



Inception Meeting note

Project name	Somerset Energy Park
Case reference	EN0110039
Status	Final
Author	The Planning Inspectorate
Date of meeting	13 July 2026
Meeting with	Meeting with Somerset Energy Park 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 (PA2008). 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 Somerset Energy Park Limited (the applicant), a subsidiary of Low Carbon Limited, for a large-scale solar energy project with an anticipated capacity in excess of 100MW. The proposed development therefore meets the threshold for a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP).

The proposed development includes construction, operation (including maintenance) and decommissioning of a ground mounted solar photovoltaic (PV) array generating station, and associated infrastructure including but not limited to on-site substation(s), inter-array and grid connection infrastructure, Battery Energy Storage System (BESS), access tracks, drainage infrastructure and security measures such as fencing and lighting.

Grid connection is proposed to the National Grid Woolavington Substation, and the applicant confirmed a bilateral connection agreement with NESO. Array parcels would be connected via underground cabling or overhead lines. The operational life is anticipated to be 40 years.

The location of the proposed development is approximately 1km east of Highbridge and 9km northeast of Bridgwater, in the administrative area of Somerset Council. The site is approximately 7km south of Weston-Super-Mare at its nearest point and 23km to the southwest of Bristol. The site extends across approximately 800 hectares of land grouped into five array areas in the vicinity of Mark, as well as land for access, Inter-Array

Connections and an onward Grid Connection. The wider site includes two existing solar installations, and pylons run north–south through the area.

Consenting programme and engagement

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

- Early and ongoing engagement with technical and other key stakeholders – commenced May 2026
- Inception meeting with the Planning Inspectorate – July 2026
- Anticipated submission of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Scoping Report – September 2026
- Planning Inspectorate Scoping Opinion – Expected November 2026
- Start of consultation for general public – Spring 2027
- Submission of the DCO application – October 2027

The Inspectorate emphasised the importance of maintaining and regularly updating the Programme Document and Issues Tracker throughout pre-application. The applicant was encouraged to continue early engagement with statutory consultees to assist the Inspectorate in understanding the extent of issues and the degree of resolution achieved before submission. The Inspectorate also advised the applicant to review issues arising in current solar examinations and relevant made DCOs to support preparation of the application.

The applicant confirmed that early pre-application engagement is underway and will continue throughout the project development process. Initial meetings and briefings have been held with key stakeholders, including the Environment Agency, Somerset Council as the host authority and the Planning Inspectorate.

The applicant has also commenced engagement with political stakeholders and is progressing wider stakeholder engagement to help inform the design and assessment of the proposed development. Further discussions with relevant statutory consultees and other interested parties are planned as the project develops.

Environmental constraints and issues

The applicant outlined several environmental constraints identified to date. These include the site's proximity to designated ecological sites, including the Somerset Levels and Moors Ramsar site and SPA to the east, the Severn Estuary Ramsar site and SPA to the west, and a number of nearby SSSIs. The Mendip Hills National Landscape is located within the wider area, while a National Nature Reserve adjoins part of the site boundary.

The applicant also highlighted a number of historic environmental considerations, including designated heritage assets adjoining parts of the proposed solar PV areas and the presence of archaeological interest within the site. In addition, parts of the site fall within Flood Zones 2 and 3 and contain an extensive network of ordinary watercourses, which

are known to support protected species including European eel. DEFRA predictive Agricultural Land Classification mapping (2026) indicates that the site comprises Grade 3b land. The Inspectorate advised the applicant to continue early engagement with relevant statutory consultees to inform assessment methodologies and the development of appropriate mitigation methods.

Scoping

The applicant confirmed that design principles for the proposed development are currently being developed and that the scoping boundary continues to be refined, including further consideration of the extent of the solar array areas and cable corridors. An EIA Scoping Report is expected to be submitted in September 2026. The report is expected to include a description of the scheme, the assessment methodologies to be applied, and the approach to cumulative effects assessment.

The applicant advised that a programme of environmental surveys is already underway. Surveys completed or in progress include wintering bird surveys, a preliminary ecological assessment, badger and bat surveys, breeding bird surveys, and aquatic ecology walkovers. Further survey work is planned throughout 2026 and 2027, including additional ecological surveys, geophysical surveys, arboricultural assessments, baseline noise monitoring, and landscape photography to support the environmental assessment and ongoing design development.

Draft Development Consent Order

The applicant explained that the principal power sought through the draft DCO will be development consent for the construction, operation and maintenance of the generating station and associated Battery Energy Storage System (BESS). The applicant advised that the draft DCO is also expected to include a range of ancillary powers, including provisions for street works and alterations to streets, temporary restrictions on Public Rights of Way, where required, traffic regulation measures, and the removal of hedgerows where necessary.

In addition, the draft DCO may include powers to undertake works to trees subject to Tree Preservation Orders, where applicable, and powers for the compulsory acquisition of land.

Land and rights

The applicant explained that the draft DCO is expected to seek powers for the compulsory acquisition of land and rights over land, together with powers for temporary possession where required. The applicant advised that the majority of land associated with the proposed solar PV areas is already subject to option agreements with landowners.

The applicant noted that master planning and technical design work is ongoing, including the refinement of BESS and substation locations, together with the routing of inter-array cable corridors. While the applicant intends to continue seeking voluntary agreements with affected landowners, it explained that compulsory acquisition powers would be required as a contingency to ensure deliverability of the scheme.

Consultation

The applicant acknowledged the changes to the statutory consultation requirements and confirmed that it intends to adopt an engagement led approach, supported by a stakeholder engagement and communications strategy. The applicant advised that the project is expected to be launched publicly around the time of scoping submission, with a main phase of public consultation currently anticipated in spring 2027.

The applicant explained that early engagement with local authorities, landowners, statutory consultees and political stakeholders commenced in 2026 and will continue throughout the pre-application stage. A range of engagement methods is proposed, including public events, webinars and a dedicated project website, with feedback used to inform the ongoing development of the proposed development.

Submission date

The expected date for submitting the DCO application is October 2027.

The pre-application service offer

The applicant stated that it is seeking the use of the basic tier pre-application service. In support of this approach, the applicant noted that the project is being promoted by an experienced applicant and project team, is being developed within the framework of the designated National Policy Statements and utilises established technology and a well understood development approach. The applicant also advised that the principal issues are expected to be broadly consistent with those encountered on other solar DCO projects, with design development and application of the mitigation hierarchy intended to minimise potential impacts where possible. The applicant confirmed that the proposed service tier has been discussed with Somerset Council and will be discussed with relevant statutory consultees as engagement progresses. The Inspectorate confirmed that a tier confirmation letter will be issued.

Programme Document

The Programme Document broadly accords with the structure and intent of the 2024 Pre-application Prospectus, providing a clear overview of the proposed development, anticipated programme, potential main issues, stakeholder engagement strategy and programme risks and demonstrates an intention to produce and maintain an issues tracker with the relevant statutory bodies and the host authority.

At this early stage, a number of elements remain high level and would benefit from further development in future iterations. The Programme Document identifies key milestones but could provide more detail on dependencies, anticipated engagement frequency with statutory bodies and expected outputs from those engagements.

No location plan or indicative order limits has been included within the Programme Document. The inclusion of plans showing the current site boundary would assist the Inspectorate, host authority and other stakeholders in understanding the geographical extent of the proposed development and the relationship between the various project components, as well as the sites proximity to heritage assets. As the project evolves, the inclusion of updated plans could also help stakeholders understand any changes to the proposed development area and support more effective engagement throughout the pre-application stage.

The Inspectorate advises that the Programme Document is updated to reflect that government guidance relating to the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 has now been published, and to set out any implications for the applicants proposed pre-application programme and approach.

The applicant states that it will update the Programme Document as required and share it, together with the project issues tracker, with Somerset Council and relevant statutory consultees. A scoping shapefile will be provided to the Inspectorate in advance of the EIA Scoping Report which is currently anticipated to be submitted in September 2026. The applicant also confirmed that that the project website will be updated prior to the submission of the Scoping Report. The next project meeting with the Inspectorate is anticipated to take place in Spring 2027.