

PLANNING FOR SOLAR INFRASTRUCTURE 2024

11 JANUARY | LONDON

Ahead of [Planning for Solar Infrastructure \(taking place on 11 January, London\)](#) **Neil Titley, Technical Director, Environment at AECOM**, shares insight on the benefits and challenges facing solar, and some guidance to solar developers.



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WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF SOLAR IN THE UK? HOW CAN THESE BE EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATED THOSE DIRECTLY INVOLVED WITH SOLAR?

Solar is an important part of the solution towards achieving net zero. It is one of the cheapest and quickest to build forms of renewable energy. It supplements other forms of renewable energy such as wind farms by producing electricity during days when it is sunny, which tend to coincide with weather patterns that deliver less wind. The midday peaks can be balanced by battery energy storage systems which store the surplus electricity and release it to the national transmission network during periods of higher demand. The revenue from solar helps supports farmers, some of whom require additional income to keep farming, and it contributes towards preventing one of the greatest threats to food security and farming, which is climate change. Solar farms allow soil replenishment and deliver high levels of biodiversity net gain, with most solar farms including substantial new tree and hedge planting and high quality grassland.

WHAT CHALLENGES DO SOLAR INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS CURRENTLY FACE? HOW CAN THESE BE OVERCOME?

The main challenges for solar are local opposition; misconceptions or people who perceive the solar farms to be an intrusion and a visual eye sore that they are unwilling to agree is acceptable to deliver clean electricity and achieve net zero. In the UK we do our best to screen solar farms, unlike other countries where I have worked where the Government prefer solar farms to be visible landmarks that communities should be proud of, and generally, in the UK developers are very good at planting trees and hedges to screen panels, which has the added benefit of biodiversity gains. There needs to be more education around solar; for example, last summer there were widespread false rumours on social media that solar panels stop working over 25 degrees Celsius, and there is an ongoing belief amongst some communities that wildlife will be worse off with solar farms and the UK food production will drop. The solar industry has been increasingly publishing research and factual evidence over the last year to reassure communities, but it is critical that developers deliver good design and are able to give back more to the community than just a community benefit fund and bring communities into and as part of the projects.

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WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO SOLAR DEVELOPERS SEEKING TO NAVIGATE THE CONSENTING PROCESS IN THE UK?

Site selection can be critical. Finding a good site with ample land. This enables the delivery of good design with substantial vegetation planting, biodiversity enhancement, and a scheme that delivers a mix of community benefits. Each developer should aim to provide something more back to the community than just a community fund, so that communities are a part of the project and able to use the land in ways that are currently prohibited by arable farming. Experienced design teams, environmental and planning consultants, and stakeholder consultants will bring good design and ideas together, with effective stakeholder engagement that allows community feedback to be incorporated into the design, creating a consentable scheme.

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