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Our ref: 460715
Your ref: SMD/2023/0594



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BY EMAIL ONLY

Dear Sir or Madam

Planning consultation: Installation of a solar array, substation and associated works forming an extension to Blythe Solar Farm (ref: SMD/2022/0160).

Location: Land at Blythe House Farm, south of the A50, Draycott in the Moors, ST10 4JN.

Thank you for your consultation on the above dated 06 December 2023 which was received by Natural England on 15 December 2023.

Natural England is a non-departmental public body. Our statutory purpose is to ensure that the natural environment is conserved, enhanced, and managed for the benefit of present and future generations, thereby contributing to sustainable development.

Soils and Agricultural Land Quality

Under the Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015 (DMPO) Natural England is a statutory consultee on development that would lead to the loss of over 20ha of 'best and most versatile' (BMV) agricultural land (land graded as 1, 2 and 3a in the Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) system, where this is not in accordance with an approved plan.

From the description of the development this application is likely to affect 24.14 ha of BMV agricultural land. We consider that the proposed development, if temporary as described, is unlikely to lead to significant permanent loss of BMV agricultural land, as a resource for future generations. This is because the solar panels would be secured to the ground by steel piles with limited soil disturbance and could be removed in the future with no permanent loss of agricultural land quality likely to occur, provided the appropriate soil management is employed and the development is undertaken to high standards. Although some components of the development, such as construction of a sub-station, may be permanently affect agricultural land this would be limited to small areas of BMV agricultural land.

However, during the life of the proposed development it is likely that there will be a reduction in agricultural production over the whole development area. Your authority should therefore consider whether this is an effective use of land in line with planning practice guidance which encourages the siting of large scale solar farms on previously developed and non-agricultural land. Paragraph 180b and footnote 53 of the [National Planning Policy Framework](#) (NPPF) states that:

'Planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by:

recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, and the wider benefits from

natural capital and ecosystem services – including the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land, and of trees and woodland.'

Footnote 53: Where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, areas of poorer quality land should be preferred to those of a higher quality. We would also draw to your attention to [Planning Practice Guidance for Renewable and Low Carbon Energy \(March 2015\)](#) (in particular paragraph 013), and advise you to fully consider best and most versatile land issues in accordance with that guidance.

Local planning authorities are responsible for ensuring that they have sufficient information to apply the requirements of the NPPF. The weighting attached to a particular consideration is a matter of judgement for the local authority as decision maker. This is the case regardless of whether the proposed development is sufficiently large to consult Natural England.

Should you have any questions about ALC or the reliability of information submitted with regard to BMV land please refer to Natural England's '[Guide to assessing Development proposals on Agricultural Land](#)'. This document describes the ALC system including the definition of BMV land, existing ALC data sources and their relevance for site level assessment of land quality and the appropriate methodology for when detailed surveys are required.

Soil is a finite resource which plays an essential role within sustainable ecosystems, performing an array of functions supporting a range of ecosystem services, including storage of carbon, the infiltration and transport of water, nutrient cycling, and provision of food. It is recognised that a proportion of the agricultural land will experience temporary land loss. In order to both retain the long term potential of this land and to safeguard all soil resources as part of the overall sustainability of the whole development, it is important that the soil is able to retain as many of its many important functions and services (ecosystem services) as possible through careful soil management and appropriate soil use, with consideration on how any adverse impacts on soils can be avoided or minimised.

Consequently, Natural England would advise that any grant of planning permission should be made subject to conditions to safeguard soil resources and agricultural land, including a required commitment for the preparation of reinstatement, restoration and aftercare plans; normally this will include the return to the former land quality (ALC grade).

General guidance for protecting soils during development is also available in Defra's [Construction Code of Practice for the Sustainable Use of Soils on Construction Sites](#), and should the development proceed, we recommend that relevant parts of this guidance are followed, e.g. in relation to handling or trafficking on soils in wet weather.

The British Society of Soil Science has published the [Guidance Note](#) Benefitting from Soil Management in Development and Construction which sets out measures for the protection of soils within the planning system and the development of individual sites, which we also recommend is followed.

We would also advise your authority to apply conditions to secure appropriate agricultural land management and/or biodiversity enhancement during the lifetime of the development, and to require the site to be decommissioned and restored to its former condition when planning permission expires.

Other advice

Protected Species

Natural England has produced [standing advice](#)¹ to help planning authorities understand the impact of particular developments on protected species. We advise you to refer to this advice. Natural England will only provide bespoke advice on protected species where they form part of a Site of Special Scientific Interest or in exceptional circumstances.

Further general advice on the consideration of protected species and other natural environment issues is provided at Annex A.

Should the proposal change, please consult us again.

If you have any queries relating to the advice in this letter please email me at Lewis.Savin1@naturalengland.org.uk.

Yours sincerely,

Lewis Savin
Adviser – West Midlands Area Team

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/protected-species-and-sites-how-to-review-planning-proposals>

Annex A – Additional advice

Annex A – Additional advice

Natural England offers the following additional advice:

Landscape

Paragraph 180 of the [National Planning Policy Framework](#) (NPPF) highlights the need to protect and enhance valued landscapes through the planning system. This application may present opportunities to protect and enhance locally valued landscapes, including any local landscape designations. You may want to consider whether any local landscape features or characteristics (such as ponds, woodland, or dry-stone walls) could be incorporated into the development to respond to and enhance local landscape character and distinctiveness, in line with any local landscape character assessments. Where the impacts of development are likely to be significant, a Landscape & Visual Impact Assessment should be provided with the proposal to inform decision making. We refer you to the [Landscape Institute](#) Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment for further guidance.

Local sites and priority habitats and species

You should consider the impacts of the proposed development on any local wildlife or geodiversity sites, in line with paragraphs 181 and 185 of the NPPF and any relevant development plan policy. There may also be opportunities to enhance local sites and improve their connectivity. Natural England does not hold locally specific information on local sites and recommends further information is obtained from appropriate bodies such as the local records centre, wildlife trust, geoconservation groups or recording societies.

Priority habitats and Species are of particular importance for nature conservation and are included in the England Biodiversity List published under section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. Most priority habitats will be mapped either as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, on the Magic website or as Local Wildlife Sites. List of priority habitats and species can be found on [Gov.uk](#). Natural England does not routinely hold species data, such data should be collected when impacts on priority habitats or species are considered likely. Consideration should also be given to the potential environmental value of brownfield sites, often found in urban areas and former industrial land, further information including links to the open mosaic habitats inventory can be found [here](#).

Ancient woodland, ancient and veteran trees

You should consider any impacts on ancient woodland and ancient and veteran trees in line with paragraph 186 of the NPPF. Natural England maintains the Ancient Woodland [Inventory](#) which can help identify ancient woodland. Natural England and the Forestry Commission have produced [standing advice](#) for planning authorities in relation to ancient woodland and ancient and veteran trees. It should be taken into account by planning authorities when determining relevant planning applications. Natural England will only provide bespoke advice on ancient woodland, ancient and veteran trees where they form part of a Site of Special Scientific Interest or in exceptional circumstances.

Biodiversity and wider environmental gains

Development should provide net gains for biodiversity in line with the NPPF paragraphs 180(d), 185 and 186. It is anticipated that major development (defined in the [NPPF glossary](#)) will be required by law to deliver a biodiversity gain of at least 10% from January 2024 and that this requirement will be extended to smaller scale development in April 2024. For nationally significant infrastructure projects (NSIPs) it is anticipated that the requirement for biodiversity net gain will be implemented from 2025.

Further information on the timetable for mandatory biodiversity net gain can be found [here](#). Further general information on biodiversity net gain can be found [here](#).

The Government's [Biodiversity Metric](#) should be used to calculate biodiversity losses and gains for terrestrial and intertidal habitats and can be used to inform any development project. For small development sites the [Small Sites Metric](#) may be used. This is a simplified version of the [Biodiversity Metric](#) and is designed for use where certain criteria are met.

Annex A – Additional advice

We advise you to follow the mitigation hierarchy as set out in paragraph 186 of the NPPF and firstly consider what existing habitats within the site can be retained or enhanced. Where on-site measures are not possible, provision off-site will need to be considered.

Development also provides opportunities to secure wider biodiversity enhancements and environmental gains, as outlined in the NPPF (paragraphs 8, 74, 108, 124, 180, 181 and 186). Opportunities for enhancement might include incorporating features to support specific species within the design of new buildings such as swift or bat boxes or designing lighting to encourage wildlife.

Natural England's [Environmental Benefits from Nature tool](#) may be used to identify opportunities to enhance wider benefits from nature and to avoid and minimise any negative impacts. It is designed to work alongside the [Biodiversity Metric](#) and is available as a beta test version.

Further information on biodiversity net gain, the mitigation hierarchy and wider environmental net gain can be found in government [Planning Practice Guidance](#).

[Green Infrastructure](#)

Natural England's [Green Infrastructure Framework](#) provides evidence-based advice and tools on how to design, deliver and manage green infrastructure (GI). GI should create and maintain green liveable places that enable people to experience and connect with nature, and that offer everyone, wherever they live, access to good quality parks, greenspaces, recreational, walking and cycling routes that are inclusive, safe, welcoming, well-managed and accessible for all. GI provision should enhance ecological networks, support ecosystems services and connect as a living network at local, regional and national scales.

Development should be designed to meet the [15 Green Infrastructure Principles](#). The Green Infrastructure Standards can be used to inform the quality, quantity and type of green infrastructure to be provided. Major development should have a GI plan including a long-term delivery and management plan. Relevant aspects of local authority green infrastructure strategies should be delivered where appropriate.

GI mapping resources are available [here](#) and [here](#). These can be used to help assess deficiencies in greenspace provision and identify priority locations for new GI provision.

Access and Recreation

Natural England encourages any proposal to incorporate measures to help improve people's access to the natural environment. Measures such as reinstating existing footpaths together with the creation of new footpaths and bridleways should be considered. Links to urban fringe areas should also be explored to strengthen access networks, reduce fragmentation, and promote wider green infrastructure.

Rights of Way, Access land, Coastal access and National Trails

Paragraphs 104 and 180 of the NPPF highlight the important of public rights of way and access. Development should consider potential impacts on access land, common land, rights of way and coastal access routes in the vicinity of the development. Consideration should also be given to the potential impacts on the any nearby National Trails. The National Trails website www.nationaltrail.co.uk provides information including contact details for the National Trail Officer. Appropriate mitigation measures should be incorporated for any adverse impacts.

Biodiversity duty

Your authority has a [duty](#) to have regard to conserving biodiversity as part of your decision making. Conserving biodiversity can also include restoration or enhancement to a population or habitat. Further information is available [here](#).