



Panel show...

Less talk and more action has seen one Brighton man help lead the way in the renewable energy battle, as **Alex Jenkins** finds out.

The Copenhagen Climate Change Conference in December 2009 may not have been as world changing as many eco-minded followers had hoped but for one man it made him take matters into his own hands.

"I wanted our country to do something about climate change but I came away from Copenhagen where it was pretty obvious that people would not do something," says Brighton resident Will Cottrell.

Disappointed, Will decided to travel around Denmark before heading home. Yet what he saw filled him with hope.

"The villages had got together to buy their own turbine," says Will, who goes on to explain they had created energy cooperatives.

Fast forward three years and Will's dream to see solar energy embraced in Sussex seems to be a reality thanks to his Brighton Energy Coop's (BEC) community-owned, solar energy scheme.

Already, the project has installed solar panels on a number of properties in Brighton, Hove and the surrounding area, including St George's Church in Kemp Town, CityCoast Church in Portslade, and Shoreham Port.

It is hoped, by the end of this summer solar panels will be installed on seven

buildings to generate more than 500kWp of renewable solar energy.

This is split into three phases requiring a total of approximately £700,000 of investment.

At the moment there are 1,400 solar panels on the south side of one of the large shed roofs at Shoreham Port, with an impressive 10,000 metres of cabling.

The electricity generated from the panels is fed into the shed and a nearby office block, as well as the National Grid.

The two churches involved in the project so far have also benefitted tremendously from the scheme.

"The church is very pleased to be part of this sustainable energy project," says Rev Dr Andrew Manson-Brailsford, vicar of St George's Church, Kemp Town.

"We have been something of a pioneer as, after learning of St George's involvement, several other churches have expressed an interest in joining the scheme.

"In addition, we have saved about £1,500 on our energy bill since the installation in July 2012, which has helped to fund our ongoing outreach and mission in the local community."

This financial saving has been seen elsewhere, with City Coast Church saving about £3,200 and Shoreham Port £3,500.

At the end of last year, CityCoast Church

used some of the savings to fund its annual Carols by the Coast service, which was attended by 500 people from the community.

"While the cost saving and the environmental benefits of hosting BEC's solar panels are important, it's the work the scheme allows us to do in the community that's really valuable," explains CityCoast Church's operations manager Simon Lewis.

"At our annual Carols by the Coast service, not only did we put on free food, drink and carols for people, but also we were able to raise money for Brighton-based domestic abuse charity Rise on the night.

"This is just one example of how we are using our energy cost savings for the benefit of local people, and it's this ripple effect that BEC's solar scheme has throughout the community that makes it such a worthwhile project to be involved with."

Will, who used to live in Midhurst, says he has been incredibly pleased with the response. Yet, it is not just something Brighton and Hove is interested in.

"If other places can see they can benefit from it they will go for it as well," explains Will.

This cooperative energy model has worked successfully in European countries, such as Denmark and Germany, and is increasingly being adopted in the UK – there



Solar panels being installed in Shoreham Port



Project supporters Minister Greg Barker, MP Simon Kirby, and Will Cottrell at St George's Church

are currently more than 50 renewable energy coops in the country.

In fact, there is a similar scheme that has been set up in Lewes, OVESCO Limited, an industrial and provident society working on projects and investigating ways to produce local sustainable energy by using natural resources.

"We have 250 members at the moment but it would be absolutely great to see 1,000 members," says Will from BEC, who explains

members range from students to retirees.

"When people get involved it is for a variety of reasons," he says. "Some people are interested in the environmental state of things. It gives people a chance of getting involved."

And Will's plans for the future?

"There are so many roofs," Will says with a smile. "It could be everywhere. We aim to earn a million pounds for Brighton in the next 20 years - that is quite a sizeable chunk."

How it works

BEC raises money by selling shares to members of the public. The minimum amount people can invest is £300, while the maximum is £20,000.

Investors receive a return on their investment of about five per cent a year and may also qualify for 30 per cent tax relief under the Enterprise Investment Scheme (EIS).

The scheme works because the electricity produced by the solar panels qualifies for a government subsidy called the Feed-in-Tariff, guaranteed for 20 years.

This is paid to BEC for generating renewable electricity and for supplying it to the National Grid.

This income is used to pay interest to members, discount the electricity sold to the roof owners, as well as cover things such as ongoing maintenance and the development of future projects.

Visit www.brightonenergy.org.uk for more details.