Meeting note

Project name White Elm Solar Farm

File reference EN0110003

Status Final

Author The Planning Inspectorate

Date 04 June 2024
Meeting with ELMYA RPC UK
Venue Microsoft Teams

Meeting Project Inception Meeting

objectives

Circulation All attendees

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 PA2008). Any advice given under section 51 would not constitute legal advice upon which applicants (or others) could rely. The Inspectorate explained that the publication of the meeting note could be delayed up to six months, or until a formal scoping request had been submitted.

Introduction to the project

The Applicant provided an introduction to the proposed development outlining that it will comprise the construction, operation, maintenance and decommissioning of a grid connected solar PV generating station together with battery energy storage system (BESS), access, landscaping and associated development. The site is located 7.5 kilometres to the north of Stowmarket within the three parishes of Mendlesham, Wickham Skeith and Thwaite. The site lies west of the A140 and extends to approximately 675 acres. The Applicant noted that there are a number of public rights of way running across the site and conservation areas adjacent to the site with a number of associated listed buildings. The Applicant advised that the majority of the site comprised arable fields of relatively low value for biodiversity.

The Applicant outlined that a 300MW AC Import/Export connection offer had been obtained from National Grid into a 400kV transmission system with an estimated connection date for 2031. The Applicant stated that the proposed development would connect to existing grid infrastructure through a new substation with the exact substation location still to be determined by National Grid. The Applicant stated that the connection is not associated with the National Grid's Norwich to Tilbury project. The Inspectorate advised the Applicant that the project should be refined as far as possible in advance of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) scoping, and that where optionality remains this should be reflected clearly in any scoping request made.

The Applicant advised that the proposed development would have an operating capacity greater than 50 MW DC with an associated BESS facility. The Inspectorate were advised

that the development would have a temporary 40-year operational lifespan. Following the operational phase, the development would be decommissioned and removed from the site.

The Applicant advised that the site is formed of 2 landownerships and currently they do not anticipate the need for CPO powers however provisions would be included into the Development Consent Order (DCO) as precautionary powers.

Project Timeline

The Applicant provided the Inspectorate with an overview of the anticipated project timeline. The Applicant stated that environmental baseline studies remain ongoing from winter 2023 and early 2024 with the soft launch of the project to stakeholders and communities having occurred earlier in 2024. The submission of an EIA scoping request is anticipated to occur in summer 2024 with Non-statutory consultation in late 2024/early 2025. Statutory consultation is expected to commence in summer 2025 ahead of a DCO submission in summer 2026.

The Inspectorate advised the Applicant that Advice Note 7 has guidance in relation to submission of scoping requests, including the technical specification for the GIS shapefile. In addition, the Inspectorate requested an accurate anticipated submission date for a scoping request to be provided as soon as practicable. The Inspectorate noted that a number of solar project scoping opinions have been recently issued and more are due in the coming months; the Inspectorate advised that the Applicant may wish to review these scoping opinions for further insight.

Stakeholder Engagement

The Applicant advised the Inspectorate of the proposed consultation that is scheduled as part of the project timeline. The Applicant provided an overview of the soft launch of the project that had taken place advising that the engagement had focused upon informing political stakeholders, the community, local businesses, interest groups and seldom heard groups.

The Applicant outlined the scheduled consultation including the Non-statutory and statutory consultations. The Applicant advised that they anticipate the Non-statutory consultation to include two consultation events along with two webinars. Further to the Non-statutory consultation events the statutory consultation would include two consultation events along with offers for webinars.

The Inspectorate asked whether engagement with other statutory consultation bodies such as Natural England and the Environment Agency had commenced. The Applicant stated that technical specialists in its team had engaged in initial discussions and this was due to continue through the EIA scoping process.

NSIP Reform

The Inspectorate advised the Applicant that the updated Pre-application Prospectus had been published on 16 May 2024 with the expression of interest process now open and running until 10 July 2024. Further advice can be found in the Pre-application Prospectus and the published Frequently Asked Questions.