



Inception Meeting note

Project name	East Pye Solar
Case reference	EN0110014
Status	Final
Author	The Planning Inspectorate
Date of meeting	24 October 2024
Meeting with	East Pye Ltd and their representatives from Stantec and Counter Context
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 proposed development

The Applicant provided an overview of their proposed nationally significant infrastructure project (NSIP) named East Pye Solar.

A Development Consent Order (DCO) will be sought for constructing and operating a solar photovoltaic (PV) generating station producing approximately 500 megawatts (MW) of Alternating Current (AC) of renewable energy, together with grid connection infrastructure including a new National Grid substation, a Customer Substation, Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) and associated development. The proposed development is to be located on multiple land parcels across approximately 1,100 hectares (2,718 acres), with the solar array sites concentrated near Long Stratton, Norfolk and an additional cluster of sites to the south of Great Moulton, within the administrative boundary of South Norfolk Council and Norfolk County Council. The proposed development would connect to the existing National Electricity Transmission System (NETS) 400Kv overhead line that passes through these sites (the Norwich to Bramford line).

In answer to a question by the Inspectorate, the Applicant explained that the design and layout of the chosen sites was based on the most viable locations to existing connecting infrastructure, the avoidance of environmental constraints (where feasible), and the availability of suitable land.

The Applicant, East Pye Solar Limited, explained that they are a subsidiary of Island Green Power specialising in the development of renewable energy, in particular solar and BESS. They have experience of the DCO process from sponsoring other solar DCO projects in the UK, including the Cottam Solar DCO which received development consent recently.

Responding to the Inspectorate on whether the parcels of land and proposed infrastructure constitute one NSIP or could be subdivided into smaller Town and Country Planning Act 1990 schemes, the Applicant said that experience of developing solar schemes in Lincolnshire has shown that the scale of projects, technology, land availability and mix of developers operating within the industry must be considered. A benefit of having one NSIP involving different land parcels is that this assists with undertaking the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA).

Consenting programme

The proposed development was launched in September 2024 with initial communications sent to stakeholders such as Members of Parliament, Councillors, Parish Councils, and others to introduce the project and explain how communities can influence and contribute as part of the pre-application process. Non-statutory consultation is being undertaken between 23 October and 6 December 2024 and will present the extent of the land available for the development and what the project will consist of. Communities will be invited to provide their initial views on the different issues and topics caused by the proposed NSIP. Their feedback will then be used to help review how consultation should be taken forward and further consultation views used to inform the details and design of the final scheme.

Submission of the EIA Scoping Request is expected by 13 January 2025, with the GIS shapefile and case information to be supplied to the Inspectorate at least two weeks beforehand. A Commitments Register will be submitted alongside the Scoping Request in view of the Inspectorate's latest published technical advice for solar development. Consultation with host authorities on the Applicant's draft Statement of Community Consultation (SoCC) is set for the Spring and publication in June 2025, followed by Statutory Consultation and the Preliminary Environmental Information Report due between June and August 2025.

Submission of the DCO application to the Inspectorate is expected in the week of 17 November 2025.

Early engagement with statutory bodies, local authorities, and stakeholders

Stakeholder engagement to date has consisted of initial briefings (materials and meetings) about the project to Norfolk County Council planning officers and members of South Norfolk Council, MPs and Parish Councils, as well as statutory consultees such as the Environment Agency and Natural England, and non-statutory consultees.

Environmental constraints and issues

The Applicant advised that environmental constraints in the surrounding area to the Proposed Development include Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Grade 2 Listed buildings and scheduled monuments. The Broads Special Area of Conservation and Special Protected Area is located to the east of the site, requiring a Habitats Regulations Assessment. Generally, there is said to be low flood risk in the immediate area. The land identified for development is mostly agricultural / arable grazing land.

Surveys are currently being undertaken by the Applicant including topographical, geophysical, noise, traffic counts, agricultural land classification, ecology (such as protected species) and glint and glare assessments. Traffic counting, noise monitoring and viewpoint photography may be undertaken at a later stage.

In reply to a question from the Inspectorate about the connecting cables, the Applicant said that most of the cables linking the solar array sites are expected to be predominately underground. A degree of flexibility is being sought at this early stage regarding the cable corridors until the outcome of the various surveys and land discussions are known. The positioning of above ground cables is expected to be limited and is being considered as part of the overall design of the scheme, with discussions being held with National Grid on the optimum siting of the new substation and any reconfiguration of existing or provision of new pylons to facilitate the connection to the grid.

In reply to a question from the Inspectorate about special procedures, the Applicant has not yet identified any Crown Land on or near the proposed development site (albeit property searches are on-going).

In reply to a question from the Inspectorate about how the land underneath the panels would be managed the Applicant stated that it was looking at different options such as farm animal grazing, wild meadow planting, and use of beehives.

The Applicant has identified other developments within proximity of the proposed site, such as the Drovers Solar Farm NSIP and High Grove Solar NSIP, both of which are at the pre-application stage. Cumulative effects from these developments will be considered where needed. The Applicant confirmed that there are ongoing discussions between the different project teams with the goal of coordinating relevant information where feasible and any lessons learned.

EIA Scoping

The Inspectorate directed the Applicant to recently published technical advice on scoping for solar development. The Inspectorate queried whether options would be presented in the scoping request and the Applicant confirmed that optionality would remain for panel type and locations of the cables within the identified cable route corridor.

From its initial discussions with statutory bodies, at this stage the Applicant is proposing to scope in matters such as landscape and visual, ecology, cultural heritage and archaeology, transport and access, noise, soils and agricultural land, climate change and ground conditions.

The Inspectorate queried whether there would be time to take informal consultation responses into account in the Scoping Report considering the given timescales and the Christmas period. The Applicant considered that there should be sufficient space between the end of the non-statutory consultation and the submission of its Scoping Request to enable relevant authorities to respond, take account of any impacts on their resources and ability to differentiate between the different types of feedback being sought.

Land and rights

The Applicant advised that there were several land parcels within the redline boundary of the project that were subject to option agreements. The Applicant also advised its land referencing team were reviewing the cable corridor route to establish if there are any land rights issues.

The Applicant further advised, in reply to a question from the Inspectorate, that the proposed development should not affect the nearby Network Rail line and it was aware of the constraints of BESS being located near to railway lines.

Consultation (statutory and non-statutory)

Publication of the SoCC and statutory consultation is expected to take place in the summer of 2025. 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.

The pre-application service

The Applicant advised that it wishes to proceed with the basic level of pre-application service offered by the Inspectorate, owing to the measures it has taken. The Inspectorate advised that a tier confirmation letter would be sent shortly after the inception meeting, and that should a change of service level be requested, six months' notice would need to be given.

Project email account

The Applicant's project email account is info@eastpyesolar.co.uk and the project website is <https://eastpyesolar.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 relevant 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 of the Programme Document. 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 on the Applicant's project website as soon as practicable.