Planning Inspectorate

Inception Meeting note

Project name	**Cearn Solar Farm**
Case reference	**EN0110044**
Status	**Final**
Author	**The Planning Inspectorate**
Date of meeting	**04 August 2026**
Meeting with	**Meeting with Cearn Solar Farm 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 the Find a National Infrastructure Project website.

Any section 51 advice given in connection with the application during the meeting would be duplicated in a Section 51 Advice log. The s51 Advice Log would be updated with all s51 advice given in connection with the application to the applicant, and others, during the pre-application stage. The applicant is requested to use the s51 Advice Log to demonstrate regard to the advice given in connection with the application to it, and others, during the pre-application stage.

Any advice given under section 51 would not constitute legal advice upon which the applicant, or others, could rely.

The proposed development

A Development Consent Order (DCO) will be sought by Cearn Solar Farm Limited (the applicant), a subsidiary of Telis Energy UK, for a large-scale solar farm in England (the proposed development) with a generating capacity in excess of 100MW. The proposed development comprises solar photovoltaic (PV) panels and associated infrastructure including an on-site substation & battery energy storage system (BESS). Other infrastructure likely to be included within the development includes collector compounds, access tracks, fencing, landscape enhancement and environmental mitigation.
The scheme benefits from a Gate 2 offer. The applicant is in the process of securing a connection with the National Energy System Operator (NESO) to enable the export of electricity via underground cables to NGET's Farmoor Substation, located approximately 12km north-east of the site. The applicant is also exploring opportunities for a private wire connection to a local business hub, located approximately 10km east of the proposed development. Further information will be provided on this connection once feasibility studies have been completed.

The host authorities are Vale of White Horse District Council (VoWHDC) and Oxfordshire County Council (OCC). South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC) would also be affected in relation to the potential private wire connection. The applicant noted that there are two other Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIP) within the surrounding area.

The Inspectorate advised that there is the possibility that the principal authorities in the area may be restructured to move from a two-tier to unitary structure and this could result in a structural change during the examination process on the current timescales for this application. The applicant confirmed they are aware of this and that it is the early days for any such restructure. However, they commented that they may need to work with two tiers of operation in scoping.

Consenting programme and engagement

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

- Public project launch – September 2026
- Stage 1 consultation – September 2026 to October 2026
- Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Scoping Report submission to the Planning Inspectorate – October 2026
- Receipt of Planning Inspectorate's EIA Scoping Opinion – December 2026
- Stage 2 consultation – February 2027
- Submission of the DCO application – September 2027

The applicant outlined its approach to stakeholder engagement, confirming that consultation will be undertaken in two stages. Stage 1 will comprise targeted workshops focussed on co-design and the presentation of emerging proposals to statutory consultees, relevant technical officers, community organisations and elected representatives. In response to a question from the Inspectorate, the applicant confirmed that feedback received during this stage would be circulated and that the applicant would demonstrate how feedback had been taken into account. The Inspectorate asked whether community benefits had been considered, the applicant confirmed that discussions on potential community benefits would commence as part of the workshops. Stage 2 will comprise a wider public consultation and is anticipated to commence in early 2027.

The Inspectorate noted that overlapping consultation and scoping activities can create confusion for stakeholders regarding the purpose and scope of each process. The Inspectorate therefore asked whether the scoping process and consultation activities were likely to overlap. The applicant confirmed that they would remain distinct and would be undertaken separately, with clear differentiation between the two processes.

The Inspectorate advised that the Section 55 Acceptance Checklist had been revised in the previous week and highlighted the publicity requirements under sections 46 and 48 of the Planning Act 2008, noting that these are relevant to Stage 2 consultation strategy and that the updated guidance would be considered.

The Inspectorate highlighted a main railway line in the vicinity of the proposed order limits and asked whether discussions had taken place with Network Rail, or whether such engagement was planned. The applicant explained that the proposed development is not currently planned to extend south of the mainline and, as a result, there would be no requirement to acquire land rights, however, Network Rail would be engaged as an adjoining landowner.

The Inspectorate advised that, where bridleways are used by horse riders, consideration should be given to potential design impacts on equestrian users in addition to walkers. The Inspectorate noted that the proposed cable route may be located in proximity to a stud farm and suggested that appropriate mitigation measures should be considered where impacts on the equestrian industry are identified. The applicant agreed to consider this matter and assess the proximity of the proposals.

The applicant confirmed that early engagement has commenced with Thames Water in relation to the proposed White Horse Reservoir project, including discussions regarding

overlapping red line boundaries. The Inspectorate advised the applicant to continue engagement with the White Horse Reservoir project team and to consider registering as an Interested Party in the White Horse Reservoir examination to ensure it remains informed of matters that could affect the proposed development.

Environmental constraints and issues

The applicant presented an overview of the environmental constraints associated with the proposed development and cable route options. Key constraints identified included areas of ancient and semi-natural woodland, flood zones, main rivers, agricultural land, and the proximity of heritage assets and settlements.

The Inspectorate highlighted relevant Secretary of State guidance relating to development within flood risk areas. The applicant confirmed that it would seek to avoid flood zones where practicable, including in relation to the proposed cable route.

The applicant confirmed that the proposed development falls within Schedule 2, Part 3(a) of the Infrastructure Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations and advised that it does not intend to seek a Screening Opinion and outlined its intention to prepare an Interim Environmental Report ahead of the Environmental Statement to accompany the DCO application.

The applicant advised that the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is expected to focus on cultural heritage, traffic and transport, ecology and nature conservation, and landscape and visual effects, in addition to other topics.

The Inspectorate highlighted that the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects: Technical Advice Page for Scoping Solar Development provides useful guidance for the development of the Scoping Report and encouraged the applicant to provide appropriate evidence in support of any proposed scoping assumptions. The applicant confirmed that this guidance would be taken into account during preparation of the Scoping Report.

The applicant provided an update on environmental surveys undertaken to date, including ecological surveys, and advised that further ecological, geophysical, agricultural land classification and and biodiversity net gain surveys are planned or underway. The applicant noted that further engagement with statutory bodies would be required as the assessment progresses. The applicant also confirmed that survey findings would inform the development of mitigation measures, and that an environmental commitments register would be prepared to set out the mitigation strategy identified through the assessment process.

Draft Development Consent Order

The applicant confirmed that the draft DCO will be prepared using the standard Statutory Instrument format. The applicant advised that the drafting approach will have regard to relevant precedent and established DCO drafting practice, including recently made Orders, whilst retaining flexibility to propose alternative approaches where these can be justified.

Land and Rights

The applicant confirmed that the draft order limits do not include any Crown land or special category land, and that the cable route seeks to avoid Crown land.

The Inspectorate advised that updated guidance on Local Impact Reports is available for the Local Authorities and suggested that the applicant draw this to the attention of relevant authorities, particularly where Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs) are in place. The applicant agreed to do so.

The Inspectorate emphasised that the early preparation of Local Impact Reports is encouraged, as this can assist in the early identification and consideration of key issues.

The Inspectorate sought clarification on how potential mitigation measures would be addressed in relation to Thames Water's proposed White Horse Reservoir, and any associated interactions with the proposed development. The applicant confirmed that ecological Impacts are currently being assessed. The Inspectorate requested that further clarity on this matter be provided as part of the scoping process. The applicant agreed to do so.

Application Submission date

The applicant intends to submit its DCO application to the Inspectorate in September 2027.

The pre-application service offer

The applicant advised that it proposes to proceed with the basic level of pre-application service offered by the Inspectorate, in accordance with the 2024 Pre-application Prospectus. In support of this approach, the applicant noted that the project is being promoted by an experienced developer and project team and is being developed within the framework of designated National Policy Statements. The Inspectorate confirmed that a tier confirmation letter will be issued, including details of the project reference code and dedicated project email address.

Practical arrangements and next steps

The Inspectorate reminded the applicant of the requirement to provide a GIS Shapefile at least 10 working days before the submission of the Scoping Report in accordance with published guidance.
The applicant confirmed its preference to publish the project website shortly before submitting the Scoping Report and agreed to keep the case team informed of any changes to this approach.

The applicant noted that some host local authorities are experiencing resource constraints due to the number of NSIPs being progressed within the area. The applicant therefore emphasised the importance of early engagement. Discussions on Planning Performance Agreements (PPA's) are ongoing.

Annex A

Meeting attendees

Organisation	Role
Planning Inspectorate	Operations Lead
Planning Inspectorate	Operations Manager
Planning Inspectorate	Case Officer
Planning Inspectorate	Environmental Services – Operations Lead
Planning Inspectorate	Case Manager
Cearn Solar Farm Limited	Head of Development – Promoter of scheme
Cearn Solar Farm Limited	Senior Development Manager. - Project Lead
Cearn Solar Farm Limited	Associate Director DWD
Cearn Solar Farm Limited	AECOM Leading Environmental Impact Assessment
Cearn Solar Farm Limited	Senior Planner DWD
Cearn Solar Farm Limited	Consultancy and Accounts Director - Lead on consultation and engagement
Cearn Solar Farm Limited	Legal Lead (TLT)