Mr Churchill shares his experience with us so that other land owners can benefit from the valuable lessons he learned. He explains exactly how to ensure you get the best offer for your land and what to look for in a responsible solar developer.

Firstly, we asked Mr Churchill what made him opt for installing a solar farm rather than other renewable energy technologies. He tells us, “It’s environmentally friendly and it suits the farm industry very much because it gives a secure regular income. That’s very important to me and to other farmers as the industry is struggling at the moment to make ends meet. It’s a lifeline.”

“Then with solar panels you can run sheep, as I do. It’s very quiet, you don’t know it’s there, and it’s generating power for the local community. People don’t realise that these solar farms they put in here, they’re generating energy for people in the area. A lot of people think, ‘Oh, they’re generating power and it’s going up the country’, but it’s not. It keeps local businesses going, and keeps our homes powered. And it’s clean energy and it’s lowering our carbon footprint.”

Mr Churchill highlights the importance of land use and making the best use of the solar farm. A typical solar farm only takes up 30 per cent of the leased area, leaving the rest of the land open for various types of diversification. This includes the grazing of small livestock such as sheep or chickens, along with a number of other practices. Fortunately, there is now best practice guidance issued by the National Solar Centre to ensure responsible and sustainable land management practices are carried out on land that has been allocated to solar farming.

Mr Churchill continues, “You need to find out at the start where the money or investment is coming from and who is going to own and operate the solar farm for its lifetime. This will determine how many companies are in the contractual chain and how quickly your solar farm can be developed. The lesser number of people involved, the better for you and the quicker the solar farm will be done.”

Lightsource Renewable Energy has leapt to the forefront of solar farm development because they have their funding secured. This means that contractual negotiations can be swift and quarterly rental payments can begin immediately. This has allowed Lightsource to become the largest operator of solar farms in the United Kingdom, managing over 4000 acres of farmland that has been diversified with solar power.

“Another thing you need to ask about is planning. The developer should tell you their process in obtaining planning permission. Make sure you ask them how many planning applications they have made and how many were successful. This will give you an idea of how the planning will go.”

It is important for farmers to ask plenty of questions and to learn about the track record of any developer they’re considering entering into an agreement with. One of the best ways to ensure success is for farmers to go directly to a reputable company that have built many sites before in the UK and are able to manage the whole process from initial meeting with the land owners to reinstating the site back to its original condition in 25-30 years’ time.

Lightsource works closely with the land owner early on in the process, agreeing a land management plan with them to put the land to best use. For example, biodiversity enhancements like sowing wildflower seeds around the field boundaries can be implemented according to the stocking density requirements. We asked Mr Churchill if biodiversity had improved at Newlands Farm since the solar panels went in: “Yes, they’ve put in lots of hedges to hide it all away, which is brilliant, and the people [Lightsource] who came in to do it were very good. I’ve got hollies, beeches, and some hawthorn. That was done straight after and is growing nicely.”

“I’ve got wild bees under the panels, this past year we’ve had masses of butterflies I haven’t seen for years, ladybirds, grasshoppers, lots of insects all coming back and enjoying the shelter. And the birds love it! The birds are absolutely enjoying it because it’s a place where they can live and be happy and there’s lots of food!”

“The solar farm supports wildlife because it can work alongside Mother Nature. Plants and animals can live peacefully underneath it and you can run stock under it… which is great. As I said, the solar farm has worked with the community very well, and the wildlife.”

Mr Churchill finishes by offering these two tips to any farmer who is considering leasing out land to a solar farm developer; “I would advise farmers to research solar companies that operate solar farms locally and regionally. You should request to view their projects and speak with some of their clients. You can then get a feel for which company has the most experience and can make you the best offer: This is a long term agreement, you need to be sure the company operating and looking after the solar farm is going to be around for at least 25 years.”

For more information on Lightsource Renewable Energy, visit: www.lightsource-re.co.uk or phone 0333 200 0755