

Cotmoor Solar Farm Applicant Response to Committee Report

PEGASUS REF: P18-2917

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This Note has been prepared to provide the Applicant's response to the Officer's Committee Report for application ref: 20/01242/FULM for the Construction of a solar farm and battery stations together with all associated works, equipment and necessary infrastructure on Land North of Halloughton, which is due to be determined at Planning Committee on 2nd March 2021.
- 1.2 This Note is provided in lieu of the opportunity for the Applicant to address the Planning Committee during the meeting.

2. RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 It is noted that the officer's recommendation is for refusal of the application with a single suggested reason for refusal.
- 2.2 It is clear from the preceding assessment that this recommendation is the result of a finely balanced consideration of the perceived effects of the development and public benefits that would result from planning permission being granted, with the Officer considering the alleged effects would "tip the balance" and outweigh the benefits.
- 2.3 The suggested reason for refusal confirms the effects which weigh against planning permission being granted are:
 - Heritage effects on Halloughton Conservation Area and Listed Buildings within this area and on the Grade II Listed Brackenhurst complex and South Hill House
 - Landscape and visual effects of the development
- 2.4 A summary of these matters is provided below, together with confirmation of the public benefits which should be given weight in favour of planning permission.

3. HERITAGE EFFECTS

- 3.1 The Application Site does not contain any heritage assets and none would be physically affected by the proposed development. Any effects are therefore to the setting of heritage assets in the vicinity.

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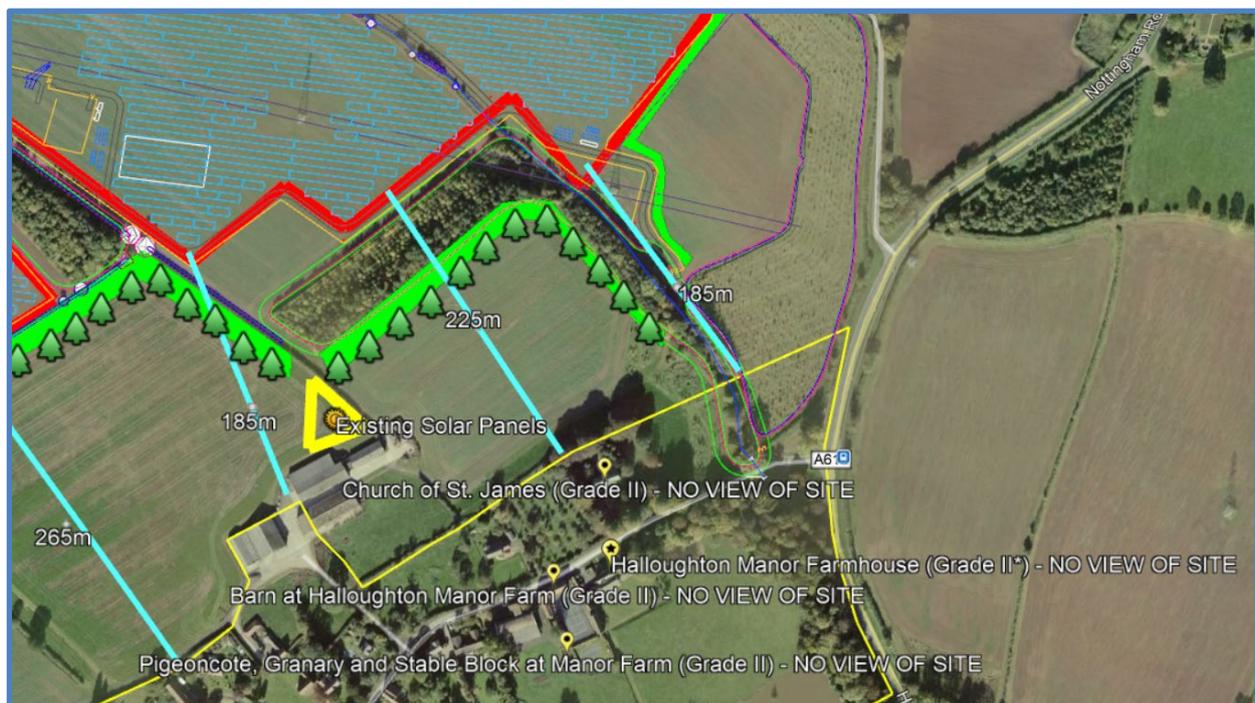
3.2 The Officer's report confirms that the assessment of impact on significance of heritage assets by virtue of changes to their setting is:

- Halloughton Conservation Area: Less than substantial harm at the higher end of the scale of 'less than substantial' and harm to the setting of listed buildings within the Conservation Area
- Brackenhurst College Complex: Less than substantial harm
- South Hill House: Less than substantial harm

3.3 The Officer's report is guided by, and the conclusions are consistent with, the Newark & Sherwood Conservation Officer's advice. It is, however, questioned whether the advice has been made with correct understanding of the site and its surroundings. Pages 14-17 of the Committee Report comprise the Conservation Officer's response. Page 16 states:

"The solar arrays are within 100m of the Church (Church of St James, Grade II Listed), and around the CA."

3.4 The distance between the arrays and the church is, however, more than 225m. It therefore appears likely that the extent of harm factored into the consideration of the planning balance has been overstated as a result of this misunderstanding of the site and its context. The figure and images below clearly demonstrate, that there is no intervisibility between the Church of St. James, Manor Farmhouse or other listed buildings and the proposed scheme. This is further supported by drone video footage which will also be submitted as a late item.



Site Context in relation to Halloughton Conservation Area / Listed Buildings

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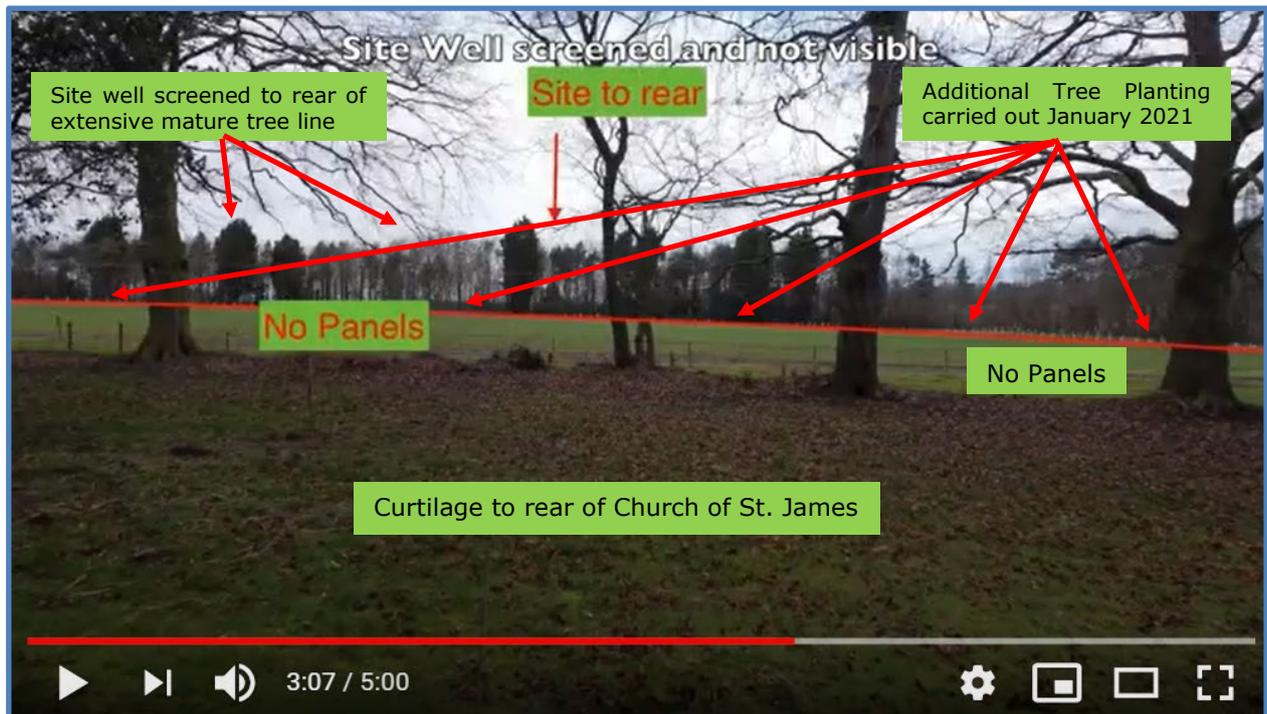
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View from front of Church of St. James looking north towards the proposed site



View from rear of Church of St. James looking north towards the proposed site

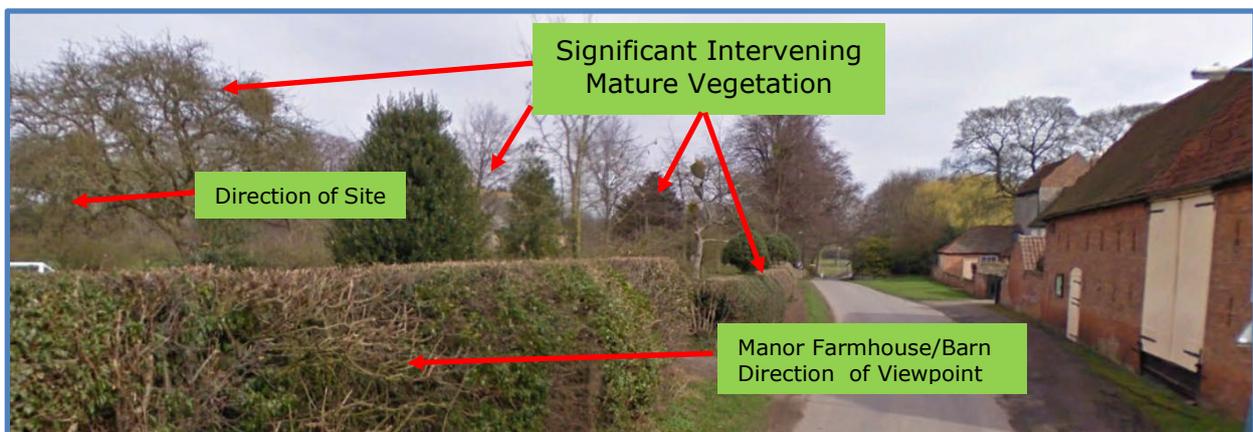
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View from entrance to Manor Farmhouse / Barn with back to both listed buildings looking north towards the proposed site – dwelling in foreground is not listed



Side view of Manor Farmhouse / Barn showing existing intervening mature vegetation

3.5 Page 16 of the Committee Report which contains the Conservation Officer's response also states:

"The proposal will be prominent in the landscape, and will have the effect of swamping the historic village of Halloughton. This will be particularly noticeable at the entrance to the CA at both east and west entrances, but also from within the CA and from outside where intervisibility is possible (including from bridleways to the south and east)."

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- 3.6 The site is not visible from the eastern entrance to the Conservation Area as demonstrated by the below image. Therefore, the proposal could not possibly be “particularly noticeable” from the eastern entrance to the CA.



Eastern entrance to Conservation Area - Site not visible due to dense woodland vegetation

- 3.7 It is acknowledged that there will be a glimpse view of the top of one field of the proposed scheme from the western end of the Conservation Area, however panels have been removed from the sloping ground of this field and only placed further up on a plateau section. A proposed new hedgerow with dotted trees will screen most of the panels from view over time. There will also be a glimpse view of the two fields next to this on the far side of the existing hedgerow, however this hedgerow will be allowed to grow in height and a new 14 metre thick tree belt has been planted in January 2021 across the southern (village side) boundary of these fields, which will ensure the development is completely screened out over time.



3.8 Solar panels will not be visible from ground level within the Conservation Area with the exception of the western entrance as noted in the previous paragraph and this view will be screened out over time. There are only two 2-storey dwellings within the Conservation Area with theoretical visibility from their upstairs rear/side windows only. This is clearly noted on page 38 of the Officer’s Committee Report and accepted by the LPA. It is evident that the proposal will not “swamp” the CA or be “prominent in the landscape” or be noticeable within the CA as stated in the Conservation Officer’s comments. Again, it is our professional opinion that the extent of harm factored into the consideration of the planning balance has been overstated by the Conservation Officer based on the evidence provided.

3.9 The Conservation Officer’s comments on page 16 of the Officer’s Committee Report also states;

“Impact on individual heritage assets within Halloughton CA is reduced by the presence of extensive hedge and tree screening. However, this mitigation will be less effective in winter”

3.10 It should be noted that the extensive additional woodland planting already carried out in January 2021 along the southern boundary (village side) contains a mix of evergreen species and other species which will provide year round screening. The full list of species include Douglas Fir, Western Hemlock, Western Red Cedar, Hazel, Holly, Hornbeam, Sweet Chestnut, Beech, Privet, Copper Beach, Holm Oak and Field Maple. The total number of trees planted in January 2021 is 7,989. The remaining proposed planting at the eastern and western ends of the development will be carried out should planning permission be granted.

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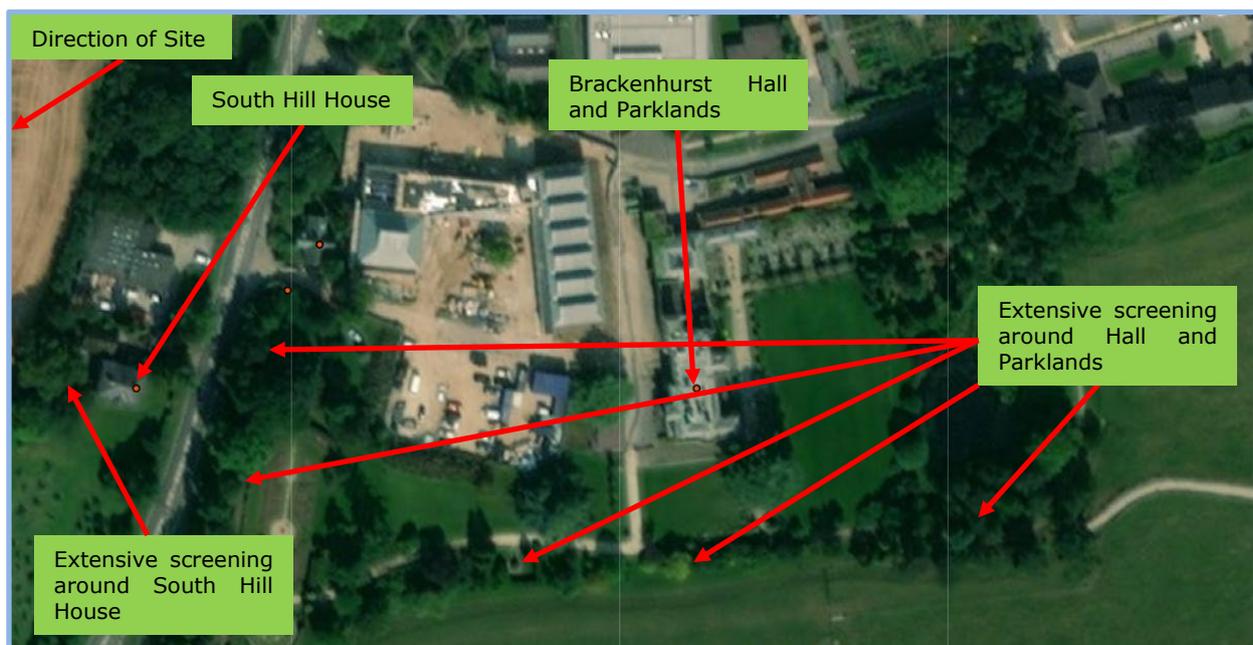
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On the same page of the Officer's Report the Conservation Officer's comments state;

"We are also concerned about impact on heritage assets at Brackenhurst, including the Hall and South Hill House which is most prominently exposed to the solar farm proposals. Whilst we accept that there is unlikely to be any intervisibility from the Hall itself, there will be an impact on the experience of travelling along the Nottingham Road to and from Brackenhurst. The applicant has not presented any persuasive evidence that there are no material receptors within and close to the historic parkland surrounding the Hall."

- 3.11 The Conservation Officer's comments acknowledge there is no intervisibility between the Hall / South Hill House and the proposed site. Regarding the parkland surrounding the Hall, this is just as well screened as the Hall itself from the development as shown below. Again, it is our professional opinion that the extent of harm factored into the consideration of the planning balance has been overstated by the Conservation Officer based on the evidence provided.



- 3.12 The Applicant's detailed assessment of heritage effects, undertaken following a site visit to fully understand the site and its surroundings and in accordance with relevant Historic England guidance, indicates that this is an overstatement of harm. The Applicant's assessment finds:

- Halloughton Conservation Area: Very small degree of harm at the lowest end of the scale of 'less than substantial' and no harm to the individual significances of the listed buildings in the Conservation Area.

- Brackenhurst College Complex: No harm
- South Hill House: No harm

3.13 The Applicant's conclusions regarding impact on the conservation area is due to the careful siting of the development to ensure little intervisibility between it and the proposed development, plus significant planting proposed and already carried out between the development and the Conservation Area boundary, which would, in itself, enhance landscape character.

3.14 The Applicant's approach to siting of the development in relation to heritage assets is in accordance with recently published Historic England guidance on solar parks, which states:

"Harmful visual impacts on the settings of heritage assets can be avoided or reduced through sensitive design and layout, and mitigation measures such as tree and hedge planting to screen the development. However, care needs to be taken that these measures do not themselves have an adverse impact on the heritage setting or landscape character."¹

Amendments to Scheme

3.15 Notwithstanding the Applicant's assessment of the originally proposed scheme, the development has been amended to remove panels from the Proposed Development, including from the land closest to the village and to provide even further planting.

3.16 This means that the Conservation Area boundary is now a minimum of 185m from the extent of the solar farm, with significant intervening planting.

3.17 These amendments are considered to reduce any effects even further, on the setting of the Conservation Area and heritage assets contained within it, than that is reported in the Applicant's Heritage Assessment.

Corner Copse Solar Farm, Swindon

3.18 The heritage effects of the development are considered lower than that reported in the Officer's Committee report and factored in the planning balance. However, should the level of harm stated be deemed correct, it is considered useful to outline details of a site for which the Applicant received planning permission for in 2020 in Swindon Borough for a similar sized solar scheme (Corner Copse Solar, Stanton Fitzwarren²).

3.19 The solar farm runs parallel to and is within 80m (significantly closer than 185m at Halloughton) of Stanton Fitzwarren village and Conservation Area. The Council's Conservation Officer found that the potential effects would be *"scale of upper end of less than substantial – to substantial harm to the character and appearance of the*

¹ Historic England Advice Note 15: Commercial Renewable Energy Development and the Historic Environment, Paragraph 70 (February 2021)

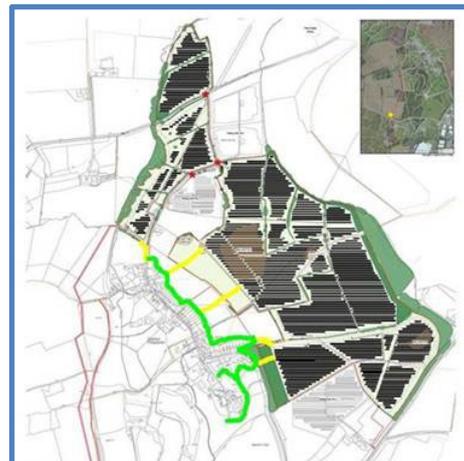
² Swindon Borough Council Planning Reference: S/19/1097

Conservation Area; and less than substantial harm to the moderate end regarding the listed buildings."

- 3.20 The case officer goes on to consider the level of harm alleged by the Conservation Officer against the requirements of the NPPF to weigh this harm against public benefits. The case officer notes that the scheme would supply the equivalent electricity needed to power approximately 15,000 homes in Swindon per annum which has the substantive benefit of reducing approximately 25,000t of CO2 emissions per annum, together with other economic, environmental and social benefits. The officer therefore concludes that:

"It is officers' view that the identified public benefits outweighs the identified temporary harm to the conservation area, designated and undesignated heritage assets to warrant the grant of planning permission in this instance."

- 3.21 The circumstances are analogous with that reported by the case officer for this application and demonstrates that planning permission can be granted when considering the weight to be applied to the wider renewable energy benefits and carbon reduction in the context of legally binding emission reduction targets and the declared climate emergency.



Stanton Fitzwarren Conservation Area (CA) Corner Copse Solar within 80m of the CA

4. LANDSCAPE & VISUAL EFFECTS

- 4.1 The Application Site is not subject to any designation relating to its landscape value. Solar farms of this scale, which would deliver this scale of benefit, must inevitably have some landscape and visual effects.
- 4.2 In this context, adverse effects on landscape character are localised to within the boundaries of the Application Site and adverse effects experienced across the wider landscape character policy zones diminish rapidly beyond the Site's boundaries.

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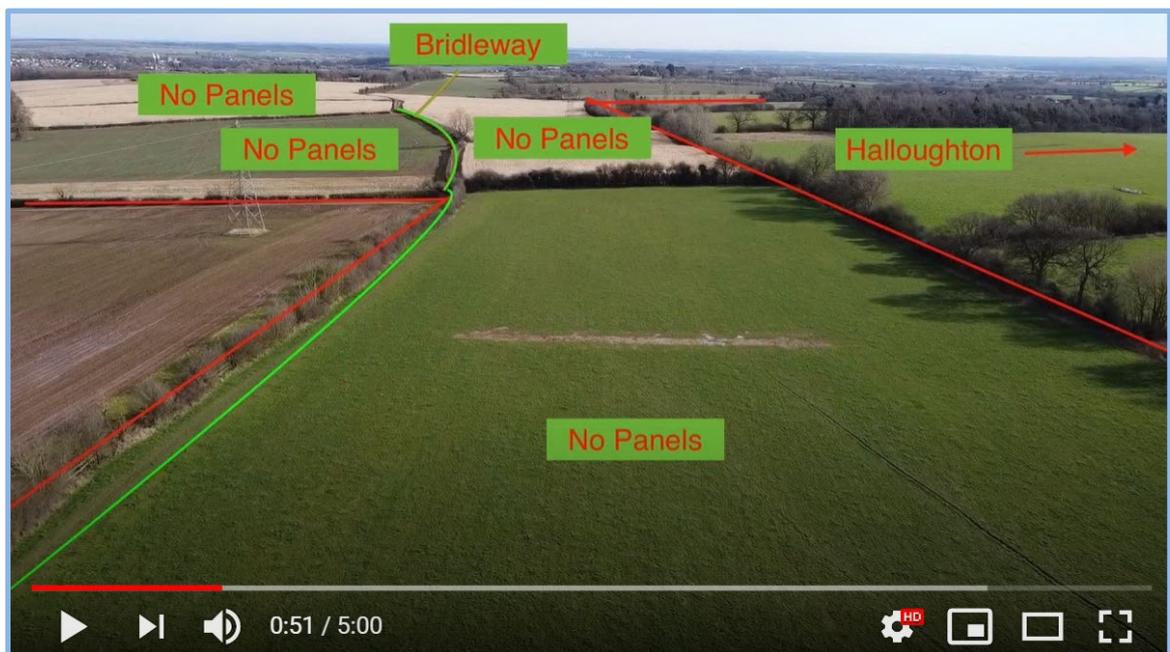
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- 4.3 Other key characteristics of the landscape character policy zones 37, 38 and 39 such as hedgerows, hedgerow trees and woodlands would be enhanced through the substantial increase in planting proposed across the Site. These enhancements would remain after the proposals have been decommissioned, which is beneficial in terms of enhancing the green infrastructure network and local landscape character.
- 4.4 The major or moderate adverse visual effects identified are confined to either within, or in close proximity to the Site, such as from PRoW Southwell 43 which is located in the far northern extent of the Site. Views from the landscape surrounding the Site are frequently filtered or curtailed by intervening vegetation, topography and in places, built form, and as confirmed by the visual analysis supplied within the LVIA and subsequent landscape and visual documents, there are no locations across the surrounding landscape where views of the whole development could be experienced.

Amendments to Scheme

- 4.5 The amendments to the proposed development have included the complete removal of all panels from a field to the immediate south of Bridleway 74, which reduces the impact for uses on this Public Right of Way, as demonstrated in the image below.



- 4.6 The comments from VIA to the case officer agreed that this amendment would reduce effects.

5. SUMMARY

- 5.1 The officer's report includes a finely balanced consideration where the harm identified tips the balance away from recommendation of planning permission being granted.
- 5.2 Heritage effects factored into this balance are considered to be overstated, possibly due to a misunderstanding of the Application Site's proximity to nearby heritage

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assets. It is considered correct for a lower amount of harm to be factored into the planning balance.

- 5.3 Landscape and visual effects are localised to within the Application Site and are considered particularly limited for a development of this scale, which would deliver substantial public benefits.
- 5.4 Any effects of the development must also be considered in the context of the Applicant's Site Selection Report (which includes the need for available grid capacity), which demonstrates that this is the most preferable potential location to deliver the public benefits within the Newark and Sherwood District and Nottinghamshire County.
- 5.5 It is therefore considered correct for planning permission to be granted when the effects of the development are considered against the public benefits. Most significant of which is the contribution to reducing CO₂ emissions by 20,690t³ per annum and providing equivalent power to c.12,000 homes per annum, displacing the need for energy to be generated by carbon emitting methods.