STAFFORDSHIRE
moorlands
DISTRICT COUNCIL
ACHIEVING · EXCELLENCE

Simon W. Baker B.Ed MBA MIMSPA
Chief Executive

Mr Thilo Von Hass
Via e-mail;

6th August 2019

Dear Sirs,

Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017
Screening Opinion for proposed solar farm
Bird Grove Farm Sandon Road Hilderstone Staffordshire ST15 8SL

I refer to your letter of the 15th June 2019 in connection with the above proposal and your request therein for a Screening opinion under regulation 6 (1) of the above Regulations as to whether the proposal is EIA development requiring the submission of an Environmental Statement.

The proposal is for a solar farm on a site of approximately 80 hectares. Such development falls within the description of development in Column 1, Section 3 (a) of Schedule 2 to the 2017 Regulations namely Energy industry; industrial installations for the production of electricity, steam and hot water. Column 2 confirms the threshold for such development to be 0.5 hectares. The proposal exceeds this threshold. The proposal is therefore 'Schedule 2 development' within the meaning of the 2017 Regulations and needs to be screened by the LPA to determine whether significant effects on the environment are likely and hence whether Environmental Impact Assessment is required.

In preparing this screening opinion the LPA has had regard to the selection criteria in Schedule 3 of the 2017 Regulations. The LPA has also had regard to the Indicative thresholds and criteria set out in the Planning Practice Guidance. This advises that key issues to consider for this description of development are levels of emission to air, arrangements for the transport of fuel and any visual impact. It also refers to an indicative threshold for output of more than 50 MW. Information provided in the letter dated 15th June 2019 refers to a proposed output of 49.9 MW. It is confirmed that the site is not in a sensitive area. The LPA has used the recommended Screening Matrix to prepare this opinion.

Characteristics of the development

The size of this proposal is significantly larger than the threshold area which may suggest an EIA could be needed. However there would be no significant emissions to air and the export of the energy generated would be transmitted via a new sub station on site to the grid. The main impacts would be visual and ecological. The development is large scale covering approx. 80 hectares. The panels however are low in height, 2.4 m off the ground, and are fixed not rotating. There are thus no moving parts. Considering the size of the proposal wider and local views are relatively limited (see comments from Trees and Woodland Officer comments). This is due to the particular site characteristics; the location and aspect of the site on a plateau and in a contained shallow valley within a gently rolling wider topography;

Simon W. Baker B.Ed MBA MIMSPA
Chief Executive

the existing landscape structure of fields, hedges, hedgerow trees and woodlands; the relative sparsity of public rights of way and public highways in the immediate vicinity affording views of the site and the relative lack of elevated viewpoints in the surrounding area offering mid-range or close-range views of the site. The farm access to New Buildings Farm and proposed access to the site is also the route of Public footpath 24. The site is directly adjacent to this footpath for some of its length and from here there would be very close range and extensive views of parts of the site. The reflective glare from the panels would also need to be considered as it could be a significant factor but could be mitigated by materials, positioning and landscaping. Overall the visual impact is considered unlikely to lead to significant environmental effects in terms of the EIA Regulations. That of course is not to say that it will not require great scrutiny at the planning application stage. Visual impact would need to be fully addressed as part of a comprehensive Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment.

The proposal would be at the expense of the agricultural productivity of the land. A site visit revealed that much of the land (applicant says approx. 60% currently although this can change) is in arable production. The land is Grade 3 quality although the specific category within Grade 3 is unknown. This is a potential issue which will need to be considered and assessed as part of a planning application. The documentation indicates however that the land would continue to be grazed. In terms of ecology Bromley Wood lies adjacent to the site. It is nationally designated ancient woodland and a locally designated Local Wildlife Site. Given the lack of survey data there may also be habitats within the site that are worthy of LWS status. There is also other potential high-value woodland and parkland adjacent to the site and potential high-value semi-improved and marshy grassland and hedgerows within the site (see comments from Staffordshire Wildlife Trust). It is considered that, subject to further appropriate surveys for protected species and mitigation in the form of buffers/stand-off distances, avoidance of sensitive area and/or compensatory land within the landowners holding and the opportunity for biodiversity enhancement/management that significant impacts in terms of the Regulations would be unlikely.

The proposal has a significant positive environmental benefit in that its core purpose is to generate energy sustainably from the naturally available light resource. The applicant says the output is estimated to be circa 49.9MW, interestingly just 0.1 MW within the indicative threshold of 50 MW.

In terms of cumulative impact there is another solar farm within 5km at Newton Heath Farm to the north. However this is considerably smaller and it is already in operation. No significant cumulative impact is considered likely from this. No other developments are known that could have a significant cumulative impact. The boundary of Stafford BC is close to the site. The authority has been consulted as part of the Screening process.

Matters of Waste, noise, air pollutants, heritage, flooding, contamination, traffic, loss of natural resources or risk of accidents, risks to the population are not considered to be significant issues in this proposal in terms of the Regulations. There will be some traffic and associated noise impact during construction but this can be mitigated/minimised through a Construction and Environmental Management plan and is not considered likely to give rise to significant effects.

Simon W. Baker B.Ed MBA MIMSPA
Chief Executive

Location of the development

The site is not within a Sensitive area in terms of the Regulations. The site is not within the Green Belt but is within open countryside in a rural area characterised by isolated farmhouses and dwellings. The character of the landscape will completely change for the lifetime of the development. Although it is reversible the submission indicates a life of 40 years. The matter of landscape character will be a key consideration in the planning application. It will need to be addressed as part of the comprehensive Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment referred to above. For the purposes of the Regulations however significant effects are considered to be unlikely.

Characteristics of the potential impact

This large scale development would be a quite unusual feature to this landscape and not in character. However it does appear to be relatively well screened from local and wider views despite its size. A full comprehensive LIVIA would be required with an application to consider these impacts in more detail as discussed above. There would be no transfrontier impact. The impacts are specific and judged relatively limited in the EIA assessment context so as not be considered complex. Although the life of the project is given to be 40 years, which would represent a significant proportion of peoples lives, the impacts are likely in the main to be readily reversible should the development be brought to an end and removed. Overall, the LPA is of the opinion that any potential impacts would not be of a magnitude to suggest that an environmental statement is required.

For the reasons above it is considered that the development would not be likely to have significant effects on the environment by virtue of factors such as its nature, size or location. The development would not be of more than local importance and would not involve unusually complex and potentially hazardous environmental effects. There would be no significant cumulative effect.

Under regulation 6(9) it is herby confirmed that in the opinion of the Local Planning Authority the above development is not EIA development in terms of the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017.

Documents to accompany a planning application

If you do proceed with a planning application, please refer to the Councils validation checklist which can be found at the following link https://www.staffsmoorlands.gov.uk/article/567/Apply-for-planning-permission. Where not specified in the checklist the following should also be provided:-

- Construction and traffic management plan
- Transport Statement
- Preliminary Ecological Appraisal with phase 1 habitat survey, search for badger evidence, HSI of relevant ponds and GCN risk assessment to determine whether further surveys are needed.
- LWS assessment of any habitats that appear to be of high value.
- Ancient woodland assessment of undesignated woodlands adjacent to site if initial surveys indicate potential.
- Breeding and wintering bird surveys

STAFFORDSHIRE
moorlands
DISTRICT COUNCIL
ACHIEVING · EXCELLENCE

Simon W. Baker B.Ed MBA MIMSPA
Chief Executive

- If any trees are to be felled- bat surveys
- A full, comprehensive Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment
- A Tree survey/Arboricultural Impact assessment report (unless the submitted details of the application evidently demonstrate that any such impact would not occur or would be so unlikely as to not reasonably require such a rep
- A Heritage Assessment in relation to the medieval moated site
- Agricultural Report

Avoidance, Mitigation, Compensation and Enhancements

- Adequate stand-off from ancient woodland, trees and hedgerows.
- Avoid panels on high value grassland.
- Avoid panels on high quality agricultural land
- Provide species-specific mitigation and compensation where present or likely.
- Ideally minimise the length of security fencing installed
- Minimise ground disturbance.
- Sustainably drain any hard surfaces.
- Enhance watercourses with appropriate management.
- Enhance hedgerows with additional species planting, and appropriate management (laying, trimming on rotation every 3 years)
- Create diverse grassland under panels wherever possible; if not entire fields, enhance field margins.
- Provide measures to protect users of the public footpath during construction

- Submit Landscape and Ecological Management Plan for the site for the life of the development, including periodic monitoring of key habitats/ species.

Yours faithfully,

X B.J. Haywood

Signed by: Ben Haywood
Head of Development Services