

Oral evidence given by myself at Gate Burton Energy hearing on sessions of 22 and 23 August 2023

1. Cumulative Adverse Effect on the landscape character and visual amenity

1.1 The Examining Authority and Planning Inspectorate is clearly aware of the other nationally significant infrastructure projects that are being proposed for West Lindsey, as well as others in and around the county of Lincolnshire.

1.2 The Planning Inspectorate, for expediency in administration, has facilitated meetings with the companies behind these projects, including meetings where representatives from all four applicants have been present.

1.3 Pinsent Masons is representing all four applicants. It has worked hard to ensure that all applicants work collaboratively where possible, the rationale 'to ensure the responses are aligned, the same information is submitted into each examination and the risk for inconsistency is reduced'.

1.4 This applicant has worked with the other proposed solar projects to coordinate work in such areas as construction phasing, grid connections and start of operation. When registering as an interested party part of the rationale was "the commonality of certain stakeholders and the potential for similar or cumulative environmental effects and coordination of mitigation measures"

1.5 There is a clear interrelationship with the other National Infrastructure Projects. However, all four proposals are to be examined by a different Examining Authority, who will only have responsibility for examining their own case. The ExA must consider whether the impacts of development (including construction and operation) on the local community and environment, outweigh the national need for it and any other benefits before making a recommendation to the Secretary of State.

1.6 In isolation, all of these projects may meet this requirement. However, should the proposals be given the green light this would result in many thousands of acres of agricultural and recreational land in West Lindsey being covered in millions of solar panels, the construction of BESS and the reconfiguration of a landscape for at least 40 years. Reference has probably been made to the combined areas being the largest solar farm in Europe.

1.7 My objection is that the clear interrelationship between these projects and the cumulative impact of them all is not being considered as a whole. Should these solar projects be approved, this would not simply be a case of the West-Lindsey area of Lincolnshire 'taking one for the team', but apparently becoming the solar farm 'face' of the UK. In a representation produced by Solar Media Ltd (2022) entitled The UK solar (Non-LPA) site capacity under development, it shows of the planned 17 GWp-dc capacity by region, the East Midland has 5.3 GW. This is the biggest capacity hosted by any region in the United Kingdom. Much of this would seem to be in Lincolnshire. I believe this is a disproportionate burden the communities of West Lindsey would have to bear.

1.8 Lincolnshire County Council in an initial response state 'By reason of its mass and scale, the proposed development would lead to significant adverse effects upon landscape character and visual amenity. The development has the potential to transform the local landscape by altering the character on a large scale...'. LCC also expresses concerns about the impact on views within a rural landscape.

1.9 I believe that this proposal in conjunction with the other projects, would result in the industrialization of this rural landscape. The wide, open spaces of this particular location, enjoyed by myself, other residents and visitors to the area, would be lost to a sea of panels for 40+ years; hedging that over the years would be allowed to grow to over 3.5 metres (to provide screening); fencing around areas that would cut off access to wildlife and restrict their movement; significant impact on views from the A1500 and B1398 Cliff Road, (an Area of Great Landscape Value). I have travelled the Cliff Road for many years and it is genuinely uplifting to be able to look out across the valley and see the landscape and skyline rolling away before you.

1.10 The Planning Practice Guidance³ (PPG) at paragraph 005 states that, "Green infrastructure is a natural capital asset that provides multiple benefits, at a range of scales. For communities, these benefits can include enhanced wellbeing, outdoor recreation and access, enhanced biodiversity and landscapes, food and energy production, urban cooling, and the management of flood risk." This natural asset we have and the benefits it brings will not be enhanced by a significant period of construction and millions of solar panels.

1.11 The applicant acknowledged that the cumulative impact with the other projects would be significant but overall, it would be 'moderate'. It suggested that many of their mitigation measures will be beneficial; the planting of more trees and joining up areas in the landscape. I disagree with this and believe that thousands of solar panels will not enhance the views. There will be very limited mitigation where newly planted trees and shrubs have to grow for 15+ years before becoming mature to screen the panels. In addition, there was reference to 'glimpses' through the hedges and trees still being present as they are now. My observation is that the 'glimpses' we enjoy now, of hares in fields or deer grazing for example, are not a good swap for a bunch of solar panels.

1.12 Mr. Shultz for the applicant suggested that the landscape was already industrialized due to the power station across the river in Nottinghamshire. I think this has a slight sense of 'clutching at straws'. The structures that currently make up West Burton power station, (soon to be dismantled), are a more distant landmark that sits in a more compact area. This solar project along with the other three projects will dominate and overwhelm the land falling away from the Lincoln escarpment.

1.13 In the National Policy Statement EN-1 para 4.2.6 it states that the Secretary of State should consider how "accumulation of, and interrelationship between effects might affect the environment, economy or community as a whole, even though they may be acceptable when considered on an individual basis with mitigation measures in place." I hope the Secretary will do this in considering the impact of the four NSIP in West Lindsey.

1.14 I would like to ask that the ExA considers my request, made to the applicant at the hearing, to provide an aerial landscape view of solar panels and buildings in situ for this and the other three projects that are being proposed. I am not referring to figure 10.12 (which has a series of yellow and pink dots) or photo shots at eye level but an actual mock-up of what millions of solar panels and BESS will look like from an elevated position.