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Simon W. Baker B.Ed MBA MIMSPA
Chief Executive

10th October 2019

Mr Roland Billington
Cadence Planning Ltd

BY E-MAIL

Dear Mr Billington

Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017 – regulation 6(1)Screening Opinion for proposed development of a ground mounted solar farm

Land at Rownall Farm, Rownall Road, Cellarhead Staffordshire Moorlands

In response to your letter dated 13th September 2019 an EIA screening assessment has been undertaken as requested. Thank you for agreeing to extend the time for this decision to be issued from 4th October to today 10th October 2019.

The proposed development falls within the description of development given at 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. In cases where such development exceeds 0.5ha in area a screening assessment is required.

The proposal site occupies some c.68 hectares. On this basis the proposal significantly exceeds the 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 impacts. It also refers to an indicative threshold for output of more than 50 MW. It is noted that in this case the anticipated output is given as c.40MW.

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 to landscape, heritage and ecology. At least one public footpath right of way crosses the proposal area. The site is bounded by public roads and other footpaths.

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It is noted that the proposed solar panels would be 2.4 m off the ground, and fixed not rotating.

The site has a shallow hill profile rising from the south, west and east boundaries to c.260m AOD at its northerly limit. This is likely to accentuate the noticeability of the development both nearby and in the wider local area.

Overall the visual impact is considered unlikely to lead to significant environmental effects in terms of the EIA Regulations but this is a proposal which will require detailed scrutiny at the planning application stage and visual impact on landscape character and public amenity would be a key consideration requiring a comprehensive Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment.

Heritage assessments to consider the implications for the significance of the setting to the nearby Listed Buildings will be critical.

The implication of reduced agricultural production of the land will need to be considered.

Ecology of the site is not known and will need to be surveyed and assessed including potential for significant species of ground nesting birds such as Curlew and Lapwing to be present as breeding species.

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 areas and/or compensatory land within the landowner's holding and the opportunity for biodiversity enhancement/management that significant impacts in terms of the EIA 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 40MW.

In terms of cumulative impact there is another solar farm at c.5km to the SE at Heywood Grange. No significant cumulative impact is considered likely from this as it is judged unlikely that the two sites could be seen in conjunction. There is also a substantial electricity sub station just south of the application land though this tends to be remarkably concealed in dip in the landscape.

There will be some traffic and associated noise impact during construction but it would be expected that this can be mitigated/minimised through a Construction and Environmental Management plan and is not considered likely to give rise to significant effects.

<u>Location of the development</u>
The site is not within a Sensitive area in terms of the Regulations. The site is within the Green Belt and is 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

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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 unlikely.

Characteristics of the potential impact

This large scale development would be a quite unusual feature to this landscape and not in character. A full comprehensive LIVIA would be required with an application to consider landscape impacts. There would be no trans frontier 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 EIA 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 hereby 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
- Local Wildlife Site 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
- If any trees are to be felled - bat surveys
- Full, comprehensive Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment
- 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
- Heritage Assessment in relation to the Listed Buildings and their settings
- Agricultural Report

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Avoidance, Mitigation, Compensation and Enhancements (Not necessarily exhaustive)

- Adequate stand-off from 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 and provide appropriate 'amenity' corridor
- Submit Landscape and Ecological Management Plan for the site for the life of the development, including periodic monitoring of key habitats/ species.

X B.J. Haywood

Signed by: Ben Haywood

Head of Development Services