



Campaign to Protect
Rural England
OXFORDSHIRE

CPRE Oxfordshire

SOLAR FARMS - BRANCH POLICY STATEMENT

1. Introduction

1.1 Oxfordshire is seeing a number of schemes coming forward for large scale solar installations in the open countryside. At present there is no official national CPRE guidance. It is therefore important that the Branch should adopt a suitable policy statement as soon as possible to guide its response to individual proposals.

1.2 This current “gold rush” of applications is being driven by the Government’s Feed in Tariff (FiT) launched in April 2010, which offers generous financial incentives to install renewable micro - generation facilities up to 5MW, but is to be generally cut back after April 2012. The pressure to obtain planning permission is likely to peak before autumn 2011. The DECC has announced an immediate cut in subsidies for large scale solar farms (over 50 KWh) to focus the funding on small scale installations - for which it was originally intended.

2. CPRE Oxfordshire approach

2.1 CPRE believes that in principle solar photovoltaic systems have a role to play in increasing electricity generation from renewable energy sources. However, we will oppose schemes which are likely to cause material harm to the Oxfordshire countryside. In particular larger scale solar farms in the open countryside may cause detriment to visual amenity, landscape character and food security.

2.2 Specifically, the following key issues should be considered and addressed if acceptable schemes are to be brought forward:

2.3 Feed in Tariffs

CPRE urges the Government to revise the FiTs scheme to focus the available funding on small scale solar installations in suitable locations.

2.4 Visual impact upon the countryside

i) **Siting** - The scale and “alien” appearance of solar farms can have an obtrusive impact on the landscape, commercial solar farms generally being large, geometric and industrial in character, and can cause sun glare from the panels. The most unsuitable sites are on sloping land highly visible from the surrounding landscapes, with sensitive landscape features and significant heritage assets.

ii) **Agricultural land** - Solar farms should not be located on the best and most productive agricultural land ie 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, appropriate to local landscape character, can be used to reduce visual impact.

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.

v) **Materials** –

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 grid connections, whether overhead or underground, confirmed by the appropriate utility company.

2.5 **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.

2.6 **Restoring the site**

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