

Pioneering solar rail company awarded £2.5 million grant to build community solar farm to power rail network

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Riding Sunbeams, the world-leading solar rail pioneer, has been awarded £2,527,500 from the South East Local Enterprise Partnership's (SELEP) £85 million share of the government's new Getting Building Fund. The funds will be used to build and connect the world's first MW scale renewable solar energy plant directly powering the railways, in East Sussex.

The £900 million UK-wide government fund has been created to invest in local infrastructure projects to drive economic growth and support a green recovery in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. It sought shovel-ready capital projects which can be delivered within 18 months.

The 3.75 MW Cuckmere Community Solar Farm that will be financed by the grant is located in Berwick, north of the Eastbourne – London mainline railway which will be powered by the energy it generates, thanks to a 'private-wire' direct connection.

The solar farm was granted planning consent in 2017, but like many community energy projects up and

down the country it has been struggling to find a business model that works, given that solar energy has not been economic without subsidy. The connection to the rail track therefore provides an important route to market for the project, ensuring its future viability and a replicable business model that subsequent groups can benefit from.

With the funds now secured, the solar farm is expected to be supplying power to the local railway network by March 2022. After completion, Cuckmere Community Solar will launch an investment offer so that the project can be owned by local community members and rail commuters who use the network.

Paul Harwood, Southern Region Investment Director, Network Rail, said: "Trains are already an incredibly efficient way of carrying people and freight – and our ambition is to run a railway that's sustainable as well as efficient. This grant is just great news and we look forward to working with Riding Sunbeams in Sussex, continuing the success of what we started in Aldershot."

Ollie Pendered, Executive Director, Riding Sunbeams, said: "Our vision is to power trains with commercially priced and unsubsidised renewable energy with a positive social impact. This award from the Getting Building Fund is a huge win for Riding Sunbeams, Cuckmere Community Solar and Network Rail. It will enable us to work together to prove that MW-scale solar can be directly connected to the railways and open up the market for region-wide solar connections. It's a fantastic opportunity to show the UK rail sector that commercial innovation can help power us all to the Zero Carbon future we need."

Graham Peters, Vice-Chair of SELEP and Chair of Team East Sussex, said: "We are proud to have been instrumental in bringing forward 'Riding Sunbeams Solar Railways', a truly innovative project to power the railway network with electricity from solar panels which will be a great contributor to the government's newly announced 10-point climate plan and also demonstrates East Sussex's commitment to cleaner, greener energy."

In order to qualify for the government grant, Riding Sunbeams had to demonstrate that building Cuckmere Community Solar Farm would provide key local and national benefits:

- Green jobs – up to 40 over the project's 25-year lifetime
- Annual carbon projected savings of over 820 tonnes/year
- Social and financial benefits for the local community arising from community ownership
- Boosting the resilience of the local electricity network
- Facilitating Network Rail's ability to source low carbon power

Network Rail is the single biggest user of electricity in the UK. The success of this project will enable them to procure green electricity at scale and a competitive price, while also creating social value for the communities they serve through better use of their assets.

It also provides a commercial route to market for community energy groups looking for new projects to develop that are financially viable without support from government subsidies.

Maria Caulfield, MP for Lewes, said: "I am delighted that Riding Sunbeams are to be supported with £2.5 million from the government's Getting Building Fund as one of five projects in my Lewes constituency to

receive funding.

“Riding Sunbeams is a world-leading innovator, leading the way in decarbonising our railways to help tackle the climate emergency. Harnessing innovation like this will be crucial to making journeys greener and cleaner. Well done to everyone involved in this project. I can’t wait to see the amazing things that can be done with this government funding.”

Dr. Alister Scott, Chair, Cuckmere Community Solar, said: “By connecting community-owned renewable energy sites like Cuckmere Community Solar to the rail network, Riding Sunbeams can inspire rail users to travel in a really low carbon way with a genuine sense of ownership over the solution.”

Councillor Rupert Simmons, Lead Member for Economy at East Sussex County Council, said: “We’re delighted that Riding Sunbeams has been awarded a grant to enable this renewable energy project to proceed. One of the key missions of our Economic Recovery Plan is ‘cleaner energy, greener transport’ and this project is a wonderful example that will help with the push towards a low-carbon economy.”

The team proved the technical concept of powering railways directly by solar power with its successful First Light demonstrator project in Aldershot last year. Riding Sunbeams is also working with other UK customers including Transport for Wales and Transport for London to deliver a similar model; the commercial success of this project will provide a model through Network Rail that can be replicated throughout the country.

Photo credit: Riding Sunbeams

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