

Utility-scale solar united kingdom

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The central role envisaged for solar power generation in supporting the decarbonisation of the UK energy sector is reflected in a draft revised planning policy designed to shape decision making on major renewable energy projects.

The government's stated aim is to increase the UK's solar capacity to 70GW by 2035, up from the 14GW of capacity noted in the British energy security strategy published last year, and in its technical annex (59-page / 1.74MB PDF) to its 'Powering Up Britain' reports has suggested solar capacity will need to hit 90GW by 2050 to align with wider net zero targets.

To meet those targets, more solar 'nationally significant infrastructure projects' (NSIPs) will need to be approved over the next decade and beyond – only two projects, the Little Crow Solar Park project and the Cleve Hill Solar Park project, have received development consent to date. The latest planning policy proposals published by the government now provide the confidence that prospective solar developers have been seeking.

NSIPs are subject to a special consenting regime under the Planning Act 2008, where approval for projects is considered and determined by the secretary of state. There are currently six national policy statements (NPS) – one overarching policy and five technology-specific policies – in respect of energy infrastructure that guide decision-making around applications for development consent for energy NSIPs.

The government has recognised, however, that these existing policy statements are out-of-step with subsequent net zero targets it has committed to. In autumn 2021, it embarked on a review of the energy NPSs and proposed amendments to five of the six existing policies – including its overarching energy NPS, EN-1, and EN-3 which applies to renewables NSIPs. It has now published, and opened a further consultation on (19-page / 231KB PDF), draft revised NPSs for the five energy policies subject to the current review – including EN-1 and EN-3.

One of the problems prospective solar farm developers have faced to date is that the existing EN-3 does not refer to solar generation specifically. This has meant that, while utility scale solar projects have been able to be promoted under the NPS for energy infrastructure, developers have had to follow a more protracted route to gaining planning permission: developers have had to rely on the general policy support within EN-1 for their solar projects.

According to the proposed new EN-1, the government envisages solar – together with wind– as accounting for the predominant sources of cheap, clean electricity supply in 2050, when the UK hopes to operate a ‘net zero’ economy, albeit complemented by other energy technologies that are less reliant on weather factors. In this context, the draft revised EN-3 helpfully moves the dial in favour of solar development and provides important clarifications on how issues arising in the context of the development and operation of utility scale solar farms should be factored into planning decision making.

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