

SMDC Planning Reference –	SMD/2023/0594		
Site Name –	Blythe House Farm Solar Facility (extension)		
Summary of proposals -	Photo voltaic array facility with control equipment		
Consultation Note Subject –	Landscape and Visual Matters		
Planning Case Officer –	Declan Cleary		
Landscape Comments Prepared By –	Stuart Ryder of Ryder Landscape Consultants		
Date of site visit —	7/2/24	Date of response	20/2/24
Recommendation –	Approval – Subject to design amendments to the upper fields arrangements.		

Dear Sir

Blythe House Farm Solar Facility Extension – Landscape and Visual Consultation Note

Thank you for appointing us to review the landscape and visual aspects of the submitted planning application and I pass a series of comments under the following headings;

1. Methodology
2. Site and surrounding's landscape character
3. Proposals for the site
4. Landscape effects
5. Visual effects from surrounding areas
6. Cumulative effects
7. Potential design considerations
8. Landscape Policy Compliance
9. Suggested Planning Conditions

1. Methodology

Staffordshire Moorlands District Council (SMDC) appointed Ryder Landscape Consultants to consider the submitted scheme and supporting documents in January 2024. Stuart Ryder an experienced Chartered Landscape Architect attended site on 7th February 2024, walked nearby public footpaths and took site photography.

The site visit was partly unaccompanied but also partly in the presence of the landowner who allowed access to the angling lake and parts of the Site away from the PRoW. The landowners helpfulness is acknowledged. I also had the following plans and report to inform me about the proposals;

- Corylus Planning – Application Plan BF/613/09 Rev E
- Corylus Planning – Landscape / Ecological Layout Plan BF/613/11 Rev -
- Google Earth satellite images of the wider area
- Staffordshire County Council's PRoW Mapping.

2. Site and surrounding's landscape character

The extension site is comprised of a series of pasture fields (7 counted off plan) put to improved grass set to the south side of the A50 in the vicinity of Blythe House Farm. Construction access is proposed from the north off Draycott Road via an existing track past a small clutch of houses. The topography of the Site is one of a valley side falling from the north to the south and forms the northern valley side to the River Blithe valley.

There are three, smaller fields to the north that are viewed immediately after crossing over the A50 on the farm access bridge that allows access to Blythe House Farm. The remaining four fields are to the south and are larger in scale, less sloped and closer to the railway line and the River Blithe.

The two sets of fields are split by other pasture fields with those to the west of the Blythe Farm access road already consented for solar arrays. The future anticipated presence of other arrays has been taken into account when considering both landscape and visual effects.

Other Site features include native hedgerows reinforced in parts by timber post and wire fencing, mature hedgerow standard trees and a purpose dug angling pond to the south of the Blythe Farm building. Crossing the south western side of the lower fields is a high voltage overhead transmission line that allows transfer of the solar generated electricity to the national grid.

The contextual area to the proposals if summarised using the cardinal points are;

- North – A50 major road corridor part set in cutting and beyond that a rural area with some dispersed settlement leading down into the Tean Valley towards the small town of Upper Tean.
- East – rural area with a mix of medium sized, hedged fields put to pastoral use.
- South – railway line, the part modified River Blithe channel and then leading up the southern side of the Blithe Valley.
- West - rural area with a mix of medium sized, hedged fields with some already put to solar arrays and other fields benefitting from recent solar consent. The existing arrays set to the valley bottom have an element of looking like water at the lower part of the valley when viewed from a distance.

There are a number of public footpaths near to and adjacent to Site. These include Checkley 5 that appears to run up the road to Blythe House Farm rather than its definitive route, and three paths Checkley 6, 13 & 15 that converge on Blythe House Farm.

The Wardell Armstrong 2008 Landscape Character and Settlement Assessment study shows no landscape constraints on the Site or in its contextual area. The Site is classified as being part of the Settled Plateau Farmland Slopes Landscape Character Type (LCT).

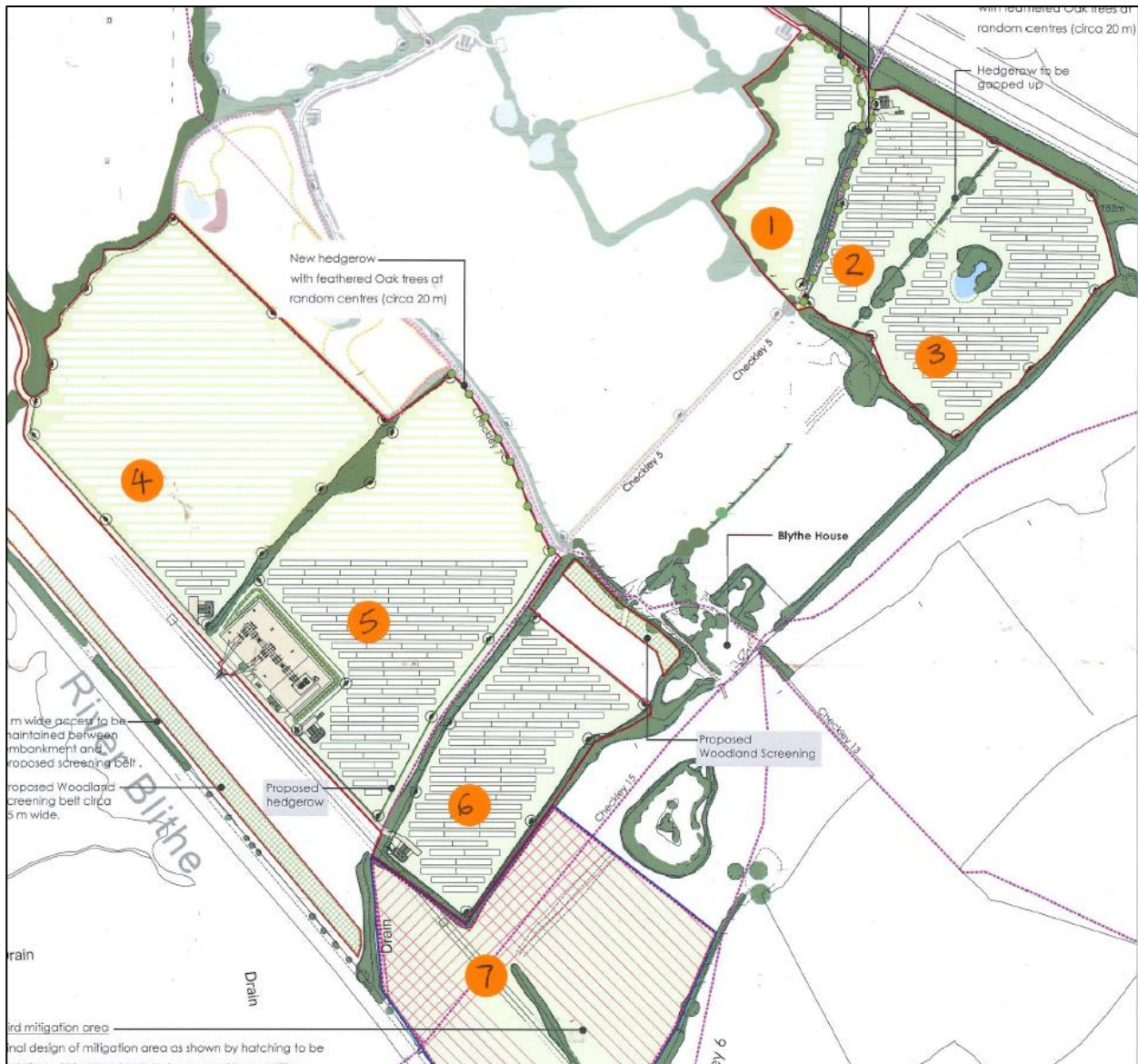
In landscape character terms there is both connectivity with and influences of the A50 road corridor and the rural landscape however the overall landscape character is however rural pastoral fields. There are no structures on Site but Blythe House Farm does act as a set of focal buildings with paths routed by it and its mix of traditional and contemporary barns to take the eye.

I would not class the Site as a 'valued landscape' as per NPPF Para 180 a) but its hedgerow pattern, hedgerow standards and contribution to the wider, undeveloped Blithe Valley are of value and the long term preservation of these features is critical to sustaining landscape character in the area.

3. Proposals for the Site

For the sake of this description and discussion of other effects the seven fields have been numbered 1 to 7 as per the diagram below.

Access is presumed from the north side of the Site utilising the metalled track up from Upper Tean, over the A50 on the farm bridge and then via the farm access track.



The first three fields (Nos 1-3) reached after crossing the A50 would have relatively small collections of arrays situated in them. The apparent edges to the arrays appear to respect the mature hedge and tree root protection areas. No tree or hedgerow removal is indicated for the northern fields and a new hedgerow is proposed for the small field (Field 1) to the west of the farm access road and gapping up to the hedgerow that separates the two fields (Fields 2 & 3) to the east of the access road. No internal roads within the arrays are indicated.

Travelling down the access road to Blythe House Farm a new woodland screening belt is indicated at the end of the track to limit forward vision to Field 6. This proposed woodland belt would also reinforce existing hedgerow screening to the south of Blythe House Farm to create perceived separation from the arrays. A cordon sanitaire scaled at approximately 35m exists to the rear of the proposed woodland belt before the first of the arrays are laid out. The cordon sanitaire does not appear to be in the planning application boundary and its long term land use is not defined.

Field 4 is the largest of all of the application fields and is proposed to be set entirely with arrays.

Field 5 is also large and its south west portion is where the DNO and Customer sub-stations would be set to connect to the national grid. Presumably an access track is put to the east of this field's boundary to allow access to the sub-stations.

Field 6 is also put to arrays to the south of the cordon sanitaire.

Finally Field 7 which appears as two field parcels on the ground largely divided by an outgrown hedgerow is set as a 'bird mitigation area' with a drawing label explaining its final design to be secured by conditioning a LEMP / BEMP. It currently stands as a field of improved pasture. It does however have the purpose dug angling lake to the north of it which is set in a ring of native and ornamental planting to provide shelter and amenity to those fishing there.

There are no proposed internal tracks or pathways shown in the individual fields other than the access route to the sub-stations in Field 5. There are however individual stores / transformers stationed in the corners of Fields 2, 4, 5 & 6.

Clearance of existing trees and hedgerows appear not to be required with the caveat placed to this comment that new, or widened hedge openings may be required to allow construction access into some of the fields. The proposals also appear to respect the existing farm pond in Field 3.

Surrounding each field is set a fence, presumably a deer-stop fence that has become the de facto treatment for solar parks. Also set along these fence lines at regular intervals are positioned CCTV cameras. The landowner I met on Site stated a desire to run sheep under the arrays but also acknowledged the difficulty in protecting wiring from inadvertent grazing damage.

4. Landscape effects

The proposals will effectively turn the collection of fields into a solar park and this change can only be classified as a **Moderate, Adverse and Temporary** effect that is an inevitability of development. It is classed as Temporary as it is assumed that the development will be granted under licence for a period of 30 years or similar. This temporal period will be perceived as **Permanent** by human receptors who pass by the Site but in landscape terms can be classed as Temporary particularly given the ease of reversibility with regards to the fixtures and fittings of a PV Site. The proposals are arguably similar to other solar fields in the area and are now part of the pastoral landscape character of the Settled Plateau Farmland Slopes providing local context for the proposals.

The ability to retain and strengthen the existing hedgerow network is acknowledged and some of the existing taller, thicker hedgerows will likely screen views to the PV arrays from the outset as discussed further in the visual effects section below. The point of greater landscape concern however is what final state the hedgerows are likely to be in with the adjacent land use changing from agricultural to energy production. The former requires regular hedgerow maintenance (cutting, shaping and laying) which the latter does not. The Applicant should explain by way of detailed landscape management proposals how they are proposing to keep the hedgerows within and around the Site as hedgerows rather than overgrown, straggly tree lines. This same concern about the field pond in Field 3 can be expressed because they too can succeed to woody areas without ongoing management.

The DNO and Customer sub-stations are positioned in a reasonably discrete location as are the various stores / transformers in each of the fields.

There is a sizeable area of bio-diversity creation indicated within Field 7 but no indication of what form this will take. It is currently improved pasture and would likely change to rougher grassland but this may not be the most preferable habitat for bird conservation value. Inversion of topsoil to de-nitrify, wildflower grass seeding, natural colonisation and low level grazing to turn soil over may all be required

but cannot be assessed with the limited detail of the target habitat and management to achieve it in Field 7. Allowing grazing swards to grow up around the arrays is not necessarily a BNG either without some form of species or management change that actually promotes a more varied, grass and wildflower sward.

5. Visual effects from surrounding areas

The Site is visible in parts from public footpaths to the south (Checkley PRow's 6, 13 & 15) and from Checkley 5 that runs through the middle space that separates the two groups of fields. There is presumably sight from the railway. Of these it is walkers on Checkley 5 that have the longer duration and closer view of the arrays than other path users. There will also be visual change for the residents of the Blythe House Farm complex with more arrays set to either side of their access route. The more detailed discussions are split into Footpaths, Railway and Residential Visual Receptors.

Footpaths

Checkley 5 is set along a surfaced farm access track from the A50 farm bridge, leading down the access road to Blythe House Farm, before turning south west to run along field edges. Views from this path will be heavily influenced by solar arrays should the extant consent be built out. It will become more like the path to the west that runs with arrays on both sides of its route.

Views out from the path will experience change at a number of locations:

Path users as they cross south over the A50 have an expansive and attractive view to the Blithe Valley that has high amenity largely in part due to the lack of development. The solar arrays in Field 1 and to a lesser extent Field 2, including additional hedgerow screening will block this long range view. It will be changing to a lesser extent anyway from the extant development but being so close to arrays in this application will cause a **Major / Moderate, Adverse** visual effect and reduce the ability to take the view over the valley.

As path users walk either way on the access road to Blythe House Farm they will be aware of the arrays from the existing consent, with additional ones to the north and south. There will be a sense of walking near an expansive solar facility, rather than a single field development.

Finally walkers on the unmetalled path as it runs to the south west will have the sense of walking between arrays on either side of them with the new arrays to the south and the existing consent to the north. There will be some existing hedgerow screening along this route but the arrays will be visible in the gaps and breaks in the hedgerow.

Of all the sections of Checkley 5 it is the 'arrival' view across the Blithe Valley near the A50 that experiences the greatest adverse change and ideally Fields 1 & 2 should be left open and free of arrays so long views over them can be retained.

Footpath Checkley 15 runs parallel to east boundary of Field 6 and there will be some sense of the arrays in the field but its existing hedge will limit the views. Checkley 15 runs on to pass the eastern boundary of Field 3 and some views of the arrays will be gained through gaps and breaks in the eastern boundary hedge.

Footpath Checkley 6 is further away from Field 6 than Checkley 13 and has the additional benefit of the hedges in Field 7 and around the angling pond as intervening vegetation. It is not until the path route passes the angling pond that mid-distance views north to Fields 2 & 3 open up in above hedge lines and around the planting to Blythe House Farm.

Footpath Checkley 13 may receive mid-distance views to the arrays at the south end of Field 6 depending on the state of the latter's eastern hedge and to Fields 1,2 & 3 to the north. These are mid-distance views so detail will be limited but a sense of scale of development will be gained and it will appear large, particularly when combined with the glimpses of the arrays to be built out under the extant consent.

Railway

I understand that the railway is a passenger route between Stoke-on-Trent and Uttoxeter. No trains were observed during my survey but it could equally have been a strike day.

Train passengers are deemed to be less sensitive visual receptors given they pass through a myriad of landscape and have limited personal attachment to them. Even though their visual sensitivity is Low they will notice the extensive change for this part of their route. The views to the arrays of Fields 4, 5 & 6 will eventually be screened by the 15m wide tree belt. Views may still exist to the arrays in Fields 1 & 2 and other arrays on the valley side.

The change in the visual quality is considered **Moderate to Minor, Adverse** reducing to **Minor, Adverse** with the mitigation.

Blythe House Farm

There would appear to be both residents and business workers at this farm. There has been a general avoidance of arrays close to the farm buildings themselves but the array fields will be clearly evident as the farm is approached. Arguably this is just providing more of the same development as recently consented and the greater visual change will come about when the large field that separates Fields 1 & 5 from each other is put to arrays.

Generally the existing vegetation combined with the new woodland belt to the west of the farm will keep the arrays from the farm complex itself but they will be visible on the approach to it. No mention of effects on residential amenity has been noted in the submitted application information and the sub-stations that can generate noise are some distance from the farm buildings.

6. Cumulative effects

There will be a cumulative landscape and visual effect with the existing consented scheme that has not yet been built out and it will be read as one large solar facility for the whole of the northern valley side running down to the River Blithe. The combined scheme will also be perceived as part of the existing solar fields to the south west adding more to the mass of solar arrays in this particularly landscape. Viewers on the train, rather than the A50 and users of rural paths in the area will be the groups of people who will experience this cumulative change most keenly.

I consider that should any further applications for solar developments come forward in this area that the challenges of cumulative effects and a broader sense of proliferation should be thoroughly investigated as part of any determination process.

7. Potential design amendments

The following summary of potential design amendments are given as a way of improving the landscape and visual aspect of the proposals. Their adoption should be sought if you are minded to consent the proposals.

- Removal of arrays from Fields 1 & 2 to retain the attractive cross valley view to the other side of the Blithe Valley.
- Look to use Fields 1 & 2 as the bird mitigation fields associated with the proposals.

- Consider locating arrays from Fields 1 & 2 in the southern part of Field 7 where their presence is less visually intrusive.
- Confirmation of long-term management of valuable landscape features (also ecological assets) of hedgerows, field pond and conversion of nutrient rich mono-culture grass sward to the bird mitigation area; and
- Confirming the positions and widths of the access route through the various hedgerows including how the fields, or areas where no arrays are proposed are accessed.

I have reviewed the suggested native planting species and consider them to be appropriate. The hedgerow planting density is not given and this should be at 5 plants per linear metre in the double staggered row as stated. Generally more planting information, including means of protection will be required should you be minded to consent the proposals.

8. Landscape Policy Compliance

The SMDC landscape planning policies that need to be considered are;

SS11 – Churnet Valley Strategy

Not applicable.

DC3 – Landscape and Settlement Setting

This is the main landscape focussed policy of the Local Plan that seeks to protect and where possible enhance local landscape. The five parts to its policy box are set below and considered in turn;

1. Resisting development which would lead to prominent intrusion into the countryside or have a significant adverse impact on the character or the setting of a settlement or important views into and out of the settlement as identified in the Landscape and Settlement Character evidence.

There would be intrusion arising from the extended facility particularly Fields 1 & 2 as discussed above. The proposals do not affect the setting of any settlement.

Conflict with Part 1 of the policy has been found but can be avoided by relocating the arrays out of Fields 1 & 2.

2. Supporting development which respects and enhances local landscape character and which reinforces and enhances the setting of the settlement as identified in the Landscape and Settlement Character evidence.

The proposals respect the hedgerow and tree planting pattern on Site but as of yet cannot be classed as enhancing local landscape character but rather detracting from it. Reinforcement and enhancement of settlement setting does not apply. With further reassurances of how the hedgerows and field pond will be managed and how bird habitat BNG will be delivered the long term landscape character of the area could be respected so at a point when the arrays are removed the rural landscape is returned to the same and possibly improved character.

Likely conflict with Part 2 of the policy but confirmation of management through LMMP would address this conflict.

3. Supporting developments which conserve or enhance the biodiversity qualities of any natural or man-made features within the landscape, such as trees, woodlands, hedgerows, walls, watercourses or ponds.

The proposed bird field habitat creation and the hedgerow planting would comply with this part of the policy and the scale of the proposed BNG works and subsequent upkeep and monitoring needs to be confirmed through suitable BNG metrics and management agreements. Their long-term establishment and ecological contribution will need to be delivered through an appropriate landscape management and maintenance plan.

Likely compliance with Part 3 subject to confirmation of management through LMMP.

4. Supporting opportunities to positively manage the landscape and use sustainable building techniques and materials which are sympathetic to the landscape.

The sustainable building techniques could be applied to the demountability of the scheme and ease of removal should the proposals become defunct or superfluous to the power grid. The materials and building form, particularly of PV arrays and extensive deer fencing, are clearly not sympathetic to the landscape when compared to traditional materials and rural land uses in the area.

Conflict with Part 4 even though this part of the policy does not appear to be strongly applicable to the proposals.

5. Ensuring that development does not adversely affect the wider setting of the Peak District National Park.

This part of the policy is not applicable to these proposals as the site is not in the PDNP's setting.

Not applicable.

In considering DC3 as a whole there is more conflict than compliance. However there also appears to be the opportunity to improve the landscape and visual effects of the scheme so that it would be possible to demonstrate clear compliance with Parts 1,2 & 3 and therefore the wider policy as a whole.

NE2 – Tree, Woodland and Hedgerows

This three-part policy is aimed to 'protect existing trees, woodlands and hedgerows, in particular, ancient woodland, veteran trees and ancient or species-rich hedgerows from loss or deterioration.'

The first part that seeks the integration of trees, woodlands and hedgerows on site unless their removal clearly outweighs their loss is complied with by the retention of field boundary hedgerow and trees. It would however be useful to understand fully the potential effect the access track would have on the individual hedgerows.

Part 1 - Compliance.

The second part seeks new tree planting associated with development that this scheme could demonstrates more than is currently indicated. It is recognised that trees can shade solar arrays so their positioning has to be carefully chosen on the north side of fields or where they are required to perform other functions such as screening Blythe House Farm.

There is also the opportunity to address ash die-back disease by felling infected ash trees and replacing them with a locally appropriate and more disease resistant tree species. The proposed species, size at planting and planting densities all will require further information in detailed proposals.

Part 2 – Part - Compliance.

The third and final part of the policy addresses the retention of ancient woodland, veteran trees and ancient or species rich hedgerows. The hedgerows and associated trees around the Site are retained but

confirmation of root protection areas and avoidance of excavations e.g. interconnecting cable runs that could affect the tree and hedge roots is recommended if not already submitted.

Part 3 – Compliance.

9. Suggested planning conditions

There is clear landscape and visual harm to be put in the planning balance but should you be minded to grant planning consent and notwithstanding the already submitted landscape proposals the following Planning Conditions are suggested;

- A. That a detailed hard and soft landscape mitigation scheme is submitted for consideration.
Reason – to ensure that the proposals maintain the field boundary character and respect the neighbouring landscape.
- B. The soft landscape proposals should be implemented in the first growing season after construction has commenced and replacement of dead, diseased or dying stock should be undertaken in accordance with a Landscape Maintenance and Management Plan for the operational life of the solar facility. *Reason – to ensure the quality of the landscape mitigation measures.*
- C. That no tree felling is undertaken on , or excavation within root protection areas, without the express written agreement of SMDC’s Arboricultural Officer and after consideration of tree sensitive construction processes – *Reason to protect the mature tree and hedge stock that contributes to the local landscape.*
- D. That a Landscape Maintenance and Management Plan (LMMP) is prepared for implementation by the site owners / tenants for the full operational life of the facility and that an arrangement for continuation of the LMMP by future owners is entered into – *Reason – to reflect the importance of the soft landscape mitigation proposals for the local landscape character.*
- E. That any Landscape Maintenance and Management Plan (LMMP) provides provision to maintain the proposed BNG areas for a minimum of 30 years in accordance with Natural England guidelines - *Reason – to ensure the successful establishment, management and monitoring of the BNG elements of the proposals.*
- F. If grazing of sheep or other farm animals under the solar facility is proposed as part of the site management then details of how the arrays, their connections and general cabling is made ‘animal-safe’ needs to be presented in detail - *Reason – to confirm if grazing is proposed as a site management method that the solar facility and associated fencing and ancillary features e.g. CCTV cameras have been designed to allow it to take place.*
- G. Low light level scheme – *Reason – to reduce the intrusive nature of lighting in the rural landscape in the hours of darkness.*
- H. Boundary detailing shall include elevational drawings of fencing, gates, associated signage and CCTV cameras and poles. Ancillary features such as stores and transformers to be presented as drawn figures to understand scale, materiality, colour and general appearance. – *Reason – to minimise visual intrusion of ancillary elements to the scheme.*
- I. That a schedule of works activities in the form of a site restoration plan is produced to explain the removal of arrays, ancillary equipment and tracks as part of full restoration of the site back to pasture fields is submitted for agreement with SMDC prior to the Site becoming operational – *Reason to protect local landscape character and rural amenity on the cessation of use as a power storage park.*

I recognise that the suggested conditions could possibly be combined with others that you may be considering and will require careful re-wording to be enforceable but wished to explain the reasoning behind them.

I trust you find these comments useful as you consider the determination of this application and the site photography assists your Officer's Report. Should you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact me.

Stuart Ryder

20/2/24