

Powering Communities with Renewables Workshop Report

A CPRE Avon and Bristol Workshop

22nd February 2024

The Engine Shed, Bristol



The countryside charity
Avon and Bristol



Quartet
Community
Foundation

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Introduction and Welcome - Andy Tickle

Andy Tickle welcomed the participants and thanked everyone for attending:

Thank you so much for coming, this is the first community energy event for CPRE AB.

My name is Andy Tickle, I'm here for all of you to get the most out of the day. It's about helping you fill in the gaps in your knowledge, learning from others, and starting a conversation.

I've worked with CPRE on a local level for the last 20 years, but I also work with the national organisation on our community energy visioning process which I'm going to explain in a little bit.

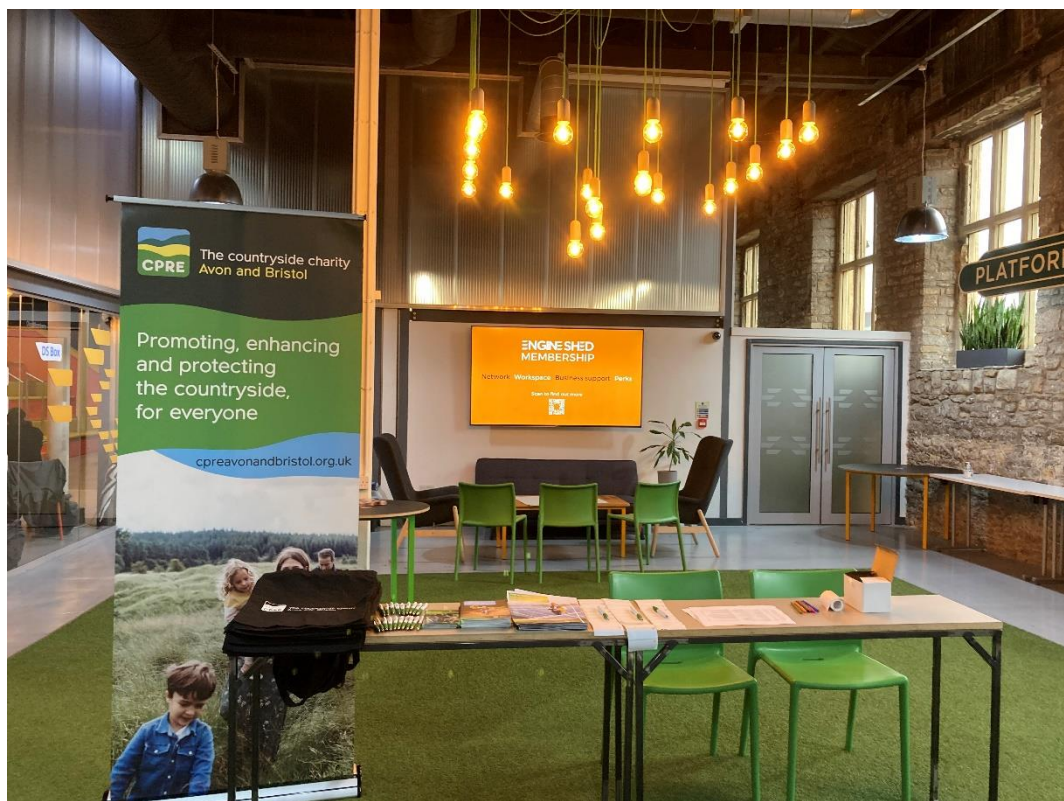
I can see from the attendee list there is a really good mix of people in the room, especially from local communities, but also from local authorities wanting to find out what their community wants and how they can help them. So, I think we absolutely have the right people in the room today.

It's very much a programme of half and half, half of the session will be transmitting information, to get all of you up to speed, and half will be hearing back from you about what you need and where we can go following this session.

There will be some resources sent out following the event, and we hope this is just the beginning of starting a relationship with us at CPRE Avon and Bristol. So please view this session as the beginning of a journey, rather than the 'be all and end all'.

We want you to enjoy the day, and we want to work together to find solutions for the future and build relationships, and most importantly we want to work together to build community energy.

And finally, we thank Quartet Community Foundation for sponsoring this event.



About CPRE Avon and Bristol -Mary-Jane Wilshire

About CPRE

Hi all, thanks for coming. I'm Mary-Jane Wilshire, the director here at CPRE Avon and Bristol and before we get into the main subject matter of the workshop I just wanted to take a couple of minutes to tell you a little more about us and what we do.

As a federated organisation, this branch is one of 49 across England – and we are coordinated by a national office in London.

In its simplest terms, the national office coordinates research, runs campaigns, lobbies government; rather as the local branches deliver projects on the ground and get involved with specific campaigns to ensure our reach is in the best interests of our communities.



CPRE and our Priorities

So CPRE, we are the countryside charity, we are about promoting and protecting the countryside. This includes its cultural and natural heritage, its landscape, and its rural economies. We are very much about connecting people to the countryside also, so that we can ensure all sections of society enjoy the health benefits that the countryside provides.

Underpinning all of that is our commitment to safeguarding access to the countryside for the future. We do this by campaigning for a safer and fairer planning system, and also by engaging with communities to ensure that citizens, activists and decision makers of the future are engaged in our work.

CPRE will be celebrating our 100th anniversary in two years' time in 2026 which I think is amazing, there aren't many organisations that can claim that longevity and that long term influence. We are behind some of the most important ideas that have campaigned for the protection of the countryside such as national park legislation, green belt regulations, and right to roam. And now that climate change and ecological decline are our most important issues facing society, CPRE have responded by putting this across all of what we do.

We are very clear, at national and at local level, that climate breakdown poses one of the most serious threats to the countryside. We also see its very important to support communities to develop solutions on the ground which is why we are running our Rooftop Renewable campaign which Paul Miner will speak to you about, and similarly why we've identified one of our principal priorities as the roll out of the community energy visioning process, which we are going to be talking about today.

And we have received some funding from Quartet Community Foundation to start a conversation with communities to find out where you are on your journey, and also to tell you about some of the trailed and tested tools and process that we developed to move community energy along, and I really hope that we you leave today you will have a better understanding of how we can work together and collaborate.

Just quickly touching on our other priorities; we also run a hedgerow restoration programme called 'Hedgerow Heroes' where we involve volunteers in planting and restoring hedgerows, building capacity among private and public landowners to better manage hedgerows.

And our commitment to our long-term priority is about helping communities to have a say in the planning system, so that it's more sustainable and fairer. And we do that through supporting our district groups which are some of you here today.

The Team

Finally, I really want to show you our team here at CPRE Avon and Bristol, we are small but we have big ambitions.

Mary-Jane Wilshire, that's me, I'm the Director

Phoebe Barker is our Information and Communications Coordinator

We have two project managers on our Hedgerow Heroes project: Sonia Parsons and Sarah Sawyer

Sarah Pitt is our Chair of Trustees and is joining us today.

And then we also have our amazing District Groups who work tirelessly keeping a watch over our areas.

Thank you.

Community Energy - Andy Tickle

Community Energy

We wanted to give you an introduction into why CPRE and why community energy and what we've been doing on the topic for the last three of four years or so.

So, why community energy?

We think that community energy is a really good fit with CPRE's values and ethos. We have a shorthand for our approach to renewables which is 'Renewables Done Well' that's our aspiration. But we also know that many renewable energy schemes, often through the planning system – particularly very big projects – are not done well, and that causes opposition, friction, and people get a skewed view of what renewable energy is about, how it affects the countryside, how it affects landscapes – and that's not helpful. We need to get to net zero, and renewables are a big part of achieving that, so they need to be done well and CPRE is about advocacy in the planning system to get everyone the best outcome for low carbon energy. That includes helping communities benefit from a system that works for them.

We see community energy as bottom-up people power, something that meets local needs, fits within the local landscape, and delivers local benefits.

There are also some big system benefits to having lots of 'distributed energy' (also known as 'decentralised energy') i.e. not having to move power from a large windfarm in Scotland, for example, all the way down to Bristol. Lots of local energy should reduce the need of moving power across the country, however the local grid was originally made for the purpose of transporting power from a large power station to your home, but in terms of flows coming back the other way, it doesn't really work for that.

In addition, CPRE work on a national level to help try and create the policy conditions for things that we want – i.e. community energy – to happen on the ground.

Just a quick one - we also have a climate emergency policy, which is wrapped up in a document called 'Greener Better Faster', it's a very high-level manifesto of what we want.

Greener: *countryside/nature at the heart of a green recovery - thriving landscapes, nature-based solutions*

Better: *climate solutions support the rural economy, working with/led by local communities, benefits wildlife, minimises landscape impacts*

Faster: *led and supported by communities, participative local planning eases route to social consent. If we work with communities instead of dumping things on them, the whole process will move faster.*

The Community Energy Visioning Process

About three or four years ago, CPRE managed to get money from the MCS foundation. MCS is a certification scheme for renewable equipment and renewable installers – if your equipment is MSC certified you should be ok.

MCS funded our programme of going out into communities, finding out what they wanted, and helping them create a vision for renewables in their local area.

The process is driven by CPRE's response to the climate emergency. It's a proactive positive response, not CPRE saying 'no' to things.

It shows rural renewables 'done well'.

It has communities at its centre, making their own plan – I was involved in facilitating the workshops and I was there as the facilitator of what the community wanted. We were not there to impose what we want, we are helpful guides to start a process.

We did three pilots in North Yorkshire in 2021. We then did the national rollout 2022-3 in Suffolk, Rutland, Derbyshire and South Yorkshire

In 2016 we had a project with the Centre for Sustainable Energy (CSE) here in Bristol, to start piloting this kind of process of going out into communities to find out what they wanted, it was called Future Energy Landscapes, and two were done in this region.

We then reinvented it for the new funding stream. What we were doing differently was that we were interested in 'how will this look in your landscape'. Because that was the key thing, would it make your local area better or worse? And will you be able to tolerate the degree of landscape change if it was well placed and well done? This visualisation process of mapping out what it would look like on the ground was really important.

The Centre for Sustainable Energy still run their Future Energy Landscapes (FEL) programme, this brings together local authorities and communities to work out what they want, but they don't do the visualisation process- that's kind of our landscape speciality and differentiates CEV from FEL.

We are interested in more communities in this area going down our Community Energy Visioning route, if they feel it is the right route for them.

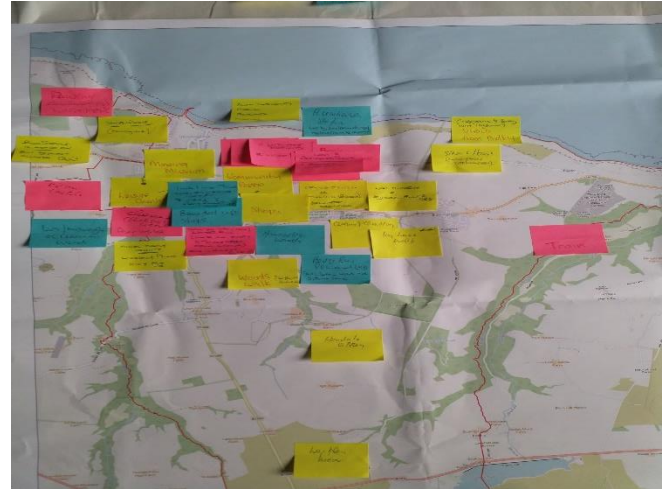
The project works as a series of 3 workshops over the course of 3 weeks, 3 hours per session in a local venue, say a parish hall – we come to you. And the first workshop is centred on the community telling us what they like and dislike about their local area. We then move on to identifying the energy needs of the community and the degree of ambition to cut carbon, encompassing building retrofits as well as the generation of power. We are generally interested in how renewables can fit into rural areas, and hopefully by the end of the workshops we have a comprehensive map of identified places and projects, and a sense of how much low carbon energy this can give you. We also co-produce a document with you to give you a template of what you decided, what's possible, and where to go next.

Here are some pictures from one of the workshops in the North York Moors.



People discussing options.

Likes and dislikes, what people value about their community.



Visualisations of what renewables the community wanted in their local landscapes, created by local artists.



Questions for Andy Tickle

Why haven't more communities gone through with it?

- *Lack of local support, people came along and were interested, but maybe they don't have time or a person confident enough to drive the process.*

How big is a community?

- *The ones we piloted were parishes. Some parishes were too small to easily find enough generating options, it's about finding the right scale.*

How small is too small?

- *It's all about acreage – if your area is predominantly high-grade farmland then farmers may be unwilling to consider ground mounted solar but there may be other options – this is what we discuss in the workshops.*



Better planning for net zero - Paul Miner, CPRE

Hello everybody, it's a real pleasure to be back at CPRE Avon and Bristol.

I've worked for CPRE for over 25 years, and it's the first time in a while I've been back to my home group as I'm from Bath originally. I am a chartered town planner, did my master's at UWE, and now I am head of Policy and Planning at CPRE.

Rooftop Solar Campaign

We are working on a rooftop solar campaign; it is part of our work around the general election but also a part of our wider work with energy. This presentation is going to be the work we are currently doing with rooftop solar.

We've been clear in our manifesto that climate change is the biggest threat to the countryside that we know and love, and we need to take action toward net zero – and a key element of this is moving toward getting our energy from renewable sources.

But there has always been this tension between that and the work we've done more traditionally around landscape protection and preservation.

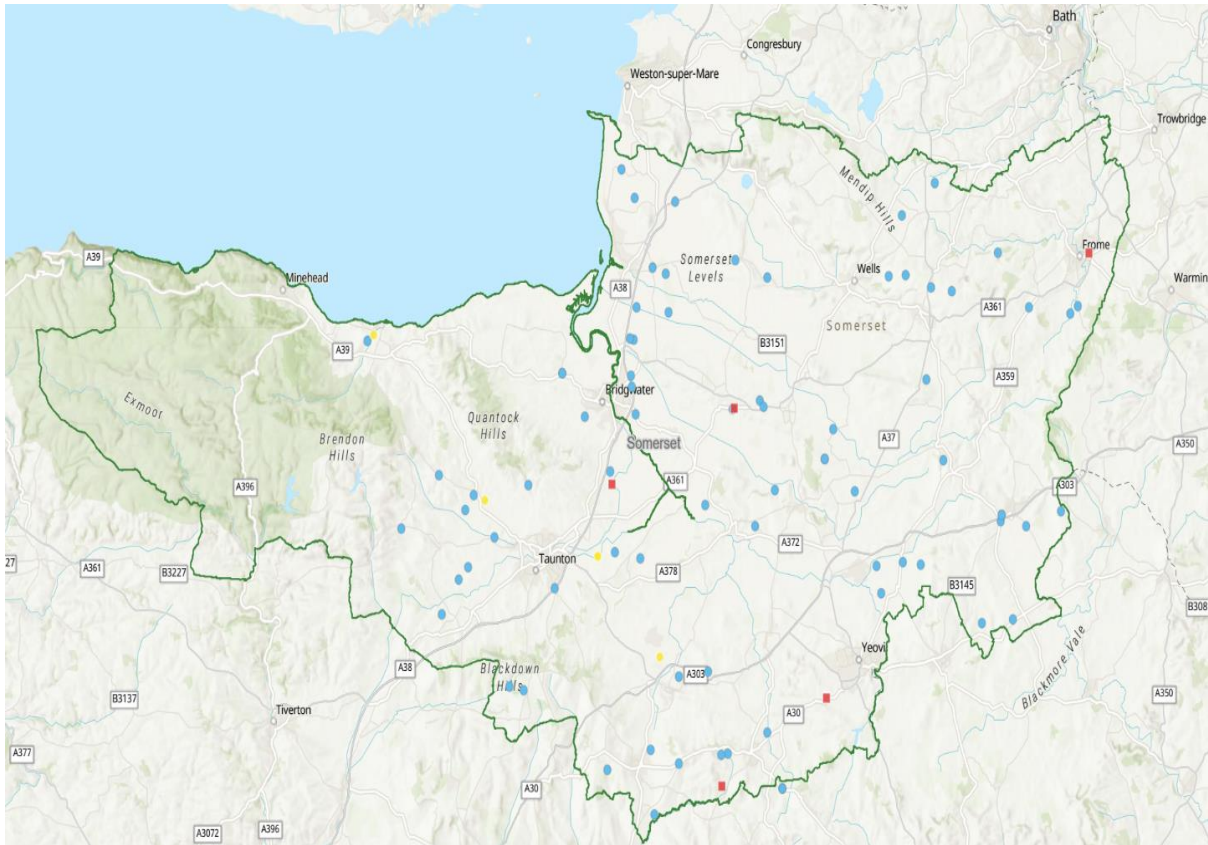
As Andy was talking about 'Renewables Done Well', in recent years we've seen a lot of renewable energy done badly, particularly large onshore windfarms imposed on communities via planning appeals, and more recently we've seen a lot of badly designed sites of ground mounted solar.

And it's this reason that we wanted to show that there is an alternative to that. Reaching net zero will still inevitably involve using ground mounted solar in the foreseeable future, but at the same time there is a lot more rooftop capacity out there, and a lot more than the solar industry and the government have been suggesting.

We commissioned the University College London Energy Institute to look at the potential for rooftop solar across England. And what we found was that up to 2035 there is enough capacity for at least 40-50 gigawatts of energy using south facing rooftops around England.

And what's more is that by 2050, if we get a positive attitude towards rooftop solar, we could potentially double that to 120 gigawatts.

We have over a quarter of a million south facing commercial rooftops, and only a very small proportion of this commercial roof space is being used for rooftop solar. The industry is actually very keen to up that utilization from that very small 5% current rate. There's a good summary of the work that UCL did called 'Shout from the Rooftops' which is available on our website: [UCL Report](#).



This is a map of the Somerset Council area (the post 1974 county boundary). This shows where solar farms are currently, where they're being developed or where there are solar farm applications. And you can see from this map that there is no indication of a strategic approach, quite a few of these farms have been located quite close to the electricity transmission lines as they can get to the community grid connection. We've seen the recent one in Watchet, West Somerset where a farmer is having to be evicted from his land to accommodate for the solar farms. So, it shows the number of issues with this landowner friendly approach.

To reiterate though, we are not saying no ground mounted solar – it will still have a role to play in reaching capacity and speed, but the capacity that we've identified for rooftop solar leads us to question whether this is the right approach in the longer term, and that actually a rooftop-first approach would be much more beneficial, and spread the benefits of having renewable energy over a much wider proportion of society than this current landowner friendly approach. And also, the current farms that are being permitted are generally given a 40-year timescale permission, and we think that should be given more closer scrutiny and attention because it's unreasonable to assume that they will be needed for that long.

So just following on from that there are benefits to rooftop solar as far as we can see:

- *Spares land for food and nature, which particularly means that farmers don't need to be evicted from their land.*
- *Can spread the benefits of renewable energy generation to a much wider section of households and can help cut bills.*

- *If you generate closer to where the energy is used, you lose much less of it in transmission.*
- *More public support- surveys have found that taking a rooftop-first approach has much more public support and we've seen in other countries, like Germany and France for example, that a rooftop-first approach has been willingly taken up.*

We're calling for a number of actions by our government and lobbyists to realise this considerable rooftop potential that we've identified. In particular we should have rooftop panels as standard on all new build housing.

That was the direction of travel in planning policy until about 2015 when we had the code for sustainable homes, until it was abolished by the then-chancellor George Osborne. And that has caused a massive amount of damage and really set us back, because some of the houses that have been built since then, not only are they of shocking aesthetic design quality, but they also don't meet basic energy performance certificates. You even see now some newbuilds that have been built since 2015 have category E or D energy ratings. We need to reverse that.

Local Area Energy Plans will be increasingly important – the definitive place to go to find out about these is the [Energy Systems Catapult website](#), because they're tracking progress towards Local Area Energy Plans across the country and they have an interactive map where you can see everything that has been done. The Southwest is the region where it's been done the least. The only places that have done them are Cornwall, Bournemouth, and Exeter.

The outstanding example for a Local Area Energy Plan is Greater Manchester, which has set up a rooftop solar target within its area energy plan. They can generate about 1TWH per year from energy from rooftop solar on both commercial and residential buildings. So that's a really good practical example that we think local authorities could learn from. The Community Energy Visioning process Andy is talking about is very much at a parish or community level, but Local Area Energy Plans usually work on a sub-regional level, and the more of these you get, the easier it becomes for some of these parish-level projects to take place.

We need a sequential 'roof first' approach for determining applications, so again questioning the need for more ground-mounted solar, but of course there will be cases where they are appropriate and needed to meet our energy demands for the future.

More investment is needed in the grid to lower connection costs and time. And calling for more encouragement for local energy generation. We also work with other coalitions who are doing more to advocate for the policy changes that are needed.

Help out with our Rooftop Renewables Campaign

- Sign our petition to the secretary of state for energy Security and Net Zero, Claire Coutinho MP to commit to a target for at least 60% of the solar energy required by 2035 to be delivered through rooftop solar.
- Sign our petition to call on the government to unleash the potential of rooftop solar, over 26,000 people have taken action so far, help us reach 30,000.

In terms of successful case studies of where rooftop solar has been done, we have a couple. Sussex University declared a climate emergency and they installed rooftop solar on a number of their buildings and they generate a significant amount of energy from them.

Ashwater in Devon, the parish council installed wind turbines on top of the village hall which has worked really well, they did have some support from a Feed-in Tariff. Although the government did scrap Feed-in Tariff about ten years ago, we do still feel like to some degree they could play an important role in the future.

We have had a number of successful case studies following our rooftop renewables campaign, head to the bottom of the page on our website to learn more about them: [Our rooftop solar campaign - CPRE](#)

Coming up for CPRE

We've also got more coming out, in the next few weeks we're about to publish a report that was commissioned by the firm WPI Economics on how you can boost rates of solar deployment based on the experiences of other countries. In particular, the example of Germany shows that there is a role for Feed-in Tariffs or some kind of tariff that gives support for households to install panels, in particular meet the upfront costs of installing panels, which is quite considerable for people on average incomes. Take Berlin for example, the amount they pay individual households for generating electricity that goes into the grid is twice what is typically paid in the UK.

In addition to scaling up the community energy work which we are very keen to do, we've also done research into the capacity of brownfield sites for housing, so we've identified there's enough brownfield sites around England for 1 million new homes, one of the things UCL did in their research for us was show that if you use this brownfield site capacity and add solar panels on the roof, that shows the potential of brownfield capacity. So, when we talk about brownfield capacity for the housing future, we are also looking at what can be done to incorporate solar panels into that housing as well.

We are also preparing a best practice guide for councils, and that will be out shortly.

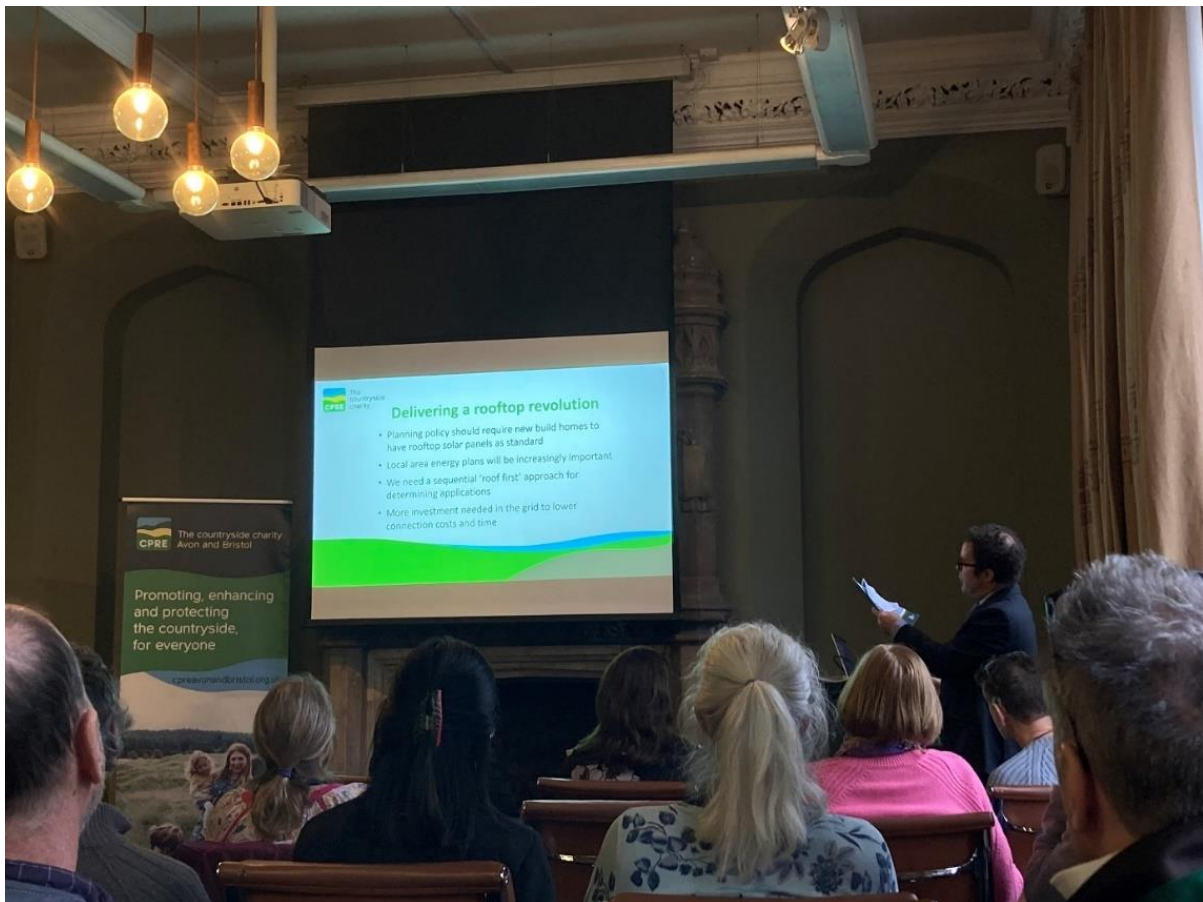
Finally, we are currently doing a live campaign at the moment, which is about the government's future homes consultation, this is actually going to reverse the damage that was created by abolishing the code for sustainable homes, and potentially make rooftop solar mandatory on all new buildings, both commercial and residential. There's a campaign live on the [website](#) and we urge every one of you who supports that campaign to get involved.

How you can help us at CPRE:

- Sign our petition calling on the government to unleash the potential of rooftop solar: [Join the call for a rooftop revolution - CPRE, the countryside charity](#)
- Respond to the latest government consultation: [Government consultation offers hope of rooftop solar on new buildings - CPRE](#)

- Following support from 35 parliamentary champions, the government’s consultation on the Future Homes and Buildings Standards, out now, could be a major new win for our campaign. Rooftop solar can help reduce the devastating impacts of climate collapse on our countryside, whilst protecting much-loved landscapes from industrial ground-mounted schemes.
- How to respond: We are calling on all our supporters, and everyone who wants to help protect the countryside for future generations, to join us in responding to the government’s consultation. By supporting the proposals for mandatory rooftop solar on most new buildings, we can make significant progress in reaching net zero while protecting our countryside.
- It takes just a couple of minutes to respond to the consultation, which you can do either via [this survey link](#) or [via email](#). You’ll need to select answers to the questions which [can be found in Annex B](#), and questions 7-11 cover rooftop solar. To support our campaign for rooftop solar as standard on new buildings, select ‘Option 1’ for questions 7, 9 and 10.

Ask your MP to be a parliamentary champion: [Tell your MP to become a Rooftop Solar Champion - CPRE, the countryside charity](#)



Questions for Paul Miner

How realistic is it to get the government to make it a conditional to have rooftop solar on planning?

- *Whilst it is not a condition to have rooftop solar on newbuilds, the government has recently revised its national planning framework, and made changes to its policy. It now becomes a consideration in planning applications for renovating existing buildings: local authorities can look to get rooftop solar as a part of the renovation. The committed development rights have changed to allow individuals to allow additional households to put solar on buildings which we think is a step in the right direction.*

Why did we campaign for only south facing roofs when East and West facing panels are almost as efficient?

- *Of course we understand the equal potential of East and West facing roofs for solar generation. We have just quantified the potential of South-facing roofs as it is good for government as a starting point to policy changes – for example by highlighting that we can generate more than half of low carbon energy on South-facing warehouse rooftops and carparks alone, it is an incredible starting point for policy makers to understand how much potential we have for rooftop solar in the UK.*

What are the obstacles for getting more commercial businesses to have solar on their roofs?

- *In more cases than you may think, its simply because they haven't thought about it, often because it's not clear which department in the company it falls into, and schemes like this often need someone passionate to take initiative. It's worth seeing what the UK warehouse association thinks of it, but from what I understand, companies do want to do more.*

Local / regional government initiatives - Marion Britton, WECA

Hi everyone, I'm Marion and I am a Programme Manager at the West of England Combined Authority. We were set up by Bath and North East Somerset (BANES), Bristol, and South Gloucestershire council to make decisions at a local level that benefit our local communities. We get funding from the government, and that means that decisions about that funding are made in the West of England, rather than over in Westminster. We also work very closely with North Somerset.

I always describe the role of our organisation as working on those issues that don't stop at the local authority boundary. We take a combined approach to issues; things like the economy, transport, but also climate and nature are our priorities also.

Lawrence Weston Wind Turbine Project

We have been lucky to be involved in a community energy project, a wind turbine project in the last couple of years. We gave it some European funding, and it's just a great example of, as Andy was saying, 'renewables done well', that have community support.

It has been set up by the community in Lawrence Weston, so not particularly rural, in Bristol. And this is an area that hasn't really benefited from the economic growth of the rest of the city, so this has been a great opportunity. So, not only have they been able to generate a considerable amount of energy, decarbonising our electricity that goes into our national grid, but they've also benefitted from it as a community, it is their local energy resource. There are lots of new turbines now in Avonmouth where a lot of the revenue is going out to the companies that developed them, this project is really about making sure that the communities benefit.

Across the lifetime of the turbine, which is about 25 years, they will receive about £100,00 every year to spend on delivering on their community and their climate plan. It's also an opportunity to engage their community on climate, and they've been able to improve the biodiversity at the site also.

We've got the case study on our website so please do have a look at that: [Ambition Community Energy Case Study](#). It explores the challenges they've faced, and the types of finance that they had to find, so I really recommend reading it.

Climate and Nature Ambitions

With our regional and local authority partners we've got a number of ambitions;

- *we want to have net zero carbon emissions,*
- *we want wildlife and the natural environment to be in recovery,*
- *and we want to be resilient to the climate change happening.*

I'm sure you've realised 2030 is not far away, it's a very challenging target without changes at a national level, but it's really mobilised the organisations in our region to meet that target. So, for us we've got a green recovery fund which is about £40 million, that is dedicated to climate and nature.

Looking specifically at renewable energy we've got some specific aims and actions. We want to have more renewable energy generation across the region, and we want to be on that innovation edge so that we are supporting things like smart local energy systems, where we are really optimising energy generation, storage, and use, at the local level.

We've also got really clear roles for communities, we really understand the importance of a community's role in energy generation, and that's part of our strategy.



Schemes, Grants, and Projects

I'm going to run through some schemes and projects, so these are all available to groups that are based in Bath and North East Somerset, Bristol, and South Gloucestershire. There are a handful of them that are available to groups in Somerset too.

*We have our **Local Energy Scheme**, so if you have a project that you have developed the thinking around it this is a good fund for that. It may be that you need to do the Community Energy Visioning first, in order to develop a plan and make use of the funds. And note that even if you miss out this time around, we do run these funds quite often.*

- At least £275k for:
 - pre-feasibility – up to £25k
 - feasibility – up to £25k
 - development – up to £50k
- Capital fund to follow

Find out more here: [Local Energy Scheme](#)

Alongside that we have the **Community Energy Fund**, this is run by the South West Net Zero Hub, but they cover the whole of the South West Area, so this is available to groups in North Somerset.

- Open now - closes 25th March
- £2m for the South West:
 - Feasibility – up to £40k
 - Full Business planning – up to £100k

Find out more here: [Community Energy Fund](#)

Wind Turbines

We also have a Wind Turbine support project - **Sustainable Innovative Finance Foundations for Turbines (SIFFFT)**. Delivered by Bristol Energy Network, they have taken that community-led model from Lawrence Weston and they're applying that to look for other sites and other interested communities across the West of England.

- Identifying potential sites and interested communities
- Taking 3 sites through to planning
- Delivered by Bristol Energy Network

Unfortunately, we can't just build all the renewable energy that we need because the National Grid capacity isn't there to take everything. So, as a combined authority we are involved in a number of projects looking at things like Local Area Energy Planning, and we can also help facilitate conversations between communities and the National Grid if you've gotten to the stage where you have a project that's ready to go.

Retrofit

Moving on slightly from those renewable energy projects, a lot of community energy groups are starting to think about retrofit. So not only about generating energy, but how can they help reduce energy demand in their local area.

In the West of England, we have a project called **Retrofit West Advice**, this is impartial advice for homeowners about retrofit, delivered by Retrofit West Community Interest Company. They also have some community grants so that you can promote retrofit in your local area, and if you wanted to develop capacity to do home energy surveys, they have some funding for that also.

- Community grants:
 - marketing – up to £5k
 - capacity building – up to £20k

Find out more here: [Retrofit West Grants](#)

And then we've got **West of England Solar Together** which is a bulk buying scheme. This is about aggregating demand so you get a better price from installers, and this is another one available in North Somerset.

- Bulk buying scheme = lower costs
 - over 1,000 homes with solar PV, batteries and/or EV chargers
 - Round 3 possible this August

Find out more here: [West of England Solar Together](#)

Low Carbon Business support

We offer small and medium sized enterprises **free carbon surveys** to help them understand their energy uses, we look at their site and then come up with some useful solutions for them.

And then some of those businesses are able to go forward and apply for some of our grants. We've recently added **rooftop solar grants** for those businesses that have a lot of warehouse roof space, but you could also get it for smaller businesses under green business grants.

Find out more here: [Low Carbon Business Support](#)

We also have a lot of opportunities for residents in your area around the low carbon sector. We have a series of skills programmes, and we are trying to make sure we have a lot of green skills, and retrofit pathways.

You can find these programmes and information regarding green careers on WECA's skills connect page: [Skills Connect Page](#)

Contact

Micaela Basford is my colleague, she is the Renewable Energy Project Manager and manages most of the schemes I've mentioned so she's a great person to talk to and register your interest, she'd be happy to help and talk you through our schemes.

Contact Micaela at: 07 770 814 462.

Or get in touch at: renewables@WestOfEngland-CA.gov.uk

Bristol Energy Cooperative's journey - Marianne Brown

Who are Bristol Energy Cooperative? / What is Community Energy?

Bristol Energy Cooperative (BEC) is one of England's more established community energy organisations.

The term 'Community Energy' refers to the delivery of community-led renewable energy, energy demand reduction and energy supply projects, whether wholly owned or controlled by communities. It is about people taking democratic control over their energy future as well as working together across the country.

Community energy is all about connection, accountability, and care:

- *Connection: in a community, you understand the networks and who should be involved and everybody who makes that community what it is.*
- *Accountability: because you need to be willing to have conversations with local people involved.*
- *Care: wanting to do the best for where you live.*

We started in 2011 as a group of passionate volunteers and like-minded friends who wanted to take some positive action to tackle the climate crisis.

It's been a hard slog at times, but with their passion and determination, the Co-op has now grown to a team of nine paid staff (with more recruitments planned for this year), and some of the original founding team are still involved today. We are really looking forward to a bigger and brighter future.

Here is BEC in numbers:

We are a cooperative, so we are funded by investing members – thus far we've got 1,500 members.

The power that we generate powers 3,500 homes, and we have raised 15 million through ethical loans, community, and investment.

And there has been £400,000 in grants distributed to communities

Some of our projects

- *Solar farms in Lawrence Weston, Bristol (4.2 MWp) and in Puriton, Somerset (4.6 MWp)*
- *15 solar arrays: community-minded buildings, small businesses*
- *An award-winning solar array on TBY2 film and TV studios*

More than 2,300 PV panels, 1MW of power, meaning it is believed to be largest community-owned rooftop array in the UK. 1MWp is like having a power plant on the roof, it is enough to power equivalent of 250 homes a year.

TBY2 received Best Sustainability Initiative as part of the Global Production Awards at the Cannes Film Festival in France last year. They also received the second-highest score out of 12 studios in BAFTA Albert's new Studio Sustainability Standard.

We are a community benefit society, and we are dedicated to social value and always put community benefit over profit. We are led by social and environmental principles, and as a Co-op we are owned by our members, where it doesn't matter how much you invest – we are one member, one vote. Our rules also forbid the sale of BEC's assets to commercial organisations should it be wound up.

We provide grants through the Megawatt Community Energy Fund, which continues to provide vital support for communities. The total amount awarded in 2023 was £37,525.

Grants in 2023 included those to the CHEESE project which received £4,000 to provide 10 free thermal imaging surveys for householders identified as living in fuel poverty, and to subsequently assist them with applying for remedial work in their homes.

We have over £46,000 in bill savings for our host sites; an estimated carbon saving of 2339 tonnes CO₂e; and £400,000 given back to the community through grants, donations, and support funds.



Latest project: Bristol Beacon

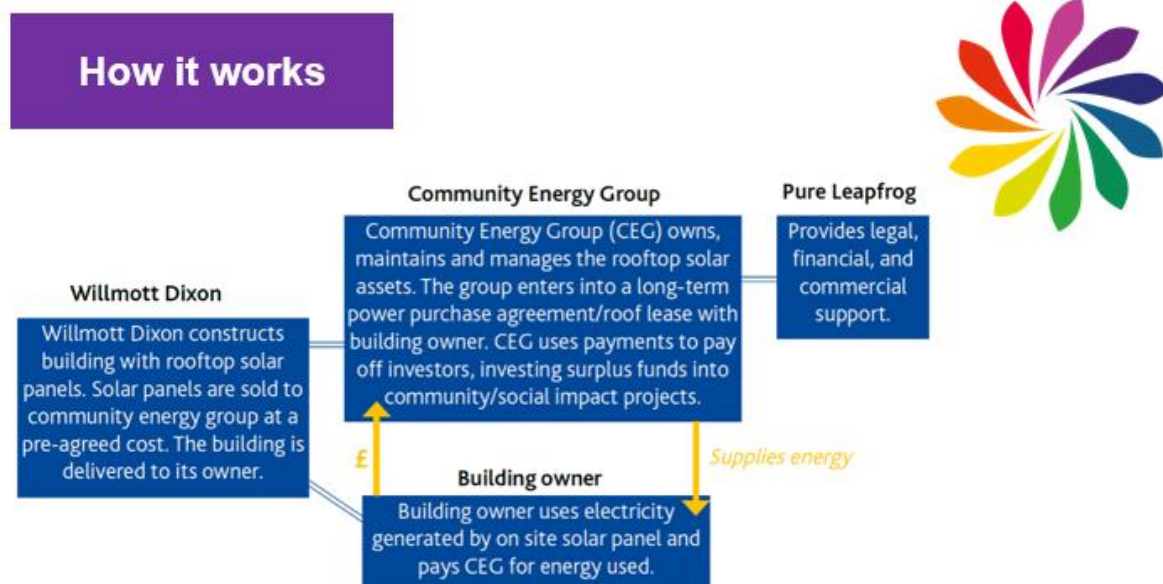
Our latest solar rooftop project is at the Bristol Beacon. It is an iconic building, with a lot of history and it is an incredible asset to the city as a beautiful music venue. It reopened in November and now on its roof is a solar array.

Our connection to Bristol Beacon came about with the support of Pure Leapfrog who introduced BEC to construction company Willmott Dixon and facilitated initial discussions and financial modelling – this is a prime example of the ecosystem that you need to connect with if you're trying to build a project.

We found this really helped to provide the building contractor with confidence that community energy really could deliver multiple benefits in terms of carbon savings, social value, and finances. A proposal was then pitched to Bristol Music Trust who run the venue, and the collaboration was widened to include Bristol City Council and local solar installation company Solarsense.

With our help, the construction company Willmott Dixon were able to install 348 solar panels on the roof, transforming it from a 30kWp array to 127kWp – four times more solar than originally planned. This gives the Beacon a huge boost in achieving its target of becoming the country's first carbon neutral music venue by 2030.

In the slide you can see how the model works: In this case BEC are the community energy group and Bristol City Council are the building owners.



The project provides a useful reference for future installations where the PV system is installed by the building contractor and adopted by a local community energy group upon

commissioning. This model makes it straightforward for building users to maximise renewable energy generation and strengthen their links to the community, whilst also ensuring that the installation ties in neatly with the contracts and specifications of the main refurbishment work.

The project in numbers:

- 348 panels = 127kWp
- 23 tonnes CO2 saving
- Annual bill saving around £2,400.
- Boosts green credentials.

We couldn't have done this project without partial funding from the West of England Combined Authority. The grant is from the Green Recovery Fund and has a particular focus on educational and community buildings. It allows us to:

- *Develop a site which might not otherwise be viable.*
- *Improve the attractiveness of our community energy offering.*
- *Develop larger installations which make full use of available roof space.*

The grant allowed us to initiate our South West Local Solar Scheme, through which we're aiming to install 2MW of rooftop solar across the region by 2025.

So far nearly 50 different locations have been involved with talks ongoing for rooftop installations on schools, small and medium enterprises, and community buildings from South Bristol to South Gloucestershire.

Getting involved

You can sign up to our mailing list and contact us at info@bristolenergy.coop

Join the movement and spread the word. Community energy really has a huge benefit to your community, and where you live. We want to get more people on board, this is something that could improve your life and the people around you. Especially at a time when we're suffering from increased isolation, and where the structures that are supposed to support us are breaking down - we can get together and really make a difference, not just for ourselves but for others.

The breakout groups

Community organising: forming a group and staying together

Facilitators: Andy Tickle and Mary Jane Wiltshire

A variety of issues were shared initially by attending community and organisation representatives:

- **Old Sodbury:** desire to link up a possible village hall heat pump initiative with solar PV generation; how to engage to get traction for a project?
- **Barton Hill estate:** successful eight year campaign to oppose new diesel generation and get roof PV instead; how to go beyond short term gains and plan long term?
- **Thornbury:** how to go beyond initial engagement on sustainability projects and also widen to adjacent communities? Especially with some negative experience of badly done community engagement
- **West of England Rural Network trustee:** WERN wanting to do more in (renewable) energy area to complement existing village projects; want to find partnerships for enhanced delivery. Recommended value of CSE Future Energy Landscapes approach as a way to break down barriers between local authorities and communities
- **Portishead TC:** very recent decision to pursue project to address energy issues on Council-owned building stock (especially solar PV). Where to start and the best route to find project monies, especially at short notice?
- **Backwell:** already has local sustainability group and environmental trust (latter with narrow focus?); some big housing developments slated for area and causing negative vibes; how to get positive project going in this situation?
- **Keynsham TC:** town council already support community group initiatives, but community energy seems very complex – where to start; how to catalyse action?

A number of possible themes came out of the ensuing discussion:

- Greater need for signposting to a knowledge bank or mapping some form of matrix of organisations/resources (if this already exists, e.g. CSE, BEN etc, how to ensure its visibility?)
- Available schemes/grants seemed complex and overlapping.
- Difficult to understand how community energy ‘fitted’ with local authority processes.
- Need to identify resources on how to start groups up and keep them going.
- A possible role for CPRE as independent broker?
- Need for grant assistance to also include frontloaded professional (staff) support.
- Grants also to leave accessible capacity building legacy/experience as well as physical community assets.

Dealing with the planning system for renewables

Facilitator: Paul Miner, CPRE

A variety of experiences were shared with the group, although many attendees were there to listen and learn. Highlights included:

- Representatives from Bristol Energy Network (BEN), Tytherington, Abbots Leigh, Lawrence Weston, Publow with Pensford, Bristol, Cleve PC (N Somerset).

- Wide experience from home solar installation, grant schemes, planning and heritage issues, managing a community development foundation, hydropower, neighbourhood plans, problems getting grid connections, community energy planning.

Summary thoughts included:

- Neighbourhood planning was not the best/easy route for community energy development.
- possible that new 'neighbourhood priority statements' might be a quicker route to promote community energy ambitions.
- grid connection issues were problematic – perhaps distribution companies could provide maps of capacity?
- BEN provided good access point for info and grants.
- Positivity over public benefits of community energy.

Finance and Raising Income

Facilitators: Marion Britton and Will Houghton (BEC)

These were the questions posed by the group:

- Sources of revenue/capital funding?
- How to avoid cowboy (solar) installers?
- How do we get people to sign up (noting that some not interested; some put off by costs?)
- How do we move on from starting up/being a new group?
- Need information for different scales of project (homes; businesses; large projects)
- How to generate income?
- How to take the next steps/understand the whole journey?
- How to overcome worries about the use of land?
- Can community energy groups help finance solar on 'difficult' roofs? (does this mean can they help leverage money for less commercially viable projects?)
- What impact does the current financial situation (e.g. low interest rates) have on viability?
- Expertise available? Grid request, structural surveys, grid capacity, smart systems.
- Different finance models: projects, crowdfunding/share offers.

Summary thoughts:

- A lot of support expressed/need recognised for community energy, need to support with provision of info in the early stages.
- Community energy and its financing model is an important part of the energy ecosystem.

Closing the session

Andy closes the session and thanks everyone for coming, and the speakers for their support. Materials, slides, and feedback forms will be distributed shortly after the event.

There was also a lot of interest in sharing details with participants who were networking, this will be an option in the feedback form for you to agree with, in line with our GDPR principles.

Thank you for your interest in us at CPRE Avon and Bristol, and this is just the beginning of our work in renewable energy.

-Session closes-