

**RENEWABLE ENERGY POSITION STATEMENT**

**Summary:** To review and, if in agreement, adopt the Board’s revised Renewable Energy Position Statement.

**Recommendation:** That the Board adopts the revised Renewable Energy Position Statement.

**Report by:** John Mills – Planning AND Landscape Lead

Background

1. The Board’s Renewable Energy Position Statement (REPS) was adopted in April 2014. Since then, the need to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change has become even more urgent. This is reflected in the declaration of climate emergencies by many of our local authorities and in our own work, including our climate crisis commitment.
2. Work began on reviewing and updating the REPS in 2022. An initial draft was circulated to the Planning and Infrastructure Working Group and Climate Action Working Group in October 2022 with a meeting of the two working groups being held on 2 November 2022.
3. An updated draft was circulated to the two working groups in early March 2023, with a meeting of the two working groups being held on 15 March 2023 to approve the draft REPS going out to external consultation. The external consultation ran for a six-week period from 24 March 2023 to 5 May 2023.
4. The draft REPS was updated to take account of consultation feedback. A further meeting of the two working groups was held on 26 May 2023 to approve the REPS going forward to the Board for adoption. The working group members were very supportive of this final draft, including the way in which consultation feedback had been addressed (see Annex 1).

External Consultation – summary

5. For the external consultation, we consulted our 15 local authorities, Natural England, the Forestry Commission, the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), the Wildlife Trusts, the Woodland Trust, the Country Land and Business Association (CLA), National Farmers Union (NFU), the National Association of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (NAAONB) and individual AONBs and National Park Authorities, CNL Board members and CNL team members.
6. We received 14 consultation responses, including four from local authorities (Gloucestershire County Council (no comment), Oxfordshire County Council, Stratford-on-Avon District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council), three from CNL Board members (other than PIWG / CAWG members) and three from CNL team members, as well as CPRE Gloucestershire, CPRE Wiltshire, Natural England and Nidderdale AONB.

7. The consultation responses were compiled into a table, grouped around the different sections of the REPS. Some of the consultation responses were quite extensive so this table is also extensive (running to 21 pages). As such, it has not been included in this report but it is available on request.
8. A further document was compiled which identified the key issues raised in the consultation feedback and set out the way in which these issues would be addressed. This document is included as Annex 1, below.
9. Overall, the consultation feedback was broadly positive, with CPRE Gloucestershire, for example, stating that '*what you have done is a superb piece of work*'. Much of the feedback related to whether the REPS planned positively for renewable energy, in the context of the climate emergency, whilst still fulfilling the Board's statutory purposes. In my professional opinion, I believe that the REPS *does* provide an appropriate balance. The two working groups (PIWG and CAWG) agree with this conclusion.

#### Next steps

10. The position statement is now ready for adoption by the Board. The only work that is still needed, prior to publication, is some minor editing (for example, numbering paragraphs). Once the position statement has been adopted, we will add it to our website, replacing the 2014 version, and inform relevant stakeholders, including local authorities, that it has now been adopted.

## **ANNEX 1. CONSULTATION FEEDBACK – KEY ISSUES RAISED AND HOW THEY HAVE BEEN ADDRESSED**

### **Summary / Context**

CPRE Wiltshire queried whether the renewable energy to be sourced from the AONB or in part from elsewhere. They stated that this is key to the matter and needs to be addressed.

I agree with CPRE that this is key to the matter. In particular, I think that we need to provide some clarity around the Board's commitment to '*identify a scenario which allows us to endorse a path to Net Zero emissions (or better) by 2050 (or sooner)*'. This could be taken to mean that, for example, we should meet all of the (residual) energy demand within the CNL with renewable energy that is generated within the CNL. However, from discussion with Board members and colleagues, I don't think that is what the commitment is intended to commit us to. For example, there seems to be an acknowledgement that some of the energy demand within the CNL will need to be met by renewable energy that is generated outside of the CNL area.

To address this issue, I have added the following sentences:

- The level of protection afforded to AONBs, such as the CNL, may mean that some of the area's renewable energy requirements will need to be generated outside of the area. However, we should still seek to make a meaningful contribution to renewable energy provision within the CNL.

### **Biomass – fuel crops**

Several consultees have highlighted the potential conflict with other land uses including food production, nature recovery and planting of (deciduous) woodland. Some have questioned why we have a supportive position for small-scale fuel crop schemes when we have identified so many adverse impacts. Some have suggested that our position should be a presumption against energy crops.

I am minded to keep our position on this topic as it is (i.e., supportive of small-scale schemes, in principle). This is because most of the adverse impacts relate to large-scale schemes. However, I would be interested to have PIWG / CAWG input on this.

Which of the following options does PIWG / CAWG think is the most appropriate position to take on this issue?

Options for our position on fuel crops:

1. Keep as it is (i.e., in principle support for small-scale schemes) (N.B. PIWG / CAWG SUPPORTED THIS OPTION)
2. Presumption against all scales of fuel crop schemes.

3. Presumption against large scale schemes but neutral on small scale schemes – assess on a case-by-case basis.

### **Solar energy – small-scale**

Some consultees queried the basis of – and evidence for - the size thresholds that we have used. I have revised the text to try and make this a bit clearer. In the process of doing so, I have added some text relating to solar energy developments that are up to five hectares in size. The Position Statement now has three size thresholds for solar energy (rather than two):

- Up to 0.5ha = micro; support in principle
- Up to 5ha = small; assess on a case-by-case basis
- Larger than 5ha = large; in principle, would not support

The risk with this is that the previous draft had identified 0.5ha as the threshold for ‘large’, which some consultees supported. However, the previous draft also dealt with solar developments up to 5ha in size within the ‘small-scale’ solar section so it was a bit muddled in this regard. I think that the revised wording now provides a more well thought out interpretation of what was said in the previous iteration.

### **Solar and Wind – having an approach that is informed by landscape sensitivity**

Some consultees explicitly supported this approach, not least because it is evidenced based and adds rigour to the assessment of development proposals.

However, some consultees are concerned about taking this approach. In particular, Nidderdale AONB stated that:

- Support for landscape sensitivity analysis in particular is a cause for wider concern ... We would vigorously resist any attempt to redefine parts of Nidderdale AONB as less or moderately sensitive. Chipping away at the integrity and geographical coherence of a nationally designated landscape whose boundaries were carefully reviewed immediately prior to confirmation of Nidderdale’s AONB designation would make the designation vulnerable to attempts by developers of all descriptions to obtain approval for projects that are currently beyond their reach due to existing policy.

This reflects similar comments that were made by Cranborne Chase AONB in relation to a previous iteration of the draft Renewable Energy Position Statement.

I strongly disagree with that analysis. I think that landscape sensitivity assessments (LSAs) are beneficial on three fronts:

- Firstly, they are useful in relation to the identification of ‘suitable areas’ for renewable energy. If local planning authorities don’t identify suitable areas for wind

energy in their Local Plans they would, in effect, be ruling out wind energy across their whole area. This isn't appropriate in a climate emergency. When 'suitable areas' are being identified, this should be underpinned by having regard to AONB considerations. In practice, this means undertaking a LSA and constraints mapping. As such, LSAs are a key component of ensuring that AONB considerations are addressed in this process.

- Secondly, the LSAs that I have referred to in the draft Position Statement have helped to justify the size thresholds that we have used for wind and solar energy. As such, they provide a more robust evidence base to justify these size thresholds.
- Thirdly, the LSAs that I have used in the draft Position Statement have, for the most part, shown that the CNL has a higher landscape sensitivity to large scale wind and solar energy than the areas that lie outside the CNL. As such, they recognise the higher landscape sensitivity of areas within the CNL compared to areas outside the CNL.

There is a small risk with LSAs identifying that one part of the CNL is less sensitive than another. However, I think that, in reality, some parts of the CNL *are* less sensitive than others. For example, there will be some areas that reflect the special qualities of the CNL to a greater degree than others. The key consideration will be to ensure that the LSA methodology is robust. The draft Position Statement should help to achieve this.

Overall, I think that advocating a landscape sensitivity-based approach (alongside size-based thresholds) is sound.

It is unfortunate that there is this difference of opinion within the AONB family (and, to some extent, within the CNL team). Nidderdale AONB is concerned about the extent to which significant policy differences between AONBs could be exploited by parts of the renewable energy industry. However, I don't think that that should mean that we back down from the positions that we have set out in the Position Statement.

### **Solar energy – large scale**

Whilst some consultees were supportive of our position on large scale solar, some raised concerns about this position. For example, Mark Connelly commented that '*if we adopt what is proposed for large PV ... we will fail our purposes to conserve and enhance - we need to stick up for the landscape*'.

Having reviewed the Position Statement, I think that the position that we have set out is sound. For example, it explicitly states that, in principle, we would not support proposals above a particular size threshold. The requirement for major development proposals to demonstrate exceptional circumstances is in line with national planning policy. I don't think that we can just ignore the fact that there may be (exceptional) circumstances in which development that is harmful to the natural beauty of the CNL might be permitted.

One relevant change that I have made is to edit the supporting text in this section (and in the large-scale wind section) relating to landscape sensitivity. For example, I have deleted a text about landscape sensitivity being a more nuanced approach and, instead, stated that it is an important consideration. This should reduce any potential inference that a landscape sensitivity assessment might make a larger scale scheme more acceptable.

Overall, I think that our position on large-scale solar energy is sound.

### **Wind energy – large scale**

Some consultees supported our position on large-scale wind energy. However, there were also concerns that the position is too permissive or too restrictive.

For example, on the one hand Mark Connelly commented that the Position Statement goes *'far too far on wind ... large scale is not appropriate for a protected landscape ... current Renewable Energy Position statement is much more appropriate and in line with the purpose of designation, etc'*. On the other hand, Stratford District Council commented that *'the Board's position effectively rules out significantly sized commercial wind energy schemes ... the Board may wish to consider the cumulative effect of such rulings across AONBs and National Parks nationally'*.

With regard to Mark's comments, I took another look at the currently adopted Position Statement and compared it with the draft Position Statement. In my opinion, the two Position Statements are broadly aligned, albeit that the draft Position Statement is more positively framed.

As with our position on large-scale wind, I think that our position is sound. It sets an appropriate threshold above which we would not be supportive, in principle, but recognises that there may be exceptional circumstances where larger schemes may be permitted. Please also refer to my comments, above, regarding landscape sensitivity,

Overall, I think that our position on large-scale wind-energy is sound.

### **Community-led schemes**

Several consultees questioned the basis of the draft position, particularly with regards to the weight that should be given to community-led schemes in planning decisions. Some consultees also highlighted that the fact that a scheme is community-led should not necessarily outweigh AONB considerations.

Changed the Board's position to focus on how the Board would view community-led schemes rather than referring to the weight that should be given to such schemes in planning decisions. The position now also addresses AONB considerations and states that all schemes should be able to demonstrate benefits for the local community.

Added more context to the supporting text, including referring to what national planning policy says about community-led renewable energy schemes. Toned down the sentence regarding the evidence-based that should be provided.

**ENDS**