

Issues and Options Paper

Renewable Energy Policy

September 2025

Contents

Background

Planning Policy Framework

Issues and Options

- Environmental impact
- Landscape and visual impact
- Noise
- Heritage
- Land Use
- Construction
- Decommissioning
- Community benefit sharing
- Community engagement



Background

Transforming our energy systems

The State Government has made significant commitments to reduce carbon emissions and address the impacts of climate change. A key part of this is the rapid transformation of the State's electricity generation, energy storage, and transmission infrastructure. Meeting these commitments will require embracing renewable energy and transforming the State's electricity generation, energy storage, and transmission infrastructure to make it future-ready.

The State government has previously announced plans to retire its state-owned coal-fired power stations by 2030 and replace them with renewable electricity generation and storage. The Commonwealth has also set a target of 82% renewable energy by the end of the decade.

Western Australia is fortunate to have some of the best renewable energy resources in the world, vast areas rich in solar and wind power that can generate low-emissions electricity at scale. Renewables are currently being deployed across Australia at record rates as ageing coal power stations exit the system. Planning systems are still catching up with the rapid transformation.



Purpose of consultation

The Shire is asking the community for feedback on the development of a renewable energy facility local planning policy. This would help decision making until the WA state government establish a state-wide policy to guide the development of large-scale facilities.

This is a preliminary step to find out if a local policy is needed and understand the community's thoughts about how it should be shaped, with a draft policy potentially going out for public consultation later this year.

The paper outlines the issues that could be addressed and provides some example options for how these issues could be dealt with.

The Shire anticipates receiving a development application for a large-scale wind farm in 2025. If this is received, it will be consulted on separately.

The role of local government in assessing renewable energy proposals

There are three development assessment pathways available for large renewable energy projects:

1. Development assessment by the local government and decision made by officers or council.
2. Regional Development Assessment Panel (DAP): opt in pathway for developments over $2 million. Assessment by local government officers and decision made by an independent panel including council representatives. Recent changes to the DAP process mean that applications can no longer be brought before council for recommendation to the DAP.
3. State significant development pathway: assessment is carried out by the Western Australian Planning Commission (WAPC) with the Shire as a referral body only.

Due to the high development costs of significant renewable projects, they are generally assessed through the DAP or State significant development pathways.

A local planning policy will be relevant to any of these decisions.





Planning Policy Framework



State planning framework

State Planning Policy

State planning policies guide the planning assessment. The WA state government is now developing a state planning instrument for large scale renewable energy developments. However, it is not expected to come into effect until 2026.

The Department of Planning Lands and Heritage (DLPH) currently has in place a Position Statement: Renewable Energy Facilities (March 2020) which provides some guidance for assessment, but does not hold the same weight as a policy. Many local governments have developed local planning policies to fill this gap in the planning framework. Examples include Shire's of Narrogin, West Arthur, Dandaragan and Carnamah.

Other legislation

In addition to the Planning and Development Act 2005 (WA), developments will also need to comply with all relevant legislation, such as the:

- Environmental Protection Act 1986 (WA)
- Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016 (WA)
- Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999

Projects with significant environmental impacts may be referred to the to the state Environmental Protection Agency to consider whether formal Environmental Impact Assessment is required.

Local planning framework

Shire's Local Planning Strategy

Provides for landscape protection along the Leeuwin Naturaliste Ridge and visual management controls over areas of landscape significance.

Shire's Local Planning Scheme

The Shire's Local Planning Scheme No.1 and Draft Planning Scheme No.2 allows for renewable energy to be developed in the rural zone but has no specific provisions. If a Development Application was to be submitted in the current framework, it would be assessed against objectives of the agriculture zone and the deemed provisions.

In general, the zone's objectives aim to protect agricultural use, avoid incompatible development and retain landscape values and rural amenity.

The deemed provisions are standard planning considerations, such as the impact of the development on the community as a whole, environmental and social impacts, impacts on the character of the locality, and the suitability of the land for development

Shire's Local Planning Policy LPP23

The Shire has an existing Local Planning Policy 23 – Renewable Energy Facilities. This focuses on acceptable development requirements and exemptions for small-scale renewable energy systems. It provides little guidance for large scale renewable energy.

The Shire has the ability to update the local planning policy to guide the development of large-scale renewable energy.





Issues and Options

Summary of Issues and Options

The following issues are relevant considerations for a Local Planning Policy (LPP):

- Environmental impact
- Landscape and visual impact
- Noise
- Heritage
- Land use compatibility
- Construction
- Decommissioning

Additional considerations that may fall outside an LPP

- Community consultation
- Community benefits



Environmental Impact

While there are broader environmental benefits from renewable energy in the reduction of emissions, it is important that local environmental impacts are mitigated. An environmental impact assessment will be required for any large-scale proposal or proposals likely to have a significant environmental impact.

Environmental impacts of a renewable energy proposal may include:

- Clearing of native vegetation for infrastructure, access roads, construction, transport routes, transmission and substations
- Impacts on sensitive sites, rare and endangered flora or threatened ecological communities (TECs)
- Impacts on fauna, in particular birds and bats
- Risk from acid sulphate soils*
- Spread of dieback and weeds
- Erosion and sedimentation
- Ground water and surface water flows

The clearing of native vegetation can be assessed under the Shire's local planning scheme which helps to ensure any adverse environmental, amenity or landscape impacts are avoided.

The Department of Water and Environmental Regulation (DWER) will assess environmental impacts under the Environmental Protection Act 1987 (WA). This includes native vegetation clearing, ground water and surface water impacts, acid sulphate soils, erosion and sedimentation.

The Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) assesses impacts on fauna and flora and provides advice on dieback management under the Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016 (WA).

A proposal will be referred for assessment under the federal Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 if endangered species or TEC's may be impacted. The proponent will need to demonstrate that they are complying with all relevant legislation.

Any proposal that is submitted to the Shire will be referred to DBCA and DWER for comment which the Shire must consider in its assessment.

What are acid sulphate soils?
Acid sulphate soils occur in wetter areas and contain iron sulphides that, when exposed to air, produce sulfuric acid. This acidity can harm plants, soil health, and water quality. Acid sulphate soils can be managed by minimising disturbance and treatment with lime.

Options

- Rely on current process of Shire's planning scheme and referral to DBCA and DWER to assess environmental impacts.
- Advocate through policy for renewable energy to be located to minimise environmental impacts (such as avoiding native vegetation clearing)
- Advocate through policy for more prescriptive requirements (such as compensating for the loss of vegetation or rehabilitation of clearings).

Landscape and Visual Impact

Impacts on visual amenity are perception based, with a wide variety of perspectives on the landscape impacts of renewable energy projects. A landscape and visual impact assessment is to be carried out by qualified professionals and submitted as part of an application.

Landscape

Landscape character is an area's cumulative built, natural and cultural character or sense of place, and is generally characterised as natural or rural landscape values.

The Shire's Local Planning Strategy and a State Planning Policy set out areas of landscape significance along the Leeuwin Naturaliste Ridge and outlines visual management controls for landscape protection. Having areas of landscape significance helps determine more suitable locations for larger projects. Under the Shire's current framework, no large developments would be permitted along the ridge.

Proposals in WA are to required to follow Visual Landscape Planning in WA guidelines as part of the impact assessment.

Options

- Rely on current standards for dealing with visual impacts in renewable energy developments – including existing distances from developments.
- Advocate through policy for different distances from a property boundary depending on the scale of the project.
- Advocate through policy to manage visual impact such as design and landscaping (eg. spacing, vegetation buffers, uniformity of colours)

Visual Impact

Visual impact is the day-to-day effects of a project on people's views. It includes assessment from public and private viewpoints and takes into account the duration from the viewpoint and other landscape features which may background a proposal.

Most renewable energy planning policies define setbacks from dwellings. For example, it is common for wind turbines to be setback at least 1.5km from dwellings. This reflects the state position statement on renewable energy facilities and addresses other amenity-based issues such as noise.

It is also common in local planning policies for setbacks from property boundaries to be prescribed depending on the scale of the project. For example, 3 times the height of a wind turbine.

Vegetated buffers are regularly used to manage visual impacts. For windfarms, additional measures can include:

- Careful spacing of turbines
- Blades that rotate in the same direction
- Uniformity of colour and design
- Matt finish to blades

Noise

It is necessary to balance the advantages of a renewable energy development with protecting the surrounding community from adverse noise impacts.

In WA, projects with potential noise impacts are required to carry out a noise assessment to show compliance with the WA Environmental Protection Authority noise regulations which have 45dB daytime and 35dB nighttime noise thresholds. Examples of common noise levels include leaves rustling 20dB; quiet library 40dB; dishwasher 60dB

The state government position statement recommends a wind turbine to be setback 1.5km to dwellings for noise. As a rough rule of thumb, a 40 dB(A) noise contour should be just less than about one kilometre from the turbine(s), whereas a 35 dB(A) noise contour is typically less than 1.5 km from turbines, although these distances can vary with topography and terrain.

Host or neighbouring landowners may enter into an agreement which allows the recommended noise levels to be exceeded. Outside of this, if any future dwelling was to be developed then the requirements of the noise regulations would still apply and not be able to be exceeded.

Proposals will need to include a noise assessment and a noise management plan that includes the construction phase as well as ongoing monitoring.

Options

- Rely on current WA EPA guidelines which require a maximum 35dB nighttime noise at dwellings
- Rely on a State Government position of having a minimum distance to dwellings of
- Create a new requirement for noise

Heritage

Large-scale proposals must consider heritage values to protect the region's unique cultural, historical, and Indigenous assets. The key legislative and planning requirements include compliance with the Heritage Act 2018 (WA), the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act 1972 (as amended).

This legislation requires developers to engage with traditional owners and undertake an Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Survey to identify and mitigate any impacts on Indigenous cultural heritage.

The Shire's planning scheme requires that cultural and built heritage be considered as part of a planning assessment. Any impact on local and state listed heritage properties should be identified and addressed through a heritage impact assessment.

Options

- Rely on planning scheme and current State Government requirements to assess heritage impacts of any developments.
- Create additional requirements to address heritage impacts.



Land use compatibility

The Shire's planning scheme is in place to assess the compatibility between different land uses.

Large renewable energy projects are generally developed on agricultural land as it is already cleared and minimises the environmental impact. The objectives of the agricultural zone in the scheme aim to maintain the productive use of the agricultural land and will apply in the assessment of projects.

Large renewable energy projects can be designed to compliment existing agricultural uses. Such as maintaining grazing in and around projects. There may be opportunities in a policy to ensure that project design supports continued use of the land for agriculture.

Other renewable energy planning policies also may include minimum setbacks to residential areas. Commonly this is set at 2km.



Options

- Rely on planning scheme to assess land use compatibility
- Advocate through policy to minimise impact on agricultural use
- Advocate through policy for distances residential areas

Construction

The construction phase of a large renewable energy project can have a greater impact on the immediate community and should form a key part of an environmental impact assessment. A construction management plan is required for any major works.

There are many aspects of the construction phase, which includes

- Road transport routes and vehicle access
- Management of construction noise and dust
- Minimising site disturbance
- Transmission lines
- Worker's accommodation

The DPLH Position Statement provides guidance on key matters that should be addressed in the construction phase

Options

- Rely on current industry best practice for construction and decommissioning.
- Advocate through policy industry best practice at the time of decommissioning
- Advocate through policy for decommissioning plan to incorporate life cycle assessment and sustainable reuse of structures and footings

Decommissioning

As renewable energy installations near their end of life they can be either:

- Refurbished – replacing key components to keep it operating for longer
- Repowered – replacing with newer technology in the existing location, or
- Decommissioned – dismantled and removed from site followed by rehabilitation of the site

At least 95% of solar panels, 95% battery storage systems and 90% of wind turbines can be recycled or reused at the end of their life.

Landholder agreement conditions play a critical role in ensuring landholders are not left with abandoned infrastructure, degraded land or unexpected asset removal costs.

Re-alliance have developed a useful toolkit: 'Refurbishment, repowering or retirement. What happens when renewables approach end of life?' It provides clear, factual information to help landholders, communities and local governments understand what happens when renewable energy projects reach retirement age.

Planning decisions will need to address this phase of the project to ensure changes to the systems reflect best practice at that time and that infrastructure is not abandoned. A decommissioning plan would need to be provided as part of any proposal.

Community benefits & engagement

Community engagement and benefits typically fall outside a local planning policy. However, they can be referred to in a policy to set expectations for future developers.

Community benefit funds

As the renewable energy industry matures, community benefit sharing is becoming increasingly commonplace as a means to integrate renewable energy developments into local communities in ways that are positive and rewarding for residents.

The concept of benefit sharing is based on acknowledging that renewable energy infrastructure – especially when it is large scale – results in changes in the local landscape. Sharing the financial and other benefits of a project enhances the social and economic outcomes for the local community, thereby making the change worthwhile.

For wind energy projects, the level of funding given to benefit sharing programs has historically ranged from $500–$1500 per MW of installed capacity per year for large-scale commercial wind farms. The forms of community benefit funds vary. They can include developer or community led grant funds, local government managed funds for grants or strategic projects, as well as use of local contractors, energy efficiency and education programs, contributions to local infrastructure, revegetation and local partnerships.

Powering WA have recently developed the Draft Guideline on Community Benefits for renewable energy projects: Consultation paper (July 2025) which provides some guidance.

Community engagement

It is generally accepted by developers that gaining support at the local level results in better outcomes for the community and helps support the ongoing viability of the renewable energy industry. It is expected that developers will carry out pre-consultation prior to submission of a development application.

The WALGA guide on community engagement (2025) provides guidance for local governments and helps set expectations for the level of consultation carried out by developer.

Th Shire is required to carry out its own community consultation as part of the planning assessment process.