

Botley West Solar Farm, Oxfordshire

Outline Skylark Compensation
Strategy Rev 1

EN010147/APP/20.4

Prepared for: PhotoVolt Development Partners GmbH
(PVDP) for the Applicant, SolarFive Ltd (SolarFive)



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1.Introduction

Sylvan Ltd. was commissioned by PhotoVolt Development Partners GmbH (PVDP) for the Applicant, SolarFive Ltd (SolarFive) to develop an outline Skylark Compensation Strategy (oSCS) with respect to the proposed Botley West Solar Farm Development Consent Order (DCO).

The oSCS has been developed in response to a request for information from the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (SoS) dated 14 April 2026 (as updated 20 April 2026 and 28 April 2026). Paragraph 33 of that request set out:

33. The OHA and the Berks Bucks Oxon Wildlife Trust have raised the issue of habitat loss for breeding skylark throughout examination [REP5-125, RR-0098 REP7-191]. The Secretary of State observes that the Skylark Technical Note [REP4-037] indicates that the Proposed Development site could potentially support 33.19 skylark territories. The 2024 surveys (APP-159) record 228 territories. If impacts to breeding skylark cannot be mitigated on site, the Applicant is requested to provide a Skylark Compensation Strategy providing off-site habitat to compensate for the net loss of breeding skylark. The strategy should be developed in collaboration with the OHA, and include details of long-term management, monitoring, reporting, and data-sharing. Compensation should not incorporate areas within the array, or areas owned by third parties unaffiliated with the Project. The Applicant is requested to provide drafting to secure this Strategy within the dDCO and relevant control documents.

The Applicant has therefore engaged with the Oxfordshire Host Authorities (OHA) to develop an oSCS through both meetings and via follow-up e-mail exchanges. The oSCS set out below is based on the outcome of the meeting on the 30/04/26 when the process by which the final compensation requirements would be determined was agreed.

This Rev1 version of the oSCS is based on discussions held with the OHA ecologists on the 03/07/26, 06/07/26 and 14/07/26 and is updated based on the final process by which

compensation requirements relating to skylark would be determined agreed with the OHA ecologists.

The oSCS is to be secured via a new Requirement inserted in the draft DCO (dDCO) (Requirement 16) that sets out that, prior to commencement, a detailed SCS (dSCS) will be agreed with the Secretary of State in consultation with the OHA and relevant statutory nature conservation body, based on the final detailed masterplan, and that the detailed SCS will be substantially in accordance with the principles set out in the oSCS.

The oSCS is to be based on the following process:

- Agree baseline of skylark population to establish requirements for mitigation/compensation;
- Agree carrying capacity of Site with respect to skylark territories, to be based on the final masterplan;
- Based on the baseline and carrying capacity of masterplan, agree number of territories displaced to be provided offsite; and
- Options with respect to offsite provision.

2. Baseline of skylark population

Breeding bird surveys were undertaken to support the application in 2023 and repeated in 2024 to provide two full breeding surveys with data provided in ES Appendix 9.9 [APP-158]. Data were highly varied with 72 skylark pairs recorded in 2023 and 228 in 2024.

As set out in the Skylark Technical Note (STN) [REP4-037], this variability was considered to represent the key issue with skylark population decline in an agricultural setting with appropriate breeding conditions not being present on a year-to-year basis. Therefore, it was agreed with the OHA that a third year of breeding skylark survey data would be gathered during the breeding season in 2026. Such surveys are currently on-going and are anticipated for completion July 2026.

Once complete, the third year's data will be used to derive an average number of territories that the Site has supported over three years of survey. It is this figure that will be used as the baseline number of skylark territories that the Site supports, recognising the inter-annual variability of skylark populations in an arable setting.

3. Carrying capacity of masterplan

In order to determine the carrying capacity of the masterplan with respect to skylark, the analysis completed to inform the STN would be repeated. This would comprise two elements:

- The number of territories directly supported within the Site; and
- The uplift in the number of territories outwith the Site provided for by the enhanced foraging opportunities within the Site through the provision of skylark plots, organic grazing for management over the majority of the site, new hedgerow margins etc, as set out in the outline Landscape and Ecology Management Plan (oLEMP).

To derive (1), an assessment of the area of habitat within the Site would be completed using the following criteria, as a precautionary approach to where skylark may nest:

- greater than 50m from hedgerow, tree, woodland and solar infrastructure (including fence lines) (i.e. area is away from any location where avian predators may perch);
- grassland habitat;
- >16m² in area; and
- within an area of grassland >5ha in overall size.

The SoS has highlighted that consideration should only be given to areas outside of array areas. Collectively, the Applicant and OHA assume this means the areas of grassland between panels which would be excluded. However, it was agreed between the parties that areas of grassland where panels have been left out to protect buried archaeology and buffers associated with residential amenity could be included in the calculation as long as they met with the four criteria above.

Once the area of habitat within the Site that is considered suitable for nesting skylark has been determined, the carrying capacity of that area would then be calculated based on a territory density of 0.47-46 territories/ha for the majority of the Site. The use of a high territory density (from Fox 2022) is based on the fact that, as set out in Table 11.1 of the oLEMP, the grassland areas will be

managed to ensure they are the correct height during the breeding season to allow skylark to nest and to have multiple broods (skylark will have up to four broods a year in optimal habitat conditions), with that management also combined with the enhanced foraging opportunities for skylark that the organic management regime and other features (such as skylark plots amongst the panels) set out in the oLEMP will allow.

For the areas of grassland associated with the residential amenity buffers, a lower territory density of 0.23 territories/ha would be used to reflect the additional predatory pressure that ground nesting birds would be under in these areas due to domestic cats.

To derive (2), it was agreed with the OHA that this element could be part qualitative and based on professional judgement and part quantitative. Accounting for this enhancement in the dSCS will be based on an analysis of the area of suitable nesting habitat in the fields 50-100m around the Site. This is on the basis that skylark will forage circa 100m from their nests but will avoid nesting within 50m of hedgerows; as such, an assessment of hedgerow presence on the edge of the Site final design will be made and a measurement of the area the suitable habitat within 50m-100m completed if a hedgerow is present and 100m if a hedgerow is absent.

To account for the current population of that surrounding landscape, the current landuse will be assessed and the density of skylark territories in that habitat used (from Fox 2022). Provision of enhanced foraging opportunities can double the skylark territory density so the difference between the Fox (2022) density and the enhanced density would be used to calculate the final uplift in territory enhancement outwith the Site.

The final carrying capacity will therefore be:

(1) Number of territories directly supported + (2) Uplift in number of territories present in surrounding landscape = carrying capacity of Site.

4. Number of displaced territories

Following the above analysis, the final number of displaced territories requiring offset will be calculated as:

Baseline average number of territories – carrying capacity of the Project site = number of displaced territories.

5. Offsite provision

Once the number of territories to be displaced has been established, the requirement for offsite provision with respect to skylark will be agreed. The SoS's request that such provision is not associated with any third-party land has been considered and discussed with Blenheim Palace who have confirmed they have land available to implement appropriate compensatory measures. In any event, the draft Requirement secures the need for evidence of relevant land agreements to be provided.

Such measures will be fully detailed in the dSCS but will include a combination of the following:

- Fields currently under intensive winter-sown arable converted to spring-sown arable;
- Fields currently under intensive winter-sown arable converted to meadow grassland; and
- Provision of skylark plots and other features to support skylark foraging in winter-sown arable.

The management of these measures will be set out in the dSCS but with the following core principles, as necessary:

- Ensure grass/crop height across the majority of the field is between 20-30cm in March to enable skylark nesting and multiple broods to be raised. This can be achieved through either low-intensity grazing or mowing parts of the sward;
- Ensure a variety of other sward heights are present (i.e. shorter sward/bareground, longer grasses and areas of tussocky grassland) to provide the best opportunities for breeding and foraging birds;
- Grassland grazing will be shut up between April and July to maximise skylark nesting opportunities; and
- Provision and management of skylark plots will be as per section 11.7 of the oLEMP.

It is anticipated that adaptive management will be adopted to ensure that, for example, grazing stocking rates are managed to maintain the necessary sward heights, following the results of monitoring. The provision of alternative or adaptive management is also built into the drafting of the new Requirement 16.

In addition to land within Blenheim ownership, the Applicant ~~discussed~~ agreed with the OHA Ecologists, that the option of agreeing a contribution to ~~the pilot Skylark Compensation Scheme~~ any relevant strategic compensation schemes that may ~~being~~ run in Oxfordshire will also be considered with respect to fulfilling the requirement for offsite provision by NatureSpace using a similar model to that adopted for the great crested newt District Level Licence. Such a contribution would be derived based on the same calculations described above to provide the necessary offsite compensation.

6. Monitoring and data sharing

If off-site compensation is delivered on land owned by Blenheim Palace, the areas chosen will be incorporated into the monitoring regime for the Project as a whole for breeding birds, as set out in sections 12 and 13 of the oLEMP. It will therefore comprise surveys in Years 1, 2, 4, 6 and 10 followed by every 5 years for the lifetime of the Project.

If ~~the NatureSpace a strategic~~ solution is adopted, ~~that any such~~ scheme ~~is anticipated has to have~~ its own monitoring, the cost of which ~~is would be~~ included within the price that users pay.

As set out in section 12 of the oLEMP, all monitoring data from the Project will be reported to the Local Planning Authority within four months of the completion of the relevant surveys.

Data will also be shared with the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre, and relevant national/regional environmental recording schemes.

7. Securing the SCS

The SCS is secured within the dDCO through the inclusion of a new Requirement 16. This drafting has been based on the draft requirement suggested by the Examining Authority in their suggested modification PC004 of the dDCO [PD-015] as well as by reference to the precedent in the Five Estuaries Offshore Wind Farm DCO 2025.

- *No part of Work No. 1 may commence until a skylark compensation strategy in relation to that part has been submitted to and approved by the Secretary of State in consultation with the relevant statutory nature conservation body and the local planning authority for the area in which the compensation measure is to be provided.*
- *The skylark compensation strategy must be substantially in accordance with the principles set out in the outline skylark compensation strategy and include-*
 - *the location(s) of where the compensation measures will be delivered and the ecological suitability of that location or locations, including details of the capacity and ability of the compensation areas to successfully compensate for the impact of the authorised development on skylarks;*
 - *confirmation that the necessary landowner agreement(s) are in place;*
 - *an implementation timetable for delivery of the compensation measure, including any arrangements made with a third party for implementation of the measures;*
 - *details for the ongoing management and maintenance of the compensation measures;*
 - *details for the ongoing monitoring and reporting of the effectiveness of the compensation measures including-*
 - *survey methods;*
 - *survey programmes;*
 - *success criteria; and*

- *timescales for the monitoring reports to be delivered under sub-paragraph (4);*
- *details of any alternative or adaptive management measures, including details of the factors used to trigger any alternative or adaptive management measures; and*
- *details of how survey and monitoring data will be shared in the appropriate formats with the relevant Local Environmental Records Centre(s) and relevant ecological recording schemes.*
- *The undertaker must implement the measures set out in the skylark compensation strategy as approved by the Secretary of State, unless otherwise agreed by the Secretary of State following consultation with the relevant statutory nature conservation body and the local planning authority for the area in which the compensation measure is to be provided.*
- *Results from the monitoring and reporting scheme referred to in paragraph (2)(e) must be submitted to the Secretary of State, the relevant statutory nature conservation body and the local planning authority for the area in which the compensation measure is to be provided following the monitoring timetables set out in the outline skylark compensation strategy. This must include details of the effectiveness of the compensation measures delivered. If the undertaker, or on receipt of a monitoring report, the Secretary of State, determines that the compensation measures delivered have been ineffective the undertaker must provide proposals for any alternative or adaptive management measures to address this. Any proposals to address the ineffectiveness of the compensation measures must thereafter be implemented by the undertaker as approved in writing by the Secretary of State in consultation with the relevant statutory nature conservation body and the local planning authority for the area in which the compensation measure is to be provided.*