

# Forest Community Energy: Priority Asks



## Priority 1:

Increase rooftop solar PV projects in the Forest of Dean



**Priority 2:** Support households with retrofit and home energy advice

**Priority 3:** Support the growth of community energy activities in the Forest of Dean



## Introduction

The following Priority Asks are aimed at Forest of Dean District Council to support the council to create an enabling environment for community energy projects to thrive in the Forest of Dean. The document has been developed by Forest Community Energy with support from the AURORA Forest of Dean project.

The Priority Asks in this document have been developed using findings from citizen engagement events, and discussions with Forest Community Energy members and with other key stakeholders throughout the course of the AURORA project so far. The document is split into three key priorities. Each priority outlines key opportunities, blockers and challenges, and actions.

This document comes at a time of potential big policy changes through Labour's Local Power Plan and the establishment of Great British Energy which are set to unlock funding and supportive policies for local authorities and communities to work together to fast track our transition to a net zero energy system.

We (Forest Community Energy and the AURORA Forest of Dean project team) welcome the "[Council Plan for the Forest of Dean District Council 2024-2028 – Responding to the Climate & Nature Emergency for a Fairer Greener Forest](#)" and note the council's commitment to climate action within it. We ask that when the council-wide annual Delivery Plan and individual council departments' operational and annual work plans get developed and reviewed, that these Priority Asks are considered, and we welcome further discussions and collaborative working with any council department responsible for achieving the relevant actions.

## What is AURORA and Forest Community Energy?

AURORA is an EU-wide programme to promote citizen-led bottom-up approaches to energy transition. One of the pilots has been taking place in the Forest of Dean, delivered by a collaborative partnership between Forest of Dean District Council and the Centre for Sustainable Energy. Forest Community Energy is a community energy group developed as part of the AURORA project, bringing together interested and passionate residents to tackle local energy and climate change issues.

## Priority 1: Increase rooftop solar PV projects in the Forest of Dean

### Opportunities

- There is support from Forest of Dean residents for non-domestic rooftop solar PV projects (these types of projects are more favourable than large scale ground mounted solar farms) and bulk buying schemes to encourage more domestic rooftop solar and make it more affordable and accessible for households.
- A list of potential sites for rooftop Solar PV has been co-produced with Big Solar Coop, Forest Community Energy and the Centre for Sustainable Energy. Once confirmed, these will collectively provide 447kWp, save the organisations 55t per year in carbon emissions, and half a million pounds in energy bills over the next 20 years. Some of these sites have already been assessed as not viable for Big Solar Coop but can potentially be passed onto Gwent Energy CIC and/or Gloucestershire Community Energy Coop to develop further. Some sites are suitable to host panels under the Big Solar Coop model but require local volunteer support to progress further to site design and building owner engagement.
- Forest Community Energy volunteers are keen to progress new projects, and several are working actively with Big Solar Coop to develop new sites for solar PV.

### Blockers and challenges

- Multi-stakeholder and legal complexities – complex land and building ownership and tenancy structures can make rooftop solar PV projects challenging to progress. In some cases, there is uncertainty in who owns the building, land, or who the tenant is, meaning that support from lawyers is often required and the process can take a long time.
- Community energy groups may have the drive and good will to progress new projects but often lack the time, technical and legal knowledge as well as experience to progress more complex projects. Maintaining engagement and retaining volunteers can be challenging and requires coordination.
- There are grid capacity issues in the North of the district that could prevent new projects from being developed.
- There is a lack of capacity in the local market for solar PV installations which will make it challenging to install solar PV at the scale and pace required to reach net zero.
- Changes to planning regulations mean that all systems over 50kWp require an application for 'Prior Approval' from the local planning authority. This is a new regulation which applies for non-domestic solar PV systems that would usually be classed as "Permitted Development". This may delay the progression of new installations.
- There are many traditional and potentially listed buildings in the Forest of Dean, which require additional planning compliance. This may limit the potential size/feasibility of rooftop solar on these buildings.

### Key actions

- Support new community energy groups (such as Forest Community Energy) with: effective knowledge gathering at the beginning of projects (in particular transparency around ownership and tenancy structures for council owned buildings and land), training to develop legal and technical capacity and skills, paid project management support to build relationships with land owners and decision makers, manage legal processes and funding to develop new projects. One way of doing this would be to employ someone at the council with a key role in coordinating and supporting community energy practitioners locally.
- Explore effective procurement templates for the future including developing a framework. For example, consider setting up non-commitment contracts for all aspects of solar installations via a framework.
- In the long term, explore the technical and policy developments for selling electricity back to the community through local generation.
- Support the development of community led renewable plans which feature rooftop solar, ensuring inclusion and equality of provision in terms of locality, income and demography. An approach that could be used is [Future Energy Landscapes](#).
- Engage with landowners, building owners and tenants in non-domestic buildings across the district to highlight the benefits of rooftop solar. Ensure that messaging is targeted to appeal to different motivations such as reduction in energy bills, reduction in carbon emissions and support of the overall decarbonisation of electricity in the district.
- Build the local market for solar installations – this could include funding training opportunities for new tradespeople and engaging the Forest Economic Partnership.
- Ensure that grid capacity issues in the Forest of Dean are considered in the development of the Gloucestershire Local Area Energy Plan and that transparency and training on grid constraints are provided to community energy practitioners by National Grid Electricity Distribution.
- Support the developed relationship that Forest Community Energy and Forest of Dean District Council have with Big Solar Coop from the AURORA project to help progress larger scale rooftop solar PV projects in the district – this could include encouraging local people to invest in the Big Solar Coop share-offer, sign up as volunteers to develop new projects or progress existing ones, and engage local building owners to get in touch if they are interested in hosting PV systems.
- Support community organisations in the Forest of Dean to build partnerships with other key organisations to enable the roll out of community-led and owned rooftop solar PV projects (e.g. Solar for Schools, the South West Net Zero Hub and GFirst LEP and others in line with renewable energy opportunities, when changes in UK policy and legislation allows (e.g. Great British Energy).
- Ensure the Forest of Dean District Council planning department are made aware of the new regulation around applications for ‘Prior Approval’ for solar PV systems under Permitted Developments to ensure unnecessary delays are avoided.
- Ensure that supportive policies for rooftop solar (including community-owned rooftop solar) are included in the local plan for Forest of Dean – including policies in support of community owned schemes.
- Lobby national government for stricter planning regulations encouraging rooftop solar on new developments (as well as influence improved building regulations to ensure new

build homes are net zero as standard), and more lenient planning regulations to support rooftop solar installations on traditional/listed buildings.

- Support the development of local bulk buying schemes (for example, working with the [Solar Together](#) scheme) to enable households to access solar PV in a more affordable way.

## **Priority 2: Support households with retrofit and home energy advice**

### Opportunities

- Existing energy advice provider – Severn Wye Energy Agency – can provide households with advice on energy efficiency and accessing grants for home improvements and low carbon measures. The Warm & Well service is well established and known about locally.
- Forest Community Energy members are interested and keen to support households with relevant information to take on energy efficiency and saving behaviours and home improvements.
- The AURORA project and Forest Community Energy have piloted a thermal imaging camera loan service which resulted in positive feedback from a local community centre and residents. There is enthusiasm for a roll out of this service to other parts of the district – something which will be progressed by the AURORA project going forward.

### Blockers/challenges

- There is a lot of information and offers coming from national government, local installers, advice organisations and community groups – in some cases, local residents have expressed a lack of trust and confusion over the spread of misinformation (particularly online) and potentially the selling of services from “cowboy installers”. This is potentially having a counter-productive impact on the willingness of households to engage in the retrofit of their homes and services available locally.
- There is a lack of skilled tradespeople to deliver retrofit at the scale and pace required for the district’s transition to net zero.

### Actions

- Help to promote the services offered by Severn Wye Energy Agency and others to help local households understand what they can access. For example, it has been noted that whilst the services on offer for fuel poor or grant funded households is known locally, there are many that are not aware of the services on offer for the self-funded market or landlords. Forest of Dean District council can promote more information in a simple and accessible way and advice services aimed at the self-funded market, landlords, and people in off-gas and traditional properties. If running/supporting events, these should be fun and family friendly and could be tagged onto existing community events happening in the Forest of Dean.
- Support community groups to share information within their communities on energy efficiency and energy saving tips, grants and services. This can be done through the provision of resources (such as leaflets) and/or funding. It has been suggested that the council should partner with trusted organisations such as community groups to get

messages out around this topic as there can be a lack of trust when it comes to messages from local authorities.

- Include energy advice providers such as Severn Wye Energy Agency (and beyond to include smaller scale community organisations giving advice) in the Local Area Energy Plan development process.
- Support the development of a one-stop shop of simple information on energy efficiency and energy saving tips, grants and services for home energy efficiency surveys and improvements. This one-stop shop should be online and in person and include outreach to ensure that everyone in the district is accessing information. Ideas for an in-person centre of information that have been suggested including using the space to demonstrate low carbon measures and using a disused high street building as a potential location.
- Coordinate the bringing together of key energy advice providers (such as Severn Wye Energy Agency, Citizens Advice and community groups like Forest Community Energy) to support collaborative working, share best practice and avoid duplication of work and reduce the risk of spreading misinformation. An example of where this is being done is in Plymouth where Plymouth Energy Community has started a forum bringing together local authorities and advice providers.
- Support the roll-out of a thermal imaging loan service from public buildings such as libraries following a similar model to what Forest Community Energy and the AURORA project piloted from the Sling & District Recreation Club (and what services developed by South Gloucestershire and North Somerset councils).
- Support community groups to run their own thermal imaging loan services by enabling access to local funding and training to develop these services.
- Support the development of a local market for retrofit including the skilling up of tradespeople through funded training opportunities (working with the Forest of Dean Economic Partnership, University of Gloucestershire and Accxel Construction School), run or support local community groups to run “meet the installer” events.
- Support peer to peer learning locally by running or supporting local community groups to run Green Open Homes style events – council can support with engagement, funding, coordination.

### **Priority 3: Support the growth of community energy activities in the Forest of Dean**

Forest Community Energy is a network of local residents in the Forest of Dean who have a mutual interest in driving forward local energy projects and supporting households access information and support to save energy in their homes, reducing costs and cutting carbon emissions. The group has been set up and supported by the AURORA project.

Forest Community Energy, and potentially new community energy groups, have the passion to develop and run projects that could support the council’s activities to decarbonise electricity and heat at scale across the district, as well as support residents to take on actions in support of a transition to net zero (such as retrofitting their homes, or investing in local solar projects).

It's worth noting that the success of community energy schemes is largely down to the passion of local community members to drive local projects forward. It is not expected that local authorities should be delivering community energy projects, however there are a number of suggestions that the council can take on board to create an enabling environment, supporting the setup of groups and to get projects off the ground:

- Access to paid coordination and project management support.
- Funding and coordination support to help groups (such as Forest Community Energy) on their journeys to become legal entities (various forms such as Community Benefit Society or Community Interest Company etc.) – support may be required to help with Financial Conduct Authority registration and committee/board of directors set up.
- Funding to develop projects, including for feasibility studies for larger capital projects.
- Support to explore more ambitious projects such as ground-mounted solar PV, or wind energy projects, particularly as UK legislation and policies allow for more development of large scale projects in the near future through Labour's Power Plan and Great British Energy.
- Support with finding funding opportunities and bid writing for successful grant applications (for example, for the Community Energy Fund).
- Connections to key stakeholders and new project “enablers” locally including building owners, planning department, Big Solar Coop, and other local installers... Included in this is connecting community energy groups to solutions-focused lawyers who have experience in working with community energy schemes.
- Training and capacity building particularly around: technical and legal aspects of renewable projects, governance and legal incorporation, retrofit and energy efficiency skills (including for traditional buildings). This can include supporting community energy groups to connect where possible to other organisations in the region delivering successful schemes (for example, through Community Energy England or the newly formed Gloucestershire Community Energy Network).
- Support with effective communications (for example – a framework or guide for community-level communications (WhatsApp, forums).

### Contact Us:

Email: [fod.energycommunity@fdean.gov.uk](mailto:fod.energycommunity@fdean.gov.uk)

Website: [www.aurora-h2020.eu/fod-home/](http://www.aurora-h2020.eu/fod-home/)

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/AURORA.FOD/](https://www.facebook.com/AURORA.FOD/)

X: [www.x.com/AURORA\\_FOD](https://www.x.com/AURORA_FOD)