



Inception Meeting note

Project name	The Droves Solar Farm
Case reference	EN0110013
Status	Final
Author	The Planning Inspectorate
Date of meeting	9 October 2024
Meeting with	Droves Solar Farm Limited
Venue	Microsoft Teams
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 Planning Act). 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 Inception Meeting note could be delayed by up to 6 months, if required by the developer for commercial confidentiality / sensitivity reasons, or until a formal scoping request had been submitted.

The proposed development

The applicant provided an overview of their proposed nationally significant infrastructure project (NSIP).

A Development Consent Order (DCO) will be sought for a solar farm comprising of ground mounted photovoltaic panels to be located on land north of Swaffham and south of Castle Acre, in Norfolk, with an expected generating capacity of over 50 megawatts (MW) of Alternating Current (AC) renewable energy. The proposed development would be connected onsite to the existing National Electricity Transmission System (NETS) 400kV overhead lines and include a Battery Energy Storage System (BESS), a new project substation, connection to a new National Grid substation, a Customer Substation, mitigation and enhancement areas, and associated development. The site is situated within the authority area of Norfolk County Council.

The applicant, Droves Solar Farm Limited, are a subsidiary of Island Green Power, specialising in the development of renewable energy, in particular solar and battery energy storage systems. They have experience of the DCO process from sponsoring seven solar

DCO projects, including the Cottam Solar DCO which received development consent recently.

Consenting programme

The project was launched in September 2024 with introductory letters sent to key stakeholders, with the Co Design of the project taking place in the autumn. Submission of the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Scoping Opinion Request is expected in November 2024. Statutory Consultation and a Preliminary Environment Information Report (PEIR) is due to be completed in Q2/3 of 2025, with the submission of the DCO to the Inspectorate expected in November 2025.

Early engagement with statutory bodies, local authorities, and stakeholders

Introductory letters were sent to relevant Members of Parliament, Councillors and Parish Councillors in September 2024 to provide a briefing on the project. Non-statutory consultation, introducing the project to local stakeholders and community groups at this early stage, was held between 17 September to 1 October 2024, which included two early engagement workshops, a presentation, and a Q&A session. The applicant received initial feedback on potential issues, such as loss of agricultural land, cumulative effects from the proposed High Grove and East Pye Solar NSIPs, and possible impacts on local traffic, local biodiversity and ecology, and community benefits. Online technical workshops were held with planning officers from Norfolk County Council and Breckland Council to discuss transport and water matters as well as socio-economic / community benefits.

Environmental constraints and issues

The applicant advised that there are no statutory designations or ancient woodland within the site. However, there is a scheduled monument located to the northwest of the site (the Old Hall Moated Scheduled Monument), the Caste Acre Conservation Area to the north, and a Registered Park and Gardens located to the west. A Special Area of Conservation and Special Protected Area are located to the northwest. Most of the site is said to fall within Flood Zone 1.

The applicant said that nearby designated heritage assets are well screened in respect of views to and from the site, or where the site is visible in this regard, it is largely in discrete sections of the land.

The existing landscape features include woodland blocks, field hedgerows and mature trees with marl pits and ponds north of Swaffham. The visual considerations at this stage include views from nearby settlements and residential properties, public rights of way (such as Peddars Way and Nar Valley Way), local road users and public access, proximity to nearby settlements such as Castle Acre Priory and Castle Acre Castle, parks and open spaces.

The applicant has identified cumulative developments within the vicinity of the proposed development, either operational or under construction, and confirmed that there are

ongoing discussions between the projects with the goal of coordinating where feasible.

EIA Scoping

The Inspectorate directed the applicant to recently published technical advice on scoping for solar development. The applicant confirmed that it was aware of this advice and said it would submit its Commitments Register alongside the EIA Scoping report on 7 November 2024 and a GIS shapefile would be sent to the Planning Inspectorate on 24 October 2024.

The Inspectorate queried whether options would be presented in the scoping request and the applicant confirmed that optionality would remain for panel type.

Environmental surveys

The applicant said several initial surveys and appraisals of onsite habitats and the topography of the predominantly mixed-use farmland were currently ongoing. This includes ecology surveys of breeding birds and wintering birds, which have been undertaken since 2024, while initial landscape and visual surveys started in the summer with further seasonal surveys planned for January 2025 (subject to agreement with the relevant local authorities). Other surveys are planned to identify any management of trees with bat roosting potential, hedgerow corridors and treelines. The applicant intends to retain certain features of the environment using appropriate buffers and new planting. Surveys will also assess the settings of any heritage assets and any important views, as well as noise, transport, and access issues. Assessment of any below ground archaeological remains within the site are also due to be undertaken.

Impacts from vehicle movements associated with building and decommissioning the proposed development are to be assessed. The site is said to have good vehicular access from the A1065 to the east, providing direct access to the A47 and strategic road network in the south, which could reduce the need for construction vehicles to travel through local villages.

Land and rights

The applicant advised that the proposed project was located within one area of land with one landowner. Access to the site would be from the existing road networks, with the possibility of road widening required at one junction.

Consultation (statutory and non-statutory)

Formulation of the applicant's Statement of Community Consultation is expected to take place in the early part of 2025, with formal consultation on the SoCC taking place in Q2 2025 followed by publication. The applicant plans to begin Statutory Consultation later in Q2 of 2025, in the form of in-person exhibitions and webinars. The Inspectorate advised the applicant of the importance of informing interested parties of how such issues have led to the design principles of the project.

Pre-application service

The applicant advised that it wishes to proceed with the basic level of pre-application service offered by the Inspectorate. It advised that owing to the measures taken by the project team, it did not envisage requiring any higher level of service. The Inspectorate advised that should a change of service level be requested, six months' notice would need to be given.

The applicant advised that it intended to issue a press release in the week commencing 14 October 2024, and requested launch of the Inspectorate's project website following this. The Inspectorate advised invoicing for the project would take place once the press release has taken place and would be issued before the launch of the project website.

Project email account

The project email account is: info@drovessolarfarm.co.uk

The project website is: <https://drovessolarfarm.co.uk/>

Feedback on the applicant's initial Programme Document (post meeting note)

The applicant supplied the Inspectorate with its initial Programme Document before the Inception Meeting in line with our request under the 2024 Pre-application Prospectus. Having reviewed the document, the Inspectorate considers that while it follows the expected content structure as set out in the government's pre-application guidance at paragraph 10, detail is needed on the following:

- the main issues and activities identified by the applicant (the Programme Document states that this section has been intentionally left blank for later completion, but some detail at this early stage as to what the applicant considers those issues are likely to be and any likely resolution or mitigation, would be welcomed);
- an indication as to whether the Programme Document has been shared with stakeholders, and whether any feedback was obtained;
- an indication as to whether any other consents or permissions are needed;
- the types of surveys being undertaken at this stage and any progress made;
- an outline of the 'risks' identified at this stage.

It would also be helpful if the applicant sets out when it intends to meet with the Inspectorate for project update meetings, which could be included in a subsequent iteration. Similarly, information as to when an Issues Tracker will be created and published on the applicant's project website page would also be welcomed, with the Programme Document to be published as soon as practicable.