Meridian Solar Farm

EN010169

Volume 8

Post-Submission Application Documents

8.29 Post ISH1 Note: Best and Most Versatile (BMV) Land Take

APFP Regulation 5(2)(q)

Infrastructure Planning (Applications: Prescribed Forms and Procedure) Regulations 2009

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1. Introduction

1.1.1. During Issue Specific Hearing 1 (ISH1) held on 9 September 2026, the ExA queried whether the DCO Application documents provided certainty that Best and Most Versatile (BMV) agricultural land would be restored to its original agricultural land classification following decommissioning, noting that the ES mentions restoration to the original grade could not be guaranteed in all locations. Action Point 1 in the **Action Points from ISH1** [EV3-008] set out an action for the Applicant to provide a clarification note addressing this matter.

1.1.2. This technical note is the Applicant's response to ISH1 Action Point 1. It consolidates information contained within **ES Chapter 5: Agriculture and Soils** (Doc Ref. 6.1 Rev 1) and the **Outline Soil Management Plan (OSMP)** (Doc Ref. 7.14 Rev 1) to summarise proposals for soil and land restoration during decommissioning of the Scheme.

1.1.3. In summary, paragraph 5.7.2 of the **OSMP** (Doc Ref. 7.14 Rev 1) sets out that the aim of the Scheme is to restore all agricultural land without any degradation of the current ALC Grade, as informed by the detailed ALC survey. The **OSMP** (Doc Ref. 7.14 Rev 1) includes a range of measures for this restoration during the decommissioning of the Scheme, including for any areas of hardstanding. However, in the absence of empirical evidence demonstrating that BMV land that has been sealed for 40 years could be restored within the decommissioning period, for the purposes of the assessment, a precautionary approach has been adopted that treats hardstanding as if permanent development.

1.1.4. As explained in paragraph 5.8.2 of **ES Chapter 5: Agriculture and Soils** (Doc Ref. 6.1 Rev 1), the assessment presented within the ES considers a worst-case scenario, whereby loss of BMV land that is under hardstanding during the operation of the Scheme is presumed permanent. This is because, while there are methods to restore soil quality within areas which have been subject to hardstanding, it cannot be guaranteed that these methods will be successful in restoring soils to the same grade within the timeframe of the decommissioning phase (i.e. within 2 years, and no later than the final date of decommissioning), as it may take several years for soils to fully recover.

1.1.5. This precautionary assessment method follows the approach advocated by the Secretary of State in the Springwell Solar Farm DCO Decision Letter,[1] where the Secretary of State concluded that it was appropriate to use this approach for a precautionary assessment of effects. This approach to the assessment was also requested in respect of the Scheme by Natural England within their relevant representation [RR-140]. It is noted that within **ES Chapter 5: Agriculture and Soils** (Doc Ref. 6.1 Rev 1) submitted at Deadline 1, this assessment approach has been extended to also apply to Grade 3a land (in addition to Grade 1 and 2 land) at Natural England's request.

1.1.6. Subsequent sections of this technical note provide a summary of where permanent and temporary effects have been identified within **ES Chapter 5: Agriculture and Soils** (Doc Ref. 6.1 Rev 1) and proposals for restoration, as secured through the **OSMP** (Doc Ref. 7.14 Rev 1). For clarity, while the ES assessment assumes a permanent impact from hardstanding, this has not been relied upon to propose no restoration. Restoration is secured for all areas of hardstanding.

2. Summary of Permanent and Temporary Effects

2.1.1. **ES Chapter 5: Agriculture and Soils** (Doc Ref. 6.1 Rev 1) considers the land-take of the Scheme as outlined in **ES Chapter 2: The Scheme** [AS-017] in assessing the likely impacts and effects on agriculture and soils. Land use was differentiated between permanent and temporary effects.

2.1.2. Permanent effects comprise:

- Construction of hardstanding on up to 15ha of BMV land, for the On-Site Substation and BESS Compounds, Solar Stations and CSEC Compounds. These are not truly permanent and would be removed during decommissioning, however, as explained above, it may not be possible to achieve the current land quality by the end of or within one year following the decommissioning phase. This has, therefore, been assumed to result in

[1] EN010149-001062-Springwell Solar Farm -Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero Decision Letter. Paragraph 4.49. Available at: https://nsip-documents.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/published-documents/EN010149-001062-Springwell%20Solar%20Farm%20-%20Secretary%20of%20State%20for%20Energy%20Security%20and%20Net%20Zero%20Decision%20Letter.pdf [Accessed 16/09/2026]

a permanent effect on the grade of BMV land on a precautionary basis, as explained above.

- Planting of trees and shrubs in hedgerows and groups of trees has also been assessed as permanent because, once established, the planting provides positive ecological and landscape contributions, and may require local authority or Forestry Commission approval for removal. Whilst this would limit the potential for return of highly sensitive land to agriculture upon decommissioning, tree and shrub planting is proposed only along field boundaries, and the area of these linear features has been calculated by buffering to each side by 5 m, which may over-estimate the scale of land use change. It is also noted that planting has beneficial effects in relation to soil function and other environmental services, and the effect on BMV land is limited by strategic location at field boundaries.

2.1.3. Temporary effects comprise:

- Long-term restriction to agricultural land across the Order Limits (that does not include hardstanding) which is considered easily reversible and has been assessed as not resulting in the permanent downgrading of ALC grade (e.g. land-take for PV panels, access roads, pylons, H-poles).
- Short-term to medium-term restriction to agricultural land as a result of construction compounds, working areas and access, which also would not result in the permanent downgrading of ALC grade.

2.1.4. The data relating to the area of land use change, also presented in Table 5-16 of **ES Chapter 5: Agriculture and Soils** (Doc Ref. 6.1 Rev 1) are tabulated for ease of reference in Table 1 below. Areas of proposed grassland and land retained in agricultural production are identified within the table, but these areas require no restoration and are not discussed in the following sections. Further break-down of areas by Scheme element is provided within Tables 5-12 to 5-15 of **ES Chapter 5: Agriculture and Soils** (Doc Ref. 6.1 Rev 1).

Table 1: Summary of Permanent and Temporary Effects by ALC Grade

Receptor & Sensitivity	Effect	Land-take (ha)	Magnitude of Impact	Residual Effect
Grade 1 & 2 (very high)	Permanent downgrading	11.9	Medium	Major (significant)
	Permanent landscaping	8.3	Medium	Minor (not significant)

Receptor & Sensitivity	Effect	Land-take (ha)	Magnitude of Impact	Residual Effect
	Temporary restriction	216.8	Low	Moderate (significant)
Grade 3a (high)	Permanent downgrading	3.04	Low	Minor (not significant)
	Permanent landscaping	10.8	Medium	Minor (not significant)
	Temporary restriction	165.5	Low	Minor (not significant)
Grade 3b (medium)	Permanent landscaping	31.5	High	Minor (not significant)
	Temporary restriction	472.3	Low	Negligible (not significant)
All grades	Proposed grassland and retained agricultural land use.	542.6	Low	Negligible (not significant)

3. Restoration for Permanent Effects

3.1.1. All On-Site Substations and BESS Compounds, Solar Stations and CSEC Compounds would be removed during the decommissioning phase, but the assessment recognises that a longer period may be required for restoration to the baseline ALC grade. Restoration approaches would be set out within a detailed soil management plan prepared in substantial accordance with the **OSMP** (Doc Ref. 7.14 Rev 1).

3.1.2. During the construction of these elements of the Scheme, areas of hardstanding will be stripped of topsoil and the soil stored in bunds for re-use in restoration during the decommissioning phase. Slope angles of the bunds, their seeding with a herbaceous plant cover and maintenance to prevent regeneration of tree and shrub species, during this long-term storage, are set out in the **OSMP** (Doc Ref. 7.14 Rev 1).

3.1.3. During decommissioning, following the removal of the infrastructure, the exposed subsoil would be ripped with a winged tine plough. At least two passes will be made across the area with the direction of cultivation switched, at the second pass, to be at right angles to the original direction of travel. A cover crop[2] would be sown directly to the exposed subsoil to introduce biological activity. The crop would be retained through a spring/summer growing season of four to six months, before ploughing the crop into the ground with a mouldboard agricultural plough. At this stage the topsoil would be reinstated by loose tipping. Further cultivation of the topsoil would be undertaken by ploughing or power-harrowing, in advance of sowing with a grass sward or arable crop.

3.1.4. Over time, extending beyond the decommissioning phase, it is considered that the original baseline conditions could be re-established, but initially the versatility of cropping options is reduced, affecting productive potential.

3.1.5. In addition, no removal or restoration of areas of trees and shrubs, planted as part of the Scheme, is proposed as part of the DCO Application, although small parts may need to be cut back to facilitate access during decommissioning. There is evidence[3] also that trees and hedges enhance agricultural production on neighbouring land, particularly under conditions of strong winds and drought.

4. Restoration for Temporary Effects

4.1.1. Temporary effects are those that utilise agricultural land in the short, medium or long-term but after restoration do not comprise the productivity and versatility of the land. Restoration will deliver the baseline ALC grade. The construction of PV panels, access roads, pylons and H-poles will limit farming options, because of the physical obstruction of the infrastructure. However, installation of these features will not remove soils. The **OSMP** (Doc Ref. 7.14

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[2] A cover crop is a crop grown for soil protection and improvement rather than for harvest. Cover crops typically combine a range of species, including nitrogen-fixing vetches and clovers, grasses and cereals to build root mass, and brassicas (such as mustard) to help break up compacted soils.

[3] The Campaign to Protect Rural England commissioned research by the Organic Research Centre, widely reported in the farming press, indicating a 10% yield boost from hedges on arable land (Available at: [redacted] USDA Forest Service consolidated data for major crops in the USA and identified greater boosts to yields (Available at: [redacted]

Rev 1) includes measures to protect soils during their installation, including temporary topsoil stripping and storage and physical soil protection measures, such as matting, stone surfacing or soil stabilisation. Re-establishing areas to the baseline ALC grade will be achieved and productive capacity retained.

4.1.2. Restoration of the land to its baseline will be achieved following good practice guidance contained within the **OSMP** (Doc Ref. 7.14 Rev 1). The **OSMP** (Doc Ref. 7.14 Rev 1) includes measures to protect soils, measures for successful restoration and measures for aftercare following reinstatement, including addressing unforeseen outcomes. For example, subsurface compaction is not anticipated but can be alleviated by ripping with a winged tine plough. Surface compaction would be restored to baseline with a mouldboard plough to cut, lift and invert the established sward, presenting options for grassland replanting or arable cropping.

4.1.3. The restoration of land used temporarily during construction will be specified in the detailed Soil Management Plan which is to be prepared in substantial accordance with the **OSMP** (Doc Ref. 7.14 Rev 1), and developed in conjunction with the appointed Contractor. At the construction stage, soil budgets for the volume of topsoil stripping and its storage locations will be confirmed. The Contractor's preferred approach to ground protection will be established and details of the works developed from the principles contained within the **OSMP** (Doc Ref. 7.14 Rev 1). Soil protection may comprise reinforced matting, stoning or soil stabilisation. However, in all cases, topsoil will be stripped and stored locally in bunds (as specified in the **OSMP** (Doc Ref. 7.14 Rev 1)) for reinstatement. Subsoil compaction would be ameliorated with a winged tine plough.

4.1.4. Short-term temporary use will not have resulted in anaerobism and so the sowing of a cover crop (as proposed after long-term hardstanding) is not required. Topsoil, from the temporary bund, will be loose tipped back to these areas and the seedbed established with an agricultural plough or power harrow. Temporary compounds required for the decommissioning phase would be restored in the same manner.

4.1.5. Land would be returned to the landowner after decommissioning. The land will be suitable for resumption of agriculture. Those working the land are best able to identify localised variation in land productivity. The **OSMP** (Doc Ref. 7.14 Rev 1) notes that expert inputs from soil scientists, agronomists, or agricultural engineers would be available to support further improvement of localised underperforming areas.

5. Summary

5.1.1. Permanent effects on agricultural land have been identified in areas of hardstanding and in areas of tree and hedge planting. All hardstanding would be reinstated to agricultural land during the decommissioning phase, but the restoration process may require a longer period for restoration to the baseline ALC grade. For the purposes of the assessment, it has been assumed that BMV land would not be restored to its original agricultural land classification at the conclusion of decommissioning phase but would recover over a medium-term timeframe. As such, initially the versatility of cropping options would be reduced, affecting the productive potential of the land. Permanent tree and hedge planting will be retained but is considered beneficial to the productivity of surrounding fields.

5.1.2. Temporary effects are those that utilise soils in situ, maintain a permeable surface layer, or have a limited surface area, which enables soil aeration. Restoration of temporary effects on BMV and non-BMV land will recreate the baseline conditions following decommissioning, without implications for productivity and versatility of the land (i.e. productive potential is expected to be the same as at baseline).

5.1.3. Approaches to soil protection and restoration, for permanent and temporary effects, are specified in the **OSMP** (Doc Ref. 7.14 Rev 1). A detailed soil management plan would be prepared in substantial accordance with the **OSMP** (Doc Ref. 7.14 Rev 1) post-DCO consent and include information on topsoil volumes to be stripped and storage locations. It would specify the approach and materials to provide soil protection and reinstatement.