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

Note on the Rushcliffe Solar Farm Landscape Sensitivity and Capacity Study

Appeal by Mrs Claire Chamberlain

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1 Introduction

1.1 This note responds to a request from Inspector Woolcock on 14th June 2024 which states, "If RBC's emerging solar farm capacity study is published prior to 1 August the parties will submit a written statement setting out any considerations relevant to this appeal".

1.2 The Rushcliffe Solar Farm Landscape Sensitivity and Capacity Study was published on 4th July 2024 and this note considers the relevance of the report in relation to the ongoing appeal regarding Land East of Hawksworth and Northwest of Thoroton, Shelton Road, Thoroton, Nottinghamshire.

2 Aims and Objectives of the Study

2.1 The Solar Farm Landscape Sensitivity and Capacity Study was commissioned by Rushcliffe Borough Council and compiled by Arup. The report operates at a strategic scale and aims to provide an overview of landscape sensitivity to inform an understanding of potential capacity for solar development within the Borough. It is noted in Section 1.1 that the findings of the study "do not determine whether planning applications are appropriate but rather provide an indicator of suitability based on likely effects to the landscape by area". This caveat goes further to state that determination of individual applications should be based on "an individual assessment of likely impacts to landscape and visual amenity as submitted by the prospective developer as part of their planning submission and the appropriateness of mitigation and enhancement measures".

2.2 Section 1.3 of the study outlines the limitations of its findings. The text includes a focus on potential cumulative effects, further emphasising the strategic nature of the study. It states, "As a general rule of thumb, LAUs where the study indicates a high capacity for a particular typology are less likely to be affected by cumulative impacts, though this still needs to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. Siting, intervisibility, receptor types and sequential views can all contribute to the perceived sense of development in an area and are all site specific". Therefore, it is my opinion that the report is useful in offering an overview of indicative capacity for solar development

across the scale of the Borough, but site-specific assessment is required to fully understand the suitability of individual applications.

3 Landscape Assessment Units

3.1 The findings of the study are organised into areas within the Borough, referred to as Landscape Assessment Units (LAU). Each LAU is broadly taken from the 2009 Greater Nottingham Landscape Character Assessment Draft Policy Zones (DPZ), with the appeal site falling within DPZ SN06: Aslockton Village Farmlands. The Capacity study uses the same boundary and refers to the area as LAU K: Aslockton Village Farmland. It is the largest LAU included within the report.

3.2 Descriptive text for LAU K reinforces some characteristics identified within the Greater Nottingham Character Assessment, including the following extracts:

- The landscape is largely rural, comprising predominantly arable agricultural land.
- The scale of fields ranges from small scale adjacent villages to large-scale modern agricultural fields in open countryside.
- Field boundaries are formed by hedgerows and are often fragmented in larger agricultural fields and intact around small-scale pasture.
- Woodland is confined to small irregular blocks scattered throughout and higher concentrations adjacent rural villages.
- Expansive views are available across the landscape, particularly to the south of the LAU and pylons are a constant feature due to the topography.

3.3 The study identifies the key characteristics for LAU K to be:

- Dispersed settlement.
- Modern agricultural landscape.
- Commuter town of Bingham.
- Small woodland blocks scattered throughout.

3.4 Whilst this is useful baseline information on the character area surrounding the site, it does not introduce any finer grained landscape characterisation than previously available to the Inquiry.

4 Baseline Assessment of Landscape Value and Susceptibility

4.1 Landscape value across LAU K is assessed using Landscape Institute TGN 02-21: Assessing Landscape Value Outside National Designations (C.D 3.26), this is the latest guidance available. Value descriptions include the following points of relevance to the appeal site and surroundings:

- Natural heritage - The landscape has a number of watercourses, though they are difficult to discern within the landscape due to the topography.
- Cultural heritage - The area includes a number of historic rural villages. Church towers and spires form prominent features within the landscape due to the landform. Agricultural land is predominantly modern in scale and pattern, though smaller scale pasture and historic field pattern is present adjacent to villages.
- Landscape condition - The landscape is in moderate condition with evidence of fragmented hedgerows around large-scale arable land use.
- Distinctiveness - The LAU is typical of a rural agricultural landscape.
- Recreational - The LAU is relatively well connected by public right of way routes connecting smaller rural villages.
- Perceptual (scenic) - The LAU affords long distance views across the landscape, though pylons are a frequent feature of views due to the topography. Smaller scale, scenic views are often available at the fringes of villages.
- Perceptual (wildness and tranquillity) - The LAU has a moderate sense of tranquillity due to the small scale of rural villages and expanse of agricultural land in between. Presence of urban features such as pylons and the modern scale of agriculture reduce the perception of wildness.

4.2 Many of these elements are identified within my original proof of evidence. The capacity study goes on to provide a summative 'medium' value assessment for LAU K. This is in line with my assessment of medium value for the site itself, as well as DPZ SN06. However, the scale of the study does not allow for finer grained assessment of value fluctuations within each LAU. The report, therefore, does not reflect the medium to high landscape value that I identified for the Hawksworth and Thoroton settlement edges.

4.3 In terms of landscape susceptibility, the capacity study highlights one characteristic to be particularly susceptible to solar farm development, the "rural and tranquil character" of the area. As detailed in much of the evidence before the Inquiry, this is a prominent characteristic across the appeal site and within the surrounding area.

4.4 The study assesses landscape susceptibility to be 'medium', this is lower than the high susceptibility I assessed each landscape receptor to have in my evidence. Looking through the detailed methodology in Appendix A, Table 4, it is my opinion that the appeal site and surroundings display many more of the indicators of higher susceptibility than lower susceptibility. It is the scale of the study that prevents it from recognising these attributes on a site-specific level.

5 Baseline Assessment of Landscape Sensitivity

5.1 Combining 'medium' value and 'medium' susceptibility, the capacity study provides a summative assessment of 'medium' sensitivity for LAU K. This is a blanket assessment that the authors believe to be most appropriate for the whole LAU. My evidence also assesses medium sensitivity for the site itself and wider SN06. However, I assess the separate settlement edges of Hawksworth and Thoroton to hold a medium to high sensitivity to the proposed change. This is based on finer grained assessment of the specific sensitivities within the area surrounding the appeal site, as well as a specific consideration of the proposed solar farm.

6 Assessment of Capacity for Solar Farm Development

6.1 Table 26 on Page 42 summarises the study's conclusions on landscape capacity for solar development within LAU K. It assesses the LAU to have 'high' capacity to accommodate all scale of potential solar development. Once again, it is important to stress the strategic scale of this assessment and the report draws this conclusion, without identifying specific potential locations. Considering the site-specific elements of landscape value, susceptibility, and sensitivity, which have been outlined in detail in my original evidence, it is my opinion that the appeal site and surroundings display a low capacity for solar development across each scale. I would, however, agree with the text accompanying the capacity conclusion which states, "Careful consideration of settlements connection to the rural landscape should be given to minimise potential impacts". As outlined in my proof, the site performs and important role in the rural setting of both settlements

6.2 The descriptor for 'high' capacity within Table 6 in the detailed methodology included within Appendix A states, "Combined judgments on the overall sensitivity of the LAU, the amount of existing solar development, and the overall scale of the LAU indicate that it could have potential to accommodate multiple solar farm developments within the defined parameters". This reinforces the strategic nature of the conclusion and the importance of carrying out a finer grained assessment for each individual site.

6.3 The text for LAU K identifies two key design principles that "are considered key to aiding the integration of any future solar development proposals within the LAU". These are principles 6 (villages in the rural landscape) and 7 (field pattern restoration), which are outlined earlier in the report on Page 17. Whilst I agree that these are key design principles when considering potential development within the vicinity of the appeal site, I would also add principles 2 (long distance views), 3 (historic setting), 4 (landmarks), and to some extent 5 (exposed slopes), as relevant to the scheme. Whereas principles 6 and 7 may be relevant across the whole of the LAU, it is only by appreciating the site-specific factors that the additional principles can be identified.

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