



better energy

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

BETTER ENERGY COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

WHY COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?

Communities worldwide are looking to solar energy to help them meet their growing energy needs and their move towards renewable energy sources. Solar energy is a safe, clean, abundant and affordable energy resource and an important part of the new renewable energy mix.

We can help communities benefit from this transition by sharing information with landowners and other community members from the very early planning stages of a project. Support for solar energy is generally positive, but few people are familiar with large-scale solar plants and the opportunities they offer. By listening and engaging early, we learn more about community interests, concerns and values.

Community engagement is really about being a good neighbour. We want to reduce carbon emissions, protect plant and animal life, strengthen the local economy and provide other opportunities for mutual benefit. The next few pages describe the best practices we use for community engagement over the life of a solar plant project.

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WE START EARLY

Conversations create growth

We have contact with landowners and close neighbours early in the site selection process. Our proactive, fair and open engagement is something that makes Better Energy stand out in the industry and it is greatly appreciated by local communities. We have a dedicated development team constantly on the road, visiting new areas often.

Large-scale solar is new to many people, so we want to give them an overview of the development process, the project, and the potential impacts and benefits it could have for the community. We clear up any myths or misconceptions about solar energy and communicate early about the opportunities that will be available at each stage of the project life cycle.

Community engagement is most effective if it starts as early as possible. It gives us more time to understand interests and respond to concerns, and it gives communities more time to make the most of opportunities.

WE LISTEN AND LEARN

Sense of community and place

Each community is different. Through conversations and visits to the area, we learn firsthand about what is unique and valued in the area, what should be preserved and what could be improved.

We engage with many different stakeholders in the community, people with an interest in or influence on the solar project. These stakeholders typically include landowners, residents, government, businesses, organisations, utilities, suppliers and educational institutions. Involving local people in the development process helps us understand their sense of community and place, the local context for the project.

We make sure communities know who to contact if they have questions, suggestions, complaints or concerns about the project. We keep track of comments and follow up.

SELECT LAND CAREFULLY

Finding a suitable location

Selecting a suitable site for a new solar plant is an important decision we make together with a community. Often, communities have large stretches of unused land – land retired from farming to protect groundwater, non-agricultural, low-grade or unproductive land. By developing a solar plant, we can add value to unused land and help the fight against climate change, while creating long-term havens for wildlife and native plants and benefits for local communities.

We look at local conditions and the surrounding environment. Criteria and requirements for site selection include physical features of the land, environmental factors, land use restrictions, social concerns and electrical grid infrastructure and requirements.

Rigorous planning process

A site-specific assessment is performed which covers legal and technical access to the site as well as irradiation and estimated energy yield of the project. If a site is promising, we secure the land-use rights and carry out further environmental, technical and financial assessments. We obtain all required planning and building licences, permits, authorisations and approvals. We manage all interconnection agreements and contractual arrangements. It takes approximately 12-20 months to bring a piece of land through development to the ready-to-build phase.

During the planning process, we have contact with community members in face-to-face meetings, small information sessions and town hall meetings. We use this time to discover new community considerations relating to projects and accommodate local ideas and points of view wherever possible.

PROTECT PLANTS, ANIMALS AND ECOSYSTEMS

Boost local biodiversity

New studies show that solar plants can significantly improve local biodiversity, with benefits to wildlife and potential benefits to surrounding crops.

Solar plants can serve as protected spaces for native and pollinator-friendly plants and long-term havens for wildlife for at least 20-30 years. The shade under the rows of modules protects plants and animals from weather conditions, and the ground stays relatively undisturbed for decades. These new havens have the potential to improve air quality, water quality, soil erosion and pollination.

Beehive boxes can be placed at the edge of solar plants. Pollinators like bees and butterflies flourish in this quiet environment that is rich in flora and free from pollutants and chemicals. They also visit nearby farmlands where they can help improve pollination and crop production.

Renewable energy development and biodiversity protection go hand in hand. We work with communities to promote and protect local flora and fauna, prevent land erosion, restore degraded land and protect groundwater.



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MINIMISE VISUAL IMPACT

Designed to fit

Together with neighbours and planning authorities, we adapt a project to fit into the landscape in the best possible way. We look at potential layouts and topographic maps to see land features and viewing situations from different locations.

We often use existing tree lines and hedgerows or establish new hedgerows to screen the project from view. Solar panels are mounted low to the ground and this low profile reduces their visibility at low viewing angles. Solar panels are also made to absorb as much sunlight as possible, so they have low reflection levels.

Careful site selection and design are the best ways to minimise visual impact. Most of our solar plants are placed on flat or gently sloping land away from highly populated areas. They are specially designed to follow the natural features and contours of the landscape. We work hard in the planning phase to ensure that we build our solar plants in harmony with nature and surroundings.

FIND MULTIPLE USES

Making the most of the land

Solar plant installations typically use less than 5% of the land. That leaves 95% of the land available for other activities such as crop production, livestock grazing and biodiversity enhancement. The goal is to use the same land area for multiple purposes and productions.

It starts in the development phase of a solar plant. Each solar plant is an opportunity to add value to the land, and the land areas are large enough to be divided up and used for several purposes. Our solar plant installations are specially designed and engineered with dual-land use in mind.



SUPPORT THE LOCAL ECONOMY

Projects create opportunities

Already during the site selection process, we consider the involvement of potential service providers and the availability of local skills and resources. Both skilled and unskilled employment opportunities could be available during the project life cycle of development, construction, operation and maintenance.

Local suppliers and resources might be used for land management and ground works. Examples of local job opportunities could be establishing roads, fencing and hedgerows, waste management, site security, grounds upkeep and electrical work.

We use local expertise and resources where possible to create jobs and support the local economy.

SUPPORT EDUCATION AND TOURISM

A living classroom

Individuals and groups often ask to visit large-scale solar energy projects. Solar power projects serve as a living classroom for visitors to learn about renewable energy, solar technology, ecosystems and biodiversity conservation.

We take into consideration the special social needs and ambitions of local communities. Solar projects provide a tremendous opportunity to inspire and educate future generations. In addition to the obvious link to science, technology and engineering, solar power plants connect communities to the broader environmental, social and human needs and values that shape technology and technical decisions.

We are open to ideas from local communities on how we can have a positive impact by supporting local education programmes and energy tourism.

SHARE BENEFITS

Build on mutual interests

Community engagement can create mutual benefits for a community and a solar project. Each community is unique, with different resources and different goals related to energy. There are many considerations, and opportunities may change over time as the needs of the local area and the project change.

Community benefit sharing means finding a way to create a positive impact that fits local values, needs and context. We welcome local ideas and collaborate on innovative products, financing, initiatives and programmes. We give members of a community the opportunity to be involved in an open and fair process to bring social, environmental and economic benefits to the area.



RETURN THE LAND TO ITS FORMER USE

Using resources wisely

The project life of solar power plants is typically 30+ years. Projects can be upgraded and repowered, or they can be decommissioned and removed.

Solar energy facilities can be dismantled and completely removed without any permanent damage to the land. In general, the dismantling of the system is performed in reverse order to the installation. No structures are left behind. We recycle as much of the system as possible. Any disposal of waste or recycling is done in accordance with local laws and requirements.

Once the equipment has been removed, the land can be restored to its former use. Farmers can grow crops or graze livestock.

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