

# GREEN ENERGY



## Policy Document for the Northumberland and Newcastle Society on Green Energy

### Position Statement

The Northumberland and Newcastle Society (N&N) is among the UK's oldest civic trusts, established in 1924 and dedicated to protecting and promoting this region's amazing built and natural heritage.

The Society recognises the urgent need to address the climate crisis and to transition to a low-carbon economy. The Society also values the distinctive landscapes and heritage of the region and seeks to ensure that any development is sensitive to its character and context.

Green energy refers to all energy sources that are an abundant and clean source of renewable energy that can help reduce greenhouse gas emissions and achieve net zero targets. However, green energy also poses some challenges and trade-offs, especially when it comes to projects such as large-scale ground-mounted solar farms or wind turbines that may have adverse impacts on the countryside, wildlife, food production and visual amenity.

The N&N believes that green energy should be harnessed in a way that maximises its benefits while minimising its costs, both for the environment and for the communities.

The N&N supports the development of green energy in accordance with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) 2021 in appropriate locations and scales, with due regard to the landscape, heritage, biodiversity and social impacts of each proposal.



## Policy statements

The N&N supports the following policy statements on green energy:

### **1. Rooftop solar should be prioritised over ground-mounted solar**

The N&N believes that rooftop solar should be prioritised over ground-mounted solar, as it can provide a significant amount of low-carbon electricity without impacting the countryside. The N&N supports CPRE's campaign for a rooftop revolution, which calls on the government to set a national rooftop solar target of at least 40GW by 2035, and to ensure that all suitable new buildings have rooftop solar as standard.

The N&N also supports CPRE's recommendations for updating planning regulations to require solar capacity as part of major refurbishments and new residential, commercial and industrial buildings. We welcome the provision of incentives and guidance for retrofitting existing buildings with rooftop solar.

The N&N believes that rooftop solar can offer multiple benefits for communities, such as reducing energy bills, creating local jobs, enhancing resilience and empowering citizens. The N&N encourages community-led initiatives that promote rooftop solar, such as community energy schemes, bulk-buying schemes, co-operatives and social enterprises.

### **2. Ground-mounted solar and land-based wind turbines should be located in appropriate sites and designed sensitively**

The N&N recognises that some ground-mounted solar and land-based wind turbines will still be needed to meet the national net zero targets, but they should be located in appropriate sites and designed sensitively to avoid or minimise negative impacts on the environment and communities.

The N&N supports the application of the following criteria for assessing ground-mounted solar and land-based wind turbine proposals, which include:

- Avoiding sites of high landscape, ecological or heritage value as well as those of high agricultural value or potential for nature recovery
- Avoiding sites that are visible from key viewpoints or public rights of way whilst also minimising visual intrusion by using appropriate screening, landscaping and colour schemes

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- Maximising biodiversity benefits by using native planting, creating habitats and allowing grazing
- Maximising social benefits by engaging with local communities, offering community ownership or benefit schemes, and providing educational opportunities
- The N&N also advocates that ground-mounted solar should not usually exceed 50MW in size or 25 hectares in area
- Not be located within designated areas such as National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Sites of Special Scientific Interest or Conservation Areas, within 2km of designated areas or within 500m of settlements, on BMV (best and most versatile) i.e. Grade 1 or 2 agricultural land or on land with high potential for nature restoration
- Should be accompanied by a Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment, an Ecological Impact Assessment and a Heritage Impact Assessment
- Demonstrate how it will enhance biodiversity, support local communities and contribute to local energy needs.

### **3. All development proposals for green energy installations must explicitly recognise the contribution of Areas of High Landscape Value (AHLV) to Northumberland's environment, economy and communities.**

The Northumberland Local Plan, Policy ENV 3 (Landscape), specifically requires proposals affecting the character of the landscape to conserve and enhance important elements of that character. Furthermore, design and access statements should refer, as appropriate, to the Northumberland Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) and other relevant studies, guidance or management plans. In January 2022 the N&N published the 'Northumberland Sandstone Ridges and Vale's' study commissioned through the respected Alison Farmer Associates' consultancy.

The Society fully endorses the findings of the Northumberland Sandstone Ridges and Vales study, which identifies the area as a distinctive and valued landscape that deserves recognition and protection.

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'Living with Beauty' expanded on this point through reference to the current inconsistent, environmentally flawed and illogical VAT taxation policy that actively favours demolition of structurally sound buildings over their renovation and reuse.

Innovative conservation incorporating good design and using quality materials may cost more in the short term but these costs are invariably insignificant in the real estate value of the completed building. An empathetic approach is much more likely to receive early planning approval and therefore reduce developers' submission costs where these often involve complex multiple revisions to inappropriate plans. There is a clear financial benefit to developers in getting an earlier return on their investment rather than having to maintain and fund vacant buildings during drawn out planning processes with uncertain outcomes.

The decline in the urban retail industry has and will continue to leave many character commercial buildings vacant thus presenting a generational opportunity to substantially alleviate housing shortages and in doing so reenergise city and town centres. There are many fine examples of innovative, sympathetic design being incorporated into existing vacant buildings where the outstanding original character architecture has been respected, protected and enhanced.

The Society's aim is to promote and embed the concept of 'Empathy Architecture' where good design that respects existing heritage architecture and the local environment is always a primary consideration in planning applications and a cornerstone of desirable urban planning and development.

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The report involved detailed local research and knowledge gathering to properly assess the landscape character, quality, sensitivity and capacity of the area, and proposes a boundary for an Area of High Landscape Value (AHLV) designation. It is evident this study should reasonably be considered a relevant study under Policy ENV 3 and thus be a material consideration in decision making, whether or not the Valued Landscape is recognised in local planning policy terms.

The N&N considers that the AHLV designation is compatible with the promotion of appropriate green energy development, as it does not preclude all forms of development, but rather requires a careful balance between conservation and change. The N&N believes that rooftop solar can be accommodated within the AHLV without compromising its character and quality, as long as it respects the scale, form, materials and colours of the existing buildings. The N&N also believes that ground-mounted solar and land-based wind turbines can be acceptable within the AHLV in some limited circumstances, providing they meets the criteria outlined above and do not adversely affect the key features and qualities of the landscape.

## Conclusion

The N&N supports green energy as a key component of the transition to a low-carbon economy, but it also advocates for a responsible and sensitive approach to its development. The N&N calls for a roof-first approach that utilises the potential of solar on existing buildings and car parks, while minimising the need for large-scale ground-mounted solar farms in the countryside. The N&N also calls for the recognition and protection of the Northumberland Sandstone Ridges and Vales as an Area of High Landscape Value, which has a distinctive and valued character and contributes to the identity and wellbeing of the region and should be recognised as such in all applications for green energy sites.

The N&N hopes that this policy document will inform and influence the planning policies and decisions of the local authorities, as well as the actions and views of other stakeholders, such as developers, landowners, communities and environmental groups. The N&N welcomes further dialogue and collaboration with all parties who share its vision for a sustainable and beautiful Northumberland and Newcastle.

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## References

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3. CPRE Rooftop Solar campaign: <https://www.cpre.org.uk/what-we-care-about/climate-change-and-energy/renewable-energy/our-rooftop-solar-campaign>
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7. Northumberland County Council planning comments on green energy applications: <https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/Planning/Planning-and-building.aspx>
8. Newcastle City Council guide to publicity and planning process: <https://www.newcastle.gov.uk/services/planning-building-and-development/guide-planning-applications/planning-applications-guide>
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10. Northumberland and Newcastle Society 'Empathy Architecture': <https://www.nandnsociety.org.uk/policy/empathy-architecture/>

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The Northumberland and Newcastle Society is a volunteer based civic society dating from 1924 to protect and enhance the landscape, culture and built environment of Northumberland and Newcastle for the enjoyment of this and future generations.

The N&N's Planning & Development Team sits monthly to consider planning applications relating to Conservation Areas and listed building consents within the City of Newcastle upon Tyne, North Tyneside and Northumberland.

To fulfill its objectives, the N&N has established committees made up of society members whom have extensive professional experience and or great passion in respect of the built and natural heritage of the area.

Find out more at: <https://www.nandnsociety.org.uk>