



Meeting note

Project name	Stonestreet Green Solar Project
File reference	EN010135
Status	Final
Author	The Planning Inspectorate
Date	16 November 2021
Meeting with	Evolution Power Ltd
Venue	Microsoft Teams
Meeting objectives	Inception meeting
Circulation	All attendees

Summary of key points discussed and advice given

The Planning Inspectorate (the Inspectorate) advised that a note of the meeting would be taken and published on its website in accordance with section 51 of the Planning Act 2008 (the PA2008). Any advice given under section 51 would not constitute legal advice upon which applicants (or others) could rely.

The Inspectorate explained that the publication of the meeting note could be delayed up to six months, or until a formal scoping request had been submitted (if requested by an Applicant for commercial reasons).

Introductions

The Applicant, Evolution Power Ltd, is a UK based independent solar developer. To date, the team has installed and/or financed more than 1 gigawatts (GW) of Photovoltaic (PV) energy, including five of the largest UK solar projects that have been built. The Project Team consists of Barton Willmore, who are providing planning, Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and landscape and visual assessment (LVIA) related assistance; Wardell Armstrong, to assist on ground conditions, arboriculture water environment, noise, cultural heritage, agricultural land, traffic and access, and glint and glare components; Lloyd Bore to assist on biodiversity matters; and Herbert Smith Freehills for legal advice throughout the Development Consent Order process.

The Project: Stonestreet Green Solar

The Proposed Development site is situated on land located near the village of Aldington, in the borough of Ashford, to the southeast of Ashford, Kent. The Proposed Development includes ground mounted solar PV and battery storage and a cabled grid connection to the northeast, which is entirely underground. The Development will connect to the local electricity network via the National Grid substation at Sellindge. The Applicant does not envisage that any extension works are required to the substation to support the Proposed Development.

The Applicant is currently considering a generating capacity of 165MW and an import and export capacity of 99.9MW. The Inspectorate enquired about the situation in relation to the land ownership of the Proposed Development site and the Applicant noted that whilst much of the site was in the same ownership, some of the land was in the ownership of other parties.

The site itself comprises approximately 20 agricultural fields (around 160 hectares). The Applicant noted there are no statutory designations within the order limits, although local nature reserves, scheduled monuments and a series of listed buildings surround the Proposed Development site as well as areas of ancient woodland. It added that the majority of the site is located in Flood Zone 1, and that parts of the site are located on best and most versatile (BMV) Agricultural Land (Grade 3).

A planned solar farm development by EDF Renewables, being proposed under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, is situated to the northeast of the Proposed Development site.

The Applicant demonstrated the siting via satellite images, showing that the EDF Renewables site was to the eastern side of the site with a further parcel of land to the north of High Speed 1. The Applicant added that it is in current dialogue with the owner of that land in terms of finalising the order limits.

The Inspectorate queried the status of the neighbouring EDF Renewables application. The Applicant confirmed that the project was still in the pre-application stage.

Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Update

The Applicant noted that a request for an EIA Scoping Opinion from the Planning Inspectorate is to be submitted in January 2022. It added that baseline surveys are currently being undertaken including a suite of ecological surveys. The Applicant is having regard to recent scoping opinions issued by the Inspectorate such as Oaklands Farm Solar Project, to consider the issues raised that may be relevant to the Proposed Development. The Inspectorate queried whether there was more detail in regard to the timing of its scoping request. The Applicant noted it would most likely be mid-to-late January. The Inspectorate added it was encouraging to see analysis of recent scoping opinions.

Approach to Consultation

The Applicant noted that some initial dialogue had been undertaken with the Ashford Borough Council and Aldington and Bonnington Parish Council to provide an initial introduction to the project, with consultation on the draft Statement of Community Consultation (SoCC) anticipated for December 2021/January 2022. The Applicant's non-statutory consultation will consist of updates on its website, project newsletter, newspaper advert and contact with parish councils and local community. It added that further liaison with Ashford Borough Council is underway. In regard to the 6-week statutory consultation under Section 42 of the Planning Act 2008, the Applicant confirmed this is scheduled for summer 2022 and that the PEIR will comprise the draft Environmental Statement.

The Applicant has made initial contact with the head of planning at Ashford Borough Council and is in the process of organising discussions.

Anticipated Timeline

The Applicant provided the following anticipated timeline to the Inspectorate:

- Statutory Consultation (including Draft ES) – June to July 2022
- Draft Document Review – August to September 2022
- DCO Application Submission – December 2022
- Examination – May to December 2023
- Decision – June 2024

Other

The Applicant confirmed that the project page could be launched on the National Infrastructure website. The Inspectorate queried whether, at this stage, there are any proposals for compulsory acquisition. The Applicant is in the process of land referencing and does not anticipate any compulsory acquisition of land for the Proposed Development.

The Inspectorate, in reference to the examination of Cleve Hill solar project, noted that concerns were raised from parties in relation to the battery storage elements of the proposal, and the potential fire risk associated with this infrastructure. The Inspectorate advised the Applicant to ensure that associated consultation is carried out with the relevant fire and rescue service. The Applicant referred to its proposed Battery Safety Management Plan, which will cover fire risk.

The Inspectorate sought clarity on the connection route. The Applicant showed this via satellite imagery to demonstrate the potential grid connection route with existing UKPN ducts.

The Inspectorate asked whether the Applicant had received any early views on the Proposed Development from the local community. The Applicant added that a limited number of residents in very-near proximity have raised some initial concerns, however, a number of people in the broader community seem to understand the need for the project.

The Inspectorate queried whether the land would return to sheep grazing after decommissioning. The Applicant noted the land is monoculture, used for industrialised farming. If consented, the land is expected to be managed during the lifetime of the project primarily by grazing sheep and would then be expected to return to agricultural use after decommissioning.

The Inspectorate queried whether there is a Public Right of Way through the site. The Applicant noted there are a number of Public Rights of Way and that it will work carefully on amenity related issues.

The Applicant added that the site's topography shields it from long-distance views and that the site cannot be seen from the main parts of Aldington. The Inspectorate asked

whether the lakes located nearby had any use. The Applicant noted that recreational carp fishing occurs here. With regard to construction traffic, the Applicant noted that, rather than using routes through Aldington, the construction material is expected to enter from the M20/A20 into a site compound for subsequent internal distribution to the site.

The Inspectorate asked whether there is any functional linkages to Special Protection Areas or related areas of ecological significance. The Applicant noted that surveys are ongoing, and that, in particular, wintering birds would be accounted for in these baseline surveys.

The Applicant queried about the potential effects of the Proposed Development in terms of telecommunications, and that they were likely seeking to scope this matter out of the ES as part of the EIA scoping process. The Inspectorate advised the Applicant to consider the criteria in advice note 7 in seeking to scope matters out. Often, the Inspectorate's ability to scope matters out of the ES is hindered by insufficient or under-developed supporting evidence being provided in the Applicant's scoping report.

The Inspectorate advised that the overlapping of any non-statutory outreach and engagement with scoping may not be advisable and may lead to confusion in parties responding. The Applicant noted the Inspectorate's comments and added that non-statutory consultation will be targeted mostly at the community level.

The Inspectorate asked the Applicant to explain the difference between the generating capacity of 165MW and the export capacity of 99.9MW. The Applicant noted that generating capacity is the maximum capacity that can be generated at the height of summer, mid-day. The Applicant discussed the use of oversizing and noted that, as the cost of solar panels have decreased, it makes commercial sense to oversize to a greater amount with a view to maximising total exported power.

The Applicant referred to questions raised by the Examining Authority in the examination of the Little Crow solar project in regard to an upper limit in terms of generating capacity. The Inspectorate reminded the Applicant to fully justify the reasoning behind the number of panels and output.

The Inspectorate queried whether there were any factors that may potentially delay the timescale of the Applicant's pre-application programme. The Applicant noted it had a fairly robust programme for submission in December 2022 and would keep the Inspectorate updated on timescales.

The Inspectorate informed the Applicant of several incoming solar projects through the NSIP regime. The Inspectorate made reference to Project Speed, whereby projects are intended to enter the DCO regime as efficiently as possible. The Applicant will be made aware of the approach to pre-application in light of Project Speed.

Specific decisions/ follow-up required?

The following actions were agreed:

- Organise a meeting pre-scoping
- Establish project mailbox and update project webpage on NI website.

