Solar farm planning requires clear guidelines

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Ireland has pushed ahead with large solar farms while leaving important parts of the national planning framework unfinished.

On September 16, housing minister James Browne confirmed that Ireland still had no specific national planning guidelines for solar development and that a national planning statement was being prepared.

General planning law, environmental protections, and county development plans still apply. But the Government has set ambitious targets without first completing the dedicated national guidance for deciding where these developments belong and how they should be assessed.

Into that gap comes a best-practice guide prepared by the Irish Solar Energy Association and engineering consultants Fehily Timoney.

Guidelines only, from the industry itself.

The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) helped fund it, and public bodies were consulted. Nevertheless, it remains industry-produced guidance rather than binding government planning standards.

The State should take responsibility for setting the standards against which the industry's applications are judged.

There is also a strategic problem. A national electricity target does not tell us how much development a particular rural area can reasonably accommodate.

Several projects concentrated around the same grid connection raise different questions from the same acreage spread across the country.

We need consistent decisions about productive farmland, water, landscape, nearby communities and the combined effects of neighbouring developments.

An Taisce raised this planning gap with the Oireachtas in November 2025, reporting that many counties lacked designated areas for solar development and that those with designations appeared to use different criteria.

And here we are, almost one year later, still waiting for the national guidance.

Other EU countries offer concrete examples we could learn from.

The Netherlands puts panels on buildings ahead of agricultural and nature land in its national preference hierarchy. Its regional energy strategies consider where, when, and how much renewable generation to develop, taking grid capacity into account.

France has specific legal rules for projects combining farming and solar generation. For crop-based projects in that category, the normal rule requires average yields above 90% of a comparable reference without panels, subject to specified exceptions. That makes the claim that farming will continue something that can actually be measured and checked.

Our electricity infrastructure is a significant issue too. The system already cannot handle all the renewable generation available to it.

EirGrid reported that 11.2% of available renewable generation was turned down in the first half of 2026. It identifies grid constraints, system-security requirements, and surplus generation as reasons.

That is wasted potential.

There are grid upgrades underway. But the Government is pushing ahead with more generation while the infrastructure needed to use it is still catching up.

Surely you make sure your infrastructure can handle what you want to produce before you create more waste?

Then there is community engagement.

In our community in Lackagh, Co Galway, we had no meaningful opportunity to influence the Blackthorn Solar Farm plans before submission.

The developer held an information evening on a Wednesday. By the following Friday morning, the site notices were up. What opportunity did that give residents to raise concerns and have them properly considered before the application went in?

Albert Dolan raised our community's experience in the Dáil on September 30 and called for clear solar planning guidelines. We now have five weeks to work through the application, understand the technical reports, and prepare our submissions.

Ireland has introduced faster permitting under the EU's RED III directive. Yet the ordinary five-week submission window remains for applications like ours.

The regulations did not introduce a general minimum period for developers to consult neighbours before submission.

These developments can remain for decades. It is absolutely shocking that communities can receive so little meaningful engagement beforehand.

We need clear national requirements. Developers should demonstrate that construction traffic can safely pass schools, that drainage will work in the actual ground conditions, and that they have properly assessed glare and effects on water and wildlife.

They should explain the impact on existing farming and secure restoration when the development ends.

And they should engage with communities early enough for local knowledge and concerns to influence the plans; that should be a basic expectation.

The Government needs to finish the rules, co-ordinate the infrastructure, and require meaningful community engagement before applications go in.

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