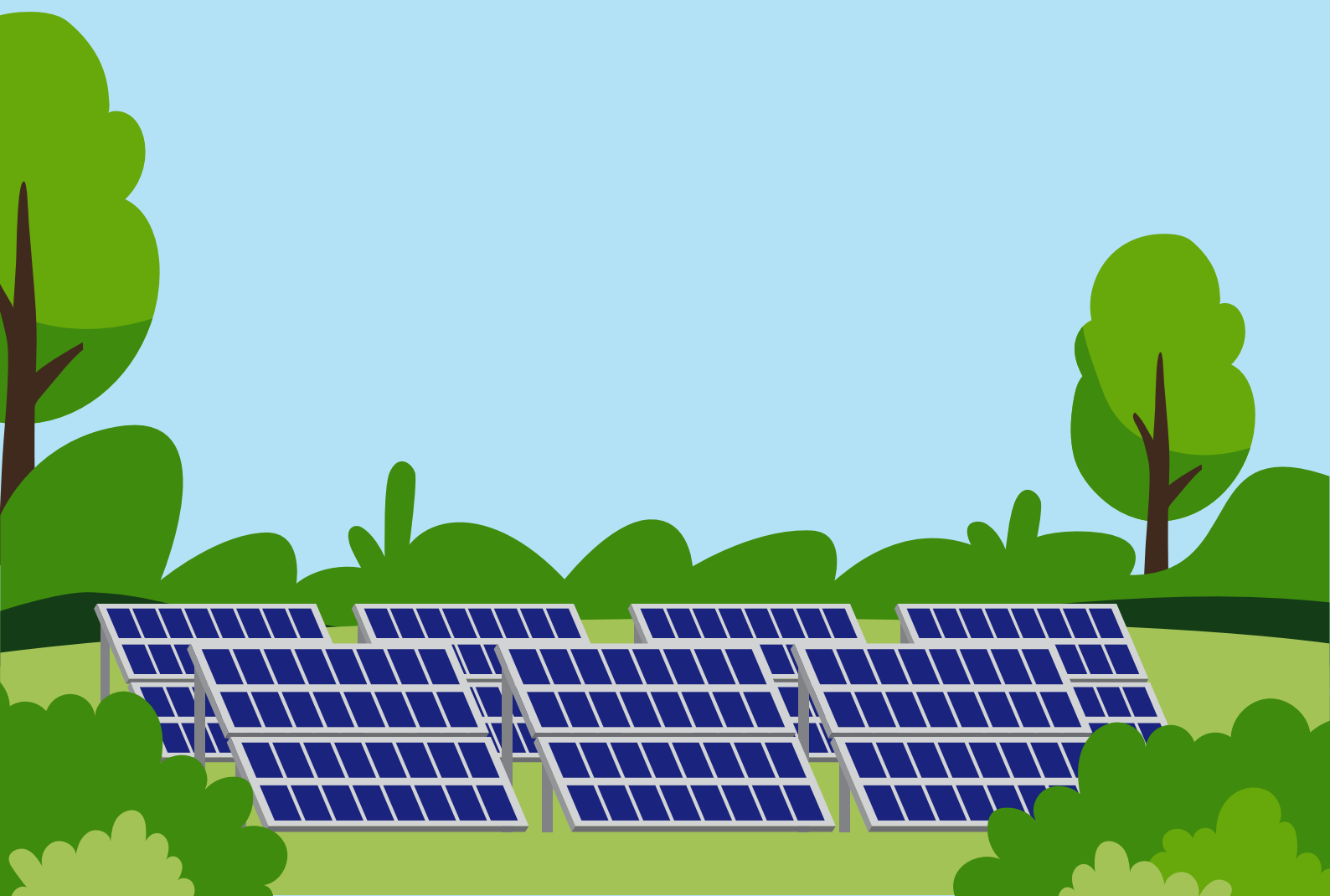


Case Study Forest Gate

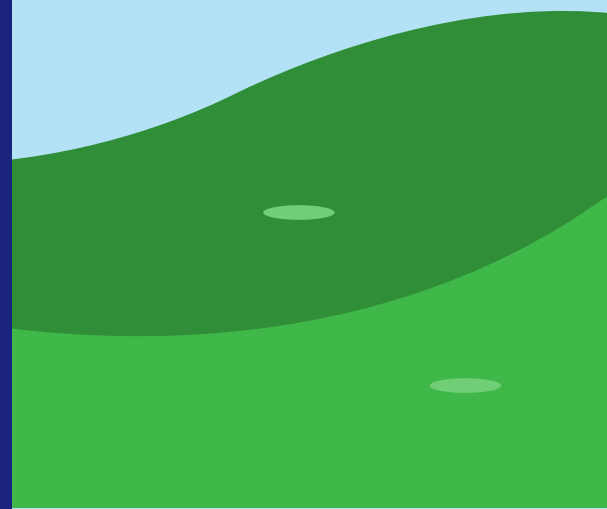


Summary

- **Location:** North Wiltshire, England
- **Capacity:** 49.9 Megawatts
- **Type:** Shared ownership solar farm and battery storage
- **Designer and installer:** Eden Renewables
- **Owner:** Eden Renewables, to be joined by Zero North Wiltshire and Bath & West Community Energy
- **Panel type:** Monocrystalline, bifacial, fixed tilt panels with lithium iron phosphate batteries
- **Completion date:** Late 2025/early 2026



Since 2010, the Eden Renewables team has led the industry with renewable energy and storage projects with a positive impact on the local environment and the communities that host them.



Overview

Forest Gate solar farm is a 49.9 MW solar farm with BESS project in North Wiltshire, developed by Eden Renewables, which was granted planning consent in March 2023. Following its expected completion in 2025/6, up to 20% of the solar farm will be owned by the local community.

From the very early stages of consultation for the project, Eden Renewables had extensive discussions with local climate action group Zero Chippenham who were keen to develop local community solar initiatives. Zero Chippenham had already set up a successful community rooftop solar buying scheme, which to date has delivered 50 rooftop installations, but wanted to expand into larger, ground-mount projects – and the proposed Forest Gate solar farm nearby was the ideal opportunity to do this in partnership with an experienced commercial developer.



Working with the very experienced community energy group, Bath & West Community Energy, Zero Chippenham set up a new Community Benefit Society, Zero North Wiltshire, to bring forward the community ownership side of the project. Longer term it intends to replicate this community share model across Wiltshire and be an exemplar of what can be achieved across the UK.

Community investors will receive a fair return on their investment. Zero North Wiltshire and Bath and West Community Energy will share ownership of the community assets and ensure the benefits will be retained within the broader North Wiltshire area, estimated at £5 million from 10 MW ownership for the project life. Eden is also contributing to a community benefit fund which, together with a separate educational fund, will be worth over £800,000 over the project lifetime. This will be used to help local initiatives to reduce fuel poverty and carbon emissions and also ensure the community continues to influence the environmental benefits of the project.

Project Summary

The Eden Renewables team had previous experience of working with community energy projects, having developed a 7.5MW community project in the national landscape (formerly area of outstanding natural beauty) in South Devon commissioned in 2019 and a “5&5” project in Sussex built in 2015. They were keen to extend this to larger sites where feasible, recognising the mutual benefits and shared interests when commercial solar developers create successful partnerships with community groups, leading to more sustainable and socially responsible solar projects.

Shared ownership fosters long-term engagement with the community and involving community groups in the development process can help build local acceptance and support for solar projects.

With growing competition for land for food production, biodiversity and carbon reduction and sequestration, "multifunctional land use" and "land sharing" are also a key driver for Eden's approach to development. For over a decade the Eden team has led the industry in best practice on continuing agricultural use and biodiversity, transforming solar farms into wildlife havens for their lifetime.

Eden's aim was that Forest Gate should be an exemplar of this, delivering for climate, nature and people. However, kicking off the pre-planning consultation process in Autumn 2020 at the height of the pandemic was a real challenge.

For Zero North Wiltshire, as a new Community Benefit Society, there were challenges around the contractual and financial aspects of the project.

Outcomes/Solution

"Due to the pandemic, Eden adapted its consultation approach. This included socially distanced site visits to over 50 properties, postal notifications to 800 residents, and an online webinar attended by over 70 participants. Subsequently, Eden organized a second in-person public consultation event with COVID-19 safety measures in place."

After the planning application was submitted the Parish Council also organised an open meeting and debate for local residents, which resulted in a strong majority of councillors supporting the solar farm. During the planning process the project was supported by representations from 229 individuals.

Delays caused by the pandemic and an under-resourced planning department at Wiltshire Council meant it took almost two years for the application to reach committee. At the Planning Committee meeting in March 2023, the Parish Council spoke in support of the project, alongside a local resident and the Managing Director of BWCE. The Chair of Zero Chippenham also submitted a supportive statement.

The project was approved by a substantial majority of councillors with informal feedback afterwards that some councillors saw community involvement and ownership as a positive indication of wider community support for the project.

Councillors clearly recognised that this was an opportunity for Wiltshire to host a genuinely pioneering and exciting community-commercial partnership which will share the financial benefits of the solar farm throughout North Wiltshire. On the Community Energy side, Zero North Wiltshire invited neighbouring Community Energy organisation, Bath & West Community Energy (BWCE), to collaborate as a partner and mentor.

The considerable experience BWCE has been able to bring has helped overcome many of the initial challenges faced by a relatively new Community Energy 'BenCom'.



Local Benefit

- New permissive footpath around the perimeter of the solar farm to provide a circular walk and a safer walking route along the busy A4.
- New woodland belt 25–30m wide comprising a mix of mature and fast-growing trees and hedgerow planting along the boundary with A4 will provide effective and immediate screening, boost biodiversity and absorb carbon.
- Enabling local people to own a share of the solar farm and receive a fair return on their investment; those who cannot have solar panels on their own home can benefit directly from local solar generation.
- While the solar farm itself will save 19,000 tonnes CO₂ per year and deliver a biodiversity net gain of at least 18% (committed to in planning, but expected to achieve much more), shared ownership will support Zero North Wiltshire and BWCE in delivering a range of other environmental benefits to the local community including tree planting schemes, a zero waste initiative, and air quality monitoring.

Community Benefit

- Eden Renewables will contribute £17,500 per year, index-linked to a community benefit fund managed by a panel of local people, with an additional £3,000 per year into its educational programme managed by Earth Energy Education, which organises in-school educational workshops and site visits.
- Community ownership through Zero North Wiltshire and Bath & West Community Energy is expected to generate an additional £5 million from a 10MW share of the project over the 40 year project lifetime, to be reinvested in the local community.

Learn more about what's happening at Eden Renewables at uk.edenrenewables.com



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