



Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland

National Energy Research, Development & Demonstration Funding Programme

FINAL REPORT TEMPLATE

SECTION 1: PROJECT DETAILS – FOR PUBLICATION

Project Title	Planning and Environmental Best Practice for Large Scale Solar Energy Development in Ireland
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	Name	Organisation
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Collaborators		

Project Summary (max 500 words)

The goal of this project is to develop a 'Best Practice Guidance Report' for the planning of the solar energy developments in Ireland. The report is aimed to benefit communities, developers who seek to develop and engage with renewable energy as well as Local Authority officials who assess such applications within the planning system. This project and report aims to respond to gaps in existing planning policy in relation to the development and deployment of solar technologies in large schemes throughout Ireland. Through public consultation with various stakeholders across Ireland, best practice recommendations were identified and discussed throughout the guidance report alongside expert advice and insight from various planners and engineers.

The report itself outlines various considerations relevant to solar farms and discusses such pre-planning considerations in detail offering guidance on the best approach and practices. The primary and secondary planning application documents required for such applications is outlined within the report alongside advice and guidance on the detail and content of such documents which are required in order to submit and assess robust planning applications for large scale solar energy developments.

In addition to this, the guidance report outlines the main key consenting considerations delivering best practice guidance on site, selection, glint and glare, landscape impacts, visual impacts, ecology, drainage, archaeology, access, noise, duration of permission and decommissioning.

It is intended that by analysing the issues which beset planning since the inception of solar in Ireland this guidance report will identify the key issues which have been encountered by both Applicants and Local Authorities and help to provide a consistent approach in the planning and development of commercial scale ground mounted solar developments in Ireland.

Keywords (min 3 and max 10)

Planning, Environmental, Solar, Guidance, Policy, Best Practice.

NB – Both Section 1 and Section 2 of this Final Report will be made publicly available in a Final Technical Report uploaded online to the [National Energy Research Database](#).

In the following Section, please provide a clear overview of your project, including details of the key findings, outcomes and recommendations. The section headings below are provided as a guide, please update or add to these as best suits your project.

By submitting this project report to SEAI, you confirm you are happy for Section 1 and Section 2 of this report to be made publicly available. If you wish to request edits to this section in advance of publication, please contact SEAI at EnergyResearch@seai.ie.

SECTION 2: FINAL TECHNICAL REPORT – FOR PUBLICATION

(max 10 pages)

2.1 Executive Summary

This 'Best Practice Guidance Report' aims to inform Stakeholders in outlining what a 'Good' solar farm design is and the criteria and considerations for the respective planning application for such a development. This guidance report also aim to provide clarity and encourage a consistent approach for planning applications relating to solar farms. This research and report will complement and work in tandem with the existing national, regional, and local policies and objectives.

2.2 Introduction to Project

This Best Practice Guidance Report has been prepared by Fehily Timoney and Company (FT) and the Irish Solar Energy Association (ISEA) to assist potential developers, stakeholders and Local Authorities in site selection, preparation of applications for planning consent and considerations relating to construction, associated infrastructure and operational procedures from a planning and environmental perspective. This report will also benefit local communities concerning any solar farm projects that are proposed in their areas by providing practical planning advice regarding how large solar farms are developed as well as setting out planning considerations, statutory requirements and relevant international experiences with solar farms.

2.3 Project Objectives

The main objective of this project is to deliver a single document which provides valuable insight on the application process of large scale ground-mounted solar farms. The Best Practice Guidance Report aims to act as a key point of reference in outlining the criteria and considerations for the respective planning application for such a development as well as offer recommendations based on best practices to ensure a consistent approach for planning applications relating to solar farms.

2.4 Summary of Key Findings/Outcomes

This project has furthered the current knowledge of large scale ground-mounted solar farm applications by outlining the ongoing trends and practices in Ireland relating to solar farm applications and identifying the challenges and restraints in local, regional and national planning policies.

The research conducted for this project explored the scale and extent of solar energy in Ireland alongside the previous decisions and example applications of solar farms throughout Ireland. This data allowed the project to identify areas of concerns and appropriate address the key criteria and considerations of solar farm planning applications.

An in depth policy analysis on the European, National, Regional and Local policies which shape the current approaches to solar energy in Ireland allowed for key recommendations and best practice guidelines to form.

The Best Practice Guidance Report offers a specific tailored made best practice document for Local Authorities, Policy makers and potential Applicants to utilise when preparing and assessing solar farm applications. This document aims to temporarily fill the gap in knowledge and understanding surrounding solar farm polices in Ireland.

- *Innovation 1: Guidance towards consistent approaches*

This Best Practice Guidance Document offers key considerations, recommendations and guidance for both Applicants and Local Authority members when assessing and preparing planning applications to ensure a consisted and robust approach is maintained

- *Innovation 2: Need for specific policies and*

This Best Practice Guidance Document can be used as base in the creation of formal policies relating to solar energy in Ireland at a National, Regional and Local level.

2.5 Project Impact

The Best Practice Guidance Report has been developed with consideration given to various national policies, including:

- Project Ireland 2030 National Planning Framework,
- Project Ireland 2040: National Development Plan 2021-2030 and the
- Climate Action Plan 2023.

In addition to the national policy documents considered, the Best Practice Guidance Report has also had regard to existing guidance on Appropriate Assessment (AA) and Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) outlined in various published guidance documents. Of particular note the 'Guidelines on the information to be contained in Environmental Impact Assessment Reports' published by Environmental Protection Agency in 2022 and the 'Practice Note PN01 Appropriate Assessment Screening for Development Management' published by the Office of the Planning Regulator in 2021. These guidance documents aid in the understanding of guidance and national policies relating to AA and EIA.

From this detailed consideration on existing policies the Best Practice Guidance Report outlines robust recommendations and guidelines on relevant considerations and topics surrounding solar farm applications and developments.

This project and the creation of the Best Practice Guidance Report will have economic and practical impacts to the Irish Planning Systems surrounding solar farms and solar energy. In outlining the constraints and recommending a consistent approach associated with such planning applications, planning applications for solar farm developments will not experience the level of restraint and subjective restrictions as that which has been previously imposed on such applications. This may help provide a greater quality of planning applications for solar energy development throughout Ireland on appropriate sites and thus help in achieve the European and Nationally set renewable energy targets.

2.6 Recommendations

It is highly recommended that policy makers, Local Authorities and potential Applicants utilised the information, guidance and data outlined in this project report to throughout the entirety of the planning application process for solar farm developments.

It is intended that policy makers at a Local, Regional and National level can utilise the distinct criteria and recommendations outlined throughout the Best Practice Guidance Report when compiling and drafting future policies surrounding solar energy developments.

2.7 Conclusions and Next Steps

The next steps for this project is for the publication of the Best Practice Guidance Report. The report is set to be published at the ISEA Solar Conference scheduled for 22nd November 2023. The Guidance Report is a useful tool for the relevant Local Authorities, policy makers, Applicants and Developers in formulating a consistent approach with regards to planning. The report will be made available on the ISEA website and will be published alongside press releases by ISEA.

It is also intended for policy makers at Local, Regional and National levels to incorporate the findings and recommendations within the report into future policies and ensure the principles of the best practices within the report are ratified and solidified into Irish Planning Policy.