APPLICATION BY AGR 4 SOLAR LTD

Proposed solar array with associated battery storage containers and ancillary development including means of access and grid connection cable on land to north and south of Gravely Lane east of Great Wymondley, Hertfordshire

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Summary of Proof of Evidence by Michael Robinson

1.0.   **Introduction and Scope of Evidence**

1.1.   I am Michael Robinson, a chartered Town Planner with 35 years of professional planning experience instructed in respect of the inquiry on behalf of North Hertfordshire District Council.

1.2.   I have prepared a proof of evidence to consider the planning matters relevant to the inquiry for the proposed development comprising of a solar array with associated battery storage containers and ancillary development including means of access and grid connection cable on land to north and south of Gravely Lane east of Great Wymondley, Hertfordshire.

1.3.   The site has an area totalling 88 Hectares of mainly agricultural land, and carriageway and verges for the cable connecting the Proposal to Wymondley Electricity Sub-station.

1.4.   The Proposal would export up to 49.995 MW of electricity to the National Grid and will have an operational life of up to 40 years after which it would be decommissioned.

2.0   **Evidence**

2.1   My evidence addresses main matters identified by the Inspector including the following:

- Consideration of the development plan including assessment of Green Belt policy and impacts
- Whether the proposal would represent inappropriate development in the Green Belt.
- The effect of the proposed development on the openness of the Green Belt.
- The implications of the proposal for meeting the challenge of climate change.
- The effect of the proposal on the character and appearance of the area.
- Whether the proposed development would be consistent with the Development Plan and other relevant policies.
- Whether the harm to the Green Belt, by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm, would be clearly outweighed by other considerations, so as to amount to the very special circumstances necessary to justify the development.

3.0   **Green Belt Policy and Impacts** of the Proposal on the Green Belt. I consider these issues in section 6 of my proof.

3.1.   It is common ground that the Proposal comprises inappropriate development in the Green Belt which is by definition harmful to the Green Belt. Such development should not be approved except in "very special circumstances" which "will only exist if the harm to the Green Belt by its inappropriateness, and any other harm, is clearly outweighed by other considerations".

3.2.   In my evidence I review and analyse the applicant's and the Local Planning Authority's assessments of the effects of the development on the openness of the Green Belt and the purposes for including land within the Green Belt and I conclude in paragraph 6.33 of my proof that "the Proposal would be inappropriate within the Green Belt and there would be significant harm to the openness of the Green Belt both spatially and visually, and in my judgement there would be limited harm to purposes a (To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas) and b (To prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another) and significant harm to purpose c of the Green Belt (To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment).

3.3.   I acknowledge that these impacts on the Green Belt would not be permanent.

4.0   **Character and appearance of the area.** I consider the effects of the Proposal on the landscape character and the appearance of the area at section 7 of my proof.

4.1   For a professional analysis of the Landscape Visual Impact Assessment accompanying the application I rely upon advice contained in the Landscape and Visual Review documents produced by the Council's Landscape Consultant (The Landscape Partnership). I do agree with the Council's consultant review where it says, "there would inevitably be adverse impacts on landscape character and appearance". I also consider that the adverse impacts would be localised and the mitigation proposed would be beneficial and would reduce the adverse effects on landscape character and appearance. I consider that ultimately, with the sites decommissioning, the planting proposed would result in improvements to the landscape character and appearance of the area that without the Proposal might not otherwise be achieved.

5.0   **Climate change**. I consider the implications of the Proposal for meeting the challenge of climate change at Section 8 of my proof.

5.1.   I acknowledge the urgent and pressing need for the rollout of renewable power generation schemes of all kinds and the very substantial benefits of the Proposal in terms of renewable energy production and its role in addressing the challenge of climate change. I note the local and national in principle policy support for renewable and low carbon energy development in appropriate locations and the declaration of both National and Local Climate Emergencies and the drive towards achieving net carbon zero in the UK (2050) and in North Hertfordshire District (2040).

6.0 **Heritage Impacts and Heritage Balance**. I consider the heritage impacts and balance at Section 9 of my proof.

6.1. In my opinion the impacts of the Proposal on the setting of heritage assets in the area is less than substantial, and at the lower end of the spectrum of less than substantial harm. I note that my assessment of heritage impacts accords with the conclusions of others, including that of Historic England.

6.2. I also consider the impacts upon potential archaeological features of the area and conclude that planning conditions would be necessary to allow for the proper investigation and recording of archaeological evidence/finds in accordance with current advice and best practice.

7.0 **Natural Environment.** I consider impacts on the conservation and enhancement of the natural environment at section 10 of my proof.

7.1 In my analysis I conclude that the land will not be lost to agriculture and that the landscape planting and future management of the site as an operational solar farm as proposed would mean the Proposal would result in net gains to biodiversity and new habitat creation.

8.0 **Drainage.** At Section 11 of my proof, I consider the issue of site drainage and on the advice of the Local Lead Flood Authority I conclude that improvements to the local surface water drainage conditions can be secured through the imposition of suitable planning conditions.

9.0 **Other matters.** At Section 12 of my proof, I consider other matters relevant to the proposal including highway and noise impacts during the construction, operational and decommissioning phases of the Proposal and the creation of permissive rights of way passing through the site for the duration of the proposal. I conclude that the highway and noise impacts are not significant and can be controlled by planning conditions and that the provision of new permissive footpaths through the development site totalling several hundred metres in length would be a benefit to the area.

10.0 **Conclusions and the Planning Balance.** In section 13 of my proof, I seek to identify those matters that weigh in favour of, and against the Proposal, and to apportion the weight to be afforded to benefits and harm. In accordance with paragraph 202 of the NPPF, I weigh the less than substantial harm to designated heritage assets against the public benefits of the Proposal and come to the conclusion that the benefits outweigh the heritage harm. In my assessment when taken together, I consider that the benefits of the Proposal clearly outweigh the harm that has been identified to the Green Belt and the other harm that has

been identified such that very special circumstances exist, and in Section 14 of my proof I conclude that except for some conflict with NHLP Policy NE2 and Wymondley NP Policy GB1 in relation to landscape and Green Belt I consider the Proposal accords with the other development plan policies, both in the NHLP and Wymondley NP that are relevant to the determination of the application.