

Landscape Review of Solar Farm Landscape Sensitivity and Capacity Study.

(Prepared by ARUP, dated 10th May 2024)

Project name: Longhedge Solar Farm
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- 1.1. This note has been prepared to respond to the recently published document, referred to as Solar Farm Landscape Sensitivity and Capacity Study, published by Rushcliffe Borough Council on 4th July 2024.
- 1.2. I note that this document is dated 10th May 2024, which was well in advance of the Longhedge Inquiry sitting days. The document has been prepared on behalf of Rushcliffe Borough Council by ARUP Consultancy. The status of this document and the degree to which it can be relied upon is qualified on its cover page noting that only the Council and ARUP can rely upon the document, but otherwise the document should not be relied upon by any other third party. I am unaware of any consultation which has been undertaken on the document.
- 1.3. I note that there are no paragraph numbers in the Study, so any cross reference is by pagination. Section 1 notes that the benefits of renewable energy are well known and widely accepted. The purpose of the study commissioned in October 2023 sought to determine the sensitivity of the landscape to solar farm development across the entire borough to ensure that planning applications adhere to the principles of sustainable development and provide an indicator of suitability mindful of the type of development and the host landscape.
- 1.4. The document also provides guidance for the siting of solar farm development.
- 1.5. Section 1.2.1 is concerned with definitions and notes that landscape capacity is about a landscape's ability to accommodate solar farm development without undue negative effects on its character and qualities. I agree on this definition.
- 1.6. The Study then goes on to define the baseline in section 3, based on the Greater Nottingham Landscape Character Assessment. I agree with this approach. The borough is divided into 14 Landscape Assessment Units (LAUs). The site and its environs fall within LAU reference K, named Aslockton Village Farmland.
- 1.7. Section 3.3 describes development typologies and describes under a number of bullet points the constituent components or elements of a solar farm which I would agree. The appeal scheme falls within these general parameters; therefore, the report is relevant to the appeal scheme.
- 1.8. I note that whilst the report describes the various parameters of the built form associated with the solar farm, it does not address the built form that is required to connect the solar farm to the grid as it is assumed (implicitly) that this connecting infrastructure would be subject to a different consenting regime. In other words, there is no reference to connecting electricity pylons as a facet of solar schemes.

- 1.9. Section 3.3, table 4 defines different sizes of solar farms with 'large-scale' being over 15MW and below 50MW and explains that this scale is typical of commercial enterprises looking to generate power up to the threshold of being considered an NSIP (49.9MW).
- 1.10. Section 4 deals with general design principles, it outlines 8 general design principles that have been developed for the Council and are described in the context of the characteristics of the landscapes they would be best suited to. The report goes on to note that to maximise the potential of outcomes of solar farm development proposals should draw upon and align with existing guidance available.
- 1.11. Mitigation principle 1 is concerned with hedgerow restoration. It notes that hedgerow restoration can provide additional benefits which help to integrate solar farm development into the landscape and reduce the potential for cumulative effects. The appeal proposal has taken the opportunity to introduce some hedgerow restoration in this regard. I note that it does not contain any suggestion that hedgerows should be reinstated exactly on previous historic hedgerow lines.
- 1.12. Mitigation principle 2 is concerned with long distance views, and notes that in flat expansive landscapes with long distance views siting solar development away from recreational routes can help to maintain the sense of openness and retain long distance views. The appeal scheme is situated in a generally low lying landscape such, that the layering of surrounding hedgerows and trees rapidly reduces the degree of visibility of the scheme over short distances from the boundaries of the site. As a result, most recreational routes would be visually affected to a negligible or limited degree. There is only one bridleway route which physically passes through the site itself.
- 1.13. Mitigation principle 3 is concerned with historic setting. In this regard the document notes that landscapes with historic features, patterns and associations which, include connectivity to the wider landscape and inter-visibility between historic features such as church towers and spires. I would note that the appeal scheme would not affect the inter-visibility between historic church towers and spires. It goes on to note that the historic setting of heritage features should be considered by limiting solar farm development within views. This principal has been adopted with regard to the appeal scheme, with regard to limiting the solar farm within views.
- 1.14. Mitigation principle 4 is concerned with landmarks and refers to significant landmarks, key views, all views of local landmarks need to be considered, and the solar farm located sensitivity to avoid degradation. This approach has been adopted with regard to the nearby Conservation Areas and landmark listed buildings. I would refer to the heritage statement and proof prepared by Laura Garcia.
- 1.15. Mitigation principle 5 is concerned with exposed slopes noting that development should be avoided on exposed slopes where it would be prominent within the landscape. I note that careful design of the scheme has ensured that development is not situated on the sloping ground where it would otherwise be more visible that the flatter areas.
- 1.16. Mitigation principle 6 is concerned with villages in the rural landscape. I note that with regard to the appeal scheme this has been sensitively set back from the 2 settlement edges to minimise visible intrusion and any sense of enclosure.
- 1.17. Mitigation principle 7 is concerned with field pattern restoration. Evidence from the historic maps reveals that the site is a fragmented landscape. The design of the green infrastructure has sought to restore and improve integration with the introduction of new hedgerows and as such, there are smaller parcels of land divided by field boundaries to provide a greater degree of visual containment and as such, the scheme does not result in any cumulative impact.

- 1.18. Mitigation principle 8 is concerned with industrial and urban fringe landscapes. In this context the guidance notes that the siting of development should be located adjacent to existing built form and industrial land use, mindful of visual amenity and recreational access. In this rural context the appeal scheme is in a landscape where there is limited industrial land use, however, there are industrial premises located on the north edge of Hawksworth village. The site and surrounding area is also punctuated with energy infrastructure in the form of pylon towers and overhead cables. The proposed substation and connecting tower options would be located close to an existing pylon tower. The site is located in the Aslockton Village Farmland. The document on pages 41 and 42 notes that pylons are a constant feature in the local landscape and are referenced with regard to perceptual scenic aspect of the landscape, where it notes that pylons are a frequent feature in views. With regard to perceptual aspects of wildness and tranquillity the local landscape features pylons which are considered urban features.
- 1.19. LAU K Aslockton Village Farmland is analysed on pages 41 and 42. Following detailed analysis of the key characteristics of the landscape, it takes into account the baseline in terms of consented future development for housing and employment uses. The Council's independent landscape consultants conclude the value of this landscape is therefore considered to be medium. This accords with my assessment, AC Proof, para 5.57. The report goes on to note medium susceptibility. This is also consistent with my analysis, AC Proof, para 5.57 and when the report combines medium value and medium susceptibility it concludes medium sensitivity. Again, this is consistent with my analysis and methodology, see AC's appendix 9, except the ARUP report is not transparent in this regard but does arrive at the same conclusion as myself.
- 1.20. As far as the landscape is concerned, with a medium sensitivity, ARUP conclude that the landscape has a high capacity to accommodate large-scale solar farm development up to 100ha in area and 50MW capacity. The appeal site extends to 94ha and falls well within this category.
- 1.21. Section 6 provides a summary table and cross refers to appendix A, paragraph 1.6.2A. This paragraph on page A13 defines high landscape capacity which notes that the LAU could have potential to accommodate multiple solar farms and that development should accord with criteria for good design.
- 1.22. The back of the report has a series of plans which identify the LAU area K with regard to sensitivity for different size projects. Figure reference C9 shows the whole of the vale landscape around the appeal site as having a high capacity to accommodate solar development up to 100ha in area in multiple locations and does not identify any constraints in terms of Conservation Areas and Listed Buildings or public rights of way which are also documented on figure C11. It is therefore evident that these elements as identified constraints do not change the proposed assessed capacity of the landscape to accommodate large-scale solar farms like the appeal scheme.
- 1.23. Supporting plans in the document specifically identify heritage assets including Conservation Areas and listed buildings, see the Aslockton Village Farmland context plan and interestingly with this information taken into account, the study still considers that the local landscape has a high capacity to accommodate large scale solar development, up to 100 hectares in size.
- 1.24. The study identifies 14 Landscape Character Areas and of those, with regard to large scale solar development only 3 areas (landscape types) in the district, are identified as having a high capacity to accommodate large scale solar development. The site and its immediate locality falls within 1 of only 3 such areas.