COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE: USE OF AGRICULTURAL LAND FOR SOLAR PANELS

Westminster Hall, Esther McVey MP

Tuesday 03 November 2026

- **The Countryside Alliance fully supports net zero carbon emissions for the UK as an environmental and economic policy objective. We are conscious, however, that achieving this aim will require the maintenance of public support, including from the rural population.**

- **Accepting that the drive to net zero involves costs as well as benefits, rural Britain must not be required to bear burdens that are impractical and disproportionate. Other important objectives, principally food security, must not be sacrificed.**

- **A perception has been allowed to develop that agricultural land has become the default option for solar energy infrastructure because it can be cheaper than alternative sites when deployed at scale, not because it is the right social and environmental option.**

- **During debates over the Energy Act 2023, the Countryside Alliance supported a range of amendments in relation to solar farming that we believed would improve the position of rural communities by promoting a fairer balance between demands on them and on urban areas to contribute to energy transition. We subsequently supported the New Homes (Solar Generation) Bill brought by Max Wilkinson MP.**

- **We welcomed the government's indication last year that it would mandate rooftop solar on new homes but have urged it to go further. A rooftop-first strategy must include commercial and public buildings, which offer vast potential for clean energy generation.**

- **Other government priorities, including the drive towards net zero carbon emissions, can only be sustained as long as there is food on the shelves. The interests of food security require that food production must continue to be the primary use for productive farmland.**

Background

- The importance of solar energy to meeting the UK's energy security needs and fulfilling its commitment to net zero is undeniable. Solar development must continue but it is important to ensure that it is situated in the right places.

- The Countryside Alliance is concerned about the trend of situating solar farms on productive agricultural land. This arises for a range of reasons:

    - Leaving less land available for agricultural production presents a threat to UK food security. While the government is right that food security does not necessitate self-sufficiency and it is reasonable to assume that some level of international trade in food

will always remain a contributory factor, the war in Ukraine and its associated impacts on global food prices have demonstrated that the maintenance of historical trade patterns cannot be relied upon. Domestic production is essential to food security.

- Subsidies and developer impetus have created a situation where the conversion of agricultural farms to solar can be lucrative to landowners. There are, however, broader economic implications beyond the ability of single farms to generate revenue. Tenant farmers have been threatened with eviction so that land can be used for solar, and further pressure has been brought to bear on land values. These trends risk making it harder for new entrants to join the sector and begin farming, in turn threatening the agricultural skill base over the longer term.

- The economic viability of solar farms relies on cost-effective connection to an electric substation, which requires proximity. As a result, solar farm developments tend to cluster in areas where a nearby substation is available. This results in a disproportionate impact on affected communities.

- A perception has been allowed to develop that agricultural land has become the default option for solar energy infrastructure because it can be cheaper than alternative sites when deployed at scale, not because it is the right social and environmental option.

Government policy

- In a response from 28 April 2025 to a parliamentary question the Energy Minister, Michael Shanks MP, said:

  "Planning guidance makes clear that, wherever possible, solar developers should utilise brownfield, industrial, contaminated, or previously developed sites. Where the development of agricultural land is shown to be necessary, lower-quality land should be preferred to higher-quality land. The total area of land devoted to solar panels is very small. As of the end of September 2024, ground-mount solar PV panels covered an estimated 21,200 hectares (52,000 acres), which is only around 0.1 per cent of the total land area of the UK."[1]

- The response on planning guidance relates to the National Policy Statement published in January 2024 under the previous government, indicating that government policy on the use of agricultural land for solar infrastructure stands unchanged between governments.[2]

- In a response the following day to a further question on the use of the best and most versatile agricultural land, he said:

  "There is no set maximum amount of best and most versatile land that may be used in a nationally significant infrastructure development. Each case is judged on its own merits in line with the requirements in the Planning Act 2008 and relevant policy, such as the National Policy Statement for Renewable Energy Infrastructure (EN-3)…"[3]

- On 17 January, meanwhile, Housing Minister Matthew Pennycook MP responded on behalf of the government to the New Homes (Solar Energy) Bill, a Private Member's Bill brought by Max Wilkinson MP (Cheltenham, LD). He said:

[1] UK Parliament, Written questions, answers and statements, UIN 45105
[2] UK Parliament, Written questions, answers and statements, UIN HCWS466
[3] UK Parliament, Written questions, answers and statements, UIN 46187

"The Government are extremely sympathetic to the intention behind the Bill, namely to significantly boost the deployment of rooftop solar. That aim is clearly shared widely across the House, and for good reason… However, we cannot support the Bill today. That is because the Government already intend to amend building regulations later this year as part of the introduction of future standards that will set more ambitious energy efficiency and carbon emissions requirements for new homes. The new standards will ensure that all new homes are future-proof, with low-carbon heating and very high-quality building fabric."[4]

- On 01 May 2025 it was reported that the government intends to mandate the fitting of solar panels during construction on almost all new homes in England within two years. While no formal announcement yet been made, a government spokesperson was quoted as saying:

  "We have always been clear that we want solar panels on as many new homes as possible because they are a vital technology to help cut bills for families, boost our national energy security and help deliver net zero.

  "Through the Future Homes Standard we plan to maximise the installation of solar panels on new homes as part of our ambition to ensure all new homes are energy efficient, and will set out final plans in due course."[5]

- The report drew criticism from the Home Builders Federation, however, that the proposal new homes to offset 40% of their carbon footprint are *"unrealistic"* and could cause delays to building. The Federation suggested that an alternative offsetting target of 20% would be more viable.[6]

- In March 2026 the government published the final Land Use Framework for England, following consultation on an earlier draft. The Framework stopped short of offering firm safeguards for food production. While it acknowledged the importance of food security in principle, it contained too little clarity on how the government will prevent further loss of agricultural land to other uses such as large-scale energy infrastructure, tree planting schemes and development. Without stronger policy direction, the cumulative impact could still undermine the UK's food security.

Further policy options

- During debates over what became the Energy Act 2023 the Countryside Alliance supported a range of amendments in relation to solar farming that we believed would improve the position of rural communities by promoting a fairer balance between demands on them and on urban areas to contribute to energy transition.

- An amendment proposed by Alicia Kearns MP would have prohibited solar energy developments over 500 acres in size where over 20% of the land is well suited to agriculture, mandating the Secretary of State to make regulations to that effect. This would have curtailed the development of large-scale solar farms on productive agricultural land without preventing it entirely, which would be counter-productive since it would prevent, for instance, farmers from diversifying by siting small-scale generation on surplus land.

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[4] HC Deb, 17.01.25, c651-652
[5] The Guardian, Solar panels to be fitted on all new-build homes in England by 2027, 01.05.25
[6] Financial Times, Installing solar panels on all new homes will slow housebuilding, industry warns, 06.05.25

- An amendment proposed by then-MP Caroline Lucas would have required new homes to carry solar panels on their roofs and developments to be planned effectively to maximise solar gain. The amendment provided for regulations to specify exemptions where solar panels are not appropriate.

- An amendment proposed by Wera Hobhouse MP would have required the Secretary of State to report on enhancing rewards available through the Smart Export Guarantee to householders with solar panels. The Smart Export Guarantee is the government-backed mechanism by which small-scale generators can be paid for exporting low-carbon energy back to the National Grid. Increasing these payments would improve the incentive to participate.

- A further amendment proposed by Wera Hobhouse MP would have exempted batteries used to store solar-generated energy, for example in homes, from VAT. In addition to Smart Export Guarantee payments, battery storage is important to allow homes to store generated electricity for use at times of low natural light. Exempting them from VAT would help make this key component of a home solar generation system more affordable.

- While these amendments were regrettably not accepted by the last government, we continue to believe that they remain important considerations for the development of future policy.

- The Labour Party manifesto promised to introduce a Warm Homes Plan which it stated would *"offer grants and low interest loans"* that could be used to support the installation of home improvements including solar panels and batteries.[7] The plan was subsequently published in January 2026,[8] but the 2026 Budget cut its capital grant provision – initially costed at £4.4 billion – by £1 billion.[9]

Countryside Alliance position

- Energy security and food security are two key issues facing this country and must be tackled together, with the countryside playing its part to deliver sustainable environmental and economic growth.

- We recognise the importance of encouraging and supporting the growth of renewable energy projects; the UK needs a mix of sustainable energy to tackle the impact other energy sources have had on the environment.

- Solar energy is an important part of the UK's sustainable energy mix and we must prioritise the growth of solar projects on brownfield sites, existing roofs and new-builds which should reduce the pressure for solar farms on productive agricultural land.

- The clustering of developments around sub-stations has consequences for local landscapes and amenities, and the cumulative effect intensifies the harm caused.

[7] Labour Party Manifesto 2024, p. 56
[8] DESNZ, Warm Homes Plan, 21.01.26
[9] HMT, Budget 2026, p. 59

- It is regularly argued that sheep can be grazed around solar panels but there are questions about whether that grazing will still be viable in three or four years' time, given that the purpose of a solar farm is to capture that solar energy that otherwise would be enabling the growth of grazing grass. There are also questions about whether land used for solar farms will or could ever return to agriculture.

- While solar farms can be profitable for landowners the deployment of large-scale solar farming projects has broader implications beyond the ability of single farms to generate revenue. There are impacts on tenant farmers threatened with eviction and further pressure on land values, which makes it harder for new entrants to join the sector and begin farming.[10]

- The Countryside Alliance responded to the government consultation on the National Policy Framework in September 2024 making a case for a *"rooftop-first"* approach to solar installations as part of the government's bid to boost renewable energy. We argued that solar panels should be placed on the rooftops of new homes, commercial buildings, and car parks before using farmland or greenfield sites. This would protect valuable agricultural land and natural spaces while maximising the use of existing infrastructure.

- Responding to the 01 May report of a possible mandate to fit solar panels during construction on almost all new homes in England within two years, Sarah Lee, Director of Policy at the Countryside Alliance, said:

  "We welcome this move to mandate rooftop solar on new homes, but urge the government to go further. A rooftop-first strategy must include commercial and public buildings, which offer vast potential for clean energy generation. Solar deployment should not come at the cost of our countryside or food security when so much suitable roof space already exists."[11]

- Other government priorities, including the drive towards net zero carbon emissions, can only be sustained as long as there is food on the shelves. The interests of food security require that food production must continue to be the primary use for productive farmland.

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[10] Countryside Alliance, Countryside Alliance joins Commons food security summit, 09.11.22
[11] Countryside Alliance, Government mandates rooftop solar on new homes, 01.05.25