

## AURORA Forest of Dean Pilot End of project reflections

The Forest of Dean pilot has been a collaborative endeavour between Forest of Dean District Council (FODDC), Centre for Sustainable Energy (CSE) and of course, the passionate residents of the Forest of Dean working together over the past 3 years to create community led action on energy and install community solar.

It's been a long journey with many twists and turns. This article outlines are final reflections and key lessons learned.

### Generating community interest

Throughout the project, we've been running a variety of events from drop ins, information days, thermography demonstrations, training etc. to engage residents in energy, get ideas for community energy projects, and recruit volunteers to form our energy community.

Despite taking a lot of time and resources, the events worked well in that they provided lots of potential hooks for the community to get involved. They also provided co-design opportunities to work with recruited volunteers to design our activities and demonstrated what the energy community could replicate themselves: in October 2025, our energy community Forest Community Energy hosted their [first big public event to support people with getting warm this winter](#) – this followed a model we used for our [Solar PV Information Day in September 2024](#).

### *Lessons for replication*

1. Ensure activities and messaging are genuinely relevant to the audience you're trying to reach (e.g. energy advice was a big hook in the Forest of Dean).
2. Have a flexible and community-led approach – be responsive and adaptable to meet communities where they are and tailor your engagement accordingly.
3. Create a strategy early on for engaging a diverse audience – this takes time and resources to plan, reach and sustain.

### Creating a community energy organisation

Creating Forest Community Energy took time and was not a linear process. We provided regular meetings for recruited volunteers to start building the group and project ideas, sometimes we brought in external speakers to provide expertise on a particular topic.

Commitment from volunteers wavered over time and we unfortunately struggled for many years to get the commitment we needed for the group to self organise. During this time, staff at CSE and Forest of Dean District Council provided ongoing coordination support for the group.



At the start of 2025, we went through a process, supported by facilitators at Holding the Space to support the volunteers to work towards a self-organised group with a strong legacy beyond

AURORA. This, as well as ongoing support to the group to get set up, has led to the re-brand and re-launch of Forest Community Energy – now a formally constituted Community Benefit Society with the structures in place to have a strong future beyond AURORA.

The key challenge we found along this journey was that although having this funding and opportunity from AURORA allowed FODDC and CSE to apply dedicated efforts to developing community energy in the Forest of Dean, having this as an aim meant that the process was not truly bottom-up. This made it hard to maintain consistent commitment, and go from handholding the group to a sense of ownership from the energy community.

#### *Lessons for replication*

1. Do not rush to incorporate – this can be off putting at the start, allow time for the volunteers to discover their interests and focus on what they want to do as a group.
2. Spend time finding a core group of committed volunteers – but be aware that this may change over time. It's especially important to find someone with good leadership qualities to take the group forward.
3. Map out the skills and knowledge areas required for the group to take on projects and activities they want to do.
4. Find a project to focus the group's attention on.

#### **Installing community-owned solar PV**

As we did not have a constituted energy community at the start of the project, we decided to collaborate with an existing organisation Big Solar Co-op to support the group to embark on their first project of installing community owned solar PV on a local school and leisure centre.

Big Solar Co-op helped with all the technical aspects of the project and will be funding the installations through their national share-offer which reduced the pressure on Forest Community Energy to raise the finance for the project in the AURORA timeframe. The idea was that the energy community would learn from this process and also support to get local people to invest into Big Solar Co-op's national share offer.

The project itself has been delayed due to many complications related to complex ownership, management and bureaucratic structures, involving several stakeholders.

During the course of developing the installations, there have been policy changes that have also impeded their progress – more recently an announcement from the UK's Treasury effectively banning any new Power Purchase Agreements on schools.

Unfortunately at the time of AURORA ending and writing this, the solar panels are still not on the roofs, however the project team will continue to work hard to ensure this happens after AURORA. On the plus side, another site has been installed through Big Solar Co-op in the Forest of Dean –



Speech

House Hotel – and Forest Community Energy has worked with other partners to install solar panels on a local community hub – the Sling Hub.

### *Key lessons for replication*

1. Accurately scope out the project at the beginning and share with stakeholders
2. Check building arrangements/lease arrangements early on
3. Have a dedicated project manager to drive the project forward
4. Ensure the stakeholders have the capacity, drive and attitude to risk to maintain engagement throughout the process.

### **The supportive role of the District Council**

The role of the Forest of Dean District Council in supporting the development of community energy in the Forest of Dean has been crucial. The AURORA funding has allowed the council to employ a dedicated project manager to coordinate the solar installations and the group as they develop.

Having that local on the ground support has provided sustainability for the new Forest Community and the links with the council has ensured that the experience of project AURORA on the ground feeds into council plans and strategies – for example [Forest Community Energy's Priority Asks for the District Council](#) and the [council's roll out of a District wide thermal imaging camera loan service](#).

### *Key lessons for replication*

1. Councils have a very important role to play in supporting the growth of community energy and should be funded to do so.
2. In doing this work, councils should establish strong working relationships with key stakeholders locally to ensure the work leads to successful and impactful outcomes.

### **Beyond AURORA**

Despite the challenges met along the way, this journey has led to the creation of a fantastic new energy community Forest Community Energy, two new solar PV installations, a council that has embedded the support and growth of community energy into their plans and a thermal imaging loan service that is supporting residents across the district.

Forest of Dean District Council and CSE will be continuing to support the growth of community energy in the Forest of Dean beyond AURORA and are looking forward to seeing what can be achieved locally.



For anyone looking to replicate such a project, here are our final key lessons:

1. There is no set process or one-size fits all for community energy.
2. Development of community energy from the ground up takes time and resource.
3. Finding the right people who are passionate and committed is essential.
4. The role of support organisations and local councils is crucial.

