

**Oxfordshire County Council
Draft Position Statement
Major Development Proposals for Ground-mounted Solar PV Arrays**

Purpose of document

This position statement sets out Oxfordshire County Council's view on the principle of ground-mounted solar PV development and the issues which should be considered when developing major solar energy proposals with a site area of 1 hectare or above.

The views expressed in this statement are intended to:

- assist in the formulation of planning policy in local plan documents
- provide pre-application guidance and aid the development management process

Status of document

This statement was approved by Oxfordshire County Council's Cabinet Member for the Environment on 24 July 2014

Introduction

Oxfordshire County Council recognises that solar PV development can help meet national and local objectives for reducing carbon emissions and reducing reliance on fossil fuels as well as provide local energy security.

Solar PV development can contribute to economic growth by creating jobs in the local economy in product development/manufacture as well as in installation and deployment. The progressive reduction in installation costs is making solar PV more competitive with other large-scale renewable generation technologies.

At North West Bicester eco-development all of the electricity will be generated from solar panels; the development will generate green construction jobs and apprenticeships for local people and is likely to stimulate the broader greener economy.

Oxfordshire County Council **supports the development of solar PV development in principle** provided there are no significant environmental or visual impacts.

This Position Statement sets out a number of considerations to ensure that schemes which come forward in Oxfordshire:

- are appropriately sited;
- respect local landscape, heritage and visual amenity;
- mitigate transport impacts; and,

- take account of opportunities to enhance bio-diversity.

Policy Context

UK Solar PV Strategy Part 1: Roadmap to a Brighter Future

Government policy is to substantially increase the deployment of renewable energy across the UK, including solar PV. It has published a Roadmap to a Brighter Future as the first part of a UK Solar PV Strategy.

The Solar Roadmap sets out four guiding principles for deployment of solar ahead of the publication of the government's Solar PV Strategy in spring 2014. It states that support for solar PV should:

- Allow cost-effective projects to proceed and to make a cost-effective contribution to UK carbon emission objectives and in the context of overall energy goals.
- Deliver genuine carbon reductions that help meet the UK's target of 15% renewable energy from final consumption by 2020.
- **Ensure proposals are appropriately sited, give proper weight to environmental considerations such as landscape and visual impact, heritage and local amenity, and provide opportunities for local communities to influence decisions that affect them.**
- Assess and respond to the impacts of deployment on: grid systems balancing, grid connectivity and financial incentives.

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

The NPPF sets out government planning policies and how they are expected to be applied. The following are relevant to solar PV development:

- NPPF paragraph 97 explains that to help increase the use and supply of renewable and low carbon energy, local planning authorities should recognise the responsibility on all communities to contribute to energy generation from renewable or low carbon sources.
- NPPF paragraph 98 sets out the government's expectation that when determining planning applications, local planning authorities should:
 - Not require applicants for energy development to demonstrate the overall need for renewable or low carbon energy (and also to recognise that even small-scale projects provide a valuable contribution to cutting greenhouse gas emissions; and

- Approve the application if its impacts are (or can be made) acceptable.
- NPPF paragraph 116 states that planning permission should be refused for major developments in designated areas, including AONBs, except in exceptional circumstances and where it can be demonstrated they are in the public interest. Applicants proposing a solar PV scheme above 1 ha in the Chilterns, Cotswolds or North Wessex Downs AONBs would need to demonstrate exceptional circumstances as to why the development needs to be located in the AONB and the benefits the scheme would bring.
- There is also more general guidance in the NPPF regarding biodiversity, landscape character, historic environment and economic development.

Oxfordshire 2030: Strategy developed by the Oxfordshire Partnership

Environment and climate change is one of Oxfordshire's four strategic priorities.

This Strategy aims to reduce Oxfordshire's greenhouse gas emissions to levels comparable with the best in the UK - a 50% reduction in CO₂ on 2008 levels by 2030.

Local Plans

The lower tier councils – Cherwell District Council, Oxford City Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council - are the local planning authorities in Oxfordshire. They are responsible for developing planning policies in local plans to guide new development and for determining planning applications apart from those for minerals and waste.

Oxfordshire County Council supports solar PV development subject to the following considerations

Oxfordshire County Council is a consultee in the local plan preparation and the development management process. This statement seeks to ensure that those matters in which the County Council has an interest are fully considered by local planning authorities when developing planning policy in local plans and by applicants ahead of the submission of a planning application for solar farm development.

OCC supports the development of solar farms in principle subject to the following safeguards to ensure that development is in appropriate locations and harmful impacts are mitigated:

- **Consent to be on a temporary basis**

Installations should be temporary in nature to ensure there are no permanent impacts. Consent should be granted on a temporary basis of 25 years maximum to

allow the solar farm to be decommissioned as other (even) more sustainable forms of renewable energy come on stream and the land can be restored to grassland/arable use.

This will usually mean that no permanent concrete foundations should be constructed

- **Use of previously developed land**

Ideally large scale solar PV arrays should be directed towards previously developed land or brownfield sites, contaminated land or industrial land. However, as Oxfordshire is the most rural county in the South East there are very few sites of this status and of sufficient scale in Oxfordshire.

- **Agricultural land**

It is likely that solar PV farms would be on land currently in agricultural use. Developments should not result in the permanent loss of high quality agricultural land. Where possible/viable agricultural activity should continue on the site; for example, panels can be installed so that sheep can graze beneath them.

- **Landscape and Visual impacts**

An Environmental Impact Assessment is likely to be needed if the solar PV development is in an environmentally sensitive or vulnerable location and the effects of the development are significant.

The character of the landscape and sensitivity to solar PV development must be taken into account to ensure that the development is appropriately located. The development will be located to minimise visual impacts and avoid significant impact on landscape character.

Equipment, security fencing and lighting should be well designed, sympathetic to the setting and landscape character and screened. Landscape character should be enhanced where possible.

Consideration should be given at an early stage to how land will be managed and maintained under the PV arrays. This should be sympathetic to the landscape, and opportunities to maintain agricultural value or improve biodiversity sought.

The landscape and visual impacts of power cables, access tracks and other infrastructure constructed above ground or off-site to serve the site should also be considered

- **AONBs**

Hillside, open vale, open valley and open downland areas are landscapes where it is least likely that solar PV development could be accommodated without causing visual harm to AONBs.

However, solar PV farms are usually not of great height and there may be concealed locations within an AONB where development could take place with only very limited and localised landscape impact.

AONB management plans, landscape character assessments and position statements must be considered in planning stages to help inform development, and early consultation with AONB planning officers sought.

- **Land of ecological value**

Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and European Protected Species are of international importance and any adverse impact on these should be avoided.

Solar energy development should avoid damaging any of the following, unless the importance of the development clearly outweighs the harm and mitigation can achieve a net gain in biodiversity:

- Sites of Special Scientific Interest
- National Nature Reserves
- Local Wildlife Sites
- Local nature reserves
- Protected and Priority Species
- Priority habitats

Opportunities should be taken within the site to improve ecology. This could include: sowing and management of native seed mixes that contain native wildflowers; creating hibernacula for reptiles and hedgehogs; and creation or strengthening of hedgerows and field margins.

Consideration should be given to grazing options, agricultural production and sward management of land between and around the PV arrays.

Applications for the routing of underground cables should consider how to avoid harmful impacts on habitat and species along the route. The proposals may be to route cables along the field margins. Even in arable landscapes field margins can be an important habitat and impact should be mitigated to avoid harm to this habitat. Damage to the root systems of trees and hedgerows should be avoided. Care should also be taken to avoid impact on protected and priority species. The timing of work may be important to avoid impacting on species hibernating/ roosting/ nesting in the field margin or hedgerow.

- **Land of archaeological interest**

Solar farms should avoid scheduled ancient monuments or heritage assets that are demonstrably of equivalent significance to scheduled monuments.

Applicants should consider the likely impacts that will be caused by the construction of infrastructure including access routes, hard surfacing, cable runs and generator plants. Plans should minimise the impact upon the historic environment and include the long term management of the site post installation. These should be included in

an archaeological desk based assessment that should form part of the planning application.

- **Highways and Access issues**

Applicants should take account of the following in developing their proposals:

- A Transport Statement will be required.
- Any existing or new access to the site should meet standards in terms of visibility splays, geometry, construction (up to 15m from highway boundary) and drainage. Vehicle swept paths (tracking) for construction/delivery vehicles will need to demonstrate access and egress to/from any access is fit for purpose.
- Undertaking improvements to an existing access involving works on the highway will require entering into a s278 agreement with Oxfordshire County Council as local highway authority.
- As existing accesses are likely to be 'agricultural accesses,' provision will need to be made to return them to an 'agricultural access' (reducing the width etc.) on completion to minimise the risk from fly-tipping, abandoned vehicles etc. This will require entering into another s278 agreement with the LHA, including for decommissioning.
- New temporary or permanent access will need planning permission if on to a classified road and will also require the entering of a s278 agreement with Oxfordshire County Council as local highway authority, including for decommissioning.
- Careful consideration will be necessary to avoid the risk of ground-mounted panels causing glare or reflecting sunlight into motorists' eyes on the adjacent highway network which could distract drivers on a nearby road.
- A Sustainable Urban Drainage Strategy (SUDS) for the access arrangements and the proposed site will be necessary ensuring no surface water discharge to the adjacent highway. The impact of any bunds on local watercourses will need to be taken into account.
- A Construction Traffic Management Plan (CTMP) will be necessary before implementation of any planning permission that may be granted.
- A 'haul road' may be necessary to enable HGV access to the proposed site; this may need to be removed on completion and decommissioning.
- Any construction compound will need to ensure that associated delivery vehicles can access it and egress in a forward gear. Consideration should be given to the impact of any associated lighting.

- Worker associated traffic should be minimised during the construction (and any decommissioning) phase.
- It may be necessary to enter into a Routing Agreement to ensure appropriate routes avoid villages and unsuitable roads.

- **Rights of way**

Applicants would need to ensure public rights of way in the vicinity of the site remain available and convenient for public use:

- No materials, plant, temporary structures or excavations of any kind should be placed/undertaken on or next to a right of way which could obstruct or dissuade the public from using it whilst development takes place.
- No changes should be made to the public right of way direction, width, surface, signing or structures without the prior approval of the Oxfordshire County Council's Countryside Access Team or the necessary legal process.
- Access for construction/demolition vehicles or access during the occupation of the site eg by maintenance vehicles should not be taken along or across a public right of way without prior permission and appropriate safety/mitigation measures approved by the Oxfordshire County Council's Countryside Access Team. It would be the responsibility of the applicants, their contractors or the occupier to put right/make good any vehicular damage to the surface of the right of way.

Any gates to be installed should be set back from the public right of way and not open outwards from the site across the public right of way.

Public rights of way through the development site should retain their character and usability as linear corridors and be integrated with the development. Consideration should be given to providing a high quality surface and suitable vegetation to act as a visual buffer where necessary. No improvements should be implemented to a right of way without prior approval of Oxfordshire County Council's Countryside Access Team.

Funds may be requested to secure off-site improvements to mitigate the loss of visual amenity and to provide alternatives or extensions of routes in the locality.

If the site is in proximity to routes used by equestrians, applicants should consider the potential impact of reflected glint or glare. For safety reasons, solar arrays should be of a type or mitigation measures should be put in place to prevent or reduce glint or glare at horse or rider eye level.

Where hedges/natural vegetation is proposed eg to shield the public from glint or glare, to coincide with new boundaries or to enhance existing boundaries, a management regime needs to be agreed with Oxfordshire County Council as local Highway Authority to ensure that public access is not impeded when the vegetation screen is established or encroaches onto the highway.

- **Mineral Safeguarding**

Important minerals resources should be safeguarded from needless sterilisation by non-mineral development under both national and local planning policy (NPPF paragraph 143; Oxfordshire Minerals and Waste Local Plan policy SD10).

Where solar PV proposals are temporary (25 years or less) and do not involve permanent foundations or other structures, it is unlikely that there will be any conflict with mineral safeguarding policy unless there is a need for the mineral to be worked within the lifetime of the solar farm. Land that has permission for mineral working or is allocated for mineral working in a minerals local plan should be avoided for Solar PV development.

Solar PV proposals on worked out and/or restored quarry sites are unlikely to conflict with mineral sterilisation policy but will need to take appropriate account of the restoration requirements of the quarry.

- **Community Gain**

Solar farm proposals can sometimes offer the opportunity for the local community to benefit from the proposal, for example by providing free or discounted energy to a local public building.

Acquiring Pre-application Advice

Applicants should contact the relevant local planning authority for pre-application advice ahead of submitting a planning application for a solar farm; this includes advice on highways and access issues.

Oxfordshire County Council will feed in advice on a proposal via the local planning authority.

Local planning Authority Contact Details:

Cherwell District Council

Bodicote House
White Post Road
Bodicote
Banbury
OX15 4AA
Tel: 01295 227006
Email: planning@cherwell-dc.gov.uk

Oxford City Council

St Aldates Chambers
109-113 St Aldates
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OX1 1DS
Tel: 01865 252513
Email: planning@oxford.gov.uk.

South Oxfordshire District Council

Benson Lane
Crowmarsh Gifford
Wallingford
OX10 8NJ
Tel: 01491 823740
Email: planning@southoxon.gov.uk

Vale of White Horse District Council

Abbey House
Abbey Close
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Email: planning@whitehorsedc.gov.uk

West Oxfordshire District Council

Elmfield
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