



The countryside charity  
Cambridgeshire  
and Peterborough

### **Agricultural Land Classification: we need to dig deeper to value our farmland**

As we've discussed before (<https://www.cprecambs.org.uk/cpre-news/2023/08/23/building-on-our-food-security/>), our agricultural land is divided into five Grades (Grade 3 is divided into subgrades 3a and 3b) according to the Agricultural Land Classification (ALC). The ALC defines the "best and most versatile" (BMV) land as Grades 1, 2 and 3a. This is the land which is "most flexible, productive and efficient in response to inputs and which can best deliver future crops for food and non-food uses such as biomass, fibres and pharmaceuticals" (Natural England <https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/35012?category=9001> ).

As can be seen from the Agricultural Land Classification Map for England, (Natural England <https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/6172638548328448> ), a high proportion of Grade 1 and Grade 2 agricultural land – the "best and most versatile" - is in Cambridgeshire. In fact, the East of England has more Grade 1 and Grade 2 land than any other region in England. However, The East of England has lost 3,232 ha of BMV land since 2010 – the greatest absolute loss within a single region.

CPRE Cambridgeshire and Peterborough is concerned that these classifications give developers a green light to build on land that is deemed to be of poorer quality – Grade 3b, described as "moderate" and Grade 4, described as "poor". But it is not as straightforward as that, and we feel that it is important to look at the overall use and value of our agricultural land and not just the ALC Grade. For example, we examined - and objected to - the proposed Sunnica East and West 500MW Solar Energy Farm, which would be located across three sites in East Cambridgeshire and West Suffolk including Isleham, Chippenham and Kennett. We found that some of the land, despite being classed as Grade 4, poor quality sandy soil, was very good for growing root vegetable crops.

In our objection letter we said: "Examination of the Agricultural Land Classification map Eastern Region (ALC008) <https://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/127056> shows that the majority of the land in Cambridgeshire to be affected by this proposal is in Grades 2 and 3. Unfortunately Grade 3 is not subdivided in this map. However, this is all good growing land and the poorer land in Suffolk is particularly prized for root vegetable production, such as carrots. In a country which imports over 60% of its food supply, taking an area of around 2,800 acres of productive land out of use is not in the national interest or in the interest of the environment. It will probably cause more food miles and greenhouse gas generation than it will save". With regard to solar farms in particular we feel that there

should be an urgent change of national policy: there are thousands of acres of space on the roofs of warehouses, factories, office blocks and other industrial buildings in this country. It should be mandated that these are fitted with solar panels and any further take-up of agricultural land should be halted.

The government's own Food Strategy

([https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1082026/government-food-strategy.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1082026/government-food-strategy.pdf) (June 2022)) notes the "crucial importance of UK food producers to our national resilience" and one of its objectives is to ensure "security and sustainability of food supply in an unpredictable world". It notes that although we produce around 60% of the food we need, food shortages and supply issues can lead to price increases. We've reported on the impact of the cost-of-living crisis in rural areas <https://www.cpre.org.uk/opinions/the-high-cost-of-country-living/>.

The House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee (EAC) report "Sustainable Development Goals in the UK follow up: Hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity in the UK" <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmenvaud/1491/1491.pdf> was published in January 2019. This identified a Sustainable Development Goal: "By 2030, ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, that help maintain ecosystems, that strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding and other disasters and that progressively improve land and soil quality".

As noted in the EAC report above, climate change will have an impact on food production and supply. Indeed, in winter 2022/23 we saw food shortages as a result of extreme weather events and this will be a continuing concern. Flooding as a result of climate change poses a further risk, with almost 60% of England's most productive Grade 1 land already sitting in the Environment Agency's Flood Zone 3. It should be noted that Grade 1 land is mostly peat-based soils such as the Fens, Humber estuary and Somerset Levels and therefore very much at increasing flood risk due to rising sea levels.

At a time when food security is an issue of increasing concern we consider that allowing development on land that has agricultural value, regardless of its classification, is short-sighted and reckless.