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**POSITION STATEMENT ON SOLAR RENEWABLE ENERGY**

The purpose behind this Position Statement is to inform local planning authorities, landowners, applicants, Trust members and supporters, and other interested parties about the current views of The Wildlife Trust for Lancashire, Manchester & North Merseyside (the Trust) on the provision of solar renewable energy projects likely to affect wildlife in our sub-region. This document is intended to guide policy-makers, to assist in the consideration of planning applications and to help to inform the decision-making process.

The Position Statement forms an extension of the principles laid out within the Trust’s Business Plan (2011‐2016). The Position Statement provides the current Trust view on solar renewable energy proposals based on existing planning policy.

**Introduction**

The Trust’s ‘Vision’ is for “*A region rich in wildlife, valued and enjoyed by all*” and our ‘Purpose’ is “*To protect wildlife, restore biodiversity and connect people with the natural world in Lancashire, Manchester and North Merseyside*”.

The Trust already does a great deal to achieve and promote the ideal of ‘one-planet living’ – striving to live and work in such a way that resources are conserved and replenished, recognizing that we only have one planet from which to draw these, not several. Sustainability is central to our land management, our education and information programmes, and the way that the Trust’s business is managed. To that end, Objective 4 in our current business plan (2011-16) is to “*Foster sustainable, One Planet living, where functioning of the natural environment is appreciated as essential for supporting life*”.

However, Objective 2 is to “*Stand up for wildlife and the environment*”. In some situations these objectives may come into potential or actual conflict.

We must seek to integrate the delivery of both Objectives as far as is practicable. Where this appears unachievable we must determine a course of action, the outcome of which would best serve our declared ‘Purpose’.

The Trust recognises that substantial benefits for wildlife and people - locally, nationally and globally - can come from reducing energy-use and increasing efficiency of energy-generation. Examples of these approaches include reducing travel, improving the insulation of buildings, and using energy-efficient appliances. These and other measures help to reduce the pace of climate-change and so to improve the chances of a diversity of indigenous wildlife surviving and thriving.

The Trust acknowledges that energy-efficiency is not sufficient in itself to deliver such benefits and that significant renewable energy generation and distribution projects are required to reduce our reliance on fossil fuels. Not all forms of renewable energy projects may be suitable in any given location; hence the production of this Position Statement to identify opportunities for and highlight constraints on different forms and scales of renewable energy generation as these relate to the solar sector.

Increased development of renewable energy resources is vital to facilitating the delivery of the

UK Government's commitments to mitigate climate change and promote renewable energy. The Climate Change Act (2008) has set a legally binding target of at least an 80 per cent cut in greenhouse gas emissionsby 2050 and a reduction of at least 34 per cent by 2020.

**The Wildlife Trust for Lancashire, Manchester & North Merseyside’s General Position**

Climate-change is a significant threat to our sub-region’s wildlife, on land and at sea. The Trust is generally supportive of renewable energy projects that realise net gains for biodiversity and have significant community benefit. It is also strongly in favour of the appropriate assessment of projects on an individual basis, for the following general reasons:

 Only if accurate professional wildlife survey work is undertaken for proposed, individual, renewable energy projects can the principle of net biodiversity gain be upheld.

 Individual assessment and professional surveying are required to determine and put in place essential and effective species- and habitat-monitoring.

 Individual assessment helps to ensure the maximisation of community benefit alongside net biodiversity gain.

**Solar Energy**

Micro-generation

The Trust supports solar thermal and photovoltaic (PV) provision at a local micro‐generation scale.

Larger, well-designed solar arrays on buildings are unlikely to be objected to by the Trust unless there are likely to be impacts on roosting, breeding or hibernating bats, all species of which enjoy European levels of protection: there are many buildings where panels could be placed with little or no negative impact. However, proposals for installations within architectural Conservation Areas and/or the Arnside & Silverdale and Forest of Bowland Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, on Listed Buildings or within the Liverpool Waterfront World Heritage Site, should always seek guidance from local authorities as this form of micro‐generation may be constrained on heritage or landscape grounds.

Macro-generation

The Trust welcomes proposals for more substantial, free-standing, solar arrays where these are consistent with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) for England - in particular the principle of net biodiversity gain as a result of sustainable development - and with the relevant local plan policies on nature.

For schemes above 1 hectare, the Trust will use a site-specific, criteria-based approach to determine our response. These criteria include requirements that:

* a sustainable net biodiversity gain would result from the project
* the solar / PV farm development(s) would not result in the degradation and/or loss of habitat of significant ecological value\* in itself and/or disruption, degradation or loss of part of the local ecological network and/or that network’s local and/or sub-regional functionality within *A Living Landscape*: ecological surveys and an environmental impact assessment will be required to determine or confirm/refute this;
* a full decommissioning programme is part of any consent and any net biodiversity gains would be maintained thereafter;
* proper consideration is given to grazing options and sward management of land beneath, between and around the PV arrays;
* improvement to boundary landscaping is incorporated, where required; and suitable management of the on-site and boundary vegetation (*e.g.* through mowing and/or grazing of livestock), and any surrounding habitat essential to maintenance of ecological function, is agreed and secured for a realistic period of time;
* a clear commitment is made to community gain: this may come in the form of free or discounted energy to a local public building/amenity, where applicable, and/or through the establishment of a suitable community fund so that the local residential/business community may also benefit from the proposal.

**Potential Conflicts**

As with most development, there is the potential for solar energy developments to impact negatively on our sub-region’s wildlife and wild places. This might be though impact of construction and/or operation and/or decommissioning on species populations and/or semi-natural habitats of significant nature conservation value and associated ecological networks. Examples would be through direct land take for panel-supporting posts; alterations in microclimate beneath the panels (light-levels, humidity and temperature); introduction of artificial lighting; erection of security-fencing, buildings, tracks and other infrastructure; alterations in hydrology; and altered perceptions of terrain by mobile species, particularly bats and birds.

**Potential Opportunities**

Net Biodiversity Gain

As with much development, there is the potential to secure a net biodiversity gain for our sub-region’s wildlife and wild places through development of solar panel arrays, particularly where these are proposed to be sited on land that has very little current value as wildlife habitat – most notably, on existing built structures and on land managed intensively for agriculture, market-gardening or horticulture. Across most of our counties’ lowland pastoral areas, creating or restoring semi-natural grasslands and hedgerows on the areas around the panels is likely to offer most benefits for plant and animal communities. Other possibilities would include creating ponds where the conditions are appropriate and planting wild bird seed mixtures for birds and nectar- and pollen-rich margins for bees, butterflies and other pollinating invertebrates. Such measures would offer more than local gain where they contributed to the integrity and functionality of part of a local ecological network.

Lancashire Wildlife Community Energy Company

The Trust believes in leading by example and would consider working with suitable partners through a registered company subsidiary to create a new community benefit society, social enterprise, limited company, mutual or cooperative. Renewable energy projects set up by such a body would need to benefit our counties’ and/or sea’s wildlife, generate significant community funds for the local environment.

\*For the purposes of this position statement, “significant ecological value” includes, but is not confined to, natural environment World Heritage Sites, Ramsar Sites, biological Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Local Wildlife Sites (*sensu* Defra and NPPF), Habitats & Species of Principal Importance in England (as defined bys41 of the Natural Environment & Rural Communities Act 2006); local Nature Improvement Areas (*sensu* HMG Natural Environment White Paper, Defra, and NPPF), and local ecological networks (*sensu* NPPF).

**References:**

*BRE National Planning Guidance: Biodiversity, November 2013*

*BRE National Solar Centre Biodiversity Guidance for Solar Developments*, Eds G E Parker and L Greene, April 2014: downloadable from [www.bre.co.uk/nsc](http://www.bre.co.uk/nsc).

*Solar parks: maximising environmental benefits* (TIN101), 1st edition, Natural England, 14th October 2011; downloadable from: <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/32027>

The Position Statement has been approved by Conservation Committee on 17th September 2014 and Trust Council on 9th October 2014.