

Landscape Proof of Evidence Summary

Southlands Solar Farm

In respect of Section 78 Appeal: Land South of Runwell Road (A132), Runwell, Wickford, Essex.

Installation of a solar farm, with battery storage and associated infrastructure.

On behalf of Enso Green Holdings J Limited.

Date: 01/10/2024 | Pegasus Ref: P23-2671

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1. Summary and Conclusions

Introduction

- 1.1. I am instructed on behalf of Enso Green Holdings J Ltd to present evidence relating to landscape and visual issues in respect of the scheme for which planning permission is sought for the construction of a solar farm and BESS together with all associated works, equipment and necessary infrastructure. This statement should be read in conjunction with the planning proof of evidence prepared by Paul Burrell. The proposed scheme was a full planning application to Chelmsford City Council (Ref: 23/00532/FUL) and Rochford District Council (Ref: 23/00285/FUL). Having viewed the site and the surrounding area and having reviewed all the relevant documentation pertaining to this scheme, I have drawn the following conclusions which are set out in the proceeding paragraphs.

Scale, Location, Layout and Appearance

- 1.2. With regard to scale, the proposal seeks to deliver up to 49.9MW solar farm with BESS that by virtue of its scale would generate power equivalent to that consumed annually by approximately 6,098 typical homes and would contribute significantly towards the renewable energy targets in light of the climate emergency. The quantum of development that is anticipated would extend over several fields, however there would be no opportunity to appreciate the total scale of this scheme from any one location. The topography together with mature tree cover, woodlands, tree belts, and hedges in the intervening landscape would mean that there would be very limited opportunity to appreciate the scale of the scheme.

Effect on Landscape Elements

- 1.3. The proposed solar farm would have a negligible adverse effect on topography. In terms of trees with the additional planting there would be a moderate beneficial effect and with regard to hedges moderate beneficial effect. There would be a moderate adverse effect with regard to land cover with the introduction of the solar farm superimposed over pastureland, nothing there would be a small loss of agricultural land to accommodate the BESS. I consider that there would be some beneficial effects with regard to landscape elements that would form the green infrastructure of the appeal site as part of the solar farm.

Effect on Land Cover

- 1.4. Land cover is a specific term which refers to the way in which the land is managed. The appeal site is currently managed for arable use. Alternating between pasture and arable is not a matter subject to planning. The scheme would require the host fields to be managed as pasture for the duration of a project but would be grazed and would benefit the fields from a soil/agronomy perspective.
- 1.5. Furthermore, the introduction of meadows would bring about material ecological enhancements. The local published Landscape Character Assessment advocates the management of pasture which is precisely what this scheme would seek to achieve. It is accepted that solar panels would be suspended above the grass swards. The introduction of the solar farm and BESS would have a moderate adverse degree of effect with regard to land cover associated with the appeal site, given the arable land is converted to pasture with panels, BESS, and associated infrastructure.

- 1.6. The character of the field parcels within the appeal site would inevitably change in terms of their landscape character with the solar farm and BESS in place, but the character of the landscape beyond the immediate environs of the appeal site would remain unchanged with the scheme in place and that would apply to the vast majority of the Landscape Character Area. Only a fraction of this area would physically change in terms of its character. This is an inevitable consequence of delivering renewable energy infrastructure.

Effect on the Visual Amenity of the Area

- 1.7. With regard to visual amenity, of particular note from my perspective is that this is an extensive solar scheme with BESS across a number of fields yet given the level and gently undulating nature of the local topography, combined with the field and hedgerow network and patchwork quilt of woodlands, the actual visual envelope and the degree to which this scheme would be seen from the surrounding area would be very limited.
- 1.8. There are a few PRoWs in the locality, however, there would be no opportunity to observe the scheme. Energy infrastructure is an integral part of the local landscape. The scheme's effect upon visual amenity of the area would be very limited in degree and very localised in extent.
- 1.9. The visual effects would be very limited given the scale of the proposal. Policies require careful integration through existing landscape features and new planting to mitigate adverse effects to minimal levels. No policy in the Development Plan specifies absolutely no visibility whatsoever. I consider that to set such a high bar would be impossible to achieve.
- 1.10. In overall terms, the visual effects of the proposed solar farm and BESS would be very limited due to its substantial visual containment as a result of a combination of topography and surrounding vegetation. Where seen only small elements of the scheme would be observed and it would not be possible to appreciate the totality of the scheme from any one viewpoint location.

Effect on Landscape Character

- 1.11. In terms of landscape character associated with the appeal site, this is defined by the combination of various landscape elements principally topography, land cover, hedgerows, tree cover and the configuration of the fields themselves, the field pattern is sometimes referred to as the "grain" of the landscape. With the exception of some small areas of development such as the substation and inverter and BESS which would require some small loss of agricultural land, these landscape elements would be retained and remain as part of the landscape whilst the scheme is in place. It is accepted that where the panels would be located the continued agricultural use would be in the form of grazing rather than arable use.
- 1.12. The hedgerows would be reinforced with further hedgerow planting and the tree cover resource associated with the appeal site would also be reinforced with some additional tree planting. Some of the hedgerows would be managed such that they would be maintained at a slightly higher level than is currently the case.
- 1.13. The trees over the project lifetime, both those existing and those introduced as part of the landscape proposals would all continue to grow developing larger canopies apart from those trees that are already fully mature. This growth over a 40-year period which is a significant period of time for both hedgerow and tree growth would result in reinforcing the defining positive characteristics of the appeal site, with regard to these features. Furthermore, the

increased vegetation growth would create a stronger sense of physical and visual containment associated with the appeal site. This change would reduce visual effects that would come about over the project timescale.

- 1.14. Upon completion of the decommissioning phase, all built infrastructure would be removed both above and below ground across the entirety of the appeal site. The management and growth of the hedgerows and trees across the appeal site would continue to remain as part of the landscape post-decommissioning phase and would leave a positive legacy in terms of landscape character given that trees and hedgerows contribute to the landscape character locally.
- 1.15. Beyond the environs of the appeal site the landscape character of the area would remain unchanged. With the proposed scheme in place, the character of the fields within the appeal site would change as they would now accommodate solar arrays, but the underlying character of the fields would still be there and would fully return with decommissioning of the solar farm in the longer term. However, it is proposed that as an integral part of the scheme, new hedgerow and tree planting would be introduced, and wildflower meadows created with arable land converted to pasture as advocated in the landscape character documents. All of these elements could and would remain after decommissioning as a positive legacy of the scheme and bring about enhancement to the landscape character in the long-term.
- 1.16. The proposed scheme involves solar arrays and some associated infrastructure located in several fields which are managed for arable use. However, depending on farm management and maintenance and crop rotation, these fields could revert to pasture for a fallow period without any recourse to planning and similarly, grazed as pasture, again without any recourse to planning, such is the minor consequence to such a change of use in farming circumstances terms. It is intended that whilst the solar arrays would be installed and operational, that the fields would continue to function as fields and accommodate grazing stock, sheep for farming for the whole duration of the lifetime of the project. The appeal site would continue to have an agricultural use.
- 1.17. Most of the existing landscape elements, vegetation, trees, hedges would continue to remain and be reinforced. Therefore, the character of the fields would remain accepting that they would also accommodate a solar farm, a renewable energy generating installation and as such, would change the current existing character of those developed fields. Beyond the confines of the red line appeal site boundary, there would be no change to the physical fabric of the landscape character of the area.
- 1.18. In overall terms I consider that there would be a moderate adverse effect upon the landscape character of the appeal site itself and its immediate environs. No off-site works are required to enable this scheme to be implemented other than the cable connection. The physical character of the surrounding landscape would remain and prevail unchanged with the proposed solar farm in place.

Effect on the Openness of the Green Belt

- 1.19. As far as the solar farm is concerned, this benefits from a high degree of visual containment evidenced by the fact that it is difficult to appreciate the proposal in terms of views from the countryside to the north, south, east and west and as such, any associated perception of openness related to this land is very limited. The perception of openness is most readily

appreciated from the adjacent and nearby roads around the appeal site, but even from these locations, the perception of openness would not materially change with the presence of the solar farm associated with the appeal site and its countryside surroundings as a backdrop and context to the appeal site as it still would feel very much part of the countryside and little difference in perception as local views would continue to over sail the appeal site as if there was a high crop, like miscanthus.

- 1.20. The introduction of the proposed solar farm would undoubtedly introduce built form where there is none currently. The aspect of openness is derived in part with regard to two aspects, the visual component and a spatial component. With regard to the visual aspect, it is evident that the perception of openness as it relates to the appeal site is only readily appreciated from the nearby roads and not from the wider countryside beyond due to the substantial physical containment of the surrounding farmland with its mature hedges and tree cover.
- 1.21. The proposed solar farm would be relatively modest in mass and footprint with regular spaces between the solar arrays that would reduce the overall scale of the development. Furthermore, the proposed scheme would be in place for a period of up to 40 years, before being fully demounted and the land returned to its former condition at the end of its use. As such, whilst 40 years is a long period of time, it is still not permanent. Therefore, the impact on the openness of the Green Belt would be reduced and the appeal site completely reinstated to its current open character. Consequently, both visually and spatially, the proposed development would result in some limited and localised harm to the openness of the Green Belt.
- 1.22. In terms of the visual aspect of openness, I consider the harm would be minor (adverse) and in terms of the spatial aspect of openness, the harm would be moderate. And in overall terms, I consider that there would be moderate (adverse) harm to the openness of the Green Belt though this would be limited and highly localised within the context of this wide designation.

Effects on the Purposes of the Green Belt

- 1.23. The proposed scheme would not have any bearing upon the first purpose of Green Belt, namely, to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas. Whilst there are towns in every direction of the appeal site, these are located several kilometres in distance and with the introduction of the proposed scheme, the solar farm would not cause any neighbouring towns to merge into one another. Indeed, the geographical disposition of neighbouring towns would remain unchanged with the proposed scheme in place and as such, the proposal would not conflict with this purpose. The proposal would inevitably introduce built infrastructure into six fields where the character of the appeal site would experience a moderate adverse effect with the introduction of the solar farm. Beyond the appeal site and its immediate environs, the character would remain unchanged. The proposal would cause encroachment in the countryside and as such, conflict with this particular purpose. The proposal would not affect the setting and special character of historic towns. The proposal would not have a bearing upon the recycling of derelict and urban land and as such, would not conflict with this purpose so far as it is relevant. In conclusion, the proposed solar farm would only conflict with one purpose in Green Belt terms.
- 1.24. In terms of safeguarding the countryside from encroachment, the proposed solar scheme would be physically limited to the appeal site itself. There would continue to be a strong disconnection between the distant urban areas beyond the Green Belt with the scheme in place. The encroachment, as a consequence of the solar farm, would be solely limited to the

appeal site itself, with the land beyond remaining countryside. As such, the proposed solar farm would conflict with one purpose of Green Belt, that of encroachment in the countryside. However, the level of harm would be limited to a moderate degree.

- 1.25. The proposed solar farm does not in my view contribute or fulfil any role with regard to the other four purposes of Green Belt.

Cumulative Effects

- 1.26. A series of four schemes were listed in the OR, as other solar farms or other major developments in the area, with a caveat stating that cumulative effects would not be limited to the four schemes listed.
- 1.27. For ease of reference, this section of the Proof of Evidence will refer to the cumulative schemes 1 to 6 as set out above. All the cumulative schemes have been granted planning permission at either the planning application stage or at appeal.
- 1.28. As the identified cumulative schemes all occupy distinct and separate sites, as a result, there would be no cumulative effects on landscape features and elements within the boundaries of the sites. However, it is noted that for each of the cumulative schemes additional landscape proposals would be brought forward which has the opportunity to remain in place once the schemes have been decommissioned which would contribute to reinforcing the landscape framework and in turn the landscape character in the locality.
- 1.29. At a national level all of the cumulative schemes are located within NCA 111: Northern Thames Basin, however, whilst the landscape character within each of the cumulative schemes would inevitably change as a result of the development, due to the overall scale of the NCA, the key characteristics would remain and prevail and there would be no notable change to the NCA as a whole.
- 1.30. The appeal scheme would have a high degree of visual containment due to topography, vegetation and built form and as such, there would be a negligible degree of effect in visual amenity terms with regard to combined, successive and sequential cumulative effects.
- 1.31. In overall terms, when the appeal scheme is considered in the round, with regard to its landscape and development context, there would be no significant cumulative effects arising from the proposed development when considered in conjunction with other nearby energy schemes. The degree of effect would be negligible with regard to the nearest energy project, a battery storage scheme located at scheme 4. This demonstrates the high degree of visual enclosure that would be associated with the site and the proposed scheme.

Conclusions

- 1.32. For the reasons articulated in the preceding paragraphs, it is my professional judgement that whilst there would be some limited adverse effects on landscape character and visual amenity, these would be localised. There would be localised moderate adverse harm to the openness of the Green Belt and the proposal would conflict with one purpose of Green Belt in terms of encroachment in the countryside. The other four remaining purposes would not be affected by the proposed solar farm. I consider there are no substantive landscape character, visual amenity or Green Belt reasons from a landscape planning perspective for refusing planning permission for the proposed solar farm on land south of Runwell Road.

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