



# Inception Meeting note

<b>Project name</b>	<b>Light Valley Solar</b>
<b>Project reference</b>	<b>EN0110012</b>
<b>Status</b>	<b>Final</b>
<b>Author</b>	<b>The Planning Inspectorate</b>
<b>Date</b>	<b>25 September 2024</b>
<b>Meeting with</b>	<b>Island Green Power, Arup and Pinsent Masons</b>
<b>Venue</b>	<b>Microsoft Teams</b>
<b>Meeting objectives</b>	<b>To introduce the project, the applicant's intended pre-application programme for the pre-application stage and Programme Document, and what work and studies are required for the preparation of the application.</b>
<b>Circulation</b>	<b>All attendees</b>

## 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 Planning Act). Any advice given under section 51 would not constitute legal advice upon which applicants or others could rely.

The Inspectorate also outlined its [privacy notices](#), which explain how we collect and use customer information.

The Inspectorate discussed its new pre-application services as set out in its 2024 Pre-application Prospectus and advised that an Advice Log will now be published, replacing full notes, for future meetings. The Advice Log will be published and maintained on the Inspectorate's website and will record the topics discussed at pre-application meetings and any project-specific advice given to applicants.

### The Proposed Development

The applicant provided an overview of their proposed nationally significant infrastructure project (NSIP).

A Development Consent Order (DCO) will be sought for a solar farm comprising ground mounted photovoltaic (PV) panels to be located within North Yorkshire near Selby with an expected generating capacity of 500MW. The scheme will connect to National Grid's existing Monk Fryston 275kV substation under a grid connection agreement. It will consist of a new solar electricity generating station and associated Battery Energy Storage System (BESS), with underground cabling to connect different solar sites to National Grid's transmission network. The entirety of the scheme would be situated within the authority area of North Yorkshire Council.

There are currently five land parcels (Sites 1 to 5) which form part of the proposed development, located between Monk Fryston, Hambleton and Escrick, covering an area of 1066ha and consisting mostly of arable land. The sites together with the cable corridors would form the proposed development order limits. Site 1 forms part of the Escrick Estate to the north, Sites 2 and 3 are located 3.5km east of Monk Fryston, and Sites 4 and 5 lie adjacent to the River Aire near West Haddlesey, Chapel Haddlesey and Temple Hirst. The applicant expects to reach voluntary agreements with relevant landowners to use these sites and is well progressed with these agreements.

The route of the connecting cables is still being determined at this stage, with route corridor options to be included within the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Scoping Report. Directional drilling will be used to install cables under the River Ouse.

Additionally, supporting infrastructure will include inverters, transformers, and switchgear at each site together with temporary compounds used during the construction phase. On-site substations will also be installed to enable electricity to be transmitted at a higher voltage from the solar and BESS sites to the National Grid. The applicant is also considering possible environmental enhancements and mitigation / biodiversity net gain areas.

Island Green Power specialises in the development of large scale solar and battery plants globally and have experience of the DCO process under the Planning Act from sponsoring other UK based Solar NSIPs. This project will be promoted by Light Valley Solar Limited, a subsidiary of Island Green Power, and represented by planning consultancy firm Arup and legal firm Pinsent Masons who will produce the DCO application, Dalcour Maclaren providing land services, and Counter Context managing the project's communications and consultation.

The Inspectorate asked whether the proposed development would amount to a single NSIP. The applicant considered that it would, owing to the scheme falling under a single applicant, with connection to a single substation and BESS. The sites are expected to all connect to create a single generating station. The scheme's generating capacity means that it requires consent under the Planning Act as opposed to the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 route.

Furthermore, the Inspectorate asked how the scheme would connect to the existing substation. The applicant confirmed that limited works are anticipated but the small scale improvement works may be required. The Inspectorate advised that clarity on the issue should be provided through its Scoping and consultation material.

### **Environmental features and constraints**

The applicant discussed several landscape features and constraints within or near to the chosen sites following their analysis of the area.

Located in the greater area (around the five Sites) are the Skipwith Common Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Special Area of Conservation (SAC), Lower Derwent Valley Special Protection Area (SPA), (SAC) and Ramsar site, the River Derwent SAC, and Humber Estuary SPA, SAC and Ramsar site. There is also ancient woodland at Gilbertson Wood, as well as Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC) such as Gilbertsons Plantation and Gashouse Plantation. However, there are no SSSIs, National Nature Reserves or National Parks or sites of local importance within 2km around the Sites.

There are also scheduled monuments, listed buildings, and conservation areas in some of the nearby settlements such as Escrick, Hillam and Birkin. Other features include established hedgerows and ditches, principal and secondary aquifers such as Sherwood Sandstone, and part of one of the sites lies within a Source Protection Zone.

Parts of the Sites are located in Flood Zones 2 and 3, with Lower Aire in Flood Zone 4.

The applicant stated that they are currently undertaking a range of environmental surveys, with some to be progressed at different points during 2025 such as seasonal landscape and visual surveys, soil, noise and vibration, wintering birds, and geophysical surveys. Most but not all of these surveys will be completed and reported at the Preliminary Environmental Information Report (PEIR) stage. The applicant is currently preparing its Scoping Report, which will take into account the Inspectorate's newly published technical advice on Scoping for Solar Schemes and the Advice Page on Commitments Registers.

The applicant stated that soil sampling has not been conducted yet, but desktop information suggests that approximately a quarter of the agricultural land is likely to be

Best and Most Versatile (BMV) land at Grade 2 and Subgrade 3a, another quarter at Subgrade 3b, and the remainder of land between BMV and non-BMV.

The applicant is considering a broad range of options for the connecting cable corridors and locations of components within the Sites at this stage, to take account of land interests, identified constraints and the need for further survey work. The Inspectorate advised the applicant to refine the scope of options where possible prior to submission of the scoping request. Where multiple and varied options remain under consideration, this may affect the ability of the Inspectorate and consultation bodies to provide detailed comment and is also likely to limit the Inspectorate's ability to agree to scope out aspects / matters to enable the refinement of the Environmental Statement. The applicant acknowledged this point and said the scheme's Order limits would be narrowed as the application progresses. However, the applicant noted that given that no landowners have yet been contacted on the grid corridors and no site surveys undertaken, some optionality would be beneficial at Scoping stage to enable the applicant to respond to issues should they arise. The applicant considered it beneficial to retain optionality so that views could be gained on corridors during non-statutory consultation.

The Inspectorate asked if the applicant knows where the BESS would be located. The applicant stated that they hope to have a confirmed position on this issue following further survey work but considered it is most likely to be centrally located within the southern sites. The applicant would adopt similar, permitted approaches as learned from other consented Solar NSIPs, such as ensuring the BESS is positioned at least 100 metres away from sensitive receptors such as residential dwellings to safeguard against effects from potential battery fires. The applicant added that they were also seeking to underground all connecting cables.

The applicant stated that they are taking an environmentally led approach to the design of their proposed development, taking account of the features and ecology of the surrounding area. They intend to use their emerging environmental constraints and opportunities maps to inform the initial parameters of the layout of the Sites to denote areas suitable for solar panels and those for environmental mitigation and enhancement. The applicant plans to hold environmentally led workshops with multidisciplinary teams to identify reductions to account for possible impacts and the creation of potential buffer zones around the cable corridors, while taking into account consultation responses on these issues at the appropriate time. The applicant is also considering appointing a design champion to lead on the design of the final scheme to help it meet the policy requirements for good design under the National Policy Statements for Energy.

The Inspectorate advised that a new advice page covering good design for NSIPs will be published soon together with part 2 of the technical advice on solar schemes, which will also cover elements on design.

The Applicant asked the Inspectorate for any advice on how impacts from decommissioning should be considered for solar development and whether this would be addressed specifically in part 2 of the technical advice on scoping Solar schemes'. It stated that effects of decommissioning are often of a similar, or lower, magnitude than the construction effects and noted that a decommissioning environmental management plan would be in place.

**Post meeting note:** The applicant should set out its proposed approach to assessment of impacts from decommissioning in the Scoping Report and explain whether any significant effects are likely to occur as a result of decommissioning. Example information that may be used to support scoping out of matters is provided in the Solar Scoping Table and can be applied for different development phases, as relevant. The applicant may also wish to review the Inspectorate's comments relating to decommissioning in Scoping Opinions adopted for other solar NSIPs to inform its proposed approach. The Inspectorate will comment on the proposed approach for the proposed development in the Scoping Opinion including whether any matters can be scoped out.

## **Consenting Programme**

Non-statutory consultation on the early phase of the proposal is being carried out for six weeks during October and November 2024, with the scoping request expected to be submitted in November 2024. The non-statutory consultation will introduce the scheme to the wider community.

Statutory consultation and the publication of the PEIR is then expected to be carried out in May 2025. Depending on the progress of surveys such as for assessing two seasons of wintering birds and evolution of the cable corridor options, the submission of the DCO application is targeted for Q1 2026.

## **Early engagement with statutory bodies, local authorities, and stakeholders**

The applicant has begun early engagement with key stakeholders to discuss the design development of the scheme and the scope of the EIA.

The Inspectorate advised the applicant to set up charging schedules with relevant bodies prior to scoping. The applicant was referred to the Inspectorate's advice page 'Advice on working with public bodies in the infrastructure planning process' and advised to consider the public bodies listed, as relevant. The applicant confirmed it is currently establishing agreements with Historic England, Natural England, and the Environment Agency for procurement of their pre-application advice services, while also engaging with National Highways, Selby Area Internal Drainage Board and the Souse and Derwent Internal Drainage Board.

The applicant has also held initial meetings with North Yorkshire Council, who noted the purpose of the project. The council is dealing with other national infrastructure projects within its administrative area and is having to manage its resources accordingly.

The applicant is also seeking to continue regular contact with landowners of the solar panel sites throughout the pre-application period.

## **Programme risks**

The applicant set out some of the possible risks associated with its pre-application programme, such as:

- a need for additional environmental surveys (for example, to obtain further bird surveying data);
- any changes to policy or legislation;

- changes in design following consultation responses; and
- where ongoing flood risk modelling may affect the siting of solar infrastructure.

The applicant will produce and maintain an Issues Tracker which will be updated and made available throughout the pre-application period to the Inspectorate, relevant statutory bodies, and the local authority.

### **Service tier**

The Inspectorate's 'basic' pre-application service tier has been requested by the applicant, as the level of service is proportionate to the scale and complexity of the project. No novel or significant issues are expected to arise that would require additional support from the Inspectorate.

The Inspectorate advised that the applicant would need to set up and maintain its Programme Document on its own website throughout the pre-application stage. The applicant will need to ensure that specific developments are captured in its Programme Document and is proactively shared with the Inspectorate and other key stakeholders at appropriate stages.

In answer to the Inspectorate's questions on cumulative effects and whether the cable corridor crosses adjacent railway lines to the sites, the applicant confirmed that they are already reviewing potential impacts in relation to other developments (being prepared, consented, or built) and that the corridor would cross the railway at two points. The applicant will liaise with statutory undertakers accordingly in respect of its proposed development.

### **Practical arrangements**

The applicant indicated that it would submit its scoping request to the Inspectorate on 28 November 2024.

The Inspectorate advised that consultation bodies are given a 28-day statutory deadline for comments which, based on a submission date of 28 November 2024, would fall between Christmas and new year. This could cause concerns about resourcing for some consultation bodies and could potentially restrict the number of responses received. The Inspectorate advised the applicant to consider submitting the scoping request either earlier in November or after the Christmas / new year period.

The Applicant noted that an earlier submission of the scoping request would result in an overlap with its non-statutory consultation. As set out in Advice Note Seven, the Inspectorate recommends any non-statutory consultation is undertaken in advance of submission of the scoping request, to avoid any overlap with the Inspectorate's statutory scoping consultation process. The Inspectorate advised that the timing of the submission was ultimately a matter for the applicant to determine but that if delaying submission until after the Christmas / new year period was not a viable option for the applicant, an overlap with the non-statutory consultation was likely to be preferable to an overlap with the Christmas / new year period. The Applicant took this matter away to consider further.

**Post meeting note:** The Applicant has subsequently decided to submit the Scoping Request on 8 November to address comments from PINS and enable consultation bodies to have full response periods outside the Christmas period.

The applicant's intention to send a copy of the Scoping Report to consultation bodies at the same time that it is submitted to the Inspectorate was discussed. The Inspectorate identified associated risks, particularly around it being sent to bodies who are not "consultation bodies" as defined in the EIA Regulations and that confusion may arise around where to direct consultation responses. The applicant advised that any such circulation of the Scoping Report is likely to be restricted to relevant Local Planning Authorities. The Inspectorate explained that the Inspectorate's statutory scoping consultation process is commenced as soon as possible on receipt of a valid scoping request, usually within the first day or two, so advised that the applicant did not submit the Scoping Report to consultation bodies at the same time that it is submitted to the Inspectorate.

In relation to the Inspectorate's pre-application fees, the Inspectorate pointed to the government's published guidance on cost recovery and its Pre-application Prospectus for information. The Inspectorate's finance team would be in contact with the applicant shortly regarding its pre-application fees, with invoices expected to be raised typically in October and April. As this Inception Meeting has been held before the introduction of the Inspectorate's chargeable services (from October 2024 onwards), it would not form part of any fee and would not count towards the maximum number of three pre-application meetings with the Inspectorate per year under the 'basic' pre-application service tier.

### **Next Steps**

The Inspectorate asked the applicant to confirm the timing of the scoping request submission and to send their GIS Shapefile at least 10 working days before the scoping request.

**Post meeting note:** the applicant confirmed on 22 October that the submission date would be 8 November.

### **Feedback on the applicant's initial Programme Document (post meeting note)**

The applicant supplied the Inspectorate with its initial Programme Document before the Inception Meeting in line with our request under the 2024 Pre-application Prospectus. Having reviewed the document, the Inspectorate considers that it satisfactorily covers the expected content as set out in the government's pre-application guidance at paragraph 10, namely:

- "the date the applicant intends to submit their application
- a comprehensive timetable of the applicant's pre-application process, the main events with dates and milestones demonstrating how the pre-application process will be completed (using the maximum target of 2 years as a benchmark)
- the applicant's view on the main issues for resolution and activities they will undertake to address those
- the applicant's proposals for engaging with statutory consultees and local authorities during the pre-application period and any intended financial support agreements, such as Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs)
- the applicant's identification of risks to achievement of the pre-application stage and the process by which these risks are tracked and managed
- cross references to the SoCC required by [section 47 of the Planning Act](#)".

The Programme Document provides enough detail about the proposed development, timetable and activities for the pre-application process at this early stage, as well as the applicant's approach to early engagement with statutory consultees and other parties. It would be helpful if the applicant includes the timescale for the Adequacy of Consultation Milestone in its overview timetable, with further details on the development of the SoCC and progress with PPAs in the next iteration of its document.