



EXCLUSIVE

Solar farm developers to offer homeowners payments in bid to avoid protests

Communities affected by a rapid expansion of solar energy projects are set to receive annual payments in a scheme that is expected to be finalised by the end of the year



The UK is expanding its solar energy production (Photo: Justin Tallis / AFP)

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Residents near solar farms will get payments from developers under plans to appease homeowners and [Nimbys](#), **i** can reveal.

Areas affected by the Government's [rapid expansion of solar energy](#) are set to receive annual cash payments in a scheme that is expected to be finalised by the end of the year, according to Solar Energy UK, a trade body.

The industry is working with the Government to flesh out the details of the “community benefits” funds, which could be administered by local councils or trusts.

Councillors in the West Lindsey district of Lincolnshire, where five solar projects are being planned despite [local opposition](#), said generous contributions were needed to compensate for negative impacts on the countryside.

They urged the Government to go further by offering residents direct payments in the form of reduced energy bills, which has been [proposed by Octopus Energy](#), the UK's largest energy supplier.

Energy Secretary Ed Miliband vowed earlier this week to “take on the blockers, the delayers, the obstructionists” to speed up the UK's progress towards a clean energy system by the end of the decade.

The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero told **i**: “Where communities live near clean energy infrastructure, they should benefit directly from it.

“We are also considering a range of options and incentives to better match where energy is generated and used.”

A Government source indicated lower energy bills were being considered for residents near solar farms, telling **i** “no decision has been taken” on whether to introduce this type of pricing.

Chris Hewett, chief executive of trade body Solar Energy UK, said the majority of the public supports solar energy projects, but “you're always going to get people who will set up a protest group and and object”.

He told **i**: “We understand that communities are having to accept infrastructure in areas where previously that sort of infrastructure has not been sighted.”

Mr Hewett said the industry is working with Government on a “community benefits” framework, adding: “The principle is something which we certainly accept.”

He added: “Broadly speaking, it would be an annual payment in proportion to the size of the development – so a certain number of pounds per megawatt per year for the length of the of the project. The projects will probably be in place for 30 years or more.”

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The sector wants the use of the money to be decided by local communities, who could choose to pay for things like playgrounds, improved footpaths and training to help local residents get jobs on the sites.

Mr Hewett said: “We wouldn't see this as something which was imposed by government on the industry. We're looking to come forward with some sort of voluntary scheme – a benchmark figure which we would expect developers to follow, like a voluntary agreement across the country.

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“It’s fair to say that many developments will have different features and different aspects, so one-size-fits-all doesn’t necessarily work. There will be different costs involved in different land values, different land rents, *et cetera*.

“The economics aren’t exactly the same everywhere, but we’d hope to set some sort of benchmark.”

He said the sector is aiming to finalise the plans by the end of the year, which could come into force soon afterwards.

Many solar energy developers already offer similar benefits packages to local communities, but this would create an industry standard, he said.

Mr Hewett said the sector was not in favour of people near solar farms getting lower energy bills via a “locational pricing” system – which has been advocated by Octopus Energy – because the “uncertainty of an entirely new system” could put off and slow down investment.

The previous government had pledged to overhaul the UK energy system and drive a five-fold increase in solar generation by 2035.

Although met with some internal backlash, these plans included proposals to build solar farms on the English countryside, one of which was the Great North Road Solar Park which could power up to 400,000 homes but has so far been met with local opposition.

Payments ‘would go a long way’ but ‘need to be big’

Richard Butroid, another Conservative councillor in Lincolnshire, where five solar projects have been proposed, said developer payments “would go a long way” to garnering support among residents, but only if the amounts were substantial.

He said he had seen some early estimates and was concerned the contributions were not large enough to compensate for the “disruption that we’ll have over the construction period” and the “damage that will be made to our country roads from these HGVs”.

Mr Butroid told **i**: “The roads that they’re proposing to use are not capable of taking these sorts of deliveries. It’s a real concern to a lot of people. I truly believe a lot of people haven’t quite realised the devastation that’s going to be made by these solar farms in this area.

“If we were getting one, we’d say, ‘well, fair enough, we’ll do our bit’, but the sheer number and the way they’re being waved through with very little local consultation is shameful.”

Two of the five projects proposed in the West Lindsey district in Lincolnshire have already been approved by the Energy Secretary, including [Cottam Solar](#),

which will be the UK's largest solar farm.

Due to its size, the Cottam development has been classified as a "Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project", and has bypassed the normal local planning process.

The five projects would span hamlets and villages such as Gate Burton, Marton, Littleborough, Brampton and Sturton by Stow.

Mr Butroid said cheaper energy bills could win over residents but "it all depends" on the size of the discount.

He said: "If you're knocking £10 off someone's bill, I don't think that will make a difference. If you're knocking 50 per cent off someone's bill, it might then start to get people's attention and they might look at saying, 'Well actually, we are getting something for this.'

"There's very limited jobs in this once they're constructed, we're losing tenant farmers, we're losing food production, we're losing rights of way because these are all fenced off. Whichever way you look at it, it's changing the look of the countryside around our villages."

Tom Smith, a Conservative councillor in Lincolnshire, cast doubt on the impact of the community payments, raising concerns that they would be too low.

He told i: "It certainly won't help bring the money back that will be lost from tourism or that people will lose in terms of work around agriculture. It won't help those individuals and it certainly won't help those businesses.

"It will take some of the pain away, but I would say a very small amount, to be honest. You're robbing Peter to pay Paul. I would say that that's used by these companies to say, 'we're taking this away, but we'll give you some money as a compensation' when the reality is very different. It will not compensate to the level required, in my opinion, for the damage it's going to do."

He said residents who are "lumbered" with solar farms close to their homes "deserve" discounted energy bills on top of payments for the wider community.

A Department for Energy Security and Net Zero spokesperson said: "Solar power is at the heart of our mission to make Britain a clean energy superpower and the Energy Secretary has consented more solar capacity since July than has been installed in the past year.

"It is also important local views are taken into account, and where communities live near clean energy infrastructure, they should benefit directly from it. We are also considering a range of options and incentives to better match where energy is generated and used."



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