

COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE: PLANNING AND SOLAR FARMS

Westminster Hall, Dr Caroline Johnson MP

Wednesday 19 July 2023

- **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.**
- **At the 2022 Party Conferences and the 2023 Liberal Democrat Spring Conference, the Countryside Alliance presented events discussing how rural communities can remain sustainable when land is increasingly being diverted away from productive agricultural use to support decarbonisation policies such as solar farms.**
- **The overwhelming message from audiences was that while everyone supported the principle of solar energy as part of the UK's energy mix, we need to think carefully about where we site solar farms, the planning regulations involved and making better use of brownfield sites, existing buildings and new-build properties.**
- **The interests of food security require that food production must continue to be the primary use for productive farmland.**

Background

- Concern about planning issues in relation to solar farms arise from the finite area of land available within the UK and the competing interests of food production and food security.
- The Government's food strategy, published in June 2022, aims at "*ensuring security and sustainability of food supply in an unpredictable world*". It cites the UK Food Security report from December 2021, which indicated that domestically we produce 60% by value of all the food we need, rising to 74% of food which we can grow or rear in the UK, with surpluses in lamb and milk and recent growth in sectors including poultry and soft fruit.
- It distinguishes between food security and self-sufficiency, given the diversity of import routes, but warns that "*exposure to international markets, in combination with global supply chain pressures and shocks, can also create price and supply impacts, such as those arising from the conflict in Ukraine*".
- The Government has committed "*to continue to monitor and strengthen the resilience of our supply chains and support our domestic production*", including by managing increased input costs such as of fertilisers, and to address food security issues worldwide.¹

¹ Defra, [Government Food Strategy](#), 13.06.22

2022-23 Party Conferences

- At the 2022 Party Conferences and the 2023 Liberal Democrat Spring Conference, the Countryside Alliance presented events entitled “*Sustaining Rural Communities in the Carbon Trading Age*”. They discussed how rural communities can remain sustainable at a time when land is increasingly being diverted away from productive agricultural use to support decarbonisation policies such as solar farms and tree planting for the sake of carbon abatement.
- Shadow Defra Minister Daniel Zeichner MP argued for a framework for land use: in its absence there is a free-for-all allowing land to be bought up and taken out of agricultural production. He raised concerns about long-term deals being signed that would take land use out of food production at a time of growing concern over food security.²
- Tim Farron MP, the Liberal Democrats’ Defra Spokesman, said that farmers are responsible both for feeding the country and saving the planet, and are not sufficiently rewarded for it. He pointed out that since the UK produces only 60% of the food we need, what we do not produce we must source from international commodities markets, in turn inflating prices paid by the poorest countries in the world.³
- Defra Minister Mark Spencer MP acknowledged the scale of the challenge and the frustration of farmers being told to take land out of the production of food that will only be substituted for by imports.⁴
- The overwhelming message from audiences was that while everyone was supportive of the principle of solar energy, the clear message being sent back to politicians was that we need to think carefully about where we site solar farms, the planning regulations involved and how we can make better use of brownfield sites, existing buildings and new-build properties.⁵

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, 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.

² Countryside Alliance, [Labour Party Conference tackles decarbonisation and community sustainability](#), 26.09.22

³ Countryside Alliance, [Lib Dem big beasts join Alliance rural debate](#), 20.03.23

⁴ Countryside Alliance, [Countryside Alliance puts rural communities in the spotlight](#), 10.10.22

⁵ Countryside Alliance, [Will more solar farms impact the future of farming and agriculture?](#), 27.01.23

- While it is regularly argued that sheep can be grazed around solar panels there are questions about whether that grazing will still be viable in three or four years' time. There are also questions about whether the land used for solar farms will ever return to agriculture.
- The Countryside Alliance was represented at a House of Commons roundtable event on UK food security in November, hosted by the APPG for Farming. We argued that 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.⁶
- We agree with the Minister, Mark Spencer MP, that 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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⁶ Countryside Alliance, [Countryside Alliance joins Commons food security summit](#), 09.11.22