mounted solar projects by fostering good relationships with their neighbouring communities. Equally, this guidance will be useful to local authorities and communities as reference material for engaging with solar industry developers and operators.

The guidance has been designed to consider ground mounted projects greater than 5MW, across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and referring to statutory requirements as appropriate.

This good practice guidance is designed to go beyond the minimum engagement requirements specified by the UK's planning systems but can't be considered statutory guidance.

Community benefit or shared ownership is not covered extensively in this guidance. However, brief summaries are provided, acknowledging the two are interlinked.



Community Benefits

Community benefits are voluntary packages that developers can provide to support communities that host solar projects. They can take a number of forms, such as a developer agreeing to make a one-off payment or regular contributions to a community fund. Community benefits can also be offered 'in kind' where a developer will support the community, e.g. building or upgrading a new town hall or school building or deliver local environmental improvements.

Community benefits are offered on a voluntary basis. These voluntary offers sit outside of the planning process and are not subject to planning law or policy.

Community benefit discussions can be in connection with any public consultations, presentations or meetings about a planning application associated with the same project.

Solar Energy UK will be publishing guidance on community benefits in 2024. This will provide a benchmark for the solar energy sector and is intended to support solar energy companies and local communities wishing to enter discussions on the topic.

Shared Ownership

In some circumstances, there may be an opportunity for communities to share ownership of a solar farm project. Shared ownership gives local individuals and community groups the chance to make an investment in a commercially owned solar farm. This can open new financial streams for the community and build an active body of stakeholders who can share the financial benefits across the community. This is also beneficial to the developer, as it encourages positive engagement with the project and helps to build a more resilient industry over the long term.

Shared ownership can be seen as an additional benefit to communities and not in replacement of any additional benefits such as community benefits (e.g., voluntary initiatives to help support the community, often in the form of monetary funding).

Organisations such as [Community Energy England](#) and [Community Energy South](#) can support developers to connect with local communities and groups.



As the UK transitions to a low carbon future, solar energy is one of the most cost-effective ways to secure the UK's legally binding-target to reach net zero by 2050. To do so and to meet the UK government's target of 70GW by 2035, we need to increase our solar generation capacity by roughly four times between 2024 and 2035.

The role of solar in the energy mix

The Climate Change Act 2008 commits the UK government to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 100% of 1990 levels by 2050. [1] To achieve this, a substantial increase in solar deployment, across all scales (rooftop and ground mounted) will be needed. To stay on the net zero trajectory, the UK will need to reach a minimum of 40GW of solar by 2030, with the British Energy Security Strategy setting an ambition of 70GW by 2035. [2] At the end of 2023, installed capacity was estimated by the industry at 17.6GW. [3]

As an essential step in achieving net zero, the UK aims to fully decarbonise the electricity system by 2035. To deliver this the UK will need a reliable and resilient mix of technologies. Solar, battery storage and onshore wind will undoubtedly play crucial roles in providing zero-carbon electricity at a low cost. In fact, ground-mounted solar is currently the cheapest source of new electricity generation, reducing the overall cost of energy.[4]

Promoting homegrown technologies such as solar can help to reduce the UK's reliance on importing energy from other countries. The importance of energy security in the UK has been underlined by recent geopolitical conflict, with the UK's dependence on foreign gas imports causing unsustainable spikes in energy bills.

Support for solar projects

Public support for solar projects has always been strong and is rising along with concern about the climate emergency and its impacts. The evidence demonstrates that the popularity of solar projects is growing across a range of demographics and within communities who live near solar projects. [5] The government's Public Attitudes Tracker shows support for all renewables to be high, with solar being the most popular, reaching 88% support in some surveys. [6]

Community engagement is mutually beneficial

Good community engagement can result in mutual benefits for both developers and local communities, such as:

- Understanding community priorities, concerns and expectations can help developers design better projects. By establishing early dialogue with communities, developers can address issues earlier, avoiding increased costs and delays.
- Better engagement with communities during the consultation stage reduces the risk of misunderstandings or any perception that information hasn't been forthcoming.
- Demonstrating respect for communities helps build acceptance, encourages social responsibility and improves the reputation for developing projects with good community engagement, benefiting future projects.
- Active participation from the community in project design, through constructively raising questions, sharing and requesting information and interacting with solar developers can help the community achieve a better understanding of the project, its stages and its benefits and impacts.

Solar projects can benefit their communities

Over its lifetime, typically 25–40 years, a solar energy project can deliver lasting economic, environmental and social benefits to families and organisations across the UK, but also directly to the communities in which they are built.

Ground-mounted solar projects can help to reduce energy bills for consumers by lowering the overall cost of energy, which is especially important given the recent pressures felt by people and businesses on energy costs. Solar projects also increase the UK's energy security by reducing dependence on foreign energy sources and the risk of supply disruptions.

Solar project operators are responsible custodians of the countryside, contributing towards local and national environmental targets, working with landowners to deliver multiple land uses, biodiversity net gains and in some cases supporting continued agricultural use such as sheep grazing. Solar projects maintain the amenity of the countryside for wildlife and communities by enhancing and protecting bridleways and footpaths supporting local conservation priorities through measures including tree planting and community orchards.

Solar projects support rural businesses by diversifying their incomes and ensuring stable revenue streams throughout the year, thereby increasing financial security. They also contribute towards increasing food production and food security in the UK agriculture sector. This is especially important in a climate where many rural and agricultural businesses face increasing uncertainty.

The growth of the solar energy industry has led to increased revenues for local government through business rates which amount to very significant sums over the lifetime of the project, with these revenues contributing towards public services and facilities, in the rural areas where solar plants are built and operated.

Finally, solar projects can offer social, educational and recreational opportunities for local schools and community groups. As the greenest of infrastructure projects, solar projects themselves are exemplars of the net zero transition that is underway in the UK and demonstrate perfectly both the need for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) skills and the employment opportunities available to young people as they consider their career choices. Solar companies regularly work with schools around their facilities to create hands on learning opportunities and support teachers delivering STEM education.

Solar projects can be used to host educational visits from local schools and community groups to provide practical, hands-on learning opportunities, creating empowered and engaged community members for the future. The visits can be tailored to each group depending on which key stage they are in and topics they are studying at the time, for example understanding the chemistry of how solar panels work, conducting minibeast hunts or classifying organisms and human impact on ecosystems.

The history of solar and community engagement

The industry has been developing good practice in ground mounted solar projects since its inception in 2012. As the industry has grown, so too has its understanding of the importance of supporting community engagement with excellent examples of good practice leading an industry-wide commitment towards continuous improvement.

Case Study

The importance of good traffic management when constructing a solar project.

Canworthy (42MW) project, constructed and operated by Solar-UK and PS Renewables Launceston, Cornwall.

“It is hugely important that there is minimal impact on the local community who are trying go about their daily business during the construction of a solar farm. Often these sites are in very rural areas where the roads are narrow and fields inaccessible. For Canworthy, before we could even dig the first trench, we had to build an access road. This meant our traffic management plan was key and during the busy times we got an additional four banksmen to direct and control traffic.” Matt Hazell, Commercial Sales Director of PS Renewables.

Engaging actively with the local community and building a level of trust early in the relationship is especially important with traffic management plans for large solar projects, which can take several months to build. PS Renewables is always looking at ways to ease any potential congestion, for example implementing strategic traffic lights or building passing spaces on narrow roads. Prior to starting the construction, the company did a leaflet drop to the residents of Canworthy Water and surrounding areas, which were going to be most affected by the construction traffic coming from the A39. This informed the residents that the solar park would soon be built, and that the construction team would actively manage local traffic plans with the local authority. During the build, both companies kept in constant contact with residents to deal with any concerns.

Construction traffic drove particularly slowly where certain residential properties were close to the road and the road was kept clear at school drop off and pick up times. Measures were taken to ensure that impact on the local environment was minimal, including filtering run-off water prior to its entry into the local stream; making small holes in the hedgerows to ensure free movement of small mammals (a requirement of the Biodiversity Management Plan) and replacing certain hedgerows. Sixty staff members stayed in local holiday accommodation, supporting the local economy. The companies facilitated conversations with the local council to ensure the unilateral agreement with the owner, Primrose Solar and the local council were reached.



3

Good practice in community engagement

Understanding the community

In the context of infrastructure development, a community would be defined as a group of people who have in common the place in which they live, work, visit, or for some other reason spend their time. As each project site differs, so will the community and therefore so must the approach to engagement for each.

After making a site selection, the task for a developer is to research and understand residents and organisations which make up the neighbouring community and organisations within or serving it. This is referred to as stakeholder mapping. It is important to identify residents that live closest to the project who may have a view or potentially be impacted by the development (e.g. during construction). The developer will typically identify the nearest neighbours living within 1-2km of the project proposal (as defined on plans by a red line boundary) for the initial public consultation, including those within a 'zone of theoretical visibility', taking care to make common sense judgements when drawing the boundary to include a cluster of houses rather than arbitrarily bisect an area, leading to some neighbours receiving communication and others not. Where the line is drawn should also consider population density: in areas of lower population density, the community may extend over a wider area.

To plan their engagement efforts and to start to develop an understanding of local issues, the developer will review the stakeholder map and consider which groups and organisations will fall into broad categories.

Typical stakeholder groupings

- Local authorities, including both:
 - councillors, both for the wards or divisions affected and councillors with portfolio responsibilities in environment and planning
 - officers, in planning, but also across other local authority departments who will engage with the project on a range of topics. There may be community engagement specialists in the local authority.

- Parish, town, or community councils
- Members of Parliament, Members of the Scottish Parliament, Members of the Senedd (Wales), or Members of the Legislative Assembly (NI)
- Local groups around housing (e.g., residents' groups), local amenities, heritage, sports and recreation, culture, the environment, voluntary and charity activities and religious groups
- Skills, education and learning organisations
- Key public service providers
- Temporary residents (renters, home shares, travelling communities)
- Local businesses and business groups, particularly in key industries such as agriculture and tourism and also the local enterprise partnership and where it exists, the Business Improvement District
- Farmers or other regular users of the land
- Local associations that bring together groups such as youth, older people, rural, women and minority groups including for example, people with disabilities, or who are LGQBTQ+, or of different ethnicities and/or nationalities
- Community energy groups (see map at <https://communityenergyengland.org/>).

There are various means of researching and understanding the demographics of an area. Developers can use census and commercially available data and will often engage with communications consultancies who have extensive experience and knowledge of the area. In many cases an engaged local authority will share an ambition for good community engagement and will be happy to advise a developer.

Good practice guiding principles

Early engagement, transparency, inclusivity and responsiveness are fundamental guiding principles that help to foster positive relationships and successful collaboration between project developers and local communities. These principles are interconnected and mutually reinforce each other.

Early engagement

At the announcement of a project, its early-stage design can cause uncertainty among community members, who can form perceptions and attitudes toward projects long before a formal consultation takes place. Being proactive by starting the conversation early can help a community to manage the uncertainty, understand the process and project parameters and it can reduce risks for developers and operators.

Early engagement provides an opportunity for communities to engage with the proposals and understand the process and gives the best chance for the developer to understand these views and take them into account in the project's design and development. It is also the best time for concerns (including any misconceptions) about the project to be surfaced and discussed.

Transparency

Transparency between the developer and the community promotes confidence in the project and trust between all parties. Sharing information about the proposals, the process and the timings for the project are helpful, but it's important that the developer is transparent about the areas of uncertainty and possible change to facets of the project, to build trust and set expectations. It is usually the case that environmental surveying in pursuit of an environmental impact assessment will result in significant changes and it's important to ensure that the community understands this.

It is helpful to include clear indications as to how and when communities will be able to engage meaningfully at each stage of the project and where this won't be possible. Developers should also take every opportunity to clearly explain the process and take care to explain in lay-terms any terms or project language that will help the community understand what is happening.

Inclusivity

Developers will undertake the task of researching a community. Within this they should identify specific issues, needs and preferences for how engagement can most effectively take place. This process is usually referred to as stakeholder mapping and within this, it is good practice to take care that underrepresented groups have been identified and proactively engaged; these groups are often referred to as seldom-heard or hard-to-reach.

Developers should consider a broad range of engagement methods and communication channels to reach the community, online (e.g. through social media), in the environment (e.g. community noticeboards, local shop windows) and directly to people's houses (i.e. direct mail are all effective means in combination. Often parish councils and local organisations serving the community can act as gateway organisations and can be particularly effective in reaching under-represented groups and improving inclusivity. If community energy organisations are active in or near the area, it is advised to engage with them proactively to explore collaboration.

Responsiveness

Good practice is providing a means of communicating with the project from the beginning, with clearly signposted contact details including a phone number, an email address and a freepost mailing address, through which the project team can receive questions and feedback from the community. Responses should be timely and complete.

Often, a developer will contract a local communications consultancy and / or will have a member of the project team specialising in community engagement which will coordinate these interactions, ensure that they are appropriately recorded and brought to the attention of the right member of the project team.

Responsiveness on the part of the developer means providing acknowledgements, timely substantive responses, providing clarity where possible or explanations where not possible, context and transparency. Feedback from the community should be welcomed at any stage, considered properly and where possible either acted upon or discussed further.

Visits to the community are helpful, either through house calls or 'surgeries' in a local and accessible venue, such as a village hall, will underline the developer's commitment to engage and further the climate of trust between the parties. Being in the environment, face-to-face with community members as they explain a point of view will help the developer to understand it more fully.

The period following a formal pre-application consultation process is a particularly opportune time for a developer to demonstrate responsiveness. Once concluded, a developer will review the feedback and seek to incorporate the recommendations into the project design where feasible and appropriate and will produce a report detailing how recommendations from the community have been considered. This 'you said, we did' process is powerful in helping the community see and understand how its feedback has been considered and how the project has changed as a result, but also provides an explanation when the feedback has been considered but has not been ultimately adopted.



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Obstacles to good engagement

Change, cumulative projects and engagement fatigue

Because of the realities of green energy infrastructure development, which is heavily reliant on the availability of grid connections, developments can cluster in certain areas of the country. So as more solar projects are built to deliver the UK's net zero targets, communities could be impacted by multiple projects, sometimes over a short period of time and sometimes simultaneously.

In the UK, we are undergoing a relatively rapid transition to new ways of producing energy. The scale of this change can be unsettling and the rigorousness of the planning process itself can lead to fatigue.

Engagement fatigue and discontent within a community can intensify if there are too many requests for communities to engage, either from one project or multiple projects. This can include overlapping or conflicting project proposals, a lack of understanding of the project information or it being too complex, insufficient feedback from previous engagement, reducing confidence in the efficacy of engagement processes from their perspective.

This underlines the importance of demonstrating to communities how their contributions have shaped the project, or perhaps more importantly, the importance of giving reasons and context to explain why, in some cases, their input has not led to changes.

It can also be demonstrated that there are benefits to hosting multiple projects in one area, with opportunities to share knowledge, infrastructure (e.g., cabling) and resources.

Communities can also feel the benefit through greater opportunities for local job creation, business opportunities and improvements to local facilities and the environment.

Negative feedback or project opposition

Infrastructure projects always receive feedback from people or organisations who oppose aspects of the proposals, or the entire project. The very nature of infrastructure development means that some level of disruption and impact to the lives of people living nearby is nearly always inevitable.

The point of community engagement is to understand these impacts and where appropriate, identify approaches to mitigate or reduce these and to maximise the realisation of project benefits. Where there are concerns from the community, the developer should avoid defensiveness and should positively and constructively actively seek to understand the reasons.

- The developer should review the feedback and past engagement with community member(s) or group(s) and identify any compounding or aggravating factors, relating to this, or other project, which might be causing an obstacle in each of the parties' understanding of the position.
- Face-to-face engagement, particularly in the community, can often help to make a discussion more constructive and can help all parties to visualise each other's perspectives.
- It's often helpful to explain and explore the components of the planning process, particularly that of environmental impact assessment, to take account of the issues that are causing concern. Often the fact that evidence-based assessments are being carried out and will determine whether a perceived potential impact will occur and to what extent and that it will seek to identify mitigation, is reassuring. Similarly, the fact that there is a formal consultation process can help reassure people that their views will be taken into account.
- Surfacing of concerns from the community will provide the opportunity for the developer to answer them directly, either with examples from prior developments and existing solar facilities, or by providing credible evidence, for example from independent research that can help to allay concerns. [7] [8]

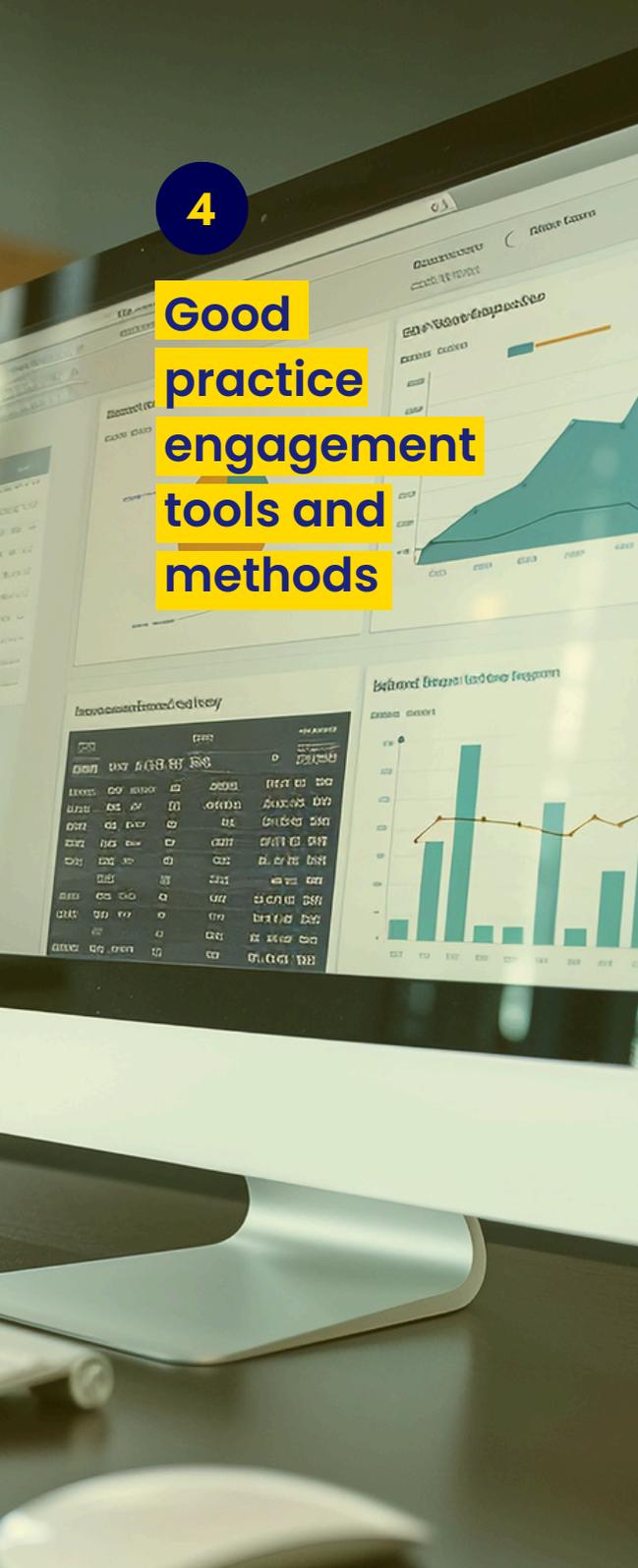
Engaging with seldom heard, or hard-to-reach groups within the community

When developing solar projects, there can be some groups or members within the community which are harder to reach and engage with. They might feel disenfranchised or are simply less motivated to engage with a project though that does not lessen the importance of their views. Local authorities and parish councils can often be helpful in helping to identify the needs and priorities of local people and particularly so for those who are seldom heard.

Similarly gateway organisations, for example, groups specifically helping older people, people in isolated parts of the community, people from minority ethnic groups, or those with less mobility should be utilised. They can provide advice and opportunities to engage, including pre-existing opportunities where people routinely meet as a group, for example.

4

Good practice engagement tools and methods



Communication lines: phone, freepost, email

Having means through which community members can get in touch with the developer and expect timely, constructive responses is a basic but fundamental part of community engagement. The developer should consider how to ensure consistency in its responses and make sure that both the language it uses to talk about the project and the tone of voice aids understanding and cooperation with its communities. Maintaining a list of ‘frequently asked questions’ to assist with responses is usually a good idea, provided they are tailored to the audience and kept updated.

Customer Relationship Management

Traditionally stemming from the world of marketing, customer relationship management (CRM) tools are now widely used to manage contacts with stakeholders on infrastructure projects. This is good practice because it enables a developer to keep a track of commitments and conversations it has had with a wide variety of stakeholders, including members of the community.

It means that data provided by stakeholders can be kept securely and confidentially, within the high standards of data protection in the UK. Correspondence can be managed and where project staff move off and on projects, the knowledge the project has of its work with the community, about the local area and ways in which the project has been developed around the community, can be well managed and referred to throughout the project’s development.

CRMs are particularly useful in the management of responses in community consultation.

Project website

Dedicated website pages are helpful as repositories of materials explaining the project, including newsletters, graphics, audio-visual materials, recorded webinar presentations, exhibition materials, interactive maps and visualisations. It's also a good place to share the project timeline and to provide all the contact points. During a pre-application consultation (page 31), the website can also be used to replicate online the full suite of exhibition materials and provide the feedback form, through which people can make their views known.

Particularly when there is a significant amount of material, for instance for a project large enough to be a nationally significant infrastructure project (or NSIP), it will also be helpful to signpost to external web resources. These include those provided by the Planning Inspectorate to help people to understand the context of the broader planning process.



Case Study

Impactful project websites and supporter portals

Working with Cavendish Consulting's planning communications and digital teams, RWE designed and developed a standard approach to online consultation that allowed them to effectively engage with communities around each proposed solar/battery storage development.

This website template was designed to maintain consistent brand and messaging across all new projects. It clearly signposts to designated sections on project specific information, plans and imagery. The template was created with the view to prioritise accessibility for communities. This was part of a mobile-first engagement and consultation strategy which looked at how websites and downloadable materials could be easily accessed by phone.

The template has been deployed across 15 RWE TCPA projects and adapted for two DCO's over the past two years, successfully streamlining online consultation for RWE.

In addition to this, Cavendish worked with RWE to develop a bespoke supporter mobilisation portal, designed to remove the need for local people to navigate the council's planning portal. This online platform can be shared directly with the community and circulated on social media using carefully targeted advertisement following submission, making it as simple as possible for local people to support solar projects on the planning file.

Support plans to deliver clean, affordable energy, locally
 We have submitted proposals for a 20MW solar farm, with battery storage, that would generate enough electricity to power the equivalent of 7,900 homes.
 By producing solar energy domestically, the UK can combat climate change, while becoming less reliant on expensive foreign gas imports for electricity and heating.
 If you want the council to support the climate agenda, and approve these plans, you need to make your voice heard by RuffordHill through council. You can do this by completing the form below.
 Read more
 Support

Support registration
 ** Indicates required fields
 Profile: Name* Surname*
 Address*
 City/Town* County*
 Postcode*
 Email address*
 Phone
 I confirm I'm over 13 years old and agree to the privacy statement
 I do not submit
 Register

If you want to see proposals for a 20MW solar farm on land off Stragglethorpe Road approved, then let the council know by completing the form above.

Benefits of Heron Solar Farm
 Heron Solar Farm is discretely sited and positioned, over a mile from both Cotgrave and Radcliffe-on-Trent, and with good natural screening.
 Heron Solar Farm will deliver enough clean domestic energy to meet the equivalent annual needs of **over 7,900 UK homes** – enough to power every home in Cotgrave, and more.
 Energy generated by Heron Solar Farm will have **over 18,000 tonnes of CO2 emissions** annually from equivalent fossil fuel energy – equating to taking 3,738 cars off the road each year.
 JBM Solar is contributing **£254,000 community benefit** fund to Cotgrave Town Council to support local organisations and initiatives.
 95% of the site can continue to be used for grazing and will remain in **agricultural use**, allowing crops to recover by increasing soil organic matter and improving soil structure.
 A **>50% biodiversity net gain** providing ecological benefits through new habitats, such as wildflower meadows, grassed areas, habitats for birds, bats, insects, and reptiles.
 Over **£2.5 million generated in business rates** over the lifetime of the project, to be used by RuffordHill Borough Council to fund important local services.

Solar's role in achieving net zero and strengthening energy security
 While the UK has been progressing towards decarbonisation and reducing its reliance on fossil fuels, our energy system still relies on expensive foreign gas imports for electricity and heating. The cost of gas has sky-rocketed, impacting our energy bills and emphasising the need to invest in renewable technology and make the UK an independent and self-sufficient energy producing nation.
 As such, the UK government has set ambitious energy market targets. One of the key strands of the policy is to utilise the country's potential for solar power, with the Government aiming for 70 gigawatts of ground and rooftop capacity together by 2035, which is a five-fold increase on current installed capacity.
 Moreover, solar energy is the most rapidly deployable renewable and low carbon energy source. The average permitting timeframe for a 10MW solar farm is under 2 years, compared to over 5 years for onshore wind and 10 years for offshore wind. This makes solar a critical component to making net zero targets a reality.
 With government forecasting placing solar as the cheapest source of electricity, developments such as Heron Solar Farm are going to play a key role in improving the UK's energy security, while supporting the transition away from fossil fuels.

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Our Proposals For Peartree Hill
 Peartree Hill is made up of several areas of land (Areas A-F), with the areas being connected by a series of underground cables. Peartree Hill will establish a grid connection via underground cables to the Creyke Beck Substation, which will transfer the electricity to the national electricity network.
 The most northern part of the site is located northwest of Leven, with the remainder of the site to be located on land between the villages of Tickton, Riston, Waane, Weel and Woodmansey.
 Anticipated to generate 320MW of clean energy, Peartree Hill is classed as a nationally significant infrastructure project (NSIP) due to its scale. As such, the project will proceed through the Development Consent Order (DCO) planning process. The final decision on whether to grant consent for the project will be made by the Secretary of State for the Department of Energy Security and Net Zero.
 Our vision for Peartree Hill includes prioritising the retention and enhancement of natural habitats and species, while delivering 'biodiversity net gain' through new planting and habitat creation.
 Existing footpaths would be improved, and new connections created, providing access to educational trails, picnic areas and outdoor classrooms.
 Peartree Hill will have a life span of approximately 40 years, following which it is proposed that the solar development would be decommissioned, and the land would be returned to its existing condition.
 More information about our proposals can be found in the Consultation Brochure.

Proposals at a glance

- The displacement of over 11,200,000 tonnes of CO2 from equivalent fossil fuel energy, which equates to taking **c.165,000 cars off the road** for a year.
- 320MW solar farm, capable of powering the equivalent of **approximately 135,000 homes**.
- Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS) on-site, ensuring the solar farm can be as **flexible as possible in delivering energy** to the grid.
- Over **95% of the site can be used for grazing** allowing the site to retain an agricultural use whilst producing clean energy.
- Over **50% Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)** expected to be delivered on-site, providing ecological enhancements through new and improved habitats.
- Providing **additional opportunities for public recreation**, with new footpaths, outdoor classrooms, picnic areas, community orchards and benches.
- Genuine benefits for local residents in the form of a **community benefit fund of £4.2 million over the project lifetime**.
- £40 million generated in business rates over the lifetime of the project**, to be used by East Riding of Yorkshire Council to fund important local services.

Through the use of these website and supporter portal templates as part of a community engagement programme, RWE and Cavendish have been able to drive large numbers of local supportive comments onto the planning file for RWE's schemes. Examples include 92 comments in favour of Stoneshollow Solar Farm in Leicestershire, and 96 in favour of Laynes Wood Solar Farm in Gloucestershire.

It is critical that everyone has an opportunity to make their voice heard. Working in tandem with an impactful website, our solar supporter mobilisation portal can be instrumental in demonstrating the strength of support often hidden behind a vocal minority.

The role of a community engagement lead

It is good practice for a developer to have a dedicated community engagement lead identified within the project team at the planning and development phase. This role would fulfil functions including coordinating the team's engagement activities, a contact for communities throughout the duration of the project and ensuring that community perspectives are applied appropriately in planning and decision making, particularly where commitments have been made through the course of engagement with community members.

Briefings to local authorities and parish, town and community councils

From an early point in the development of a project, it is good practice to provide regular briefings to relevant local authority members, parish or community council members. Good relations with these community representatives, avoiding surprises and listening to advice offered can help identify issues and opportunities before engagement with the wider community and can facilitate constructive wider engagement.

Community newsletters

It is often helpful to establish a recognised online or hard copy newsletter, either produced on an agreed frequency or ad-hoc as and when developments occur. In some areas, local councils may already have established newsletters that can be used. The communication could be emailed to a self-subscribing online mailing list or posted to local residences. This will enable residents to be informed about matters including work taking place on site, consultation events, or unusual traffic movements and be given the opportunity to communicate with the developer.

Community engagement forums

Through the development, planning and then construction phases, developers and communities might find it helpful to have a regular scheduled forum to discuss ongoing development and any issues arising.

This forum might meet infrequently at quieter times and then choose to step meetings up during busier times, for example in the lead up to consultation, through the post-application period and at the construction phase. These meetings could be online or in person and can help to demonstrate a commitment on the part of the developer to be a good neighbour.

Site visits to operational solar projects

In a project's planning and development phase, organising visits for key members of the community to other operational solar projects can be impactful and reassuring. This provides a first-hand opportunity for people to experience how a solar farm operates. These visits also help people visualise how the proposed project could look in their own community and if there are any features of the site or realised project benefits that might be applicable to their community.

Open days

Opening an operational solar farm to the public can connect the community to the site, dispel myths and can help a developer to achieve engagement with local groups and organisations. This includes schools, local associations and businesses, helping to achieve its broader community engagement aims.





Case Study

Westmill Solar Co-Operative

Westmill Solar Co-operative was established to inspire change and to be an exemplar of what ordinary members of the public can achieve when working together to uphold community renewable energy. Westmill Solar Park was commissioned in July 2011 on the same site as Westmill Wind Co-operative. Following successful fundraising, Westmill Solar Co-operative acquired the park in 2012, making it, we believe, the world's largest community-owned solar farm at the time. As a community-owned renewable energy co-operative, community outreach and benefits are a key priority in the Westmill Solar Co-operative ethos.

Together, Westmill Solar and Westmill Wind Co-operatives created an independent charity WeSET (Westmill Sustainable Energy Trust) to promote the deployment of sustainable energy, energy efficiency and education about climate change and renewable energy. WeSET accomplishes this mission through activities such as educational outreach and supporting local energy conservation and renewable energy initiatives.

WeSET's team of 11 dedicated volunteer guides lead site tours for co-operative members, families, school groups, universities and other societies. The tours offer a unique and understandable perspective of how a wind farm and solar park works. Visitors learn about renewable energy and the inspiring story of how the solar farm became community owned. They also get an extraordinary up-close perspective of the scale of the technology and site. WeSET also organises Open Days that allow the community to experience the joy and fascination of the site. To date, around 13,000 people have visited Westmill, and the tours and events have become increasingly popular with 90% of visitors polled saying they would recommend a visit to others.

WeSET also provides a fantastic curriculum enabling students to make sense of the power and possibilities of sustainable energy. The Westmill site offers an open-air classroom and practical location for understanding sustainability for both children, and those young at heart.

Biodiversity and educational visits for community groups and local schools

Developers work with neighbouring landowners, local ecologists and wildlife experts to determine suitable ecological enhancements to promote biodiversity at the site. Developers often find ways to involve community groups and local schools in these efforts, realising wider opportunities for the community to get involved in understanding their local natural environment, connect with the ecological goals of the project and promoting the environmental benefits.





Case Study

Supporting Biodiversity On Solar Farms

Wilburton Solar Farm (5MW), constructed by Abbey Renewables and owned by Lightsource Bp Cambridge.

Lightsource bp developed a tailored planting plan for the site, as well as a range of other wildlife habitat enhancement measures. The solar farm is now home to a wide range of different species, supported by the new habitats created across the 31-acre site.

Rare species spotted include brown hares, whose population in the UK has declined by more than 80% over the last 100 years, and the English partridge, for whom the solar farm presents the ideal habitat with plenty of shelter, insects to eat and protection from predators. The gamekeeper has noted that he has seen between 40-50 of each species on the farm.

Banks of wildflowers behind each row of panels harbour an abundance of insects, including several species of butterfly. The Small tortoiseshell is one of the most widely recognised butterflies in Britain, though, it is sadly experiencing a worrying decline.

One theory is that it is being targeted by the parasitic fly, known as *Sturmia bella*, which is increasingly migrating from the continent due to global warming. Wilburton Solar Farm provides valuable habitats for these surviving British icons, whilst helping to address the issue of climate change first hand.

Use of local contractors and suppliers

Most developers will use local labour, suppliers and amenities where possible. This is a simple but effective way to demonstrate commitment to community relationships and contribute to the local economy. Opportunities to supply or work for the project can be listed on local display boards or be made available through local channels.

Changing of hands

If the project is built and later acquired by another company, the companies could consider involving community and wider stakeholders in a handover and introductions meeting, or other event. This could include an agenda of items considered relevant such as site history, planning, environmental considerations, etc. This demonstrates competence and transparency and will enable continuity which the community and new operator will find helpful.



Good Practice for community engagement when delivering NSIP scale projects

Effective community engagement is crucial for the success of any solar project. As the project size increases, so does the value of involving the community. It is important to be proportionate and to tailor the level of engagement to a project's size. Larger projects, particularly NSIPs, require more extensive engagement with communities due to potentially larger footprints, impact potential and greater opportunities which communities can benefit from.

For developers working on NSIP-scale projects, going above and beyond statutory requirements is recommended to build positive and trusted relationships with the community (see annex). Developers working on NSIPs are encouraged to explore a range of engagement tools and methods (page 20) to enhance community involvement throughout all stages of the project lifecycle.

Pre-application community consultation

Within the development (pre-application) stage and the application stage there are more formal consultation processes which give communities and other stakeholders a specific voice in those processes. Although it is good practice to undertake pre-application on all projects, for some projects there will be a statutory requirement in compliance with the planning application (e.g. under the NSIP and DNS regimes) (further guidance can be found in the Annex).

Consultation is an opportunity for people living in the vicinity of the proposed site and other stakeholders to examine the entirety of the proposals, ask questions of the developer and respond to any part of the proposals. The developer is expected to take this feedback into account before submitting its application, with evidence that it has done so in the form of a report.

Common features of a consultation

The format of consultations can vary for lots of reasons, including a project's size or scale, or its proximity to communities, but consultations often involve:

- Scheduled and advertised exhibitions in neighbouring community facilities such as village halls.
- Presentations to parish, town, community councils, in schools and colleges and with other community groups, both online and in-person.
- Newsletters or other information materials mailed out to addresses in the community.
- An online platform and exhibition.
- Materials about project proposals left in local libraries or other public buildings.

The consultation proposals

A clear set of proposals will be developed by the project team for a lay audience, designed in a way which is clear and concise for any stakeholder, without specialist knowledge to understand the proposal. Maps of the area, before and after the project, with a visualisation of how the development will look and how screening will be achieved, from different perspectives is especially helpful for people.

Engaging the local authority in consultation planning

For a larger consultation, local authorities, acting as either statutory stakeholders, or as a planning authority (depending on the scale of the development and country) will require the developer to produce and publish its consultation plan.[9] The consultation plan will outline the features of the consultation, explaining how the developer plans to conduct an effective consultation, with respect to the local area and demographics of the area.

As discussed earlier (see page 14) even in the case of a smaller consultation, it is good practice to engage with the local authority, which will have good insight into both the relevant groups and how to reach them.

Consultation events

Hosting events is a staple of a community consultation. They can take various forms and be tailored to what is most useful for that community. The most common events are public drop-in exhibitions, at which the developer's team of engagement and project specialists will be on hand to explain the project, answer questions, help people to navigate the project proposals and facilitate their responses.

Online events

Having one or two supplementary online events is a popular option for many people who have caring commitments or prefer for any number of reasons to not be in a venue with multiple other people. These presentation-led events can also be recorded and be available online afterwards, though all participants, if identified in the forum, for example by asking a question, would need to consent through the participation terms and conditions.

Scheduling

The timing of consultation events should be chosen carefully. If holding multiple events, it's considered a good idea to choose weekdays and at least one weekend day, to ensure that the events will take place to suit people's availability as much as possible (for example opening in both daytime and evening hours). Avoiding school holiday periods can reduce the chances that someone will be away on holiday and unable to attend.

Locations

A central, accessible venue within the community is preferable, with suitable parking options and public transport links, where possible and for larger projects neighbouring more than one community, it's most helpful to those communities to host events in the different villages.

Welsh, Scottish or Irish language support

For projects in Wales, project developers can be expected to provide certain materials in both Welsh and English, although this will be dependent on what is agreed and discussed with the local authority. The Welsh language enjoys significant and increasing support throughout Wales.[10] In the planning system, consideration is given to adequacy of consultation and the Welsh language should be considered in this context. In a broader context, planning authorities have a legal duty to consider the effects of a project on the Welsh language.

Materials should be provided in digital and hard copy format and provision should also be made as part of these for people wishing to communicate with the project in Welsh. Developers may also consider having at least one Welsh speaker available on its consultation event team. This may help to support the promotion of the proposal and assist with engaging members of the community who prefer to use the Welsh language.

For projects in Scotland or Northern Ireland, materials in Irish Gaelic or Scots Gaelic should be made available upon request. Operators may consider adopting a comparable approach to the engagement strategies recommended in the previous paragraph.

Materials should also be available in other languages, braille, or large type on request.

Promotion of consultation and consultation events

Depending on the requirements of the respective planning process (see annex), promotion of a consultation can include a combination of statutory elements which include notifications of people with an interest in the land and people living in the vicinity through mailshots and advertising in newspapers. The vicinity is usually a 1-2km radius around the project's red line boundary.

Many developers will have a communications plan involving multiple channels, including direct relationships with stakeholders, press releases to local media, local social media forums and placing posters in local shops and display boards.

A project that has had a effective and early approach to community engagement will be able to use the connections it has built up in the community to get the word out. In the pre-application stage, local authorities and other stakeholders can raise awareness of a consultation, as local authorities can be willing to use their own channels for a consultation's publicity or will highlight other avenues of advertisement, such as community publications, social media channels and noticeboards.

It is advisable to give communities at least a months' notice of a consultation event and output reminder communications close to the dates.

Case Study

Berryhill Scotland

The Solar2 team has extensive experience engaging with local communities in the development of renewable energy projects. When planning Berryhill Solar Farm, Solar2 proactively involved the local community at the earliest opportunity. Information regarding the project was provided and regularly updated through a dedicated website, press reflecting Solar2's commitment to transparency and clarity.

The Solar2 team engaged with local Community councillors ensuring they were well-informed about the project plans and to gain feedback regarding the proposed community fund. This was initially done via an Introductory call via Zoom (due to Covid) with a follow up 2 months later, prior to the Public Exhibitions.

Additionally, the team conducted door to door communication, sending leaflets to 52 local homes. An online Zoom Public Consultation presentation and meeting was held. This was followed up 2 days later with an in person Public Exhibition event which was promoted via local media and social media. These different methods of communication provided members of the community opportunities to read information regarding the project, see visual representations and discuss the project with the Solar2 team. A visit was also organised for the Community Council representatives to a local solar farm.

Ensuring that residents near the site understood the visual and practical implications of the project was paramount. Solar2 facilitated transparent communication to gather opinions and feedback from the community. This took the form of communication and face to face meetings with several individual households. This feedback allowed the project development team to make adjustments where feasible. Communication leaflets were also distributed to near neighbours alerting them to the opportunity to submit formal representations to the Council.

Engagement during construction

Good community engagement should continue throughout the project's lifecycle.

The construction phase can be the most visible presence of a solar farm to the local community. Maintaining the good relationships built in the planning stage of the project can be helpful to address any concerns and keep the communication channel open for questions or queries. To facilitate this, continued opportunities for community engagement should be clear.

Communications during construction are about ensuring the community knows what's happening, being up front about potential disruption, creating clear lines of contact for any complaints and having the ensuing protocols in place to manage them swiftly.

During the construction phase, developers ought to take into consideration impacts that could affect the local community and surrounding areas.

It is recommended that the developer follows a code of construction practice (CoCP). A CoCP sets out the standards to which a developer and or contractor must adhere to manage the potential environmental impacts of construction. This will set out requirements and expectations to reduce the disruption to those who live, work or visit the area.

Contractors and developers should commit to nationally recognised CoCP schemes such as the [Considerate Constructors Scheme \(CCS\)](#). This is a voluntary initiative that looks to improve constructors' behaviour and reduce the impact of construction activity. They have created a code of conduct to deliver projects that are attentive to the community, environment and workforce.

The code focus on three areas:

1. Respecting the community
2. Caring for the environment
3. Valuing the workforce

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Engagement during operation

The operational phase of the solar project is the longest; with the typical solar farm operating for approximately 25-40 years. In the operational stage, a solar project will require little maintenance; often one short visit every month to maintain the site. There may be requirements to visit the site more often if a solar project is undertaking regular ecological monitoring (which is encouraged). [11]

Although good communication is fundamentally important to being a good neighbour and minimising discontent towards a project, regular communications also present the opportunity for a developer to raise their profile and to deliver social value. This could be through initiatives such as working with local schools on education initiatives throughout operation, celebrating milestones with local councillors and MPs and involving the community in the naming and lasting heritage of elements of a project.





Case Study

Supporting educational visits Verwood Solar Farm

Earth Energy Education (EEE) works with renewable energy project developers and asset owners and managers to facilitate educational visits and workshops connecting the community to their local solar projects. They have been working at Verwood Solar Farm in Dorset since 2014. The project developer, Solstice Renewables included an educational programme to be delivered by EEE as part of the community benefits package with the planning application. EEE has worked with Belltown Power and Foresight Group to continue to deliver the programme since the solar farm was built.

Since 2014, 43 school groups have visited the site and a further 66 groups have had workshops, reaching over 2,000 young people to date. Nursery, primary, secondary schools and university groups have visited the site.

During site visits young people bridge the gap between theory and practice and learn first-hand about electricity generation, the equipment involved and the biodiversity improvements on site. Visits are often accompanied by a solar engineer from the operations and maintenance company providing an invaluable source of first-hand expertise and inspiring the students to consider a career in renewable energy. All learning is experiential and hands on, linked to the national curriculum and connected to the climate and ecological crises.

Nine years on and the Verwood school teachers use the school visits and workshops as a topic starter to stimulate pupils' learning or as a topic finale to consolidate concepts. The solar farm has become firmly embedded into their curriculum.

"We have had an association with Verwood Solar Farm for many years. Through visits to the farm and their outreach with us, the children have been able to appreciate first-hand how this is a vital resource for the community. They have learned about sustainable and renewable sources of energy and what they can do to help combat climate change in a very real and engaging way. Our relationship with the farm is invaluable; a long-term commitment has enabled us to design a curriculum that really meets the needs of our learners and allows opportunities to see the positive impact solar projects have on the environment. I would not hesitate to encourage other companies and schools to begin developing a relationship with Verwood Solar Farm." Wimborne St Giles Headteacher.

"I really enjoyed learning about the Solar Panels at the farm because it made me think about how I can save energy at my house!"
Year 4 Pupil, North Mundham Primary School.

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Engagement during decommissioning and repowering

Unlike many forms of energy infrastructure, solar projects are soft developments. This means that they are temporary and completely reversible. As the solar project comes to the end of its operational lifespan, the developer will need to consider whether the project is decommissioned (all infrastructure is removed, and land is returned to its original state) or repowered (new solar infrastructure replaces the old and the solar farm is repowered meaning it can continue its operational life for a further period).

Prior to any end-of-life decision being made, the project operator is encouraged to engage with the local planning authority to inform them of the proposed decision and seek guidance well in advance. The operator is encouraged to inform and engage the local community and wider stakeholders of decommissioning or repowering activities at the earliest convenience.

Engagement during decommissioning

Decommissioning a project, put simply, is the reverse of construction. In most cases, decommissioning requirements will be set out in a Decommissioning Environmental Management Plan (DEMPs) which is prepared as part of the planning condition.

All equipment above and below ground should be removed and the site fully restored to its former condition. However, ecological enhancements that have been established during the project will usually remain, in accordance with any planning conditions.

The decommissioning process may be unfamiliar to the community and stakeholders. Where possible, project operators are encouraged to provide additional information on the process of decommissioning with environmental and social considerations set out in detail. This includes acknowledging the opportunities and concerns around decommissioning a project, such as the loss of an educational facility for local schools and community groups, or the loss of planted habitats.



Like the construction phase of the project, decommissioning can have short term impacts on the community while equipment is being removed from the site. Where appropriate, good practice measures from the considerate constructors' schemes (see page 36) should be adopted to minimise disturbance to the community and the environment.

During this phase communities may be concerned about noise, traffic and disturbance to land and the environment. It is recommended that operators engage with communities prior to decommissioning to understand concerns the communities may have during the decommissioning process and develop thinking as to how best to alleviate them.

Engagement during Repowering

When a site is repowered, rather than decommissioned, the old components (PV panels, inverters etc) are replaced with new components to increase the performance of the site. The process of repowering can take as little as a few weeks to complete. When a site is repowered, the project lifespan will be increased. A repowered site could see the project in operation for a further 25-40 years. This can vary depending on the efficiency of the new panels, the number of panels or invertors changed and the conditions of the planning agreement. If the owner is seeking to fully repower a solar project, then they would need to submit a new planning application and the entire community engagement process will begin again.

Where a project is considering extending operational life, operators should engage early with the community following the good practice guiding principles (page 15). The changes to the project should be clearly communicated through diverse channels with the local community (e.g. newsletter, display board) and information presented on how repowering the project could affect the community and the additional benefits the community might look to receive.



Annex – Planning Guidance

Statutory requirements for developers to engage with communities during the planning and development stage of a project differ depending on where the project is located and on the project size. These two factors will determine the appropriate planning route for a project. This section identifies the different planning routes and the statutory community engagement requirements in each country.

Location	Project size	Local or national determination
England	Up to 50MWac	Local
	Above 50MWac	National
Scotland	0MW–19.9MWac	Local
	20MW – 49.9MWac	Local
	Above 50MWac	National
Wales	Up to 10MWac	Local
	10MW to 349.9MWac	National
	Above 350MWac	National
Northern Ireland	Up to 5MWac	Local
	5MW to 29.9MWac	Local
	350MWac or above	National

England

Local planning authorities (LPAs) / TCPA

Local planning authorities in England determine all planning applications for energy infrastructure below 50MWac in capacity. Applications are considered under the [Town and Country Planning Act 1990 \(TCPA\)](#) and its various amendments.

The relevant national planning policy is contained in [National Planning Policy Framework \(NPPF\)](#). In addition, all LPAs will have their own local plans.

There are no statutory requirements for applicants to carry out community engagement on projects at this scale, either at the pre-application or application stage. Formal consultation at the application stage is undertaken by the LPA. However, as with all projects, of all scales, it is strongly recommended that developers engage with communities at the earliest opportunity.

Planning Inspectorate / NSIPs

For energy infrastructure in England with an installed capacity of 50MWac and above, the Planning Inspectorate (PINS) assess applications, known as a Draft Development Consent Orders (DCOs), and makes recommendations to the Secretary of State for consideration and final decision. DCOs in England are considered under the [Planning Act 2008](#).

The relevant planning policy guidance against which a NSIP proposal is assessed is contained in [National Policy Statements \(NPSs\)](#).

Statutory consultation requirements:

For NSIP projects it is a statutory requirement for developers to engage with local communities under section 48 of the Planning Act 2008. As part of the NSIP process and under section 47(6) of the Planning Act 2008, developers are required to produce, publicise and submit a Statement of Community Consultation (SoCC), which sets out how the developer plans to engage with communities in relation to their project.

The SoCC is produced by the developer to establish how it will engage with the community during the pre-application stage of the project. The SoCC should be sent to all local authorities within the project boundary (the host authorities) at the earliest opportunity. A SoCC sets out the following parameters.

- A detailed description of the planning process and the statutory requirements which must be completed.
- A detailed outline of the proposed project.
- The method in which the consultation process has been developed.
- How the developer intends to engage with the local community and opportunities where the community will be able to provide feedback.
- The tools of engagement proposed at the outset.
- How the consultation will be published, with the engagement methods clearly outlined.
- The consultation timeline and arrangements.
- How feedback from the consultation will be considered and how the feedback will inform the final planning submission.
- Next steps as to how the project will progress.
- Any further information that may be needed.

The SoCC will be reviewed by the relevant LPA and proposals made on how best to consult with local communities. The developer will then consult on the proposed project with the community, or communities, as set out in the SoCC. Further details can be found on the PINS website.^[12] The SoCC must be agreed between the developer and the LPA and published prior to the Statutory Consultation phase, otherwise the DCO application will not be compliant.

The SoCC has value beyond being an important aspect of legal compliance. By working with the host LPA to agree an approach to the consultation, the developer can proceed with the comfort that they and the involved authorities' expectations about the consultation process are in the same place. The SoCC process can also be valuable in adding to the developer's knowledge about the communities in which they are working.

Informal, or non-statutory, consultation with stakeholders and communities is highly recommended by PINS and can take place at any time, either before or after the SoCC.

Scotland

Local Planning Authorities

Local Planning Authorities in Scotland determine all planning applications for energy infrastructure below 50MWac in capacity. Applications are considered under the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997 (TCPSA) and its various amendments.[13]

The relevant national planning policy is contained in National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4). In addition, all LPAs will have their own Local Plans.

Within this there are two categories:

Non-Major Applications: Projects between 0 and 19.9MW

Local Applications, under 20MW, are determined by the LPA. There are no statutory requirements for applicants to carry out community engagement on projects at this scale, either at the pre-application or application stage. Formal consultation at the application stage is undertaken by the LPA. However, as with all projects, of all scales, it is strongly recommended that developers engage with communities at the earliest opportunity with their projects.

Major Applications: Projects between 20 and 49.9MW

Applications below 49.9MWac, but above 20MW are classed as Major Applications (defined in the Town and Country Planning (Hierarchy of Developments) (Scotland) (Regulations) 2009) and are determined by the LPA.

A solar project classed as a major development is required to undertake statutory PAC. The PAC allows the community to learn about the project and provides an opportunity for comments/concerns to be feedback the developer prior to finalising and submitting the planning application.

The PAC should contain:

- Serve a proposal of application notice (PAN) on the planning authority describing the proposal and location and indicating what consultation they intend carrying out as part of PAC. [14]
- Consult councils in the location or adjoining areas of the proposed project.
- Hold a public event.

- Publish information in a local newspaper which identifies where information on the proposal can be obtained (e.g., website), how an individual can engage with the developer, public events (of which notice must be at least 7 days prior to the public event)
- Carry out any further PAC measures required by the planning authority (the authority has 21 days from the receipt of the proposal of application notice to make such requirements).

The developer is required to summarise feedback and produce a PAC report. The report should provide a clear summary of how the developer has engaged with communities and statutory bodies in line with the statutory requirements. The PAC report should cover the following.

- Dates, timings and locations outlining where public events were held in accordance with the statutory requirements.
- A clear description of any additional consultations or notification required by the planning authority.
- Steps which have been taken via the applicant to consult with members of the public.
- A list of bodies, group and organisations who were consulted by the applicant and evidence as to how the applicant has carried out the engagement.
- Copies of materials sent to consultees (including any materials provided at a public event e.g., display boards).
- Confirmation as to whether consultees and attendees at public events were informed that the PAC does not remove the right or the potential need to comment on the final application once it has been made to the planning authority.
- A summary of written responses to consultations and views raised at public events (including the number of consultations responses received and the number of individuals that attended public events).
- A clear explanation of how the prospective applicant took into consideration the views of those raised during the PAC process.
- An explanation of how a member of the public was given feedback based on the applicant's consideration of views raised during the PAC process.

Pre-application consultation guidance was updated October 2022 and is available [here](#).

The PAC can be mutually beneficial to both the developer and community. It seeks to encourage community engagement and raise awareness of the project from the very start. Bringing communities along on the journey and providing opportunities to feed back into the project's design can increase overall acceptance of the project and reduce opposition. For the developer, a PAC helps to create greater understanding of any issues felt by the community, which can be reviewed and if appropriate the planning application revised before being formally submitted.

Scottish Government

- The Scottish government determines all planning applications for energy infrastructure over 50MW, under [Section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989](#). Applications are assessed by the Energy Consents Unit (ECU) who make recommendations to the Scottish Minister for their consideration and final decision.
- The relevant planning policy is contained in [Scottish Planning Policy](#) and the National Planning Policy Framework 4.
- Statutory consultation requirements:
- There are no statutory pre-application consultation procedures for applications under section 36 and 37 however there is a minimum expectation for applicants to carry out a pre-application consultation (as outlined above).[15]



Wales

Local and Nationally Significant proposals

Local Planning Authorities in Wales determine all planning applications for solar projects below 10MW. Solar proposals above 10MW and below 350MW are determined by the Welsh Ministers and these projects are known as Developments of National Significance (DNS). All planning applications in Wales are made and determined under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (TCPA) (as amended by the [Planning \(Wales\) Act 2015](#)), and their associated regulations.

The National Development Framework (NDF) – known as [Future Wales](#) – is the highest tier of development plan in Wales. All LPAs have their own Local Development Plans (which need to be in general conformity with the NDF). The Planning (Wales) Act 2015 also allows for the adoption of regional/strategic development plans, but none has been progressed to date. Supporting national policy and guidance is contained in [Planning Policy Wales \(PPW\)](#), and a series of topic specific Technical Advice Notes (TANs).

If a project meets certain criteria, there is a statutory requirement for applicants to carry out community engagement on solar projects. For schemes under 10MW where the project is classed as ‘major development’ under the terms of the [Development Management Procedure \(Wales\) Order 2012](#) (i.e., the site is over 1 hectare) the applicant must carry out statutory pre-application consultation (PAC). All DNS projects must carry out PAC.

Notwithstanding PAC, it is strongly recommended that developers engage with communities at the earliest opportunity with their projects.

Planning Application Process

Proposals under 10MW are made directly to the LPA and determined under the Development Management Procedure (Wales) Order 2012.

DNS proposals are made to the Welsh Ministers. [Planning and Environment Decisions Wales \(PEDW\)](#) administers all DNS applications. A Planning Inspector is appointed who will assess an application before making a recommendation to the Welsh Ministers. Welsh Ministers take the final decision on DNS applications. There is no route to appeal the final decision, save for a claim for statutory review.

The DNS process is different to a standard planning application process and it involves several set stages which are set out in a series of Development of National Significance Regulations. The DNS process also allows for secondary consents to be included in the application e.g., for commons consent, planning permission for non-DNS aspects of the project, stopping up/diversion of public rights of way.

Statutory consultation requirements: LPA 'major development'

As a minimum, developers are required to fulfil specific requirements as part of their consultation process. This includes:

- Consulting specific community consultees, specialist consultees and any relevant persons.
- Serving written notice on owners or occupiers of land adjoining the site.
- Displaying site notices.

For schemes under 10MW which are classed as 'major development', the consultation period should run for a minimum of 28 days.

As part of the consultation process, there is a requirement to publicise what is essentially a draft of the full planning application (including all supporting information).

DNS projects

For DNS projects, as a minimum, developers are required to fulfil specific requirements as part of their consultation process. This includes:

- Consulting specific community consultees, specialist consultees and any relevant persons,
- Serving written notice on owners or occupiers of land adjoining the site,
- Displaying site notices
- Publicising the application in a local newspaper.

For DNS projects the consultation should run for a minimum of 6 weeks. It may be prudent to offer a longer period of consultation depending on the nature of the project.

As part of the consultation process, there is a requirement to publicise what is essentially a draft of the full planning application (including all supporting information).

Local communities should be encouraged to engage with the project and consultation process at the pre-application stage. This provides an opportunity for communities to provide feedback and voice concerns.

Once the consultation process has ended for DNS proposals, developers must submit a consultation report with the DNS application. The report will include details of the consultation process, a summary of any comments and the representation received and the applicant's response to them. [16]

Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (Wales): Projects of 350MW and above

For a project of 350MW or above in Wales, a Planning Inspector assesses the application and makes a recommendation to the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State will take the final decision on whether to approve the DCO. The process under the Planning Act 2008 is followed for NSIPs in Wales.

The relevant planning policy guidance is contained in [National Policy Statements](#) (NPSs).

NSIP projects in Wales, are required to provide a SoCC (parameters of which are set out in the above). The SoCC will be reviewed by the relevant LPA and proposals made on how best to consult with local communities. The developer will then consult on the proposed project with the community, or communities, as set out in the SoCC. Further details can be found on the [National Infrastructure Planning website](#). The SoCC must be agreed between the developer and the LPA and published prior to the Statutory Consultation phase, otherwise the DCO application will not be compliant.

The SoCC has value beyond being an important aspect of legal compliance. By working with the host LPA to agree an approach to the consultation, the developer can proceed with the comfort that they and the authorities' expectations about the consultation process are in the same place. The SoCC process can also be valuable in adding to the developer's knowledge about the communities in which they are working.

Informal, or non-statutory, consultation with stakeholders and communities is highly recommended by PEDW and can take place at any time, either before or after the SoCC.

Northern Ireland

Local Planning Authorities in Northern Ireland determine all planning applications for energy infrastructure projects below 30MWac capacity. Applications are considered under the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) and the Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2035. In addition LPAs will have their local development plans for the area which will be taken into consideration.

Projects with an installed capacity of less than 30MW or below will be categorised as either 'local' or 'major' developments.

Local developments – projects between 0 and 4.9MW

The LPA will assess local development projects under 5MW. For projects of this size there is no statutory requirement to carry out community engagement consultations at either the pre-application or application stage. The LPA will likely undertake a formal consultation. Nevertheless, it is highly recommended that developers proactively engage with communities at the earliest opportunity irrespective of the project size.

Major developments – projects between 5MW and 29.9MW

Project applications between 5MW and 29.9MW are classed as major developments (defined in [The Planning \(Development Management\) Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2015](#)) and will be considered by the Local Planning Authority.

All major and regionally significant development applications are subject to pre-application community consultation (PACC) per the [Planning Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2011](#) and a PACC report prepared and submitted with the planning application. The level of pre-application engagement should be proportionate to the scale and complexity of the proposed development. [17] Undertaking a PACC can be mutually beneficial for both the developer and the community; for the community it provides an opportunity to learn about the proposed project and contribute their views before a formal application is submitted. For the developer it provides an opportunity to understand any preliminary concerns or misunderstandings and opportunities.

The PACC should contain:

- Prior to submitting a major applications proposal, the developer must give notice known as a 'Proposal of Application Notice' (PAN) to the local Authority. This must contain a general description of the project, information on the site's location, details of how an applicant should be corresponded with. Further information can be found here.
- Host a public event (at least one and in locality to the proposed development).
- Publish notice in a local newspaper (containing information on where information on the proposal can be obtained (such as a website), how an individual can engage with the developer, public events (of which notice must be at least 7 days prior to the public event).

-Carry out any further PACC measures required by the planning authority (the authority has 21 days from the receipt of the proposal of application notice to make such requirements).

Following the pre-application community consultation (and submission of PAN at least 12 weeks in advance of the application being submitted) the developer is required to submit a report outlining how the pre-application consultation has been undertaken in line with the statutory requirements. The PACC report should cover:

- Description and evidence of the consultations, specifying when, where and with whom they took place (evidence of the consultation process, such as dates and copies of advertisements, references to materials provided at events, minutes of meetings and samples of letters/leaflets if applicable.)
- Documentation of dates, venues and attendance numbers for all consultations events and meetings.
- Clear evidence as to how the developer has tried to ensure accessibility of public events to all community members
- A summary of comments from the general public/those consulted and how the developer has considered the feedback.
- A summary of primary issues/concerns raised through the consultation and how they've been responded to.
- Details as to how the proposal has been changed based on the consultation
- Information on existing liaison arrangements, arrangements with the local community or proposed monitoring during the construction and operational phases of the project.

Pre-application and consultation guidance is available on the Department for Environments website [here](#).

Regionally significant developments: Projects 30MW or above

Projects with a generating capacity 30MW or above are considered as regionally significant applications under The Planning (Development Management) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 and the 2011 Planning Act and are submitted to and determined by the Department of Infrastructure.

Regionally significant development projects have a statutory obligation to undertake a PACC (as outlined above) which will be determined by the department.

References

- [1] <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2023-0124/#:~:text=In%20June%202019%2C%20with%20the,as%20the%20net%20zero%20target.>
- [2] <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/resear.>
- [3] <https://www.solarpowerportal.co.uk/uk-on-track-to-add-1-7-gwp-dc-of-solar-pv-in-2023/>
- [4] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/electricity-generation-costs-2023>
- [5] https://solarenergyuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Copper-Consultancy_Solar-Energy-UK_Public-attitudes-to-solar_January-2022.pdf
<https://solarenergyuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/A-study-of-public-attitudes-to-solar-development.pdf>
- [6] <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/public-attitudes-tracking-survey>.
- [7] For example, Solar Energy UK has produced a variety of documentation on A) Increasing biodiversity on solar projects, B) Solar projects, agriculture and food security (UK wide and Wales), C) The facts of solar energy and D) 11 solar farm commitments.
- [8] Wider research includes A) Copper Consultancy's study into public perception on solar projects, B) BRE Community Engagement good practice guidance for solar projects, and C) Carbon Brief produced an article on solar and agriculture.
- [9] In England and Wales this can be referred to as a 'statement of community consultation' (SOCC). In Scotland it is a 'Pre-application consultation' (PAC) and in Northern Ireland a 'Pre-application community consultation' (PACC). Further information on each can be found in the annex.
- [10] <https://www.gov.wales/welsh-language-data-annual-population-survey-april-2022-march-2023>
- [11] <https://solarenergyuk.org/resource/solar-habitat-2024-ecological-trends-on-solar-farms-in-the-uk/>
- [12] <https://infrastructure.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/application-process/frequently-asked-questions/section-47-faq/>
- [13] Energy consents - Energy infrastructure - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)
- [14] https://www.fife.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/162415/PAN-Proposal-of-Application-Notice-1.pdf
- [15] Energy Consents Unit: Good Practice Guidance for Applications under Section 36 and 37 of the Electricity Act 1989 - February 2022 (www.gov.scot)
- [16] <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-07/developments-of-national-significance-guidance-the-pre-application-stage.pdf>
- [17] [Development Management Practice Note 10 Pre-Application Community Consultation \(and Pre-Application Discussions\) \(infrastructure-ni.gov.uk\)](https://infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/development-management-practice-note-10-pre-application-community-consultation-and-pre-application-discussions/)

Notes



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