

21 March, 2013

Development Services
Monkton Park
Chippenham
Wiltshire
SN15 1ER

Tel: 01249 706444
email:developmentmanagementnorth@wiltshire.gov.uk
www.wiltshire.gov.uk

Application No: N/13/00435/SCR

**Screening Opinion as to whether an Environmental Impact Assessment Is Required In Relation to a Proposed Photovoltaic (PV) Solar Farm.
Wickfield Farm, Royal Wootton Bassett, Swindon, Wiltshire, SN4 8QR**

Dear Ms Donkin,

Screening Opinion for Solar Park
Land at Wickham Farm, Royal Wootton Bassett

I refer to your request received on 15th February 2013 under Regulations 5 (1) of the Town & Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2011 (EIA Regulations) for an opinion as to whether the installation of a solar park is Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) development.

The site comprises of 14 ha of agricultural land at Wickfield Farm, adjacent and south of the A3102 Swindon Road, located between Royal Wootton Bassett and Swindon. The edge of the site is approximately 0.4 km from the edge of Royal Wootton Bassett to the west and approximately 0.9km from the edge of Swindon to the east. The M4 is to the north with junction 16 approximately 0.6km to the east. A railway runs east- west, approximately 0.5km to the south. The site is on relatively elevated land locally with hedgerows bordering the fields. Wickfield farm house is located to the south with access from the unclassified road to the south west. There is a pond to the south of the site and east of the farmhouse. To the north and south of the site is generally open countryside with scattered farmhouses and some isolated dwellings. The farmland is set in a framework of hedgerows with some small woodland areas. The North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is approximately 3km to the south. There public footpaths on the locality including a public footpath crosses the eastern part of the site, in a north east / south west alignment, intersecting the A3102. The site is within the Swindon Rural Buffer and Great Western Community Forest Area designations in the North Wiltshire Local Plan.

The submitted screening letter refers to a number of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and conservation assets within 5km of the site:

SSSIs:

- i) Wootton Bassett Mud Spring lies 1.8km to the south west;
- ii) Goldborough Farm Meadows lies 2.4km to the south;
- iii) Bincknoll Dip Woods lies 3.6km to the south and;
- iv) Restrop Farm and Brockhurst Wood lies 3.9km to the north.

Local Nature Reserves in the area include Jubilee Lake 2.4km to the north west and Rushey Platt Canalside Park 4.4km to the east. There are two County Wildlife Sites approximately 1.2km to the south.

Scheduled Monuments:

- i) a Medieval Rural Settlement 240m south of Lower Woodshaw Farm lies 1 km to the south west;
- ii) a Post Mill at Church Lane lies 1.2km to the north west;
- iii) Post Mill Mound 150m north west of Brynards Hill Farm lies 1.9km to the west;
- iv) Roman pottery 140m SSW of Tewkesbury Cross lies 2.8km to the north east and;

v) Bincknoll Camp lies 3.6km to the south. Lydiard Park is a Grade II designated Park and Garden, which lies 2.8km to the north of the site.

Listed Buildings:

A Milestone near Spittleborough Farm (Grade II) is located on the site boundary.

Other nearby Listed Buildings include:

- i) Upper Studley Farm House (Grade II) 0.7km to the east;
- ii) A Bridge near Swindon Road (Grade II) 0.7km to the south;
- iii) Lower Woodshaw Farm (Grade II) 0.8km to the west;
- iv) Studley Grange Farm House (Grade II) 1km to the south east and;
- v) Milestone at NGR SU 080831 opposite Nor Marsh Road (Grade II) 1km to the north west.

There are numerous other Listed Buildings within 5km of the site including those within the Conservation Areas of Royal Wootton Bassett approximately 2km to the west and Lydiard Millicent 3.2km to the north.

The screening letter states that the proposal would constitute the construction of Solar Photo Voltaic PV panels laid out in rows running from east to west and would generate up to 7 MW of electricity. The height of the installation would be limited to 2.4m above ground level, the framework would be driven into the ground without foundations and the solar panels would be 25 degrees from the horizontal. There would be a security fence to restrict access to the specific solar arrays. It is stated that should the life span of the solar panels be reached, which at present is 25 years, then it is envisaged that the site would be restored back to full agricultural use.

The EIA regulations do not specifically refer to the need or otherwise of an EIA for solar parks, but do state that any energy industry development including "installations for the production of electricity" covering an area exceeding 0.5ha are considered to be Schedule 2 developments. As the proposal would cover an area of 14ha, it would fall to be considered against Schedule 2, paragraph 3(a) of the Regulations. The test for the need for an EIA is therefore whether the proposal would be likely to give rise to significant effects on the environment by virtue of factors such as the size of the development, cumulation with other developments, the risks of accidents having regard in particular to substances or technologies used as set out in Schedule 3

Characteristics of development

a) Size of development:

The proposed development is to erect solar arrays and associated buildings and infrastructure on 14ha of land to produce 7 MW of power.

The site is on relatively elevated land in the sensitive Swindon Rural Buffer. The County Landscape Architect has commented as follows:

It is my understanding that the applicant 'A.C. Crocker Properties Ltd.' has requested a screening opinion from Wiltshire Council as the appropriate Local Planning Authority under Regulation 5 of the 2011 EIA Regulations for installation of Photo Voltaic apparatus for the purpose of generating up to 7 MW of renewable solar energy.

The information submitted in relation to the location of proposed development, description of the proposed development (although I note likely control & inverter buildings, temporary and permanent access requirements have not been included within the description of the proposed development), and initial evaluation of environmental sensitivity provided within Peta Donkin's (Pegasus Group) letter dated 14 February 2013, is adequate for the LPA to consider the screening request in my opinion.

The proposed development does obviously qualify as 'Schedule 2 development' within the description and thresholds criteria as prescribed within the schedule under; '3. Energy Industry (a) Industrial installations for the production of electricity, steam and hot water (unless included in Schedule 1)' as the proposed development area exceeds 0.5 hectares. The question is whether the potential environmental effects are likely to be significant when screened against Part 4(6) & Schedule 3 of the EIA Regulations & paras. 33-47 of Circular 02/99 Environmental impact assessment.

The proposed industrial installation at this elevated and visible countryside location will in effect urbanise half of the existing rural length of the A3102 (Swindon Road) between J16 of the M4 motorway (edge of Swindon) and the

gateway to Royal Wootton Bassett at Upper Woodshaw, along the midpoint of one of the narrowest points of the rural buffer separating Swindon from Royal Wootton Bassett. The site is overlooked by the AONB to the south, and residential areas to the west. This will in my opinion result in visually prominent urbanisation of the countryside, in a location which is recognised to be particularly vulnerable to urban fringe sprawl/pressures leading to settlement coalescence.

The proposed development may require an environmental statement, although I'm inclined to suggest that this would be unnecessary in this instance as a comprehensive & iterative Landscape & Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) process, the scope of which should be agreed with the LPA before it is carried out, could adequately assess landscape and visual effects, including assessment of increased urbanising effect within the rural buffer, the setting of the town (Royal Wootton Bassett), physical and visual settlement coalescence and inter-visibility issues with the AONB etc.

Whether the LPA consider the proposals to constitute EIA development or not, I would recommend that the applicant seeks early pre-application planning advice before proceeding to make a full planning application, or before they commission a Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment for the purpose of supporting any subsequent planning application. As in my opinion this proposed location is completely unsuitable for development of this industrial scale and nature.

Taking into account the nature and height of the component parts, it is considered that a comprehensive LVIA would be required to assess the landscape impact of the development.

b) Cumulation with other development:

The Circular elaborates at paragraphs 45 & 46 confirming that each application (or request for opinion) must be considered for EIA on its own merits. The development should be judged on what is being proposed by the developer. However in judging whether the effects of a development are likely to be significant, local planning authorities should have regard to the possible cumulative effects within any existing or approved developments.

There is no comparable development in terms of scale, impact or sensitivity in the vicinity of the site in the local authority area that would lead to a significant environmental impact in conjunction with the proposed development.

c) and d) Use of natural resources and production of waste

The site will involve the development of green field land for a specified time period. No significant waste is to be produced.

d) and f) Pollution, nuisance and risk of accidents, having regard to substances or technologies used

It is not considered that the proposal would increase the possibility of pollution, nuisance or risk of accidents.

Location of development

This concerns the environmental sensitivity of the geographical area likely to be affected by the development. The relevant criteria proposed as follows:

a) The existing land use

Paragraph A19 of Circular 02/99 confirms that development proposed for sites which have not been intensively developed are more likely to require an EIA if the site is more than 5ha.

The site comprises a pair of agricultural fields divided by a hedgerow and surrounded by hedgerow boundaries with occasional trees. The development would result in a relatively large electricity generation facility in open countryside.

b) and c) Relative abundance, quality and regenerative capacity of the natural resources in the area and absorption capacity into the natural environment:

The County Ecologist has commented as follows:

Having reviewed the available information, it is considered unlikely that the proposals would have likely significant effects upon the natural environment. The proposals could however have implications for protected and any

application should be supported by an Extended Phase 1 habitat survey to assess the site for the potential presence of protected species including reptiles, great crested newt, breeding birds and badger.

It is considered that the development is unlikely to have any ecological impact beyond the immediate vicinity of the site.

The location of the site is in a geographically sensitive location within the Swindon Rural Buffer. There are concerns regarding the visual impact of the development and I would refer you to the comments of the County Landscape Architect above and the need for a comprehensive Landscape Visual Impact Assessment to assess any such proposal.

There is a footpath crossing the eastern part of the site.

Characteristics of potential impact

The potential significant impacts of development must be considered in relation to criteria set out under paragraphs 1 and 2 of Schedule 3.

(a) to (c) extent, magnitude and complexity of impacts

The likely impacts of this development are not considered to be complex and are largely localised upon the surrounding area.

(d) and (e) concern the probability of impacts, their duration, frequency and reversibility

A timescale of 25 years for the initial installation is proposed at this time; being fairly typical of the estimated lifespan for the products currently available for this purpose. Due to the type and limited amount of ground works necessary to accommodate the solar PV arrays proposed, it would seem likely that the reversal of the development would be entirely possible; and a condition to do so reasonable, if justified in itself.

Conclusions

Paragraph 33 of Circular 02/99 "Environmental Impact Assessment" states an EIA will be needed for Schedule 2 developments in 3 main categories.

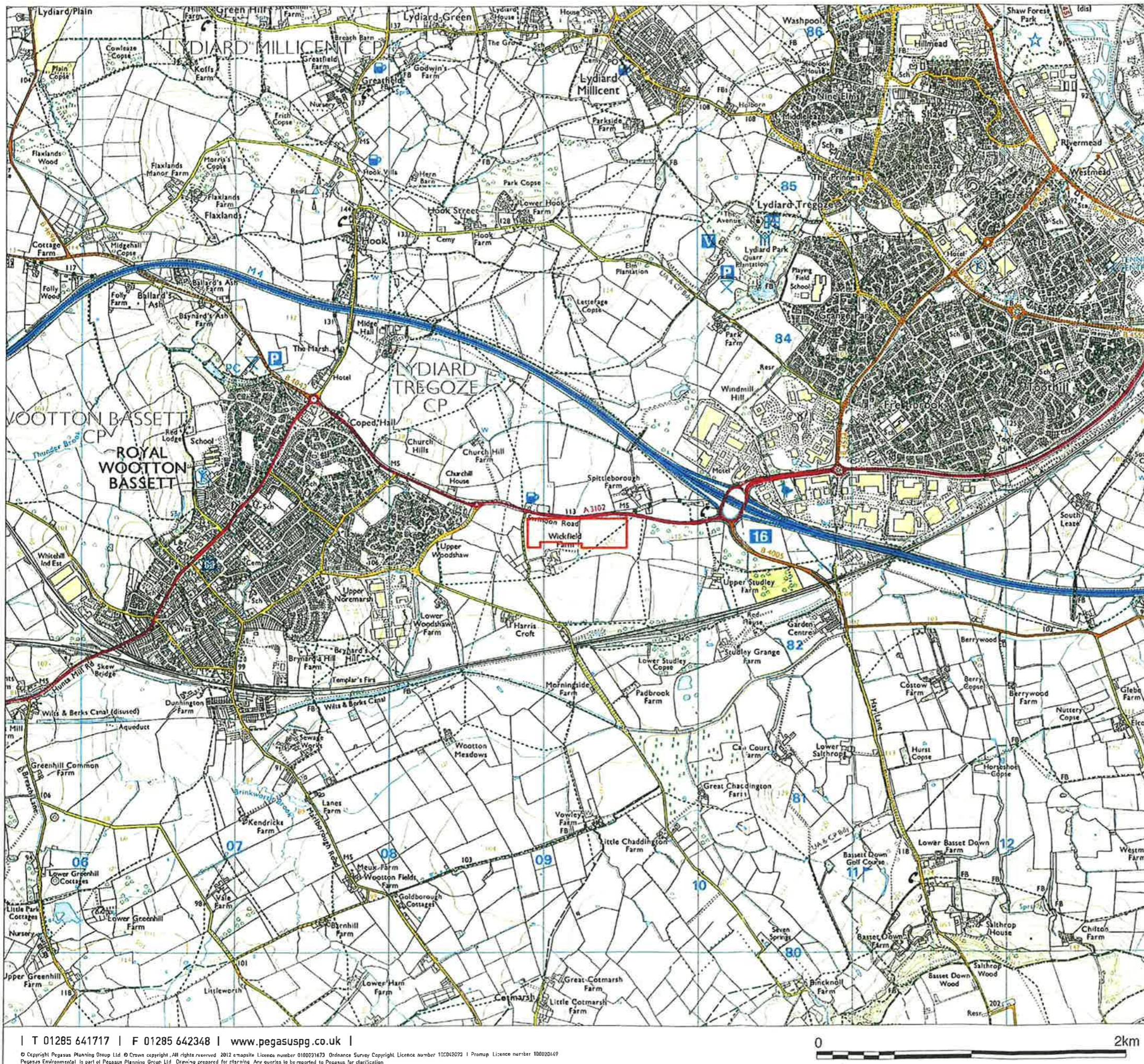
- a) For major developments which are of more than local importance;
- b) For developments which are proposed for particularly environmentally sensitive or vulnerable locations;
and
- c) For development with unusually complex and potentially hazardous environmental effects.

In terms of a) the development is considered to be a large scale electricity generating installation of functional importance, but without significant impact as such on any area beyond its locality.


With regard to b) the site is considered to possess a degree of environmental sensitivity with regard to the ecological and in particular the landscape receptors.

In the case of c), it is not considered that the proposal would have any potentially hazardous environmental implications for the site.

Taking the above into account, the Council concludes that assessed against the criteria set out in the 2011 Regulations and the guidance set out in Circular 02/99 an Environmental Impact Assessment **will not be required** for the proposed Solar Park at Land at Wickham Farm, Royal Wootton Bassett. However, a comprehensive LVIA would be required and habitat survey would be required. You are advised to contact the LPA to discuss relevant requirements for supporting information that should support any planning application.



KEY

 Application Site Boundary

13 / 00435

PLANNING SERVICES
15 FEB 2013

Wickfield Farm, Wootton Bassett

Site Location Plan

Client:
Adrian Crocker

Drawn by : JS

Checked by : SGC

Date : 13.02.13

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1 : 25,000 @ A3

