

## Planning Briefing Note – Proposed Solar Farm

### Land at Wood Lodge Farm, Thrapston (adjoining the A14)

#### Introduction

This note has been prepared to provide some initial background information in relation to a proposed development for a Solar Farm on land at Wood Lodge Farm and Coales Lodge Farm, adjoining the A14 east of Thrapston on behalf of Wood Lodge Solar Project Limited.

Electricity demand is set to double by 2050 due to the electrification of the UK including widespread use of heat pumps and electric cars. In addition, seven nuclear power stations have already been decommissioned in recent years and all 14 of the UK's coal fired power stations are set to be closed by 2025 (with only three currently operating). New energy generation is essential and with the escalating climate and ecological crisis, there is an unprecedented need for electricity to be provided urgently through clean renewable generators that don't emit carbon and can support biodiversity.

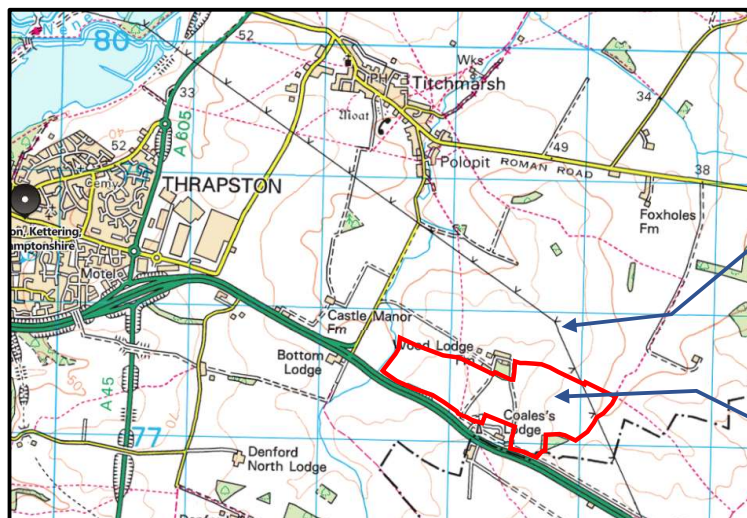
The proposed scheme would provide enough electricity to meet the needs of approximately **15,000 homes** and would offset 21,500 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> annually and deliver a net gain to biodiversity. Importantly it can be delivered within a year, just a fraction of the time it takes to deliver new power stations.

The proposals remain in draft at this stage and no planning application has yet been submitted. It is intended that a thorough process of consultation will take place with key stakeholders prior to the submission of the planning application so that any feedback received can be fully acknowledged with the potential to shape the final proposals where appropriate.

A full consultation exercise will be undertaken in due course along with a project website and public participation. Full details will be available shortly to enable the local community to express their views.

#### The Proposed Site

The proposed site is located to the north east of the A14 and approximately 1.5km from eastern edge of Thrapston. It comprises three agricultural fields and includes a length of existing track for the site access.



Transmission line for connection into the grid

Site location



The site is not located in any significant environmentally sensitive areas. For the avoidance of doubt the site is **not** located in an:

1. Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty;
2. National Park;
3. Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)
4. Nature Reserve or protected habitat
5. Ancient woodland
6. Special Area of Conservation (SAC)
7. Green Belt
8. The setting of listed buildings, Scheduled Monuments or other designated heritage assets.

The site is predominantly lower grade agricultural land, which is where government policy seeks to direct new energy generators. There is no grade 1 or 2 land within the site. In any event, the proposal would be temporary and the land would be grazed by sheep to maintain an element of farming. A full archaeological survey has been undertaken including geophysics and trial trenching; the site contains some pockets of archaeological remains and as such, these areas will be avoided and retained in arable farming.

#### The Proposed Development

The proposed development will consist of the installation of a solar farm comprising ground mounted solar PV panels with a generating capacity of up to 49.99MW(AC), including mounting framework, inverters, underground cabling, stock proof fence, CCTV, internal tracks and associated infrastructure, landscaping, biodiversity net gain and environmental enhancements for a temporary period of 50 years.

Considerable landscaping works are proposed to be incorporated alongside the solar panels with a view to enhancing natural screening of the development and reinforcing the key habitat features within the area alongside wildflower areas.

The development is proposed to be a 'temporary installation', being operational for a period of 50 years, after which the site would be restored to its current agricultural function. This type of planning consent would not alter the greenfield status of the land in any way which might facilitate further prospective development of the site.

#### Need for Renewable Energy

Acknowledging the scale of the challenges described in the introduction to this note, National Policy accepts that renewable energy is essential and as such, specifically doesn't require applicants to demonstrate a need.

A Government Planning Inspector has recently written an important decision on a solar farm which was scrutinized at a public Inquiry in Dorset (Ref: 3300299). He clarified the sheer scale of the challenge faced in decarbonising our economy and the need for the planning system to facilitate this transition. In determining the Appeal the Inspector noted that:

*"it is clear that decarbonisation will rely very heavily on wind and solar power, and that the national need is significantly greater than the capacity of current projects.*

*The Government's latest Energy Security Strategy (2022) identifies the need for five times as much solar PV deployment by 2035. This scheme is essential to help address climate change."*



As set out above, with electricity demand soaring, traditional non-renewable power stations being decommissioned and the climate emergency more acute than ever, this proposal is essential.

We are aware of the Elgin Energy solar farm proposal to the north of this site but this alone does not satisfy the need, indeed both schemes are essential, albeit we consider this site to be better suited (it is lower grade land, it is located adjacent to existing development in the form of the busy A14 and construction traffic will not need to be routed through any villages). We will however, assess cumulative impact as part of the planning application.

#### Important Facts about the Proposal

- A solar farm must be located near to a point of connection; this proposal will connect into the pylon that is located on site.
- There are no environmental or landscape designations on this site; it is not environmentally sensitive demonstrated by the absence of designations.
- There is one public right of way through the site, however it is severed by the A14 so is a 'dead end'. We will however retain the route and ensure it is surrounded by a buffer of wildflower planting.
- The construction route will either be from the east or directly off the A14, but neither option will result in construction traffic being routed through a village.
- It is predominantly lower grade agricultural land (3B) and the proposal will support ongoing sheep farming on the site alongside energy production.
- This proposal is temporary and fully reversible. It will not set a precedent for any future development since it will not change the status of the land to 'brownfield'.
- There is an ecological emergency across the UK. The land is farmed and does not provide a good habitat for biodiversity. The proposal would result in much improved habitat and a biodiversity net gain will be achieved across the site.
- A Community benefit fund is available and will be directed towards important local initiatives. Further information on this will follow shortly.



*Photograph of a UK solar farm showing flourishing biodiversity.*



### What happens next?

The planning application is currently being prepared and it is anticipated that an application would be submitted in the Spring. We will shortly start a full local consultation on draft proposals which will include a project website and presentation to the Parish Council. Community feedback will help to shape the proposals before they are finalised and importantly, help to identify local initiatives that can be supported by our Community Benefit Fund.

The technical work to support the planning application is ongoing and has comprised the full suite of necessary assessment including the following key disciplines:

**Ecology** – Survey work is being undertaken to confirm baseline habitat types and the bird interest across the site. The proposed scheme will ensure that appropriate buffer distances are maintained to the hedgerow habitats and that it would deliver a net gain in biodiversity, calculated using the Natural England metric.

**Landscape** – An initial, technical assessment of the site and the wider topography has been undertaken in order to ensure that the proposed scheme can be accommodated in the landscape without significant landscape and visual impacts.

A Landscape and Visual Appraisal is ongoing and this will assess the impacts upon all sensitive receptors in the area and further inform the final design of the proposed landscaping scheme.

**Heritage** – All archaeological investigations are completed and associated pockets of archaeology on the site will be avoided and kept in arable use. The proposed scheme is sited at considerable distance from any listed buildings or other heritage assets.

### Key Deliverables

The proposed scheme represents a key component in optimising the supply and management of our existing electricity supply and would deliver the following key benefits:

- The project would help to secure electricity supply onto the local distribution network for local people at a time of increased uncertainty due to various factors including the war in Ukraine, rising electricity demand and decommissioning of power stations.
- Contributing to the UK and the Council's own objective of tackling the Climate Emergency which was declared in July 2021.
- Deliver a Biodiversity Net Gain measured using Natural England's Metric.
- The development will be well-screened and initial findings show the proposal will not give rise to any overriding adverse visual impacts.
- Retain the long-term agricultural function of the land with the option for sheep grazing whilst using predominantly lower grade land.
- The development will not attract any noticeable vehicle movements once operational.
- Local community benefit fund – grants provided to local community projects

