Solar energy — CPRE practical campaign tools

Landscape character factors

The table below identifies landscape character factors that can aid site selection and design; it is taken from Natural England's Technical Information Note on solar farms. It provides a general guide, but is not a rigid checklist as most landscapes will display a mixture of factors indicating a greater and lesser degree to which solar farms can be accommodated.

Factor	Increased chance that solar farms can be accommodated in the landscape	Reduced chance that solar farms can be accommodated in the landscape
Landform (also related to visual factors such as elevation and viewing angle)	Absence of strong topographical variety. Featureless, convex or flat	Presence of strong topographical variety or distinctive landform features
Landscape pattern and complexity	Simple, regular or uniform	Complex, rugged and irregular
Settlement and man-made influence	Presence of contemporary structures, for example, utility, infrastructure or industrial elements. Presence of roads and tracks in the landscape	Absence of modern development, presence of small scale, historic or vernacular settlement, roads and tracks
Inter-visibility with adjacent landscapes	Little inter-visibility with adjacent sensitive landscapes or viewpoints	Strong inter-visibility with sensitive landscapes. Forms an important part of a view from sensitive viewpoints
Perceptual aspects (sense of remoteness, tranquillity)	Close to visible signs of human activity and development	Physically or perceptually remote, peaceful or tranquil

Solar farm summary checklist

The following solar farm summary checklist, based on CPRE's acceptability criteria for solar farms, can be used when considering responses to proposals or planning applications for solar farms. All the criteria (a. to g.) need to be met for a solar farm project to be acceptable.

Criteria			
a. Does it avoid harm to landscape character and quality, when viewed from publicly accessible vantage points?	Yes	Partially	No
b. Does it avoid cumulative impacts on landscape character and quality, when viewed from publicly accessible vantage points?	Yes	Partially	No
c. Does it avoid harm to valued and special areas, and designated heritage assets, especially those that are nationally and internationally protected?	Yes	Partially	No
d. Does it avoid harm to views from publicly accessible land and the surroundings of settlements?	Yes	Partially	No
e. Does it avoid using the Best and Most Versatile Land (BMVL) — Grades 1, 2 and 3a?	Yes	Partially	No
f. Do planning conditions require that the site will continue to be classified as agricultural land so its agricultural status is sustained after decommissioning?	Yes		No
g. Does it avoid adverse effects on biodiversity and deliver positive biodiversity gains?	Yes	Partially	No

If acceptability criteria a. to g. are met then any remaining local environmental risks should be mitigated; the following table lists key issues that should be addressed by the planning conditions.

Solar farm planning conditions

Once all the acceptability criteria (a. to g. – see table above) have been met, we recommend that local planning authorities should ensure that any remaining local environmental risks from a solar farm proposal are mitigated effectively by attaching conditions to any planning permissions. These should include requirements that:

- Panels are coated in a non-reflecting material to minimise glare and visual impact
- Where appropriate the development is screened with planting that is consistent with local Species, and is maintained for the lifetime of the solar farm through an agreed schedule
- Security fencing is specified that is of a design and of a colour that will minimise its visual impact
- Measures are put in place to ensure effects on wildlife are minimised e.g. suitable tunnels under any fencing
- Any additional infrastructure (such as inverter cabinets, transformer stations, lighting and CCTV) is selected and sited so that it minimises visual impact
- Any lighting is infra-red or, if not, designed to minimise light spill and be motion-activated but not susceptible to false triggers
- New roads and access tracks are kept to an absolute minimum
- The connection to the grid is by underground cable or, if not, overhead cable runs are designed to minimise landscape impact by following best practice considerations – such as those contained in the "Holford Rules" (proposals should include details of the work required to connect the installation, including substations and cable routes)
- The ground anchors for the solar panel framework should be easy to remove to permit effective restoration of the land
- The site is fully restored when generation ceases or permission expires (whichever is sooner)
- The site continues to be classified as agricultural land throughout its life so that its agricultural status is sustained after decommissioning
- Financial provision is made to cover the costs of decommissioning so that the site is not abandoned due to lack of funds
- There is effective mitigation of construction and maintenance impacts.

Further reading

- The Government's planning guidance on renewable and low carbon energy, which includes sections on:
    - Particular considerations that relate to solar energy more generally and to solar farms specifically (paragraphs 12 and 13)
- UK Solar PV Strategy – Parts 1 and 2
- Letter from Minister Greg Barker to local authorities following publication of Part 1 of the solar strategy
- Letter from Minister Greg Barker to local authorities following publication of Part 2 of the solar strategy
- Natural England's Technical Information Note on solar farms
- Solar Trade Association's 10 commitments for solar farms
- BRE National Solar Centre planning guidance for the development of large-scale ground-mounted solar PV systems
- BRE National Solar Centre biodiversity guidance for solar developments: in conjunction with the Solar Trade Association, and National Trust, RSPB and other NGOs
- There have also been several recent decisions that have wider implications for solar energy developments, including:
    - The Court of Appeal ruling on the proposed Barnwell Manor windfarm in Northamptonshire, which has implications for how the impact of renewable energy developments on nearby heritage sites should be taken into account in planning decisions
    - The Secretary of State's decision on a proposed solar farm at Hacheston in Suffolk, which may have implications for future planning decisions, including in relation to the weight given to the reversibility of solar farms proposed on agricultural land
    - The planning appeal decision on a proposed solar farm at Tattingstone in Suffolk, which may have implications for how searches for non-agricultural sites are carried out by solar farm developers.

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