



Inception Meeting note

Project name	Beacon Solar
Case reference	EN0110024
Status	Final
Author	The Planning Inspectorate
Date of meeting	09 September 2025
Meeting with	Meeting with Beacon Solar 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 proposed development

A Development Consent Order (DCO) will be sought by Beacon Solar Limited (the applicant), a special purpose vehicle led by Galileo Empower, for the Beacon Solar project. This proposed development is defined as a nationally significant infrastructure project (NSIP) under sections 14 and 15 of the Planning Act, as it will constitute the construction, operation (including maintenance) and decommissioning of a large-scale, ground-mounted solar energy generating station with an export capacity of over 100 megawatts (MW), located solely in England. The project will be located on agricultural land near Holsworthy Beacon, within the administrative area of Torridge District Council, Devon. The site is roughly 4 kilometres (km) to the north of Holsworthy, with Barnstaple and Bideford located approximately 25 km and 35 km respectively to the north-east of the site. The A388 road crosses between the proposed development, with the River Torridge to the north.

There will be associated development for the ancillary works which will form part of the proposed development, which will include a battery energy storage system (BESS), access tracks for maintenance, security fencing and CCTV, landscape and ecological mitigation, underground cabling connecting the solar farm with the on-site substation, and underground cabling connecting the generating station to the National Grid. It is expected that the point of connection with the electricity grid will be to a proposed, new National Grid substation, the location of which has not been determined at this stage. The new National Grid substation will be subject to consent under a separate application by National Grid

and separate consenting timeline, but the applicant will continue to hold discussions on the matter, including its site selection assessment.

The Inspectorate asked the applicant if the BESS will have import as well as export capabilities, and whether this has been discussed with local fire and rescue authorities. The applicant advised they do not intend to have import capabilities and that engagement with fire and rescue teams will occur as the proposed development progresses.

Environmental constraints and issues

The site was identified on the basis it is considered to be relatively unconstrained regarding environmental and planning designations it has good levels of solar irradiation and a suitable land gradient to deliver a large-scale solar project. Natural England's provisional mapping confirms Grade 3 and 4 agricultural lands on the site with a reduced likelihood of the presence of best and most versatile agricultural land and access is facilitated by proximity to the A388.

The applicant noted limited public rights of way, low flood risk (predominantly Flood Zone 1 with pockets of Flood Zones 2 and 3), limited residential receptors, and minimal statutory and non-statutory protected ecological sites across the site. However, there is one Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) adjacent to the red line boundary designated for wetland and grassland, and one scheduled monument is located to the north of the site. Additionally, two overhead lines run through the site and there are three existing wind turbines (two are 500kW 80m turbines and one 50kW farm-scale turbine).

The applicant has a grid connection agreement in place with National Grid. The proposed development's redline boundary will seek to cover the connection point with National Grid's new substation, subject to confirmation of the location by NGET and dealt with under a separate application. The Inspectorate pointed to questions and Statements of Common Ground being asked on current examinations with regard to grid connections.

Consenting programme

The applicant proposed consenting programme includes:

- non-statutory consultation – September to October 2025
- Scoping – January to March 2026
- publication of the Statement of Community Consultation – April 2026
- statutory consultation – May 2026
- Adequacy of Consultation Milestone statement – October 2026
- submission of the DCO application – April 2027

The applicant advised that if the Planning and Infrastructure Bill receives royal assent, the consenting programme may change to reflect amendments to legislation. The applicant stated that it would follow current legislative requirements at the pre-application stage, including the production of a Preliminary Environmental Information Report, until such changes are enacted.

Early engagement with statutory bodies, local authorities, and stakeholders

The applicant discussed its approach to stakeholder engagement, which includes holding co-design workshops with community and technical stakeholders to obtain insight into the design and assessment of the proposed development at an early stage. Meetings with the local Member of Parliament, council leaders and ward councillors at Torridge District Council and Devon County Council, and with host parish councils and technical stakeholders such as the Environment Agency, Historic England and Natural England, were taking place during its non-statutory phase.

In answer to questions from the Inspectorate, the applicant said that it would be sharing its Programme Document with relevant stakeholders for any views on its proposed programme. The Inspectorate advised that Suffolk County Council's NSIP Centre of Excellence had produced guidance for local authorities about the DCO process which may be of help to Council members. The applicant was aware of these and is proposing to provide assistance and training to both Devon County Council and Torridge District Council on the DCO process.

EIA scoping

The applicant is currently developing the design principles and concept masterplan for the Beacon Solar project. Following confirmation of the site boundary and the area of search for the inter-connecting underground cables connecting the solar PV areas to the on-site substation, the scoping process will proceed. Engagement with stakeholders is planned during autumn 2025 to get input on the main receptors, survey requirements, and proposed methodologies. The Inspectorate advised that, where possible, to seek any agreement with relevant consultees on matters to scope in/out in the Scoping Report and include such evidence of agreement in the Scoping Report submission.

The applicant plans to submit the EIA Scoping Report to PINS in early January 2026, with the shapefile submitted in mid-December 2025, taking into account the Christmas break. The Scoping Report will be submitted separately following the non-statutory consultation phase, which is expected to conclude in October 2025.

The broad structure of the EIA Scoping Report will include a project description, consideration of alternatives, identification of environmental factors scoped out and in, the proposed approach to cumulative effects, and the proposed approach to the EIA and assessment methodology. Feedback from the non-statutory consultation phase is expected to feed into the report, particularly in relation to survey requirements and methodologies. The Inspectorate advised that the red line boundary should show the development as a whole and not separate out the cable route corridors. The Scoping Report should provide the scope of the development as a whole or where cable routes and solar development are scoped separately, that references in the scoping report should be clear. The applicant acknowledges this.

Environmental surveys

Surveys are being undertaken to establish baseline conditions for the scheme. The topographical survey is currently underway and will inform the technical design as well as support other technical disciplines, including the arboriculture survey. Preliminary ecological surveys, including a preliminary ecological appraisal, UKHab assessment, phase 2 botany surveys, and bat and breeding bird surveys, have either been completed

or are ongoing. Consultation with Natural England regarding the scope of further ecological surveys is currently underway.

A geophysical survey is ongoing across the site to assess archaeological potential and determine if further investigation is required. Site visits and walkovers are being undertaken to inform the access strategy and initial swept path analysis. Noise surveys are scheduled to commence in October 2025, with methodology and monitoring locations to be agreed. Traffic surveys are scheduled for September and October 2025, with methodology and monitoring locations also to be agreed. Walkovers relating to landscape, visual, and heritage assessments have been completed, while walkovers for contamination and water assessments are underway. Agricultural land classification surveys have been recently completed on site. Ecology surveys have been ongoing since early 2025 and will continue in accordance with seasonal species survey windows and any emerging requirements identified during fieldwork. An arboricultural survey is scheduled to be undertaken within the next month.

The Inspectorate asked whether any cable corridors within the order limits will pass through or near watercourses and advised that where this is potentially the case, any relevant receptors such as riverine species and potential impacts from Electro-Magnetic Fields should be addressed in the Scoping Report.

The Inspectorate asked whether there is possibility of functionally linked land falling within the site boundary. The applicant's current understanding is that no functionally linked land would be located on-site on the basis that the closest SAC is situated approximately 2km away to the west of the Site and is 'culm grassland'. The applicant is in discussion with Natural England.

The draft development consent order

The draft DCO is not expected to include any novel or particularly complex drafting and should follow other recently made DCOs for solar projects that have been drafted by the applicant's lawyers and any standards set by the Secretary of State. The DCO is likely to include other consents and powers, including street works, alteration of streets if required, temporary restriction on the use of Public Rights of Ways (PRoWs) if applicable, traffic regulation measures, removal of hedgerows if required, powers to undertake works to trees subject to Tree Preservation Orders if applicable, and powers for the compulsory acquisition of land. The applicant added that it may submit a draft DCO for review under the Planning Inspectorate's draft document review service, at the relevant time.

Land rights

The applicant has already negotiated heads of terms with all freehold owners for the main site, covering the PV arrays and associated development. Negotiations are ongoing for option agreements for the main site. The Order Limits have not yet been finalised, and further design iterations may require additional land, particularly in relation to potential options associated with the point of connection.

Further site selection and technical work are being undertaken in respect of prospective cable route corridors linked to the point of connection. While the applicant intends to reach

voluntary agreements with all landowners, the draft DCO will include compulsory acquisition powers as a safeguard. In answer to questions from the Inspectorate, the applicant confirmed there are 16 to 17 current landowners in total, with five main landowners holding significant portions of the land.

For cable route corridors, the land strategy involves creating new rights and interests to permit the laying and subsequent maintenance of cables, and where necessary, extinguishing existing rights. The Scheme is expected to include both permanent and temporary possession for construction purposes.

Initial land referencing has identified that several statutory undertakers have assets in or near the site, including National Grid Electricity Transmission PLC, National Gas Transmission PLC, South West Water Limited (both water and sewerage), National Grid Electricity Distribution (South West) PLC for local electricity distribution, Wales & West Utilities Limited for local gas distribution, and telecommunications providers British Telecommunications PLC and Airband Community Internet Limited. Legal searches are ongoing to confirm the full extent of these assets and associated land rights, which will inform protective provisions in the draft DCO and guide further design iteration.

The pre-application service offer

The service tier requested by the applicant, including justification

The project team is experienced, and the project falls under the designated energy national policy statements. The main issues anticipated are similar to those in other solar DCO projects, mainly in relation to landscape and visual effects and the management of impacts during construction. Design iteration will be used to minimise impacts through the application of the mitigation hierarchy. However, the applicant has requested the standard service tier to enable feedback to be received on selected draft documents and strategy for securing development consent, and to provide further contact points during the pre-application stage to discuss any unfixed elements, such as the grid connection point.

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 was held, in line with the Inspectorate's 2024 Pre-application Prospectus. The Inspectorate notes that it follows the format and expected structure of a Programme Document as set out in the government's pre-application guidance at paragraph 10, such as providing information about the proposed development, the applicant's approach and methods of stakeholder engagement, its approach to managing risks, and a clear and comprehensive timetable of proposed consultation activities. However, the Programme Document should also contain:

- further description of the development to cover its main components, the expected land take for the project, an indication of the expected generating capacity of the scheme (which may be subject to change) and any significant nearby landscape

features such as any major roads, rail networks, airports or other major infrastructure.

- a high-level summary of the main issues and activities proposed against these, even at this early stage (it will be important for the applicant to ensure the main issues table is updated with high-level notes at relevant intervals to capture any progress with assessments and survey / mitigation outputs, especially where agreements have been reached with statutory bodies on these matters)
- indicative dates for future Project Update Meetings with the Planning Inspectorate in its programme timetable, and proposed dates for any multiparty meetings and / or evidence plans (if being pursued).

It is also helpful if the Programme Document includes information on whether any other licences or consents may be needed, whether Crown Land or Special Category Land is involved, and whether the Programme Document has or will be shared with relevant statutory bodies for their views on the proposed programme. In later iterations, information on whether any targeted consultation might be needed and whether the applicant intends to submit a Design Approach Document and a Policy and Compliance Document with its application, would also be useful.

