# CPRE Staffordshire Position Paper on Solar Energy Development

**Executive Summary:**

CPRE Staffordshire recognises the urgent need for renewable energy sources to address the climate crisis and meet the UK's net-zero targets by 2050. However, solar energy development must be implemented strategically to protect our county's valuable agricultural land, rural landscapes, biodiversity, and community wellbeing.

This paper provides a clear framework to support consistent decision-making across Staffordshire's local authorities. It is intended as a practical blueprint that councils can adopt or adapt to guide a coordinated and sustainable approach to solar development.

The priorities set out below mirror the structure of the main paper and summarise CPRE Staffordshire's key positions on solar energy development:

- Prioritising rooftop, brownfield, and low-grade land.
- Protecting agricultural land and strengthening food security.
- Minimising landscape and visual impacts.
- Safeguarding biodiversity and wildlife habitats.
- Implementing strict safety standards for Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS).
- Guaranteeing responsible decommissioning and land reinstatement.
- Ensuring robust community engagement and meaningful, tangible benefit-sharing.

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**CPRE Staffordshire advocates for a balanced approach to solar energy development that delivers genuine benefits to both the environment and local communities.**

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## 1. Introduction, Background, and Document Purpose:

CPRE Staffordshire is dedicated to promoting the beauty, tranquillity, and diversity of the Staffordshire countryside. We recognise the vital role renewable energy plays in mitigating climate change and ensuring a sustainable future. However, this transition must not undermine the landscapes and communities it is intended to protect.

Staffordshire has seen a significant increase in solar farm applications in recent years, and this trend is likely to continue given the urgency of the energy transition and the falling cost of solar technology. While this growth is understandable, it raises concerns about the cumulative impact of multiple developments on landscapes, agricultural land, and wildlife habitats.

This position paper aims to:

- Clearly articulate CPRE Staffordshire's policy positions on solar energy development.
- Provide guidance to local planning authorities, developers, and communities.
- Support a more consistent, coordinated approach to decision-making across the county.

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## 2. Solar Farm Development Planning Context in the UK and Staffordshire

### 2.1. UK Planning Permission Thresholds:

In the UK, the planning framework for solar farms is determined by their generating capacity. Currently, solar farms with a generating capacity *below* 50 megawatts (MW) require planning permission from the relevant Local Planning Authority (LPA). These applications are assessed against local planning policies, including Local Plans and the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

Solar farms with a generating capacity *above* 50 MW are classified as Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs). These projects require Development Consent Orders granted by the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, bypassing local planning authorities in the decision-making process.

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### 2.2. Proposed Reforms to NSIP Thresholds:

The UK Government has proposed reforms to the NPPF, with consultations in December 2024 suggesting an increase in the NSIP threshold for solar farms from 50 MW to 150 MW. If implemented, more large-scale solar developments would be determined at the local level. This shift would place increased responsibility on local authorities and reinforces the need for a clear, consistent local framework.

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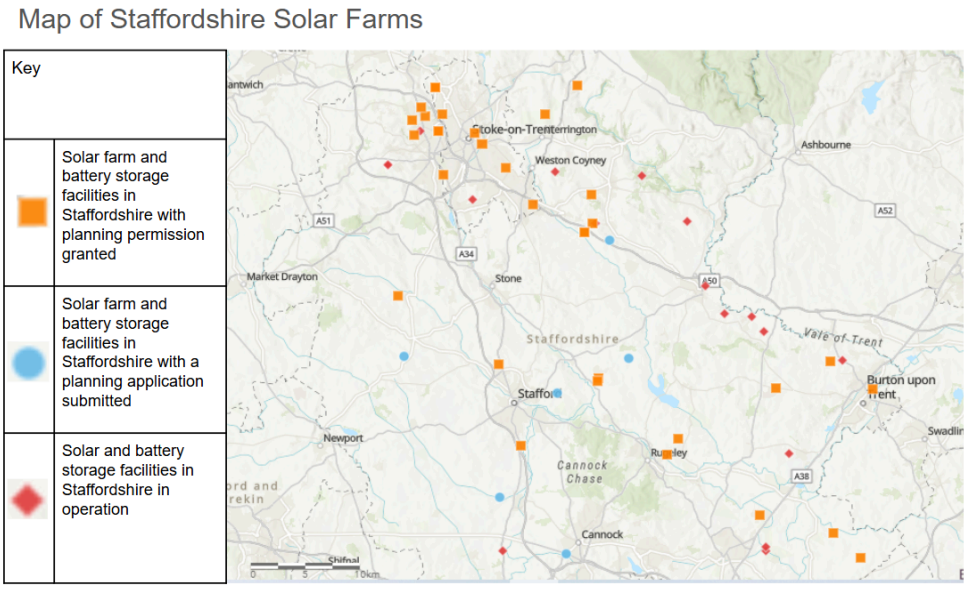
### 2.3. Cumulative Impact Concerns in Staffordshire:

Staffordshire is experiencing a growing number of solar farm applications, from mid-scale to large-scale proposals. Even where individual developments may be considered acceptable, their combined impact across the county is a growing concern. The cumulative effect of multiple developments on landscape character, agricultural land, and rural identity is not adequately addressed within current planning processes, but is expected to become increasingly significant over time.




CPRE Staffordshire's Map of Solar Farms (2025)
https://www.cprestaffordshire.org.uk/what-we-care-about/climate-change-and-energy/map-of-staffordshire-solar-farms/

### 2.4. Community Generation and Small-Scale Solar Initiatives:

CPRE Staffordshire strongly supports community-led and small-scale solar energy initiatives. Rooftop solar panels on homes, businesses, and public buildings, alongside appropriately sited community-owned schemes, offer significant potential to contribute to renewable energy targets. These approaches generate energy closer to where it is used, reduce pressure on open countryside, and can deliver more direct and visible benefits to local communities.

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## 3. Issues and Position Statements

### 3.1 Prioritising Brownfield Sites and Low-Grade Agricultural Land:

The most sustainable path for solar energy is generation at the point of use. CPRE Staffordshire therefore supports a “Rooftops First” approach, making full use of industrial buildings, warehouses, and domestic properties before considering greenfield land. In practice, developers often favour greenfield sites due to lower commercial costs and easier grid access. However, these efficiencies must not override the intrinsic value of Staffordshire’s countryside and agricultural land.

Where rooftop capacity has been exhausted, a structured “sequential test” should be applied to the planning process. This hierarchy prioritises previously developed (brownfield) and contaminated land over open countryside. Only where these options are demonstrated to be unfeasible should greenfield land be considered, in which case development should be directed toward the lowest agricultural quality (Grades 4 and 5) to protect the long-term integrity of rural landscapes.

Uncertainty remains about whether land used for solar can genuinely be restored to its previous condition, which reinforces the need for a cautious and evidence-led approach.

**CPRE Position Statement:**

CPRE Staffordshire calls for a mandatory “Rooftops and Brownfield First” approach, supported by a rigorous sequential site assessment for all solar proposals. Greenfield development must be a last resort and restricted to land of the lowest agricultural quality, regardless of commercial pressures.

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### 3.2 Loss of Agricultural Land and Food Security:

The increasing use of agricultural land for large-scale solar development raises legitimate concerns about food security and the long-term resilience of domestic food supply chains. Agricultural land is a finite resource in Staffordshire, and its value extends beyond soil classification alone.

Lower-grade agricultural land, including Grade 3b, continues to play an important role in food production. It supports rural livelihoods and contributes to the resilience and diversity of local food systems. For this reason, planning decisions should not rely solely on “Best and Most Versatile” classifications, but should also reflect the wider contribution all agricultural land makes to a functioning farming sector.

The loss of agricultural land also has wider implications for rural economies and the long-term viability of farming, particularly in the context of ongoing pressures within global food markets. A balanced approach is therefore required to ensure that renewable energy development does not undermine long-term food resilience.

**CPRE Position Statement:**

CPRE Staffordshire calls for planning assessments to move beyond a narrow focus on land classification alone, and instead give proper weight to the long-term value of food production, rural livelihoods, and expansion of local food systems. Decisions should reflect the wider strategic importance of agricultural land in maintaining a secure and sustainable food system.

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**3.3 Landscape and Visual Impact:**

Large-scale solar farms can significantly alter the character of rural landscapes, affecting visual amenity and sense of place. The visual impact of solar farms can be particularly pronounced in areas with sensitive landscapes, such as Cannock Chase National Landscape (formerly AONB) and in locations with strong heritage or local identity.

Visual impact extends beyond the panels themselves. Ancillary equipment, such as inverters, substations, security fencing, and access tracks, can contribute significantly to visual intrusion. The siting of these elements is primarily driven by operational requirements rather than landscape sensitivity.

Glint and glare can also create disturbance for nearby residents and may pose risks for road users and aviation in certain circumstances.

**CPRE Position Statement:**

Solar developments should be sited and designed to minimise landscape harm, making full use of natural screening and landform. Glint and glare should be addressed through careful orientation and design.

Ancillary equipment should not be treated as purely functional, but should be deliberately designed to reflect and complement the rural setting, for example, by housing it within structures that resemble traditional farm buildings or using colours and materials that blend into the landscape. Consideration should also be given to strengthening local landscape policies and design guidance to support more consistent outcomes, such as by creating new Local Landscape Designations (LLDs).

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**3.4 Wildlife and Biodiversity:**

Solar farms can have both positive and negative impacts on biodiversity. In some cases, they can create new habitats, particularly for pollinators and ground-nesting birds, where land is managed sensitively. In others, they can lead to habitat loss and fragmentation, especially for species that depend on larger, uninterrupted areas of land.

The impact of solar development varies depending on location, scale, and design. Proposals affecting areas of higher ecological value, such as species-rich grasslands or land near ancient woodland, are likely to have more significant effects. Lower-value or intensively managed land may offer greater opportunities for biodiversity enhancement where well designed.

Design is a key factor. Features such as hedgerows, wildflower planting, and wildlife corridors can help to mitigate habitat loss and improve connectivity. There is also growing evidence that factors such as panel height, spacing, and ground management can influence biodiversity outcomes, although these must be balanced against landscape and visual considerations.

**CPRE Position Statement:**

CPRE Staffordshire expects all solar developments to demonstrate no net loss of biodiversity and, where possible, to deliver measurable ecological enhancement. Robust ecological assessment should inform site selection from the outset. Developers should incorporate habitat creation, connectivity, and appropriate land management into scheme design, and consider how layout and infrastructure affect wildlife. Biodiversity should be treated as a central design consideration throughout the life of the development.

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**3.5 Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS) and Safety:**

Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS) are increasingly situated alongside solar farms to store excess energy and support grid stability. While they are an important part of the energy system, they introduce additional safety considerations.

Lithium-ion batteries, commonly used in these systems, can overheat under certain conditions and lead to fire through thermal runaway. While rare, these fires are severe, release toxic fumes, and are difficult to suppress, particularly in large-scale installations where the concentration of batteries increases risk.

Safe deployment requires that BESS infrastructure be sited to ensure effective emergency access for fire and rescue services. Furthermore, planning requirements must reflect that the rate of emerging battery technologies often outpaces existing UK safety standards. Guidance from the National Fire Chiefs Council (2025) provides the authoritative framework for the safe operational pre-planning of these sites.

**CPRE Position Statement:**

CPRE Staffordshire calls for robust and evidence-based safety standards for all BESS installations. Developers should be required to submit a Battery Safety Management Plan (BSMP) as part of any planning application, setting out fire prevention, containment, and emergency response measures. This should be developed in consultation with local fire services. The siting and layout of BESS infrastructure must ensure effective emergency access, and proposals should be consistent with current UK fire safety guidance and capable of independent validation.

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**3.6 Manufacturing, Decommissioning, and Land Reinstatement:**

While solar energy is low-carbon in operation, its full lifecycle has environmental implications. The manufacturing process involves substantial energy use, greenhouse gas emissions, and use of hazardous materials. At the end of their lifespan, solar panels can also be difficult to recycle.

The decommissioning of solar farms is a complex and costly process. Solar farms are often described as temporary developments, but without clear requirements there is a risk that infrastructure is not fully removed or that land is not restored to a suitable condition. This is

particularly relevant in Staffordshire, where land use has long-term implications for agriculture and rural character. Ensuring responsible end-of-life management is therefore essential.

**CPRE Position Statement:**

CPRE Staffordshire advocates a whole-lifecycle approach to solar development. Developers should be required to provide detailed and enforceable decommissioning plans, supported by financial guarantees, such as bonds, to ensure that sites are properly dismantled and land is restored. We also support greater emphasis on sustainable manufacturing and improved recycling processes for solar technologies.

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**3.7 Community Provision and Benefits:**

Solar farms can provide a range of benefits to local communities, including community energy funds, reduced energy costs, and employment opportunities. However, these benefits are often inconsistently defined and do not always reflect the impacts experienced by local residents, particularly those living closest to development sites.

Meaningful community engagement is essential to ensure that solar farms are developed in a way that is sensitive to local needs and priorities. Developers should engage in early and transparent consultation with residents, providing clear information, addressing concerns, and maintaining communication throughout the lifetime of the development.

Community benefits should be clearly defined and agreed through a collaborative process. In practice, this may include direct financial support, energy bill reductions, or investment in local infrastructure. Developments can also support local engagement through measures such as on-site information boards displaying energy generation and biodiversity updates, alongside regular reporting to parish councils to maintain transparency and community connection.

**CPRE Position Statement:**

CPRE Staffordshire supports a two-part approach to community benefit. First, there should be direct, fixed benefits for residents living closest to developments, recognising the specific impacts they may experience. This could include measures such as energy bill credits or equivalent support, provided regardless of project profitability.

Second, a wider community fund should be established to support local priorities and reflect the use of the landscape as a shared asset. Developers should be required to provide a comprehensive community benefits package as part of any planning application, supported by early and meaningful engagement, ongoing communication with parish councils, and measures that strengthen community involvement over the lifetime of the development.

Communities should also be encouraged and supported to develop their own small-scale or community-led energy projects.

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## Closing remarks:

## CPRE Staffordshire supports the transition to renewable energy but believes this must be achieved in a way that does not undermine the landscapes and communities it is intended to protect.

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