

Meeting note

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| Project name | Beacon Fen Energy Park |
| File reference | EN010151 |
| Status | Final |
| Author | The Planning Inspectorate |
| Date | 30 November 2023 |
| Meeting with | Low Carbon (“The Applicant”) |
| Venue | Microsoft Teams |
| Meeting objectives | Project Update |
| 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.

Project update

The Applicant detailed past and present versions of the site boundaries, highlighting relevant Local Planning Authorities (LPA) and impacted agricultural land. The removal of Beacon Fen South was recounted, with the section of the planned solar array being discontinued due to the proposed Anglian Water Lincolnshire Reservoir being sited within this area. Due to the extensive siting appraisal for the reservoir’s development, the decision was made to remove the southern area of the park, decreasing the expected output of the project from 600 megawatts (MW) to 400MW. The area of cable route in South Holland is no longer required, so is no longer a directly affected local authority. The area around Bicker Fen 400kV substation is generally subject to flood risk and contains Best and Most Versatile (BMV) agricultural land. The solar and battery components of the Proposed Development are located as close as possible to the Bicker Fen substation without encountering large areas subject to these designations.

The Inspectorate enquired about how the construction period would align with the Heckington Fen Solar Park project. The Applicant stated that it expected little to no crossover with Heckington Fen, predicting a starting date after construction has finished and is regularly updating a cumulative effects assessment in the lead up to submission.

The Applicant explained that the connection to the Bicker Fen Substation would be provisioned for in the draft Development Consent Order (DCO) but noted that the Heckington Fen Solar Park project DCO includes the same provisions for the connection to the Bicker Fen Substation, which if consented and built first, would enable capacity for Beacon Fen Energy Park to connect in.

Preliminary Environmental Impact Report (PEIR) and Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) update

The Applicant confirmed that it had completed most baseline surveys, although activities such as trial trenching and consultation with Local Planning Authority archaeologists are currently ongoing. Surveys of the cable route corridor are expected to commence in January 2024, with some walkover surveys already undertaken on areas of public access, followed by surveys of the bespoke access road corridor. The Applicant described difficulties with trenching in this area, with recent storms and the high-water table impacting the ease of carrying out works.

The Applicant requested guidance on levels of pre-application surveys required. The Inspectorate advised the Applicant to document all consultation regarding the archaeological baseline and set out its position in the Environmental Statement and to review the archaeological information for ongoing solar project examinations.

The Applicant explained that the PEIR is currently being finalised based upon a reasonable 'worst-case scenario,' considering all potential impacts. This will be produced alongside a 'with-mitigation layout' which will highlight how possible environmental impacts will be addressed by the Applicant. The Applicant provided an update on the proposed scope of the EIA. Embedded mitigation discussed includes landscape and visual buffers; ecological enhancement areas; and exclusion of areas with archaeological potential. The Applicant is assessing the potential for impacts of embedded mitigation on other aspects within the EIA.

Consultation and engagement update

Recent engagement discussed by the Applicant included meetings with LPAs, technical leads, key stakeholders, and the wider local community.

The Applicant detailed the ongoing timescales surrounding the Statement of Community Consultation (SoCC). The draft SoCC was shared on 4 October with the 3 LPAs, and responses were received by all 3 by Wednesday 8 November. The final SoCC was published on 29 November 2023.

The Applicant outlined the responses received to the draft SoCC, which included suggestions of using social media, inclusion of additional information points, expansion of the consultation zone (5km from the energy park and 2.5km from the cable route) and extension of the consultation period to 6 weeks. In general the Applicant has accommodated the requests from the LPAs.

The Inspectorate enquired about contact from action groups. The Applicant discussed minor outreach prior to the removal of the south site which was primarily due to the proposed Anglian Water Lincolnshire Reservoir and was nearer to settlements.

Programme updates

The Applicant explained key dates going forward in the programme including timings on the consultation expected in Q1 2024. The Inspectorate reminded the Applicant to submit the section 46 notification prior to statutory consultation.

AOB

The Applicant is currently awaiting results for a wintering birds survey to help inform the draft Habitats Regulation Assessment (HRA).