

SUMMARY TO LANDSCAPE PROOF OF EVIDENCE

**LAND NORTH OF LITTLE CHEVENEY FARM,
SHEEPHURST LANE, MARDEN, KENT**

ON BEHALF OF STATKRAFT UK LTD

TOWN & COUNTRY PLANNING ACT 1990

MBC REF: 22/501335/FULL

PINS REF: APP/U2235/W/23/3321094

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INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. My name is Allison Walters and I am a Chartered Landscape Architect and a Chartered Member of the Landscape Institute (CMLI). I was instructed in February 2023 on behalf of Statkraft UK Ltd, ('the Appellant'), to present evidence in relation to landscape and visual matters in respect of the refusal of planning application 22/501335/FULL by Maidstone Borough Council.
- 1.2. My Landscape Proof of Evidence comprises this document together with separate appendices. This evidence should be read in conjunction with the Planning Proof of Evidence prepared by Mr Chris Cox.
- 1.3. With regards to the proposed development (Appeal Scheme) I comment on the four matters that are raised in the Reason for Refusal, namely Scale, Mitigation, Character and Appearance.

SCALE

- 1.4. With regards to scale, the proposal seeks to deliver a 46.7MW solar farm. The solar development would be located within 6 connected fields and the HV compound to the centre of the western most field.
- 1.5. The arrays are set back from the site boundary allowing for PROW, permissive paths, mitigation planting and biodiversity enhancements.
- 1.6. The scale of the Appeal Scheme is not dissimilar to existing polytunnels within the wider landscape, as well as the approved Bockingfold solar energy farm in the neighbouring authority and the Switching Station south of Sheephurst Lane.
- 1.7. Existing vegetation would be retained and limits the appreciation of the extent of the site and development. Vegetation within the wider landscape provides some screening of the scale from visual receptors outside of the site boundary particularly from the north, west and further south of the site boundary.
- 1.8. PROW and residential dwellings within or in close proximity of the Appeal Scheme would only view part of the development and as such would only appreciate the scale of that which is visible. Solar arrays have been set back from these receptors to allow for mitigation vegetation and biodiversity enhancements.

MITIGATION

- 1.9. The development of the site includes extensive interconnecting woodland, new hedgerows along fencelines, orchard planting and enhancements to the existing hedgerow vegetation as well as permissive paths.

- 1.10. The mitigation has been included to reduce the visual effects of the solar arrays and to enhance the landscape character.
- 1.11. Mitigation planting has been provided in accordance with local provenance.
- 1.12. The woodland planting creates deep woodland corridors that respond to the guidelines and recommendations of national, regional and local landscape character areas.
- 1.13. The landscape planting also enhances biodiversity by restoring east-west connections within the landscape providing beneficial wildlife corridors whilst creating meadow landscapes for a wide range of wildlife.
- 1.14. The landscape planting will help to create small scale field patterns prevalent but, in many instances, fragmenting within this landscape.
- 1.15. The permissive paths have been identified to connect with existing disconnected PROW to create more fluid and circular routes to improve access around the local area.
- 1.16. Replacing arable use with pasture and meadow use will also have a positive role in improving the quality of water in the adjacent watercourses and site ponds.
- 1.17. The enhancements to the landscape character will have wider benefits both locally, responding to Maidstone Borough Council's Climate Change Action Plan and nationally by contributing to reversing the decline in nature as detailed in the State of Nature Report 2023
- 1.18. The effect of the landscape mitigation on the landscape would be beneficial and would not in itself result in harm.

EFFECT ON LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

- 1.19. The site is located within two local landscape character areas, Laddingford Low Weald and Teise Valley. Whilst a line can be drawn on a plan to show their demarcation, the reality on site is that the characteristics of both of these landscape character areas are very similar and with vegetation erosion, there is limited visual difference between them.
- 1.20. Evidence of loss of vegetation over the last 40+ years has also meant that these landscape character areas are losing their individual characteristics. Small field patterns are being lost through fragmentation evident on the site, allowing for an open character and longer distant views, which are, by default, a recent characteristic.
- 1.21. The solar energy farm is located within the arable fields and avoids existing vegetation. It has been located away from the boundaries of the Site where these may have an impact on the PROW and dwellings.
- 1.22. In assessing a solar farm in terms of impact on landscape character, it is appropriate to identify harm, and to determine if mitigation is required based on that harm.

- 1.23. It is then appropriate to determine whether, if the impact is mitigated, the landscape screening would in itself give rise to harm. This involves analysis of the existing landscape character and any recommendations within the national, regional and local landscape character assessments for enhancements and restoration which are considered and designed, if appropriate, into the landscape strategy.
- 1.24. It is also an important consideration that when assessing the effects of the Appeal scheme on landscape character, to understand that the solar farm is a temporary development and when decommissioned, the new landscape infrastructure would remain and would have established over 37 years. Developments such as solar farms within rural landscapes are a great opportunity to improve and enhance existing landscape infrastructure as well as introducing new landscape infrastructure that is sympathetic to landscape character.
- 1.25. The landscape strategy for this site has considered the existing landscape character and recommendations and incorporated these into an appropriate mitigation and enhancement strategy that is not dissimilar to the nature of the local landscape in creating small scale fields and PROW that pass between rows of vegetation. The need to enhance and repair the landscape is stressed within the guidelines for National, Regional and Local landscape character areas within which the site is located.
- 1.26. The scale and massing of the development is not out of character within the wider landscape and there is greater opportunity to incorporate more considered landscape enhancements within this development than those of polytunnels prevalent in the wider landscape (also temporary development).
- 1.27. The scale and massing of the development without the landscape mitigation would equate to Slight-Moderate harm. With landscape mitigation the harm would reduce to Limited.
- 1.28. The landscape mitigation will deliver substantial benefits during the operational life of the solar farm but also once the site is decommissioned in repairing a landscape that has suffered substantial fragmentation. This has local, regional and national benefits to the landscape character and to biodiversity.
- 1.29. Winter views are considered to be effectively screened with deciduous planting within 10 years and would provide satisfactory mitigation of a development of this size and scale.
- 1.30. When the pros and cons are considered for the landscape strategy of the Appeal Scheme, it is very clear that the benefits of the landscape enhancements far outweigh any negative effects of a temporary solar farm.

EFFECT ON VISUAL AMENITY

- 1.31. It is acknowledged that the solar farm will have an initial adverse impact on the visual amenity of a number of receptors within the local vicinity. It is highly unlikely that a solar farm can be placed within a rural landscape without having adverse effects.

- 1.32. The Appeal Scheme has addressed the adverse effects to move the southern aspect of the solar arrays and HV compound away from dwellings and provide substantial mitigation planting for biodiversity and landscape character enhancements.
- 1.33. The entire site has incorporated mitigation in the form of gapping up existing boundary vegetation, new hedgerows along fencelines and woodland belts and blocks to reduce the visual impacts from residential and PROW receptors.
- 1.34. Adverse effects can be mitigated within 10 years. The resultant effect of mitigation would reduce the adverse impacts on receptors and would continue to do so within the winter months.
- 1.35. The overall harm of the Appeal Scheme reduces substantially with increase in distance from the site. The general harm to visual receptors prior to landscape mitigation and within a limited area of 500m of the site would be Moderate. With landscape mitigation and within 5-10 years the harm would reduce to Limited.
- 1.36. Once the solar arrays are decommissioned after 37 years, the mitigation planting would remain, providing a structure to the landscape not dissimilar to the wider landscape character. The visual amenity of this structure would remain and be similar to what can be seen in existing local views from PROW and residential dwellings within the wider landscape.
- 1.37. The impacts are therefore acceptable and would not result in significant harm to the residential, PROW or highway receptors.

CONCLUSION

- 1.38. For the reasons stated above it is my professional judgement that on landscape and visual grounds there are no substantive reasons for refusing planning permission for the solar energy farm on Land North of Little Cheveney Farm, Marden, Kent.