

CPRE Oxfordshire SOLAR FARMS - BRANCH POLICY STATEMENT – June 2013

1. Introduction

1.1 Oxfordshire is seeing a number of schemes coming forward for large scale solar installations in the open countryside. This policy statement outlines the position of CPRE Oxfordshire and will be used to guide our response to individual proposals.

1.2 The Government's Feed in Tariff (FiT) was introduced in April 2010 as a financial incentive to introduce renewable electricity-generating technologies, including solar panels. The subsidies for large scale solar farms (over 50kW) were cut back in 2011 to focus on the funding of small scale installations. The latest influx of applications is a response to the threat of further impending cuts in tariffs. However, a substantial decline in panel costs has made solar potentially attractive even at the lower subsidy levels.

2. CPRE Oxfordshire solar policy

2.1 CPRE Oxfordshire believes renewable energy is desirable, but not at unacceptable cost to the countryside or to the economy.

2.2 CPRE Oxfordshire is opposed in principle to solar farms for the damage they do to the countryside and landscape, particularly in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and the Green Belt. We do not consider that the minimal benefit they offer in terms of renewable energy is sufficient to offset the environmental harm they create or the otherwise useful land that is lost.

2.3 CPRE Oxfordshire will support relatively small discrete developments on the roofs of existing buildings, or in other sites where they are effectively concealed by existing development or the lie of the land, and do not involve the loss of land useful for agriculture, recreation or biodiversity.

3. Policy background

3.1 Landscape character - The scale and 'alien' appearance of solar farms are an obtrusive impact on the landscape and represent an unwelcome and inappropriate industrialisation of the countryside.

3.2 Food security – the UK imports 40% of the food it consumes and this proportion is rising¹. As global food prices rise and food security becomes an increasingly important

¹ Food Matters: Towards a strategy for the 21st Century

issue, agricultural land in England, even of lower grades, should not be wasted by giving it over to inefficient renewable energy schemes.

3.3 For further information, please see the background article on our website:

<http://www.cpreoxon.org.uk/campaigns/energy-and-water/energy/solar-farms/item/2248-solar-farms>

4. Further Considerations

Where developments are to be considered, the following issues and mitigation measures should be taken into account:

4.1 Visual impact upon the countryside

i) **Siting** - The most unsuitable sites are on sloping land highly visible from the surrounding landscapes, with sensitive landscape features, rights of way and/or significant heritage assets, particularly where these are in Green Belts or AONBs.

ii) **Agricultural land** - Solar farms should not be located on useable agricultural land, in particular not the most productive Grade 1 and 2 land. The grade should also be stated on the application.

iii) **Screening** - Screening (and softening) in the form of hedges or tree belts may be appropriate to help reduce visual impact, providing it is in keeping with the local landscape character.

iv) **Zone of Visual Impact** - Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment should be employed at the pre-application stage to describe local landform and key views. This should consider the potential for sun glint and glare at any properties or key landscapes and the impact on users rights of way. The panels should not detract from the local character of a settlement but remain both discrete and discreet.

v) **Materials & additional infrastructure**

a) Solar panels should be coated in a non-reflecting material to minimise glare and visual impact, and be stipulated as a planning condition.

b) Bases should be easy to remove to permit restoration of the land.

c) Security fences should be of sympathetic design, and screened as necessary.

d) Lighting features should be of sympathetic design, and installed to eliminate light spill.

e) Pole mounted CCTV should be carefully considered to minimise visual impact.

vi) **Building structures** - transformer stations and inverter cabinets etc should be unobtrusively sited and suitably shielded to minimise visual impact.

vii) **Access roads** - roads and tracks should be kept to an absolute minimum.

viii) **Grid connection** - proposals should set out clear assessments of the visual and environmental impact of grid connections, whether overhead or underground, confirmed by the appropriate utility company.

http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/work_areas/food_policy.aspx

4.2 Assessment of Impacts

Proposals should set out suitable assessments of impacts on biodiversity, hydrology, archaeology, landscape and possible cumulative effects. Transport assessment should consider access and vehicle movements during all stages of construction and development.

4.3 Restoring the site

Developments should be regarded as temporary. A legal agreement should be sought to ensure restoration of the land to agricultural usage once the consent or use has terminated and a condition imposed that all equipment associated with the solar farm is removed.

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