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Rushcliffe Borough Council

BY EMAIL ONLY

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Dear Craig Miles

Planning consultation: Installation of solar farm with ancillary infrastructure, including landscaping and biodiversity enhancements

Location: Land East Of Hawksworth And Northwest Of Thoroton, Shelton Road, Thoroton, Nottinghamshire

Thank you for your consultation on the above dated 14 December 2022 which was received by Natural England on 14 December 2022.

Natural England is a non-departmental public body. Our statutory purpose is to ensure that the natural environment is conserved, enhanced, and managed for the benefit of present and future generations, thereby contributing to sustainable development.

SUMMARY OF NATURAL ENGLAND'S ADVICE

NO OBJECTION

Based on the plans submitted, Natural England considers that the proposed development will not have significant adverse impacts on designated sites and has no objection.

Natural England's further advice on designated sites/landscapes and advice on other natural environment issues is set out below.

Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land

Under the Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015 (DMPO) Natural England is a statutory consultee on development that would lead to the loss of over 20ha of 'best and most versatile' (BMV) agricultural land (land graded as 1, 2 and 3a in the Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) system, where this is not in accordance with an approved plan.

From the description of the development this application is likely to affect 35.4ha of BMV agricultural land. We consider that the proposed development, if temporary as described, is unlikely to lead to significant permanent loss of BMV agricultural land, as a resource for future generations. This is because the solar panels would be secured to the ground by steel piles with limited soil disturbance and could be removed in the future with no permanent loss of agricultural land quality likely to occur, provided the appropriate soil management is employed and the development is undertaken to high

standards. Although some components of the development, such as construction of a sub-station, may permanently affect agricultural land this would be limited to small areas. The ALC survey does not detail the area of BMV land that will be permanently lost; we recommend your authority make consideration of these areas of permanently lost land.

However, during the life of the proposed development it is likely that there will be a reduction in agricultural production over the whole development area. Your authority should therefore consider whether this is an effective use of land in line with planning practice guidance which encourages the siting of large scale solar farms on previously developed and non-agricultural land. Paragraph 174b and footnote 53 of the [National Planning Policy Framework](#) (NPPF) states that:

- *‘Planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by:*

recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, and the wider benefits from natural capital and ecosystem services – including the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land, and of trees and woodland.’

Footnote 53: Where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, areas of poorer quality land should be preferred to those of a higher quality. We would also draw to your attention to [Planning Practice Guidance for Renewable and Low Carbon Energy \(March 2015\)](#) (in particular paragraph 013), and advise you to fully consider best and most versatile land issues in accordance with that guidance.

Local planning authorities are responsible for ensuring that they have sufficient information to apply the requirements of the NPPF. The weighting attached to a particular consideration is a matter of judgement for the local authority as decision maker. This is the case regardless of whether the proposed development is sufficiently large to consult Natural England.

Should you have any questions about ALC or the reliability of information submitted with regard to BMV land please refer to Natural England’s [‘Guide to assessing Development proposals on Agricultural Land’](#). This document describes the ALC system including the definition of BMV land, existing ALC data sources and their relevance for site level assessment of land quality and the appropriate methodology for when detailed surveys are required.

Soil is a finite resource which plays an essential role within sustainable ecosystems, performing an array of functions supporting a range of ecosystem services, including storage of carbon, the infiltration and transport of water, nutrient cycling, and provision of food. It is recognised that a proportion of the agricultural land will experience temporary land loss. In order to both retain the long term potential of this land and to safeguard all soil resources as part of the overall sustainability of the whole development, it is important that the soil is able to retain as many of its many important functions and services (ecosystem services) as possible through careful soil management and appropriate soil use, with consideration on how any adverse impacts on soils can be avoided or minimised.

Consequently, Natural England would advise that any grant of planning permission should be made subject to conditions to safeguard soil resources and agricultural land, including a required commitment for the preparation of reinstatement, restoration and aftercare plans; normally this will include the return to the former land quality (ALC grade).

General guidance for protecting soils during development is also available in Defra’s [Construction Code of Practice for the Sustainable Use of Soils on Construction Sites](#), and should the

development proceed, we recommend that relevant parts of this guidance are followed, e.g. in relation to handling or trafficking on soils in wet weather.

The British Society of Soil Science has published the [Guidance Note](#) Benefitting from Soil Management in Development and Construction which sets out measures for the protection of soils within the planning system and the development of individual sites, which we also recommend is followed.

Other advice

Biodiversity Enhancements

Natural England welcome the biodiversity enhancement proposals included within the plans and note the Net Gain Assessment which illustrates the development would give rise to a 187.13% gain in area habitat units and a 24.68% gain in hedgerow units. Nonetheless, we have set out below our advice regarding some potential further environmental enhancements:

- We note the presence of multiple woodland blocks within and bordering the development site. There is significant opportunity through this development to enhance the connectivity of these isolated woodland blocks. Woodland planting could be utilised to create wider corridors of connectivity between the woodlands; these woodland areas could be included within the biodiversity net gain calculation to illustrate further biodiversity gains on the site.
- We note the species rich hedgerow planting along the Public Right of Way (PRoW) running through the northern portion of the site, this PRoW provides a good ecological corridor through the site and it's retention and enhancement will contribute positively towards the national Nature Recovery Network.
- Further ecological enhancement could be achieved along the site boundaries, particularly the eastern and northern boundaries. Enhancements of these areas could again benefit the ecological connectivity in/around the site.

Further general advice on the consideration of protected species and other natural environment issues is provided at Annex A.

Should the proposal change, please consult us again.

If you have any queries relating to the advice in this letter please contact me on 07767556842.

Yours sincerely

Robbie Clarey
Lead Adviser – East Midlands Area Delivery