

St John's Sunshine – A good story

Generating energy out of thin air

That's easy. Take one community asset – a south facing church roof, for instance, add a solar panel or two and before you know it you are helping to power a community. But what about the other energy that powers society - the creative energy of the people who live there? That energy, like sunshine or wind energy, is in every neighbourhood, but harnessing it and making it work for the benefit of all is a much greater challenge. In Old Trafford, Greater Manchester, St John's Sunshine (SJS) set out to do exactly that.

“We wanted people to feel like they could make a difference and be part of something really good”

About the solar scheme (see Figure 1):

Stage 1

- Solar photovoltaic (PV) panels 3.75kW (18 panels), installed February 2012
- Capital cost ~ £13,000
- 3,000kWh+ per year
- Income and savings ~ £1,700+ per year

Stage 2

- Further 5-6kW planned later in 2012

What is St John's Sunshine?

SJS is a new enterprise based at the St John's Centre and located in the heart of Old Trafford in Greater Manchester. It is an Industrial and Provident Society for Community Benefit, registered with the FSA, and owned and run by its members for the benefit of local people and communities.

How did it come about?

Rev. John Hughes of St John's Church dreamed of putting solar panels on the church roof but was unsure how to make it happen. The pieces began to fall into place over an ice-cream at the St John's Centre Neighbours Day, Spring 2011, where John first met Fiona Nicholls, co-founder of Sustainable Change Co-operative. The idea began to evolve for a not-for-profit co-op that could finance and run an alternative energy scheme, purely for the benefit of the local community.

Two more Directors, Pete Abel, a local campaigner, research consultant and Carbon Co-op Founder Member, and Gavin Wood, a business advisor and Chair of Emerge 3Rs, also volunteered to come on board. Within months the foundations were in place and a unique share offer to enable local residents to 'invest in sunshine', was launched.

“We wanted people to feel like they could make a difference and be part of something really good” Fiona Nicholls explains. “The share offer is exciting and very unusual.”

John Hughes adds: “We wanted to involve as many people as possible, and people from all the different communities that make up Old Trafford.”

How does SJS benefit the community?

The Founder Members, who are also the current Directors, spent some time trying to work out what the focus of SJS should be, and they came up with six objectives. They include generating low carbon energy, issuing grants, encouraging others to get involved in issues that affect society and the environment, and providing people with the chance to invest. SJS is run by volunteers so all the money raised from the share offer, membership subscriptions and donations are used directly to support these goals.

“What is important in all of this is the idea of working co-operatively”

*Figure 1: Stage 1 project installed
Source: John Hughes*



Can others become part of SJS?

Local people or supporters from farther afield can become members of SJS for a nominal fee. They can also invest anything from £100 into shares to cover the cost of installing the solar panels on the Church roof. The panels are already generating electricity and reducing the bills of the neighbouring St John's Centre. For each unit of electricity produced, cash is also generated through the Government's cash back scheme, the Feed-in tariff (FIT). It is proposed that the surplus be used to offer 'Sunshine Grants' to local projects and offer a small return to investors.

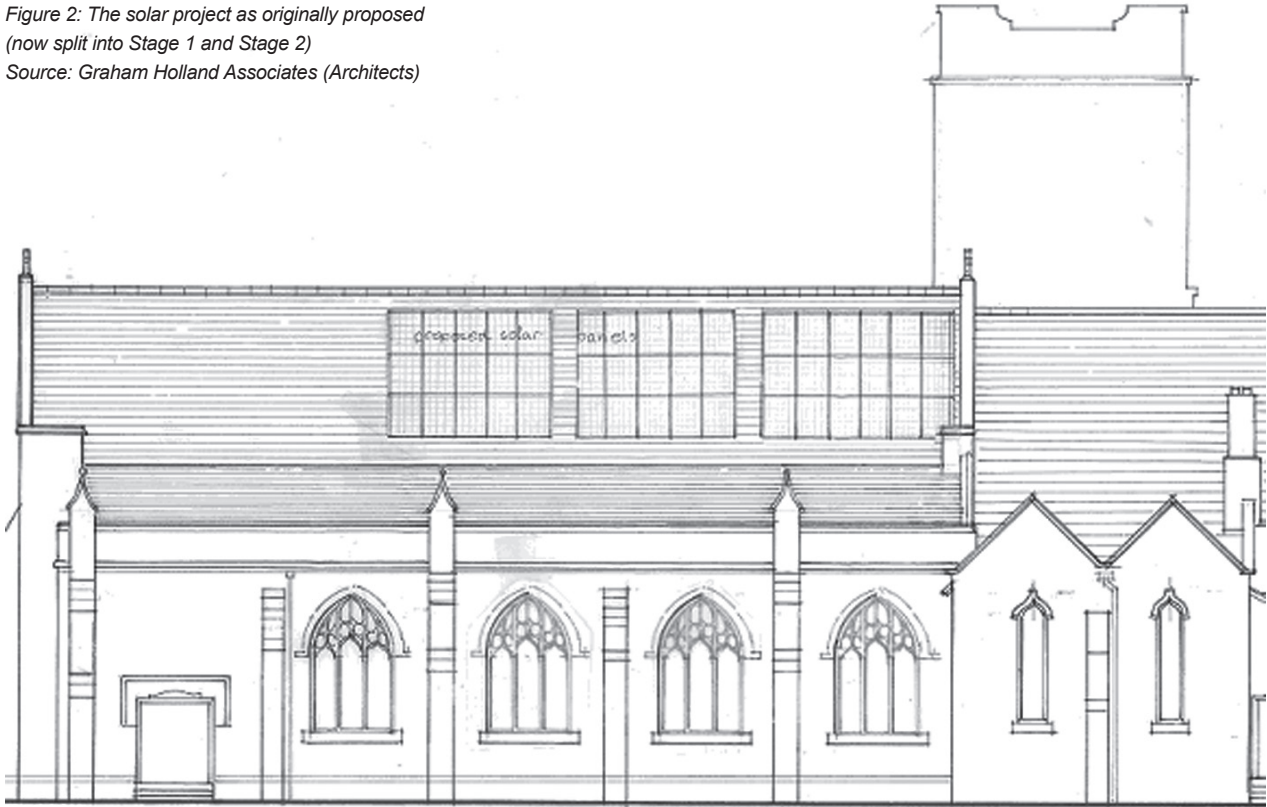
“I have a real passion for co-operatives and I'm also an environmentalist,” continues Fiona, “so the opportunity to combine the two was one not to be missed.” Gavin Wood stresses that the scheme is still a business. “This is practical as well as empowering” he says. “It isn't something fluffy being handed down by the Government. It's something people can really get their hands on - the community is doing something itself, for itself.”

All members agree it takes a lot of energy to get things going and it can be difficult to keep up momentum. A community grant helped to speed things up but even without this, all were committed to making it happen. “We did it the hard way” says John. “We could have explored other ways to raise the money such as bank loans, an energy supply company, for example but then the returns wouldn't have benefited our community.”

The legal model and approach used offers an ethical alternative to high street savings, meaning people can literally invest in their own community. Members who join can also get involved in running the enterprise and can become a Director. “What is important in all of this is the idea of working co-operatively” adds Pete Abel. “No matter how much or how little a person can afford to put in, they get an equal say in how it works.”

“It isn't something fluffy being handed down by the Government... the community is doing something itself, for itself”

Figure 2: The solar project as originally proposed
(now split into Stage 1 and Stage 2)
Source: Graham Holland Associates (Architects)



It looks like the perfect model on paper but how easy it?

“Anybody can do it” says Gavin. You don’t have to be rich or know much about it at the outset, but you’ll be in for a bit of learning curve if not. It is a business, not a charity, so you do have to make some money to enable it to run. Some skills and basic understanding will help but there is a lot of advice out there.”

Just how smoothly things run in practice depends upon what obstacles tumble in your path. In December 2011, with project planning already well underway, the Government announced it was slashing the FiT for solar power, throwing a question mark over the project. The powers that be are still debating policy changes, so the final outcome still remains a little uncertain. Another issue was the ‘wrong’ power supply being in place. Although a 3 phase had been identified and suitable, it turned out to be disconnected and only a single phase supply was in place. “This was a real blow” says Fiona, “it meant that the much larger project we were going for had to be put on hold”. Undeterred, SJS went ahead and installed the first set of solar panels, and plans to do more soon to complete the project (see Figure 2) .

“How much is involved depends upon how many obstacles you meet along the way. We came across a few but tackled them one by one. Nothing goes smoothly, it never does. We fleetingly thought about packing it in but the desire to have a go was strong for all of us.”

“People have different skills and things they can bring to the table, which helps when making decisions and getting things done.”

What might another community or group need to do develop a similar project?

A project of some sort could be done in any community. “It’s just finding the right one for the people who live there,” says Fiona. This could be one that uses the sun, the wind, water or wood or it could focus on saving energy rather than focussing on renewable power or heat. “The key is to work with others sharing tasks, tackling problems and enjoying the results. People have different skills and things they can bring to the table, which helps when making decisions and getting things done. You need the people who like to talk to people, the sociable, friendly people. And people who like doing the detailed things. Everybody doesn’t have to know how to do ever thing, they just need to want to have a go.” Other things to think about are whether planning permission is needed, what others in the community think and what advice you might need.

What's in it for me?

For every person that gets involved in something like this, there are different motivations and different things to get out of it. "I've learned a lot about setting up a different kind of enterprise and have really enjoyed learning from the others" says Fiona. While individuals can gain a lot, John stresses that there are higher aims. "We want to take something generated locally and invest it in our people and our community. This isn't investment simply for personal gain. It is investment for community gain."

All members of St John's Sunshine, now and in the future, have the opportunity to learn how to run the business, and also gain skills in marketing, raising finance, co-operation and more.

Get help:

- **Energy Saving Trust** - www.energysavingtrust.org.uk
- **Co-operative Enterprise Hub** - www.co-operative.coop/enterprisehub
- **Co-operatives UK Simply series** - guides to starting up, Governance, finance, co-operation and other things
<http://www.uk.coop/simplyseries>
- **Feed in Tariff** - www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/meeting_energy/Renewable_ener/feedin_tariff/feedin_tariff.aspx
- **Financial Services Authority (FSA)** - www.fsa.gov.uk/pages/doing/small_firms/msr/societies/index.shtml
- **Investing in Community Shares** - www.uk.coop/resources/documents/investing-community-shares
- **Money Advice Service** - <http://www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk> (search for 'withdrawable shares')

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Find out more about the project and share offer
(open April-June 2012), and how to become a member:
contact@stjohnssunshine.org.uk / www.stjohnssunshine.org.uk