



Inception Meeting note

Project name	Whitestone Solar Farm
Case reference	EN0110020
Status	Final
Author	The Planning Inspectorate
Date of meeting	13 February 2025
Meeting with	Whitestone Net Zero Ltd
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

Consultants for Whitestone Net Zero Ltd (the applicant) provided an overview of the proposed nationally significant infrastructure project (NSIP), named Whitestone Solar Farm. It was explained that the applicant, Whitestone Net Zero Ltd, is a subsidiary of Net Zero One Ltd. Green Nation Energy Ltd is a leading developer of rooftop solar installations in the UK as well as ground-mounted solar farms and battery storage facilities. Green Nation are utilising their development experience to develop Whitestone Net Zero Ltd with funding from Net Zero One Ltd.

A Development Consent Order (DCO) will be sought for constructing and operating a solar photovoltaic (PV) generating station producing approximately 750 megawatts (MW) of renewable energy, together with provision for a Battery Energy Storage System (BESS). The proposed development will also include onsite underground cables (connecting the solar array areas to the national grid), a collector substation, satellite substations, fencing and security, site access works and access tracks, surface water drainage systems, temporary construction compounds, and landscaping and biodiversity works.

The proposed development will be located on multiple land parcels across approximately 1,400 hectares to the east of Sheffield, including in fields in close proximity to the M1 and M18 motorways. The solar array sites will consist of PV fixed modules within three main areas: 'Whitestone 1' located to the east of Clifton; 'Whitestone 2' to the south of Thurcroft and the M1 and M18 junction, and; 'Whitestone 3' to the north and south of Woodall. Each site will have its own satellite substation, which will export energy to a collector substation

and the national grid.

The proposed site falls within the administrative areas of the City of Doncaster Council and Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council. If consent is obtained, construction of the proposed development would begin in 2027, and would connect into the National Grid at the Brinsworth Substation in 2029 under a grid connection agreement. The applicant explained that the location of the grid connection route could be subject to change, depending on the needs of National Grid and any new grid infrastructure. Consequently, different options for the cable routes would need to be pursued and later refined as part of scoping and consultation.

In answer to a question from the Inspectorate, the applicant explained that the design and layout of the chosen sites was based on, inter alia, the availability of suitable land close to existing grid infrastructure and where built or environmental constraints could be managed or avoided (where feasible). It is expected that the Order Limits will reduce in extent following further assessment work, design appraisals and stakeholder engagement.

The applicant also discussed its approach to good design and the design principles it has created for the proposed development: (1) maximizing the amount of clean energy provided to the National Grid; (2) crafting a project that is resilient to the impacts of climate change; (3) taking opportunities to limit the amount of embodied carbon across the project; (4) engaging with stakeholders to develop the design; (5) supporting local ecology and enhancing biodiversity, enriching ecosystems where possible; (6) discovering what is important to people about the local area and seeking to protect it; (7) considering how people engage with their local environment and retaining these patterns and practices where possible; (8) enhancing recreational access across the landscape; (9) respecting landscape character and cultural heritage; (10) minimising visual impact; (11) taking opportunities throughout the project lifecycle to contribute to the local economy; and (12) supporting research and development.

These principles, the applicant said, would influence the project's design from the outset, having taken account of the recent advice published by the Inspectorate on good design and in following design guidance issued by the National Infrastructure Commission and seeking to comply with the criteria on design in the relevant National Policy Statements for Energy. The Inspectorate advised that the applicant should embed the importance of good design throughout the construction and decommissioning phases, alongside its assessment of any likely significant impacts caused by the proposed development.

Consenting programme

The applicant is working to the indicative timescale below, subject to any changes needed:

- project launch – 13 November 2024
- non-statutory consultation – 18 November 2024 to 31 January 2025
- submission of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) scoping request – late March 2025
- statutory consultation – Q3 2025
- application submission – Q2 2026

Early engagement with statutory bodies, local authorities, and stakeholders

The proposed development was publicly launched in November 2024 with initial communications sent to stakeholders and nearby residents to introduce the proposed development and explain how consultees could provide feedback during the forthcoming non-statutory consultation phase. Leaflets were posted to approximately 30,000 properties, the applicant explained, along with launching its project website and Facebook page. The project was also advertised in the local media, in print and online.

The applicant said it has held initial briefings in November 2024 with the host local authorities as well as with the office of the Right Honorable John Healey MP. The applicant confirmed it held further briefings in December 2024, to help explain the DCO process for planning officers and technical experts at Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council, as the project was the first NSIP for the Council within its administrative boundary, alongside hosting initial meetings with the office of Jake Richards MP, the Environment Agency, and the developers for HS2 (as safeguarding measures for HS2 are close to the proposed development). An initial meeting with the South Yorkshire Archaeology Service was also held in January, the applicant added, as well as briefings with members of the City of Doncaster Council in February. The applicant said that, to date, there had been no meetings arranged with Historic England but these would be scheduled in due course.

The 11-week non-statutory consultation phase included seven in-person and one online public information events, supported by print and online consultation materials, with visits made by the applicant to 26 local properties. There were also meetings held with nine parish councils and 16 meetings with residents to discuss the proposed development. 939 pieces of feedback had been received from the community, with concerns raised about the effects from the development on Conisbrough Parks, Conisbrough Castle, other heritage assets, the visual impact on local properties, on recreation and access to public rights of way, and around traffic and impact to local roads.

The applicant said it was in the process of reviewing the feedback received from the non-statutory consultation, which would be used to help influence any design changes and refinement of the Order Limits (where needed), before drafting its Statement of Community Consultation and undertaking the statutory consultation phase.

Environmental constraints and issues

The applicant informed the Inspectorate that there are no identified Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), European sites or Ramsar sites, or registered parks or gardens within the Order Limits. However, nine Water Framework Directive watercourses fall within the study area, along with some local wildlife sites. Residents had also highlighted that flooding has taken place within Whitestone 1, which the applicant was assessing in respect of choosing suitable locations for the satellite substations and BESS away from flood risk. Multiple Rights of Way also cross the site or are adjacent to it, as well as a rural road network.

In respect of cultural heritage, 15 Conservation Areas and some listed buildings are located within 1km of the site together with other designated cultural assets, including a Medieval Pottery Site and Roman Villa within Whitestone 1 (with appropriate mitigation to be proposed). Conisbrough Castle is also located nearby, with the site and much of the study area falling within the greenbelt.

In terms of landscape and visual impact, the applicant said that the undulating land within

and near to the site created some open and long-distance views from residential areas, which would form part of its assessment.

In respect of cumulative effects, the applicant had identified five solar related developments near the site and would focus its assessment on combined effects on landscape and visual matters, as well as construction traffic. In answer to questions from the Inspectorate, the applicant explained that it was applying a radius of 10km to its assessment of cumulative effects from the proposed development and other nearby developments (proposed, applied for and / or built), in forming its long and short lists within the zone of influence, which would then be narrowed to 5km.

The applicant also explained that it had reached out to South Yorkshire Archaeology Service to begin discussions around the methodology and extent of trial trenching required and are intending to discuss scoping for LVIA and Best Most Versatile (BMV) land with Natural England. The latter with regard as how to best mitigate any loss of BMV land. Most of the site is rural arable land and is said to be comprised of undifferentiated Grade 3 land (grade 3a being BMV, and grade 3b not being BMV), with some smaller areas of Grade 2, from the applicant's initial assessment. The Inspectorate advised that the applicant should clearly set out its proposed methodology and justification for siting infrastructure on BMV land.

In reply to a question from the Inspectorate about whether any of the cables would cross watercourses, the applicant advised there was potential for such crossings. The Inspectorate flagged to the applicant the issues of effects from Electromagnetic Fields (EMF) on marine habitats, which the applicant acknowledged and said it would take a proportionate approach to such assessments should any relevant watercourses be crossed. The applicant asked what constitutes a watercourse in terms of assessment, which the Inspectorate advised that the applicant should consult with the Environment Agency on this matter.

In reply to a question from the Inspectorate about the crossing of a railway line located between Whitestone 2 and Whitestone 3, the applicant understood that it would need to engage with Network Rail in respect of effects on any assets owned by the statutory undertaker and would consider the inclusion of appropriate protective provisions within the draft DCO.

In reply to a question from the Inspectorate, the applicant said that parts of the site were previously mined and that it would give due consideration to the requirement for any relevant consents and permits from the Mining Remediation Authority, as necessary, and that the applicant had begun discussions with the authority in respect to the proposed development.

EIA Scoping

The applicant said that the submission of its Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Scoping Request would be submitted towards the end of March 2025, with the GIS Shapefile and case information to be supplied to the Inspectorate at least 10 working days beforehand.

The Inspectorate directed the applicant to its recently published technical advice on scoping for solar development and the commitments register. The applicant said it had considered these advice pages. The Inspectorate queried whether options for the

connection corridor(s) would form part of its scoping request. The applicant confirmed that optionality would remain for the cable corridors as well as the possible locations of the grid connection point(s). The Inspectorate advised that the applicant should provide as much detail as possible on its optionality, to allow consultees to provide informed responses.

Environmental surveys

Surveys are currently being undertaken by the applicant, such as field habitat and species surveys. All surveys are expected to be concluded by the end of 2025, in consultation with Natural England. Further fieldwork is to be undertaken throughout the design and assessment process, the applicant added, alongside further ecology, Agricultural Land Classification surveys, baseline noise monitoring and Listed Buildings settings assessment.

Land and rights

The applicant advised that there were several land parcels within the redline boundary of the project that would be potentially subject to compulsory acquisition pursuant to the DCO. However, in the first instance the applicant is seeking to complete voluntary land options in respect of all the solar array land within the site. The applicant advised that its land referencing team are reviewing the cable corridor route to establish the extent of land rights involved.

The draft Development Consent Order

The applicant's legal adviser explained that the draft DCO is expected to broadly align with other recently made DCOs for solar schemes. Whilst no novel drafting is currently foreseen, the draft DCO and draft Explanatory Memorandum would be submitted for review under the Inspectorate's draft document review service, prior to the submission of the DCO application. The applicant also stated that the approach to compulsory acquisition would also align with other solar DCO applications, which would be informed by discussions relating to the cable easements and engagement with relevant land stakeholders. The totality of the site would be subject to compulsory acquisition powers, the applicant added.

The pre-application service

The applicant advised that it wishes to proceed with the standard pre-application service tier. The applicant said that its consultants were suitably experienced and that it was not considered that the proposed development was exceptionally complex, but that it would benefit from the number of project update meetings offered by the standard service alongside the draft document review service, given that some degree of risk and challenges remained. The Inspectorate advised that a tier confirmation letter would be sent shortly after the inception meeting, together with launching the Inspectorate's website project page.

The Inspectorate also asked the applicant to set out any indicative dates for future project update meetings within its Programme Document, to help with scheduling these, and

directed the applicant to its 2024 Pre-application Prospectus for details about the service offer and when meetings might best be held.

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 its request under the 2024 Pre-application Prospectus. Having reviewed the document against the government's guidance on the pre-application stage at paragraph 10, the Inspectorate considers that it provides enough detail about the proposed development, the main issues identified and proposed activities for the pre-application process, and the applicant's approach to early engagement with statutory consultees and other parties, at this early stage.

However, the applicant should also include:

- the estimated generating capacity of the proposed development
- Indicate whether an Issues Tracker will be used
- date for submission of scoping request and date of the submission of the shapefile to support the scoping request
- indicative dates for Project Update Meetings with the Inspectorate in its programme timetable
- information on whether the Programme Document has or will be shared with relevant statutory bodies for their views on the proposed programme
- date for draft document reviews
- date for the Adequacy of Consultation Milestone (AOCM) and how local authorities will be able to provide views and supporting information at the AOCM stage
- date for consultation on its draft Statement of Community Consultation
- date for publication of the PEIR
- dates for any multiparty meetings or the evidence plans process (if these are being pursued by the applicant)
- an outline of the 'risks' identified by the applicant at this stage (in addition to how those risks will be managed).

It would also be helpful if the Programme Document could indicate whether any non-DCO licences or consents need to be sought, as well as whether the applicant intends to submit a Design Approach Document and Policy Compliance Document with its DCO application.