

Super solar

The future is bright for three Gloucestershire parishes taking part in a radical scheme to lower energy bills.

Sarah Lonsdale reports



Residents near Stroud in Gloucestershire, including solar scheme creator Richard Dean, second from left, and harp-maker Creag Louttit-Vermaat, centre
ADRIAN SHERRATT FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

The villages around Stroud, scattered across the west Gloucestershire landscape of deep green valleys and hump-back hills, have long attracted city dwellers yearning for a quieter, simpler way of life. This summer the normally easy-going parishes of Chalford, France Lynch and Rodborough will be temporarily thrumming with manic activity as dozens of roofs are transformed into mini power stations, virtually overnight. Under a unique and radical scheme spearheaded by local GP Dr Richard Dean, the rooftops of houses, bungalows, schools, village shops and surgeries of this

idyllic corner will be clad in solar panels and start generating electricity from the sun.

The scheme is helping people to offset the terror of the autumn's fuel bill. Depending on usage and size of installation, solar panels usually cover between 40-70 per cent of a home's electricity use; more if storage batteries are also installed. By drumming up enough interest among locals, Dean has been able to secure significant discounts on the panels through bulk buying. Dean, who installed panels on his 1970s semi two years ago, spoke to residents using the

good old-fashioned method of the village hall public meeting. "It was last November, a horrible night," he says. "There hadn't been any sunshine for about nine days and I was trying to present my vision in front of 40 cold and damp people of a bright, new future where everyone could power their home from the sun."

Fortunately the energy in Dean's words inspired the first sign-ups: "Doctors, harp-makers, musicians and village shopkeepers all expressed an interest." The idea gradually snowballed through the early spring; when the energy price rise and war in Ukraine delivered a double dose of fear, 40 signed up in one day.

In the absence of any significant government help either to reduce bills or to save energy, apart from the recent removal of VAT on energy-efficient materials, across the country people are having to come up with their own solutions to the crisis. Solar panels are one of the quickest and least disruptive ways of reducing fossil fuel use; they can be installed in a day and start generating electricity immediately.

"We shouldn't have to do all this by ourselves," says Andy Williams, who is on the nine-strong management committee of the Chalford Community Shop. The shop, a co-operative run by a team of 35 local volunteers, sells groceries, award-winning bread and speciality teas in a





Panels on Dean's roof
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former chapel and will be part of the second wave of roofs getting panels. “We use a lot of electricity for our fridges and freezers. It seemed the obvious thing to do.”

Creag Louttit-Vermaat, a harp-maker who lives just down the road in Rodborough, will get his panels later this summer. His semi-detached bungalow has a south-facing roof at an ideal 32-degree angle and with the discount he can put up ten panels for £5,000. “It won’t quite cover all our needs as we have an electric car and we work from home, but it will significantly

reduce our bills,” he says.

The installer First4solar is starting work at the end of this month, putting up panels at the rate of seven roofs a week, with an average of 10-15 panels per roof. “We’re moving into Chalford for the summer,” says Aron Pullan, UK operations director at First4solar. “Altogether we’re putting up 750 panels on 94 roofs. It works for us because putting in so many panels at once means the cost per panel is far less than if you’re just putting up 50.”

Across the country other buying schemes are in

operation and demand is snowballing. The longest-established is [Solar Together](#), whereby local authorities invite residents to join a group buying scheme. Since 2018 the scheme has led to 100,000 panels being installed in homes in the UK, from Devon to Manchester. “While a lot of people know they are interested in solar, they don’t feel confident in making a decision about things like inverters and system capacity, which can be confusing, but the scheme creates a safe environment where people feel they can make an informed



decision,” says George Frost, country manager for iChoosr, the group-buying firm behind Solar Together.

“Each year the demand goes up,” Frost says. In 2021 the scheme arranged 7,000 installations; this year it will be more than 12,000 and next year it will be more than 20,000. “Because it’s a group buying scheme people on average have saved between £1,000 and £3,000 on a 12-panel installation. It’s for so-called able-to-buy households — because fuel bills are going up so fast, people might be choosing between investing in an Isa or investing in panels on their roof instead.”

The local authority imprimatur gives reassurance to residents wary of the solar-panel industry’s former reputation for cowboyism. Sian Berry, a Greater London Assembly member for the Green Party and a member of its housing committee, says Solar Together helps groups of residents, often in the same street, to navigate the difficulties of planning together, although it doesn’t help people in private rented

accommodation or those on low incomes. “In London, planning restrictions are one of the major barriers to installing solar panels,” she says. While some 2,700 London roofs are getting solar panels via Solar Together this year, she says registration for the next phase is at 30,000.

Perhaps the most visionary scheme is Power in Walthamstow, east London, which aims to provide solar panels for an entire street of 150 Victorian terraced houses, regardless of residents’ ability to pay. Artist Hilary Powell and film-maker Dan Edelstyn are designing, creating and printing banknotes, works of art that people can buy, and the money will be turned into solar panels for the homes the length of Lynmouth Road, E17. The artists’ target to raise £1 million by the end of the summer isn’t as far-fetched as it sounds. They previously produced another art-based campaign, Bank Job, again using artistic banknotes and raised £40,000, with which they helped to pay off people’s debts. These notes were bought by individual collectors

as well as institutions such as the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Museum of the Bank of England.

“We’re turning our street into a power station,” Powell says. “There’s a strong connection between climate crisis and the financial system and we wanted to find a creative solution to the problem.”

Edelstyn points out that much of Walthamstow’s housing stock is old, leaky Victorian terraces and fuel poverty in the borough is high. “We first wanted to take the whole of Walthamstow off the grid but realised that was a bit ambitious. But if we can use our street as a template to show what is possible, it will help people both reduce their bills and give them back power over their own energy supply.”

Instead of the Queen’s head, the banknotes feature portraits of local east London heroes including the football club Coppermill Swifts and the food co-operative Organic Lea. They go on sale this week starting at £1 and can be bought from www.power.film ■.