



Council name	COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL
Name and date of Committee	CABINET - 7 FEBRUARY 2022
Report Number	AGENDA ITEM 13
Subject	DECISION TO PARTICIPATE IN 'SOLAR TOGETHER COTSWOLD' GROUP BUYING SCHEME FOR DOMESTIC SOLAR PHOTOVOLTAIC PANELS
Wards affected	ALL
Accountable member	Cllr Coxcoon, Cabinet Member for Climate Change and Forward Planning Email: <a href="mailto:rachel.coxcoon@cotswold.gov.uk">rachel.coxcoon@cotswold.gov.uk</a>
Accountable officer	Chris Crookall-Fallon, Head of Climate Action Email: <a href="mailto:chris.crookall-fallon@publicagroup.uk">chris.crookall-fallon@publicagroup.uk</a>
Summary/Purpose	To decide whether the Council should participate in a group buying solar panel discount scheme, enabled by a private sector company and in collaboration with Wiltshire Council and Swindon Borough Council, to provide Cotswold homeowners with easy-to-access, discounted, quality assured, domestic rooftop solar photovoltaic (PV) installations.
Annexes	Annex 1: iChoosr company summary.
Recommendation/s	<i>That Cabinet:</i> <i>a) approves in principle participation in a 'Solar Together Cotswold' initiative, subject to officers' further due diligence and advice from legal services</i> <i>b) delegates authority to the Chief Executive to enter the contract, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Climate Change and Forward Planning, and the Deputy Leader/Cabinet Member for Finance.</i> <i>c) approves funding of £5,000 from the revenue earmarked reserve set aside for climate studies to fund the promotion of the scheme.</i>
Corporate priorities	Respond to the climate crisis
Key Decision	No
Exempt	No
Consultees/ Consultation	Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive, and the Cabinet Member for Climate Change and Forward Planning.



## I. BACKGROUND

- I.1 The intention to facilitate a 'solar streets' type group-buying scheme for domestic rooftop solar PV is included in the Council's Climate Emergency Strategy, adopted in September 2020.
- I.2 There are two basic options for creating a scheme of this type. These are a bespoke, district-specific approach giving the Council a high degree of autonomy in scheme design, but incurring significant cost and risk, or participating in a large-volume, established scheme with much lower risk, but giving the Council less flexibility and autonomy in scheme design and operation. The proposal here is that the Council takes the latter approach.
- I.3 Over recent months an attempt was made by Gloucestershire local authorities to create a solar PV group-buying scheme, which the Council had hoped to participate in, but this initiative has not progressed. This is due to advice offered by One Legal to Stroud District Council (the coordinating authority) pertaining to perceived reputational risk related to a third party (the consumer data and analytics firm Experian, whose services are used by iChoosr in targeting direct marketing for the Solar Together scheme), which is under investigation by the Information Commissioner's Office. The exact advice from One Legal is not available to us since it is privileged, although Stroud District Council intends in due course to issue an explanatory note. Please also see paragraph 4.2 below.
- I.4 Cotswold District Council now has an alternative opportunity, to collaborate with Wiltshire and Swindon Borough Councils, and take part in (effectively the same) solar group buying scheme that is at an advanced stage of preparation. Communications to Cotswold homeowners will identify the district Council as the scheme promoter, without reference to Wiltshire or Swindon Councils, in the same way that Swindon and Wiltshire residents will have reference with their own authorities.

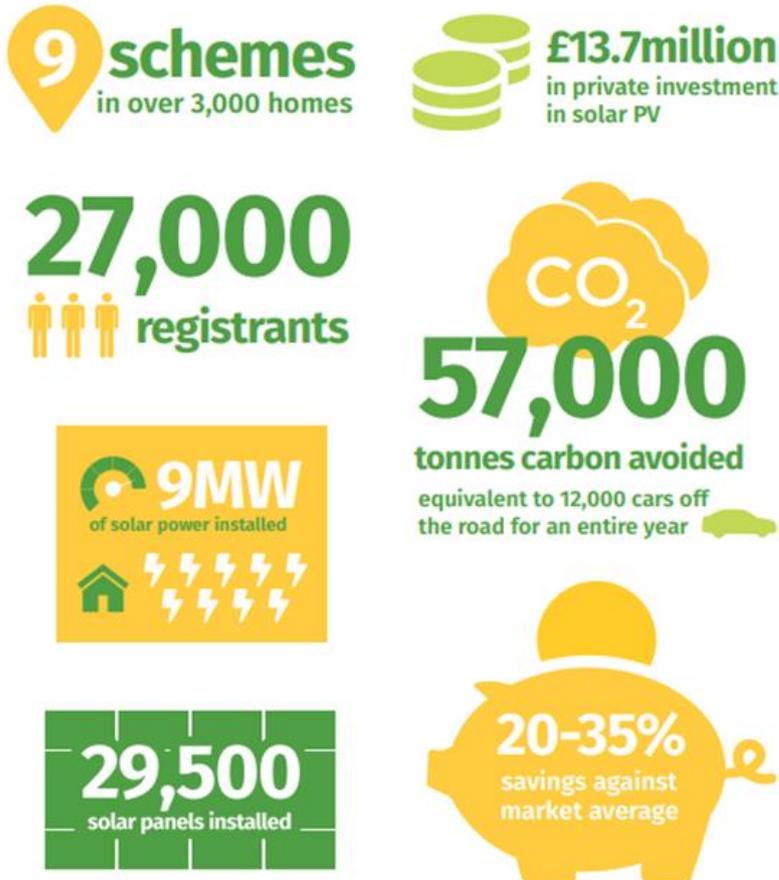
## 2. MAIN POINTS

- 2.1 It is proposed to use the established 'Solar Together' scheme run by the company iChoosr (see: <https://ichoosr.co.uk>), a commercial firm that has developed the primary service to local authorities, within the market. Please refer to appendix I for further details on iChoosr.
- 2.2 *iChoosr has now worked with some 160 Councils and their service is generally seen as reliable and good value. iChoosr currently has live rooftop PV schemes running with Cambridgeshire, Devon, Essex, Hampshire, Kent, Norfolk, Suffolk, Surrey, Sussex and Warwickshire county councils. An extract from iChoosr's previous annual report indicates the take-up of the scheme to date from authorities around the country (see graphic).*



## Solar Together Year Two

2019 saw our first 3 schemes to include optional battery storage with an average uptake of 30%. We expect this trend to continue and increase in 2020 and beyond.



- 2.3 iChoosr's Solar Together model requires a minimum of 100,000 households, and therefore is typically used by unitary authorities, county councils or London boroughs. Cotswold District has around 36,000 households and therefore cannot run a scheme in isolation. However there is a time-limited opportunity for the Council to join a scheme developed over recent months by Wiltshire Council and Swindon Borough Council. Both councils are happy for the District Council to join the scheme at this relatively late stage in their negotiation with iChoosr. Cotswold District Councils participation in the Wiltshire-led scheme is made possible by our shared border. This is believed to be a good opportunity for Cotswold District Council, to access a scheme which it would not be possible to run in isolation.
- 2.4 The branding of the scheme, that Cotswold residents will see in direct marketing and on websites, will be 'Solar Together Cotswold'. The collaboration with Wiltshire and Swindon is not relevant to, and will not be visible to, any Cotswold participant in the scheme.



**2.5** The Council will have a direct contract with iChoosr to administer the scheme. There is no contractual relationship between Cotswold, Wiltshire or Swindon Councils– the three councils are simply collaborating to ensure that the minimum threshold number of households can be reached to make the overall scheme viable, within a contiguous land area.

**2.6** The Solar Together scheme operates by:

- 1) iChoosr aggregating households (across council areas) together to reach a minimum of 100,000;
- 2) iChoosr runs a supplier / installer selection process with tight due diligence and criteria on customer service, equipment quality assurance and installation price;
- 3) letters are sent from the participating council to a subset of homeowners, targeted by geographic and demographic marketing data (the Council does not provide any data on residents - targeting is based on publicly available data, undertaken by iChoosr);
- 4) the council supports and promotes the direct mail marketing campaign with social media and website links, highlighting the Climate and financial benefits to residents;
- 5) interested homeowners contact the scheme administrator (iChoosr) directly;
- 6) the shortlisted installers compete by auction based on the number of householders identified, in order to drive down the installation price;
- 7) the auction-winning installer makes a no-obligation offer to the homeowner;
- 8) for each homeowner that proceeds to installation, a small fee is paid to the Council, to help offset the up-front marketing costs. This is not a profit making initiative for the Council but has the potential to be cost neutral.

**2.7 Benefits to Cotswold homeowners.**

Cotswold homeowners that have suitable roof space, and who may have been considering solar PV, will be able to purchase solar panels (and related equipment if desired such as domestic battery storage and electric vehicle charge points), at reduced cost (due to bulk buying) and with much higher confidence (due to the endorsement by the Council and strict supplier selection criteria). This Council-endorsed scheme should remove much of the difficulty for homeowners in selecting the right product and finding reliable installers. The scheme is best understood, and communicated, as a relatively low-cost means of engaging homeowners in the district by offering the opportunity to take personal action to tackle the climate crisis.

**2.8 Benefits to the Council.**

Whilst domestic solar is a relatively small part of the solution to the climate crisis, and will not be available for all homeowners, it is nonetheless one piece of the jigsaw. Expanding the number of households with solar PV (and related technology) should help increase



behaviour change in favour of lower carbon lifestyles, and the visibility of the scheme provides opportunities for the Council to communicate its ambitions for district-wide emissions reduction, and engage with residents.

- 2.9 As a result of the campaign the Council expects to achieve between 50-100 domestic rooftop installations in the district. This is an estimate only. Subsequent campaigns over time could add to this.

### 3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 The Council's commitment would comprise endorsement and promotion and a modest financial outlay to support the promotion of the scheme.
- 3.2 Assuming that direct mail marketing is targeted at half of the district's owner-occupiers, direct costs to the Council (ie, excluding officer time) is expected to be approximately £4,700, with projected revenues from referral fees around £6,000, leaving a small surplus for the Council, which can be reinvested into further marketing or set aside for other public engagement on the Climate emergency.
- 3.3 The modelling of costs and revenues is approximate only at this stage of planning, so there is a risk costs are not recouped. The scheme is not intended to be a revenue generator for the Council.
- 3.4 The Council holds a revenue earmarked reserve to fund climate change studies. It is proposed that £5,000 of this reserve is allocated to fund promotion of the Solar Together Cotswold initiative.

### 4.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 Legal Services have approved the contracts between the Council and iChoosr. The Contracts for installation will be between individual householders and the approved installer.
- 4.2 Note that the existence of the advice from One Legal to Stroud District Council (para 1.3 above) which led to the cancellation of the proposed Gloucestershire-wide scheme, has been disclosed to Cotswold District Council's legal services team, who have considered it, and have approved the contract with iChoosr.

### 5. RISK ASSESSMENT

- 5.1 The financial risk to the Council is limited to the marketing costs and is therefore low.

5.2 **There is potential for** reputational risk to the Council if,

- the scheme was poorly executed;
- homeowners' experience of customer service was poor;
- no apparent cost savings were realised for homeowners;



- solar panels and related equipment, or installation, were of poor quality and redress was difficult;
- installations did not generate the amount of energy predicted;

This reputational risk is managed through iChoosr's experience and the rigorous installer selection process they operate, to ensure that all installers and equipment meet stringent quality standards.

- 5.2** If homeowner communications are poorly executed it is possible that extra workload for the Council's customer services staff could be generated, fielding calls that should be going straight to either iChoosr or chosen installers. This is mitigated by iChoosr's experience of running schemes with many councils, and the tried-and-tested nature of the template communications that iChoosr uses.

## **6. CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1** The direct carbon savings from the solar installations will be modest. The total installed generation capacity from the scheme is likely to be around 200-250kWp (for comparison, similar to the capacity that will be installed on the roof of Cirencester leisure centre under the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme programme).
- 6.2** Carbon dioxide savings are estimated at around 35-40 tonnes CO<sub>2</sub>/year in the first year installed (falling thereafter as the electricity grid becomes progressively lower carbon).
- 6.3** The more important climate action impact is in creating more visibility of solar roofs in the district, which experience shows is likely to increase confidence and interest among neighbours, and lead eventually to more installations.

## **7. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**

- 7.1** The Council could decide to do nothing and not participate in the scheme, however the minimal input in terms of funding and resources should generate notable benefits in terms of public awareness and take up of carbon reducing technologies in homes.
- 7.2** If members were uncomfortable with the relative inflexibility of the iChoosr scheme, the Council could still develop its own scheme, perhaps in collaboration with neighbouring authorities. Development of such a scheme would be time consuming and demanding of limited officer time and expertise. There would be increased cost risk for the Council and furthermore may result in no better, and perhaps weaker, price discounts for Cotswold residents.

## **8. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 8.1** Appendix I: iChoosr company summary

The due diligence report on iChoosr states the company's credit health is 'low risk'.



The following extracts from the Solar Together and iChoosr websites provide a summary of the business and the Solar Together proposition.

## Who is iChoosr?

iChoosr is an independent expert in group-buying and has been organising schemes with councils and other community leaders in the UK since 2012. They have worked with over 160 councils to deliver [collective energy switching](#) schemes nationwide in the UK helping residents save more than £47 million since 2012. They have been running group-buying for solar schemes in the UK and mainland Europe since 2015.

iChoosr's primary role is to support local authorities to deliver Solar Together locally as well as maintain and run the online platform. iChoosr also provides support and advice to participants via the online helpdesk and call centre.

If you choose to accept your personal recommendation, iChoosr receives a fee that is shared with your local authority to ensure they can continue to promote Solar Together locally.

If you would like to find out more about iChoosr, please visit [ichoosr.co.uk](http://ichoosr.co.uk)

iChoosr also works with local authorities across the UK to deliver collective energy switching schemes. If you are interested, please visit [bigcommunityswitch.co.uk](http://bigcommunityswitch.co.uk) to see if there is a scheme in your area.

## What is Solar Together?

Solar Together is a unique group-buying scheme for solar photovoltaic (PV) panels and battery storage. This scheme will make solar PV and batteries more accessible and more affordable for a great number of people.

With a group-buying scheme, it becomes easier to buy your solar PV system and battery storage. And by buying together, you gain a competitive price. iChoosr is the owner of Solar together and a group-buying specialist in this field, who cooperates with participating local authorities to deliver the scheme.

Local authorities work together with iChoosr to promote Solar Together in your area. We want to help residents to get a solar PV system installed on their homes and perhaps battery storage, at an affordable price and help local authorities reach their carbon reduction targets.

We group residents from across the country to increase our bargaining power, and to ensure you get the most competitive offer from our pre-vetted installers. Our dedicated helpdesk is on hand to handle all your enquiries via our online contact form, over the phone and social media.



## Are you an interested council?

Many counties and councils already work together with iChoosr to promote Solar Together in their area.

## Do you want to help your residents reduce their carbon emissions?

We believe we can achieve more when we work together. Saving your residents money, and reducing carbon emissions.

Solar Together is the solar group-buying scheme that local authorities can join. We group residents from across the country to increase our bargaining power, and to ensure they get a competitive offer from our pre-vetted installers. A dedicated helpdesk is on hand to handle questions of residents via our online contact form or over the phone.

We are trusted and experienced experts in group-buying. Since 2012 we have partnered with over 160 councils in the UK to carry out three collective energy switching schemes a year, averaging 60,000 registrants per scheme.

### Our Promises

- High-quality complete solar systems
- Clear and impartial information
- Being part of a wider community will help gain a competitive package
- We provide a free and no obligation platform

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