

New arrival to harness solar power

Lightforce aims to cut energy bills in North

Solar energy company Lightforce has arrived in the Far North, with the stated aims of reducing the price of electricity, creating jobs and partnering with local charities.

The company has opened its hub in Kerikeri, founder and chief executive Luke Nutting saying it would service the entire Northland region with three full-time staff, all of whom had moved to Kerikeri.

"This is the first new branch we've launched outside our HQ in Auckland, so it's a pretty exciting milestone for us," he said.

"We expect to hire a whole lot more locals in the near future as we get established and start growing. It's great to be able to invest in this special place and eventually create new jobs here."

The new building, on SH10, had already attracted plenty of attention.

"We've had lots of inquiries and visits already. The hub is pretty hard to miss from the main road," Nutting said.

"We can't wait to start installing more world-class solar systems in the region and start helping out local charities and partnering with like-minded, environmentally-focused organisations. That's also a big focus of our business."

Every three months Lightforce

would install a free solar system for a chosen charity.

Nutting, who founded the company in 2013, said it had been decided to expand into Northland for a number of reasons.

"The region is well-known for its great weather, so it's perfect for solar, but what's not so well-known is that in Northland, a community where a lot of people are in serious poverty, the price of power is double, sometimes triple, what we see in Auckland," he said.

"It's just not right. We could be harnessing the sun's energy, and if we do that we can help the community thrive."

While environmental appeal and energy independence had been major selling points for solar, it now also made financial sense.

A lot of Lightforce customers were not paying anything for power and were often receiving credits from their power companies for energy sold back into the grid. Upfront costs had been a barrier in the past, but, especially in places with high power prices, like Northland, and for high-power users, installation costs could be paid back in as little as five years, with no subsidies.

Not surprisingly, demand for solar had been growing rapidly, but uptake was still low in comparison to other



The Lightforce crew on the job at Te Whakaora Tangata's premises in South Auckland, a charity install for an organisation that works with high-risk whānau in Auckland and Northland.

Photo / Dom Thomas

markets such as Australia, the UK and Northern Europe.

Being able to store the sun's energy and use it when it was most needed had been a game-changer, however, and around 90 per cent of the systems installed by Lightforce now included battery storage.

"The innovation in that space is incredible," Nutting said.

"Batteries are getting better and cheaper. And the moment you can store energy for less than the wholesale cost of electricity, that's when it doesn't make sense to buy power. That's the tipping point. And we're only about one to two years away from that."

In what he said could be seen as a big vote of confidence in Lightforce and its plans for growth, the company had recently signed an exclusive deal with one of the world's leading battery brands. It would be the only company in New Zealand with exclusive distribution rights, in retail

Charities can apply for solar system

Lightforce has a \$30,000 solar system and Energizer Homepower battery to give to a charity or not-for-profit organisation in Northland. Applications should be emailed to editor@northlandage.co.nz (with Solar Power in the subject box), which will then be forwarded to the company.

The company's first charity install was for Whakaora Tangata, in south Auckland – see the video at <https://vimeo.com/500720473>

premium option that utilises smart technology to give control back to rooftop solar customers, enabling home owners to store and use their solar energy more effectively," he added.

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Lightforce, one of the country's biggest solar installers, was now responsible for around 20 per cent of all installations in New Zealand. It employed more than 50 staff and planned to employ at least 50 more by the end of the year, as it set up similar regional hubs in Waikato, Nelson, Christchurch and Queenstown.

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