Melton Climate Change Study

Document E: Renewable Energy

Melton Borough Council

Final report

Prepared by LUC

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Chapter 1

Renewable energy

Introduction

1.1 The deployment of renewable energy is critical to achieving net zero. This chapter discusses the potential ways the Local Plan can help to increase the delivery of renewable energy across the Borough through stronger polices supporting:

- Onsite renewable and low carbon energy generation via supportive and positively worded criteria based policies;
- Stand-alone renewable and low carbon energy schemes, including specific policies on solar photo voltaic (PV) and wind energy identifying areas of suitability for these technologies and recognising that some landscape change will be required; and
- Community-led renewable and low carbon energy schemes.

1.2 This information is structured as follows:

- Local renewable energy context: the extent and type of existing renewable energy development that has come forward; and the renewable and low carbon technologies identified by the Renewable Energy Assessment (see Document F) as having the most significant technical potential in the borough
- National planning policy context: the key requirements of existing national planning policy and key changes proposed in the 30/7/24-24/9/24 consultation on proposed changes to the NPPF
- Local policy context: local objectives in relation to climate change mitigation.

- Local Plan policy: what does existing Local Plan policy say and how could this be improved to further support deployment of renewable energy, based on the requirements of national policy and the local context.

Supporting onsite and stand-alone renewable and low carbon energy generation

Context

Existing renewable energy development

1.3 Operational or consented renewable and low carbon energy installations in Melton borough are currently estimated to provide 88MW of electricity generation capacity, of which 90% is solar PV and 9% onshore wind. Most of the renewable and low carbon heat generation capacity in Melton borough is from non-domestic biomass systems (estimated 5MW installed capacity **[See reference** 1**]**).

Technical potential identified by the Renewable Energy Assessment

1.4 There is significant technical potential for additional renewable and low carbon energy generation within the Borough. The greatest technical potential is from ground-mounted solar PV with an estimated total capacity of 24,240 MW (approximately 76% of the technical potential for additional renewable and low carbon electricity capacity). Onshore wind also has significant technical potential with an estimated total capacity of 2,868 MW (approximately 21% of the technical potential for additional renewable and low carbon electricity

capacity). The technical potential energy output per year identified for renewable and low carbon heat (6% of total output) is much lower than for electricity (94% of total output). The largest technical potential heat output identified was from miscanthus energy crops, followed by air source heat pumps.

National planning policy context

1.5 Paragraph 160 of the NPPF includes the following:

> "To help increase the use and supply of renewable and low carbon energy and heat, plans should:
>
> a. provide a positive strategy for energy from these sources, that maximises the potential for suitable development, while ensuring that adverse impacts are addressed satisfactorily (including cumulative landscape and visual impacts);
>
> b. consider identifying suitable areas for renewable and low carbon energy sources, and supporting infrastructure, where this would help secure their development…"
>
> c. "…identify opportunities for development to draw its energy supply from decentralised, renewable or low carbon energy supply systems and for co-locating potential heat customers and suppliers."

1.6 Paragraph 163 of the NPPF includes the following:

> "When determining planning applications for renewable and low carbon development, local planning authorities should:

a.… recognise that even small-scale projects provide a valuable contribution to cutting greenhouse gas emissions…"

b.… approve the application if its impacts are (or can be made) acceptable. Once suitable areas for renewable and low carbon energy have been identified in plans, local planning authorities should expect subsequent applications for commercial scale projects outside these areas to demonstrate that the proposed location meets the criteria used in identifying suitable areas…"

1.7 Paragraph 164 of the NPPF includes the following:

"In determining planning applications, local planning authorities should give significant weight to the need to support energy efficiency and low carbon heating improvements to existing buildings, both domestic and non-domestic (including through installation of heat pumps and solar panels where these do not already benefit from permitted development rights)…"

Changes to national planning policy

1.8 A July 2024 Written Ministerial Statement stated the new Government's commitment to doubling onshore wind energy by 2030 and removed the de facto ban on onshore wind energy development in England that had been in place since 2015. It did this by deleting, with immediate effect, the requirements in footnotes 57 and 58 to NPPF paragraph 163. Footnote 58 previously stated that applications for wind energy development should not be considered acceptable unless they were both in an area identified as suitable in the development plan or an SPD and the proposal had community support.

1.9 The removal of footnotes 57 and 58 is confirmed in the proposed changes to the NPPF, along with proposed changes to paragraph 160(b) to set a stronger expectation that local plans identify areas suitable for renewable and low carbon development.

1.10 Proposed amendments to existing paragraph 163 of the NPPF direct decision makers to give significant weight to the benefits of renewable and low carbon energy generation, and proposals' contribution to meeting a net zero future in order to increase the likelihood of local planning authorities granting permission to renewable energy schemes and contribute to reaching zero carbon electricity generation by 2030.

Local context

Local climate change mitigation objectives

1.11 Subsequent to adoption of the current Local Plan (2018), MBC has made clear its commitment to climate change mitigation, including by:

- Declaring a climate emergency **[See reference 2]** with the aim of not only making Melton Borough Council activities carbon neutral by 2030 (as far as practical) but also promoting cutting of emissions within the wider Borough of Melton.
- Signing the Leicestershire Climate and Nature pact in 2023 **[See reference 3]**. In relation to climate change mitigation, this commits signatories to "the adoption of policies, to transition to net zero, including rapidly scaling up the deployment of clean power generation".
- Adopting a Climate Change Strategy (2024) that recognises the duty of the Borough "to do our part locally to work towards the UK's national and legally binding carbon reduction targets including reaching 'net zero' emissions by no later than 2050."

Local plan policy

Existing

1.12 Melton's adopted Local Plan Policy EN10 – Energy Generation from Renewable and Low Carbon Sources and covers both on-site and standalone energy development. The main components of this policy are:

- A statement that renewable and low carbon energy proposals appropriate for Melton borough will be supported, accompanies by example technologies (biomass power generation, combined heat and power (CHP), hydro, wind, solar and micro generation systems).
- A list of factors (1-14) that will be taken into account when considering all development proposals for renewable and low carbon energy generation.
- Four further factors (15-18) that will be taken into account only when considering proposals for wind energy development and an accompanying table setting out the scale of wind energy development that is acceptable in each landscape character area in the Borough, based on the findings of the Melton and Rushcliffe Landscape Sensitivity Study (2014).
- Local Plan Policy EN9 (ensuring energy efficient and low carbon development) provides some guidance for on-site renewables and de-centralised networks. It states that major development proposals will be required to demonstrate within the design and access statement how developments (dwellings and non-dwellings) have considered on-site renewable, low carbon or de-centralised energy provision, including connection to existing networks, where feasible, in accordance with Policy EN10.

Policy options

1.13 In addition to the current technology examples, MBC may wish to consider including support for zero carbon energy storage systems such as battery

storage and a presumption against fossil fuel powered plant. Proposals for this supporting infrastructure are increasingly common as they enable energy from intermittent renewable generation technologies such as solar and wind to be stored and then released when the power is needed most, helping to balance supply and demand in the grid without resort to fossil fuel fired balancing plant. An example policy is provided by the emerging policy CC2 Renewable Energy and supporting text in the recently consulted upon Local Plan by Cotswold District Council **[See reference** 4**]**.

1.14 The list of factors (1-14) in the existing policy EN10 relating to proposals for all types of renewable energy development is considered broadly appropriate. However, MBC may also want to consider the following:

- Not all of the factors are relevant to all types of renewables technology. The policy could make this clear when introducing the list. Although not essential, the policy could also be restructured and expanded to highlight factors likely to be of particular importance for the technologies with the greatest technical potential, i.e. ground-mounted solar PV and wind (see for example the Central Lincolnshire Local Plan **[See reference** 5**]**).
- In addition MBC could consider adding text that directs developers to identify opportunities to deliver additional environmental benefits beyond climate change mitigation by designing and managing renewable energy development sites to deliver multiple forms of ecosystems services (for related guidance **[See reference** 6**]**.
- Factor 2: Consider deleting the word ‘surrounding’ to make clear that the effects of development on landscape, townscape and heritage assets within site boundaries must also be considered.
- Factor 6: It is unclear why ancient woodland and veteran trees have been singled out; consider referring instead to ‘irreplaceable habitats’ for consistency with the terminology in footnote 7 and paragraph 186(c) of the NPPF.
- Factor 10: Consider referring to the ‘best and most versatile agricultural land’ rather than ‘high quality agricultural land’ for consistency with the terminology in the NPPF.

- Factor 13: These factors are likely to be covered by health and safety regulations; consider confirming this and deleting from the policy.

1.15 It is considered that factors 15, 16 and 18 relating to wind energy development should be amended or replaced as follows:

- Factor 15: It is recommended that the policy's decommissioning requirements are not limited to wind energy developments since other types of renewable infrastructure, notably ground-mounted solar PV are also relatively temporary in nature and can take up a large land area. The policy could, for example, state that decommissioning arrangements will be secured by condition where appropriate to the nature of the proposed scheme. Further advice and links to policy examples are provided in chapter 5 of Document F.
- Factors 16 and 18: Factors 16 and 18 are out of date as they reflect restrictions that were removed from the NPPF in July 2024 (see above). They should be reframed to reflect the need for community engagement and involvement in the scheme design.
- Factor 17 and the accompanying landscape sensitivity table restrict wind energy development to scales of development and to locations where sensitivity to this development is low or low-moderate. It is considered that this is unduly restrictive in light of national policy objectives on achieving net zero and doubling onshore wind development by 2030 and the local climate change mitigation objectives outlined above. Although relevant at the current time, it is recommended that the Landscape Sensitivity study (2014) should be updated to support the next review of the local plan. The text in Factor 17 should be amended to refer to the current landscape sensitivity study, so that reference to the 2014 study is not outdated.

1.16 The Local Plan identifies the areas of the Borough that are suitable in principle for wind energy development and for ground-mounted solar PV in the policies map, in line with the approach suggested in the NPPF (and required in the proposed changes to the NPPF).

1.17 The renewable energy policy states that wind energy and ground-mounted solar PV developments are more likely to be supported in the areas identified as suitable in principle but that proposals outside of these areas will also be considered where the suitability of the area is clearly justified. For example, areas may have technical constraints which may be overcome in the future as technologies develop.

1.18 Supporting text to the renewables policy explains that the location of a proposal for wind energy or ground-mounted solar PV within a 'suitable area', as identified in the policies map, does not preclude the need for a site-specific investigation of the proposed site in relation the criteria set out in the renewables policy. It should also explain that the Renewable Energy Assessment study deliberately drew areas of technical potential widely to avoid excluding areas that site-specific investigation might find to be suitable for development.

1.19 The assessment of technical potential includes agricultural land grades 1 and 2 as a constraint in line with the scope of the partial local plan update. Further site specific study would be required to identify grade 3a agricultural land, as a full-coverage national dataset is not available. There is a future need to undertake further study to create opportunity maps which combine the technical potential, updated landscape sensitivity and additional information on grade 3a agricultural land. The need to undertake a revised assessment should be included in the supporting text, which should require the use of the most up to date available renewables opportunity assessment for the Borough.

Evaluation

1.20 The recommended approach above requires site-specific investigation against a set of criteria that include landscape. Although now 10 years old, the Melton and Rushcliffe Landscape Sensitivity Study (2014) should continue to give a reasonable indication of the sensitivity of different landscape character areas within the Borough to wind energy development. The study shows that

almost all of the Borough has a 'high' sensitivity to large-scale turbines (111-150m high to tip).

1.21 There is a lack of evidence of what commercial schemes are likely to come forwards in England due to the de facto ban on onshore wind in England from 2015 to Jul 2024 created by national planning policy. Now that supportive national planning policy exists, it will be necessary to wait and see what proposals commercial developers bring forward, given the relatively low wind speeds in much of England, including Melton. However, experience elsewhere in the UK suggests that commercial developers are principally interested in large/ very large turbines to take advantage of the fact that wind speed increases with height above the ground.

1.22 If the significant technical potential of wind energy in the Borough is to be harnessed, it will therefore be necessary to accept that significant landscape and visual impacts are likely and to consider these against the climate change mitigation benefits in the planning balance. While the landscape and visual impact of commercial scale wind energy development in likely to be significant across most of the Borough, it would nevertheless be beneficial to direct such development to those parts of the Borough that are relatively less sensitive.

1.23 To support this approach, MBC may wish to update the 2014 Landscape Sensitivity Study and extend its scope beyond wind energy development to also assess ground-mounted solar PV at a range of scales. The policy could then also state that wind energy and ground-mounted solar developments PV are more likely to be supported if they fall within those landscape character areas within the Borough that have lower sensitivity to the relevant development type and scale relative to other character areas of the Borough. Site specific assessments (including landscape and visual impact and residential amenity assessments) would continue to be needed to verify the suitability of specific wind energy and ground-mounted solar PV development proposals in landscape terms.

Supporting community-led renewable and low carbon energy schemes

Context

1.24 Melton's Climate Change Strategy (2024) reports the findings of widescale public consultation with the local community on climate change. It confirms that the local community is very concerned about climate change and that it overwhelmingly supports tackling climate change locally, including by achieving net zero as soon as possible, with a strong desire for local councils and others to show local leadership and do more, faster.

National planning policy context

1.25 Paragraph 161 states that:

> "Local planning authorities should support community-led initiatives for renewable and low carbon energy, including developments outside areas identified in local plans or other strategic policies that are being taken forward through neighbourhood planning."
>
> Paragraph 163 of the NPPF includes the following:
>
> "When determining planning applications for renewable and low carbon development, local planning authorities should:
>
> … recognise that even small-scale projects provide a valuable contribution to cutting greenhouse gas emissions…".

1.26 Planning practice guidance advises that local planning authorities may wish to establish policies which give positive weight to renewable and low carbon energy initiatives which have clear evidence of local community involvement and leadership **[See reference 7]**.

Proposed changes to national planning policy

1.27 While the proposed NPPF reforms delete existing paragraph 161 (reproduced above), the requirement to recognise that even small-scale and community-led projects provide a valuable contribution to cutting greenhouse gas emissions remains.

Local plan policy

Existing

1.28 Policy EN10 – Energy Generation from Renewable and Low Carbon Sources states that "*Renewable and low carbon energy proposals which will directly benefit a local community in the medium and long term and/or are targeted at residents experiencing fuel poverty will be particularly supported*."

Policy options

1.29 As stated in Chapter 5 of Document F, Renewable Energy Assessment, the Local Plan could broaden its support for community renewable schemes by stating that MBC would actively support community renewable energy schemes which are led by or meet the needs of local communities.

Evaluation

1.30 Community-led schemes are distinct from developer-led ones that include some community benefits. Such developments would normally be conceived by and/or promoted within the community within which the renewable development will be undertaken, delivering economic, social and/or environmental benefits to the community. Neighbourhood plans provide a particular opportunity to define detailed local site allocation policies for renewable and low carbon technologies that are community-led.

1.31 In addition to the adopted BANES policy example provided in Chapter 5 of Document F, a further example is provided by the emerging policy CC2d Community Renewable Energy Schemes recently consulted upon by Cotswold District Council **[See reference 8]**.

References

1 Source Table 3.1 Document F: Renewable Energy Assessment

2 Melton Borough Council (2019) Declaration of a climate emergency. Available at: https://democracy.melton.gov.uk/mgAi.aspx?ID=3567

3 Leicestershire County Council (2024) Sign up to the Leicestershire Climate and Nature Pact. Available at: https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/environment-and-planning/net-zero/sign-up-to-the-leicestershire-climate-and-nature-pact

4 Cotswold District (2024) Local Plan Update Consultation Draft Policies. Available at: https://www.cotswold.gov.uk/media/ggrfzjwz/14-1-1c-local-plan-reg-18-consultation-draft-policies-accepted-changes-v2.pdf

5 Central Lincolnshire Local Plan (2023). Available at: https://www.n-kesteven.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2023-04/Local%20Plan%20for%20adoption%20Approved%20by%20Committee.pdf

6 Solar Energy UK (undated) Natural Capital Best Practice Guidance Increasing biodiversity at all stages of a solar farm's lifecycle. Available at: https://solarenergyuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Natural-Capital-Best-Practice-Guidance.pdf

7 MHCLG (2023) Guidance: Renewable and low carbon energy. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/renewable-and-low-carbon-energy

8 Cotswold District (2024) Local Plan Update Consultation Draft Policies. Available at: https://www.cotswold.gov.uk/media/ggrfzjwz/14-1-1c-local-plan-reg-18-consultation-draft-policies-accepted-changes-v2.pdf

Report produced by LUC

Bristol
12th Floor, Beacon Tower, Colston Street, Bristol BS1 4XE
0117 389 0700
bristol@landuse.co.uk

Cardiff
1.04, 1st Floor, Brunel House, 2 Fitzalan Rd, Cardiff CF24 0EB
0292 254 0920
cardiff@landuse.co.uk

Edinburgh
Atholl Exchange, 6 Canning Street, Edinburgh EH3 8EG
0131 326 0900
edinburgh@landuse.co.uk

Glasgow
37 Otago Street, Glasgow G12 8JJ
0141 403 0900
glasgow@landuse.co.uk

London
250 Waterloo Road, London SE1 8RD
020 7199 5801
london@landuse.co.uk

Manchester
4th Floor, 57 Hilton Street, Manchester M1 2EJ
0161 802 2800
manchester@landuse.co.uk

Sheffield
32 Eyre Street, Sheffield, S1 4QZ
0114 392 2366
sheffield@landuse.co.uk

landuse.co.uk