Landscape Proof of Evidence

Land East of Hawksworth and Northwest of Thoroton, Shelton Road, Thoroton

On behalf of Renewable Energy Systems (RES) Ltd

Date: 14th May 2024 | Pegasus Ref: P24-0105

PINS Ref: P3040/W/23/3330045 | LPA Ref: 22/02241/FUL

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Contents.

Appendices.

APPENDIX 1: SITE LOCATION AND PUBLIC RIGHTS OF WAY PLAN (WITH LVA VIEWPOINTS)

APPENDIX 2: LANDSCAPE MASTERPLAN (SCHEME B) WITH FIELD NUMBERS

APPENDIX 3: ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGNATIONS PLAN

APPENDIX 4: LANDSCAPE CHARACTER PLAN – NATIONAL AND REGIONAL

APPENDIX 5: LANDSCAPE CHARACTER PLAN – LOCAL

APPENDIX 6: ROAD NAMES PLAN

APPENDIX 7: CONTEXT VIEWPOINT LOCATION PLAN

APPENDIX 8: CONTEXT PHOTOVIEWS

APPENDIX 9: LVIA METHODOLOGY (PEGASUS)

APPENDIX 10: SUMMARY VISUAL IMPACT SCHEDULE

APPENDIX 11: NCA 74 LEICESTERSHIRE AND NOTTINGHAMSHIRE WOLDS

APPENDIX 12: EAST MIDLANDS LANDSCAPE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT (EXTRACT)

APPENDIX 13: GREATER NOTTINGHAM LANDSCAPE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT (EXTRACT)

APPENDIX 14: CROSS SECTION OF PROPOSED GREEN LANE

APPENDIX 15: HISTORICAL MAP 1883

1. Witness Particulars

1.1. My name is Andrew Cook and I hold a Bachelor of Arts degree in Geography (BA Hons) and a Masters Degree in Landscape Design (MLD). I am a Chartered Landscape Architect, Chartered Member of the Landscape Institute (CMLI), Chartered Environmentalist (C Env) and Member of the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment (M IEMA).

1.2. I am one of the founding Executive Directors of Pegasus Group which was established in 2003. Since then, the company has grown, establishing sixteen offices across the UK, employing approximately 420 planning and environmental planning professionals and staff. I jointly head the environmental planning division in which planning for solar development accounts for a significant part of the business. The company is a corporate member of the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment (IEMA) and was a founding member of IEMA's Quality Mark scheme, under my direction.

1.3. I have gained over 35 years of landscape planning consultancy experience. Prior to Pegasus, I was an Environmental Director at RPS (formerly Chapman Warren Planning Consultants) where I specialised in addressing landscape planning issues related to a wide range of renewable energy projects. I have had considerable experience of and involvement in a wide range of residential development and built infrastructure projects throughout the UK, many of which have involved sites in Green Belts as well as statutory protected landscapes including National Parks (NP), Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) as well as non-statutory landscape designations such as a Special Landscape Areas (SLAs), as 'valued landscapes'. I have presented evidence at public inquiries on many occasions to address various landscape planning, design and visual issues, as these relate to landscape character and appearance.

1.4. I am based in the Cirencester office of Pegasus where I manage a team of 28 environmental planners and landscape architects. I and the landscape architects within my team at Pegasus undertake their work in compliance with the Landscape Institute's Code of Standards of Conduct and Practice for Landscape Professionals (May 2012).

1.5. This landscape proof of evidence is based on my own professional judgement and is presented in accordance with the guidance of my professional institution, the content of which is true to the best of my knowledge and belief and is presented irrespective of by whom I am instructed.

2. Introduction and Scope of Evidence

Introduction

2.1. I am instructed on behalf of Renewable Energy Systems (RES) Limited, hereafter referred to as the Appellant, to present evidence relating to landscape and visual matters in respect of a planning inquiry concerning the construction of a solar farm together with associated works, equipment, and necessary infrastructure on land east of Hawksworth and northwest of Thoroton, Shelton Road, Thoroton. This evidence should be read in conjunction with the planning proof of evidence prepared by Nigel Cussen (CD7.10) and heritage proof of evidence prepared by Laura Garcia (CD7.12), which elaborate upon the Appellant's Statement of Case (CD7.6).

2.2. I was not involved with the application stage of the project. Neo Environmental prepared the Landscape and Visual Assessment (LVA) (CD1.21) for the application. When the application was refused and the Appellant decided to appeal against the Council's decision, I was instructed at that stage. I reviewed all the relevant documentation pertaining to the application including LVA to determine whether I considered if I could act as an expert witness on behalf of the appellant in support of the scheme.

2.3. An application for full planning permission (ref: 22/02241/FUL) was submitted to Rushcliffe Borough Council (RBC or the LPA) on 30 November 2022 and validated on 2 December 2022. The application was refused by delegated decision, as confirmed in a decision notice (CD2.2) dated 30 March 2023. The Reasons for Refusal are set out below:

> ***"1. The magnitude of the scale and nature of the ground mounted solar proposals would have a significant adverse impact on landscape character and visual amenity, contrary to Policy 22 (Development in the Countryside), Policy 34 (Green Infrastructure, Landscape, Parks and Open Spaces) and Policy 16 (Renewable Energy) of LPP2 which both seek to ensure that new development does not have an adverse impact and that any adverse effects can be adequately mitigated and paragraphs 155 and 180 of the National Planning Policy Framework, which seek to support the use and supply of renewable and low carbon energy provided the adverse impacts are addressed satisfactorily (including cumulative landscape and visual impacts).***
>
> ***2…"***

Scope of Evidence

2.4. The first Reason for Refusal is concerned with impacts upon landscape character and visual amenity which I seek to address in my proof. The second reason is addressed by Laura Garcia as it relates to heritage matters.

2.5. I have set out in my proof my analysis and professional judgement as to how the proposal would have a bearing upon both landscape and visual aspects as these relate to character and appearance. I explain why in landscape and visual terms the proposed scheme is considered acceptable given the character of the site and its surrounding development context, recognising that the overall planning balance is for Nigel Cussen to comment upon.

2.6. In line with the Appellant's Statement of Case (CD7.6) I discuss the following in my proof:

- How the character of the site, coupled with the typology, temporary and reversible nature of the scheme, with proposed planting would mitigate the harm
- Effects on landscape character, including cumulative effects where relevant
- Effects on visual amenity, including cumulative effects where relevant
- Legacy benefits of the proposed planting

2.7. In short, my landscape proof explains how the proposal would affect landscape elements, landscape character and visual amenity.

2.8. I also rely upon the two draft Statements of Common Ground (SoCG) between the Appellant and RBC (CD7.9), and the Appellant and the Hawksworth and Thoroton Action Group (HTAG) (Rule 6)(CD7.9B) where they consider landscape and visual issues and reflect where the parties have reached an agreement or disagree. In preparing my evidence, I have reviewed the following documents to inform my professional judgement.

- Decision Notice (CD2.2)
- Officer's Report (CD2.1)
- Landscape consultation responses (CD6.14)
- Landscape and Visual Assessment (LVA) (CD1.21)
- Arboricultural Impact Assessment (CD1.30)
- Relevant published landscape documents (CD3.21-3.32)
- Design and Access Statement (CD1.2)
- Planning Statement (CD1.3)
- Relevant planning policies (CD4.1-6)
- Other Relevant Documents

2.9. Where appropriate, I draw upon relevant information from these documents. However, in presenting my evidence and in the interests of brevity, I do not unnecessarily state detailed amounts of information where this has been previously documented. I have reviewed the scheme with reference to the application LVA viewpoints surrounding the site. I have set out my own analysis with regard to the scheme in my proof of evidence. Whilst I note that a Landscape and Visual Assessment was prepared for the application, in preparing for this Inquiry I have undertaken my own analysis which has assisted me in forming my professional judgements. I rely upon my own professional judgement rather than the LVA and therefore my analysis supersedes the application LVA. There are differences in my findings set out in my proof to that set out in the LVA. This is in part due to the fact that there are differences in the methodologies adopted by Neo Environmental and that which I have used as set out in my appendix 9. Neo Environmental have produced a report which is referred to as the Landscape and Visual Assessment (LVA) which I regard as a Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA), i.e.. only the name is different.

2.10. The judgements in terms of effects that I have identified are predicated on my methodology (see appendix 9). On the basis of this methodology I have reviewed each of the 8 viewpoints that were assessed in the application LVA. My findings are set out in a schedule which summarises visual impacts at appendix 10. This schedule also includes the analysis and findings undertaken by Neo Environmental for each of the 8 viewpoints. This summary schedule enables the differences to be identified between the application LVA and my LVIA analysis incorporated in to my proof of evidence. Review of this table reveals that in terms of year 1 there is a degree of consensus between my findings and those of Neo Environmental in terms of similar rating and half-to-one-step difference in general terms. I conclude that the degree of visual effects for both years 1 and 10 would generally be slightly lower than those identified by Neo Environmental. I have liaised with the Council's and Rule 6 landscape witnesses with the intention of preparing a Scott Schedule that will summarise the respective positions of the Council's, Rule 6 and Appellant's evidence.

2.11. In preparing my evidence I have undertaken an assessment of the operational phase of the scheme, as a worst-case scenario, as the later stages of the construction phase and the early stages of the decommissioning phase would be comparable to the operational state of the proposals.

Landscape Strategy

2.12. As part of the planning application that was submitted in December 2022 a planting plan (CD1.21.12) was prepared by Neo Environmental; this planting plan is referred to as a Landscape and Ecological Management Plan (LEMP) Revision D (Drawing number NEO00782_023I_D) and comprises a series of four drawings. This identifies, in detail, the retained and proposed landscape features including enhanced hedgerows, new native hedgerows with trees and new native woodland planting, together with areas of meadowland. This version of the proposals is hereafter referred to as Scheme A.

2.13. As part of the material that was prepared for the September 2023 appeal submission by Neo Environmental, the Landscape and Ecological Management Plan was amended to remove solar infrastructure north of Hawksworth village in field 1 as a result of feedback from statutory consultees and the community. The proposed permissive path and alignment of the proposed hedgerow were then amended to follow the reduced extent of the proposed built form in this field. This iteration of the LEMP prepared by Neo Environmental is referred to as Revision F (Drawing number NEO00782_023I_F).

2.14. The Landscape Masterplan - Appeal (P24-0105_EN_02_E) prepared by Pegasus Group reflects the amendments illustrated in Revision F of the Neo Environmental LEMP but also takes the opportunity to realign a section of the proposed hedgerow in field 5 to reflect historic field patterns. This version of the proposals is hereafter referred to as Scheme B (Landscape Masterplan – Appeal, Revision E) and has been subject to public consultation.

2.15. It was confirmed in the Post Conference Note which followed the Case Management Conference on 23 April 2024 that the Inspector was satisfied that there would be no prejudice to any party and confirms that he would accept the revised plans (Scheme B), and any further submission of evidence can be based on the revised scheme (Scheme B). My landscape proof has therefore been prepared with regard to Scheme B.

Plate 1: Scheme B (Landscape Masterplan – Appeal, Revision E)

Representative Viewpoints and Visualisations

2.16. I consider that the LVA viewpoint photographs (CD1.21.4-7) and my additional context photo views (appendix 8) as viewpoints of the landscape surrounding the site are appropriate and suitable for this Inquiry, and for the Inspector's consideration. It is anticipated that the Inspector would visit these representative viewpoints and use all the visualisations including photomontages that have been provided as an aide memoire. The Officer's report addresses landscape and visual effects and refers to 8 viewpoints. The Case Officer does not reference any additional views or identify a requirement for any additional views to enable the Case Officer to be fully informed for decision making. The Case Officer notes that the external landscape advisor raised concerns about the locations of some of the selected viewpoints. The Officer's report goes on to note that the external landscape advisor agreed with the conclusion of 5 out of the 8 viewpoints but considered that the remaining 3 impacts have been under estimated. Neither the Case Officer nor the external landscape advisor identify any additional specific viewpoints with commentary, except appendix A of the WWA report.

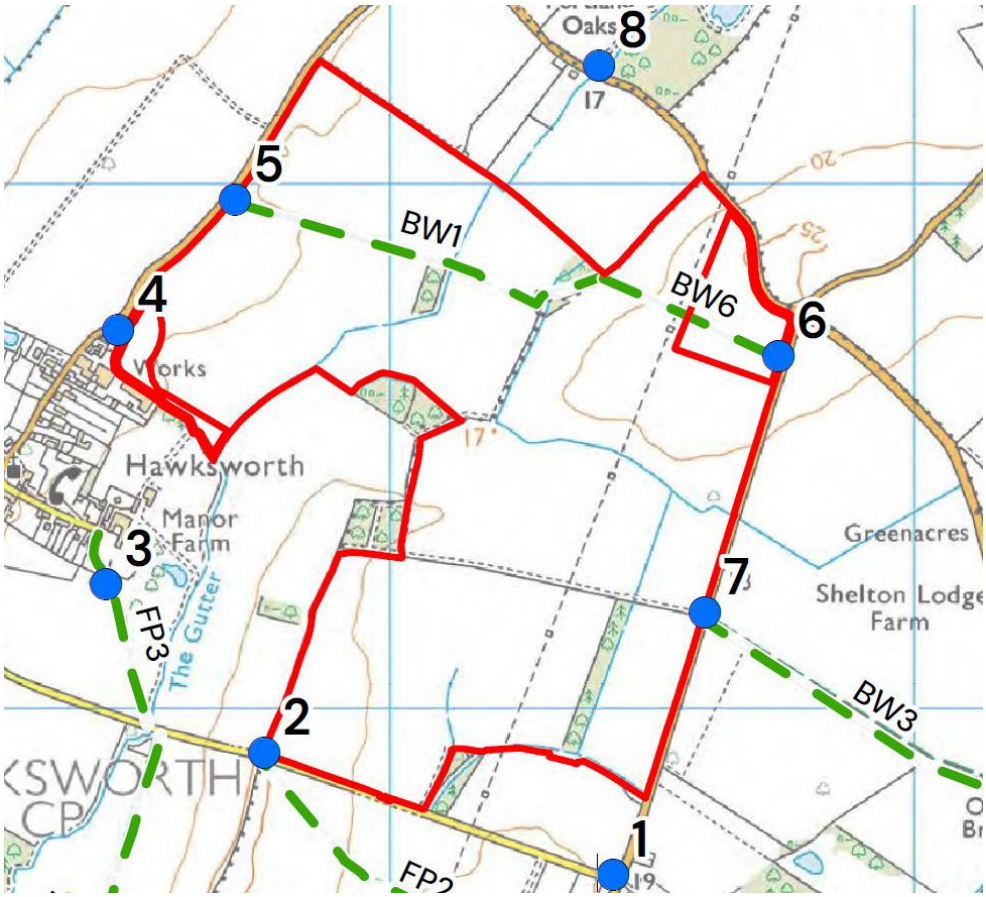

Plate 2: Site Location Plan with LVA Viewpoints

2.17. It should be recognised that it is not practical to include viewpoints from every possible location. The viewpoints which have been selected illustrate a range of visual receptors at different distances and directions from the site. I consider that the locations of the viewpoints have been carefully considered and the photography has been undertaken when atmospheric conditions and visibility were good. I consider that the photography is appropriate given the type and scale of development. The representative viewpoints and visualisations have been prepared mindful of the Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment 3rd Edition (GLVIA3) (CD3.21) and Landscape Institute guidance relevant (CD3.22-26) at the time of production, however, it is recognised that there is no substitute for visiting the viewpoints in the field to gain a first-hand appreciation of the viewing context.

2.18. With this information, the Case Officer was fully informed with regard to the visual implications of the proposal as set out in the Officer's Report.

Professional Judgement

2.19. Mindful of the GLVIA3 (CD3.21) I have reviewed Scheme B (as accepted by the Inspector) based on the application viewpoints 1 – 8 as part of my field work and site visits. This has allowed me to ascertain both the landscape and visual effects and make informed professional judgements concerning these matters and to establish both the level and nature of change for landscape and visual effects. My assessment was based on winter views, given the Inquiry timetable, representing the worst-case scenario in terms of visibility with the site.

2.20. The degree of landscape or visual effect is identified by means of a descriptive scale as per the GLVIA3 guidance (CD3.21). However, it is also necessary to consider the nature of the landscape and visual effects. GLVIA3 (CD3.21) assists by noting that with regard to landscape effects (at paragraph 5.37) that:

> ***"One of the more challenging issues is deciding whether the landscape effects should be categorised as positive or negative. It is also possible for effects to be neutral in their consequences for the landscape. An informed professional judgement should be made about this and the criteria used in reaching the judgement should be clearly stated. They might include, but should not be restricted to:***
>
> ***The degree to which the proposal fits with existing character.***
>
> ***The contribution to the landscape that the development may make in its own right, usually by virtue of good design, even if it is in contrast to existing character.***
>
> ***The importance of perceptions of landscape is emphasised by the European Landscape Convention, and others may of course hold different opinions on whether the effects are positive or negative, but this is not a reason to avoid making this judgement, which will ultimately be weighed against the opinions of others in the decision-making process."*** (my emphasis)

2.21. With regard to visual effects, paragraph 6.29 of GLVIA3 (CD3.21) states that:

> ***"As with landscape effects an informed professional judgement should be made as to whether the visual effects can be described as positive or negative (or in some cases neutral) in their consequences for views and visual amenity. This will need to be based on a judgement about whether the changes will affect the quality of the visual experience for those groups of people who will see the changes, given the nature of the existing views."*** (my emphasis)

2.22. In this instance and for the purposes of this proof, the effects upon the landscape are specifically considered in terms of effect upon firstly landscape elements and secondly landscape character which considers the combinations of landscape elements. This proof also sets out how the proposal would have a bearing upon the general visual amenity associated with the area. The proposed design includes integral green infrastructure which would be in character and in keeping with the rural area. I am aware that people on the whole generally adopt an adverse reaction to change, particularly with regard to their local environments, with which they are very familiar irrespective of whether it is harmful or indeed beneficial. I have adopted a precautionary approach here and as such, I consider that the proposed solar farm would be adverse in terms of the nature of effect in landscape character and visual terms unless otherwise stated. There would, however, be beneficial effects for some landscape elements.

2.23. I have reviewed the LVA that was prepared for the application and noted the effects that were identified with regard to landscape character and visual amenity. However, I have undertaken my own assessment as to how the scheme would affect landscape elements, landscape character and visual amenity. My assessment is based on a methodology which is set out in appendix 9 to my proof.

Rule 6 Parties

2.24. I am aware that there is a Rule 6 Party, the Hawksworth and Thoroton Action Group (HTAG), involved with this Public Inquiry and are liaising to agree a Statement of Common Ground and Scott Schedule regarding viewpoints.

Officer's Report

2.25. The Case Officer (CO) prepared an Officer's Report (OR) (CD2.1) dated 17 March 2023. I note that the OR is not paginated nor does it have the benefit of paragraph numbers. I note that the CO refers to specific policies which I do not propose to comment upon, leaving policy interpretation to Nigel Cussen. It should be noted that the Case Officer's report is based on the application scheme. This has been subsequently amended and as confirmed by the Inspector, with the appeal proceeding on the basis of the amended scheme (which I refer to as scheme B). This masterplan includes some amendments. Specifically, a proposed hedgerow has been realigned in the north-eastern part of the site, such that it is more geometric in plan form rather than sinuous in design, whilst panels are set further north in field 1.

2.26. The OR at page 8, under the heading "form and sitting" acknowledges that the proposed development is the minimal level of development necessary to ensure that the site performs effectively with regard to its main purpose of generating renewable electricity. It goes on to note that the inverters would be set within the rows of panels to reduce visual impact and the panels and associated infrastructure buildings on the site would be no higher than a single storey in height which would ensure that they would not be significantly visible from most viewpoints outside of the site. That even when viewed from nearby vantage points, the CO considered that the scale of development would not be overbearing due to its low profile. The OR goes on to state that, this situation would take on a further positive direction when proposed screen planting matures, which, in addition to the significant existing screening around the site, would effectively assimilate the site into the local landscape over time.

2.27. At the top of page 9, the OR acknowledges that the highest structures within the site would be the transformers at 3.9m and that the solar panels themselves would be no more than 2.8m high, which is the height of a mature hedgerow. The CO goes on to state that it is therefore considered that the scale of the proposed development is appropriate to the location and the containers/cabins and other small buildings would be appropriately coloured or clad to minimise any visual impact and comply as far as practicable with the local vernacular**.**

2.28. In the second paragraph on page 9, the CO accepts that the proposed development has been designed to respect the character of the landscape, and uses the strong field pattern to integrate the scheme as far as practicable. It goes on to explain that the existing landscape features would be retained, protected and strengthened including the retention of existing field margins (hedgerows and ditches) except, where necessary, for access and standoffs from boundary habitats. Trees on the site would be retained and additional planting provided, where necessary, to fill gaps in the existing boundary planting. The landscaping and planting proposals associated with the proposed development would bring about significant ecological benefit when compared to the present situation, including upgrading lower-value, biodiversity-poor, arable land to higher value grassland habitats. In light of those findings, the OR concludes that the proposed development accords with Policy 10 of the Local Plan Part 1 (Design and Enhancing Local Identity). It is worth noting at this stage that Policy 10 requires

all new development to, *inter alia,* make a positive contribution to the public realm and sense of place; create an attractive environment; reinforce valued local characteristics; be designed in a way that conserves locally and nationally important heritage assets and preserve or enhance their settings; and conserve landscape character.

2.29. The OR addresses landscape and visual effects from pages 9 to 12. It refers to the LVA findings from page 10 and notes that the Council commissioned an independent landscape to review the proposals. As reported in the OR (page 10), that review concluded that the methodology adopted in the LVA was in accordance with the guidance in GLVIA3; it provides a detailed description of the existing site and its context, as well as referring to the necessary precedent landscape character studies and that the LVA presents sound conclusions.

2.30. The external landscape advisor agreed with the assessment in the LVA that effects on the character of the wider Landscape Character Unit 25: South Nottinghamshire Farmlands: Aslockton Village Farmlands would be moderate adverse in year 1, reducing to minor adverse by year 10. The external landscape advisor also agreed with the LVA that the surrounding LCUs will not experience landscape effects.

2.31. In the final paragraph on page 11, the OR notes that the external landscape advisor acknowledged that the landscape effects would be temporary, but should be considered to be long-term and reversible.

2.32. With regard to visual effects, the external landscape advisor acknowledged that the effects on landscape and visual receptors would be limited, and visibility of the proposals would be reduced from locations beyond 280m from the site.

2.33. The OR notes that the external landscape advisor agreed with the conclusions in respect of five out of the eight viewpoints which formed part of the LVA, stating that for the other three viewpoints (2, 4 and 5), they considered the potential impacts had been underestimated.

2.34. With regards to glint and glare, the OR finds (on page 13) that the proposed development is in accordance with the aims and objectives of the Rushcliffe Local Plan and NPPF.

2.35. With regards to the amenity of nearby properties, the OR concludes (on pages 13 – 14) that the proposed development is considered to be acceptable in terms of its impact on residential amenity and accords with relevant planning policy.

2.36. The Reason for Refusal includes a reference to the cumulative effects of the development. There is no analysis of cumulative effects in the OR so it is not clear why this has been included in the Reason for Refusal. The only reference to cumulative effects within the OR is in the summary of consultee responses where the Planning Policy Officer for Rushcliffe Borough Council is noted as providing comments which are understood to have included cumulative impacts. There is no other mention of cumulative schemes within the OR.

2.37. The LVA in paragraph 6.88 states that no developments requiring cumulative assessment were identified in this instance. A review of the Renewable Energy Planning Database and online mapping has confirmed that there are no renewable energy proposals which warrant consideration for cumulative assessment, acknowledging that those which are operational are considered as part of the landscape and visual baseline. Operational solar farms; Lodge Farm and Elton Solar Farm are located approximately. 2.2km to the east south-east and 3.1km to the south south-east respectively. The Grange Solar Farm is located approximately 4.8km to the north of the site near the settlement of Cotham.

3. Description of the Proposal

Introduction

3.1. A detailed description of the proposals is set out in the application documentation including the Planning Statement and the Design and Access Statement (DAS) (CD1.2). I rely upon these detailed descriptions rather than repeating this information. However, as discussed above, there have been some amendments to the scheme since permission was refused, including a realignment of proposed hedge and the partial removal of panels from field 1 such that the nearest panels are set back from the north eastern edge of Hawksworth village. A hedgerow has been realigned such that it is more geometric and more closely reflects the historic field pattern in the north-eastern part of the site.

Plate 3: Historic hedgerow re-alignment (Scheme B)

3.2. The southern panels in field 1 have been removed and set back such that now the separation distance between these panels and Hawksworth village and its Conservation Area has been increased with regard to the setting of Heritage Assets, a matter which is addressed in Laura Garcia's Heritage Proof. The proposed hedge also reinstates an historic hedgerow. The southern boundary of solar field 1 would be defined by a proposed hedgerow which would be managed upon maturity at 3-4m in height and would include a proposed permissive path running alongside of this new hedgerow. Conversant with the proposals, I have set out my analysis and professional judgement. In this section of my proof, I comment upon aspects of the proposal that are particularly pertinent to landscape character and appearance.

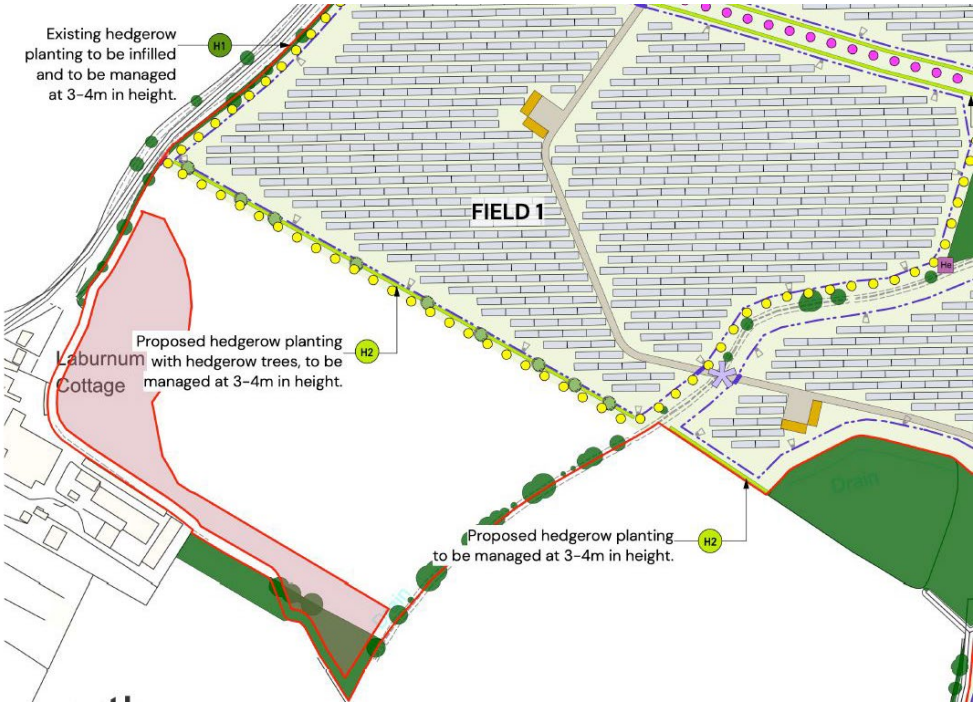

Plate 4: Removal of panels from field 1 and historic hedgerow re-alignment (Scheme B)

3.3. The Appellant seeks planning permission to construct a solar farm on farmland, albeit the actual land take of the parcels would be considerably smaller as not all the land within the site area would accommodate panels or associated infrastructure. The solar farm would be a temporary use of the land as the equipment would be fully removed and the land returned to its former condition when the development is decommissioned 40 years from the date of the first export of electricity to the electrical grid.

3.4. The scheme will utilise high-efficiency panels based on a fixed layout design. The solar arrays are arranged in linear rows orientated east-west. This maximises the renewable energy generated and significantly increases the efficiency of the solar arrays. The solar panels would be arranged on simple metal frameworks supported by pile-driven steel pins, without the need for concrete foundations.

3.5. The arrays are proposed to be spaced to avoid any shadowing effect from one panel to another with topography dictating exact row spacing. There would be space between the bottom of the panels and the ground to allow sheep to graze the land between and amongst the panels. This is common practice for sheep management and maintenance.

3.6. There would be a number of small-scale elements of infrastructure such as inverters (CD1.15) housed within green coloured metal containers, and distributed across the scheme.

3.7. The site is comprised of agricultural land located to the north and east of the settlement of Hawksworth, and north-west of the settlement of Thoroton. The entirety of the application site comprises a total of 9 fields.

3.8. The site is located on very gently sloping land with subtle variations in topography and heights ranging between 20-25m Above Ordnance Datum (AOD).

3.9. Local roads lined with well-established hedgerows are located adjacent to parts of the site's northern, eastern, western and southern boundaries. Beyond these roads is agricultural farmland interspersed by small areas of woodland. Hawksworth village lies a short distance to the south west of the site.

3.10. Within the site, field boundaries are demarcated by hedgerows which include hedgerow trees. Small blocks of woodland are also present both within the site and directly adjacent to sections of the site's boundary.

3.11. Two sets of overhead power lines cross the site, one on wooden telegraph poles which cross north-west south-east through fields 4, 5, 6 and 9, and the second crosses the site via large-scale pylons on a broad north-south axis through fields 5, 6 and 8.

3.12. The site and surrounding local landscape also accommodate a network of recreational routes, including a number of Bridleways (BW) that cross or lie adjacent to the site (appendix 1). These include bridleways BW1 and BW6 which are located on the site, and bridleway BW3 to the east of the site, and footpaths FP2 and FP3 which are located to the south and south-west of the site respectively, as well as a number of bridleways and footpaths located to the west of Thoroton. Sustrans route (National Cycle Network Route 64) which is part of the National Cycle Network runs along the road which is located adjacent to part of the site's eastern boundary (appendix 3).

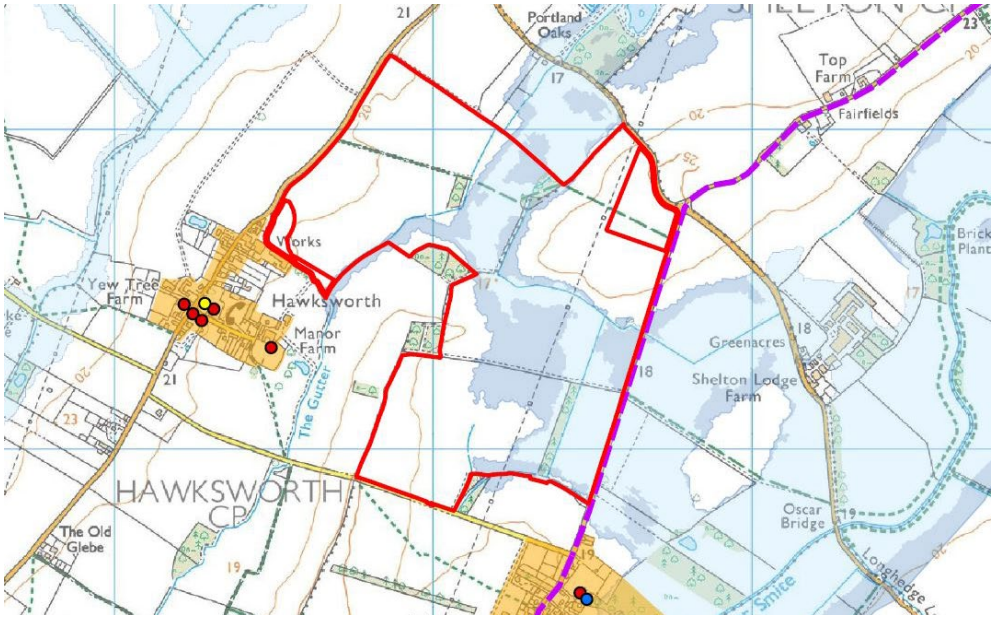

Plate 5: Map showing the route of National Cycle Network Route 64 (purple dashed line)

3.13. There are no statutory landscape designations covering the site or its immediate surroundings.

Proposed Solar Farm

3.14. The site would be accessed through the creation of a new access point on the road which passes along the site's southern boundary. The access point would be used for the construction and operational phase of the proposals and would require the removal of a 17m section of hawthorn hedgerow assessed as category C (CD1.30).

3.15. The proposed development would take approximately six to nine months to complete. This includes the preparation of the site, erection of security fencing, assembly and erection of the PV arrays, and installation of the inverters, transformers and grid connection. Once installed, it would require infrequent visits for the purposes of equipment maintenance or cleaning.

3.16. At the end of the 40-year operational lifespan of the proposed development, the site would be fully restored to agricultural use with all equipment and below-ground connections removed. It is envisaged that the decommissioning of the solar farm would take approximately three to six months. The landscape mitigation planting would remain as would the proposed access from the road to the south.

3.17. The layout of the proposed development has been designed to ensure that there is minimal disturbance to existing trees and hedgerows within the site. The layout has been designed to incorporate the existing trees and hedges into the scheme and to avoid root plate areas of trees within the site. Existing hedgerows would be strengthened and infilled where necessary with native shrubs and/or hedgerow trees. The proposed development would seek to retain and enhance existing landscape elements and in order to further integrate the proposals into the surrounding landscape.

3.18. An Arboricultural Impact Assessment (AIA) (CD1.30) has been submitted in support of the application which concludes that no surveyed trees are proposed to be removed, but a limited quantity of hedgerow is to be removed at the access point and internally within the site to allow for the creation of new permissive paths and access tracks. The AIA explains that these minor changes can be mitigated through new tree/hedgerow planting as detailed in the landscaping proposals for the site, which also includes a range of biodiversity enhancements as part of the overall development.

Landscape Design Principles for Green Infrastructure

3.19. The vision for the solar farm includes integral green infrastructure that would provide a network to reinforce the character of the site.

3.20. At a macro level, the proposed green infrastructure would ensure that the development would:

- Conserve and reinforce local landscape character
- Protect and enhance existing green infrastructure assets namely the trees and hedgerows
- Protect and create habitats to enable biodiversity habitats and flora and fauna species to thrive
- Provide a resilient and adaptive environment in the face of climate change

3.21. Landscape mitigation and enhancement works are also proposed (mitigation planting, including new infilled hedgerow planting, tree planting and enhancement of field margins through proposed species-rich grassland). Particular aspects include the following:

- Retention, protection and enhancement of the existing network of trees and hedgerows along field boundaries

- Provision of new native infill planting where gaps are present in the existing field boundary hedgerows, to define site boundaries and provide additional visual enclosure
- Provision of new native hedgerows to define field boundaries where none are present, or have been removed over time, including the incorporation of standard trees where practical
- All existing and proposed native hedgerows managed to a height of 3-4m to enhance visual enclosure
- Provision of new native tree planting adjacent to existing field boundaries to improve visual enclosure
- Provision of new native woodland belts to provide additional visual enclosure
- Enhancement of boundary margins and areas underneath solar panels, through proposed species-rich grassland in line with ecological requirements
- Ongoing landscape management of planting during the lifetime of the solar farm
- Proposed ecological features such as bat and bird boxes, hibernacula, hedgehog houses, bee banks and invertebrate 'hotels', located at various locations across the site.

3.22. I describe the proposed green infrastructure below by reference to the Pegasus Landscape Masterplan for Scheme B (see Appendix 2), based on the numbering shown at Figure 3 of the application (CD1.7). The fields are numbered 1 to 9. Existing and proposed hedgerows across the site would be maintained at 3-4m, reflecting management regimes found in the locality.

Field 1

3.23. Field 1 is located in close proximity to the settlement of Hawksworth. The western boundary of the field is defined by well-established hedgerow vegetation which includes scattered hedgerow trees. The northern boundary runs alongside the on-site bridleway BW1. As part of the landscape proposals for the site, this bridleway will be kept on its current alignment and accommodated within a generous green corridor (10m in width) with hedgerows on either side, see appendix 14. The eastern boundary to the field is formed by riparian vegetation along the watercourse which includes trees. The southern boundary is to be defined by a length of new hedgerow with hedgerow trees. With Scheme B, the field boundary is more regular in its form and runs in an east south-east, west north-west orientation; the extent of the proposed built infrastructure has been amended accordingly. A block of woodland is located adjacent to part of the eastern boundary which would be retained. A new permissive path is proposed to follow the perimeter of Field 1. The panels would be set back from the field boundaries to create wide grass margins around the perimeter of the field, grassland is also proposed inside of the security fencing beneath the panels.

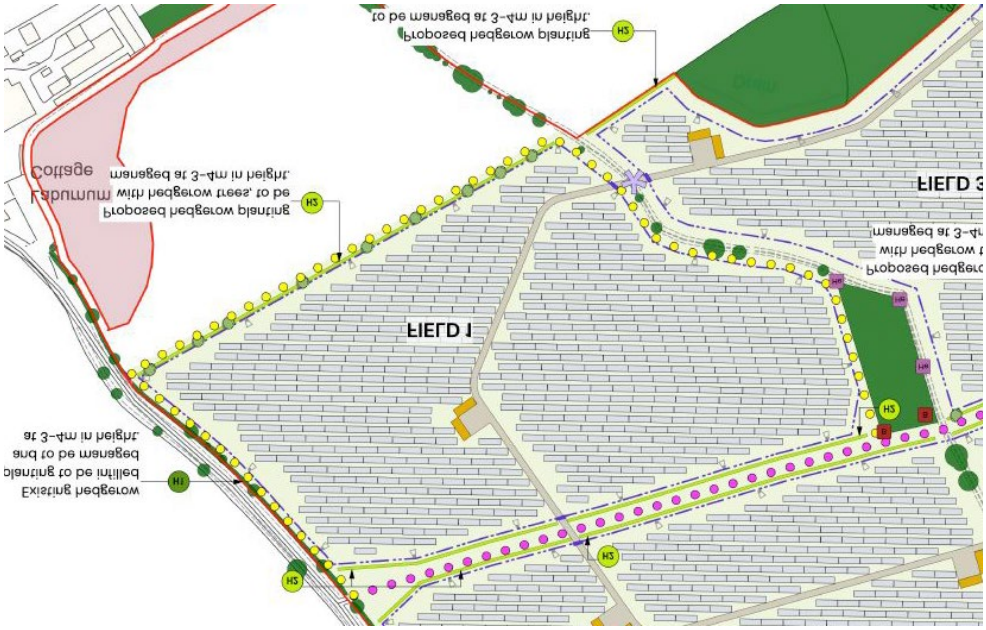

Plate 6: Field 1 (Scheme B)

Field 2

3.24. Field 2 is broadly rectangular in shape. The northern and western boundaries of the field are defined by well-established hedgerow vegetation which would be retained. The eastern boundary is defined by existing scattered trees. The southern boundary of the field is currently defined by bridleway BW1. As part of the proposals, new hedgerows are proposed alongside the bridleway which would define the southern boundary of the field. The panels would be set back from the field boundaries to create wide grass margins (variable in width) around the perimeter of the field, grassland is also proposed inside of the security fencing beneath the panels.

Plate 7: Field 2 (Scheme B)

Field 3

3.25. Field 3 is irregular in form and defined by riparian vegetation in the form of scattered trees along its eastern and western boundaries. Blocks of retained woodland contain part of the field's western and southern boundaries. A length of new hedgerows and a section of existing hedgerows with trees also form the field's southern boundary. As part of the proposals, a short section of this existing hedgerow would be removed to accommodate an access track. The northern boundary of the site is formed of a new hedgerow with hedgerow trees along the southern side of bridleway BW1. The panels would be set back from the field boundaries to create wide grass margins (variable in width) around the perimeter of the field, grassland is also proposed inside of the security fencing beneath the panels.

Plate 8: Field 3 (Scheme B)

Field 4

3.26. Field 4 is broadly square field in form and would accommodate solar panels. The northern boundary is formed of hedgerow vegetation, the western boundary by scattered trees and a short length of hedgerow and the eastern boundary is contained by the woodland edge. The southern boundary is currently defined by the bridleway BW1, which as part of the proposals would be lined with new hedgerows. The panels would be set back from the field boundaries to create wide grass margins (variable in width) around the perimeter of the field, grassland is also proposed inside of the security fencing beneath the panels.

Plate 9: Field 4 (Scheme B)

Field 5

3.27. Field 5 is located in the north-eastern corner of the site and is crossed by bridleway BW6. The field is broadly L shaped with the northernmost field located adjacent to the road to the north. The western boundary is composed of a mix of hedgerow, a woodland edge and scattered riparian vegetation including well-established trees, and the southern boundary is also composed of scattered well-established trees of varying size along the course of a watercourse. The eastern boundary is located adjacent to the road which travels north out of Thoroton and is formed of a robust, well-established hedgerow.

3.28. The north-eastern corner of field 5 is excluded from development, the area is rectangular in form. Bridleway BW6 passes on an east-west axis through the field. As part of the proposals the western extent of the bridleway will be lined on both sides with new hedgerow vegetation, up until approximately the point at which the route passes under the overhead pylons. The panels would be set back from the field boundaries to create wide grass margins around the perimeter of the field, grassland is also proposed inside of the security fencing beneath the panels.

3.29. On Scheme B the proposed hedgerow has been realigned to better reflect historic hedgerow patterns which used to be present within the site. This section of the proposed hedgerow does not include hedgerow trees, and the areas of woodland and scattered trees present in the previous iteration of the proposals (Scheme A) are omitted, so as to preserve the line of sight from the bridleway to the spire of the Church of St Helena in Thoroton.

Plate 10: Field 5 (Scheme B)

Field 6

3.30. Field 6 is broadly rectangular in form. The northern and eastern boundaries of the field are defined by scattered well-established trees of varying size along the course of a watercourse, mature blocks of woodland are also located adjacent to the north-west and south-west corners of the field. The southern boundary of the field is defined by a hedgerow. The panels would be set back from the field boundaries to create wide grass margins (variable in width) around the perimeter of the field, grassland is also proposed inside of the security fencing beneath the panels.

Plate 11: Field 6 (scheme B)

Field 7

3.31. Field 7 is also broadly rectangular in form. The northern boundary of the field is not currently defined on the ground with any vegetation, although a clump of woodland planting is proposed adjacent to this boundary as part of both schemes. Scattered trees define the western boundary and well-established hedgerows define the southern and eastern boundaries. The proposed permissive path runs along the eastern edge of the field. The panels would be set back from the field boundaries to create wide grass margins around the perimeter of the field, grassland is also proposed inside of the security fencing beneath the panels.

Plate 12: Field 7 (Scheme B)

Field 8

3.32. Field 8 is located in the south-western corner of the site. The northern and western boundaries of the field are defined by well-established hedgerow vegetation which includes trees. The eastern boundary is contained by a linear belt of mature woodland. The southern boundary to the field wraps around an existing woodland block and also follows the roadside hedgerow. To provide access to the site, a section of the roadside hedgerow along the southern boundary of the site would be removed. As part of the proposals, a belt of woodland is proposed along sections of the southern boundary where hedgerow exists currently to further strengthen the vegetation framework. The proposed permissive path runs along the southern boundary of the field, exiting the site in the south-west corner to allow PRoW users to join up with the existing PRoW network. The panels would be set back from the field boundaries to create wide grass margins around the perimeter of the field, grassland is also proposed inside of the security fencing beneath the panels.

Plate 13: field 8 (Scheme B)

Field 9

3.33. Field 9 is also broadly rectangular in shape. The belt of mature woodland which contains the eastern boundary of field 9 also defines the western boundary of field 9. The southern, eastern and northern boundaries of the field are currently defined by hedgerow vegetation. As part of the proposals the belt of woodland along the southern boundary of field 8 is continued along the southern boundary of field 9. The proposed permissive path runs along the eastern and southern boundaries of the field. The panels would be set back from the field boundaries to create wide grass margins around the perimeter of the field, grassland is also proposed inside of the security fencing beneath the panels.

Plate 14: Field 9 (Scheme B)

Decommissioning Stage

3.34. I note that the solar farm comprises a range of built infrastructure in addition to the solar arrays including transformer units, access tracks and grid connection compound. All of the infrastructure associated with the proposed scheme, including the construction and maintenance tracks, would be removed as part of the decommissioning stage to ensure that the landscape reverts back to its original state prior to construction. The mitigation and enhancement planting would remain in place. Where built form is removed, the land would be reinstated as grassland to reflect the existing pastoral fields in the locality. Post-decommissioning, the landowner would have the opportunity to either continue to practice pastoral farming or convert to arable use where such decisions do not require any planning permission.

3.35. The OR (CD2.1) specifically addresses decommissioning on page 25 noting that at the end of the operational lifespan (40 years), the solar panels and the infrastructure would be removed, and the site restored back to agricultural use. The land would be restored to its existing condition. The restoration process would ensure that over time the land is restored to the same as it was previously, and in the event that planning permission was granted this could be secured through a suitable condition.

4. Effect on Landscape Elements

Introduction

4.1. This section of my proof assesses the effects on those landscape elements (features) that currently characterise the site itself. It particularly considers the introduction of the new elements as part of the scheme and how these would physically affect the existing features present within the site. It also explains why the scheme would result in some beneficial effects for some landscape elements.

Topography

4.2. The site is located in a very gentle undulating vale landscape. The gradually sloping gradients across the site mean that only limited earthworks would be necessary to accommodate the proposed scheme. The susceptibility of the topography to the type of development proposed is considered to be medium which combined with a medium value, would result in a medium sensitivity.

4.3. Changes to the topographic profile would be reversible and would be only very localised and relate to the construction of tracks and foundations such as the platforms for the inverters and substation. Consequently, there would not be any requirement for large-scale remodelling of the existing landform within the site. I consider that the overall magnitude of change to the ground profile of the site would be negligible. With a medium sensitivity and a negligible magnitude of change, the overall effect on the topography would be negligible (adverse) in terms of the scale of effect.

Trees / Tree Cover

4.4. Trees and tree cover are notable landscape components within and on the periphery of the site. Internally, along with the blocks and belts of woodland, there are numerous scattered hedgerow trees. The existing tree resource is considered to be of high value in overall terms and of high susceptibility to changes arising from the proposed development. With a high value and susceptibility, the overall sensitivity of the tree resource is considered to be high. As illustrated by the Landscape Masterplan (Scheme B) (appendix 2), there is tree cover around the periphery as well as internally within the site that would be retained as part of the green infrastructure. This would be reinforced with new woodland areas comprised of native standards and feathered trees covering 0.89ha based on the Scheme B landscape proposals. No trees are required to be removed to accommodate the proposed scheme. A number of trees are proposed to be planted including standard native trees together with woodland planting using standard and feathered native tree planting (see appendix 2). There would be a net gain in terms of tree resource.

4.5. A Detailed Planting Plan can be secured by means of a suitably worded condition. Overall, the magnitude of change is assessed as low, which when combined with a high sensitivity results in a moderate (beneficial) effect on the tree resource of the site. The proposed mitigation planting in terms of trees and woodland areas would reflect the type of vegetation which is characteristic of the locality and reinforce these presence of these elements.

Hedgerows

4.6. Across the site, there are a number of hedgerows of varying heights which demarcate the field boundaries. While many of these are in good condition, where there are existing gaps, these would be 'gapped up' with indigenous shrub species and complimented with some entirely new hedgerows to aid in screening views and assimilating the proposals into the landscape. The AIA (CD1.30) identifies a number of locations across the site where short sections of the existing hedgerows are proposed to be removed to accommodate access tracks and security fencing. However, the scheme would include 2390m of new native hedgerow planting and a further 3287m of existing hedgerow infilled.

4.7. As a result, the magnitude of change is assessed as low. The susceptibility of the hedges is considered to be high, which when combined with a high value results in a high sensitivity. A high sensitivity combined with a low magnitude of change would result in a moderate beneficial degree of effect. The proposed mitigation planting in terms of hedgerows would reflect the type of vegetation which is characteristic of the locality and reinforce these presence of these elements.

Land Use / Land Cover / Openness

4.8. There would be an inevitable change in the existing land cover of the site with the proposed scheme in place. The existing land cover, under arable, would be converted to pastoral use. Therefore, to accommodate the solar farm, the land would retain its agricultural function managed as pasture, whilst still accommodating the solar array infrastructure. The notable point here is that there would be a very limited loss of agricultural land throughout the operational years and upon decommissioning, would allow arable to be reintroduced. Switching between pastoral and arable use is an integral part of farm management either short or long term and does not require planning permission.

4.9. I understand that the grazing density for sheep within a solar farm is not materially different to general grazing densities. By conversion to pasture, the land would not only have the opportunity to rest, but there would be an improvement in agronomy terms through sheep being kept on the land with associated increased nutrient levels. With a medium susceptibility and medium value, resulting in a medium sensitivity combined with a medium magnitude of change (retained fields with solar panels which would remove some sense of openness across the pastoral fields) would result in a moderate (adverse) degree of effect with regard to land cover associated with the site.

4.10. My analysis which I have set out above is based on a number of considerations relating to this aspect of the scheme, and is noted in the following paragraphs.

4.11. The land is currently farmed as arable land. The land management can change from arable to pasture as good farming practice without the requirement for planning permission.

4.12. With the scheme as proposed, the land would be managed as pasture where the solar panels are located within the existing fields.

4.13. This land cover would be retained across the entire site, with the solar panels superimposed over this managed grassland, in contrast to development that sits in the land and is permanent.

4.14. This land would be managed with sheep grazing to ensure that the grassland is appropriately managed and maintained for the lifetime of the project. Sheep are able to effectively graze across any of the grassland whether it is under the panels or between the panels themselves.

4.15. Throughout the life of the project the land would be farmed based on sheep grazing and therefore would remove any intensive arable farming practice.

4.16. The amount of actual of loss of agricultural land as a result of the scheme would be negligible given the overall size of the site. Apart from the DNO substation and inverter the only other infrastructure that would be superimposed over the grass sward would be the steel supports for the solar panels. The loss of agricultural land would amount to approximately 2% of the overall site area would be temporarily lost.

4.17. It is good practice to break the agricultural cultivation of the land with the land left fallow and retained as pasture to allow the soil ecology to recover. This scheme would allow the land to effectively rest from arable use for the life of the project. With the land managed for grazing the sheep droppings as humus, this would allow the soil to become more enriched in soil habitat terms. At the end of the period the soil resource would be a better-quality enriched resource for farming as a consequence. There will be as a result, long term benefits for the soil from being rested for 40 years. Furthermore, with the land managed for pasture with sheep grazing present, the proposal would allow carbon sequestration with regard to the soil resource within the site.

4.18. The physical form of grassland would remain with the solar panels in place.

4.19. The fields are currently free of built development and therefore have a sense of openness associated with the field units. The introduction of the solar panels whilst extending across the topography at a approx. height of 3m above ground, would nonetheless result in some reduction concerning the sense of openness associated with the field units. This aspect would result in an adverse nature of effect as it relates to land cover, as the actual physical impact but would be limited in scale across the site.

4.20. No land will be permanently lost as a result of the proposals apart from the substation and access track. The installation of the solar arrays would not seal the land, nor would it cause any downgrading of quality. Only a small area for access tracks and infrastructure would be temporarily lost but this land would be restored on decommissioning. I understand that the installation and decommissioning process would not have any significant or long term adverse effects on soils subject to the proposal following good practice in terms of pasture management and maintenance.

4.21. The term 'openness' with regard to countryside is not specifically identified in the NPPF, though I note that the Officer's Report refers to impact on openness. The introduction of the solar farm across the site would inevitably have a bearing upon the openness on the site itself. The sense of openness associated with the site is most readily appreciated from the PRoW that crosses the northern part of the site which currently has open views, the route currently affords open views where it passes across three fields. The introduction of the solar farm would result in the creation of a green lane, such that views from the PRoW would be channelled along the green lane framed by hedgerows flanking the route. This situation would apply to fields 1, 2, 4 and also part of field 5. The eastern part of field 5 would continue to pass across a retained field with an open aspect with views both north and south of the route.

4.22. The introduction of the proposed solar farm would inevitably introduce various elements of built form and reduce the spatial aspect associated with the site to some degree, though this would be limited given the low profile nature of the development combined with its light footprint. Given the hedgerows around the perimeter of the site are of a comparable height, 3-4m, the perceived loss of any spatial aspect associated with the fields would be modest resulting in a limited and moderate degree of harm in this regard. The solar farm with its various elements would inevitably reduce the sense of openness from a spatial point of view.

Public Rights of Way

4.23. There are a number of public rights of way in the locality of the site (appendix 1). All those beyond the site would be physically unaffected with the scheme in place. There are two PRoWs which pass across the northern part of the site. Users of this route would be affected in visual amenity terms which is addressed in section 6 of my proof.

4.24. With regards to the on-site PRoWs, no diversions of any routes are required to facilitate the proposed scheme, with the existing routes retained on their current alignments. PRoWs are considered to be high susceptibility, value and sensitivity, which when combined with no magnitude of change, result in no physical degree of effect on the public right of way as a resource and facility. Visual effects upon uses of the PRoWs are considered in Section 6 of this proof of evidence which deals with visual amenity.

4.25. Two new permissive paths are proposed as part of the scheme to connect to existing PRoWs and in order to extend the PRoW network. With a high susceptibility, value and sensitivity which when combined with a low magnitude of change, would result in a moderate beneficial effect to this resource.

Water Features

4.26. Technical Appendix 4: Flood Risk and Drainage Impact Assessment (CD1.24) submitted as part of the application identifies a number of short sections of small watercourses within the site, which are typical in the locality. Due to the characteristic nature of these features within the site when compared to the surrounding area, they are considered to have a medium susceptibility, value and sensitivity to the type of development proposed. The proposals have been designed to allow a separation buffer between these features and the proposed infrastructure. In short, the existing water features would be retained and not physically affected which would result in a negligible magnitude of change. As a result, the effects would be negligible beneficial with regard to water features within the site.

Summary of Effects upon Landscape Elements

4.27. The scheme would result in some beneficial effects upon the landscape elements within the site when considered in the round, as summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of Effects on Landscape Elements	
Element	**Landscape Effect**
Topography	Negligible (adverse)
Trees	Moderate (beneficial)
Hedges	Moderate (beneficial)
Land Use/Land Cover/Openness	Moderate (adverse)
Public Rights of Way	Moderate (beneficial)
Water Features	Negligible (beneficial)

4.28. In overall terms, the scheme would result in some beneficial effects with regard to the landscape elements that currently define the landscape character of the site, which would change from a series of arable and improved grassland fields to one of a solar farm set within grassland and field pattern vegetation. However, the elements that currently contribute to defining the character of the site, namely trees and hedgerows would be retained and enhanced, albeit set within the context of a solar farm with the land managed for sheep pasture. The introduction of the solar farm would introduce some infrastructure though this would be limited given its low profile nature, combined with its light footprint and would result in a limited and moderate degree of harm with regard to the perceived openness of the landscape as it relates to the site.

4.29. It is also worth reiterating that the scheme has an operational life of 40 years, with the land cover being temporary; meaning that it will be possible for the land to be returned to its previous arable use. Solar energy developments are characterised by their low profile, light footprint, and reversible nature. The timescale of 40 years is similar for some other elements in the landscape such as timber crop production.

4.30. During the decommissioning stage all infrastructure, with an exception for the DNO substation would be removed. However, all the new planting introduced would have matured along with the ongoing management and maintenance of the other retained features and as a result, there would be a clear beneficial legacy from this project in terms of landscape elements which collectively would also enhance landscape character as advocated in the published Landscape Character Assessments, see section 5 of my proof.

4.31. I recognise that the scheme would bring about a change to the character of the site itself, introducing solar panels and associated infrastructure superimposed over grassland which can be managed for pasture and grazing. However, such a change would in physical terms be confined to within the boundaries of the site.

5. Effect on Landscape Character

Introduction

5.1. This section of my proof explains how the scheme would have a bearing on the landscape character of the site and surrounding area. As defined in the GLVIA3 glossary landscape character is defined as ***"A distinct, recognisable and consistent pattern of elements in the landscape that makes one landscape different to another…".***

5.2. To further clarify a distinction in the use of terms, Landscape Character Areas (LCAs) are discrete geographical areas of a particular landscape, as opposed to Landscape Character Types (LCTs), which are defined in GLVIA3, page 157 as follows:

> ***"These are distinct types of landscape that are relatively homogeneous in character. They are generic in nature in that they may occur in different areas in different parts of the country, but wherever they occur they share broadly similar combinations of geology, topography, drainage patterns, vegetation and historical lands use and settlement pattern, and perceptual and aesthetic attributes."***

5.3. A number of landscape character assessments have been undertaken in recent years to identify landscape character types and areas and published to assist professionals in understanding how development can affect landscape character.

Effect on the Character of the Site

5.4. I have provided in the preceding chapter some narrative to explain how the proposed scheme would have a bearing upon the landscape elements of the site (Section 4). With regard to the site itself, I consider this to be quite unremarkable in landscape character terms and in this regard consider the site to be of medium value and of medium susceptibility and sensitivity with regard to this proposal. This combined with a low magnitude of change (given the retention and enhancement of green infrastructure combined with the limited built form) would result in an overall minor adverse effect upon the character of the site itself. I proceed to consider the landscape character of the 'wider' landscape beyond the site itself.

National Level – National Character Area 48: Trent and Belvoir Vales

5.5. The site and the surrounding area are located within the National Character Area (NCA) 48: Trent and Belvoir Vales (CD3.28, appendices 4 and 11). This NCA forms part of an assessment of the character of England's landscape, first undertaken by the Countryside Agency but now the responsibility of Natural England. The key characteristics of this NCA are described on internal page 7 of the document as follows:

- ***"A gently undulating and low-lying landform in the main, with low ridges dividing shallow, broad river valleys, vales and flood plains. The mature, powerful River Trent flows north through the full length of the area, meandering across its broad flood plain and continuing to influence the physical and human geography of the area as it has done for thousands of years***

- ***The bedrock geology of Triassic and Jurassic mudstones has given rise to fertile clayey soils across much of the area, while extensive deposits of alluvium and sand and gravel have given rise to a wider variety of soils, especially in the flood plains and over much of the eastern part of the NCA***

- ***Agriculture is the dominant land use, with most farmland being used for growing cereals, oilseeds and other arable crops. While much pasture has been converted to arable use over the years, grazing is still significant in places, such as along the Trent and around settlements***

- ***A regular pattern of medium to large fields enclosed by hawthorn hedgerows, and ditches in low-lying areas, dominates the landscape***

- ***Very little semi-natural habitat remains across the area; however, areas of flood plain grazing marsh are still found in places along the Trent***

- ***Extraction of sand and gravel deposits continues within the Trent flood plain and the area to the west of Lincoln. Many former sites of extraction have been flooded, introducing new waterbodies and new wetland habitats to the landscape***

- ***Extensive use of red bricks and pantiles in the 19th century has contributed to the consistent character of traditional architecture within villages and farmsteads across the area. Stone hewn from harder courses within the mudstones, along with stone from neighbouring areas, also feature as building materials, especially in the churches***

- ***A predominantly rural and sparsely settled area with small villages and dispersed farms linked by quiet lanes, contrasting with the busy market towns of Newark and Grantham, the cities of Nottingham and Lincoln, the major roads connecting them and the cross-country dual carriageways of the A1 and A46***

- ***Immense coal-fired power stations in the north exert a visual influence over a wide area, not just because of their structures but also the plumes that rise from them and the pylons and power lines that are linked to them. The same applies to the gas-fired power station and sugar beet factory near Newark, albeit on a slightly smaller scale."*** *(my emphasis)*

5.6. All of these key characteristics identified above would remain and prevail beyond the site itself with the scheme in place. Any landscape character effects would be negligible beyond the boundaries of the site itself.

5.7. On page 4 of the document, it sets out statements of environmental opportunities. SEO2 notes that:

> ***"Enhance the woodland and hedgerow network through the planting of small woodlands, tree belts, hedgerow trees and new hedgerows to benefit landscape character, habitat connectivity and a range of eco-system services, including the regulation of soil erosion, water quality and flow."*** *(my emphasis)*

5.8. The proposal would accord with this objective in general terms.

5.9. The document notes that the Trent and Belvoir Vales offer a gently undulating and low-lying landform with low ridges dividing shallow broad river valleys and floodplains. That is the case with the landscape that surrounds the site here.

5.10. The document goes on to note on page 9 that major industrial developments are mainly focused along the Trent floodplain corridor including power stations and associated overhead power lines, a sugar beet factory, industrial estates, sewage treatment works and active sand and gravel extraction sites. I note that within the same local Landscape Character Area there are a whole series of overhead electricity lines and pylons, together with a commercial scale solar farm to the south-east at Lodge Farm. The Report goes on to note that two power stations have a very dramatic visual impact in the north of the area, their prominence undiminished in the low-lying open landscape.

5.11. The impermeable Mercia Mudstone has trapped reservoirs of oil and several wells are in operation over the Gainsborough Beckingham oil field. It goes on to note that brick clay is also dug and processed into bricks, while gypsum is mined south of Newark and processed at the plaster works at Balderton. Major infrastructure routes traverse the area, notably the A1, the A46 and the East Coast mainline railway. Road infrastructure is visually prominent around the towns and cities and in some other places such as the A46 around Bingham and along part of the A1. Traffic noise and light pollution from the major roads have a significant impact on the tranquillity of what is otherwise a relatively quiet rural area.

5.12. Page 18 of the document provides further information with regard to objective SEO2. This seeks to enhance the woodland and hedgerow network through the planting of small woodlands, tree belts, hedgerow trees and new hedgerows to benefit landscape character, habitat connectivity and a range of eco system services including the regulation of soil erosion, water quality and flow. It proceeds to identify some examples, one of which notes that:

> ***"Considerably increasing the number of hedgerow trees even though these are not a significant feature at present to enhance landscape diversity and eco system services including carbon storage and to counteract the threat to landscape character and biodiversity from tree diseases such as ash die back."***

5.13. The proposal would include enhancing the green infrastructure which would include an increase in the number of hedgerow trees.

5.14. It goes on to cite another example stating that:

> ***"Expanding existing woodlands and planting new woodlands to increase carbon sequestration and storage, the provision of biomass following the guidance produced for the area…"***

5.15. The proposal would introduce new woodland planting within the site.

5.16. It also recommends using native, preferably local providence, stock for all new plantings and species characteristic of the National Character Area. The proposal would accord with these recommendations.

5.17. Objective SEO4 is set out on page 20 which is concerned with maintaining and enhancing the character of this gently undulating rural landscape by promoting and carefully managing the many distinctive elements that contribute to the overarching sense of place. It cites two examples: ensuring that new development incorporates well-designed green infrastructure providing enhanced access and recreational opportunities for local communities and secondly, supporting the rural economy to ensure that the prevailing character of the area is able to remain predominantly rural and tranquil.

5.18. On internal page 25 it addresses the subject of boundary features and patterns and in paragraph 5.1 notes that hedgerows which were previously often gappy or excessively trimmed are now slowly becoming taller and wider, benefiting wildlife and landscape character in response to a different management approach through agricultural stewardship schemes. With regard to boundary features, it notes on page 32 that the assessment of hedgerows between 1999 and 2003 concluded that poor hedgerow condition had been commonplace across the area with hedgerows often being excessively trimmed and gappy and that the few surviving trees were often in poor condition. The proposals would seek to enhance and maintain the hedgerows within the site.

5.19. Page 33 is concerned with the settlement development in the area, noting that power station cooling towers are not as prominent in the landscape as they used to be with Staythorpe and High Marnham having now been demolished in 1995 and 2012 respectively. Page 35 is concerned with drivers for change, the first of which is climate change. It notes under this heading that there are a range of potential threats from climate change. Collectively, these changes are likely to have a significant effect on the character of the local landscape. Finally, on page 36 of the document, it notes under the heading "Drivers for Change and other Drivers", that there is pressure to accommodate wind energy schemes across the NCA, however, I would note that there is no reference to solar farms requiring guidance or raising concern in the same way.

5.20. With the proposal in place, the field pattern hedgerows and hedgerow trees and the grain of the landscape would all remain in place. The only material change would be that instead of there being a combination of arable and pastoral land, it would all be managed as pasture for sheep grazing with solar arrays introduced in the fields, consistent with existing field boundaries. There would be no loss of any features other than the arable use, the only difference is that the solar panels would be introduced along with the other infrastructure within the framework of the fields. In character terms, beyond the site and its boundaries, there would be no material change to the physical and experiential (such as tranquillity and remoteness) characteristics of the landscape.

5.21. The site would remain in agricultural use just not so obvious given the solar panels and associated infrastructure. There would be no net loss of any features other than the current arable land use, the only difference is that the solar panels would be introduced along with the other infrastructure within the framework of the fields. In character terms, beyond the site and its immediate boundaries, there would be no material change to the physical and experiential characteristics of the landscape.

5.22. The overall key characteristics of the NCA reveal a settled and farmed landscape with many specific references to built infrastructure. This Natural England document is inevitably a high-level character assessment, but it provides a useful overview to understand the character of the local and wider landscape and its surroundings. At this higher level, it is considered that the appeal scheme would bring about no change to the key characteristics of this NCA as identified above. Beyond the boundaries of the site, this character area has a medium susceptibility and value, resulting in a medium sensitivity, which combined with a negligible change of magnitude, would result in a negligible (adverse) degree of effect as a consequence of the proposed solar farm being in place as far as the wider landscape beyond the site is concerned. At this higher level, it is considered that the scheme would not have any discernible effect with regard to the key defining characteristics of this NCA as identified above. It is also appropriate to examine the local character assessments.

East Midlands Regional Landscape Character Assessment (2010)

5.23. The East Midlands Regional Landscape Character Assessment was published in April 2010 (CD3.29, appendices 4 and 12) and was commissioned by the East Midlands Landscape Partnership and prepared by LDA Design Consulting LLP. The introduction recognises that this is a new tier in the landscape character assessment hierarchy in England and the first regional assessment to not only provide a comprehensive and detailed examination of the region's landscape but also to address seascape characterisation. It goes on to note that the character assessment identifies 31 Regional Landscape Character Types (RLCTs) which are split into 11 groups, the purpose of which is to provide a strategic regionwide evidence base to help decision-making on issues that will have implications for the landscape and wider environment.

5.24. Section 1 provides an introduction to the assessment and states in section 1.3 that one of the aims is to conserve and maintain historic features of the landscape.

5.25. The site and the immediate surrounding area (which includes the villages of Hawksworth and Thoroton) fall within Group 4, Lowland Vales and RLCT 4A, Unwooded Vales Key characteristics of RLCT 4A (CD3.29, appendices 4 and 12) relevant to the site and the locality include:

- ***"Extensive, low lying rural landscape underlain by Triassic and Jurassic mudstones and clays and widespread superficial deposits;***
- ***Expansive long distance and panoramic views from higher ground at the margin of the vales gives a sense of visual containment;***
- ***Low hills and ridges gain visual prominence in an otherwise gently undulating landscape;***
- ***Complex drainage patterns of watercourses that flow within shallow undulations often flanked by pasture and riparian habitats;***
- ***Limited woodland cover; shelter belts and hedgerow trees gain greater visual significance and habitat value as a result;***
- ***Productive arable and pastoral farmland, with evidence of increasing reversion to arable cropping in recent times;***

- ***Regular pattern of medium sized fields enclosed by low and generally well maintained hedgerows and ditches in low lying areas; large modern fieldscapes evident in areas of arable reversion; and***

- ***Sparsely settled with small villages and dispersed farms linked ▪▪by quiet rural lanes."*** (underlining is my emphasis)

5.26. All of these key characteristics identified above would remain and prevail both within the site and beyond the site itself with the scheme in place. Any landscape character effects would be negligible beyond the immediate boundaries of the site, by that I mean the adjacent roads.

5.27. Under the heading 'Landscape Character' on page 138, the text states that:

> ***"…Within the vales, low hills and ridges are also important, foreshortening views and creating subtle relief features. The vale landscape is generally characterised by productive mixed agriculture, set within an enclosed landscape of low, well maintained hedgerows. Wide areas are under permanent pasture, often grazed by dairy herds. However, areas of pasture are increasingly being ploughed up for cereals and hedgerows removed to accommodate large machines… Despite low levels of woodland cover, local landform, hedgerows and shelter belts create visual containment and give the Vales landscape an intimate character."***

5.28. The proposed scheme would not change these defining characteristics either within the site or beyond the site itself. The site would still be characterised by mixed agriculture and set within enclosed and well-maintained hedgerow.

5.29. Under the heading 'Physical Influences', the unwooded vales are noted as being characterised by a mixed farming regime of both arable and pastoral farming. The long history of agriculture and human presence are noted as being drivers for the typically low level of woodland cover and little surviving ancient woodland, although the text goes on to note that despite this the landscape appears 'well-treed' and states that:

> ***"…Despite this, the landscape appears well treed, largely on account of ground level views across wide areas encompassing hedgerows and well established, moderately sized, game coverts, mixed plantations and shelter belts. Whilst not common, hedgerow trees, notably oak and ash, are also important both to provide shelter and to add to the overall treed character of the landscape."***

5.30. The proposed scheme would not change these defining characteristics both within the site and beyond the site itself.

5.31. Recent farming practices of ploughing up large areas of permanent grassland are noted as having taken place across the RLCT leading to some areas with a predominance of arable. The text also goes on to state that the enclosure of the landscape has also been modified by the removal of hedgerows and ditches to allow fields to accommodate large-scale machinery, from studying historic maps it is evident that the site has undergone hedgerow removal.

5.32. Under the heading 'Aesthetic and Perceptual Qualities' on page 140, the text notes that the RLCT is a simple and unified landscape type, consisting of a limited palette of features and elements, it is also described as a productive mixed farmland. With regards to landform, the

text notes that the RLCT is typically low-lying and that the rising landform towards its fringes creates a sense of containment. Whilst wide panoramic views are noted as being possible from low hills and ridges, a more intimate character is stated as prevailing in the lower-lying areas particularly where intact hedgerow networks or belts of riverside trees truncate views. The RLCT is noted as relatively sparsely settled, with belts of trees around settlements integrating them into the landscape. Skylines are noted as often only being punctuated by church spires, noting that large-scale pylons exist on the site. The final paragraph covering aesthetic and perceptual qualities states that the RLTC has a strong agricultural character and a sense of rural tranquillity. The landscape beyond the site would retain its strong agriculture character as well as its sense of rural tranquillity.

5.33. On page 141, under the heading 'Landscape Change and Management,' built development; forces for change; the majority of new built development is noted as being located on the fringes of the larger settlements of Nottingham, Lincoln and Newark-on-Trent.

5.34. Under the heading 'Shaping the Future Landscape,' the text advocates the planting of new trees and woodland to help integrate new development into the landscape.

5.35. Under the heading 'Agriculture and Land Management' on page 142, the text notes that whilst the rural landscape is a mix of pasture and arable, there is evidence of agricultural intensification which has resulted in the loss of many typical landscape features including hedgerows. The text goes on to note that although the remaining hedgerow network is generally strong, there is nevertheless evidence of decline in a number of areas, with gaps and few hedgerow trees. The text also notes that the loss of pasture is particularly evident around settlements. The proposal would positively address this decline with the re-introduction of extensive areas of new pasture.

5.36. Under the heading "Shaping the future landscape", the text states that the aim should be to protect existing rural landscape features, whilst encouraging positive management of those features lost or under threat. In particular, the restoration of hedgerows should be given priority where there is evidence of decline. The creation of new hedgerows and permanent pasture along watercourses should also be a priority. The landscape proposals would include gapping up existing hedgerows and significant lengths of new hedgerows to aid in restoring the landscape pattern and framework within the site in line with this strategy.

5.37. Under the heading 'Forestry and Woodland, Forces for Change,' the text notes that whilst woodland is not a significant component of the RLCT, limited tree planting could be used in and around settlements to integrate new development into the landscape and in more intimate low-lying areas to help create a mixed pattern of land-use, increase the occurrence of semi-natural habitats and maintain the perception of a 'well treed' landscape. The proposed solar farm would reinforce semi-natural habitats whilst retaining the existing field pattern.

Greater Nottingham Landscape Character Assessment (2009)

5.38. The Greater Nottingham Landscape Character Assessment (CD3.30, appendices 5 and 13) forms one of the background documents that supported the preparation of the Rushcliffe Local Plan. The assessment identifies a series of Regional Character Areas (RLA), which are then further broken down into a series of Draft Policy Zones (DPZs).

5.39. The assessment locates the site and its locality within the South Nottinghamshire Farmlands RLA (appendix 13). Key characteristics of the RLA include:

- *"This is a large tract of land between the southern edge of Greater Nottingham and the urban fringes of Newark;*

- *It is closely associated with a belt of Triassic rocks to the south of the River Trent and is the largest single geological formation within Nottinghamshire;*

- *The geology is mostly Mercia Mudstone which comprises reddish mudstones with occasional hard sandstone (Skerries). This is less developed than elsewhere in Nottinghamshire and creates a fairly uniform gently rolling lowland landform;*

- *A low escarpment is present on the south eastern boundary where the uppermost beds of Mercia Mudstone pass onto Rhaetic beds;*

- *Alluvium is present in hollows and depressions laid down as a result of gypsum solution in the upper layers of the land surface. This formed lowlying alluvium separated by narrow mudstone ridges which are 5-10 metres above the alluvium;*

- *The highest land is along the edge of the Trent Valley where a line of hills falls sharply to the low-land of the Trent Washlands region;*

- *The land is dissected by streams in the north creating two prominent hills at Wilford and Clifton;*

- *Small nucleated settlements tend to be concentrated on traditionally high mudstone ridges; there is a lack of built form on lower alluvium basins;*

- *Closer to Nottingham, villages have expanded considerably which exerts an urbanising influence on the landscape;*

- *Arable farmland is predominant although pasture is present along some stream margins, escarpment slopes and village fringes;*

- *Uniform sometimes monotonous character created by large tracts of arable farmland with few other notable features;*

- *Strong pattern of medium to large-scale hedged fields with smaller village side pasture;*

- *Low-lying alluvium 'basins' such as Ruddington Moor, Bennington Fen and along the Rivers Smite and Devon are characterised by intensive arable farming with frequent ditches and drainage dykes. There is little woodland or hedgerows present in these areas;*

- *Hedgerows are of variable condition, they tend to be intact along lanes and in pasture fields and less intact, smaller and often fragmented around arable fields;*

- ***Hedgerow trees are mostly ash with some oak and willow. Frequent young lime and horse chestnut trees have been planted along roads and are a notable feature;***

- ***General lack of woodland within the area with few hedgerow trees enables open extensive views across the area;***

- ***Where present woodland tends to be small geometric plantations, the general lack of woodland means these are prominent features;***

- ***Pockets of isolated mature parkland are prominent wooded features; remnant parkland exists where land has been ploughed for arable farming;***

- ***Trees and woodland along fringes of villages creates an impression of higher tree cover than actually exists; and***

- ***Frequent overhead lines and pylons are prominent vertical features, their scale emphasised by the lack of other vertical structures such as woodland"*** (underlining is my emphasis)

5.40. All of these key characteristics identified would remain and prevail both within the site and beyond the boundaries of the site itself with the scheme in place. Any landscape character effects would be negligible beyond the environs of the site.

5.41. Guidelines and recommendations for the South Nottinghamshire Farmlands RCA (appendix 13) include:

- ***"Conserve and enhance the overall structure and traditional agricultural character of the landscape;***

- ***Conserve and strengthen the simple pattern of medium to large hedged fields;***

- ***Identify opportunities for enhancing the structure and unity of the landscape through new tree and woodland planting;***

- ***Conserve the character and setting of village settlements;***

- ***Promote measures for achieving better integration of new and existing features in the countryside;***

- ***Conserve the character of areas of pasture where present particularly along village fringes;***

- ***Conserve the remote undeveloped character of low-lying alluvium areas;***

- ***Conserve parkland where present and retain the character of parkland pasture with frequent individual specimen trees;***

- ***Conserve woodland; and***

- ***Enhance visual unity between arable and pastoral farming through smallscale woodland planting and, where appropriate, by strengthening the traditional pattern of hedged fields."*** (underlining is my emphasis)

5.42. The proposed solar farm would accord with these guidelines and recommendations.

5.43. At the finest level of the study, the site is located within Draft Policy Zone (DPZ) SN06 Aslockton Village Farmlands (CD3.30 and appendices 5 and 13). Characteristic features of DPZ SN06 include:

- ***Series of Mercia Mudstone outcrops and thin bands of lower-lying alluvial levels following rivers. The outcrops vary between 5 and 10m above adjacent levels; the most prominent being along Sutton Lane and Barnstone Lane in the south east of the area***

- ***A number of watercourses such as the River Smite and Devon flow through the landscape; they are lower than surrounding ground with arable fields extending to their banks and little riparian vegetation. Therefore they are not easily discernible in the landscape***

- ***Rural remote and tranquil character comprising arable farmlands and a regular dispersal of small rural settlements***

- ***Land use is mostly arable although pasture is common around village fringes. Larger tracts are present where villages are situated close to each other and pasture extends between; these tend to have a slightly more enclosed and intimate character***

- ***Field pattern ranges from small-scale fields around village fringes to expansive large scale fields in open countryside***

- ***Field boundaries are almost all hedgerows which are of variable condition; they tend to be more intact around pasture fields where left to grow taller whereas in adjacent arable fields are often low and in places quite fragmented***

- ***There is a relatively low level of woodland cover with a regular pattern of small geometric and irregular shaped woodlands throughout; other woodland is often linear in character following the line of a former railway, around village fringes and where individual hedgerows are left to mature***

- ***Hedgerow trees are infrequent although clustered around pasture fields on village margins and within villages. Where hedgerows are often taller around arable fields trees tend to be less frequent. There are lots of young hedgerow trees planted as avenues along small lanes which will increase tree cover as they mature. These are mostly ash and horse chestnut***

- ***The combination of taller hedgerows, hedgerow trees and scattered woodlands creates a dispersed wooded character and woodland is often a key component within skyline views***

- *Small parklands at Flintham, Langar, Whatton and Wiverton Hall are local wooded features*

- *Dispersed small rural settlements include both linear and nucleated patterns; they are often situated on the slightly higher Mercia Mudstone outcrops. Bingham is the only large commuter settlement within the DPZ and its northern and eastern edges are locally prominent in the landscape*

- *Villages of Elton on the Hill, Granby, Sutton and Barnstone are prominent on higher ground; they are seen mostly as a single line of dispersed housing set within trees*

- *Rooflines of villages are generally obscured by mature trees; where visible they appear dispersed and as individual or small groups of properties. Church towers and spires are prominent above the villages and are distinctive features within the landscape*

- *Villages are particularly distinctive often containing very little modern development; they are along narrow roads often bordered by red brick walls. All villages are well wooded with many mature trees along roads within small fields and open spaces within the villages and around their fringes*

- *Buildings within villages include small cottages and terraces and larger individual properties both set behind small and larger front gardens. Almost all are constructed of red brick with red pantile roofs although there is the occasional rendered or painted house. Villages often contain a few former farm buildings which are now converted to private residences.*

- *Churches within villages are almost all constructed from local stone and are either towers or spires and always set within mature grounds*

- *Narrow winding lanes are common throughout the landscape although a few straighter roads across lower lying land are present around Orston and Granby. Roads are characterised by often large verges or pockets of grassland. In these places traditional gypsy caravans and horses grazing are sometimes present*

- *Scattered farmsteads, often constructed of red brick with small out buildings and barns are throughout the DPZ although not present on the lowest lying ground*

- *Pockets of rough grassland and village greens grazed by cattle are a feature of villages in the northern part of the area such as between Car Colston and Screveton*

- *Many prominent overhead line routes are present within the landscape and are always visible on the skyline*

- ***Expansive long distance views across the landscape to the Belvoir Ridge to the south in Leicestershire"*** (underlining is my emphasis)

5.44. All of these key characteristics identified would remain and prevail both within the site beyond the boundaries of the site itself with the scheme in place. Any landscape character effects would be negligible beyond the boundaries of the site.

5.45. With regards to the condition of DPZ SN06, the assessment assigns it a valuation of moderate, with the explanatory text noting that the area is characterised by very gently undulating landform and that the land is mostly arable farming with pockets of pasture which are more intimate in character close to village fringes. The landscape is also noted as being described as having a strong rural tranquil character.

5.46. Continuing under the heading of condition fields are noted as being a mixture of medium to large scale. With regards to woodland cover, this is described as low level, with small coverts and copses listed as being scattered throughout the landscape. Other woodland cover is noted as including clumps, avenues, parkland and linear belts along maturing hedgerows and disused railways. All of these are noted as combining to give a wooded impression in views. The text goes on to note that there is evidence of some fragmentation of features through the area such as loss of hedgerows, but that there is also evidence of replanting of hedgerow trees along many of the small rural roads.

5.47. Under the heading of 'Landscape Strength', the strength of character is assessed as 'strong', with the explanatory text noting that, views are rural in character across arable fields interspersed with linear tree belts and clusters of woodland at village fringes. Overhead lines are also noted as being prominent vertical features within the landscape. It is the views from the bridle way that passes across the site where views currently across arable fields would materially change, with views channelled along new green lanes flanked by hedgerows along part of this route.

5.48. The assessment assigns DPZ SN06 an overall landscape strategy of 'conserve and enhance' with the explanatory text for "conserve" stating that, where the landscape quality is considered to be good (due to good condition and strong character) there should be an emphasis on protecting or safeguarding the key features and characteristics of the landscape in their present form. The explanatory text for "enhance" stating that emphasis should be to improve existing features which may not be currently well-managed or where existing features are of good quality but could be of greater benefit if improved. This may include improvements to landscape management practices or the introduction or removal of elements or features in order to strengthen character and/or improve perceived condition.

5.49. Landscape actions for DPZ SN06 (CD3.30, appendix 13) are listed as:

"Landscape features

- ***Conserve the older field patterns within the DPZ such as those reflecting open systems and the semi-regular geometric patterns in the north particularly enclosure patterns around Car Colston and Screveton***

- ***Enhance field boundaries through planting of new hedgerows and hedgerow trees to reinforce field pattern***

- *Enhance the distribution of hedgerow trees by encouraging planting of trees within hedgerows. Species used should be mostly ash with some horse chestnut along roads which currently have low numbers of hedgerow trees*

- *Conserve areas of permanent pasture and woodland clumps around village fringes*

- *Restore hedgerows and encourage planting of new hedgerow trees to provide unity between more open arable land and the slightly more enclosed and wooded pasture fields around village fringes*

- *Enhance woodland cover within the DPZ ensuring where implemented it is small in size and reflect surrounding field patterns and contributes to the regular dispersal of woodland within views. Planting should be focussed on the more open areas to help integrate them with the more intimate pastoral landscapes close to village fringes*

- *Conserve the distinctive character of open grazing land at Car Colston*

- *Conserve and enhance areas of parkland through ensuring replacement of specimen trees and retention of land as informal grazing*

- *Enhance the character of rivers through the DPZ through small scale planting of clumps of riparian woodland*

Built form

- *Enhance the village fringe of Bingham through planting small linear belts and copses to break up the uniform nature of the urban edge to integrate with the dispersed character of other village fringes*

- *Conserve the consistent distinctive character of small villages throughout the area; any infill or alterations to buildings should make a positive contribution to local distinctiveness*

- *Conserve the prominence of churches within village skylines*

- *Any developments along village fringes should encourage the use of red brick and pantile roofs and make a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness within each individual village*

- *Conserve the appearance of dispersed linear settlements on higher ground*

- *Conserve the tree cover and pockets of pasture, fields and small open spaces within villages*

- *Conserve the narrow street pattern and variation of building orientation within villages*

- ***Any new development along village fringes should aim to provide a dispersed character rather than a sharp line and incorporate smaller fields or open spaces, woodlands and trees along roads to provide a dispersed appearance to village fringes***

Other development/ structures in the landscape

- ***Conserve the wide grass verges and pockets of grassland along the small roads within the DPZ***

- ***Retain the remote rural character of rural roads ensuring that any highway upgrades for safety do not affect the rural character"*** (underlining is my emphasis)

5.50. The proposed development would accord with the recommended landscape actions identified accepting that the host fields would accommodate arrays.

5.51. The landscape proposals for the scheme would reflect the landscape actions for the SN06 Aslockton Village Farmlands. The proposal would introduce hedgerows to reintroduce the smaller-scale historic field pattern which used to be present on the site as well as conserve the existing field patterns. The existing arable fields would be converted to pasture. The proposed new woodland planting would be small in scale. Existing hedgerows would be infilled.

Melton and Rushcliffe Landscape Sensitivity Study: Wind Energy Development (2014)

5.52. This Sensitivity Study (CD3.32) is concerned with wind energy development and as such, is not relevant to this proposal or site.

Rushcliffe Landscape Sensitivity/Capacity Study for Solar Farm

5.53. I note that the Council's Statement of Case indicates that the Council is currently preparing a Solar Sensitivity Study for the Borough. Once this is issued I will review and comment upon the findings of the document with regard to this appeal scheme and reserve the right to prepare a rebuttal proof to address this matter should the document be issued after the submission of my proof.

Analysis Concerning Effect on Landscape Character

5.54. At the National Character Areas (NCAs) and the regional and local landscape level, the proposed solar installation would not change existing topography or drainage patterns. It would not change the local distinctive nature of these features and would be imperceptible at this scale.

5.55. The proposed development would represent a change from arable fields to pastoral fields containing solar panels. The proposed development would be contained within the existing landscape pattern and scale. Existing hedgerows would be retained with opportunities for hedge and tree planting to maintain and reinforce the key characteristics of the landscape.

5.56. I assess that the landscape has a medium susceptibility to change. I assess that the landscape has a medium value. This is in part due to it exhibiting some scenic value with medium recreational value.

5.57. Following a review of published local character assessments and review of the landscape sensitivity assessment, as well as considering the medium susceptibility to this change, and the medium value of the landscape, I assess, at a local level, that the site has a medium sensitivity to the proposed development.

5.58. The proposed development would bring about a low magnitude of change with regard to the landscape character of the site itself. The proposed development would introduce some built form but is not considered to be a substantial feature in the landscape like housing. This would have a negligible degree of effect upon the wider landscape beyond the site.

5.59. With a medium sensitivity to change and an overall low magnitude of change, there would be a minor (adverse) effect on the site itself and a negligible effect upon the wider landscape character beyond the site and its boundaries.

5.60. Following decommissioning at the end of the operational life of the panels, the site would be returned to its current condition. However, the landscape enhancements would remain. There would be minor long-term benefits to the local landscape character arising from the mitigation measures, the enhancements to the landscape elements and biodiversity within the site, accepting that the substation would remain with its access track.

Effects of the Landscape Character upon the Immediate Environs of the Site

5.61. The landscape character to the north of the site would remain physically unchanged with the proposed scheme in place. Visibility of the proposal would be essentially restricted to glimpsed views from field gates along Longhedge Lane. The general physical character of the Longhedge Lane road would not change except that the hedge on the south side of the road which forms the red line would be maintained at 3 – 4m in height, whereas it is currently at a lower height.

5.62. Regarding the landscape character immediately to the south of the site, the southern boundary of the site extends to Thoroton Road which is orientated east-west. The physical characteristics of the landscape would not change and would remain and prevail south of the site. The visual context would not materially change. This visual context would be restricted to views from field gates along Thoroton Road and views from sections of footpath FP2 linking Thoroton Road to Thoroton Village. Views from this footpath would be very limited. Small elements of the solar farm would be seen set within the existing field framework and would be seen as a dark blue colour tone to the fields in terms of visual context.

5.63. The eastern boundary is defined by Shelton Road which is orientated north-south. The character of the landscape to the east of this road will not physically change with the proposed scheme in place. The land is low-lying and essentially flat and from both PRoWs and public highways there would be no opportunity to observe the proposal. Both the character of the landscape and the visual context to the landscape does not change east of the Shelton Road. The character of the road itself framed by hedgerows would not change with the proposal in place. The only change to landscape character would relate to Shelton Road with the hedgerow on the western side of the highway maintained at 3 – 4m in height.

5.64. The western boundary of the site is defined by Main Road which is orientated north-south and follows a broad ridge of local high ground at approximately 20m AOD. West of this road the land slightly falls in height. Beyond the road to the west, the character of the landscape and its visual context would not change. The only change to character would relate to the character of the road itself with the hedge on the eastern side of the road managed at 3 – 4m in height. This would be the only change to character to the landscape to the west of the site.

5.65. To the south-east of the site lies the small village of Thoroton. This village has a rural context, characterised and defined by the agricultural fields that lie adjacent to the settlement and its residential curtilages. The existing field pattern around the perimeter of the village would remain unchanged with the proposed scheme in place. This includes a field which lies to the north-west of the Thoroton Road and Shelton Road junction. The proposed solar farm would be set back from the village by this field which would continue to partly frame the northern part of the village. The closest point of the village to the proposed solar farm is the Thoroton Road and Shelton Road junction. From this highway location, the opportunity to observe the proposed solar farm would be very limited (see viewpoint 1) and once the perimeter hedgerow and proposed woodland planting is above 3m in height, around the perimeter of the site there would be a negligible effect upon views from this location. There is a public right of way FP2 which heads westward out of the village and again, the opportunity to observe the proposed solar farm from this route close to the village would be very limited. The landscape character that forms the immediate environs of the settlement would not change with the proposed scheme in place.

5.66. Hawksworth lies to the west of the site. The overall character of the farmed landscape surrounding this village would not change with the proposed solar farm in place. The adjacent fields to the east, south and west of the village would be unchanged in terms of their physical character, however, the field which abuts the northern edge of the settlement does form field 1 of the proposal. However, the southern part of this field is proposed to be retained in agricultural use and absent of solar arrays with this enlarged field subdivided with a new hedgerow re-introduced to reinstate an historic hedgerow in broadly the same location. With this new hedgerow, an historical field would be recreated forming part of the agricultural landscape framing the northern part of the village. The viewing context for this landscape immediately around the village would also not materially change with the proposed solar farm in place. apart from a fleeting view from a field gate on Main Road at the northern point of the village.

5.67. In summary, changes to the physical character of the landscape forming the immediate environs of the site would be very limited and confined to the site boundaries and adjacent highways in terms of hedgerow management.

Summary

5.68. In overall terms, I consider that there would be a minor adverse effect upon the landscape character of the site itself. No off-site works are required to enable this scheme to be implemented. Beyond the boundaries of the site, the physical character of the surrounding landscape would remain and prevail unchanged with the proposed solar farm in place, resulting in negligible effects beyond the site.

5.69. In terms of landscape character associated with the site, this is defined by the combination of various landscape elements principally topography and land cover, hedgerows, tree cover and the configuration of the fields themselves. The field pattern is sometimes referred to as

the "grain" of the landscape. With the exception of some small areas of development such as the substation and inverters which would require the loss of some agricultural land, all of these landscape elements would be retained and remain as part of the landscape whilst the scheme is in place. It is accepted that where the panels would be located the continued agricultural use could be in the form of grazing rather than arable use, although it is acknowledged that there would be some moderate adverse impact on openness.

5.70. The hedgerows would be reinforced with further hedgerow planting and the tree cover resource associated with the site would also be reinforced with additional tree planting. The hedgerows would be managed such that some of them would be maintained at a slightly higher level than is currently the case, 3-4m in height.

5.71. The trees over the project lifetime, both those existing and those introduced as part of the landscape proposals would all continue to grow developing larger canopies apart from those trees that are already fully mature. This growth over a 40-year period which is a significant period of time for both hedgerow and tree growth would result in reinforcing the defining positive characteristics of the site, with regard to these features. Furthermore, the increased vegetation growth would create a stronger sense of physical and visual containment associated with the site. This change would mitigate and reduce the visual effects that would come about over the project timescale.

5.72. Upon completion of the decommissioning phase, the built infrastructure would be removed both above and below ground across the site, except for the substation and access track. The management and growth of the hedgerows and trees across the site would continue to remain as part of the landscape post-decommissioning phase and would leave a positive legacy in terms of landscape character given that trees and hedgerows contribute to the landscape character locally.

5.73. Beyond the boundaries of the site, the landscape character of the area would remain materially unchanged. With the proposed scheme in place, the character of the fields within the site would change as they would now accommodate solar arrays, but the underlying character of the fields would still be there and would fully return with the decommissioning of the solar farm in the longer term. However, it is proposed that as an integral part of the scheme, new hedgerows and tree planting would be introduced, and meadows created with arable land converted to pasture as advocated in the Council's own landscape character documents. All of these elements could remain after decommissioning as a positive legacy of the scheme and bring about enhancement to the landscape character in the long term, realising objectives of the landscape character.

5.74. The proposed scheme involves solar arrays and some associated infrastructure located in several adjacent fields. Some of these are managed for arable use. However, depending on farm management and maintenance and crop rotation, these fields could revert to pasture for a fallow period without any recourse to planning and similarly, grazed as pasture, again without any recourse to planning, such is the minor consequence of such a change of use in farming circumstances. It is intended that whilst the solar arrays would be installed and operational, the fields would continue to function as fields and accommodate grazing stock, sheep, for the whole duration of the lifetime of the project. The site would therefore continue to have an agricultural use.

5.75. The existing landscape elements, vegetation, trees, and hedges would continue to remain and be reinforced. Therefore, the general agricultural character of the fields would remain accepting that they would also accommodate a solar farm, a renewable energy generating

installation and as such, would change the current existing character of those developed fields. Some parcels of land within the red line would remain materially unchanged in terms of their character as farmland and beyond the confines of the red line site boundary, again there would be no material change to the physical fabric of the landscape character of the area beyond the site. The site itself is to a substantial degree framed by a mosaic of hedgerows and woodland areas and the physical character of the fields, hedges and woodlands would not change with the proposed scheme in place, nor would the general character of the landscape beyond the site. The existing field pattern with its hedgerows and tree cover enables the site and the proposals to benefit from a high degree of physical and visual containment from the rest of the surrounding countryside. In my experience, having been involved with numerous solar farm sites, it is unusual to see such a high degree of physical and visual containment.

6. Effect on General Visual Amenity

6.1. Character and appearance are two different aspects. As discussed above, the physical character of the surrounding landscape would remain unaltered with the scheme in place.

6.2. In order to gain a better understanding of the extent and nature of the change brought about by the scheme on the appearance of the local landscape, I examine the effect of the proposed scheme on the general visual amenity of the landscape and the perception of those visual receptors (people) using the landscape.

6.3. My assessment relates to the representative LVA viewpoints (CD1.21.4-7, Appendix 1) and additional context viewpoints (Appendices 7 and 8).

6.4. Visual amenity is defined on page 158 in the Glossary of Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment – Third Edition (April 2013) as:

> ***"The overall pleasantness of the views people enjoy of their surroundings, which provides an attractive visual setting or backdrop for the enjoyment of activities of the people living, working, recreating, visiting or travelling through an area."***

6.5. The LVA analysis demonstrated that much of the landscape within the locality would be visually unaffected by the proposed scheme. In reality, the actual visual envelope from where the proposed scheme would be seen would be very limited and highly localised owing to the layering effect of vegetation, principally the extensive woodlands and hedges in the intervening landscape between the visual receptor (person) and the site boundary. Detailed analysis is set out in the LVA which I do not repeat in my proof. Notwithstanding this analysis, I have undertaken my own analysis which I rely upon rather than the LVA analysis. I have assessed each of the eight LVA viewpoints and set out my findings, see appendix 10 and for clarity my analysis also sets out the Neo Environmental findings.

6.6. The appreciation of views from the countryside is mainly gained from vantage points accessible to the public. The two main ways in which members of the public can gain an appreciation of views when in the countryside are primarily from public highways and by using the various public rights of way (PRoWs) that pass through the landscape.

6.7. Within the local area, the network of public highways is limited. It includes a number of unclassified roads (Appendix 6) that connect the various settlements in the landscape. The typical character of these minor roads tends to be narrow, with hedgerows, hedgerow trees and built form situated immediately beyond the metalled surface of the carriageway. Consequently, within the local landscape, the presence of such roadside vegetation and built form means that a road user using these highways often has only a restricted opportunity to gain views of the countryside. The view of the user is most often channelled along the lane itself in the direction of travel. The user's appreciation of the wider countryside is very much limited to the direction of travel and to a narrow landscape corridor associated with the highway in front of the vehicle. Thus, the opportunity to gain a panoramic appreciation of the landscape and of the proposed solar farm within the site would be very restricted.

6.8. I comment here to provide a further narrative to my visual analysis. There are a number of public highways and rights of way in the vicinity of the site which I proceed to address with regard to the cardinal points of the compass.

Views of the Solar Farm from the Countryside to the North

6.9. There is a network of public highways to the north of the site, the nearest of which is Longhedge Lane which forms a short part of the northern boundary of the site. This highway is broadly orientated north-west to south-east and as such, the primary views for road users are orientated in these directions. As a result, views towards the solar farm would be at 90 degrees to the general direction of travel. This road is flanked by roadside hedgerows and as such, the opportunity to observe the solar farm would be very limited.

Plate 15: View from Longhedge Lane

6.10. To the north-east of the site lies another unclassified lane known as Main Road which is orientated broadly north-east to south-west linking the village of Shelton to the north with Thoroton to the south. This stretch of road which lies to the north-east of the site is flanked by mature hedgerows and as such, the opportunity to observe the solar farm would be very limited. Only the southern section of this route would afford some limited views for road users.

6.11. Close to the north-western corner of the site lies a crossroads, north of which lies an unclassified country lane known as Newfield Lane which connects with Sibthorp village. This highway, again is flanked by mature hedgerows and is orientated broadly north-south. As a result of hedgerows in the intervening landscape, there would be little opportunity to observe the proposed solar farm.

6.12. Close to the northern boundary of the site lies a crossroads, from which a road heads in a north-westward direction to a small hamlet, Flintham and forms a continuation of Longhedge Lane which runs into Town End Lane and Main Street close to Flintham. Again, this route is flanked by mature hedgerows, a number of which are punctuated with hedgerow trees which further channel views along the orientation of this highway. As such, there would be little opportunity to observe the solar farm from this route.

6.13. There is a network of PRoWs which extend across the landscape to the north of the site. The nearest public footpath to the site lies approximately 1km in distance and is orientated broadly east-west linking Sibthorp village to the west with Shelton village to the east. From this route, there would be little opportunity to observe the proposed solar farm due to tree cover and hedgerows across the intervening landscape and this route would be visually unaffected by the proposals. Further north away from the site, there is a byway which is broadly orientated north-south linking the hamlet of Top Green to the south with an

unclassified lane to the north with this route extending over 1km in distance. This PRoW would be visually unaffected by the proposal due to a combination of distance and vegetation cover.

6.14. In the vicinity of Sibthorp, there are a few short lengths of PRoW to the north but again, these would be visually unaffected by the proposals.

6.15. There are a number of longer PRoWs to the north of Sibthorp over a kilometre to the north of the site, all of which would be visually unaffected by the proposals.

Views of the Solar Farm from the Countryside to the South

6.16. There are a number of highways to the south of the site, the closest of which forms much of the southern boundary of the site and is known as Thoroton Road. Thoroton Road is broadly orientated east-west linking Hawksworth village to the west with Thoroton village to the east. This road is framed by mature hedgerows which channel views for road users along the orientation of the highway and as such, views of the solar farm would be heavily restricted and limited to a few fleeting views from field gate entrance locations in the main as the hedges are generally continuous in length and mature.

6.17. At the western end of Thoroton Road, there is a junction with another highway, Scarrington Road which is broadly orientated north-south linking Hawksworth to the north with Scarrington to the south. Again, this highway is framed by mature hedgerows along its length such that views are channelled along the alignment of the road and given it is topographically at a lower level in the local landscape, users of this route would be visually unaffected by the scheme.

6.18. Close to the south-east corner of the site, an unclassified country lane known as Main Street runs southward to form the principal highway for Thoroton village. Users of this highway through the village would be visually unaffected by the scheme as would users of the highway further south which runs into Thoroton Road.

6.19. There are a number of highways cutting across the countryside further south of the site over 1km distance which link nearby villages of Scarrington, Orston and Aslockton. None of these routes would be visually affected by the proposal given topography, vegetation and built form in the intervening landscape.

6.20. There is a network of public rights of way to the south of the site and Thoroton Road. There are several bridleways which link Thoroton to the east with two roads to the west. These routes would be visually unaffected due to a combination of trees, hedges, distance and topography.

6.21. There is a public footpath which heads westward from Thoroton and Main Street in the village across several fields in a north-west direction to link with Thoroton Road. Whilst much of this route would be visually unaffected, there is a short length which would allow northward views such that some parts of the solar farm would be visible to a limited degree.

Plate 16: View from the footpath to the south

Views of the Solar Farm from the Countryside to the East

6.22. East of the site there are a number of highways, the main one being Longhedge Lane which extends in a south-eastward direction away from the site. This hedgerow is flanked by mature hedgerows with some hedgerow trees which tend to channel views for highway users along the alignment of the road. This fact, combined with the mature hedges both adjacent to the road and in the intervening landscape, would substantially limit views of the solar farm such that there would be a negligible effect upon the visual amenity of this route of this road. There is a further network of roads further to the east over 1km from the site where they link the villages of Orston and Flawborough, known as Mill Lane and Orston Lane. This route follows a broad ridge of local high ground. This route is flanked by mature hedgerows such that views are orientated broadly north-south whilst views towards the solar farm would be westward and as such, these routes would be visually affected to a negligible degree. Other highways further east would lie beyond zones of visibility.

6.23. Immediately to the east of the site is a bridleway that is orientated east-west linking Shelton Road to the west with Longhedge Lane to the east. Users of this route travelling eastward would be visually unaffected. For users travelling westward views would be facing towards the site. However, the site's eastern boundary is defined by a mature hedgerow such that with this hedge managed at 3-4m in height, there would be a negligible effect upon the visual amenity of this route.

6.24. There are a number of PRoWs further east of the site, particularly in association with the River Smite watercourse, though none of these routes would be visually affected due to a combination of distance, topography, vegetation and built form, particularly as the watercourse area is low-lying.

Plate 17: View from the bridleway from the east

Views of the Solar Farm from the Countryside to the West

6.25. West of the site there are a few highways. Longhedge Lane extends in a north-westward direction from the site and initially descends to a low level as it crosses a local watercourse and given roadside hedges, would be visually unaffected. A further highway west of the site links Hawksworth to the east with Screveton with Hawksworth Road and Screveton Road. This route is framed by mature hedgerows and would be visually unaffected primarily due to the rising ground in the intervening landscape.

6.26. There are few public rights of way to the west of the site with a single route linking Hawksworth with Flintham village to the northwest. This route cuts across a series of fields passing under two overhead lines and pylons. Again, this route would be visually unaffected by the scheme.

6.27. There is a short public footpath extending from Hawksworth which passes southward to connect with Thoroton Road. This footpath would also be visually unaffected by the proposal due to a broad ridge of local high ground in the intervening landscape.

PRoWs Across the Site

6.28. There are two PRoWs (referenced BW1 and BW6) which pass across the site itself which is a bridleway, broadly orientated east-west linking Main Road to the west with Shelton Road to the east. The eastern half of the route passes across two arable fields which makes it difficult for pedestrians to cross in wet ground conditions. These arable sections with the proposal in place, would be managed as green lanes with a permanent grass sward making the route easier for pedestrians to use in amenity terms year round and reflect the similar green lane which forms the western half of the route. The patchwork of woodlands close to this route together with the hedgerow network across the site mean that only small areas of the solar farm would be visible along this route from any one location and new hedgerows would visually screen the proposal to a substantial degree having reached maturity and managed

at 3 – 4m in height. Users of this route would have a high susceptibility, value and sensitivity combined with a medium magnitude of change would have a major adverse degree of effect in terms of visual amenity, though these effects would substantially reduce to a negligible level with the maturation of mitigation planting (Year 10), see Landscape Masterplan, appendix 10.

Hawksworth Village

6.29. Hawksworth lies to the west of the site. From the vast majority of this village and the public right of ways FP2 and FP3 on the southern side of this settlement would be visually unaffected by the southern part of the proposed solar farm to the east, see viewpoint 3. This is because the ground rises to a local broad ridge to the east with the solar farm located further east of this ridge. Views eastward effectively terminate on an existing hedgerow which forms a local skyline beyond which the solar arrays would be located. At the most northern point of the village, a field gate would allow road users to have a fleeting view of the solar array set back in field 1 whilst a new hedgerow establishes and matures. Once this hedgerow has reached 3 – 4m in height, road users would be visually unaffected at this point on the highway, see viewpoint 4. This is the only location where members of the public could gain a temporary view of the solar farm.

Thoroton Village

6.30. Thoroton lies to the south-east of the site and from public locations associated with the village would be visually unaffected apart from a fleeting view from viewpoint 1 which would be rendered negligible within a couple of years.

Summary of Visual Effects

6.31. It is evident from both the LVA and my visual analysis that the proposed solar farm would be visually well-contained due to the low visual profile of the scheme with the panels at a maximum height of 2.8m. The proposal would be set within existing fields and within a wider field pattern and woodland landscape where field boundaries are demarcated by mature hedges and substantial woodland areas. Where there are gaps in the existing hedges, these would be gapped up, i.e. filled with new planting and the hedges maintained at 3-4m in height, which would substantially limit the opportunity to observe the scheme and would reduce the degree of effect to a low level through such measures.

6.32. From my analysis, I conclude that visibility would be restricted by a combination of woodland cover and landform, distance from the site and the enclosure provided by intervening vegetation surrounding the site, principally woodland areas. Due to the relatively low profile of the panels, they would not be perceptible in most distant views from most publicly available viewpoints and the layering effects of intervening vegetation would successfully integrate them into the landscape.

6.33. Having reviewed this information and assessed the scheme I consider that the geographical extent of visibility associated with the proposal would be very limited and highly localised in close proximity to the site boundaries. Where visible, only small elements of the scheme would be apparent with no opportunity to experience the full extent of the proposal from any one location. The site itself is to a substantial degree framed by a mosaic of woodland areas and hedges. The physical character of these woodlands would not change with the proposed scheme in place, nor would the general character of the countryside beyond the boundaries

of the site and these woodlands. This existing topography, hedges, and woodland enable the site and the proposals to benefit from a high degree of physical and visual containment from the rest of the surrounding countryside. In my experience, having been involved with numerous solar farm sites, it is unusual to see such a high degree of containment due to the grain of the surrounding landscape.

7. Effect on Residential Visual Amenity

7.1. It is right to make a distinction between residential and general visual amenity. The latter term from a planning policy perspective usually relates to the public realm and the wider landscape whilst the former is concerned with the private visual amenity of an individual residential property.

7.2. The separation between what is a private interest and what should be considered in the public interest is clear. Private views have no status in terms of being part of statutory documentation, planning policy or guidance. Furthermore, it is noted that no individual has the right to a particular view but there does come a point where, by virtue of the proximity, size and scale of a given development, a residential property or properties would be rendered so unattractive as a place in which to live that planning permission should justifiably be refused. The test relates to the position which would pertain with the proposed schemes in situ, irrespective of the position beforehand. In other words, the test is not whether, in relative terms, a property would become a substantially less attractive place to live, the test is whether viewed objectively and in the public interest, a property would become an unattractive place in which to live. Such a situation if left unchecked would lead clearly to undesirable consequences. It is useful to pose the question:

> ***"Would the proposal affect the outlook of these residences to such an extent, i.e., be so unpleasant, overwhelming and oppressive that this would become an unattractive place to live?"***

7.3. The test of what would be unacceptably unattractive should be an objective test, albeit that professional judgment is required in its application to the circumstances of each particular case. There needs to be a degree of harm over and above an identified substantial adverse effect on a private interest to take a case into the category of refusal in the public interest. Change in the outlook from a property is not sufficient; indeed, even a fundamental change in outlook is not necessarily unacceptable.

7.4. It is worthy of note that the visual component of residential amenity should be addressed "in the round" taking into account factors such as distance, the direction of the view, the size of the solar farm and its layout, the layout of particular dwellings in terms of their floor plans, their garden environment, and the lines of sight towards the scheme.

7.5. I have visited the site and noted that there are some residential properties relatively close to the proposed solar farm.

7.6. Given the position of the solar panels and the distances between these and the existing residential properties and mindful that there is existing well-established vegetation including individual trees, tree belts and hedgerows along the boundary between the properties and the solar farm, and mindful of the proposed additional planting, any effect on the outlook for the elevations of these properties and their garden spaces would not breach the public interest test here.

7.7. Opportunities for residents within Hawksworth to gain views of the proposals are further reduced with the removal of panels in the field closest to the village in Scheme B.

Officer's Report (OR)

7.8. The OR (CD2.1) specifically addresses the amenity of nearby properties on pages 13 and 14.

7.9. Page 13 addresses Policy 10 'Design and Enhancing Local Identity' of the LPP1 states that development will be assessed in terms of its impact on the amenity of nearby residents.

7.10. Policy 1 (Development Requirements) of the LPP2 states that permission for new development will be granted where:

> ***"There is no significant adverse effect upon the amenity, particularly residential amenity and adjoining properties or the surrounding area, by reason of the type and levels of activity on the site, or traffic generated."***

7.11. Policy 34 is also referred to on page 13 which is concerned with green infrastructure and open space assets.

7.12. The OR notes that the primary construction phase is estimated to extend over a 16-24 week period. It concludes that the proposed development is acceptable in terms of its impact upon residential amenity and accords with relevant planning policy. I note that this is consistent with the Reason for Refusal which does not cite Policy 10, Policy 1 and Policy 34 with regard to amenity of nearby properties.

7.13. The OR notes that the glint and glare assessment submitted concludes that there would be no significant impact on residential properties following the establishment of mitigation measures through planting. The final paragraph on page 13 of the OR is concerned with the impact of noise and disturbance on adjacent residential properties.

7.14. The OR notes that during construction, a Construction Method Statement has to be provided to protect amenity and as such, it is considered the proposals would comply with the NPPF and Local Plan with regard to residential amenity.

7.15. Given this situation, the proposal would not render any properties unattractive places in which to live mindful of the public interest 'Lavender' test.

7.16. In terms of the anticipated visual impact on occupiers of residential properties in the immediate surrounding area, which include properties on the edge of Hawksworth, Thoroton and Shelton Lodge Farm, it is possible that from some upper floor rooms partial views of the proposals could be possible, but from lower floors, it is likely that once intervening mitigation planting matures, views of the proposals would be restricted within their curtilages.

7.17. Overall the number of potential residential properties effected by the proposals would be very limited.

8. Cumulative Effects

8.1. The Reason for Refusal mentions cumulative effects. However, the only reference to cumulative effects within the OR is in the summary of consultee responses where the Planning Policy Officer for Rushcliffe Borough Council is noted as providing comments which are understood to have included cumulative impacts. There is no other mention of cumulative effects with other schemes within the OR.

8.2. The application LVA (CD1.21) in paragraph 6.88 states that no development requiring cumulative assessment were identified. A review of the Renewable Energy Planning Database and online mapping has confirmed that there are no renewable energy proposals which warrant consideration for cumulative assessment, acknowledging that those which are operational are considered as part of the landscape and visual baseline. Operational solar farms; Lodge Farm and Elton Solar Farm are located approximately. 2.2km to the east south-east and 3.1km to the south south-east respectively. The Grange Solar Farm is located approximately 4.8km to the north of the site near the settlement of Cotham. There would be no simultaneous cumulative visual effects associated with the proposal.

8.3. As a result, I consider that there would be no cumulative landscape and visual effects arising as a result of the proposals.

9. Summary and Conclusions

Introduction

9.1. I am instructed on behalf of Renewable Energy Systems (RES) Limited to present evidence relating to landscape and visual issues in respect of the scheme for which planning permission is sought for the construction of a solar farm together with all associated works, equipment and necessary infrastructure. This statement should be read in conjunction with the planning proof of evidence prepared by Nigel Cussen (CD7.10). The proposed scheme was a full application submitted to Rushcliffe Borough Council reference 22/02241/FUL. Having visited the site and surrounding area and having reviewed all the relevant documentation pertaining to this scheme, I have drawn the following conclusions which are set out in the proceeding paragraphs. The structure of this section of my proof reflects the key points which are articulated in the Inspector's CMC and decision notice dated 30 March 2023 (CD2.2). It also responds to the Statement of Case prepared by the Council and Rule 6 Party.

Scale, Location, Layout and Appearance

9.2. With regard to scale, the proposal seeks to deliver a solar farm to contribute towards the renewable energy targets in light of the climate emergency. The quantum of development that is anticipated would extend over several fields, however, there would be no opportunity to appreciate the entire scale of this scheme from any one location given the existing lowland vale topography together with mature tree cover, extensive woodlands, tree belts, and hedges in the intervening landscape would mean that there would be very limited opportunity to appreciate the scale of the scheme.

Effect on Landscape Elements

9.3. The proposed solar farm would have a negligible adverse effect on topography. In terms of trees with the additional planting, there would be a moderate beneficial effect and with regard to hedges moderate beneficial effect. There would be a moderate (adverse) effect with regard to land cover with the introduction of the solar farm superimposed over grazed pasture. However, I consider that there would be some beneficial effects with regard to landscape elements that would form the green infrastructure of the site as part of the solar farm.

Effect on Land Cover

9.4. Land cover is a specific term which refers to the way in which the land is managed. The site is currently managed for arable use. Alternating between pasture and arable is not a matter subject to planning. The scheme would require the host fields to be managed as pasture for the duration of a project but would be grazed and would benefit the fields from a soil/agronomy perspective.

9.5. Furthermore, the introduction of meadows would bring about material ecological enhancements. The local published Landscape Character Assessment advocates the management of pasture which is precisely what this scheme would seek to achieve. It is accepted that solar panels would be suspended above the grass swards. The introduction of the solar farm would have a moderate (adverse) degree of effect with regard to land cover

associated with the site, given the arable land is converted to pasture with panels. This also acknowledges that the openness of the field parcels within the site would also be inevitably reduced with the solar farm in place, but the character of the landscape beyond the immediate boundaries of the site would remain unchanged with the scheme in place and that would apply to the vast majority of the Landscape Character Area. Only a fraction of the local character area would physically change in terms of its defining character. This is an inevitable consequence of delivering renewable energy infrastructure.

Effect on the Visual Amenity of the Area

9.6. With regard to visual amenity, of particular note from my perspective is that this is an extensive solar scheme across a number of fields yet given the level and gently undulating nature of the lowland vale topography, combined with the field and hedgerow network and scattered woodlands, the actual visual envelope and the degree to which this scheme would be seen from the surrounding area would be very limited.

9.7. There are a few public rights of way in the locality and some paths in the immediate vicinity and as such, there would be some opportunity to observe the scheme. Energy infrastructure is an integral part of the local landscape, with large-scale pylons located on the site frequently punctuating the skyline in views observed on the site and the locality. The scheme's effect upon the visual amenity of the area would be limited in degree and very localised in extent.

9.8. The visual effects would be very limited given the scale of the proposal. Policies require careful integration through existing landscape features and new planting to mitigate adverse effects to acceptable levels. No policy in the Development Plan specifies absolutely no visibility whatsoever. I consider that setting such a high bar would be impossible to achieve.

9.9. In overall terms, the visual effects of the proposed solar farm would be very limited due to its substantial visual containment as a result of a combination of topography and surrounding hedges and woodlands. Where seen only small elements of the scheme would be observed and it would not be possible to appreciate the totality of the scheme from any one viewpoint location.

Effect on Landscape Character

9.10. In terms of landscape character associated with the site, this is defined by the combination of various landscape elements principally topography, land cover, hedgerows, tree cover and the configuration of the fields themselves, the field pattern is sometimes referred to as the "grain" of the landscape. With the exception of some small areas of development (such as the substation and inverters which would require some small loss of agricultural land), these landscape elements would be retained and remain as part of the landscape whilst the scheme is in place. Hedge removal would be minimal. It is accepted that where the panels would be located the continued agricultural use would be in the form of grazing rather than arable use.

9.11. The hedgerows would be reinforced with further hedgerow planting and the tree cover resource associated with the site would also be reinforced with some additional tree planting. Some of the hedgerows would be managed such that they would be maintained at a slightly higher level than is currently the case, 3-4m in height.

9.12. The trees over the project lifetime, both those existing and those introduced as part of the landscape proposals would all continue to grow developing larger canopies apart from those trees that are already fully mature. This growth over a 40-year period which is a significant period of time for both hedgerow and tree growth would result in reinforcing the defining positive characteristics of the site, with regard to these features. Furthermore, the increased vegetation growth would create a stronger sense of physical and visual containment associated with the site. This change would reduce visual effects that would come about over the project timescale.

9.13. Upon completion of the decommissioning phase, built infrastructure would be removed both above and below ground across the entirety of the site except for the substation and access track. The management and growth of the hedgerows and trees across the site could continue to remain as part of the landscape post-decommissioning phase and would leave a positive legacy in terms of landscape character given that trees and hedgerows contribute to the landscape character locally.

9.14. Beyond the boundaries of the site, the landscape character of the area would remain unchanged. With the proposed scheme in place, the character of the fields within the site would change as they would now accommodate solar arrays, but the underlying character of the fields would still be there and would fully return with the decommissioning of the solar farm in the longer term. However, it is proposed that as an integral part of the scheme, new hedgerows and tree planting would be introduced, and wildflower meadows created with arable land converted to pasture as advocated in the landscape character documents. All of these elements could remain after decommissioning as a positive legacy of the scheme and bring about enhancement to the landscape character in the long term.

9.15. The proposed scheme involves solar arrays and some associated infrastructure located in several fields which are managed for arable use. However, depending on farm management and maintenance and crop rotation, these fields could revert to pasture for a fallow period without any recourse to planning and similarly, grazed as pasture, again without any recourse to planning, such is the minor consequence of such a change of use in farming circumstances terms. It is intended that whilst the solar arrays would be installed and operational, the fields would continue to function as fields and accommodate grazing stock, and sheep for farming for the duration of the lifetime of the project. The site would continue to have an agricultural use.

9.16. Most of the existing landscape elements, vegetation, trees, and hedges could continue to remain and be reinforced post-decommissioning stage. Therefore, the character of the fields would remain accepting that they would also accommodate a solar farm, a renewable energy generating installation and as such, would change the current existing character of those particular fields. Beyond the confines of the red line site boundary, there would be no change to the physical fabric of the landscape character of the area.

9.17. In overall terms, I consider that there would be a minor (adverse) effect upon the landscape character of the site itself up to its boundaries. No off-site works are required to enable this scheme to be implemented other than the cable connection. Beyond the site, the physical character of the surrounding landscape would remain and prevail unchanged with the proposed solar farm in place.

Cumulative Effects

9.18. Whilst referred to within the Reason for Refusal, the only reference to cumulative effects within the OR is in the summary of consultee responses where the Planning Policy Officer for Rushcliffe Borough Council is noted as providing comments which are understood to have included cumulative impacts. There is no other mention of cumulative schemes within the OR (CD2.1).

9.19. The application LVA in paragraph 6.88 states that no developments requiring cumulative assessment were identified in this instance. A review of the Renewable Energy Planning Database and online mapping has confirmed that there are no renewable energy proposals which warrant consideration for cumulative assessment, acknowledging that those which are operational are considered as part of the landscape and visual baseline. Operational solar farms; Lodge Farm and Elton Solar Farm are located approximately. 2.2km to the east south-east and 3.1km to the south south-east respectively. The Grange Solar Farm is located approximately 4.8km to the north of the site near the settlement of Cotham.

9.20. As a result, I consider that that there would be no cumulative landscape and visual effects arising as part of the proposals.

Conclusions

9.21. For the reasons stated above in this section of my proof, it is my professional opinion that on landscape and visual grounds, there are no substantive reasons for refusing planning permission for the proposed solar farm located on land east of Hawksworth and north-west of Thoroton, Shelton Road, Thoroton.

Appendices

Town & Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended)
Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004

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