

Proposed Solar Park at Blackberry Lane, Cosheston, Pembrokeshire

LPA Ref. NS/0442/19

PINS Ref. DNS 3245065

Comments of the Council's Ecologist

Any application/ES must provide sufficient information to identify any nature conservation features (habitats/species) that are likely to be affected by the proposals and identify potential options for mitigation and enhancement. The impacts of any species protected under legislation must be considered along with any species or habitats listed under the Pembrokeshire LBAP, UK BAP and the Section 7 list of the Environment (Wales) Act 2016. Surveys must be carried out by a qualified ecological surveyor and the ES must identify the potential of the habitats on site to be used by protected species

Any application/Environmental Statement (ES) must:

- Cover the construction, operation maintenance, closure and decommissioning stages of any project.
- Determine the importance of ecological features affected, through survey and/or research.
- Assess impacts potentially affecting important features.
- Characterise the impacts by describing their extent, magnitude, duration, reversibility, timing and frequency.
- Identify cumulative impacts; and identify significant effects of impacts in the absence of any mitigation.
- Consider alternative location(s) or layouts for the proposed development.
- Identify mitigation measures and explain their likely success.
- Identify opportunities for enhancement.
- Design and agree a monitoring strategy and monitoring of mitigation performance.
- Provide sufficient information for mitigation measures to be implemented effectively.
- Produce a clear summary of the residual impacts and the significance of their effects following incorporation of avoidance and mitigation measures, in accordance with planning policies and legislation.

In order to provide confidence in the information provided as part of the application/ES the following key points must be addressed:

- Ecological baseline and trends if the project were not to go ahead.
- Criteria used to evaluate ecological features.
- Criteria used to assess the significance of impacts of the project.

- Justification of methods used.
- The identification of likely impacts (positive and negative) on ecological features together with an explanation of the significance of their effects.
- Mitigation, compensation and enhancement measures.
- Legal and policy consequences.
- A note of any key data that were unavailable or missing and
- A presentation of any analytical techniques used and the analysis itself.
- Consideration for the zone of influence – if the site requires new infrastructure (roads, power supply etc.) there could be significant consequences for ecological features beyond the boundaries of the site

Any ES must also be mindful of the following:

- Preliminary activities prior to the main construction contract
 - Ground investigations.
 - Vegetation clearance.
- Construction phase
 - Access and travel on/off-site, including temporary access routes for vehicles.
 - Areas for plant maintenance and for storage of oils, fuels and chemicals.
 - Movement of materials to/from or within the site.
 - Acoustic disturbance and vibration from construction activities.
 - Dust generation.
 - Soil stripping.
 - Environmental incidents and accidents e.g. spillages, noise and emissions.
 - Lighting
 - Vegetation/habitat clearance including tree felling.
- Occupation/operational and decommissioning phase
 - Access to site (both route and means).
 - Drainage.
 - Implementation of habitat management.
 - Lighting.

Species and Habitats to be considered:

A primary ecological assessment has been submitted in support of the current pre-application consultation and scoping opinion. This may already include much of the following information.

- Any application/ES must identify any habitats and species that are likely to be affected by the proposal and identify potential options for mitigation and enhancement. There must also be justification for disregarding certain species from any assessments.

- A **Phase I habitat survey** must identify the quality and extent of the habitats present. The habitat survey must be carried out between the months of April and September only. It should also identify the presence of any invasive species.
- **Reptiles** – common species of reptiles may be present on a site of this nature. If suitable habitat is to be removed as a result of the proposal then survey may be required. A precautionary approach to any site clearance may also be necessary. It is likely that the development will result in opportunities for reptile enhancements, these should be clearly identified and described.
- **Badgers** – Several signs of badger activity have been identified within the ecological report, although no setts are currently present on site it is important to be mindful that activity within 30 metres of a sett will require a license, therefore surveys may need to be undertaken to ensure there will be no disturbance of setts outside the red line boundary. The recommendations made within Section 5 of the submitted report must also be followed. Badgers are protected under The Protection of Badgers Act 1992.
- **Birds** – The application must make an assessment of the bird populations currently using the application area in the form of a breeding bird survey and the impact of the development on these birds, in terms of loss of habitat and displacement.
- **Dormice** – The submitted report identifies that there are suitable hedgerows on site to support dormice, however does not consider dormice further as there are no records within close proximity. The closest known record is approximately 6km away; however, it is still possible that dormice are present in the area. Provided the suggested 5m buffer for hedgerows is retained throughout and there are no hedgerows to be removed, dormouse surveys will not be necessary. However, the exact amount of hedgerow to be removed and further justification for not undertaking dormice surveys will be required within any submitted application/ES. Dormice are protected under European and UK legislation, their presence is a material consideration in the planning process.
- **Bats** – There are several important sites for bats within relatively close proximity to the proposed development. Consideration will need to be made of any impacts for foraging and commuting bats. If the habitat assessment identifies suitable foraging habitats, which will be lost as a result of the proposal then activity surveys may be required. Furthermore, any security lighting may impact upon bat movements in the area, therefore if significant lighting is proposed, activity surveys may be required in order to establish important areas for bats which must remain dark and inform any lighting plan to ensure there is no impact upon the bats and other nocturnal wildlife. Again, if activity surveys are not required, then clear justification for this will need to

include within any application/ES. Bats are protected under European and UK legislation, their presence is a material consideration in the planning process.

- **Otter** – There may be suitable habitat for otter immediately adjacent to the boundary of the development site. If there is suitable otter habitat on the site then surveys may be required, if suitable otter habitat is found immediately adjacent, then measures for ensuring there is no disturbance must be included within any application/ES. Otters are protected under European and UK legislation, their presence is a material consideration in the planning process.

Biodiversity Enhancements:

Solar Parks offer numerous opportunities to provide enhancements for wildlife, particularly where they are developed on land which has previously held low ecological diversity, such as improved and arable land. An **ecological management plan** should be submitted, to include details of how the site will be managed for wildlife throughout the solar farms lifetime.

The plan should also include details of an **ecological monitoring programme**, to ensure the management plan is working and, where necessary, make changes to ensure appropriate and successful management for biodiversity.

Please also be mindful of the following points:

- The results of all required surveys and assessments of the effects the development may have on species and habitats and recommendations for mitigation and enhancement must be included within any application/ES.
- Ecological assessments may result in the requirement for further survey work.
- Surveys and assessments must be carried out in line with the British Standards for Biodiversity: Code of Practice for Planning and Development (BS42020:2013) and other relevant species and survey best practice guidelines. All surveys will be required to be carried out by a suitably qualified ecologist within the appropriate season and to appropriate survey standards and methodology.

If you have any questions or seek clarification on any of the points raised, please get in touch.

Regards

Rebecca Blackman

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