



Priory Farm Solar Array

Proposed Development of a Photovoltaic Solar Array on Land at Priory Farm to the East of Great Wymondley, North Hertfordshire

PINS Ref: APP/X1925/V/23/3323321

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Summary Proof of Evidence Landscape and Visual Matters

On Behalf of the Applicant



AGR 4 Solar Limited

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1.0 SUMMARY PROOF OF EVIDENCE

- 1.1.1 I am Jon Mason, a Technical Director of Axis, a multi-disciplinary planning, environmental and landscape consultancy.
- 1.1.2 I am a Chartered Member of the Landscape Institute and lead a team of experienced landscape architects acting on a wide range of primarily infrastructure projects throughout the UK. I have over thirty years of professional experience and extensive experience of assessment of major infrastructure projects across the UK.
- 1.1.3 A senior colleague with over nine years' experience in my team at Axis produced the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) which accompanied the original planning application (ref 21/03380/FP). I have subsequently become involved following the decision by the Secretary of State to call-in the planning application for determination.
- 1.1.4 I am familiar with the Site and the immediate surrounding area having made a site visit on Tuesday 18th July 2023. The evidence which I have prepared and provide for this call-in inquiry is true, and I confirm that the opinions expressed are my true and professional opinions.
- 1.1.5 This is a summary of the proof of evidence that I have prepared to consider landscape and visual matters for this call-in inquiry for the proposed solar farm development (the 'Proposed Development') on land at Priory Farm to the East of Great Wymondley, North Hertfordshire (the 'Site').
- 1.1.6 My proof of evidence provides an overview of the Site and its landscape context, the design of the Proposed Development and the LVIA prepared for the Application. It then addresses landscape and visual matters relevant to the openness of the Green Belt.
- 1.1.7 My proof then goes on to consider matters raised in the North Hertfordshire District Council (NHDC) Statement of Case, and matters raised by third parties during the course of this inquiry.
- 1.1.8 Finally, I consider in detail whether the Proposed Development is compliant with Policy NE2 Landscape of the North Hertfordshire Local Plan (NHLP), and Paragraph 174 of the NPPF.



- 1.1.9 The Site is within Green Belt. Essential characteristics of the Green Belt are openness and permanence. Whilst Green Belt is not designated to preserve landscape quality or visual amenity, case law has established that the openness of Green Belt has a visual dimension.
- 1.1.10 In considering the effect of the Proposed Development on the openness of the green belt, my conclusion is that the Proposed Development would materially harm the visual openness of the green belt in the short-term. The level of harm would reduce as planting establishes and screens the development.
- 1.1.11 Whilst it is accepted that 40 years is a long period of time, the Proposed Development is temporary in nature and the form of the development is such that following removal of its component parts the Site would revert to a condition very similar to that which exists now. It is my view (and a view accepted by the Council) that the measures introduced to protect existing landscape elements and introduce new ones should leave the landscape in a better condition after decommissioning than exists now.
- 1.1.12 In determining whether very special circumstances exist to justify development in the Green Belt, consideration has to be given as to whether the benefits of the Proposed Development outweigh the harm to the Green Belt by reason of inappropriateness, and 'any other harm'. The landscape and visual impact of the Proposed Development falls into the category of 'any other harm'.
- 1.1.13 The Planning Application submitted in December 2021 was accompanied by a LVIA prepared in accordance with current best practice guidance.
- 1.1.14 The LVIA found that due to the relatively low height of components, the presence of existing screening around the Site, and the influence of landform, that there would only be limited visibility of the Proposed Development from the wider landscape. I agree with these findings.
- 1.1.15 The conclusion by both the Applicant and by NHDC is that there would be no residual significant adverse landscape or visual effects, and that residual adverse landscape and visual effects would only be experienced in a very localised area in the close vicinity of the Site. I also agree with these findings.
- 1.1.16 I consider that the limited zone of visibility for the Proposed Development is such that the manner in which the Proposed Development will be experienced is as a short



duration 'event' by those passing through the landscape. The lack of long-distance views means that there will be little if any 'warning' of the Proposed Development before it comes into view. Once visible the Proposed Development would only be in sight for a short duration. The Proposed Development's zone of visibility also largely coincides with a part of the landscape where the A1(M) has a notable influence on the perception of tranquillity.

- 1.1.17 NHDC has assessed the Proposed Development to be in conflict with NHLP Policy NE2, which seeks to avoid *unacceptable* harm to landscape character and appearance.
- 1.1.18 I have considered the Proposed Development against each of the criterion of Policy NE2, and provide a detailed appraisal of the relevant sensitivities and management guidelines for the local landscape in my proof. Whilst there would be localised adverse landscape and visual effects resulting from the Proposed Development, I consider the level of landscape and visual impact to be very modest and not equivalent to unacceptable harm. I therefore conclude that whilst localised adverse landscape and visual effects would result from the Proposed Development, these effects would not be sufficient to generate conflict with Policy NE2.
- 1.1.19 In the NHDC SoC (CD138) the Council attaches moderate weight to the landscape and visual harm resulting from the Proposed Development. In my opinion the weight given to landscape and visual harm should certainly be given no greater weight than moderate given the limited scale and extent of the effects. Moreover, I would go further and say that having found the Proposed Development to be compliant with Policy NE2 (in contrast to NHDC who found the Proposed Development to conflict with the policy) I believe there is justification to say that on this basis the weight attributable to landscape and visual harm should in fact be less than moderate.



