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Energy powerhouse RWE has proposed an extensive solar project named High Grove, which aims to substantially bolster the region's renewable energy capacity. Spanning 4,000 acres across five sites near Dereham and Swaffham, this initiative is slated to become the UK's largest solar farm, dwarfing the current leader, Llanwern solar park in Wales, which comprises just 260 acres.

High Grove Solar Farm is designed to generate an impressive 720MW of power, sufficient to supply energy to 363,000 homes. This capacity translates to powering roughly 80% of homes in Norfolk. Encompassing farmland around Swaffham, Necton, Ashill, and Bradenham, its total area is about 2,667 football pitches.

RWE, a German energy giant also behind significant wind farm developments in Norfolk, including Norfolk Boreas, Norfolk Vanguard West, and Norfolk Vanguard East, has invested heavily in renewable energy. These wind farms are among the largest in Britain and were acquired from Swedish competitor Vattenfall for £963 million earlier this year. Like these wind farms, High Grove is classified as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project, necessitating a thorough planning process before construction can commence.

**Project Specifics and Community Involvement**

The project will involve the installation of thousands of solar panels, battery storage systems, and substations, all connected by an underground cable route. A new National Grid substation will also be required, although its location is yet to be determined.

RWE has initiated a consultation this week to engage with local communities. Project Manager Mike Greslow emphasised the importance of this engagement, asserting that collaboration with the community is essential for the project’s success. He urged local residents to learn more about the plans through the dedicated project website, drop-in events, or webinars.

Public consultation events will be held across various locations in Norfolk, including Swaffham, Scarning, Shipdham, Ashill, Necton, and Sporle. These events will run throughout September and October, offering multiple opportunities for locals to provide input. Dates and venues include:

* Regency Room, Swaffham Assembly Rooms, September 17, 2-7 pm
* Scarning Village Hall, September 18, 10.30 am - 2.30 pm
* Letton Hall, Shipdham, September 27, 2-7 pm
* Ashill Community Centre, September 28, 10.30 am - 2.30 pm
* Necton Community Centre, October 4, 1-6 pm
* Sporle Village Hall, October 5, 10.30 am - 2.30 pm

Online engagement will also be facilitated through webinars on September 19 from 6.30-7.30 pm, and October 1 from 1-2 pm and 6.30-7.30 pm.

Feedback collected during these consultations will help refine the design of High Grove, with further consultations planned for 2024 before a final decision is made by the Secretary of State. Construction is expected to commence in 2028.

**Government Support and Economic Benefits**

The UK government, represented by Energy Secretary Ed Miliband, has underscored the crucial role of solar power in the nation's strategy to achieve net zero emissions from electricity generation by 2030. Mr Miliband has expressed his commitment to advancing onshore wind and solar projects that demonstrate a clear benefit.

In addition to its energy contributions, High Grove Solar Farm is projected to generate significant environmental and economic benefits, including saving almost 25 million tonnes of CO2 emissions over its lifespan. The project will also create job opportunities during both construction and operational phases, thereby stimulating the local economy.

RWE aims to further support local communities by establishing a community benefit fund for local initiatives and projects. Plans also include enhancing local green spaces with new footpaths and recreational areas, aiming to improve biodiversity and provide accessible enjoyment for all.

Mr Greslow acknowledged potential concerns regarding the project’s impact on views, noise, and local wildlife. However, he assured that these issues would be mitigated through careful planning, vegetation screening, restricted working hours during construction, and creating new habitats to ensure a net biodiversity gain of at least 50%.

The consultation process is set to run until October 18. For further information or to participate in the consultation, residents can visit the dedicated project website or attend the planned events.

By blending a comprehensive renewable energy strategy with significant community and environmental benefits, the High Grove Solar Farm represents a milestone in the UK’s transition toward sustainable energy.