



FIELDS OS 6700 6722 AND 5200 MUSTON LANE, EASTHORPE -

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Proof of Evidence of

Simon Higson BA (Hons), MA, CMLI

Prepared for Melton Borough Council

and



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1 INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE OF REPORT

1.1 Qualifications and Experience

1.1.1 I am Simon James Higson, Director at Felstone Consulting Limited (Felstone), a Practice Registered with the Landscape Institute.

1.1.2 I am a Chartered Landscape Architect and Chartered Horticulturist with over 20 years of professional experience. I have a BA (Hons) degree in Landscape Architecture from Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education (1998) and MA in Landscape Architecture from Leeds Metropolitan University (2000).

1.1.3 I have provided landscape planning, assessment, design and management advice in relation to a wide range of project work. I have previously acted both as landscape expert witness and supported other witnesses.

1.1.4 I was instructed by Heatons (on behalf of Melton Borough Council) in April 2024 to act as landscape expert witness for the appeal.

1.1.5 I confirm that the opinions expressed are my true and professional opinions.

1.2 Scope and Methodology

1.2.1 This document is my proof of evidence and sets out my assessment of landscape and visual effects, in so far as they relate to the reasons for refusal in the Decision Notice of 11th September 2023.

1.2.2 The proposed development is a full planning application for the construction of a solar farm together with all associated work, equipment and necessary infrastructure.

1.2.3 This proof of evidence is a summary of my findings. Appendix 1 is my own Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA), which is based on desk-top research and field work to the Study Area and sets out my findings in detail. Appendix 2 contains my LVIA figures and Appendix 3 are my context photographs. Appendix 4 is Cornwall Environmental Consultant's Review of Pegasus Group's Landscape Rebuttal on CEC's Review of the Submitted LVIA for Easthorpe (16th March 2023).

2 ASSESSMENT OF LANDSCAPE EFFECTS

- 2.1.1 My re-assessment of landscape effects is set out in Section 3 of my Appendix 1.
- 2.1.2 The Appeal Site is located within National Character Area 48 Trent and Belvoir Vales and Melton Borough Council's LCA 1 Vale of Belvoir, which is described as an area of neat and well-managed farmland, where the landscape is gentle and subtle. It is relatively remote and tranquil, punctuated by historic villages and churches. The Appeal Site is adjacent to LCA 2 Bottesford to the north and c1.5km away from the boundary with LCA 9 Parkland to the south.
- 2.1.3 Melton Borough Council Drawing titled "Belvoir Solar Farms" shows the location of the Appeal Site in relation to the other permitted and operational schemes, including Jericho Lane, a permitted solar farm to the west; Lodge Farm, an operational solar farm to the north-west; Land South of the A1 Foston Bypass, a permitted solar farm to the north-east; and Land South of The Railway Line & East of Station Road, an operational solar farm to the north-west of the Appeal Site.
- 2.1.4 The addition of the solar farm at the c100ha Appeal Site would result in a total combined area (with the other projects) of approximately 317ha. This includes the extent of solar panels, as well as the associated equipment and infrastructure at each site.
- 2.1.5 The local landscape of the 'Vale' around Bottesford has a high sensitivity to the introduction of further large-scale solar farms and/or additional urbanising features. This is especially the case in the segment of land to the south-east of Bottesford, which extends to Belvoir Castle and is situated within the approximate angle of view from a notable viewpoint (views of Borough-wide importance). The Appeal Site itself also has a high sensitivity to the proposals, due to the sense of time depth, distinctiveness, recreational access and scenic quality.
- 2.1.6 The cumulative magnitude of change to landscape character resulting from the addition of the solar farm at the Appeal Site would be High. This is due to the following:
1. the introduction of panels and other infrastructure, including transformers, inverters and fencing at the Appeal Site, would introduce a fundamental change to additional areas of agricultural land;
 2. additional swathes of panels would be visible within vistas from rights of way,

lanes and roads, and people's experience of aesthetic and perceptual aspects of the rural area would be diminished and not adequately mitigated;

3. additional parts of the area would be punctuated by solar farms, forming a circular pattern around Bottesford and this would detract from the existing landmarks of church spires and Belvoir Castle; and
4. the duration of 40 years would effectively be permanent in landscape terms. GLVIA3 (CD 8.1) confirms in paragraph 5.51 that "*..long term ten to twenty-five years..*" and paragraph 5.52 "*reversibility is a judgement about the prospects and practicality of the particular effect being reversed in, for example, a generation*".

2.1.7 The addition of the Appeal Site would result in solar farms becoming a key characteristic of this landscape, and this landscape could be described as a landscape with solar farms, where:

1. solar farms now influence the character of the local landscape. These additional changes would be of such an extent that solar farms would become a key characteristic of the local 'Vale' landscape around Bottesford; and
2. the combination of the 5 separate developments would result in a higher density cluster of solar farms, which would be different to the wider Vale of Belvoir landscape and would therefore transform it to a different landscape sub-type, the 'Vale' landscape around Bottesford.

2.1.8 GLVIA3, paragraph 7.28 states that "*The most significant cumulative landscape effects are likely to be those that would give rise to changes in the landscape character of the study area of such an extent as to have major effects on its key characteristics and even in some case, to transform it into a different landscape type. This may be the case where the project being considered itself tips the balance through its additional effects*".

2.1.9 Overall, there would be major and adverse effects on the landscape character of the Appeal Site and I also consider that the cumulative effects upon the 'Vale' landscape around Bottesford would be major and adverse. These would be significant.

2.1.10 The addition of an operational solar facility at the Appeal Site would result in a disproportionate effect to the area; the proposed development would 'tip the balance' through its additional effects.

2.1.11 I have also noted that there would be residual adverse landscape effects after decommissioning and restoration. This is due to the additional hedgerow and tree planting (intended to screen the solar panels) which would reduce how people perceive the expansive vale, increase the sense of enclosure and obscure the historic landmark features of Belvoir Castle and church spires. There would also be additional visual clutter from the permanent substation and associated fencing and access track, in conjunction with the existing electricity pylons on the Appeal Site, resulting in the erosion of the rural undeveloped character.

3 ASSESSMENT OF VISUAL EFFECTS

- 3.1.1 My re-assessment of visual effects is set out in Section 4 of my Appendix 1.
- 3.1.2 There is over 1.5km of public footpath (F82 and F90) and 1.4km of byway open to all traffic (F85B) which extend through the Appeal Site. Pegasus' LVIA concluded that despite mitigation measures there would be a major effect on viewpoints from public rights of way within the Appeal Site (paragraph 2.8.16) and that the character of these views would be changed from open views to more contained (paragraph 2.8.14).
- 3.1.3 These rights of way form part of a network of publicly accessible recreational routes and visitor attractions in the area where experience of the rural and historic landscape is important. This includes Muston Meadows Nature Reserve, Grantham Canal and Beacon Hill, as well as the winding lanes connecting the villages and National Cycle Route 15.
- 3.1.4 Recreational visitors to the area and users of these routes and attractions have a high sensitivity to the introduction of large-scale solar farms and/or additional urbanising features. This is especially the case on part of the Jubilee Way at the north-western edge of the Belvoir Castle Registered Park and Garden.
- 3.1.5 The ability of the public to appreciate and enjoy the landscape character of the 'Vale' around Bottesford from the routes within the Appeal Site would be diminished and adversely impacted by the proposed development to a high degree:
1. The perceived naturalness and rurality, particularly in relation to the mixed farmland and traditional villages, would be reduced by the introduction of panels and other infrastructure, including transformers, inverters and fencing at the Appeal Site;
 2. Open and expansive views of the wider rural vale and wooded escarpment would be obstructed/ foreshortened either by solar panels and fencing or by higher hedges or belts of tree planting designed for screening. This would create corridor effects or passageways, altering the recreational experience;
 3. Deciduous vegetation generally has reduced or no foliage for 4-6 months of the year and therefore limited screening qualities. There is also a delay from planting to establishment and sufficient growth necessary to provide effective screening;

4. The addition of solar panels and fencing, higher hedges or belts of tree planting designed for screening would either obstruct or detract from the existing landmarks of churches (such as Church of St John the Baptist) and Belvoir Castle from recreational routes and viewpoints with and around the Appeal Site;
 5. The proposed development would be clearly visible from views around Belvoir Castle and interrupt the expansive and rural patchwork character of the view towards the spire of Church of St Mary, Bottesford; and
 6. the duration of 40 years would effectively be permanent in visual terms (see reference to GLVIA3 above).
- 3.1.6 Beyond the extent of the Appeal Site, the visibility is more variable due to the gently undulating topography, with intervening vegetation and other elements.
- 3.1.7 The proposed development of an operational solar farm at the Appeal Site would result in major adverse visual effects upon recreational visitors and users of routes and facilities within and around the Appeal Site, with moderate/major effects on part of the Jubilee Way at the north-western edge of the Belvoir Castle Registered Park and Garden and for visitors to Beacon Hill. I consider these to be significant.
- 3.1.8 There would also be residual adverse visual effects after decommissioning and restoration. This is interrelated with the landscape effects described above, from the additional hedgerow and tree planting (intended to screen the solar panels) which would increase the sense of enclosure along F82, F90 and along F85B and result in the obscuring of historic landmark features of Belvoir Castle and church spires.

4 MATTERS IN DISPUTE

- 4.1.1 I have concluded that the proposal would not recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the 'Vale' landscape around Bottesford and would be contrary to paragraph 180(b) of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).
- 4.1.2 The proposal would not comply with Melton Local Plan policies SS1, EN1 and D1 which require *inter alia* to conserve and, where possible, enhance the Borough's landscape and countryside.
- 4.1.3 The proposals would conflict with Bottesford Neighbourhood Plan Policies 2 and 9 which requires renewable energy development to not have an unacceptably adverse impact on the amenity of residents and visitors, including views and vistas.
- 4.1.4 There would be a noticeable loss of the expansive and rural patchwork of fields perceptible in the views of Borough-wide importance associated with Belvoir Castle towards St Marys Church, Bottesford.
- 4.1.5 The Appeal site would be seen in conjunction with other operational and permitted solar farms around Bottesford, either in combination or sequentially as people move around the area.

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