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**TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING (ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT) (ENGLAND AND WALES) REGULATIONS, 2017 (AS AMENDED)**

EIA Screening Opinion under Regulation 5(1) of the Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations 2017 – Proposed ground mounted solar farm with associated ancillary works and buildings (up to 105.11 hectares) at Ford Farm Ford Lane Upton Grey Basingstoke Hampshire RG25 2RP

Thank you for your letter and enclosures relating to the proposed development of a ground mounted solar farm with associated ancillary works and buildings at the above site.

This letter provides the Local Planning Authorities (Hart District Council) EIA Screening Opinion pursuant to Regulation 6 of the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017 (as amended), hereafter referred to as the 'EIA Regulations'.

The Site:

The site has a stated area of 105.11 hectares and comprises of mixed farmland (arable and grazing) on land to the north and west of Long Sutton as identified on the accompanying plan 20201026 FOF site location plan-r00 lpa.

RAF Odiham is located to the north.

Representations:

The Council are not statutorily required to consult with local residents on an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Screening Opinion. There is also currently no mandatory requirement to consult key consultees.

There have however been a significant number of letters of representation received objecting to the proposed development. However, in considering a screening opinion such representations cannot be formally taken into account.

Proposed Development:

The proposed development would consist of a solar farm comprising rows of solar panels mounted on frames fixed into the ground using non corrosive metal poles/legs. The panels would be connected using cables fixed under the rows, linking to inverters also fixed under the rows.

Groups of inverters would be connected to substations, housed in prefabricated metal buildings, using underground cables. Switchgear, also housed in prefabricated metal buildings, would connect and manage the energy produced from the solar panels.

The housings would be sited on concrete plinths.

A high voltage cable would run underground from the site to the Fleet Electrical Sub Station at Mill Lane to the north east.

The site would be enclosed using 2m – 2.4m high deer fencing or other non-industrial fencing with security cameras positioned on poles of similar height at the perimeter to monitor activity within the site.

A communication tower of approximately 3m in height would be located within the boundary.

Panels and the supporting structure would be made of non-reflective and non-corrosive materials. Housing for inverters, switchgear and sub stations would be prefabricated using sheet metal in a colour, typically green.

The installation would utilise the areas between hedges, trees, footpaths and highways, with a set-back of approximately 5m where necessary.

The installation would provide up to 49MW of energy to the National Grid for a temporary period of approximately 40 years.

Materials for construction would arrive in the area using a variety of vehicles including large HGV's and specialist haulage vehicles. The access route from the M3 would be the B3349 Alton Road.

Construction would take place over a period of approximately six months, with an intensive period in the middle and less intensive activity at the beginning and the end of that period.

#### EIA Regulations Schedules and Guidance:

Does the development fall within Schedule 1 or 2?

The responsibility for implementing the EIA Regulations lies with the Council as part of its role as the LPA. The EIA Regulations include two lists of different types of development projects.

The first list is called Schedule 1 and identifies types of development projects for which an EIA is mandatory.

Having considered the information submitted, the proposed development is not considered to fall under the definition of Schedule 1 development as defined in the Regulations and there is therefore no automatic requirement for an EIA to be undertaken.

The second list of development projects is called Schedule 2 and identifies the types of development projects for which EIA may be required. The Regulations lists types of developments which are considered to be Schedule 2 development.

The proposed development is considered to fall within Part 3 (a) of Schedule 2 of the EIA Regulations as an industrial installation for the production of electricity where the site area of development would exceed 0.5 hectares.

Development projects which are located in, or partly in, a 'sensitive area' as defined in the Regulations, also need to be screened.

These are:

- Sites of Special Scientific Interest and European sites;
- National Parks, the Broads and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty; and
- World Heritage Sites and scheduled monuments.

The site is not within a 'sensitive area' as defined in the EIA Regulations.

Accordingly, this EIA Screening Opinion has been undertaken in accordance with the 'Selection Criteria for Screening Schedule 2 Development' at Schedule 3 of the EIA Regulations which comprise: characteristics of development; location of development and types and characteristics of the potential impact.

Guidance on undertaking EIA Screening for Schedule 2 projects is provided in the Government's Planning Practice Guidance (Paragraph: 018 Reference ID: 4-018-20170728), which states the following and to which the Council has had due regard:

*"When screening Schedule 2 projects, the local planning authority must take account of the selection criteria in Schedule 3 of the 2017 Regulations. Not all of the criteria will be relevant in every case. Each case should be considered on its own merits in a balanced way. When the local planning authority or Secretary of State issues its opinion they must state the main reasons for their conclusion with reference to the relevant criteria listed in Schedule 3. Where it is determined that the proposed development is not Environmental Impact Assessment development, the authority must state any features of the proposed development and measures envisaged to avoid, or prevent what might otherwise have been, significant adverse effects on the environment (see regulation 5)."*

Relevant comments from consultees have also been considered and incorporated within this Opinion.

In accordance with Regulation 28(2) of the EIA Regulations, a copy of this screening opinion will be displayed on the Council's website.

Is the development likely to have significant effects on the environment?

As the development is a Schedule 2 development, the proposal has to be assessed against the selection criteria set out in Schedule 3 of the Regulations. These are set out in three broad categories:

- Characteristics of development
- Location of development
- Types and characteristics of the potential impact

#### Characteristics of Development

1. The characteristics of development must be considered with particular regard to -

- (a) the size and design of the whole development;
- (b) cumulation with other existing development and/or approved development;
- (c) the use of natural resources, in particular land, soil, water and biodiversity;
- (d) the production of waste;
- (e) pollution and nuisances;
- (f) the risk of major accidents and/or disasters relevant to the development concerned, including those caused by climate change, in accordance with scientific knowledge;
- (g) the risks to human health (for example, due to water contamination or air pollution).

As noted above, part of the assessment when considering likely significant effects must cover “*the cumulation of the impact of other existing and/or approved development*”. (Preston New Road v SSCLG [2018]). In this regard, it should be noted that planning application reference number 20/03185/FUL has been received for a new solar farm development on a site at Chosley Farm, Bidden Road, North Warnborough, RG29 1BW. This site has an area of just under 100 hectares and would also provide a 49mW facility some 1.8 kilometres to the north-west of the Ford Farm site on the opposite side of RAF Odiham.

The Planning Practice Guidance states, amongst other things, that each application (or request for a screening opinion) should be considered on its own merits. It also states that there are occasions, however, when other existing or approved development may be relevant in determining whether significant effects are likely as a consequence of a proposed development. Furthermore, it states that local planning authorities should always have regard to the possible cumulative effects arising from any ‘*existing or approved development*’.

In this instance, as a matter of fact, at the present time of this screening opinion, there is another solar farm development proposed in the vicinity that would trigger significant cumulative impacts when considered together with the proposed development. However, this development is currently not ‘existing’ or ‘approved’.

The proposal should not result in any significant use of natural resources although it would potentially remove a significant area of the Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land in the district from agricultural use for an extended period.

Due to the use proposed, it is not considered that the proposed development would generate waste to any significant level.

During the operational phase, any pollution and nuisance would be minimal given the limited maintenance regime and associated vehicle movements. The solar panels would be silent.

There is greater potential for there to be some pollution and nuisance during construction and decommissioning stages. This would be from vehicle movements and installation and decommissioning. Such impacts would however be relatively temporary and may not be to a level where there would likely be significant environmental effects. It is anticipated that management plans could be secured to ensure impacts are minimised.

The site is also in close proximity to RAF Odiham, an operational Air Force base receiving a number of helicopter and other aircraft movements. The base also has an explosives storage area located in the vicinity of the development site. There could therefore be potential for a risk of accidents to

occur should the solar farm development impact on the safe operation of the air base. The Defence Infrastructure have highlighted that the development raises potentially concerns regarding the safe operation of the air base due to the location of parts of the site to explosive storage areas, the effect of downwash on the infrastructure to be provided, potential bird strike issues, the possibility of glint/glare from the panels and the impact of lighting/cranes in close proximity to the runways of the air base during the construction phase.

The locality is also identified as a Drinking Water Protected Area (surface water), Safeguard Zone (surface water), Groundwater Vulnerability and Groundwater Source Protection Zone. The area is identified as having soluble rock risk, whereby solution features that enable rapid movement of a pollutant may be present.

Whilst in this respect it is recognised that soil disturbance will occur during the construction phase and that structures will be installed it is not considered likely that any of these activities would result in contamination of groundwater.

Overall, the characteristics of the proposed development are such that significant environmental impacts cannot be ruled out at this stage, given the size of the development, the potential loss of a significant area of agricultural land, the possible risk of accidents, the visual impact of the proposal on the character and appearance of the countryside and the potential impact on heritage assets, due to its extent at over 100 hectares and its proximity to RAF Odiham.

#### Location of development:

2. The environmental sensitivity of geographical areas likely to be affected by development must be considered, with particular regard, to -

(a) the existing and approved land use;

(b) the relative abundance, availability, quality and regenerative capacity of natural resources (including soil, land, water and biodiversity) in the area and its underground;

(c) the absorption capacity of the natural environment, paying particular attention to the following areas:

- (i) wetlands, riparian areas, river mouths;

- (ii) coastal zones and the marine environment;

- (iii) mountain and forest areas;

- (iv) nature reserves and parks;

- (v) European sites and other areas classified or protected under national legislation;

- (vi) areas in which there has already been a failure to meet the environmental quality standards, laid down in Union legislation and relevant to the project, or in which it is considered that there is such a failure;

- (vii) densely populated areas;

- (viii) landscapes and sites of historical, cultural or archaeological significance.

As noted above, the site is not within a 'sensitive area' as defined by the EIA Regulations.

In terms of relevant habitats, Greywell Fen Site of Special Scientific Interest (GFSSSI) is located approximately 3km to the north west of the site. Odiham Common with Bagwell Green and Shaw SSSI 4km to the north and Heath Brow SSSI over 5km to the east. Basingstoke Canal SSSI (BCSSSI) is to the north.

Natural England have also commented that there is particular potential for adverse effects on the Greywell Tunnel (Basingstoke Canal) Site of Special Scientific Interest as the development would potentially impact on commuting and foraging routes for bat species utilising the tunnel for roosting and the South Downs National Park.

The Council's ecology officer has also commented on this screening assessment and also advises that a proposal of this size has potential to impact commuting and foraging bats. The ecology officer also comments that undertaking an Ecological Impact Assessment either as part of a formal EIA or otherwise would ensure that there is sufficient information regarding the potential impacts of the proposed development on biodiversity.

The ecology officer also makes reference to a Natural England publication 1<sup>st</sup> edition 9 March 2017 entitled 'Evidence review of the impact of solar farms on birds, bats and general ecology (NEER012).

The site is in Flood Zone 1 which is the lowest flood risk Zone. The Local Lead Flood Authority (LLFA) has advised that due to the size of development it would expect that a full Flood Risk Assessment with a surface water strategy would be required. The Lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA) also commented that particular note should be made to the overland flow path in this area and how it will be ensured that it is retained.

The presence of any major surface water overland flow route crossing the site and the need to robustly assess this as part of any future planning application is noted.

The site is not within, nor does it contain, any designated heritage assets. However, Long Sutton Conservation Area is located to the south, around 30 metres from the development site at its nearest point, and contains a number of listed buildings. South Warnborough Conservation Area is located further to the west and contains a number of listed buildings. Based on the information provided, there would be no direct impacts on these assets but there is likely to be an impact of the setting of the Long Sutton Conservation Area due to the close proximity and extent of the development site.

Public Right of Way Long Sutton Footpath Number 3 also runs across part of the site toward its south-west corner and users of this PRow would be impacted by the proposal.

The site is therefore considered to be environmentally sensitive such that significant environmental impacts cannot be ruled out.

#### Types and characteristics of the potential impact:

3. The likely significant effects of the development on the environment must be considered in relation to criteria set out in paragraphs 1 and 2 above, with regard to the impact of the development on the factors specified in regulation 4(2), taking into account -

(a) the magnitude and spatial extent of the impact (for example geographical area and size of the population likely to be affected);

(b) the nature of the impact;

(c) the transboundary nature of the impact;

- (d) the intensity and complexity of the impact;
- (e) the probability of the impact;
- (f) the expected onset, duration, frequency and reversibility of the impact;
- (g) the accumulation of the impact with the impact of other existing and/or approved development;
- (h) the possibility of effectively reducing the impact.

The proposed development would significantly change the visual appearance of the area and result in impact upon the landscape.

Landscape impacts would largely be confined to the site whilst visual impacts would be wider. Coverage of the site would be over a large area but at a relatively low level. These impacts would be temporary (albeit, up to 40 years) and reversible and would be reduced to some extent through the retention of landscape features such as trees and hedges and hedging would be reinforced in places. However, any such mitigation measures would likely vary in effectiveness given seasonal changes in foliage.

A number of consultees and respondents have identified the need to fully assess impacts on landscape and visual amenity. This view is shared by the LPA and a comprehensive landscape and visual impact assessment would be required with any future planning application.

With due regard to the above, it is considered that landscape and/or visual impacts would be significant in EIA terms and would need to be fully assessed through a detailed Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment.

Whilst noting the requirements for the requisite planning assessment in relation to potential impacts upon highways, Public Rights or Way and flood risk/drainage respectively, the Local Highway Authority, County Countryside Planning Team and Local Lead Flood Authority have not specifically identified any potential significant environmental effects such that in their view an EIA would be required.

Natural England have also identified the requirement for biodiversity and landscape assessments to accompany a future planning application.

As identified elsewhere in this report, construction and decommissioning impacts would be temporary as would the proposed development itself.

The characteristics of the potential impact, given the spatial extent of the development, the nature of the impact in visual terms, the certainty of the impact and the duration of the impact (a minimum of 40 years), are such that significant environmental impacts are anticipated.

#### Conclusion:

This EIA Screening Opinion is provided pursuant to Part 6 of the EIA Regulations in relation to the proposed development. The development does not fall within Schedule 1 but does fall within Part 3(a) of Schedule 2 of the EIA Regulations.

Taking into account the characteristics and location of the development and the types and characteristics of potential impacts and with due regard to consultation comments, the scale, nature and location of the proposed development and associated proposed assessments to accompany a

planning application, it is anticipated that the development will result in significant environmental effects.

Accordingly, the Local Planning Authority considers that based on the information provided, the proposed development is EIA development (positive screening opinion) due to the visual impacts on the landscape, impacts on ecology, potential impacts on flooding and heritage and possible risk of accidents due to the proximity of the site to a major military air base.

Yours sincerely,

Peter J. Lee

Planning Team Leader

Hart District Council