|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Meeting note | | |
| **Project name** | **High Grove Solar** |
| **File reference** | **EN0110010** |
| **Status** | **FINAL** |
| **Author** | **The Planning Inspectorate** |
| **Date** | **30 May 2024** |
| **Meeting with** | **RWE Renewables** |
| **Venue** | **Microsoft Teams** |
| **Meeting objectives** | **Inception meeting** |
| **Circulation** | All attendees/ additional contacts to share meeting note |

**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.

**Details of the proposed development**

The proposed High Grove Solar project is a solar generation project with 720 Mega Watts capacity and co-located battery storage (BESS). Core elements of the design include a number of onsite 132 kilovolts (kV) substations and one single 400kV substation with works to connect to an existing overhead line. Underground cables will connect the solar arrays and the 400kV substation. The proposals are to be situated across a number of panel areas, spanning approximately 23km. The Applicant plans to have BESS containers located across the site, the height of which are designed to be lower in height than the solar panels. Further, the Applicant is making plans for mitigation measures including planting and enhancements to elements such as Public Rights of Way. The Applicant has agreement from National Grid for a connection date of 2031.

The project requires a new National Grid substation which the Applicant expects to be located within the Development Consent Order (DCO) order limits but will be installed and operated by National Grid. The Applicant advised that discussions are being had with National Grid and they are hopeful of reaching an agreement on the location of the substation. The Inspectorate asked the Applicant to characterise any risks around uncertainty about the grid connection works to the DCO application programme. The Applicant confirmed that its siting expectations align with National Grid’s approach to assessments due to the substation site’s close proximity to overhead lines. The Applicant is not in position to confirm the substation location at present; however, it is anticipated it will be located adjacent to the overhead line that crosses land controlled by the Applicant and therefore it is planning ahead on that basis.

The Inspectorate asked the Applicant if there are any significant associated works aside from the principal development that might constitute an NSIP in their own right. The Applicant confirmed that there are no planned works to support the proposed development that exceed the NSIP thresholds. The Applicant is unaware of any other solar DCO applications within the area but is mindful of cumulative impacts owing to Necton substation being associated with other major works.

**Activities to date**

The Applicant has identified Breckland Council and Norfolk County Council as the host authorities and has arranged a meeting with both authorities for June 2024. The Applicant has begun early surveys and optioneering work around locations of the substations, grid connection routes and infrastructure within land parcels, including high level landscape and visual impact appraisal of land parcels.

The Applicant has been working on its non-statutory consultation strategy by stakeholder mapping and preparation of materials for early engagement and organisation of events.

**Compulsory Acquisition**

Eleven landowners (Los) have been identified by the applicant in relation to the solar array areas which support the Proposed Development. The Applicant explained that voluntary agreements have been signed by nine Los and that discussions with the further two Los are progressing. The Applicant hopes a voluntary agreement will be made by Statutory Consultation period, and aims to minimise the need for compulsory acquisition (CA) powers; however, their use cannot be ruled out at this stage, particularly in relation to land associated with grid connections between land parcels and the 400kV substation connection.

**EIA Scoping and Environmental Surveys**

The Applicant outlined surveys being conducted to inform its Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) scoping and its Preliminary Environmental Impact Report (PEIR). These include geophysical surveys, wintering and breeding birds’ surveys, Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) and soil sampling, glint and glare (owing partially to proximity to an RAF base), and arboricultural surveys amongst others. The Applicant indicated that it is seeking to agree the need for any targeted trial trenching with relevant consultation bodies.

The Applicant explained that the site is located adjacent to Breckland Special Protection Areas (SPA). It stated that stone curlew was a qualifying feature of the SPA but the risk area for this species was south from the Proposed Development. The Applicant advised that there is also hydrological connection to the River Wensum Special Area of Conservation (SAC). The Applicant proposes to undertake Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) screening. The Applicant described that there are no other designated sites with the proposed Order Limits although there are several Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) within a 10km radius, together with some ancient woodland and other priority habitats. The Applicant has identified three scheduled monuments and other non designated heritage assets within the order limits. The Applicant expects that impacts on these receptors can be avoided through the project design. The Applicant stated that the majority of the provisional ALC is Grade 3.

The Inspectorate asked if there has been engagement with Statutory Consultation Bodies. The Applicant advised that meetings are being arranged to discuss the project with the relevant bodies. These meetings will be prior to submitting its EIA scoping request if possible.

The Inspectorate advised the Applicant to review [Advice Note 7](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nationally-significant-infrastructure-projects-advice-note-seven-environmental-impact-assessment-process-preliminary-environmental-information-an) on the GOV.UK website for information on how to prepare and submit its scoping request.

**Consultation**

The Applicant outlined their plan for engagement and consultation with stakeholders and the local community. The Inspectorate advised the Applicant to consider several venues to reflect the rural location and different parcels of land within the proposed order limits for consultation events and for future needs such as hearings, should the project be accepted for examination.

The Inspectorate noted that the non-statutory consultation and Scoping Report are scheduled within the project programme to take place in July 2024. The Inspectorate advised of the risks involved when conducting EIA Scoping and non-statutory consultation concurrently. Based on previous experience, this approach can lead to confusion between the two processes, in particular for parish councils, who may not be as aware of the differences between them. The Inspectorate further advised that the Applicant should take steps to familiarise bodies with the two processes and consider conversations being held prior to launching publicly so that it is understood what the purpose of each exercise is and to whom consultees should respond. All responses from consulted bodies to the Scoping Request should be received by the Inspectorate as these will need to be considered in the Scoping Opinion.

The Applicant noted that the intention had been for non-statutory consultation to occur in June/ July prior to the Scoping Report submission, but had been delayed due to the election, leading to the overlap between the two processes. The Applicant considers that a delay to either process to avoid overlap was not considered necessary given that the issue could be addressed through clear communication and it was a limited number of stakeholders who were likely to be affected. This would impact the programme for the project. The Inspectorate acknowledged that other DCOs were proceeding with overlapping timescales and that this could be managed.

The Applicant made a note of this to ensure that it is reflected in consultation materials where appropriate.

**Project programme**

The Inspectorate advised the Applicant to read through the [new pre-application service prospectus](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/nationally-significant-infrastructure-projects-2024-pre-application-prospectus) and [Frequently Asked Questions](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nationally-significant-infrastructure-projects-2024-pre-application-prospectus-frequently-asked-questions) documents for guidance, including regulation 8 guidance in relation to fees. Further, the Inspectorate advised that Expressions of Interest for the pre-application service is open and running until July 10, 2024.

The Applicant outlined the project programme:

* May 2024 Design freeze One for non-statutory consultation and scoping purposes
* July 2024 Scoping Report submission
* July 2024 Non-Statutory Consultation
* October / November 2024 Design Freeze Two for Statutory Consultation purposes
* October / November 2024 Statement of Community Consultation (SoCC) consultation
* March 2025 PEIR publication and Statutory Consultation
* April / May 2025 Design Freeze Three for DCO application purposes
* Autumn 2025 DCO submission

**Specific decisions/ follow-up required?**

The following actions were agreed:

* Case Officer to arrange practicalities with Applicant for Inspectorate NI Project webpage and email address and discuss further meeting timing estimated for late August/early September 2024.