



## Meeting note

<b>Project name</b>	Green Hill Solar Farm
<b>File reference</b>	EN010170
<b>Status</b>	FINAL
<b>Author</b>	The Planning Inspectorate
<b>Date</b>	5 February 2024
<b>Meeting with</b>	Green Hill Solar Farm Limited
<b>Venue</b>	Microsoft Teams
<b>Meeting objectives</b>	Inception meeting
<b>Circulation</b>	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 (if requested by an Applicant for commercial reasons), or until a formal scoping request had been submitted.

### Details of proposed development

Green Hill Solar Farm is a proposed up to 500 megawatt (MW) solar farm over approximately 950 hectares (ha) covering seven sites with associated infrastructure including Battery Energy Storage System (BESS), inverters, transformers and substations, underground cable connection, mitigation and enhancement including landscaping and Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG). The Applicant confirmed that the sites are separated into six parcels (A- F), as well as the BESS. The sites are located within the administrative boundaries of West Northamptonshire and North Northamptonshire respectively and include an area covered by 10 Parish Councils. The Applicant has identified nine affected landowners, with the land use being predominantly agricultural. The Inspectorate advised the Applicant to consider the policy set out within the National Policy Statement (EN-3) with regard to use of Best and Most Versatile agricultural land. The Applicant explained that the Site Selection report would detail how the land for the Scheme had been selected. The Applicant also stated that environmental enhancement is high on the process design criteria and will come through as part of the iterative design process and gave an example of using the solar farmland for low-intensity sheep grazing and an aim to achieve BNG as part of the Landscape and Ecological Management Plan.

The Inspectorate asked if there are any other Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) presently within the vicinity of the application sites. The Applicant advised that it is not aware of any NSIPs but believe that the LAs have a team of consultants and contractors who may have NSIP experience.

The Inspectorate asked the distance between Site A and F. The Applicant advised that it is approximately 20km and confirmed that Site A will connect to the BESS (north Northamptonshire) rather than Site F.

The point of grid connection is the Grendon Substation (400 kilovolt). The cable route is currently being assessed but is approximately 21km. The anticipated operational period of the project before decommissioning is 60 years.

The Inspectorate asked the Applicant for an explanation as to why the operational period being sought is 60 years. The Applicant advised that this is driven by the direction of industry and is a 'worst case scenario' factoring in the need to replace panels and other equipment within the Environmental Statement (ES).

## **Proposed Project Timeline**

- **January 2024:** Public launch
- **March 2024:** Non-statutory consultation including co-design workshops, Q&A, and interactive sessions.
- **April 2024:** Submission of Environment Impact Assessment Scoping Report (EIA)
- **June/July 2024:** Statement of Community Consultation (SoCC) including Local Planning Authority consultation.
- **August 2024:** Finalise Preliminary Environmental Impact Report (PEIR)
- **September / October 2024:** Statutory Consultation including in-person events and webinars.
- **October 2024 – February 2025:** Prepare ES
- **February 2025:** Submission of Development Consent Order (DCO)

## **Stakeholder engagement to date**

The Applicant outlined the stakeholders engaged to date:

- North Northamptonshire Local Planning Authority (LPA) Officers
- North Northamptonshire Councillors
- North Northamptonshire Parish Councils
- West Northamptonshire LPA Officers
- West Northamptonshire Councillors
- West Northamptonshire Parish Councils
- Near neighbour letters sent to those within 50m of the site
- Technical consultee engagement with Natural England

The Inspectorate advised that the Applicant ensures it has identified all the correct neighbouring authorities as there may be a larger group of statutory consultees that it must consult.

## Environmental Impact Assessment Scoping

The Applicant advised that several assessments are ongoing, including desk assessments and field surveys for ecology, geophysics agricultural land classification, arboriculture, constraint mapping and cable route optioneering.

The Applicant showed maps indicating project constraints including:

- Site A: Listed building and public rights of way
- Site B: Largely unconstrained
- Site C: Ancient woodland to the north
- Site D: Listed buildings and public rights of way
- Site E: Listed buildings and public rights of way
- Site F: In close proximity to the River Nene so some flood risks
- BESS site: flood risks however undertaking hydrology modelling that indicate it is not as significantly prone to flooding as the map suggests.

In addition, several of the project's component sites are in the vicinity of or adjacent to ancient woodland and Sites of Special Scientific Interest. The Applicant advised that its ecological consultants are giving significant consideration to these designations.

The Inspectorate advised of NPS EN-3 in relation to Public Rights of Way (PRoW), an important consideration to build into project plans. The Applicant confirmed factoring in and retaining PRoW as much as is possible to avoid diversions or stopping.

The Applicant advised that it intends to submit a scoping request in April 2024. The Inspectorate noted that this is after the proposed completion of non-statutory consultation that is due to complete in March 2024. The Inspectorate advised to avoid having the non-statutory consultation overlapping with consultation in relation to scoping opinions, as this can cause confusion. The Inspectorate drew the Applicant's attention to Advice Note 7 that outlines the evidence the Inspectorate requires before agreeing to scope matters out of environmental impact assessment. Further, the Inspectorate advised that as the project sites are close to a European site, if birds are a feature at this site, Natural England would normally expect two years' worth of survey data to support the baseline. The Inspectorate suggested that it would be prudent to hold conversations with Natural England to agree the approach to gathering baseline data.

The Applicant advised that it has started wintering bird surveys and are in conversation with Natural England regarding nocturnal bird surveys. Further, that just over half the sites have had geophysical studies. Weather has hampered progress in this area.

The Inspectorate noted aerodromes located on the map, Sywell Aerodrome, Eastern Maudit (Site F) air strip and William Pitt runway (Site E) and asked if these runways are still active. The Applicant confirmed that they understood that all 3 were operational, with Sywell likely being the most active.

The Inspectorate questioned the Applicant on whether Compulsory Acquisition powers are likely to be sought in the draft Development Consent Order. The Applicant advised that Compulsory Acquisition powers are not expected to be sought; the intention is to reach voluntary agreement with landowners.

The Inspectorate reminded the Applicant of the draft document review service it can provide between statutory consultation and submission. Further, if the Applicant wishes to avail themselves of this service, it takes between six to eight weeks to complete.

### **Specific decisions/ follow-up required?**

The following actions were agreed:

- Planning Inspectorate to send a project info template.
- Planning Inspectorate to set up a project email address.
- Planning Inspectorate to assign a Case Team.
- Applicant to give The Inspectorate a months' notice when requesting the next Project Update Meeting