



Proposed Ground Mounted Solar Array at Leigh Farm, Pucklechurch

Pre-Planning Application Consultation - Report

Background

South Gloucestershire Council identified a site in the village of Pucklechurch as the best council-owned site for a solar panel farm. The local Parish Plan also included an ambition to develop a renewable energy project in the area. Before deciding whether to submit a planning application for the scheme the Council wanted to hear the views of local residents and stakeholders on the proposals.

Consultation methodology

A dedicated page on the Council's Consultation website was set-up with key documents made available including a Summary Information paper, a Questions and Answers factsheet and access to a short questionnaire about the proposals (online and printable hard-copy).

A letter to local residents was mailed out and also made available on the webpage.

Engagement Activity

As part of reaching out to local residents, staff from the Council had a stall at the Pucklechurch Revel, (an annual summer community event), held a drop-in session at the local community centre and attended a public meeting in the village solely concerning these proposals. 53 questionnaires were completed and returned.

Key Findings

Leigh Farm solar project update

- 59% of those responding were in favour of the proposal for a solar panel array at Leigh farm, Pucklechurch. Those not in support totalled 32% with 9% of respondents answering as unsure
- 72% of those who answered the survey supported the use of ground mounted solar panels for generating energy on appropriate sites in the UK

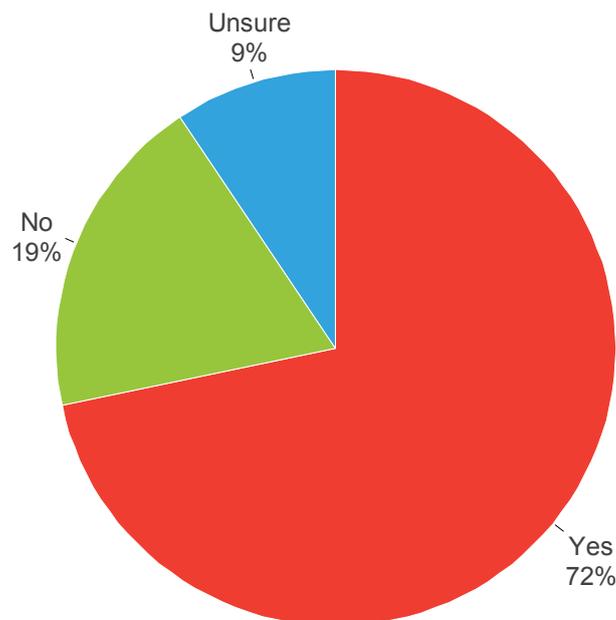
- 69% considered it appropriate for the Council to use council-owned land for solar energy generation
- Support for a community energy organisation to lease the site from the council reached 54% of those responding whilst a solely, council-owned option gleaned 46% support
- Although 70% of respondents were aware that communities across the UK were setting up community energy enterprises, this figure fell to 27% awareness of any local interest in a community-owned renewable energy enterprise
- Over half of all respondents expressed an interest in getting involved in a community energy enterprise
- The main priority for the community income generated by a community energy enterprise was energy efficiency with 81% support

Survey Responses

Question 1: In principle do you support the use of ground mounted solar panels for generating energy on appropriate sites in the UK?

Whilst 72% of respondents supported the principle of using ground mounted solar panels for generating energy on appropriate sites in the UK, almost a fifth did not and a further 9% were unsure.

In principle do you support the use of ground mounted solar panels for generating energy on appropriate sites in the UK?



Comments mostly focussed on whether the land in question was best retained for agricultural purposes, if the proposals would despoil the countryside/green belt, that solar panels should be on buildings or that wind turbines would be a better option.

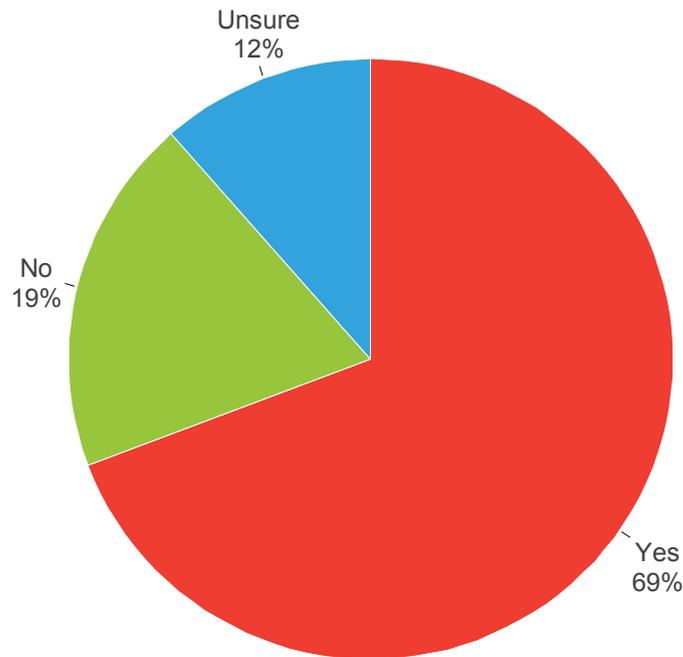
All comments are listed below:

- I am strongly opposed to the further destruction and despoiling of our precious countryside.
- PV should be put on buildings and not necessarily green belt
- Should be used for farming
- We should be looking to reduce the amount of generated electricity that we have to purchase. If new domestic & industrial building developments incorporated roof mounted solar panels ground mounted panels would be unnecessary. This is where councils should be looking to make changes to planning strategy. This would help reduce the call on the National Grid and ensure new housing was energy efficient.
- Inappropriate use of land for South Gloucestershire
- To cover good grazing or growing land when huge amounts of land locally is covered with buildings (ie yate) that pv panels can be placed upon; is morally wrong; especially when we have an ever growing uncontrolled population that needs feeding. To transfer our food needs to foreign countries is placing us in a vulnerable situation should conflict ever break out between us and those countries providing our food.
- 5mw installed how many mw actually produced per day average?
- Would prefer wind turbine (2)
- Depending on visual impact
- But in the right place on 'dead' land
- On studying the site map this proposal is on farmland which is in close proximity to Leigh Farm farm buildings. Therefore I consider it would be of value to the tenant farmer rather than land further away as animals in these fields are easier to keep a check on. I do not support taking away land which is grazed by the farmer's animals which are no doubt the main source of his income.
- Eyesore, looks terrible covering up green open fields
- We would only support this on brown field sites or commercial premises NOT on Green Belt land
- As long as good productive agricultural land is not used
- Plenty of energy going to waste in the Severn Estuary.

Question 2: Do you think it is appropriate for the Council to use council owned land for solar energy generation?

Almost 70% of those responding agreed that it was appropriate for the council to use its land for solar energy generation. However, 19% disagreed and 11% were unsure.

Do you think it is appropriate for the Council to use council owned land for solar energy generation?



Some of the comments left at this stage mirrored those left at question one, in wanting to protect the green belt or use wind whilst others proffered support only if the land was otherwise redundant. All comments are listed below:

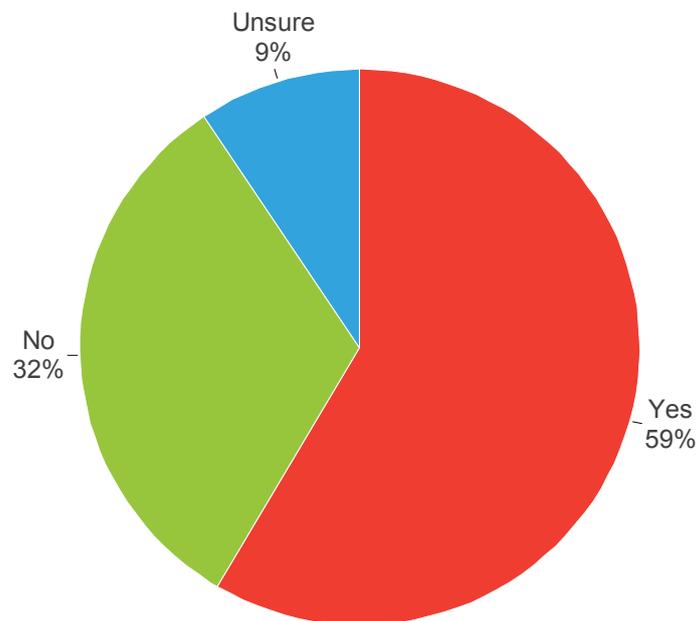
- If it is set in the correct area and surrounding
- But not necessarily on greenfield sites!
- Depends on land usage
- No
- Not for ground mounted panels. Put them on roof of building.
- Not when services like emptying green bins are not included in the council tax as it always was. If there is no money for this; then there is no money for pv panels
- Can a profit be guaranteed
- Best use of land that would otherwise not be used
- Takes part of farm away & reduces opportunity for young starter farms
- Takes farm away & reduces opps for starter can still use land with wind turbines
- If in right place. See above 'on dead land'
- Only if it is redundant land with no useful purpose.
- Not as opposed to wind turbines

- As above only appropriate of brown field sites or commercial properties NOT on Green Belt land
- I would approve providing it does not prevent tenants farming the land.
- It greatly depends on where the land is, in this case yes

Question 3:

When asked if they thought that the land to the North of the M4 motorway at Leigh Farm in Pucklechurch would be a good location for a ground mounted solar array, (based on the information provided), 58.5% of respondents agreed. Just under a third of those responding disagreed (32.1%) with 9% saying that they were unsure.

Do you think that the land to the North of the M4 motorway at Leigh Farm in Pucklechurch would be a good location for a ground mounted solar array?



Question 4: this question asked for any comments about the proposals

Comments left in this section reflected the often polarised views to the proposals. Whilst several comments considered it either poor use of farming land or an incursion into the green belt there were also several comments that noted it was a good use of low grade land. Equally, although some respondents said the visual impact of the installation would not have a negative effect there were a similar number of comments that thought the visual impact to be considerable.

A number of comments expressed direct support for the project whilst others queried the loss of potential food producing land. All comments are listed below:

- We are seeing more and more of these proposals. How long before our green countryside is covered with thousands of these ugly panels.
- I live in Parkfield rank, Pucklechurch and I am 100% in support of this scheme

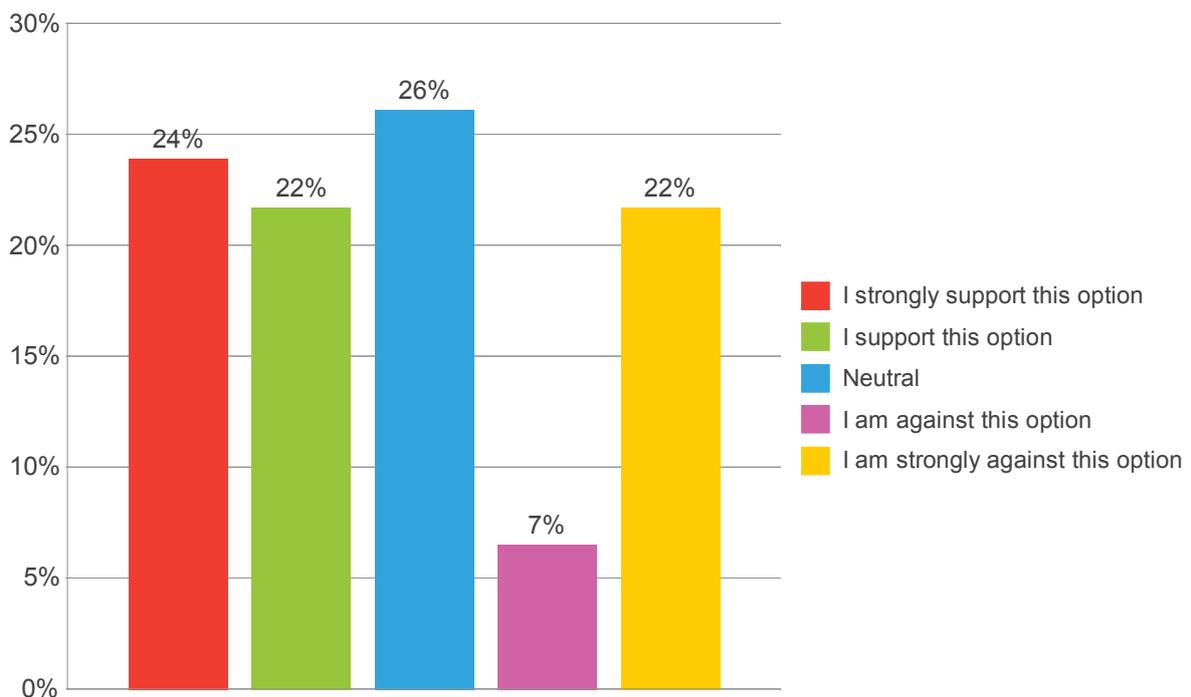
- Inappropriate building in the green belt.
- This is a green-field site and makes the farm untenable and therefore removes another farm from the community and the employment associated with it. This is an inappropriate development in the Green Belt with no special circumstances in support.
- Wind may be better
- No way should this be allowed
- In favour of the plan, also interested in it being a community owned project
- This is a green belt site and as indeed others have been; would be a visual eyesore that will result in further degradation of the land it is on. Despite comments that the land would benefit from lying fallow for 25 years; there is no evidence to support this. Indeed there is serious doubt as the land beneath the panels would receive neither sunlight or rainfall (rain would run off panels and merely result in a narrow line beneath one edge and thus the majority of ground beneath panel would receive nothing at all).
- The Council have outlined the benefits in their proposal but I think these are outweighed by other considerations. Based on my observations of the impact of other major ground mounted solar PV schemes in the area; I do not think it an appropriate use of the land in South Gloucestershire. South Gloucestershire is a mix of urban and rural land that is essentially a transition from the city of Bristol to the more rural area of Gloucestershire. To put a relatively large tract of the land under solar PV is not only visually unattractive but it puts the land out of use for any other possible shared purpose. In short; it is not a good use of land in this area. The land also becomes ecologically very deprived because it is fenced and vegetation is actively suppressed so as not to affect the power generation capacity; it becomes a desert for wildlife. Stating that there may be no individually endangered or protected species affected is just a distraction from the wider ecological impact. The land may be graded as poor quality agricultural but it is nevertheless the traditional use to which the land has been put. It helps define the area as what it is; a mix of semi-rural / semi-urban that is a continuum between city and countryside. A solar PV development will detract from the rural character of the area and not contribute to the urban character. In many ways it is more intrusive than development for commerce or residential use. There is undeniably a need for the UK to look strategically at sources for future energy provision but there are areas of the UK further away from this more densely populated area that are more suited to solar PV. There are also other means of energy generation that would be a better suited to south Gloucestershire than ground mounted solar PV farms. Solar PV is the wrong choice of energy generation in this area. Oldbury on Severn nuclear power station even seems more appropriate than this proposed solar PV installation.
- I do not think any land should be used for solar energy generation when there is a multitude of buildings that do not have retrofitted panels. Also the buildings being put up from new should be fitted as a matter of course. Planning!!!
- I think this appears to be a good site. South facing and close to the motorway (ie not in the middle of the village.)

- The site is unsuitable as it is very visible from the road and motorway; there are other sites in the surrounding area more suited
- I would like a detailed plan to show where crops or grazing that happens on this land will take place after pv panels are installed. To cover vast swathes of land at the expense of grazing and crop growing; is storing up future problems with an uncontrolled growing population Base.
- There are no hard financial facts for people to make a judgement
- Seems like a practical use of the land
- Would be a great use of the land which isn't very visible + has little agricultural use
- Concerned about the number of sites in the local area
- Not a good use of agricl land. Goes against my understanding of the council's ... (undecipherable) ...ethics
- I think this is an excellent scheme and fully support it.
- We have to realise with the increasing population food growth is going to be a major issue converting farms for solar energy is inappropriate; and you create unemployment and the loss of farming experience.
- As mentioned previously it is land used for grazing and therefore has a useful purpose in providing food and income for the farmer. I beg to question whether this is the thin end of the wedge and another means to be able to dispose of tenant farms owned by councils. I am not overly concerned about the visual impact on the proposal; my objections are purely against using farmland.
- As the proposed area is not high grade agricultural land the proposition appears both financially and ethically sound
- I feel that Pucklechurch has already had it's fair share of unwanted council plans in the area; with the prison now housing sex offenders; all the building in Lyde Green; and the gypsy sites. We walk the dogs in these fields too. I think people would be happier if it was further from the village.
- You have not made it clear where the footpaths will be diverted to and how they will be maintained
- Solar panels are not attractive and ruining countryside is not worth it for the revenue received
- Good idea except if loss of land for food production
- Nowhere in your documentation does it mention the fact that the site is in the Green Belt. It is quite a distance from nearest substation in Wapley. We do not condone the loss of agricultural land for solar farms.
- I don't like the view from the Pucklechurch bridge and road. Tt will be off putting to drivers. Can it be shielded by trees on this boundary?
- It is Grade 4 agricultural land and offers little visual impact. Land can be returned to agriculture after the life of the installation.
- I support the proposal
- 5MW is acceptable & will not impact on the landscape in this location. (we would not like to see a larger solar array here)
- Farmland is for farming. Nothing else!

- This is a good site; between the motorway and crematorium and close to a demand for electricity. The green belt is not an issue as its purpose was to prevent urban spread; this would be allowed as an exception given the need to move towards renewable energy. I fully support this proposal.
- The site is currently in Green Belt. This designation should not be changed should the project go ahead.
- Although I am concerned about this project being built within the greenbelt, I think the need to invest in renewable energy overrides that in this case. Solar farms are not attractive, but this site next to the M4 is not highly visible from most places in the area.
- This site is in the Green Belts and while I support the development of the site it there must be clear reasons put forward why it is necessary to develop this otherwise it will be used as a precedent for other developments in the Green Belt
- I believe, based on the information provided to date and the meeting held in Pucklechurch 22/07/2015, that this is an excellent and innovative proposal for the use of this land. I should also stay that, had this been a proposal for a wind-turbine installation, I would have the exact opposite view.

**Question 5: Please indicate which the following ownership options that you support?
(Council owned)**

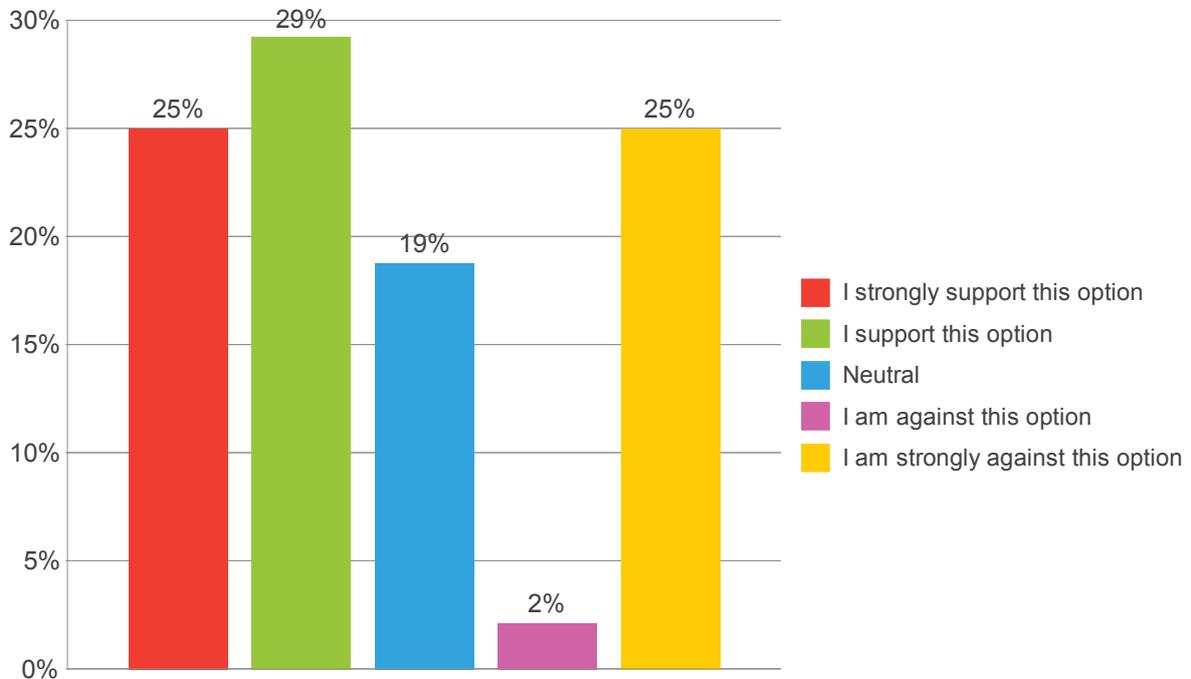
Council owned



46% of survey respondents answered positively, (strongly support and support combined), to the council owned option. 29% provided a negative response with 26% neutral.

Please indicate which the following ownership options that you support? (Council leases the land to a local community energy organisation)

Council leases the land to a local community energy organisation



54% of survey respondents answered positively to the option of the council leasing the land to a community energy organisation. 27% expressed negative support for this with 19% neutral.

Comments: Whilst two comments referred back to whether this was appropriate use of the land several others both supported the scheme and were favourable towards community ownership. A number of others suggested a combination of both community ownership with council support. All comments are listed below:

- Unsure?!
- Not appropriate to give answer as I do not feel the development is either necessary or an appropriate use of land.
- I think land should be best used for agriculture or similar
- I would be happy to be involved as a member of the community but I also have faith in it being run by the local authority.
- The council already leases this land.
- The UK energy mix needs alternative sources. "Not in my back yard" is not a responsible answer. I would invest my own money in this enterprise!
- Complicated to organise but good for local ownership
- A combination of both models (local ownership/involvement & expertise of council).

- If a community owned would need council support to set up the organisation preference for (undecipherable) support option in the right place
- Not worried
- Local community scheme is not achievable in timescale proposed therefore not a realistic option
- Depending on grants/subsidies available and feasibility.
- Community Ownership will act as a catalyst for other community energy projects
- Having heard more information on the two options proposed, the potential gain for the local community from local ownership is very attractive.

Question 6: Are you aware that communities across the UK are setting up community energy enterprises?

Almost three quarters of respondents were aware that other communities in the country were setting up community energy enterprises. 30% were not.

Are you aware that communities across the UK are setting up community energy enterprises?



The comment section asked respondents if there were any community energy enterprises that they had heard of which they thought were a good example? All comments are listed below:

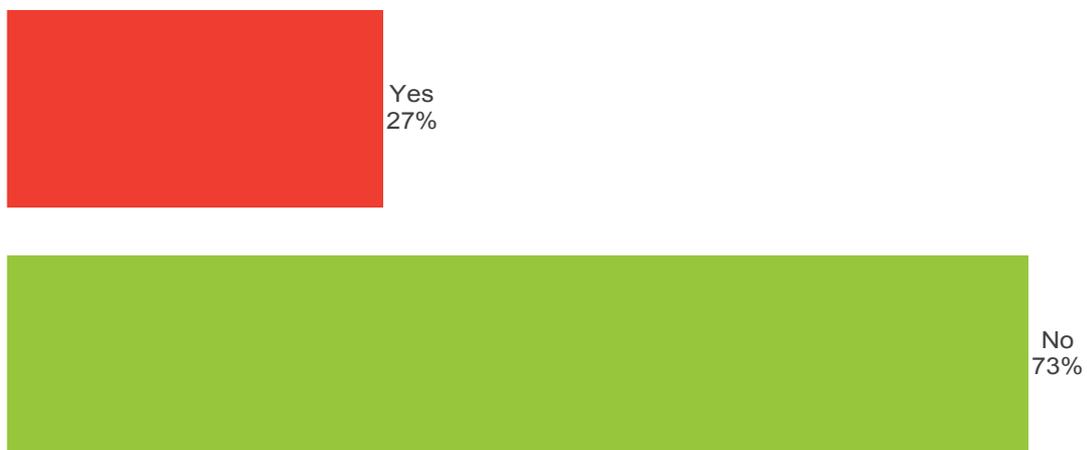
- Not until today
- No
- But I am now
- I am a member of the Bath Community Energy Group
- No
- Westmill Wind Farm
- Totnes, Bristol, Westmills

- Bristol Energy Cooperative
- No.
- Can't think of any examples at the moment.

Question 7: Are you aware of any interest/activity in community owned renewable energy in the local area?

Just 27% of respondents were aware of any local interest in community owned renewable energy with 73% unaware.

Are you aware of any interest/activity in community owned renewable energy in the local area?



Comments:

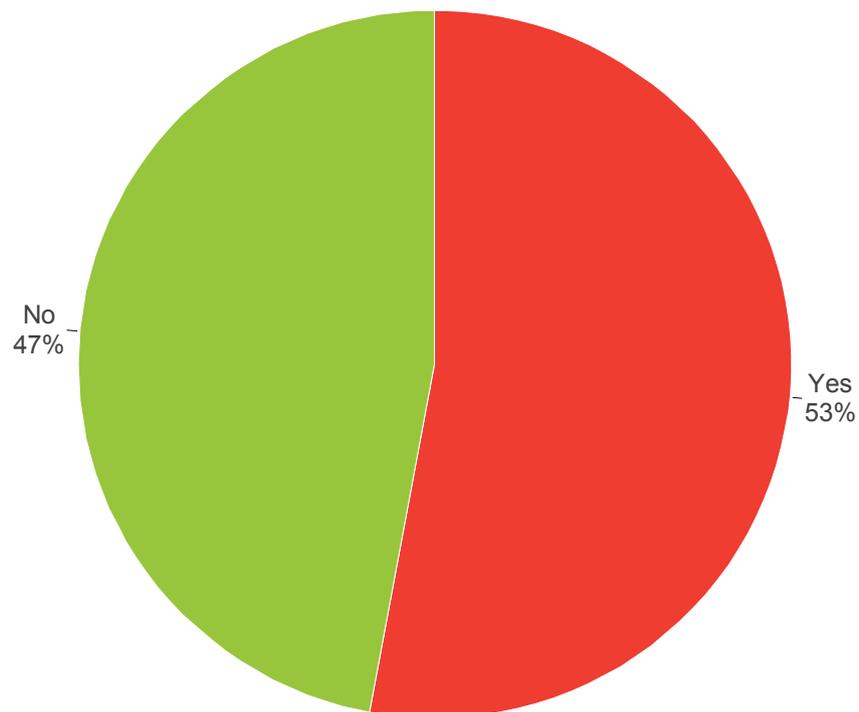
- Marshfield
- No
- But it sounds like a good plan
- But aware of Marshfield
- Potential hydro electric (Archimedes screw) at Wick Nature Reserve - presently on hold due to change of land ownership
- There has not been sufficient communication to raise awareness within the community
- Bristol Energy Co-op
- Some interest in Marshfield and Thornbury
- Yes, from the interest expressed at the Consultation Meeting in Pucklechurch Community Association Social Club on Wednesday evening 22 July 2015. Also see Pucklechurch Parish Summer Survey 2007 responses to Q58 and Q 59 at: http://www.pucklechurch.org/SummerSurvey2007WholeReports_20100606.pdf

- Having now attended the local parish meeting, I am aware that there is at least some interest in these schemes.
- Bath & NES, Chew Magna

Question 8: Would you be interested in getting involved in a community energy enterprise?

53% of those who responded (28 individuals), said they would be interested in getting involved in a community energy enterprise. 47% said that they would not.

Would you be interested in getting involved in a community energy enterprise?



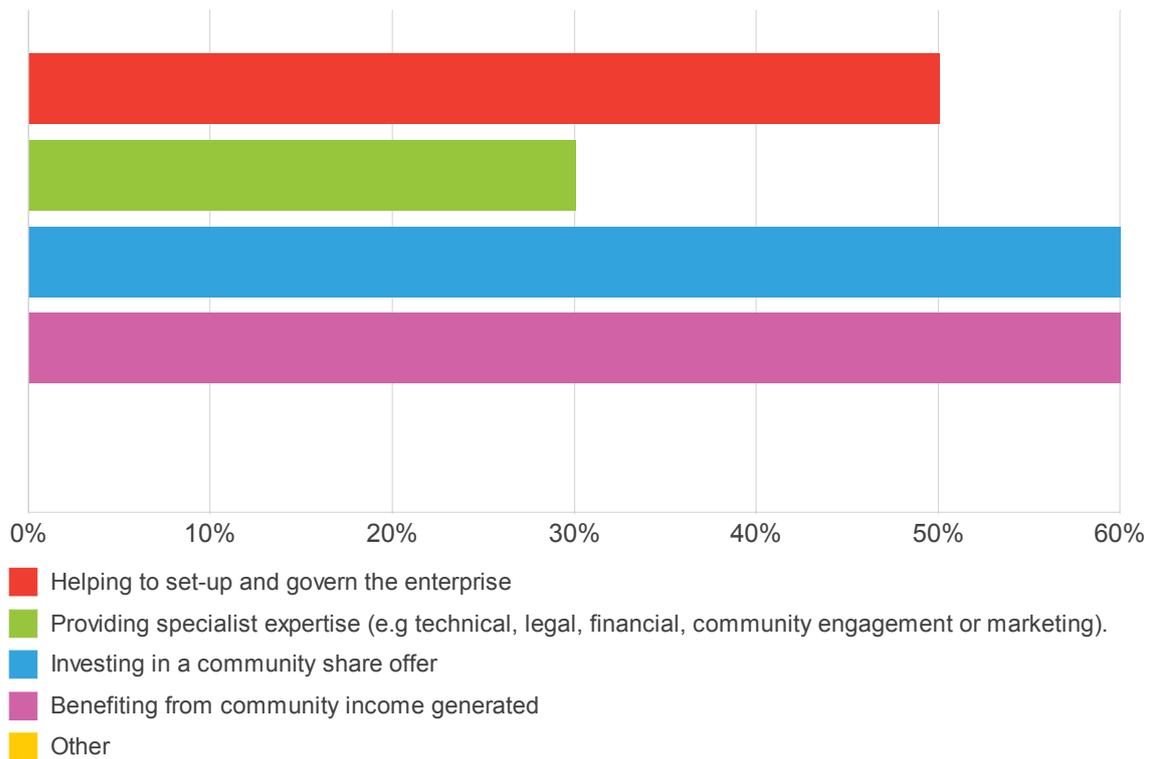
Comments:

- But with little time available
- Possibly (get involved) - would like to find out more
- Only interested if project NOT on green belt land
- To consider supporting similar community projects locally - perhaps in a wider area like Boyd Valley
- General advice and help but don't want a key role

Question 9: If yes, how would you like to be involved? Tick all the options that interest you.

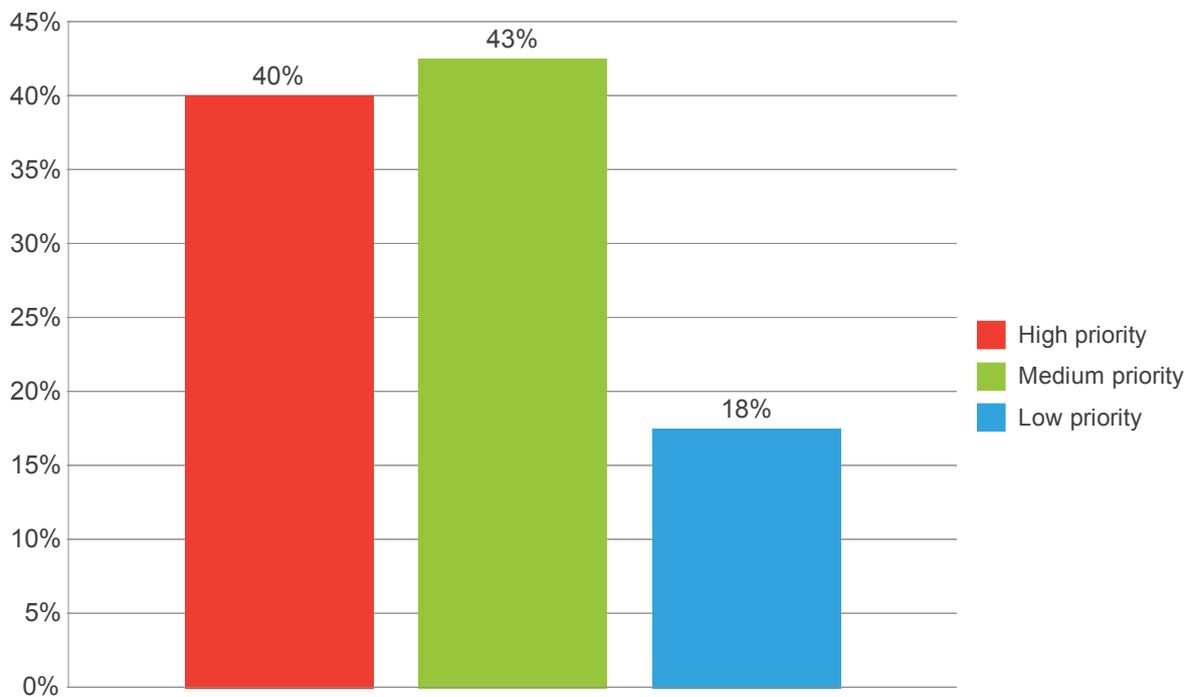
Investing in a Community Share Offer and Benefitting from the Community Income generated from the scheme were the joint most popular options for involvement in the project each with 60% support. Close behind on 50% was *Helping to Set-up and Govern the Enterprise* with *Providing Specialist Expertise* being the least supported option on 30%.

How would you like to be involved?



Question 10: What do you think the priorities should be for community income generated by the community energy enterprise? (Tackling Fuel Poverty)

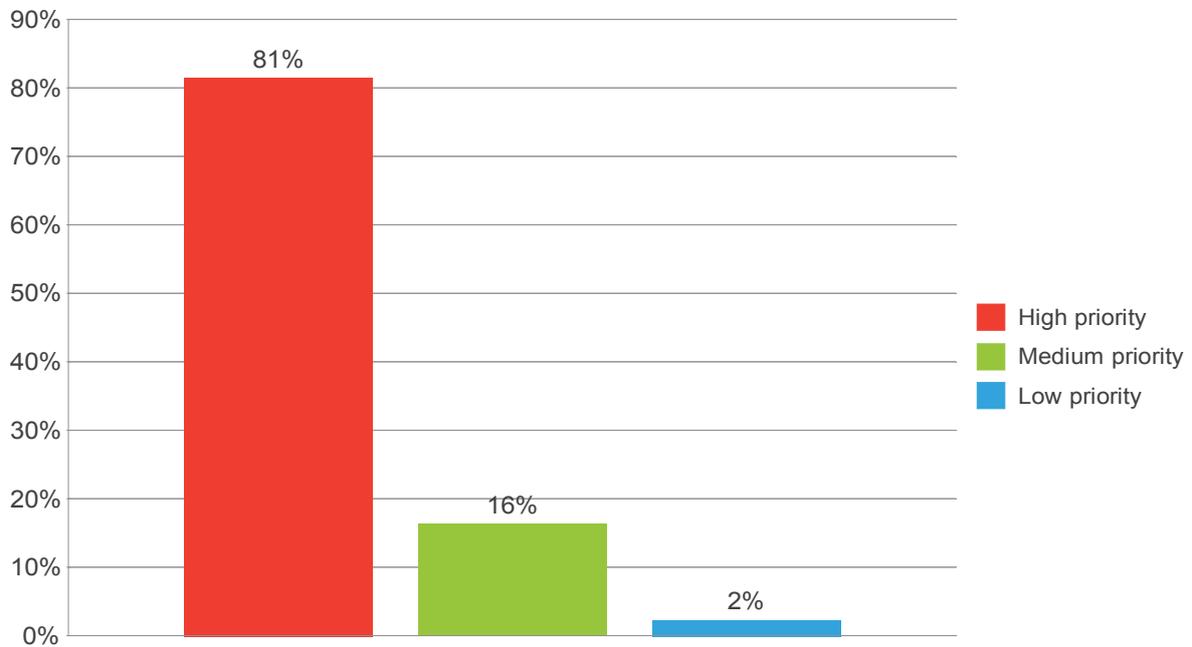
Tackling fuel poverty



Of those responding, 40% considered *Tackling Fuel Poverty* to be a high priority for any community income generated by the community energy enterprise.

Energy Efficiency

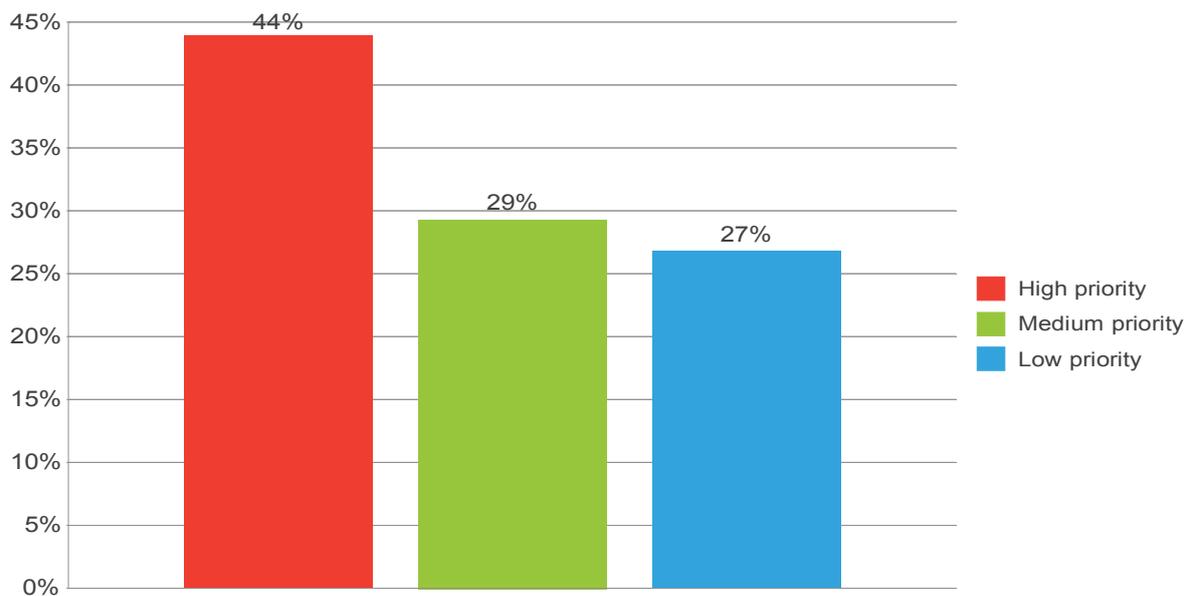
Energy efficiency



Over 80% thought that *Energy Efficiency* be a high priority for any community income generated by the community energy enterprise.

Re-investment in Community Energy

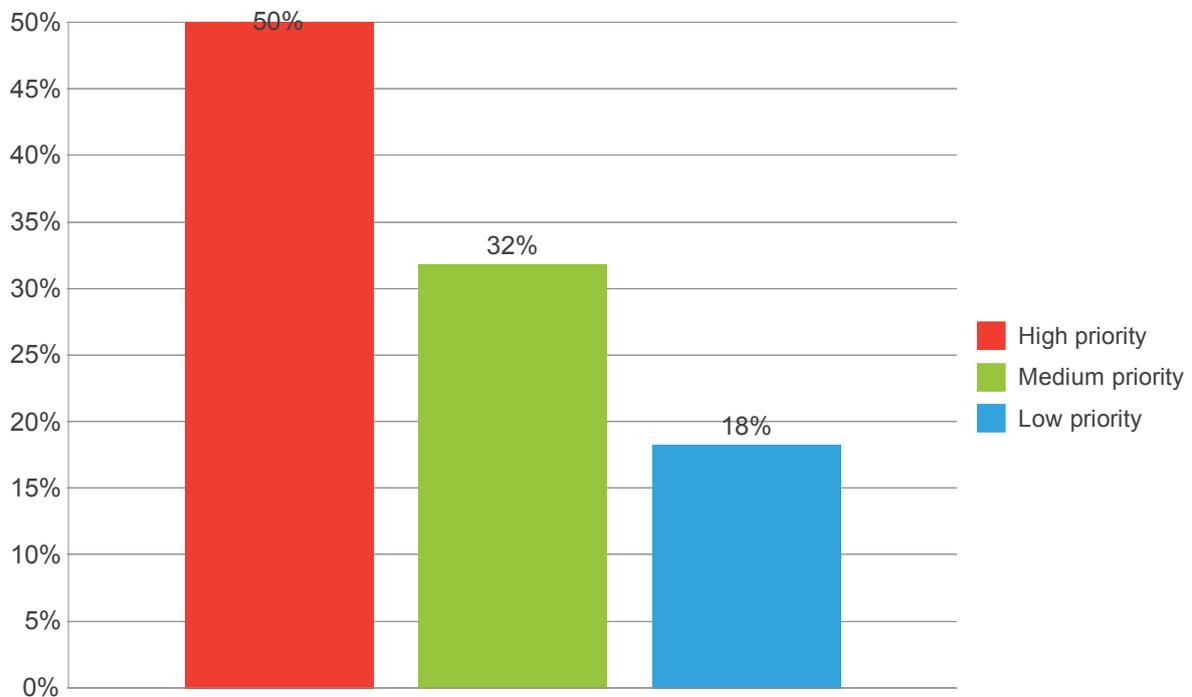
Re-investment in community energy



Using the income generated by the community energy enterprise for *Re-investment in Community Energy* gleaned 44% of support from respondents.

Grants for local community projects

Grants for local community projects



Half of those responding opted for using the income generated by the community energy enterprise for *Grants for Local Community Projects*

Respondents were offered the chance to suggest other options as priorities. All comments are listed below:

- I cannot answer this question
- Making a profit without subsidies
- Community should decide
- Creation of local nature reserves to compensate for loss of natural habitat
- Tackling fuel poverty - how?
- Reasonable returns to investors, with ability to trade investments

Comments to the Consultation Mailbox

In addition to the consultation survey, residents could also leave comments and responses to the proposals in the consultation mailbox. Nine comments were left. Five of these were from residents and of these five, three were broadly in support of the proposals and two were not.

Of the other four submissions, two Parish Councils had no objection to the scheme, one councillor requested further information on the potential financial returns involved and a 10

page submission was received from the Cotswolds Conservation Board. All comments are listed below:

- Consider alternative orientation of the panels to maximise generation in the morning/evening and make better use of public funds
- Cotswolds Conservation Board Position Statement; please refer to the summary below of the 10 page pdf document submitted
- I cannot understand the logic which uses valuable agricultural land to erect solar panels. I would have thought that this is a "no brainer". The reasons for objection can be summarised as follows:
 1. Solar panel only work in daylight e.g. In winter no electricity would be produced when required in the evenings
 2. Solar panels have a productive life of approx. 25 years. They produce less and less electricity as time goes on
 3. Despite rumours to the contrary, land used for panels cannot be used for grazing animals
 4. Without large subsidies solar panels would be uneconomic
 5. The costs of manufacture outweigh benefits
 6. As stated earlier, valuable agricultural land should not be used for these panels
 7. I have solar panels fitted to the roof of my house and I would suggest that roofs of houses, offices, factories etc. are the best location for these panels
- Cllr - Give detail on how much it might return/ i.e. if built now, this is what it would be worth.
- I'm happy as long as it's not houses
- Planning Committee met today and considered the above proposed project: The Comments of Emersons Green Town Council Planning Committee are: No Objection.
- Yet another piece of our green belt going. Look at the fields and fields already used in Westerleigh a complete eye sore. And what is the measure of the benefit to us all and is it more beneficial to the human race Than green spaces. All it seems to me is the green lobby, no science involved, but look who Benefits the multi millionaire owner of SGC. We have limited space in the UK don't let all our green belt go That's why we live in the countryside
- I think this form of energy is the least intrusive, efficient and clean, and should be encouraged by South Glos Council
- At the meeting of Oldland Parish Council on 21 July 2015, it was resolved to support this project.

Cotswolds Conservation Board: Position Statement - summary

The position statement explains in more detail:

- The purpose of Areas of Natural Beauty (AONBs); designated by the Government for the purpose of ensuring that the special qualities of the finest landscapes in England and Wales are conserved and enhanced
- The role of the Cotswold Conservation Board; the Cotswolds Conservation Board is the body set up by Parliament to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the

Cotswolds AONB and increase the awareness and understanding of the special qualities of the AONB

- The aims of the Position Statement; to provide guidance to local planning authorities, landowners and other interested parties regarding the consideration of the impact of development and land management proposals which lie outside the AONB but within its “setting”
- Links to the Cotswolds AONB Management Plan 2013-18; “The surroundings of the AONB are also important to its landscape and scenic beauty. Views out of the AONB and into it from surrounding areas can be very significant in this regard.”
- Links to key policies; LP1: The key characteristics, principal elements, and special qualities (including tranquillity), which form the natural beauty of the Cotswolds landscape are conserved and where possible enhanced.
- LP2: Development proposals and changes in land use and management, both within and outside the AONB, take account of guidance and advice published by the Board.
- Specific guidance for local authorities to consider in Core Strategies, Local Plans and Planning Applications; The Board will seek to ensure that the importance of considering the impact of development and land management proposals outside the Cotswolds AONB on the natural beauty and special qualities of the AONB is made clear in all Core Strategies and Local Plans and in policies in other relevant documents.
- The Board will expect local authorities to be mindful of both the possible positive and negative impacts of a development within the setting of the AONB on the natural beauty and special qualities of the AONB when determining planning applications, and seek the views of the Board when significant impacts are anticipated.
- Examples of adverse impacts;
 - Blocking or interference of views out of the AONB particularly from public viewpoints
 - Blocking or interference of views of the AONB from public viewpoints outside the AONB
 - Loss of tranquillity through the introduction of lighting, noise, or traffic movement
 - Introduction of abrupt change of landscape character
 - Loss of biodiversity, particularly if of species of importance in the AONB
 - Loss of features of historic interest, particularly if these are contiguous with the AONB
 - Reduction in public access
 - Increase in air or water pollution
- Appendices that provide policy guidance on the consideration of development proposals within the setting of protected landscapes, local planning guidance and further information on appeal decisions on previous planning applications in AONB.

National Trust consultation response:

Without prejudice to any comments which we may make on the forthcoming planning application, we note a degree of harm to the views from the Dyrham Parkland would take place, and therefore would prefer the smaller [5MW] scheme, but this would be much less than 'substantial harm', so we don't have any detailed comments or objections at this point.

Historic England consultation response:

Historic England's remit permits us to comment on the potential for developments to impact upon the setting of grade I and II* listed buildings and registered parks and gardens, and the setting of scheduled monuments. There may be other designated assets, including grade II listed buildings, on which you should consult your conservation officer.

Having reviewed the draft LVIA and the site proposals, we would agree that the potential impact on highly graded listed buildings, registered parks or scheduled monuments is likely to be relatively low. While there may be some visibility between the site and assets such as the scheduled fort at Hinton, the distance between the two and the nature of the intervening landscape is such that the impact may not cause undue harm. It is important, however, that this is adequately demonstrated and explained in any application.

As such, we are happy at this stage for you to continue with the development of detailed information in support of a planning application, and would be pleased to comment further at a later date.

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This report was compiled by the Corporate Consultation Team at South Gloucestershire Council for the Environment and Climate Change Team. For further information please call 01454 863468 or email sustainability@southglos.gov.uk