



Northumberland

County Council

SCREENING OPINION

Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017

Ref: 22/03672/SCREEN

1. Site

1.1 Land to the southwest of Whittonstall, Consett, Northumberland

2. Description

2.1 EIA screening request for proposed ground-mounted solar farm with associated ancillary equipment and Battery Energy Storage System (BESS).

3. Proposal

3.1 The proposed development comprises the construction of a ground-mounted solar farm including all associated ancillary equipment. The panels will have the capacity to generate up to 49.9MW of electricity.

The proposed development will likely include the following:

- Photovoltaic (PV) panels mounted on a frame to form an array, which is then driven into the ground to about 1m 2m metres depending on ground conditions to avoid the need for substantive foundations. The individual arrays will be no higher than 3m above ground;
- Ancillary equipment including a substation, invertors, and transformers;
- A secondary site to the north consisting of the BESS;
- Stock proof fencing will surround the panels; and
- Creation or improvement of a site access for construction and operation purposes.

3.2 The solar panels will generate energy via a renewable source and provide electricity for the sale to the grid.

3.3 Ground mounted solar panels have a minimal long-term impact on the land, and the site is capable of reverting to an agricultural use when the solar farm reaches the end of its operational lifespan.

3.4 Biodiversity enhancements are also proposed to be included in the scheme to achieve 10% biodiversity net gain.

4. Screening

4.1 Having regard to The Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (2017), the proposed development is considered as a Schedule 2 development under Category 3(a) (energy industry), which sets a threshold of over 0.5ha in size. As the site area is over 0.5 ha in size it therefore meets the threshold for EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment) Screening.

4.2 In determining whether the development is likely to give rise to significant effects, consideration should be given to the characteristics of development, location of development, and characteristics of the potential impact (as set out within Schedule 3 of the EIA Regulations).

5. EIA Regulations

5.1 Schedule 3 (1) of the EIA Regulations states that the characteristics of development must be considered having regard to the size and design of the development, its cumulative impact, use of natural resources, production of waste, pollution and nuisance, risk of major accidents and/or disasters, and the risks to human health.

5.2 Schedule 3 (2) of the Regulations states that the environmental sensitivity of geographical areas must be considered having regard to the existing and approved land use, natural resources within the area and the absorption capacity of the natural environment paying particular attention to various defined areas including national and European designated areas, landscapes, and sites of historical, cultural, or archaeological importance.

5.3 Schedule 3 (3) of the Regulations states the likely significant effects of the development on the environment must be considered in relation to the criteria set out in paragraphs 1 and 2 about the impact of the development on the factors specified in regulation 4 (2), considering:

- the magnitude and spatial extent of the impact (e.g., geographical area and size of the population likely to be affected);
- the nature of the impact;
- the transboundary nature of the impact;
- the intensity and complexity of the impact;
- the probability of the impact.
- the expected onset, duration, frequency, and reversibility of the impact.
- the cumulative impact with other developments; and
- the possibility of effectively reducing the impact.

5.4 The factors specified in Regulation 4 (2) are population and human health; biodiversity with reference to protected species and habitats; land, soil, water, air, and climate; material assets, cultural heritage, and the landscape; and the interaction between these factors.

5.5 An assessment of the proposal has been undertaken with reference to Schedule 3 of the EIA Regulations to identify if the development would be likely to have significant effects on the environment and hence whether an Environmental Impact Assessment is required.

5.6 Planning Practice Guidance advises that ‘only a very small proportion of Schedule 2 development will require an Environmental Impact Assessment’. The “Planning Practice Guidance Annex: Indicative screening thresholds” sets out thresholds and criteria for the identification of Schedule 2 development requiring Environmental Impact Assessment and indicative values for determining significant effects.

5.7 In respect of energy industry proposals falling under category 3(a) the indicative criteria and threshold is ‘*thermal output of more than 50 MW. Small stations using novel forms of generation should be considered carefully.*’ Key issues to consider are:

- Level of emissions to air,
- Arrangements for the transport of fuel and any
- Visual impact

5.8 Schedule 5 (4) (b) of the Regulations requires the Local Planning Authority to consider the results of any relevant environmental assessment that is available. Northumberland County Council has carried out a Sustainability Appraisal (SA) of the Northumberland Local Plan. The SA incorporates the Strategic Environmental Assessment process and the results of the SA have been considered in preparing this Screening Opinion.

6. Characteristics

6.1 In accordance with Schedule 3 (1) of the Regulations the characteristics of the proposal are considered as follows.

Size and surrounds

6.2 The site is to the southwest of Whittonstall surrounding Highfield Farm. The BESS is to the north of Whittonstall. The main site extends across a series of fields used for arable farming. The site is outside any defined settlement boundary and is open countryside for development management purposes. The total land take of the main site extends to 192 hectares (440 acres).

6.3 The main site is made up of a series of mostly rectilinear agricultural fields in arable use, separated by a series of maturing coniferous linear woodland blocks which provide an excellent buffer from the site to Whittonstall and any other viewpoints. Fields in between woodland blocks are defined by a mix of hedgerows and agricultural fencing. The southern part of the site is dissected by a minor unnamed road providing access from Whittonstall to other minor roads and farmsteads, including Highfield Farm which lies adjacent to the site. Highfield Farm with associated agricultural buildings and small-scale pastoral fields are excluded from the site. Central parts of the site sit on locally high ground with north-western fields falling steeply and south-eastern parts falling more gradually towards opposing valleys. Public rights of way cross the site, mostly on access tracks around Highfield Farm.

6.4 There is an existing 12.5MW wind farm to the southeast of the site, with planning approved for the scheme in 2011. To the west, thick pockets of deciduous woodland sit within the western boundary, beyond which lies Grey Mare Hill Road and agricultural fields used for pastoral farming. To the south, the site is bordered by a thin strip of deciduous woodland and Boundary Lane, which partially runs along the

southern boundary. To the east, a thick strip of dense woodland lies within the north-eastern boundary, beyond which lie agricultural fields used for arable farming. To the north, a thick strip of woodland partially sits within the northern boundary, beyond which is Grey Mare Hill Road which runs eastwards.

6.5 The northern site lies outside any defined settlement boundary and is considered to be open countryside for development management purposes. The northern site is located within the Green Belt. The total land take of the appraisal site extends to 9.5 hectares and is situated to the south of the settlement boundary of Stocksfield, approximately 200m away. To the north, the site is bound by further agricultural fields beyond which are patches of dense foliage including mature trees and hedges with Stocksfield Golf Club located further to the north, c. 500m. To the east, the site borders a sparse cluster of foliage and a small grouping of dense foliage which includes mature trees and hedges, beyond which is a small cluster of residential dwellings located on the northern side of the B6309. To the south, the site is bound by a strip of dense foliage including mature trees and hedges which contains a small watercourse. To the west, the site is bound by Lead Road of which is partially screened from the site by a thin strip of trees along the site boundary.

6.6 The Northern Site lies on steeply sloping agricultural land in pastoral use, extending over parts of three separate fields, with each field separated by dry stone walls. Lynn Burn (ancient woodland) with its surrounding woodland lies to the south-west, with mature trees aligning Lead Road bordering the north-west. Boundaries to the northeast and east are undefined. Large scale pylons with associated overhead powerlines cross the northern part of the site, as well as a public right of way crossing in an east-west direction, providing a link from Lead Road to properties at Apperley.

Proposal

6.7 The solar facility will be designed to generate up to 49.9MW of electricity. This will consist of panels on a frame, avoiding the need for substantive foundations. The arrays will be no higher than 3m. There will be ancillary equipment including substation, invertors, and transformers.

6.8 The solar panels will provide electricity to the grid.

Cumulative Impacts

6.9 Cumulative impacts occur when the effects of the proposed development combine over the same period with other effects in a locality. The proposal would be seen in context with existing renewable energy proposals over a large area. However, this is not considered to be of such significance as to warrant being assessed outwith a cumulative LVIA (Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment).

6.10 As such there would be no requirement for an EIA to be carried out in this respect.

Use of Natural Resources

6.11 It is proposed that the development will connect to the grid. This will reduce the carbon footprint of the grid in a small way. The land use will not be irreversibly impacted by a result of the minimal ground works required for the frame supporting the panels.

6.12 The changes proposed would not have a significant impact upon the use of natural resources beyond the construction period.

Ecology

6.13 The site is not designated for any natural environmental designations and there are none within 5km of the site. The following are the closest to the site:

- Burnhope Burn Site of Special Scientific interest (SSSI), located 5.5 km southwest.
- Derwent Gorge and Mugglewick Woods National Nature Reserve, located 5.6 km south; and
- North Pennine Moors Special Protection Area (SPA) and Special Area of Conservation (SAC) located 5.8 km south southwest.

6.14 Discussion with NCC (Northumberland County Council) Ecology has confirmed that an Ecological Impact Assessment (EclA) will be required with the submission and that this can be done outwith the EIA procedure.

6.15 It is considered that the proposals offer an opportunity for biodiversity net gain and to add ecological value. This coupled with the nature of the proposals is welcomed in principle.

Landscape and Visual Impact

6.16 The topography of the site is relatively flat, and the site is well screened by boundary vegetation and various elements of woodland across the wider area. However, concerns remain regarding the impact on Highfield Farm and the cumulative impacts. The applicant is expected to undergo a full LVIA to support the application.

6.17 Given the low rise nature of the proposals and minimal wider impact it is not considered that this qualifies for the EIA procedure. However, an LVIA should be submitted with the application.

Emissions and Production of Waste

6.18 The proposed development is not likely to have any significant effects resulting from residues, emissions or the production of waste.

6.19 The proposed development is not considered to give rise to any significant risks of pollution or nuisance, major accidents or risks to human health.

6.20 Whilst there may be some noise generated during construction, this is unlikely to have an impact as there are no noise sensitive receptors in close proximity to the site. The development will not generate any significant noise during operation.

6.21 Similarly, the development will not give rise to any air quality impacts during operation, with any associated with the construction phase for a temporary period and capable of being managed through a suitably worded condition.

Flood Risk and Drainage

6.22 It is not considered that the proposal raises any risk of flooding. However, run-off will need to be considered to ensure flood risk is not increased elsewhere.

7. Environmental Sensitivity of Geographic Areas

7.1 In accordance with Schedule 3 Part 2 of the EIA Regulations the location of the development must be considered, specifically where there are sensitive ecological receptors including sites designated for their importance for nature.

The existing and approved land use

7.2 The site is used for agriculture. There are no designations covering the site or adjacent.

The absorption capacity of the natural environment

7.3 As noted above the site does not fall within any protected areas for nature conservation.

8. Likely Impacts of the Proposal

8.1 In accordance with Schedule 3 (3) of the Regulations the likely significant effects of the development on the environment must be considered.

The magnitude and spatial extent of the impact

8.2 The extent of the impact of the proposed changes is not considered to be significant in relation to the geographical size of the site and the size of the affected population.

The nature of the impact

8.3 The likely effects of the development on the environment are not considered to be significant in respect of their extent, magnitude or complexity due to fact that the proposal is to directly support the national grid, the proposal will have a negligible environmental impact but matters of landscape and visual impacts will be required to be carefully considered.

8.4 Potential impact will arise from surface water drainage, but this can be mitigated through appropriate SuDS.

The probability of the impact

8.5 The proposal will have some impact in terms of landscape and visual. Any application should be accompanied by an LVIA and glint and glare assessment. These can be addressed outwith the EIA process.

8.6 The impacts are minimal. The arrays require little in the way of permanent infrastructure and a cable will connect it to the BESS to the north.

The expected onset, duration, frequency, and reversibility of the impact

8.7 The impact will be mostly during the construction phase, but this will operate during normal working hours. Construction vehicles will be accessing the site creating dust and noise, but the site is remote from residential properties. During operation there will be minimal impact other than those arising from landscape and visual. Upon decommissioning the site can be returned to agriculture given the minimal foundations required.

The cumulation of the impact with the impact of other existing and approved developments

8.8 The proposed changes are such that cumulative impacts will arise with respect of landscape and visual effects, but these can be assessed outwith the EIA process.

The possibility of effectively reducing the impact

8.9 Impacts can be reduced through a glint and glare assessment ensuring there is minimal impact from reflection. It is expected that mitigation measures can be incorporated that will reduce the impact of the development.

9. Conclusion

9.1 Northumberland County Council as Local Planning Authority (LPA) has considered the proposed development in the context of the EIA Regulations 2017. The Council notes the objections and representations that have been received following the submission of the request for the Screening Opinion. The LPA considers that the proposed development is not likely to have significant effects on the environment and as such **is not considered to be EIA development**. The reasons for reaching this conclusion are set out in sections 6-8 of this Screening opinion.

9.2 The LPA reserves the right to alter this screening opinion if further information becomes available to demonstrate that the environmental impacts of the proposal are likely to be significant in the terms specified in the Regulations.

9.3 This assessment does not imply any consideration of the planning merits of the proposals or indicate the success or otherwise of the application for planning permission.

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