



power to  
change

business in  
community  
hands

## CORE case study: Yealm Community Energy – monitoring the impact of Community Benefit Fund grants June 2020



### About CORE:

Community Owned Renewable Energy (CORE) Partners, a partnership between Power to Change and Big Society Capital, has invested in nine solar farms with a combined capacity of c. 40MW and is working with six community partners, including Yealm Community Energy. It aims to transfer these into full community ownership by 2022, whilst maximising the financial, environmental and social impact for their local communities. The first investment offers for the community solar farms are expected to be launched in the winter of 2020, allowing local people to have a stake in their local green energy generating assets. After this process has been completed, these solar farms are expected to generate several million pounds over their lifetimes to be distributed locally for community benefit.

### About Yealm Community Energy:

Operating within the five parishes of the River Yealm in Devon (around 10,000 residents), Yealm Community Energy (YCE) is in the process of taking ownership of the Newton Down, Creacombe and Marlands solar farms from CORE Partners (Community Owned Renewable Energy LLP). Profits made from these farms are allocated to a Community Benefit Fund (CBF) managed by YCE and overseen by CORE. In both 2018 and 2019, £20,000 was distributed to 28 projects delivering a wide range of environmental and social benefits in the Yealm area. In April 2020 a further £10,000 was dispersed to support the community's response to the COVID-19 pandemic with a further £38,000 available to distribute.



## Key points for Community Energy groups:

- YCE have developed a social impact policy document that has proved useful in clarifying governance, guiding the grant allocation process, and defining indicators of desired impact.
- YCE have deliberately kept their criteria for allocating a CBF grant quite wide so as not to be too restrictive and to recognise that community needs might change over time.
- This broad remit has enabled the fund to support a range of projects (including emergency food provision during the COVID-19 pandemic), but communication and liaison across this programme has required significant amounts of time from YCE Directors.
- It is also important to arrive at a proportionate level of reporting from grant recipients. Impact reporting is challenging even for the largest charities, so a balance needs to be struck between the CBF's expectations and the capacity of organisations receiving small grants to generate the required feedback.

## Our learning so far:

### Allocating the grants

The grant allocation process is clearly set out in the social impact policy document and has proved effective. Decisions on awarding grants are made by a panel drawn from YCE board members and independent representatives from the five Yealm parishes. After a verification and validation process, a decision is made considering the intended impact of the project alongside the likelihood of successful completion and whether the project has any matched funding. The CBF also provided advice to some organisations to optimise their grant applications. Over two annual grant rounds 28 projects across activities including energy advice, installing solar panels, creating wildlife friendly areas, learning opportunities for young people, reflooring a community hall and renovating traditional crabber boats have received grants ranging from £145 to £4,000.

### Monitoring the grants

Learning has been generated on both sides of the funder/beneficiary relationship. From the CBF's perspective, it has been challenging to maintain the engagement of some beneficiaries and make sure others are fulfilling their grant obligations (e.g. using the YCE logo and mentioning the source of grant). Interviews with 2018 grant recipients revealed a feeling that the CBF's reporting requirements (two reports after six- and 12-months) were relatively onerous, particularly for the smaller grants.

### The impact of the CBF grants

Each of the funded projects has generated its own positive outcomes. One theme that emerges from evaluation interviews with CBF grant recipients is the additionality generated by the CBF grant. In this respect, the broad grant giving approach has had a considerable effect on several local projects that may not have happened, or been as effective, without the CBF funding. Examples of specific projects include:

- South Dartmoor Community Energy received £2,541 to provide free, impartial home energy advice. Usually SDCE use DNO "social obligation" maps to target their activity, but the Yealm parishes do not show up in those maps as, overall, the area is quite affluent. However, there is hidden fuel poverty and some isolated residents. SDCE were able to reach 47 residents that they would not have been able to reach otherwise. 15 home visits were made and after six months £2,582 in bill savings had been achieved through tariff switching. In addition, three residents in need were referred for free home energy saving measures (e.g. a new boiler).
- Newton and Noss Village Hall received £4,000 to install solar panels (roughly two-thirds of the total cost). The local area has no shops and an elderly population, so the hall is a vital space for education and leisure activities. The hall is now saving money on its energy bills (£318 by March 2020, roughly 20% of their annual bill) as mains electricity consumption has reduced by between one half and one third. A representative said that the grant was "*absolutely critical, we wouldn't have done it otherwise. Saving money on our ongoing costs, helps to keep rental rates lower for local events, so hopefully we get more hires – which, ultimately, keeps the hall open.*"



- Bee Wild received £1,750 to create a pollinator friendly wildflower meadow in Yealmpton. The grant (the project's largest) was used to buy seeds, fruit trees, hedge plants, and resources to ensure planting events were family friendly (for example a storyteller and an information board.) The grant enabled over 80 people to attend each of three community planting events and Bee-wild has successfully improved the extent and diversity of insect, bird and wildlife habitats in the local area.

Given the diverse nature of the activities supported, it is difficult to collate the various positive outcomes generated by those projects into one overarching narrative that articulates the impact of the CBF as a whole. YCE have devised a metric around the number of Yealm parish residents whose lives have been "touched in a meaningful way" by the funded projects (estimated at 1,000 (10% of the population) after six months of the 2018 projects).

### What we're doing next:

YCE's eventual portfolio will include three major solar farms: Newton Downs, Creacombe and Marlands. Marlands (close to Creacombe) was the UK's first 'post subsidy' community solar farm, developed without subsidy from the Feed in Tariff or Renewables Obligation Certificates. YCE has ambitions to improve the management of biodiversity on these solar farms and to support low-carbon energy initiatives and hopes to contribute over a million pounds to its CBF over the next two decades.

YCE is keen to discuss different approaches to CBFs with other Community Energy groups. For example, how to involve members in decisions about what the CBF's desired outcomes should be and how its funding can be used as a catalyst to attract even bigger grants (e.g. from government). The fund also plans an in-depth evaluation of the first two years of funding to help develop future impact reporting. The CBF is also in consultation with Parish Councils and community groups to determine how best to allocate the £38,000 available for local projects alleviating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### If you want to know more:

Andrew Moore – Director, Yealm Community Energy - [andrew.moore@omkltd.org](mailto:andrew.moore@omkltd.org)