

Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment)  
Regulations 2011, as amended (2015)

Screening Opinion - reference SMD/2015/0261

**Site Address**

Land near Beacon House Farm, Wedgwood Lane, Gillow Heath, Biddulph, ST8 6RQ

Grid reference: SJ 38774 359206

**Proposal**

4.6MWp Photo Voltaic Solar Energy Development covering c.9.3 hectares as detailed in the submitted project summary and its accompanying plans and illustrations.

**Applicant**

TGC Renewables,  
TGC House,  
10 Duckmoor Road Industrial Estate  
Bristol  
BS3 2BJ

**Agent**

N/A

**Planning Application Case Officer**

N/A  
Staffordshire Moorlands District Council

**EIA Assessment**

Mr. Wayne Johnson  
Staffordshire Moorlands District Council

**Decision**

An Environmental Impact Assessment **is required**.

**Justification**

**Schedule 1**

Not applicable. The proposed development does not fall within any of the categories listed in this Schedule.

## Schedule 2

The proposed development falls within Schedule 2, Section 2, paragraph 3: Energy Industry category (a) Industrial Installations for the production of electricity, steam and hot water.

## Sensitive Area Test

The site is not within an environmentally sensitive area strictly as defined in Part 1, Section 2(1) of the Regulations.

## Threshold and Criteria Test

With a site area of c.9.3 hectares the application site exceeds the threshold of 0.5 hectares quoted in column 2 of the table in section 3 of schedule 2 by nearly 19 times. Current EIA guidance headed **Annex: Indicative Screening Thresholds** states at paragraph 057:

“The criteria and thresholds in column two represent the ‘exclusion thresholds’ in Schedule 2 of the Regulations, below which Environmental Impact Assessment does not need to be considered (subject to the proposal not being in a sensitive area).”

In this case therefore an EIA must be considered. The guidance goes on to give Indicative criteria and thresholds. The proposal under consideration here would have an output of 4.6MW, less than one tenth of the indicative trigger level quoted in the guidance as:

“Thermal output of more than 50 MW. Small stations using novel forms of generation should be considered carefully.”

It should be noted that in the introduction to this section of the guidance at paragraph 057 it is stated that:

“The figures in column three are indicative only and are intended to help determine whether significant effects are likely. However, when considering the thresholds, it is important to also consider the location of the proposed development.”

Paragraph 18 of the current Government Guidance for Environmental Impact Assessment at:

<http://planningguidance.planningportal.gov.uk/blog/guidance/environmental-impact-assessment/screening-schedule-2-projects/> states:

“It should not be presumed that developments above the indicative thresholds should always be subject to assessment, or those falling below these thresholds could never give rise to significant effects, especially where the development is in an environmentally sensitive location. Each development will need to be considered on its merits.

At paragraph 058 of the guidance (Column 3) the key issues for this category of development are given as being:

“Level of emissions to air, arrangements for the transport of fuel and any visual impact.”

Part II Section 4(5): Schedule 3 Selection criteria for screening Schedule 2 Development

1 Characteristics of the development

1.1 The size of this proposal with an overall area of 9.3 ha is significantly bigger than the 0.5ha threshold which may suggest an EIA could be needed. There would though be no, or certainly no significant, emissions to air and it is understood that the export of the energy generated would be by existing transmission routes. The main impacts that can be anticipated will be visual and ecological. There are also likely to be public access implications which need to be assessed as it is evident that there is public access that runs through the site, in between field 4 & 5 as shown on the 1:5000 aerial photograph. The structures would be extensive in land area covered and the heights of structures are shown in plan no. 2v Racking System rev A as being up to c.3.0m above ground level. An unusual and potentially significant factor could be a propensity to reflect light from across the installation. You have stated that the site is identified as having current agricultural use. The degree of ecological impact would need to be determined according to ecological survey and could be significant in this instance.

1.2 The cumulative impact upon the landscape of this proposal along with other development needs to be considered. In this case there are not found to be any cumulative impacts with other solar developments but the development could be considered to add cumulatively to the developed margins of Biddulph.

1.3 The proposal has a significant positive environmental benefit in that its core purpose is to generate energy sustainably from the naturally available light resource.

1.4 Waste production is not a feature of this development. A requirement for complete removal of all components of the development following any de-commissioning can also be imposed.

1.5 Noise implications are not considered likely to be a significant issue although any potential for noise from substations needs to be considered.

1.6 Risk of accidents for the public is not considered likely to be a significant environmental factor of this proposal although it needs to be noted that as an electrical power generation facility appropriate protective controls in accordance with prevailing standards will be important. It is anticipated but not stated in the details provided that the substations would be secured to a recognised specification as per the Distribution Network Operators requirements and will be fenced with security fencing within the site. Use of CCTV could be envisaged as part of any security arrangements. Close to residential areas and evidently a site well established as land open to informal

recreational access, site security would need to be robust and it is presumed must be regarded as critical to ensuring public safety.

## 2 Location of the development

2.1 The site occupies a prominent area of land that forms a valley side to the west of Biddulph. The site overlooks the surrounding built environment of Biddulph and Gillow Heath. The west of the site abuts Willocks Wood and will be surrounded by grassland in all other cases due to it being in the open countryside. The total area is made up of 5 fields that have natural hedgerows forming the boundaries and in general the land falls away to the east towards the A527.

2.2 The site lies in the defined county landscape character type: Gritstone Uplands, which are closely related to the gritstone highland fringe, but lie on lower elevations. It follows the ridgeline that runs north–south at Biddulph Moor, extending west, north of Biddulph to bound the gritstone edge that extends north–east from Mow Cop along the boundary with Cheshire.

2.3 There are public footpaths in the immediate vicinity that run through and along the site boundaries. Through the countryside and in close proximity of the site there are a network of footpaths more generally within near range all of which may have the potential to yield relatively close range views of the development. Immediately adjoining to the west is Willocks Wood that is classified as an ancient woodland, which is understood to open for public recreational access. The town of Biddulph, is in close proximity to the site meaning that public access areas and footpaths tend to have relatively high levels of public usage.

2.4 Landscape character and topography, and the relationship of the proposed development to it, is a crucially significant factor in the assessment of this proposal. Assessments to current recognised practice standards would need to accompany the application in respect of both landscape character and visual impact and separately in respect of ecology and impact on amenity.

## 3 Characteristics of the Potential Impact

3.1 The proposal would result in a quite large and a somewhat unusual development to this landscape which strictly would not be in character. The built and developed nature of the proposal would tend to significantly extend the adjoining urban boundaries of Biddulph. A significant population of c.20,000, including extensive residential settlements lie close to this site. Due to the extremely prominent nature of the site the site will be visible from some of these residential areas, especially from more elevated locations. It is clear that the site and surrounding footpaths are well used for informal edge-of-town countryside recreation. The development is judged likely to lead to the substantial elimination of the ecological qualities of the site, especially given the close proximity of nearby watercourses and ponds. Additionally, the hedgerows bounding the site will also have the potential to provide suitable habitats for local wildlife. There would be no transfrontier impact. The impacts whilst specific and not overly complex would, it is judged, be significant and there is a strong likelihood that the impacts which

have been identified would occur. Whilst the impacts are likely in the main to be readily reversible, should the development be brought to an end and removed, the lifespan of the proposal, at 25 years plus, would result in a significant duration of the impacts representing a substantial proportion of people's lives.

#### 4 Conclusions

4.1 The area of development proposed substantially exceeds the trigger threshold to require screening but is substantially below the stated indicative threshold of 50MW stated for determining significance and thence whether or not there is a need for an EIA. However it is clear that the proposal would have a very significant effect on the recognised existing biodiversity of the site. It is very likely that there would be a significant effect amounting to large scale curtailment of the currently enjoyed recreational amenity offered by the site and potentially the enjoyment of surrounding countryside footpaths and amenity land would be marred by the visual impacts. By virtue of the prominent topography of the site and the 9.3ha area of the development the proposal is judged likely to have a significant impact on landscape character, the more so given that this is within a high quality landscape highly sensitive to development and land use change. The nearby presence of an ancient woodland, watercourses and residential areas, add further significant considerations. By reference to the guidance on the Government website at: <http://planningguidance.planningportal.gov.uk/blog/guidance/environmental-impact-assessment/>, and noting the consideration above in sections 1 to 3 it is concluded that, an EIA should be undertaken.

Report prepared by:  
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Senior Planning Officer

Signed  
Dated 26<sup>th</sup> May 2015

Delegated Authority:  
Robert Weaver  
Head of Regulatory Services

Signed  
Dated 26<sup>th</sup> May 2015