

Our Ref: SMD/2024/0004

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30th January 2024

Dear Miss Donnelly

Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017
Screening Opinion Ref: SMD/2024/0004 – With regard to planning application
SMD/2023/0594 Installation of a solar array, substation and associated works at
Land at Blythe House Farm, south of the A50, Draycott in the Moors, ST10 4JN

I refer to your letter dated 28th November 2023 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 the installation of a solar array which would be an extension to an existing extant permission for a solar farm, approved under planning permission SMD/2022/0160. The proposed development would have an installed capacity of 17.6MW, and along with the existing approval (27.7MW) would have a cumulative capacity of 45.3MW.

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. It is confirmed that the site is not in a sensitive area. The LPA has used the recommended Screening Matrix to prepare this opinion and this letter should be read in conjunction with that.

Characteristics of the Development

The size of this proposal is significantly larger than the threshold area. In addition, cumulatively with other existing operational, approved and developments under consideration in the local area, the threshold output of the development(s) would exceed 50MW. This may suggest an EIA could be needed. However, there would be no significant emissions or pollutants arising from the development. The main impacts would be landscape, visual and ecological matters.

The proposal would be at the expense of the agricultural productivity of the land but there is an opportunity to graze underneath the panels and, in any event, the proposal is regarded as temporary and is wholly reversible. The land is stated to be predominantly Grade 4 and Grade 3b, only 2% of the land is understood to be Best and Most Versatile (BMV) land falling into Grade 3a. The proposals therefore minimise the loss of BMV agricultural land.

In terms of landscape/visual impact, a solar farm of this scale has the potential to have an adverse impact on the character and appearance of this rural area, introducing an urban form of development. Although the impacts in this case are not anticipated to be at a level leading to significant environmental effects in terms of the Regulations, the landscape and visual impact of the proposal will need to be thoroughly considered and assessed in the planning application.

In terms of ecology and biodiversity effects, the proposal has the potential to have impacts upon species, and habitats. The development does not directly affect designated sites and no significant effects on international, national or local sites are expected. However, there are ecological considerations that will need to be addressed through the planning application regardless.

The development would not directly impact designated or non-designated heritage assets, although the site does lie within the wider setting of a number of designated heritage assets. The effects of which can be adequately assessed through a planning application. Evidence

suggests that the site has low archaeological potential, nonetheless the effects could be considered through appropriate investigative works secured via condition.

Matters of waste, noise, air pollutants, flooding, contamination, traffic, loss of natural resources, risk of accidents or 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, vibration and dust 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.

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 which is generally characterised by a pastoral landscape which includes isolated farmhouses and dwellings. The local landscape is, however, crossed by significant transport infrastructure, overhead power lines and existing solar arrays. These provide a degree of urbanisation to the rural landscape character.

Nonetheless, the character of the landscape will completely change for the lifetime of the development. The effect of the development is however reversible; and the submission indicates a life span for the development of 40 years before decommissioning. 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. Given the sensitivity of the landscape, reversibility and nature of the development, for the purposes of the Regulations, significant effects in isolation and cumulatively, are considered to be unlikely.

Characteristics of the potential impact

This large-scale development would be an uncharacteristic feature within the local landscape, although it is noted that similar interventions have been integrated into the local landscape. The application requires a full and comprehensive LIVIA to consider the individual and cumulative landscape and visual impacts in more detail. There would be no trans frontier impact. The impacts are specific and judged relatively limited in the EIA assessment context so as not to be considered complex. Although the life of the project is given to be 40 years, which would represent a significant proportion of people's 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. However, this is not to suggest that the development would not be harmful when assessed against the Development Plan. The effects of the development can be adequately assessed through the planning application process without the need for an ES.

Other matters

Comments of the Footpaths Society and Parish Council are noted. However, it is considered that the issues raised, including cumulative impacts can be dealt with through the standard information requirements of a planning application and do not warrant EIA.

Conclusions

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 hereby confirmed that, in the opinion of the Local Planning Authority, the above development is not EIA development in terms of the Regulations.

Yours sincerely,

X *B.J. Haywood*

Signed by: Ben Haywood

Head of Development Services