



Inception Meeting note

Project name	Hedgehog Grove Solar Farm
Case reference	EN0110021
Status	Final
Author	The Planning Inspectorate
Date of meeting	25 February 2025
Meeting with	Hedgehog Grove Solar Farm 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

A Development Consent Order (DCO) will be sought by Hedgehog Grove Solar Farm Limited (the applicant) for a new solar farm in Essex, within the administrative boundaries of Uttlesford District Council and Braintree District Council and on land adjacent to the A120 road. The proposed development would comprise of the installation and operation of ground-mounted solar photovoltaic (PV) generating panels with a targeted electricity generating capacity of 98 megawatts (MW).

The proposed development would also include underground cabling to connect the Hedgehog Grove Solar Farm into the UKPN network at the Braintree 132kV substation, together with other features (such as inverters, transformers and switchgear, an onsite substation, ancillary works including boundary treatments, security equipment, lighting, landscaping, access tracks, earthworks, and surface water management, alongside habitat management and biodiversity enhancement, and highway works to facilitate vehicular access to the site).

The applicant is currently exploring five different route options for the expected 10 kilometre connection cable corridor.

The applicant explained that the site has been selected owing to the availability of suitable land for solar development, its proximity to an available grid connection point, the

avoidance of designated sites, and following the applicant's preliminary evaluation of environmental constraints.

The project was originally two 49MW solar farm applications, called 'Drapers Chase Solar Farm' and 'Poplars Solar Farm', that were being progressed separately under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (TCPA 1990). Following engagement with the Planning Inspectorate, however, the applicant decided the two sites should be conjoined to form one DCO application, as both projects would require the same point of connection to the grid (combining to produce an expected 98MW of energy and thereby exceeding the threshold set out at section 15 of the Planning Act for a nationally significant infrastructure project).

In answer to a question from the Inspectorate, the applicant said that it was mindful that the proposed development could fall under the TCPA 1990 regime again should the government change the electricity generating capacity threshold for solar schemes in the forthcoming Planning and Infrastructure Bill. However, the applicant said it would continue to progress its proposals under the DCO regime at this point in time.

Near the proposed development site is another solar project named 'Willows Green Solar Park' which is being developed. An initial meeting between the applicants took place on 20 February 2025. The applicant explained the purpose of the meeting was to ensure clarity between the projects for stakeholders and to explore opportunities for sharing any local data as well as collaborating in respect of identifying and mitigating any cumulative effects from the cable corridor.

Consenting programme

The applicant provided its proposed consenting programme:

- initial engagement with stakeholders – February to March 2025
- EIA Scoping submission - April 2025
- statutory consultation - summer 2025
- submission of the application – November 2025

Early engagement with statutory bodies, local authorities, and stakeholders

The applicant held its first community liaison meeting on the 24 February 2025, which included Felsted Parish Council and Rayne Parish Council, to discuss potential community benefits, the construction phase, and the design of the project. The applicant also met with Natural England and Historic England respectively in early February to introduce its project. Furthermore, a tripartite meeting with Uttlesford District Council, Braintree District Council, and Essex County Council is scheduled for 10 March 2025, to discuss the local authorities' involvement in the DCO process and to address any early concerns regarding consultation, project design, and engagement. A meeting is also scheduled for 17 March 2025 with the Environment Agency, the applicant added.

The Inspectorate advised the applicant to ensure that all local Parish Councils are supported to adequately engage in the application process and emphasised the importance of securing early engagement with Natural England on its proposed programme. The Inspectorate advised that as much clarity within the Programme Document on the main issues and proposed pre-application activities would assist local

stakeholders on knowing when they will be consulted throughout the process and given adequate timeframes for comments.

Good Design

The applicant explained its design vision and approach to embedding good design within the proposed development to help underpin the site selection as well as its decisions on engineering, mitigation, above and below ground infrastructure, and layout that could maximise value to the project, people, place, climate and the environment.

The proposed development's 'good design principles' consist of:

- Climate – maximise the amount of clean energy provided to the national grid; craft a project that is resilient to the impacts of climate change (such as flooding and drought); and take opportunities to limit the amount of embodied carbon across the project.
- People – engage in open discussion with stakeholders and take their views into account; find out what is important to people about the local area and seek to protect it; and consider how people engage with their local environment and retain these patterns and practices where possible.
- Places – respect and, where possible, enhance landscape character and cultural heritage; support local ecology and enhance biodiversity, enriching ecosystems where possible; and craft a design that is responsive to people's visual amenity.
- Value – take opportunities throughout the project lifecycle to contribute to the local economy; provide resource for research and development; and enhance opportunities for recreation and access across the site.

The proposed development is following a project decision making process, namely: (1) identifying the need for design changes; (2) ensuring the proposal meets the project specific design principles; (3) ensuring an efficient engineering solution; (4) minimising and mitigating significant environmental impacts if they arise; (5) demonstrating sustainable credentials; (6) engaging with consultees.

The Inspectorate asked whether there are any nearby or onsite residential properties that would require mitigation as well as development near or crossing of the main roads or the assets of statutory undertakers, especially in respect of the cable corridor. The applicant said the topography of the site ensures limited visibility from 2-5km away and the site is well screened by existing vegetation, though some open views exist which will be appropriately assessed (with offsets built into the next version of the masterplan). Additionally, the cable route could follow either the length of the main road to the grid substation or across open fields near Willows Green, but the applicant said it was still considering a range of options against engineering and technical considerations.

The Inspectorate also advised about the importance of documenting the design evolution throughout the various stages of the pre-application process and how consultation feedback or mitigation has resulted in changes, in as much detail as possible, to provide justification and evidence for the final design.

Environmental constraints and issues

The applicant provided an overview of the environmental constraints on or near the site from its initial studies. The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process is being used as a design tool to inform the project boundary and siting of infrastructure, the applicant said, as well as the assessment of cumulative effects and where mitigation and enhancement measures would be required.

The applicant reported that there are no Special Protection Areas (SPAs), Special Area of Conservation (SACs) or Ramsar sites in the vicinity of the Order Limits. The nearest European Site is 20km away on the Essex coast (the Ramsar Blackwater Estuary). However, the Flitch Way local nature reserve borders the site and is known to provide habitats for bat, badger, great crested newts, and potentially other protected species.

While most of the site is within Flood Zone 1, a thin parcel of land falls within Flood Zone 3 where the River Ter bisects the site.

Owing to initial Agricultural Land Classification surveys, the site is said to be Grade 3a Best and Most Versatile land.

In terms of cultural heritage, one Grade I Listed Building and several Grade II listed structures are located within the vicinity of the proposed development, while geophysical surveys have revealed likely buried remains in some areas.

The applicant said it would be undertaking all necessary assessments as part of the development of the DCO application and would report its findings within the Environmental Statement.

Environmental surveys

The applicant stated that some environmental surveys had been undertaken under the previous TCPA 1990 applications and that many of the new surveys would consist of updates to the existing reports, in response to design changes or requirements under the Planning Act. Partial survey data from 2021-2022 was said to be available for the eastern and western farmsteads which comprise the main site (Lord Rayleigh's Farm and Draper's Farm), while new survey data would be required for the middle parcels of the site. Further survey work is expected on different ecology matters and trial trenching, with wintering bird surveys ongoing. Breeding bird surveys would be undertaken in the Spring and Summer of 2025, the applicant added.

EIA Scoping

The applicant intends to submit its request for scoping opinion on 11 April 2025. The applicant said that it has had regard to the Inspectorate's technical advice on scoping for solar projects and the commitments register and would seek to provide certainty around the different topics likely to have environmental impacts, and which topics will require detailed environmental assessment. Its Scoping Report would contain a draft Commitments Register to provide an early indication of the type and extent of mitigation and benefit to be delivered. The applicant would also look to produce a more detailed Preliminary Environmental Impact Report at the statutory consultation stage, to help obtain more targeted and actionable feedback from consultees.

The Inspectorate advised that the cable corridor route options should be narrowed as much as possible before scoping, to ensure that the relevant consultees have sufficient information to provide detailed responses. The applicant noted this and would seek to supply as much detail as possible in its Scoping Report, including a wider red line boundary of indicative cable routes, and that a final route corridor would form part of the DCO application.

The Inspectorate advised the applicant to consider what it wished to achieve from the Scoping Opinion, given the overlap with the anticipated production of the PEIR and the surveys already undertaken to date. It queried whether the applicant would have sufficient time to take on board the comments owing to its truncated pre-application timetable. The applicant confirmed that it would have regard to the feedback in finalising the project proposals and documentation that would underpin the statutory consultation.

The pre-application service offer

The service tier requested by the applicant, including justification

The applicant has requested the Inspectorate's 'basic' pre-application service tier. While this is the first solar DCO for the applicant, it has an experienced consultant team and there are no novel or complex DCO matters foreseen. The applicant stated that its approach of targeted engagement and consultation means that they have confidence that many of the anticipated issues will be resolved during the pre-application stage.

The Inspectorate said it would confirm the service tier soon after the meeting. The Inspectorate advised the applicant to indicate in its Programme Document the anticipated dates of further meetings with the Inspectorate, as the basic service would allow for only two further meetings under the current proposed timescale.

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 covers most of the expected content as set out in the government's pre-application guidance at paragraph 10, such as providing a good level of detail about the identified main issues and the applicant's proposed approach to engagement.

However, the applicant should also include:

- indicative dates for any Project Update Meetings with the Inspectorate as well as specific dates for consultation on the draft Statement of Community Consultation (SoCC), publication of the SoCC, publication of the PEIR, and the Adequacy of Consultation Milestone in its programme timetable;
- information on whether the Programme Document has or will be shared with relevant statutory bodies for their views on its proposed programme; and

- details of the risks to the pre-application stage identified by the applicant at this stage, including how these are to be tracked and managed.

It would also be helpful if the applicant could indicate whether any other consents or licences will be needed for the proposed development, as well as whether a Design Approach Document and a Policy Compliance Document will be submitted as part of the application. The Programme Document will then need to be published on the applicant's website as soon as practicable once the project has been launched.

