

06 April 2021
Our Ref: P20-SCR

Planning Department
Central Bedfordshire Council
Priory House
Monks Walk
Chicksands
Shefford
Bedfordshire
SG17 5TQ

Dear Sir/Madam

**REQUEST FOR A SCREENING OPINION UNDER REGULATION 6 TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING (ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT) REGULATIONS 2017
PROPOSED INSTALLATION OF A SOLAR FARM AND BATTERY STORAGE FACILITY WITH ASSOCIATED INFRASTRUCTURE ON LAND ADJACENT TO TEBWORTH, LEIGHTON BUZZARD, CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE**

Enso Energy requests an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Screening Opinion from Central Bedfordshire Council (CBC) with regards to the development of a solar farm and battery storage facility with associated infrastructure located on land adjacent to Tebworth, Leighton Buzzard, Central Bedfordshire. This request is made under Regulations 6(1) of the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) (England) Regulations 2017 (“the EIA Regulations”).

EIA Requirement

It is considered that the Proposed Development constitutes Schedule 2 development under Section 3(a) *Industrial installations for the production of electricity, steam and hot water* as the area of development exceeds 0.5 ha and accordingly it is appropriate to seek a Screening Opinion from CBC as the relevant local planning authority.

In accordance with Regulation 6(2), this request is accompanied by the following information to assist CBC in adopting an EIA Screening Opinion:

- A plan sufficient to identify the land;
- A description of the development; including in particular a description of the physical characteristics of the development and a description of the location of the development, with particular regard to the environmental sensitivity of geographical areas likely to be affected;
- A description of the aspects of the environment likely to be significantly affected by the development;
- A description of any likely significant effects of the Proposed Development on the environment resulting from expected residues and emissions and use of natural resources, in particular soil, land, water and biodiversity; and

- Such other information or representations as the person making the request may wish to provide or make.

This screening request considers the need for an Environmental Statement (ES) to accompany a planning application, with consideration of the relevant selection criteria for screening Schedule 2 development presented in Schedule 3 of the EIA Regulations.

Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) provides guidance on EIA screening and how to assess whether a development is likely to give rise to significant environmental effects, such as to require an EIA. Paragraph 018 (Ref ID: 4-018-20170728) of the PPG states: *'only a very small proportion of Schedule 2 development will require an Environmental Impact Assessment'*.

As set out in Paragraph 023 (Ref ID: 4-023-20170728) of the PPG: *'Developers are encouraged to identify any features of their proposed development and any measures envisaged to avoid or prevent what might otherwise have been significant adverse effects on the environment and to include these with the information required to inform the screening decision'*. This approach is in accordance with Regulation 6 of the EIA Regulations.

Site Location and Description

The Site comprises two areas of land totalling approximately 62 ha connected via an underground cable route to the Point of Connection at Sundon Substation (see Location Plan at Appendix 1).

The Site is mainly rural in character with some localised intrusion of man-made features, such as overhead lines which cross the site. The Site is currently accessed via existing agricultural access points from the A5 and Toddington Road.

The field network within the Site is characterised by a well-established vegetated network of hedges trees and ditches. There are public rights of way which intersect the Site.

The Site is located north of Tilsworth and east of Tebworth. The surrounding area comprises a wider network of farmland in arable cultivation or for the grazing of livestock divided by a regular framework of hedges, trees and ditches. Beyond this is the Sundon Substation and Toddington located to the east, with the built-up areas of Leighton Buzzard to the west and Houghton Regis to the south.

Planning and Environmental Designations

The Site is not covered by any statutory or non-statutory designations or assets that relate to biodiversity, landscape and cultural heritage.

The nearest Site of Special Scientific Interest is Dropshort Marsh approximately 140 m to the east of the eastern parcel designated for its wetland habitat and associated flora. The Environment Agency's Flood Map for Planning indicates that the majority of the Site is located within Flood Zone 1. The agricultural land classification for the site is indicated as Grade 3 on the Natural England Regional Agricultural Land Classification Maps.

There are a number of scattered listed buildings surrounding the Site. The Grade 1 listed Church of All Saints (Chalgrave) lies approximately 800 m to the east of the eastern parcel. The nearest Scheduled Ancient Monument (Warren Knoll) is approximately 780 m to the south of the western parcel. The Conservation Area of Tebworth is approximately 300 m at its nearest point.

Proposed Development

The proposal is for the construction, operation, maintenance and decommissioning of a ground mounted solar farm with an export capacity of up to 30 MW for distribution to the national grid. Provision is also provided for a battery storage facility which would be utilised to reinforce the power generation of the solar farm. The proposal would operate for a temporary time period of approximately 40 years.

The main components of the proposal comprise:

- Solar photovoltaic panels, ground mounted to a piled anti-reflective frame made of galvanized steel or aluminium. The posts would be pile-driven (like a fence post) into the ground;
- Inverter/transformer stations distributed evenly across the solar arrays housed within green metal containers;
- Battery storage facility comprising battery containers housed in shipping containers or similar;
- A security-fenced enclosed substation and switchgear compound;
- Underground cabling to connect the panels, inverters/transformer stations and battery storage facility to the proposed on-site substation and control room;
- Underground cabling to link the proposed substation to the existing Sundon National Grid Substation;
- Security deer type fencing and gates to enclose the Site;
- Security and monitoring CCTV/infra-red cameras mounted on fence posts along the internal perimeter of the Site;
- Site access from the public highway;
- Compacted internal crushed stone tracks to allow vehicular access between fields; and
- Landscape planting, biodiversity enhancements and surface water attenuation measures (to be designed as part of the evolving design).

Construction

The construction of the proposal would take place over 6 months, with construction vehicles accessing the site via the existing access points along the A5 and Toddington Road.

A Construction Traffic Management Plan (CTMP) will be prepared and submitted with the planning application and be implemented during the construction phase. The aim of the CTMP is to reduce the effect of the construction phase on the highway network. It will contain all of the required information for the construction phase, as well as package of agreed mitigation measures.

Operation and Decommissioning

Once operational there would be limited vehicle visits each month comprising a transit style van, accessing the Site via the existing access along the A5 and Toddington Road. A Landscape and Ecological Management Plan (LEMP) would be prepared and submitted with the planning application. The LEMP will set out how the land would be managed throughout the operational phase of the development. It is anticipated that it would be managed in such a way as to deliver significant biodiversity net gains.

After a 40 year period the proposal would be decommissioned with all electricity generating equipment and built structures associated with the development removed from the Site and the land returned to agricultural use.

Assessment of Likely Significant Effects

The Screening process should consider the development proposals against the criteria and thresholds which are included within the EIA Regulations and accompanying Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) in determining the requirement for an ES to accompany an application for planning permission.

Schedule 3 of the Regulations sets out the criteria for screening Schedule 2 developments. The characteristics and location of the Proposed Development along with the characteristics of the likely significant effects are determinants as to whether the Proposed Development constitutes EIA development.

The characteristics of the Proposed Development together with its location and potential effects have been assessed against the following considerations:

- Landscape and visual;
- Heritage;
- Biodiversity;
- Amenity (glint and glare and noise);
- The use of agricultural land;
- Flood Risk;
- Traffic and access; and
- Cumulative effects.

An appraisal of Schedule 3 is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Assessment of Proposed Development as EIA Development

Characteristics of Development	Assessment	EIA
Size and design of development	The Site area is approximately 62 ha, exceeding the 0.5 ha threshold. Maximum height of the panels is approximately 3 m. The Site generally enclosed with an opportunity to mitigate closer views with effective screening. The overall extent of ground disturbance on Site would be minimal with, the area excavated limited to cabling, access roads, inverter/transformer stations, panel frames and proposed on-site substation and battery storage facility.	No
Cumulation with other development	Whilst there are other solar developments approved in the area, there is unlikely to be any significant cumulative effects. As part of a Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment a cumulative assessment will be undertaken considering existing and/or other committed development.	No
Use of natural resources	The Proposed Development will require solar panels, other ancillary electrical equipment and batteries all of which use natural resources. However, it would also make efficient use of sunlight, a renewable resource, to generate electricity rather than high carbon polluting fossil fuels. It would enable the potential continued use of agricultural land between the solar arrays for grazing and reversion to arable and grazing on decommissioning.	No
Production of waste	No waste would be produced other than a limited amount during construction through excavation of cable	No

Characteristics of Development	Assessment	EIA
	trenches. The metal framework will be driven into the soil rather than piling or deep foundations which would result in the creation of greater volumes of waste spoil.	
Pollution and nuisances	The noise impacts are anticipated to be limited from the inverter/transformer stations, on-site substation and batteries and not likely to be perceptible to sensitive receptors above background noise levels. There will be no harmful pollutants or odours. Disturbance arising from construction and related traffic will be short term in nature.	No
Risks to human health	There would be a low risk of accidents during the temporary construction period. Public access amongst the solar arrays and substation and battery compounds will be restricted by security fencing and security cameras.	No
Location of Development	Assessment	EIA
Existing land use	The existing use is agricultural land. The Site contains no statutory designations for landscape, heritage and ecology. The site is a suitable distance from existing settlements. The Site is not located in a sensitive area and topography and intervening vegetation means it is unlikely to significantly affect the distant Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, ecological resources and heritage assets.	No
Relative abundance, quality and regenerative capacity of natural resources in the area	The agricultural land use will change from a mix of grazing and arable crops to harvesting of sunlight and potentially low intensity sheep grazing. This will be temporary and fully reversible. Soil will rest and its quality improve. The Proposed Development will significantly improve the biodiversity of the Site.	No
Absorption capacity of the natural environment	Due to the existing vegetative boundaries, the Proposed Development can be absorbed well into the landscape with the incorporation of additional planting where required. The layout of the Proposed Development will maintain and protect existing internal hedgerows, mature hedgerow trees, field margins and drainage ditches. The site is wholly within Flood Zone 1, a Flood Risk Assessment will be prepared to ensure that the Proposed Development is safe and it will not increase flood risk elsewhere. With existing and proposed screening it is considered unlikely that any significant effects on heritage would occur. In terms of proximity to residential receptors the Proposed Development will sit passively in the landscape. Noise during construction will be limited to specific hours, and during operation noise levels will be typically below background noise levels.	No

Types and Characteristics of Potential Impact	Assessment	EIA
Magnitude, extent and nature of impacts	The impact of the Proposed Development will relate to landscape, heritage and archaeology. Impacts beyond the site boundary will be limited due to topography and intervening vegetation. The Proposed Development is temporary and fully reversible and impacts from construction are short in duration. The existing landscape will be protected through enhanced screening and biodiversity net gains. Impacts on heritage can be mitigated through good design and effective screening. Archaeological protection can be secured through relevant studies and the imposition of planning conditions.	No
Transboundary nature of impact	The Proposed Development will make an important contribution to achieving legally binding national targets to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2050 and local climate targets by 2030.	No
Intensity and complexity of impact	The magnitude of effect will be low and non-complex.	No
Probability of impact	It is considered that the Proposed Development will not have a significant impact, and this will be fully evidenced by the assessments accompanying the planning application.	No
Duration, frequency and reversibility of impact	The effects of construction will be temporary. The effects of operation will be long term (40 years) but temporary and fully reversible. The effects of decommissioning will be temporary and short term. The impacts are fully reversible.	No
Cumulation of impact	A Landscape and Visual Assessment will consider the cumulative impact of the Proposed Development with developments currently being determined in the planning system and/or granted planning permission. An initial review indicates the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CB/14/03113/FULL - Land North of Leighton Road West of Hawthorn, Leighton Road, Eggington – permitted. • CB/20/03856/FULL - Chalgrave Manor, Luton Road, Toddington, LU5 6HT – awaiting decision. • CB/21/00437/FULL - Land north of Stanbridge Road, Stanbridge Road, Tilsworth, Leighton Buzzard, LU7 9PU – awaiting decision. 	No
Possibility of reducing impact	Impacts will be reduced through initial consultation with statutory consultees, effective screening, biodiversity enhancements and through in-built mitigation into the design through iterative reviews as the environmental assessment work and community engagement progresses.	No

Given the nature of the development proposals, it is considered that whilst there may be some effects upon the environment as a consequence of the proposed development, none of these are considered to constitute significant effects upon the environment.

The PPG, under the EIA section (Paragraph 057), provides further indicative criteria and thresholds, as well as key issues to consider, in the determination of likely significance of effects. For 3(a) Energy Industry, the criteria and advice given are:

- Indicative Criteria and Threshold – *‘Thermal output more than 50 MW. Small stations using novel forms of generation should be considered carefully’.*
- Key Issues to Consider – *‘Level of emissions to air, arrangements for the transport of fuel and any visual impact’.*

The operational development is less than the 50 MW threshold and is unlikely to give rise to significant impacts relating to air, transport or visual or any further wide-ranging effects.

Accordingly, it is considered that the proposals do not constitute EIA development and would not require an ES to be submitted with a planning application for a solar farm and battery storage facility with associated infrastructure in this location.

We look forward to receiving the Screening Opinion within three weeks of receipt of this request as specified in the Regulation and confirmation that the Screening Opinion will be placed on the Public Register.

Yours faithfully,



Kirsty Lodge
Principal Planner



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Encs. Appendix 1 – Location Plan