

Individual Cabinet Member Delegated Decision

Cabinet Member for Development Management, Strategic Planning and Climate Change – Cllr Nick Botterill

Service: Climate Programme

Officer Contact: Sara Grimes: 01225 716 723 sara.grimes@wiltshire.gov.uk

Reference: ED-02-21

Title: Solar Together Collective Solar Procurement Scheme

Purpose of Report

1. To inform the Cabinet Member of the opportunities for the council to assist residents to install solar panels through Solar Together, a collective solar procurement scheme run by the company iChoosr.
2. To seek approval to enter a contract with iChoosr to run the Solar Together project, subject to revisions of the contract being agreed with iChoosr.
3. To seek approval to enter a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Wiltshire and Swindon Borough Council to set out ways of working between the two councils to achieve the scale needed for the collective procurement.

Relevance to the Council's Business Plan

4. The Solar Together project meets the Business Plan principles as follows:
 - **Empowered People:** The supported process, competitive price and quality assurance provided by Solar Together will empower residents, businesses and organisations who have been considering installing solar photovoltaic (PV) panels to proceed to installation.
 - **Resilient Society:** Rooftop PV provides residents with greater security of energy supply and price. This lends resilience in the face of an uncertain energy market.
 - **Thriving Economy:** The PV panels will “pay back” then generate a revenue over their lifetime, increasing prosperity in the county.
 - **Sustainable Environment:** The primary objective of this project is to cut carbon emissions and help to achieve the Council's carbon neutral ambition. The scheme is part of delivering the Climate Strategy, which contributes to the Business Plan principle of “We are on the path to carbon neutral.”

Background

5. In February 2019 the Council resolved to acknowledge a climate emergency and to seek to make the county of Wiltshire carbon neutral by 2030.
6. Renewable energy is key to achieving this, as noted in the draft Climate Strategy, which is due for adoption in early 2022. The Energy theme sets an objective to *“Increase renewable electricity generation...within Wiltshire by working in partnership with others”*. This is essential for meeting the greater demand from the electrification of heat and transport.
7. The Climate Strategy consultation received over 1000 responses. Roof mounted solar PV was the most popular renewable technology amongst respondents. Now the Climate Strategy is moving towards adoption, practical projects to deliver the aims are needed.

Main Considerations for the Council

8. Wiltshire Council has previously worked with iChoosr between 2013 and 2015 on a successful Collective Energy Switching project to support residents to switch energy suppliers and access lower energy tariffs, thereby saving them money on their energy bills. 369 residents switched provider during this time.
9. Solar Together works on the same principle as collective switching but for solar photovoltaic (PV) panels, battery storage and electric vehicle charging points. It allows residents to get a good price and be assured of the quality of the installation. The involvement of the council provides a level of reassurance about the process. Solar Together is aimed at homeowners with sufficient funds to make the investment themselves, but who may be concerned about finding a good quality installer on their own. In addition to residents, any organisation can register for the scheme, for example businesses and community groups.
10. The council and iChoosr work together to target and promote the scheme to residents who are most likely to have the resources and interest to install solar PV. Residents are sent a direct mailing, co-badged with Wiltshire Council. iChoosr then runs a “reverse auction” to appoint a supplier who can meet their quality requirements at the lowest cost, making use of economies of scale to improve the deal for the homeowner. iChoosr also undertake various quality checks to ensure that only highly reputable installers, with the appropriate certifications are included in the auction. iChoosr offers support to residents throughout the process.
11. As with collective switching, residents can register their interest in the auction with no commitment to take up the offer. Following the auction, residents are provided with a quote from the supplier. Residents can choose to accept the quote, at which point the suitability of their home would be assessed prior to installation.
12. If the residents’ home is suitable, the resident can proceed with the installation. The installation and products are covered by guarantee and iChoosr employs

an independent company to do a random spot checks on the quality of installation. The price of the installation should be lower than market price for products of similar quality (previous auctions have returned 30% savings), but the actual saving cannot be advised on until after the auction.

13. iChoosr runs three reverse auctions a year. Wiltshire plans to participate in the Summer 2022 auction, with residents able to register with the scheme from May 2022 and an auction in June 2022. To secure a place on the summer auction, the council needs to sign a contract with Solar Together before February 2022. Wiltshire would need to run the scheme in parallel with Swindon Borough Council to reach the minimum number of households to achieve the economies of scale required.

14. To summarise, the benefits of Solar Together to residents are:

- By coming together, residents get a better deal
- Council backing gives reassurance
- Hassle-free process
Working with experts who have vetted suppliers and researched the market helps navigate uncertainty
- Service desk for queries and support at all stages of the process

15. The benefits to the council are:

- Significant measurable carbon reduction driven by resident investment in green energy
- Group buying is an extremely cost-effective option, apart from staff time, it should be cost-neutral
- Small investment of council officer time to drive significant private investment
- Supplier vetting and engagement handled by iChoosr
- Customer support handled by iChoosr

Overview and Scrutiny Engagement

16. As part of the governance supporting the development and delivery of the Climate Strategy, the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee and the cross-party Climate Emergency Task Group sits on the Councillor Climate Working Group. The Councillor Climate Working Group and the Climate Emergency Task Group have been consulted on the intention to participate in Solar Together and support the principle of the scheme.

Safeguarding Implications

17. The impacts of climate change are amplifying safeguarding issues and falling heavily on vulnerable people both globally and in the UK.

18. Evidence suggests that vulnerable demographic groups experience disproportionate effects on their health outcomes from climate related impacts.

19. This includes young children, babies and older people who are particularly affected by extremes in temperature and the disruption caused by severe weather such as floodingⁱ. People with physical or mental health problems have a lower ability to act due to physical constraints or a lower awareness of their circumstances. People with low personal mobility or living in areas with lower accessibility of services tend to have less ability to respond and recover because it may take them longer to help themselves or to seek and receive help from others.
20. By reducing carbon dioxide emissions Solar Together will contribute to reducing climate change whilst creating a visible marker of the transition away from fossil fuels.
21. The scheme itself is not expected to have any safeguarding implications. The project engages adults who are able to pay for the installation of renewable energy. There is no pressure to participate, targeted residents receive only one direct mail letter. However there have been a small number of cases of cold callers imitating Solar Together. To mitigate this, Trading Standards and Customer Services will be briefed on the scheme and how to assist residents looking to verify the legitimacy of a Solar Together promotion.
22. Installers will need limited access into the houses of residents to install equipment such as inverters or batteries however Solar Together applies a level of rigour to the installation process, with an independent helpline and quality checks of the installation.
23. China manufactures the majority of the world's solar PV, including in the Xinjian region which poses a risk of slave labour. iChoosr is an active participant in the Solar UKⁱⁱ campaign to enhance the transparency of the solar supply chain and has as a contractual requirement that the supplier they appoint verifies that their PV is not produced using slave labour and has an up-to-date Modern Slavery Statement.

Public Health Implications

24. There is evidence to suggest that any steps to address climate change will have a public health benefits now and over the longer term. For example, heatwaves are associated with increasing aggression and violenceⁱⁱⁱ and Public Health England research found that over a third of people who were flooded in 2014 suffered with depression, anxiety, or PTSD, and nearly a quarter of people were still experiencing these negative mental health impacts two years later^{iv}. Young people are suffering mental health impacts from eco-anxiety with a recent survey finding nearly 60% of young people feeling very worried or extremely worried about the climate^v.
25. The scheme will enable residents to improve the function of their homes by reducing energy bills.
26. It is acknowledged that there is a risk that Solar Together could increase economic and health inequality since it benefits those residents who are able, and willing, to pay. Therefore, it is likely to exclude some of our more vulnerable population demographics. However, Solar Together is only one of

a suite of projects Wiltshire Council is running, some of which are restricted to disadvantaged households. For example, the council has secured £500,000 in grant funding for energy efficiency improvements and advice for fuel poor households via Warm and Safe Wiltshire and the council is also investing £50m to retrofit all council homes to Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) rating B standard. Whilst this does not completely remove the risk of increasing inequality, it does provide mitigation in alternative routes for some of those groups.

Procurement Implications

27. iChoosr will be directly appointed through a concession contract. The council will not pay iChoosr for any services, rather the council directly pays for the promotion required under the scheme in return for a commission.
28. iChoosr's service, consisting of a reverse auction, promotional materials, quality control and customer support has been shown through procurement exercises in other areas to be a unique offering. The spend for this project is also under the £25,000 threshold to require a full procurement exercise.

Equalities Impact of the Proposal

29. Solar Together will be widely promoted through general council channels. The owner of any building can register for Solar Together, including landlords, community buildings, businesses or social housing providers (other than the council which would need to do a separate procurement to install PV through Solar Together).
30. As noted above, the scheme would be out of financial reach for some residents however council does offer several schemes to support improvements for people on lower incomes. This includes partnership working through the Warm and Well scheme to reach and support the boater and traveller communities^{vi}. Energy advice leaflets are available in different languages.
31. Trading Standards, Parish Councils and Wiltshire Council customer services will be informed about the scheme so that they can answer queries and reassure residents. The communications work carried out as part of the scheme will also make residents aware of the scheme and how to avoid scams.

Environmental and Climate Change Considerations

32. Solar Together is unlikely to affect the consumption of energy in the county however it will increase the generation of renewable electricity. At current levels of carbon intensity of the UK electricity grid an average 3.5kWp PV system would save around a tonne of CO₂ per year.
33. Carbon emissions are "embodied" in the PV panels through the manufacture, transport and installation. It is not a simple matter to calculate the "carbon payback" on the panels and several factors must be considered:

- a. The UK electricity grid is expected to decarbonise as renewables increasingly replace fossil fuelled power, so the panels will displace less carbon per unit of power generated as time goes by.
- b. However, if not enough solar is installed, the grid will not decarbonise. The Committee on Climate Change states that the UK's solar capacity needs to increase by around six times to achieve net zero. Rooftop PV such as through Solar Together will further this aim.
- c. Embodied emissions are also falling as solar manufacturers improve their processes and increasingly use renewable energy themselves^{vii}.

34. **Static Sources** –The manufacture of the panels will produce emissions at the sites of manufacture, in many cases as noted these emissions are falling^{viii}.

35. **Transport Sources** - Transport within the county will be minimised through the scheme as one of the efficiencies it provides is installing panels in bulk and grouping installations.

36. The installations will have a life of 25 years. Solar panels do not increase or decrease vulnerability to extreme weather.

Risks that may arise if the proposed decision and related work is not taken

37. Not supporting a collective solar procurement scheme could be a reputational risk to the Council in relation to its commitment to reducing carbon emissions in response to the Climate Emergency.

Risks that may arise if the proposed decision is taken and actions that will be taken to manage these risks

38. The scheme potentially holds a reputational risk for the council if installations are not completed in a satisfactory way or complaints are handled inadequately.

39. This risk will be managed by the thorough checking process of iChoosr before installers can bid in the auction, as well as the efficient customer service support offered by iChoosr and the release of accurate and timely information through the comms part of the project. Wiltshire Council will have sight of any complaints, without the individual details of the residents, to comply with GDPR.

40. Apart from a small holding deposit, residents participating in the scheme pay no money until the installation is complete and the Council does not handle any of the money. All workmanship is covered by an Insurance Backed Guarantee, meaning that if the supplier ceases to trade during the term of the workmanship warranty, the insurer will take on the warranty.

Financial Implications

41. The Climate budget will be used to fund the marketing of a scheme. The Solar Together contract requires the council to fund a single letter to a targeted list of residents in early 2022/23 at a total upfront cost of around £20,000 and an additional cost of around £3,000 to use iChoosr's data licence (at cost) to create the target list. The council may then undertake additional paid promotion to boost participation in the scheme, this is not mandated in the contract so would be at the council's discretion.
42. It is expected that most or all of the upfront cost will be recovered. iChoosr will receive a fee from the winning supplier for each solar installation completed and will pass some of this back to the council. The amount per installation is determined by the total number of installations as shown in the tiers in the table below. Swindon and Wiltshire are running the scheme concurrently through a single reverse auction, so the sum of installations across both council areas will count towards the tiers. Each council will receive a total fee proportionate to the number of installations in its area.

Number of installations		Fee Per Installation
From	To	
0	100	£30.00
101	200	£45.00
201	300	£60.00
301		£75.00

43. Based on performance in other areas the highest commission tier of 301 installations should be reached and exceeded if the communications plan set out by Solar Together is implemented in Wiltshire and Swindon. For Wiltshire to break even and fully recover the £23,000 upfront costs outlined above, 307 installations would need to be carried out in Wiltshire.
44. The council has performed a due diligence check with Companies House on iChoosr which has raised no financial issues.

Legal Implications

45. To participate in the Solar Together scheme, the council and Swindon Borough Council (SBC) would each sign a separate but identical "mirror" contract with iChoosr. No significant issues have been identified with the iChoosr contract by the Legal Services at either council, although work is underway to re-word several clauses. Wiltshire Council's participation in the Solar Together scheme is contingent on these points being resolved to the satisfaction of Legal Services.
46. In addition to the contract, a light-touch Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) would be signed between Wiltshire Council and SBC to set out working arrangements. This is currently being drafted by Wiltshire Council's Legal Services. The collaboration with SBC will extend to the pooling of the residents from each constituency for the purpose of the reverse auction on

the iChoosr platform. The two authorities will advertise to their residents separately and also market the scheme separately.

47. There is no personal data being processed by iChoosr under this agreement and therefore there are no GDPR implications. Marketing by Wiltshire Council for the scheme will be carried out by using anonymised data matched against a Mosaic profile to identify households who might benefit from this. We will only be using anonymised data throughout the contract.

Workforce Implications

48. Time and expertise for promotion of the scheme would be required from the Wiltshire Council communications team, as well as from the Climate Team and Community Engagement Managers (CEMs) to ensure that community promotion is as wide and thorough as possible. The officer time requirement is highest during this inception and the promotion setup stage that runs until May 2022, of c1.5 days per week of officer time between the services.
49. Once the scheme promotion has ended, it is envisioned that a small amount of Climate Team officer time (c0.5 days/ week) will be needed until the end of the installation phase in spring 2023, to liaise with Solar Together and handle any publicity issues that come back to the council. Whilst iChoosr provides a helpdesk and they and the supplier will handle the bulk of public queries, it can be expected that there will be a few residents who approach the council directly.

Options Considered

50. The council could choose not to engage in a collective solar procurement project. This option was discounted since it would prevent residents across the county from having the opportunity to access the benefits of the scheme and result in lower uptake of rooftop solar.
51. Another option would have been to set up a scheme with a local installer. Such schemes have been successfully set up in towns such as by Zero Chippenham and in Bradford on Avon. We hope that the Wiltshire-wide Solar Together scheme is complementary to these local schemes and helps to multiply the benefits across Wiltshire. However, at a county-wide scale, without the service that iChoosr provides with strong customer processes and quality control, setting up such a scheme would take considerably longer, require greater staff capacity at the expense of other projects and carry a greater risk of underperformance or reputational damage.

Conclusions

The conclusion is to participate in the Solar Together scheme as a practical way to support residents taking a popular action to address the climate emergency.

Date of report 20 December 2021

Appendices: No appendices

Background Papers: No background documents

- i [Socially vulnerable groups sensitive to climate impacts | Climate Just](#)
- ii [UK industry supply chain statement • Solar Energy UK](#)
- iii [Temperature and aggression - ScienceDirect](#)
- iv [Tools for Councils • Ashden](#)
- v [Climate change: Young people very worried - survey - BBC News](#)
- vi Centre for Sustainable Energy 2020 [“Supporting the traveller and boater communities in Wiltshire”](#)
- vii Etude, 2021 [“The rapid fall of solar's embodied carbon”](#)