Deadline 8, 11/09/2026

Further Information and Remaining Issues, [redacted] Helen Stark [redacted]

Biodiversity and Nature Conservation

1.0 Skylark Within the Scheme Area

1.1 Conservation Status of Skylark

The conservation status of skylark is detailed in the Applicant's Environmental Statement Volume 2 - Technical Appendices (Appendices 7-2: Breeding Bird Survey Report 2025, September 2025). Skylark is given IUCN 'red list' status on Birds of Conservation Concern. It is also listed as a rare and threatened species under Section 41 (S41) of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act (2006), and Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Local Biodiversity Action Plan. The UK population has shown a 9% decrease from 1995 to 2023 (BTO website).

1.2 Breeding Bird Survey Results for Skylark

East Park Energy's sub-contractor stated that there are 125 estimated skylark territories over a surveyed area of 731.44ha. This equates to 0.17 on-site skylark territories per ha (average territory density). It was considered that approximately 7 additional skylark territories are likely to be present in the 41.93ha of land, which was excluded from the survey.

Skylark was mainly recorded in open agricultural fields, and was identified in all 8 survey areas (Applicant's Environmental Statement Volume 2 - Technical Appendices (Appendices 7-2: Breeding Bird Survey Report 2025, September 2025)).

1.3 Government Policy and Targets

In January 2023, the Office for Environmental Protection published a review of progress in 2020/2021 towards targets in the 25 Year Environment Plan. The Chair stated that 'Progress on delivery has fallen short of what is needed'. At this time, government also published, in its Environmental Improvement Plan, proposed actions to meet the targets stipulated by the 2021 Environment Act, such as the number of species included in the 'red list' improving i.e. decreasing.

- SEPE considers that the highest value should be placed on skylark habitat within the area of the East Park Energy proposed scheme (subsequently, referred to as 'the scheme'). This is in line with government policy and targets, and the survey findings.

- SEPE also recognises that the environment is a public good; no one can 'own' skylarks. Skylarks nesting, foraging, singing and displaying over fields are dependent on good land

management (suited to their particular needs and 'preferences') by landowners and those leasing land to enable future generations of skylark to thrive.

2.0 The Scheme

The main area of the scheme will be covered by solar panels. There will be disturbance and habitat effects on skylark during the preparation (including site clearance), construction and operational phases of the scheme.

- SEPE challenges the Applicant's point of view that 'displacement of ground nesting birds would however be reversed on decommissioning of the Scheme once all infrastructure is removed, but given the lifespan of skylarks this is assessed as permanent for the purposes of the Environmental Statement' (refer to Q1.3.16 Short Term Minor Adverse Effects, Applicant Response to Examining Authority's First Written Questions, Document EN010141/DR/8.33, May 2026).

- SEPE considers it unlikely that displaced birds (and their offspring) would return as the scheme's 'life' continues for many decades and skylarks only live for an average of two years. Therefore, the loss of nesting sites represents significant adverse long-term impacts on skylark in the absence of appropriate and timely mitigation. The Applicant has proposed mitigation to compensate for the loss of skylark nesting areas, however, there is uncertainty relating to the success of mitigation on such a large site (see below).

2.1 Use of an 'Adapted' Fox (2022) Skylark Metric to Determine Compensation

- SEPE notes that Cambridgeshire County Council commented on the assessment of the mitigation frameworks (skylark metrics) for the scheme. Subsequently, East Park Energy's sub-contractor issued a 'Technical Note on Skylark Metric' (refer to Document EN010141/DR/8.73, August 2026). This metric has been adapted by the Applicant's sub-contractor to predict the number of skylark territories likely to be supported by the scheme, and then, calculate the percentage of existing territories mitigated for (in this case, 65%, recognising that there are also enhanced foraging opportunities as part of the scheme).

- A key point for SEPE is that the Applicant has failed to address the cumulative ecological impacts of the scheme (with other projects such as 'neighbouring' solar, Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) and NSIP projects); and in-combination (or intra-project) effects. To date, the applicant has provided insufficient supporting material to address these issues. Concerns have not been addressed, and hence, remain. The cumulative impacts of the scheme and other projects may lead to nesting disturbance (for example, through predation) and displacement in the long-term.
- The scheme functions as an ecological 'whole', which relates to how elements of the wider ecosystem (including hedgerows, trees and open fields) function. The scheme's impact on one species could have 'knock-on' impacts for skylark, such as a decline in food sources.

SEPE has considered the use of the Fox (2022) metric ('Blithe Spirit: Are Skylarks Being Overlooked in Impact Assessment?', InPractice Issue 117, CIEEM, September 2022). SEPE has also consulted a skylark expert in the past few days to better understand the metric and its application, including issues, constraints and opportunities.

SEPE notes and/or recommends the following:

- The estimate of nesting skylarks is an estimate. It is recommended that the Applicant undertakes further skylark surveys depending on the timeline of the scheme.

- Displacement of skylark is an issue and cannot be overlooked.

- There are other factors that determine the breeding success of skylark, such as breeding productivity, levels of predation (which may be a cumulative impact, see above).

- It cannot be assumed that adjacent habitat can 'absorb' displaced pairs of skylark. This is less likely in intensive arable areas, such as the scheme, and may lead to a decline in local breeding success, particularly when there are other developments in the proximity (Fox, 2022).

- The metric has a number of assumptions and the numbers derived should not be taken as absolute. The figure of 65% (based on the organic set-aside density of 0.56. Using set-aside/fallow (0.39), lowers this figure significantly) should be viewed as a starting point for the Applicant to discuss with the Host Authorities (Cambridgeshire County Council, Huntingdonshire District Council and Bedfordshire County Council) and the Wildlife Trust.

- It is too early to ascertain how the metric 'performs' as the monitoring of mitigation for most existing solar farms is at an early stage.

- It is recommended that the Applicant undertakes further skylark surveys depending on the timeline of the scheme.