

Consultation Response from Conservation & Design

2021/93644 Low Farm, Wakefield Road, Flockton, Huddersfield, WF4 4BB

Erection and operation of grid-connected solar photovoltaic farm, with ancillary infrastructure and landscaping and biodiversity enhancements

Date Responded: 27/01/22 Responding Officer: NRG Responding Ref:

1. Context:

- 1.1. The proposal is for a significant and extensive development within the designated Green Belt which would transform the character of the impacted parts of the rolling pastoral and arable landscape.
- 1.2. The development is acknowledged as being *“inappropriate development”* within the Green Belt (section 5.11 of the Planning Statement) and consequently its location is questioned, while its impact must be fully justified in terms of the NPPF and Local Plan. In accordance with NPPF (Paragraph 148), when considering the proposal, the Council must ensure that **“substantial weight is given to any harm to the Green Belt”**. This is because the necessary, *“Very special circumstances’ will not exist unless the potential harm to the Green Belt [i.e. resulting from the inappropriate development] is clearly outweighed by other considerations.”*
- 1.3. This fundamental Planning requirement also requires that the impact of any inappropriate development should be tempered by the mitigating quality of its design or landscaping (in accordance with NPPF paragraph 130). This is necessary to ensure it, *“functions well and adds to the quality of the area”*. Given the scale of this development and the rolling nature of the landscape the physical and visual impact of the proposal will be extensive and will overall have a demonstrably adverse impact on the appreciation of the historic landscape (Section 6.4 submitted LVIA) in terms of its character, visual qualities and the accommodation for biodiversity enhancement. The current justification for the adverse physical and visual impact of the development is primarily based on the ‘other consideration’ of the potential to produce green energy.
- 1.4. The following comments are thus made in relation to the impact on the character and appearance of the landscape and the context of NPPF section 13 (Protecting Green Belt land) as well as paragraphs: 126, 130, 174, and 199 as well as the requirements of the Kirklees Local Plan

2. Historic and landscape character and impact.

- 2.1 The impacted site has remained in agricultural use since at least the medieval period and is located within the former Denby Grange Estate, which comprised a combination of parkland, woodland, plantation, and agricultural fields. Residual structures and boundary features remain which historically defined the estate character of the field systems, despite the rather dilapidated state of the boundary walls facing the Wakefield Road. The surviving structures and landscape features appear to largely date from the C19th.
- 2.2 However, much of the historic landscape’s built heritage features have been lost and the Historic Environment Record contains little detail about the Denby Grange Estate, omitting many of the features shown on the historic map records. Consequently, the archaeological potential of the estate and site remains largely unknown, although it is understood that ongoing geophysical surveys indicate that the archaeological potential of the site is likely to be low.
- 2.3 It is noted that there are 11 Listed Buildings, two scheduled monuments and the Hope Pit Conservation Area (part of the National Coal Museum) recorded within 1km of the proposed development. However, the development would have **no direct (physical) impact** on any of

these designated heritage assets.

- 2.4 In terms of **indirect impacts**, most of the designated heritage assets are sufficiently detached or located at such a distance to negate or minimise the visual impact of the proposed PV arrays on the appreciation or understanding of the identified designated buildings and monuments. The development would adjoin the designated Hope Pit Conservation Area and have an adverse impact on the setting (and thus the character or appearance) of the former colliery site, although the moderate adverse indirect impact could be mitigated through strengthened boundary screening. The proximity of the PV array to the grade-II listed milestone on Wakefield Road (near Denby Lane, Denby Grange Barn) and the undesignated Rookery Farm, would have a minor adverse impact on the setting of these heritage components but would not compromise their intrinsic heritage values and would be screened by the road or extant landscape features.
- 2.5 Consequently, the proposed development is considered to have a **minor adverse indirect heritage** impact on the appreciation and understanding of the historic environment.
- 2.6 The development would have a potentially more significant adverse impact on the holistic landscape character of the historic estate and the appreciation of the Green Belt. It is noted that no part of the PV development site is included in a designated historic parkland or a national or local landscape designation, other than the designated Green Belt. The Green Belt is significant Planning designation which is intended to avoid the coalescence of towns and assist in safeguarding the character of the countryside by preventing apparent urban sprawl.
- 2.7 It is unfortunate that the submission appears to undervalue the openness of this part of the Green Belt as a significant contributor to the rolling landscape character of the district's boundaries edge. It also fails to consider the topography in terms of viewpoints, or the impact on longer distance views from the neighbouring settlements to the north, or fully address the immediate impact on key views. For example, the PV array would be clearly viewed as an intrusion in the agricultural landscape both from above (looking north) and below (looking south) from Grange Lane and the Wakefield Road.
- 2.8 Therefore, despite the acknowledged major adverse landscape impact on the site itself and its immediate environs (section 6 LVIA – Doc. R010), the submission is considered to under-state the adverse impact on the landscape character and the changing nature of the development on the former estate. This conclusion that there would be *“no notable effects on the openness of the green belt”* (para. 6.5.7 – LVIA – Doc. R010) is considered to contradict the presented evidence and site evaluation, while the LVIA fails to evaluate the full range of distant impacts.
- 2.9 The proposed development may be able to present evidence of substantial public benefits which could outweigh its identified adverse impacts. But to reach that conclusion further work is required to fully evaluate the impact and design enhancements to temper the currently demonstrated negative impact on the wide historic landscape and protected landscape (i.e the Green Belt). The following design enhancements/issues need to be addressed as a minimum:
- The buffer zones flanking the historic woodlands should be a minimum of 15m, as per national guidance. 5 metre is insufficient to protect the established woodlands.
 - The submission needs to be supported by an arboricultural impact assessment, particularly focused on the ancient woodlands and TPO trees which are remnants of the estate landscape.
 - The limited illustrated viewpoints in the LVIA do not demonstrate evidence how the expansive PV array will be viewed across the rolling landscape proposal, particularly from the north. The proposal should reveal the extent of the impact so that the balancing public benefits can be fully measured. Further photomontages from elevated, distant viewpoints and the PROW network should be required, with the effects of the mitigating landscape planting clearly demonstrated.

- d) The buffer zone planting to the PROWs should be enhanced to minimise visual intrusion and space for biodiversity enhancement.
- e) The boundaries along Grange Lane and Wakefield Road (at Pit Hill Plantation) should include an increased buffer zone and strengthened boundary planting to create an enhanced layered view and thereby minimise the impact of the fencing and enclosed PV structures on the main road and footpaths.
- f) The use and management of the proposed fenced enclosures should be made clear as it is unclear whether the projected Biodiversity net gains would be achieved if the parcels are to also remain grazed by sheep.

3. Conclusion

- 3.1 This proposal is acknowledged in the Planning submission as being “*inappropriate development*” in the designated Kirklees Green Belt. Consequently, the application must present clear evidence to demonstrate why it should be located in this particular landscape, as well as revealing the substantial public benefits which would substantially outweigh the identified adverse impacts.
- 3.2 The NPPF paragraph 151 does note that such “*Very special circumstances*” could include provision for, “*increased production of energy from renewable sources.*” However, it is necessary to fully understand and evaluate the extent of harm to the character and appearance of this part of the Green Belt (i.e. its openness) to establish whether the acknowledged adverse impacts could be demonstrably and substantially outweighed by the positive impacts of the generation of renewable energy in this location. Therefore, the positive side of the Planning balance needs to be tested by enhanced analysis and as a minimum tempered by further mitigation. Unfortunately, the application in its current form fails to either provide sufficient justification or mitigation of the acknowledged adverse impacts and thus requires additional evidence and design enhancements.