

Development Management Delegated Decision Report

B/22/0010



SUMMARY OF APPLICATION				
Application Reference	B/22/0010			
Application Type	Consultation to BBC			
Proposal	Consultation by the Planning Inspectorate on a scoping opinion for an Environmental Statement to accompany a proposed Development Consent Order in a neighbouring local authority by Ecotricity (Heck Fen Solar) Limited for the Heckington Fen Solar Park - Consultation request for Scoping Opinion (Regulation 10(1) of the EIA Regulations)			
Location	Land at Six Hundreds Farm, Six Hundreds Drove, East Heckington			
Applicant	Ecotricity Group Ltd			
Agent				
Received Date:	11-Jan-2022	Consultation Expiry Date:		
Valid Date:	11-Jan-2022	Statutory Expiry Date:	31-Jan-2022	
Date of Site Visit:		Extension of Time Date:		
Objections received?				
5 day notification record:				
	Councillors notified	Date	Response received – date	Ok to continue
Recommendation	Send comments to the Planning Inspectorate.			
Report by:	Peter Udy			
Date:				



OFFICER REPORT

SITE AND SURROUNDINGS:

The site is about 587 hectares (1450 acres) and is located in North Kesteven DC area to the west of the shared boundary with Boston BC. The site is open farmland with limited tree cover and some development on the A17 frontage.

DETAILS OF PROPOSAL:

It is proposed to construct a solar farm with a capacity of about 500mw and a battery with a capacity between 200 and 400mw. The development will also include 95 hectares of land given over for biodiversity net gain, most of which is against the limited development along the A17 frontage. It is also proposed to create species rich grassland and provide new lengths of hedgerow as well as infill gaps in existing hedgerows.

The export cable will link to the National Grid substation at Bicker Fen. The proposal will require some new infrastructure to the north east or south west of the existing substation. The route for the cable is at present unclear. It could cross land within Boston Borough or alternatively cross land within North Kesteven before crossing the South Forty Foot Drain into the National Grid substation. The cable(s) will be buried.

RELEVANT HISTORY:

B/11/0363 - proposed windfarm by Ecotricity. The Borough Council objected.

EVALUATION:

The proposed development is expected to be submitted to the National Infrastructure Planning process in the first quarter of 2023. It will then undergo a public examination in the same way the Boston Alternative Energy Facility is currently doing. The Secretary of State is likely to make the decision during 2024.

As part of preparing the application for submission, the applicants have said they will prepare an Environmental Statement to support their case. This application is a consultation by the Planning Inspectorate on the scope, i.e. the contents, of the Environmental Statement. The Borough Council can therefore, decide to make no comments or indicate information that should be in the Environmental Statement that appears to be omitted.

The Scoping Report is 164 pages long. It describes the site, the proposed development, the equipment that is required, the national government and local government policy and the requirements of the Environmental Statement legislation. It says the Environmental Statement will contain the following chapters:

Non-Technical Summary

Chapter 1 Introduction

Chapter 2 EIA Methodology & Public Consultation

Chapter 3 Site Description, Site Selection and Iterative Design Process

Chapter 4 Proposed Development

Chapter 5 Planning Policy
Chapter 6 Landscape and Visual Impact
Chapter 7 Residential Amenity
Chapter 8 Ecology
Chapter 9 Ornithology
Chapter 10 Hydrology, Hydrogeology and Flood Risk
Chapter 11 Cultural Heritage
Chapter 12 Socio Economic
Chapter 13 Noise
Chapter 14 Climate Change
Chapter 15 Transport & Access
Chapter 16 Air Quality
Chapter 17 Agriculture
Chapter 18 Glint & Glare
Chapter 19 Miscellaneous – to include Major Accidents & Disasters, H&S at Work, Telecoms, TV & Utilities
Chapter 20 Summary
Chapter 21 Glossary

These cover the main issues the Secretary of State will need to consider.

The impact on the Borough is small. The panels will be a maximum of 4.5m above ground level and will face away from the majority of properties in the borough. One dwelling on the A17 may see them at its rear. Transformers and some other infrastructure could or would be higher. However, since new hedging is proposed and the site is some distance from property in the Borough visual impact will be minimal. Chapters 6 and 18 will consider these impacts.

Similarly owing to the open nature of the landscape, noise impacts should be limited. Chapter 13 will consider this issue.

The cable route to the Bicker Fen sub station is currently unknown. If it runs through North Kesteven before crossing the South Forty Foot Drain to the sub station, the impact on the Borough will clearly be less. The cable is to be buried and so there is no post construction impact. If it runs through the Borough there will be an impact during construction in a similar way as experienced recently with the Tritton Knoll cable route to Bicker Fen.

In relation to the cable route, impacts could be on archaeology and ecology.

The archaeology section in the scoping report focuses on the site. The cable route is mentioned but seems less important. The scoping report in para 10.3 refers to obtaining HER data for a 2km radius of the main site boundary. The cable route is about 6km and so it is unclear what information has been derived for it. Para 10.3 refers to recent ongoing work to the east of the site revealing roman activity. This may be in relation to the Tritton Knoll cable route. The Tritton Knoll and Viking Link work needs to be viewed to add to the knowledge on impact of the cable route. This is intimated in para 10.26. Para 10.5 does say the main assessment work will be for a 5km area with professional judgement on assets beyond that distance. Overall the assessment work to be undertaken on the cable route needs clarity.

In relation to ecology, the scoping report says various flora and fauna surveys will be undertaken to consider the impact of the proposal on them and data will be requested from the Lincolnshire Environmental Records Centre.

During construction, the development will produce extra traffic movements and this will be considered in Chapter 15 and a Construction Traffic Management Plan will be developed as part of the Environmental Statement.

A concern with solar development is the loss of agricultural land from agricultural production. This application uses 587 hectares. The climate change chapter mentions carbon sequestration in para 13.15. It would be beneficial to expand on this, quote research that investigates the changes to soils under solar panels, the benefits or otherwise of being fallow and ameliorating the expected drying of soils through climate change.

CONCLUSION:

The proposal is outside the Borough and will have limited visual or noise impact. Traffic may be worsened along the A17 but a Construction Traffic Management Plan will be prepared and The Environmental Statement will consider these three issues.

The impact relating to the cable connection depends on the route chosen. Clearly a route through North Kesteven reduces this issue significantly. However, the scoping report is not particularly clear on the assessment of Archaeology. The scoping report is clear on the assessment of Ecological impact.

Therefore, in relation to the impact in the Borough more clarity on the assessment of Archaeology is required.

More widely a concern about solar farms is the loss of agricultural land from agricultural production. Our own local plan policy includes a criterion on land take. The scoping report includes sections on climate change and agricultural land. It is considered that analysis of any research on impacts of solar schemes on soil structure, fertility and carbon content would usefully add to the discussion on carbon sequestration and the ability of soils to cope with their expected drying from climate change.

RECOMMENDATION:

CONDITIONS / REASONS			
Pre-commencement conditions?		Agreed with applicant/agent - Date:	
<p>Dear Sir/Madam,</p> <p>Thank you for your consultation on the scoping report for the Heck Fen solar farm.</p> <p>The Borough Council consider the scoping report provides suitable information to show the Environmental Statement will adequately consider the impact of visual intrusion, noise and</p>			

traffic on the Borough.

It is acknowledged that the cable route to Bicker Fen is not yet decided and this will clearly change the level of impact this may have on the Borough. However, if it is decided to have the route within the Borough, it is considered the scoping report provides suitable information to show the Environmental Statement will adequately consider the impact on ecology.

However, the Borough Council are not convinced by the scoping report of the analysis of the impact of the cable route on archaeology. The archaeology section in the scoping report focuses on the site. The cable route is mentioned but seems less important. The scoping report in para 10.3 refers to obtaining HER data for a 2km radius of the main site boundary. The cable route is about 6km and so it is unclear what information has been derived for it. Para 10.3 refers to recent ongoing work to the east of the site revealing roman activity. This may be in relation to the Tritton Knoll cable route. The Tritton Knoll and Viking Link work needs to be viewed to add to the knowledge on impact of the cable route. This is intimated in para 10.26. Para 10.5 does say the main assessment work will be for a 5km area with professional judgement on assets beyond that distance. Overall, the assessment work to be undertaken on the cable route needs clarification.

Although the site is outside the Borough, the use of 587 hectares of land for a solar farm removes a significant local area from agricultural production. As such, it is considered important that benefits are clearly stated. The scoping report includes sections on climate change and agricultural land. It is considered that analysis of any research on impacts of solar schemes on soil structure, fertility and carbon content would usefully add to the discussion on carbon sequestration and the ability of soils to cope with their expected drying from climate change.

Yours faithfully

INFORMATIVES / NOTES TO BE INCLUDED ON/WITH DECISION NOTICE

STATEMENT OF PROACTIVE WORKING:

In determining this application, the authority has taken account of the guidance in paragraph 38 of the National Planning Policy Framework 2021 in order to seek to secure sustainable development that improves the economic, social and environmental conditions of the Borough.