



Inception Meeting note

Project name	EcoPower Suffolk Solar
Case reference	EN0110019
Status	Final
Author	The Planning Inspectorate
Date of meeting	31 January 2025
Meeting with	Meeting with Ecoenergy
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

A Development Consent Order (DCO) will be sought by EcoPower Suffolk Limited (the Applicant), a special purpose vehicle of Econergy International Limited, for a solar farm comprising of ground mounted solar photovoltaic (PV) panels, a Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) and substation, with associated and ancillary development, and a planned 400kV connection to the existing National Grid electricity substation at Leys Lane, Yaxley, Suffolk. The proposed development is expected to have a generation capacity of around 250 Megawatts (MW) and 11 gigawatt hours of energy storage.

The proposed development site is approximately 600 hectares (ha) in size on predominantly agricultural land, across five solar array areas situated around the Yaxley substation (on separate land parcels to the southwest of Stutson, northeast of Eye, north of Gislingham, north of Occold, and southwest of Thrandeston), together with cable route corridors (connecting the solar array areas and new substation to the Yaxley substation). The proposed development is located within the Mid Suffolk District Council area. The Great Eastern Main Railway Line as well as the A140 road run between the proposed solar array areas and the cable route corridors.

The Inspectorate asked questions about the site selection and advised the Applicant to explain its approach as to why the project was being treated as a single nationally significant infrastructure project (NSIP) in its consultation material (in view of the recent High Court judgment in 'Durham County Council and Hartlepool Borough Council v

Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and others' [2023] EWHC 1394). The Applicant clarified that the site selection was based on initial considerations regarding the availability of development land close to the Yaxley substation and the degree of built or ecological constraints within the local area. While broad zones for the indicative cable corridors have been mapped, this will be subject to further refinement following the completion of the Applicant's 'feasibility study'.

Consenting programme

The Applicant's initial Programme Document sets out its pre-application timetable for its project, with plans to add further information to this document once the project launches.

The draft timetable of activities include:

- project launch – 10 February 2025
- non-statutory consultation - between 10 March to 18 April 2025
- scoping request submission – April / May 2025
- consultation on the draft Statement of Community Consultation – Q2 / Q3 2025
- statutory consultation – Q4 2025
- submission of draft documents to the Inspectorate for review – Q1 2026
- adequacy of consultation milestone – Q1 2026
- DCO application submission – Q2 2026.

An 'Issues Tracker' is expected to be used by the Applicant during the pre-application process, which will be informed by engagement and consultation with stakeholders. The Programme Document and the main issues for resolution will also be iteratively updated as the project develops. The Inspectorate, relevant statutory consultees and the public will be kept up to date with any changes primarily through the Programme Document and other project material published on the Applicant's website. The Inspectorate highlighted the importance of keeping the Programme Document updated at significant points during the pre-application stage and the type of additional detail to be included.

Early engagement with statutory bodies, local authorities, and other stakeholders

The Applicant reported that it had held initial meetings about its project in early July 2024 with Mid Suffolk District Council and Suffolk County Council, with further meetings planned. The Applicant said it was also holding regular meetings every three months with National Grid and has started engagement with applicants for other major developments in the area (namely the Norwich to Tilbury NSIP and White Elm Solar Farm NSIP), to discuss possible mitigation for any potential cumulative effects between the projects and the sharing of any relevant data. The Applicant will also attend a NSIP round table meeting hosted by Mid Suffolk District Council in June 2025. In respect of potential effects from the proposed development on the assets of statutory undertakers, the Applicant stated that it would engage in discussions with Network Rail on the drafting of likely protective provisions owing to the possibility of the cable corridors crossing beneath, or over, the main railway line. The Applicant said it would look to share any draft protective provisions to affected statutory undertakers for comment, in advance of submitting the DCO application, together with any draft Asset Protection Agreement.

In answer to questions from the Inspectorate, the Applicant explained that it had sought a list from the host authorities of other developments in the area which may result in cumulative effects together with the proposed development, and would therefore need to be identified and assessed in its Environmental Statement (ES).

Environmental constraints and issues

The environmental issues identified by the Applicant at this stage included potential effects on landscape and visual amenity when viewed from the site and immediate surrounding area, as well as on nearby heritage assets and any onsite archaeology. There are sites designated for nature conservation in the surrounding area and habitat that is potentially suitable for certain protected species. Protected species surveys will be undertaken to confirm presence or absence of these species.

The Applicant said it is currently progressing work in relation to the proposed development's red line boundary and future layout, including potential areas of land to be set aside for environmental mitigation and enhancement. Early consultation with the Council's archaeological service would be undertaken, the Applicant stated. The Inspectorate asked about the general level of flood risk in the area and the flood zones. The Applicant said that, from its initial assessment, most of the site fell within Flood Zones 1 and 2 but that all appropriate survey work would be undertaken to confirm this.

The Applicant stated that there were no European sites in close proximity to the proposed development and that it would undertake a Habitats Regulations Assessment screening exercise in due course.

EIA scoping

The EIA scoping request is expected to be submitted in April or May 2025, with the GIS Shapefile to be provided at least 10 working days before the scoping request is made. The Inspectorate informed the Applicant of its new, published Technical Advice pages on 'Scoping for Solar Projects' and the 'Commitments Register'. The Inspectorate advised the Applicant to set up charging schedules with relevant bodies prior to scoping. The Inspectorate asked to be kept informed as the likely date for the Applicant's scoping request becomes further refined, to assist with resourcing requirements.

The Inspectorate advised that should multiple and varied options remain under consideration at scoping stage, this may affect the ability of the Inspectorate and consultation bodies to provide detailed comment and may also limit the Inspectorate's ability to agree to scope out aspects/ matters to enable the refinement of the ES. The Applicant acknowledged this point and explained it was currently necessary to retain optionality for the cable route but that where possible, it would refine the options prior to submission of the scoping request.

Environmental surveys

The Applicant reported that survey work had begun, which has included a preliminary ecological appraisal and protected species surveys - including barn owl surveys, a breeding bird scoping survey, great crested newt surveys, a bat activity scoping survey, and wintering bird surveys.

Land rights

The Applicant stated that it was currently in negotiations with five principal landowners. The Inspectorate asked whether there was any potential for applications under section 53 of the Planning Act. The Applicant confirmed that they are looking to use voluntary agreements with landowners rather than statutory powers for access on land, where possible, but that it would keep the Inspectorate informed should a section 53 application be needed.

The Inspectorate asked about any potential interaction between the Norwich to Tilbury NSIP redline boundary and this project and any likely management of cumulative effects on any recreational areas, listed buildings and / or rights of way networks in or near the proposed development. The Applicant explained that all such issues were being investigated.

The Inspectorate stressed the need to manage and agree any protective provisions at an early stage regarding interference with the main railway line and main road, to avoid these becoming difficult examination issues, of which the Applicant was aware. The Inspectorate further advised that the site selection and the refinement of the Order Limits as the project progresses (taking account of relevant statutory consultation feedback and / or mitigation of built or environmental assets) should be reflected in the proposed development's design concept. The Applicant acknowledged this and stated that it was working to a set of design principles and would explain the evolution of the design in a Design Approach Document.

Consultation (statutory and non-statutory)

The Applicant is planning a multistage approach to consultation, with tailored project briefings and in-person and webinar consultation events with elected officials and different consultee groups to coincide with the launch of the proposed development. These non-statutory consultation meetings would be held before the pre-election period in Suffolk [post-meeting note, local elections in Suffolk have since been delayed]. The Applicant also plans to share its Programme Document with the host authorities currently. A local press release, newsletters and adverts for consultation will be issued, the Applicant explained, together with enabling different communication mechanisms for obtaining consultee feedback.

The Inspectorate asked whether the Applicant was considering how it would consult the nearby business park and hard to reach groups and whether the host authorities had provided advice on the matter. The Applicant explained that its website, webinars and in-person events were being planned to take account of these issues but it would continue to confer with the host authorities on its consultation proposals. The Applicant further mentioned that it was mapping the primary consultation zone at this stage, to ensure all addresses in the vicinity of the site are being captured. A further meeting with the host authorities about its consultation strategy is planned for 5 February 2025.

Submission date

The Applicant is currently considering Q2 2026 for submitting its DCO application, and that it would refine to a month as the proposed development progresses through pre-application.

The pre-application service offer

The service tier requested by the applicant, including justification

The Applicant has requested the 'Standard' pre-application service tier for its project. The project team has considerable experience of the DCO process and does not consider that the project presents any complex or novel issues, the Applicant stated. However, the Applicant thought that it might benefit from more regular meetings with the Inspectorate than offered under the Basic service, as well as the possibility of the Inspectorate reviewing certain draft documents. The Inspectorate explained that it would confirm the service tier shortly following the meeting.

Post-meeting note: in answer to a question from the Applicant, the Inspectorate confirms that there is no expectation for applicants to publish multiple versions of the Programme Document on their websites. Instead, superseded copies should be replaced by the most current Programme Document version. However, it may assist the Inspectorate and others if a version control/history sheet is included on the front page of the Programme Document.

The Inspectorate explained that its 2024 Pre-application Prospectus set out the types of draft documents that can be reviewed under the Standard service tier, such as the draft DCO and any protective provisions, the draft Explanatory Memorandum, the draft ES project description chapter and a draft Habitats Regulations Assessment report.

Next steps

The Inspectorate will formally assign a Case Manager to the project shortly, who will be the Applicant's main point of contact at the Inspectorate for the project going forward. A project mailbox and project page on the Inspectorate's website will also be set up in due course. The Inspectorate will also provide feedback on the Programme Document and asked the Applicant to let it know if it has any comments. The Inspectorate confirmed that the Applicant can provide updates via updating its Programme Document and by contacting the case team. The Inspectorate noted it is best for the Applicant to provide updates on changes to the programme as early as it can.

Specific decisions/ follow-up required?

The Inspectorate also advised the Applicant to keep track of made DCOs for other major solar farms and any standards emerging in respect of protective provisions and the arrangements for securing any post consent matters. The Inspectorate also mentioned its X and LinkedIn posts, which issue a monthly map of all DCO applications listed on its register of projects and the different stages such projects have reached in the DCO process, which the Applicant may find helpful. The Applicant stated that its consultants and legal team were keeping abreast of made DCOs and potential examination issues.

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 Inspectorate's 2024 Pre-application Prospectus. Having reviewed the document, the Inspectorate considers that it appropriately covers the expected content as set out in the government's pre-application guidance at paragraph 10. The document provides enough detail about the proposed development, timetable and activities for the pre-application process at this early stage (which is to be supplemented by an Issues Tracker), as well as the Applicant's approach to early engagement with statutory consultees and other parties.

It would be helpful, however, if the Applicant could:

- include any indicative dates for Project Update Meetings with the Inspectorate in its Pre-application Process Timetable;
- include details of any draft application documents that may require a review by the Inspectorate;
- explain whether other related non-DCO licences or consents need to be sought and the timescales;
- explain whether the Programme Document has or will be shared with relevant statutory bodies (and when) for their views on its proposed programme; and
- explain whether it plans to hold any multiparty meetings and / or if evidence plans will be pursued (and when).

It would be helpful if the Applicant includes its intention to submit a Design Approach Document in the Programme Document, and whether a Policy and Compliance Document will also be submitted with the application. It would also be helpful if the Applicant could explain, briefly, how the Local Authorities will input on the Adequacy of Consultation Milestone (noting that this may need to be included in a later iteration).

The Applicant should then seek to publish its Programme Document on its website, as soon as practicable once its project is launched.