

## **REA Response: Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill: reforms to national planning policy**

The Association for Renewable Energy & Clean Technology (REA) is pleased to submit this response to the above consultation. The REA represents a wide variety of organisations, including generators, project developers, fuel and power suppliers, investors, equipment producers and service providers. Members range in size from major multinationals to sole traders. There are over 500 corporate members of the REA, making it the largest renewable energy trade association in the UK.

### **Q.38 Do you agree that this is the right approach to making sure that the food production value of high value farmland is adequately weighted in the planning process, in addition to current references in the Framework on best and most versatile agricultural land?**

The REA welcomes the Government adopting a nuanced approach to balancing food security with net zero and energy security ambitions. We support the government in not outrightly banning other developments (such as ground mounted solar) on agricultural land and looking for a more evidence based, and site specific, route to considering appropriate land use. Where possible, the REA believes food production should take priority over solar developments or other land uses, avoiding as far as possible development on agricultural land of classification 1, 2, 3a (Best and Most Versatile land). However, planning rules do need to be able to recognise possibilities for site specific realities and options for Agri-solar developments, especially on 3b BMV. This includes, for example, considering the proximity to and availability of useful grid connections.

We would, however, highlight that it is difficult to determine whether this is the right approach without knowing how explicitly including consideration of agricultural land for food production will be practically balanced alongside other priorities, particularly net zero ambitions and energy security, given the current wording used in the consultation.

The REA suggests two approaches to providing further clarity. Firstly, changing the proposed wording in footnote 67 to the National Planning Policy Framework to explicitly include net zero ambitions and energy security. In addition, the REA would welcome further guidance and clarity on how the proposed wording in footnote 67 will be implemented and how planning authorities will be expected to balance using agricultural land for other priorities in practice.

The REA welcomed that the consultation singled out 'energy security' as an example of an imperative that the UK's best high performing farms have a role in addressing. In addition, other suggestions within this consultation make essential planning reforms to achieving the Government's net zero ambitions. However, the inclusion of these other imperatives is not yet reflected in the draft wording of footnote 67. We caution that the addition of this explicit consideration without further detail on how this consideration will be balanced with using agricultural land for renewable energy generation, especially solar development, could increase investor uncertainty. Ultimately, this uncertainty

could risk jeopardising crucial investment into solar and other lower carbon technology deployment.

The REA recommends including these objectives within the wording of the footnote 67 to reassure investors and solar developers that net zero ambitions and energy security will be prioritised along with food production when considering planning for agricultural land. The REA suggests:

Footnote 67: Where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, areas of poorer quality land should be preferred to those of a higher quality. The availability of agricultural land used for food production should be considered, alongside *net zero ambitions, energy security, and* the other policies in this Framework, when deciding what sites are most appropriate for development.

In the absence of this explicit consideration of net zero ambitions and energy security in the draft footnote, the REA would welcome further guidance on how planning authorities should value agricultural land for food production in relation other land uses, such as low carbon generation, as suggested within this consultation. The use of agricultural land for food purposes is already considered during the planning process for development on BMV land. The addition of an explicit consideration to the National Planning Policy Framework suggests that the Government believes that agricultural land for food purposes is not being considered enough during the planning process currently.

Overall, the REA would like to highlight that any weighting given to the relative value of agricultural land must also consider wider strategic Government aims, such as deployment of renewables, and have a realistic and evidenced based consideration of the how land needs to be used to meet all government ambitions. As Carbon Brief has estimated, 0.1% of UK land is currently taken up by ground-mounted solar and 0.2% of UK land would be required to reach the UK's ambition to reach a five-fold increase on the current UK's solar capacity. While we acknowledge that that this figure does not reflect that ground-mounted solar might have to be developed on BMV agricultural land due to grid connections, it does demonstrate that the overall threat to food security would be minimal when appropriate consideration is given to how much land is required.

In addition, solar developers have a close working relationship with the farming industry. For instance, the REA works closely with the National Farmers' Union (NFU), who are supportive of solar development on agricultural land. Solar developers can provide a secure source of income, allowing farmers to focus on food production on other land that they own. Solar developers can also enhance the natural and local environment due to the biodiversity gains that solar developers can provide to an area through a well-managed site. In addition, food production and solar development should not be approached as being mutually exclusive uses of land. Agri-voltaic

development has been used to share land for both food production and renewable energy generation.

**Q40. Do you have any views on how planning policy could support climate change adaptation further, specifically through the use of nature-based solutions that provide multi-functional benefits?**

The REA would like to take use this opportunity to highlight how the proposed new Infrastructure Levy (to be consulted on at a later date) could also be designed to promote low carbon uses of land, including nature-based solutions. Suitable levy reliefs for development of low carbon projects, either related to power generation, agricultural practices, growth of innovative biomass feedstocks or other forms of adaption, could help to incentivise such developments away from high carbon land uses.

**Q.43: Do you agree with the changes proposed to footnote 54 of the existing National Planning Policy Framework? Do you have any views on specific wording for new footnote 62?**

The REA recognises that the proposed changes do help to advance onshore wind power planning guidance but raise concern that the proposals do not yet equate to a lifting of the memorandum on onshore wind projects. The amended footnotes seem to continue to promote a default position against onshore wind development in England. This needs to be addressed, given both the governments stated ambitions for net zero and the decarbonisation of the power system by 2035. The use of onshore wind can complement other low carbon developments, including hydrogen production, electric vehicle charging, energy storage and combined with multi-generational sites, such as where solar is already installed. Diversity in generation helps provide both grid security and diversity of revenue streams to landowners and farmers. The planning system should be encouraging onshore wind development where sensible planning processes are considered and the needs of local communities are addressed.

**Q.44: Do you agree with our proposed new Paragraph 161 in the National Planning Policy Framework to give significant weight to proposals which allow the adaptation of existing buildings to improve their energy performance?**

The REA is supportive of the Government giving significant weight to proposals that allow existing buildings to improve their energy performance. While we largely agree with the wording of paragraph 161, the REA would like to see the inclusion of 'energy storage devices' and recognition of other low carbon heating technologies.

The current omission of energy storage devices could result in proposals not maximising their energy generation from installed solar. Solar installations on properties generate electricity during the day in sunny conditions, which does not always coincide with demand for electricity peaking in the evening. While the unused electricity generated during the day can be sold back to the grid, a more efficient method is to store this electricity using a battery energy storage device in the property.

These devices allow buildings to store solar-generated electricity during the day and use that electricity in the evening, thereby maximising use of rooftop solar panels.

Similarly, with a sole focus on heat pumps, the drafting potentially misses ensuring that the planning guidance promotes the right technology in accordance with a building's specific heat needs. While heat pumps will likely be suitable for most properties, some large non-domestic buildings may require heat loads better suited to biomass boilers, biofuel or hydrogen applications. The planning guidance should not exclude any low carbon heating solutions.

The REA therefore proposes the following wording:

161. To support energy efficiency improvements, significant weight should be given to the need to support energy efficiency improvements through the adaptation of existing buildings, particularly large non-domestic buildings, to improve their energy performance (including *through installation of solar panels, energy storage solution and low carbon heating solutions, such as heat pumps*, where these do not already benefit from permitted development rights). Proposals affecting conservation areas and listed buildings should also take into account the policies set out in chapter 16 of this Framework.

**March 2023**