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Project No: 312040

Green Belt Assessment – Leaford Solar Farm

Prepared for:

Renewable Energy Systems Ltd.

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Contents Amendment Record

This report has been issued and amended as follows:

Revision	Description	Date	Signed
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Acknowledgement

This report has been prepared for the sole and exclusive use of Renewable Energy Systems Ltd. in accordance with the scope of work presented in Mabbett & Associates Ltd (Mabbett) Letter-Agreement (312040/LA/SB/pb Rev 5.0), dated 30th January 2023. This report is based on information and data collected by Mabbett. Should any of the information be incorrect, incomplete or subject to change, Mabbett may wish to revise the report accordingly.

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Executive Summary

The proposed development comprises the construction and operation of a solar farm development with a maximum generation capacity of 30MW and the associated infrastructure. The Proposed Development covers an area of 69.21-hectares and lies within the North Staffordshire Green Belt designation.

This Green Belt Assessment concludes that the Proposed Development is not likely to result in significant environment impacts and would provide the opportunity to bring ecological and landscape enhancements to the surrounding area through a positive biodiversity net gain of 74.2% habitat units and 22.04% hedgerow units and the introduction of proposed native hedgerow and tree planting to screen the site from critical viewpoints, alongside proposed wildflower seed mix at the Public Rights of Way and proposed enhanced grassland throughout the Application Site. The purpose of the Proposed Development is to generate a renewable source of electricity, aiding in contributing towards a transition to a low carbon economy with the potential to power up to 8,000 UK homes, whilst the installation of battery storage at the site will allow for electricity to be stored and utilised at a later date, when these sources are not available. The Proposed Development would also help boost economic growth and support new employment opportunities, therefore complying with the NPPF.

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Section 1.0: Green Belt Assessment

1.1 Introduction

Renewable Energy Systems Ltd. (herein the Applicant) is applying to Stafford Borough Council (SBC) for full planning permission for the construction and operation of Leaford Solar Farm and its associated infrastructure (herein the Proposed Development). The Proposed Development would include energy storage to help increase the flexibility and generation opportunities of the site. The Proposed Development would comprise the construction and operation of a maximum generation capacity 30MW solar array and its associated infrastructure on a site of 69.21 hectares, on land to the northeast of Fulford, between Stallington and Saverley Green, Staffordshire, approximately centred on grid reference 395651, 339248.

The description of the Proposed Development is as follows:

"Construction and Operation of a solar farm with all associated works, equipment, necessary infrastructure and biodiversity net gains."

1.1.1 Application Site

For the purposes of this Green Belt Assessment, the term 'Application Site' refers to the red line illustrated on Figure 2: Site Location Map (Drawing Number: 05004-RES-LAY-DR-PT-003), submitted alongside the planning application.

The Application Site comprises 69.21 hectares (Ha) of agricultural land. The land within the Application Site is divided into 19 fields, which are largely bound by well-established and mature hedgerows, woodland and trees. Field numbers are illustrated on Figure *3*: Field Numbers submitted alongside the planning application. To the north of the site, a 33kV overhead line runs in a west-east direction crossing Field 2 and Field 3. In addition to this, there are two 11kV overhead lines that cross the site towards the middle of the Application Site boundary; one of these flows in a northwest-southeast direction and crosses Fields 5, 6, 8 and 9 and the other line flows in a southwest-northeast direction and crosses Field 12 and Field 14.

According to the Cranfield University Soilscapes Map[1], the soil within the Application Site comprises "*slowly permeable seasonally wet slightly acid but base-rich loamy and clayey soils*". According to Natural England Provisional Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) Map[2], the land within the Application Site comprises Grade 3 land. An Agricultural Land Classification Report is submitted alongside this planning application. The report determined that 95.68% of the Application Site is Grade 3b and 4.32% is Grade 3a land. The Proposed Development largely avoids development in Grade 3a land, which is considered best and most versatile land, with only small areas in Field 9 and Field 12 of Grade 3a being utilised for development.

The Application Site comprises grassland divided by hedgerows with areas of woodland and trees present. The land within the Application Site is gently undulating, south-facing and ranging in elevation from approximately 165m above ordnance datum (AOD) in Field 3 to approximately 205m AOD in Field 11. Critically, the development does not plan to alter the topography of the site.

1.2 Introduction to the Green Belt Assessment

The Application Site lies within the North Staffordshire Green Belt designation. The aim of this Green Belt Assessment is to demonstrate the following:

- Assessment of the Proposed Development upon the openness and character of the Green Belt;
- Identification of very special circumstances relevant to the Proposed Development; and
- Acceptability of the Proposed Development at the Application Site.

[1] Cranfield Soil and Agricultural Institute. Soilscapes. Available online: http://www.landis.org.uk/soilscapes/
[2] Natural England, Provisional ALC Map. Available online: https://naturalengland-defra.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/provisional-agricultural-land-classification-alc-england?geometry=-1.582%2C54.587%2C-1.543%2C54.596

1.3 Green Belt Policy & Guidance

1.3.1 National Policy

The fundamental aim of Green Belt Policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. Section 13 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)[3] (2023) sets out the national policy approach to protecting the Green Belt. As stated in Paragraph 137 of the NPPF, the Government attaches great importance to Green Belts, and has adopted a fundamental aim of preventing urban sprawl by keeping Green Belt designated land open to maintain its essential characteristics of openness and permanence.

Paragraph 138 of the NPPF states that the Green Belt serves five purposes, including:

- *"To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;*
- *To prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;*
- *To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;*
- *To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and*
- *To assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land."*

As noted in Paragraph 147, *"inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances."*

Paragraph 151 states that *"when located in the Green Belt, elements of many renewable energy projects will comprise inappropriate development. In such cases, developers will need to demonstrate very special circumstances if projects are to proceed. Such very special circumstances may include the wider environmental benefits associated with increased production of energy from renewable sources."* Section 1.5 below presents an assessment and identifies very special circumstances relevant to the Proposed Development.

The Green Belt PPG[4] identifies Guidance in relation to the role of the Green Belt in the planning system. The PPG identifies a number of matters to take into consideration when assessing the potential impact of a Proposed Development upon the Green Belt. These include, but are not limited to:

- *"Openness is capable of having both spatial and visual aspects – in other words, the visual impact of the proposal may be relevant, as could its volume;*
- *The duration of the development, and its remediability – taking into account any provisions to return land to its original state or to an equivalent (or improved) state of openness; and*
- *The degree of activity likely to be generated, such as traffic generation."*

The Overarching National Policy Statement (NPS) for Energy (EN-1)[5] (2023) was adopted in November 2023, replacing the previous NPS EN-1 published in 2011.The NPS is primarily focussed on Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) developments. However, it is still relevant as a material consideration for the determination of applications that fall under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended).

Section 5.11 of the NPS identifies considerations for proposals located within the Green Belt. The NPS EN-1 highlights in Section 3.3.20 that:

"Wind and solar are the lowest cost ways of generating electricity, helping reduce costs and providing a clean and secure source of electricity supply (as they are not reliant on fuel for generation). Our analysis shows that a secure, reliable, affordable, net zero consistent system in 2050 is likely to be composed predominately of wind and solar."

[3] Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2023): National Planning Policy Framework. Available Online: National Planning Policy Framework (publishing.service.gov.uk)
[4] Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2019) Planning Practise Guidance: Green Belt. Available online: Green Belt - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
[5] Department of Energy and Climate Change: Overarching National Policy Statement for Energy (EN-1). Available online: EN-1 Overarching National Policy Statement for Energy (publishing.service.gov.uk)

The NPS EN-1 does not directly address solar farm developments in the Green Belt. Nonetheless, it details in relation to renewable infrastructure that:

"The Secretary of State should ensure that substantial weight is given to any harm to the Green Belt when considering any application for such development, while taking into account, in relation to renewable and linear infrastructure, of the extent to which its physical characteristics are such that it has limited or no impact on the fundamental purposes of Green Belt designation. Very special circumstances may include the wider environmental benefits associated with increased production of energy from renewables and other low carbon sources".

The NPS for Renewable Energy infrastructure (EN-3)[6] was also adopted in November 2023, replacing the previous NPS EN-3 published in 2011. This NPS is also primarily focused on NSIP developments. In relation to solar farm developments, Section 3.10.1 of the EN-3 states that *"the government has committed to sustained growth in solar capacity to ensure that we are on a pathway that allows us to meet net zero emissions. As such solar is a key part of the government's strategy for low-cost decarbonisation of the energy sector. "* The EN-3 does not include specific guidance in relation to the Green Belt and solar farm developments.

1.3.2 Local Policy

Local Development Plan policy aims to protect the Green Belt through the provisions of The Plan for Stafford Borough 2011-2031 (PSB1).[7] Policy SP7: Supporting the Location of New Development. Policy SP7 states that *"developments in other locations (in settlements or in the countryside) will only be supported where:*

i) If located within the green belt, it is consistent with national policies for the control of development and Policy E5;
ii) It is consistent with the objectives of Spatial Principles SP6, Policies E2 and C5 in supporting rural sustainability;
iii) It does not conflict with the environmental protection and nature conservation policies of the Plan;
iv) Provision is made for any necessary mitigating or compensatory measures to address any harmful implications."

Policy E5: Major Developed Sites in the Green Belt in PSB1 highlights that *"the following sites will be identified as previously developed sites (whether redundant or in continuing use, excluding temporary buildings) within the Green Belt, where limited infilling or the partial or complete redevelopment will be supported for employment purposes consistent with Spatial Principle SP7, which would not have a greater impact on the openness of the Green Belt and the purpose of including land within it than the existing development;*

- *Hadleigh Park (Former Creda Works Limited), Blythe Bridge.*
- *Moorfields Industrial Estate, Swynnerton.*
- *Former Meaford Power Station, Meaford, Stone."*

The Proposed Development is not located within or adjacent to any of the above sites mentioned in Policy E5. Furthermore, there will be no intervisibility at the sites mentioned in Policy E5 with the Proposed Development due to screening from woodland and built form.

In addition to this, as discussed in the Planning Statement submitted alongside the planning application, the Proposed Development is consistent with the policy objectives of Spatial Principle SP6 of supporting rural sustainability through the use of sources for renewable energy. Policy E2 focuses on rural areas outside of the Green Belt and Policy C5 is in relation to residential properties outside the settlement hierarchy and therefore both are not relevant to the Proposed Development.

[6] Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (2023). National Policy Statement for Renewable Energy Infrastructure (EN-3). Available online: NPS EN-3 - Renewable energy infrastructure (publishing.service.gov.uk)
[7] The Plan for Stafford Borough 2011-2031 (2014). Available online: The Plan for Stafford Borough - Adoption (staffordbc.gov.uk)

Furthermore, the Proposed Development adheres to Policy SP7 as it seeks to protect and enhance the surrounding environment through the suggested enhancement and habitat creation measures detailed in Figure 19: Landscape and Ecology Management Plan (LEMP) and Figure 20: Landscape and Ecology Management Plan (LEMP) Enlargement submitted alongside the planning application and shown in the results of the Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) calculations which detail that there is an overall BNG of 74.2% for habitat units and a BNG of 22.04% for hedgerow units. In addition to this, as concluded from the various specialist reports undertaken and submitted alongside the planning application, the Proposed Development is not anticipated to result in any harmful implications.

The emerging Stafford Borough Local Plan 2020-2040[8] (SBLP) will seek views on draft policies and proposals for new development across Stafford Borough over the next 20 years. This document has not yet been formally adopted as part of the planning policy framework for Stafford Borough. Nonetheless, there are relevant policies in relation to Green Belt included in the upcoming SBLP that can aid in assessing the impact on Green Belt in Stafford Borough, and which may be material considerations with regards to decision making. Policy 5: Green Belt states that *"inappropriate development will not be permitted in the Green Belt unless very special circumstances exist. Development proposals, including those involving previously developed land and buildings, in the Green Belt will be assessed against the relevant national planning policy… the openness of the Green Belt will be protected from inappropriate development in accordance with national planning policy".*

1.3.3 PSB1 Green Belt

Paragraph 9.23 of the PSB1 details the specific areas of Green Belt within Stafford Borough and the Council's reasoning for determining these as Green Belt. With reference to the location of the Proposed Development, it states that *"the Green Belt area to the north of Stafford Borough acts as a buffer to prevent unrestricted growth of the North Staffordshire conurbation, and to assist in focusing urban regeneration within the conurbation through encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land."*

1.4 Openness

National policy is clear that the fundamental aim of the Green Belt is to prevent urban sprawl, by keeping land permanently open. Therefore, the permanence and impact upon openness needs to be addressed to determine whether the Proposed Development can be considered acceptable. The impact upon openness needs to consider the spatial and visual aspects, as determined by various court rulings. In addition, a Supreme Court decision in 2020 (*Samuel Smith Old Brewer (Tadcaster) v North Yorkshire County Council*)[9] identified the assessment of openness as being a planning judgement, stating:

"Openness is the counterpart of urban sprawl and is also linked to the purposes to be served by the Green Belt. As PPG2 made clear, it is not necessarily a statement about the visual qualities of the land, though in some cases this may be an aspect of the planning judgement involved in applying this broad policy concept. Nor does it imply freedom from any form of development. Paragraph 90 shows that some forms of development, including mineral extraction, may in principle be appropriate, and compatible with the concept of openness. A large quarry may not be visually attractive while it lasts, but the minerals can only be extracted where they are found, and the impact is temporary and subject to restoration. Further, as a barrier to urban sprawl a quarry may be regarded in Green Belt policy terms as no less effective than a stretch of agricultural land."

In reference to the above Supreme Court decision in 2020, it is important to note that openness does not imply freedom from any type of development. Certain types of development, such as the Proposed Development, is effective at preserving openness and preventing urban sprawl as it would act as a barrier to urban development. The Proposed Development is temporary in nature and the land will be restored to its original condition with the benefit of the retained and enhanced landscape and biodiversity value from the matured mitigation planting detailed within the LEMP.

[8] Stafford Borough Local Plan 2020-2040: Preferred Options. Available online: New Local Plan Preferred Options (staffordbc.gov.uk)
[9] Samuel Smith Old Brewery (Tadcaster) and others v North Yorkshire Council (2018) EWCA Civ 489.

1.5 Assessment

As outlined above, the fundamental aim of Green Belt is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open; the essential characteristics of Green Belt are openness and their permanence.

As noted above and as outlined within Paragraph 138 of the NPPF, the Green Belt serves five purposes, including:

- *"To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;*
- *To prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;*
- *To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;*
- *To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and*
- *To assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land."*

Table 1.1 below provides an assessment of the Proposed Development against the five purposes of the Green Belt.

Table 1.1: Proposed Development assessed against the defined purposes of Green Belt

Purpose	Assessment	Impact on Green Belt
Purpose 1: To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas.	Urban sprawl will occur when new development is proposed on the urban fringe of settlements. The Application Site is located in a countryside location approximately 2.5km to the southeast of the closest significant urban settlement of Stoke, Small village settlements surrounding the Application Site includes Fulford located approximately 0.5km to the southwest, Stallington located approximately 0.5km to the northwest and Saverley Green located approximately 0.3km to the east of the Application Site at its closest. The Application Site is a greenfield site within the designated Green Belt. As discussed in Section 1.4, the Proposed Development would effectively preserve openness and prevent urban sprawl, acting as a barrier to urban development. Furthermore, consent is being sought for 40 years after which the components at the Application Site will be removed and returned as close as practicable to its original condition. Therefore, the Proposed Development will not be a permanent addition to the countryside location.	Low
Purpose 2: To prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another.	The Proposed Development does not represent a typical "bricks and mortar" development that would contribute towards the merging of	Low

	the neighbouring towns of Cheadle, Stone or Blythe Bridge into one another physically or visually. In addition, the consent for the Proposed Development is being sought for a temporary period of 40 years. One of the benefits of solar farm developments is the reversible nature of such developments. Following the end of the operational phase, the components of the Proposed Development would be removed and recycled where appropriate, with the land returned as close as practicable to its original condition.	
Purpose 3: To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment.	It is acknowledged that the Proposed Development is located on greenfield land, however it is unlikely to result in significant encroachment on the surrounding countryside. A countryside location is required for the viability of the Proposed Development, including the availability of a large parcel of land with minimal environmental and technical constraints, located within close proximity to a viable and available grid connection. In this case, the Forsbrook Substation, located to the northeast of the Application Site. Furthermore, the Proposed Development has been designed in order to ensure that the existing hedgerow and trees at the site are retained and enhanced in order to be utilised as natural screening in the surrounding area, further protecting the local countryside from encroachment.	Moderate
Purpose 4: To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns.	The Proposed Development would not significantly affect the setting and special character of Fulford and its Conservation Area due to the physical distance of approximately 0.5km between the Application Site and the village, as well as the topography which forms a ridge line, the trees already in situ and the proposed planting located between the Application Site and the village.	Low
Purpose 5: To assist in urban regeneration by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.	The Application Site is not located within an area of derelict or urban land, and therefore does not assist with urban regeneration. As	Negligible

	discussed in Section 1.5.1, there are no suitable areas of brownfield land within Stafford Borough Council that could accommodate the Proposed Development.	

The PPG also provides assessment criteria for development in the Green Belt. These criteria and an assessment of the Proposed Development is provided in Table 1.2 below.

Table 1.2: PPG Green Belt Criteria

Criteria	Assessment of Proposed Development
"Openness is capable of having both spatial and visual aspects – in other words, the visual impact of the proposal may be relevant, as could its volume."	As noted in the Planning Statement, an LVIA has been undertaken for the Proposed Development, including the production of a number of photomontages. The LVIA concluded that the Proposed Development has the capacity to accommodate the scale of the development within the vicinity of the Application Site and surrounding area without any significant effects on public amenity. Any significant visual effects would be restricted to residential, recreational and road user receptors crossing the Application Site itself or located within 500m of which these effects can be reduced through appropriate landscape measures. The Proposed Development would not result in harm to the "openness" of the Green Belt given the topography of the land, enclosed nature of the Application Site from existing and enhanced vegetation and the absence of critical views. The low-lying solar panels and the potential to provide enhancement and mitigation through retention of existing hedgerows and tree cover, together with the introduction of new planting, reduces the potential for visual effects. Furthermore, the Application Site has been carefully sited to ensure that natural existing screening from woodland, hedgerow and the tree belt associated with the A50 and nearby villages takes place. In addition to this, proposed hedgerow and tree planting will occur at the site, ensuring greater screening from visibility.
	In relation to permanence, as noted throughout the Planning Statement, consent is being sought for a temporary period of up to 40-years. During the period of operation, agricultural use can continue through managed sheep grazing.

"The duration of the development, and its remediability – taking into account any provisions to return land to its original state or to an equivalent (or improved) state of openness."	Following the cessation of electricity generation, the components of the solar farm and associated infrastructure would be removed from the land. Due to the non-intrusive nature of the construction of a solar farm, the solar arrays are easily removed, and the land beneath the arrays is then reinstated to its original condition and often in a better condition as it enables the ground underneath to recover while providing income for the farming business. This means solar farms help to regenerate soil quality, and so are helping to ensure the continued availability of high-quality agricultural acreage for future generations. Therefore, the Proposed Development allows for remediation onsite, returning it to its current state.
"The degree of activity likely to be generated, such as traffic generation."	As discussed within the Planning Statement, there will be traffic movements associated with the construction phase of the Proposed Development, expected to take place over a period of approximately 12 months. The Transport Statement concludes that that expected level of traffic generated is not anticipated to create additional congestion or delay on the strategic or local road network. During its operational phase, the Proposed Development will be unmanned and monitored remotely. Any activity onsite will consist of visits for scheduled maintenance, emergency maintenance and vegetation maintenance. Therefore, during its operational period, activity at the Application Site will be negligible and potentially less than when in full operation in its current use.

1.5.1 Site Selection

The Applicant undertook an alternative site analysis. The results of this determined that there are no viable alternatives to The Proposed Development within 5km of the grid point of connection. As highlighted in Figure 1 of the Green Belt Assessment, the owners of three other sites were contacted for potential solar farm development, but the Applicant received no response from the relevant landowners.

The Stafford Borough Council Brownfield Land Register 2022[10] was also considered when selecting a site for this development. The Applicant has reviewed the Stafford Borough Council brownfield register. There is just over 48 hectares of brownfield land spread across 23 different locations in the area, with an average area of 2 hectares. These are not practicable for ground-mounted solar projects. From the Land Register, all sites detailed a minimum net dwelling number that would be expected for housing developments and the majority detailed the land was for use as residential. The remaining sites on the register did not have details specified but were all located within urban areas and settlements that are out with the 5km buffer of Forsbrook Substation.

[10] Stafford Borough Council Land Register 2022 (December 2022). Available online: Brownfield Land Register Site Plans 2022 (staffordbc.gov.uk)

As per the Town and Country Planning (Brownfield Land Register) Regulations 2017, brownfield land is designed to identify and promote brownfield land for residential development. Therefore, the location of the Proposed Development on an area of greenfield land ensures that the development is not in conflict with land that could otherwise be utilised for residential purposes.

Furthermore, the Application Site was deemed suitable for solar development for the following reasons:

- The Application Site has good solar irradiation levels.
- Lies outside of any statutory environmental, archaeological and landscape designations with a viable grid connection.
- The Application Site is bound by hedgerows and trees, allowing for natural screening of the Proposed Development.
- Sufficient distance from potentially sensitive residential receptors.
- Sufficient distance from potentially sensitive environmental receptors.
- The Application Site abuts the local highway network, with access available from Saverley Green Road, located to the south of the Application Site.

1.5.2 Precedent Examples

A review has been undertaken of similar developments located within areas of Green Belt. Table 1.3 identifies these schemes and provides a summary.

Table 1.3: Precedent Examples of Approved Green Belt Developments

Project	LPA	MW	Statements
Park Farm, Dunton	Brentwood Borough Council	30	Officers' recommendations that the proposal is unacceptable on the grounds *"it would result in development in the greenbelt outside any exception listed in the National Planning Policy Framework".* [11]. **Approved** by Planning Committee as agreed that there were very special circumstances that clearly outweighed the harm to the Green Belt. The very special circumstances included the proposal being in accordance with the Council's Green Agenda and the proposal consisting of green infrastructure that will address climate change.
Grounds Farm Solar Park, Hockcliffe	Central Bedfordshire	20	**Approved** Planning officer concluded: *"The proposal would result in some harm to the landscape and the ambiance of the Green Belt in both spatial and visual terms.* *But the wider environmental benefits associated with increased production of energy from a renewable source and a planned biodiversity net gain outweigh the harm to the Green Belt."*[12]
Church Farm Solar Farm	Rushcliffe Borough Council	49.9	**Approved**

[11] Park Farm, Planning Committee Report. Available online: Park Farm Solar Farm 002.pdf (moderngov.co.uk)
[12] Grounds Farm: Planning Committee Report. Available online: Central Bedfordshire Council Planning Pages

			"One of the core planning principles of the NPPF is to encourage the use of renewable resources, for example by the development of renewable energy. Paragraph 152 of the NPPF states that to help increase the use and supply of renewable and low carbon energy, local planning authorities should recognise the responsibility on all communities to contribute to energy generation from renewable or low carbon sources. *In view of the above it is considered that the proposal would not result in a significant interruption to the openness of the Green Belt in this location. On balance, the wider environmental benefits associated with increased production of energy from renewable sources to serve the development as set out above clearly outweigh the totality of harm by reason of its inappropriateness and other harm and the very special circumstances necessary to grant planning permission exist and a favourable recommendation is forthcoming."*[13]
Barnsdale	Leeds City Council	40	**Approved** *"It's detailed ecology and biodiversity strategy will see the biggest increase in biodiversity for any project within Leeds to date, and includes extensive wildflower meadows, wetland habitat, native trees, scrub and hedgerow planting."*[14]
Medebridge Solar Farm, Fen Lane	Thurrock Council	49.9	**Approved** Planning Officer concluded: *"The temporary nature of the development attracts some weight, and some weight can also be attached to the economic, social and environmental benefits of the proposals. On balance it is concluded on this point that the benefits of the proposals clearly outweigh the substantial harm to the green belt, and therefore a departure from normal green belt policies is justified."*[15]

1.6 Recent Appeal Decisions

A review has been undertaken of similar developments located within areas of Green Belt that were approved as appeal decisions from the Planning Inspectorate. Table 1.4 identifies these schemes and provides a summary in order to highlight the Government's commitment to solar in the face of refusal by a planning authority.

[13] Church Farm Solar Farm: Planning Committee Report. Available online: 22_00809_FUL--1675953.pdf (rushcliffe.gov.uk)
[14] Barnsdale Solar Farm: Planning Committee Report. Available online: Application No. 2007999FU.pdf (leeds.gov.uk)
[15] Medebridge Solar Farm, Planning Committee Report. Available online: Committee Report (thurrock.gov.uk)

Table 1.4: Recent Approved Appeal Decisions for Green Belt Developments

Project	LPA	PV	Statements
Ground Mounted Solar PV Farm and Associated Infrastructure on Land at Canon Barns Road, East Hanningfield, Chelmsford, CM3 8BD (Appeal Ref: APP/W1525/W/22/3300222)[16]	Chelmsford City Council	49.9MW	Chelmsford City Council refused proposal on the grounds that the proposed development is located within the metropolitan Green Belt. **Appeal was allowed and planning permission granted subject to conditions by the Planning Inspectorate:** "The proposal *would deliver a renewable energy facility that would create up to 49.9MW of power. This would provide power for around 16,581 households, result in a carbon dioxide displacement of around 11,210 tonnes per annum and therefore help combat climate change. The appeal site, whilst large is relatively unobtrusive, within a depression of land that prevents most wide views of the site to be experienced*". *"The public benefits are of sufficient magnitude to outweigh the substantial harm found to the Green Belt".*
Ground Mounted Solar PV Farm and Associated Infrastructure on Land at Rowles Farm, Bletchington, Oxfordshire (Appeal Ref: APP/C3105/A/13/2207532)[17]	Cherwell District Council	10MW	Cherwell District Council refused proposal on the grounds that the proposal represents inappropriate development in the Green Belt.

[16] UK Government: The Planning Inspectorate: Appeal Decision (Appeal Ref: APP/W1525/W/22/3300222). Available online: Reference: APP/W1525/W/22/3300222 (planninginspectorate.gov.uk)

[17] UK Government: The Planning Inspectorate: Appeal Decision (Appeal Ref: APP/C3105/A/13/2207532). Available online: Microsoft Word - mimeattach.bin (hertsmere.gov.uk)

			Appeal was allowed and planning permission granted subject to conditions by the Planning Inspectorate: *"The proposal is promulgated on a temporary basis and so the harm in Green Belt and landscape terms would be both temporary and reversible".* *"In carrying out that balancing exercise, I attach substantial weight to the harm that would be caused in Green Belt terms, and moderate weight to the limited landscape harm that would be caused.* *Against that, the proposal would bring forward benefits of a significant scale in terms of the production of renewable energy and, as well as that, assist the ongoing viability and stability of a rural business".*
Battery Storage Facility and Ancillary Development on land west of Wolverhampton West Primary Substation, South Staffordshire, Railway Walk, Wolverhampton, WV4 4XX (Appeal Ref: APP/C3430/W/22/3292837).	South Staffordshire District Council	50MW	South Staffordshire District Council refused proposal on the grounds that the proposal represents inappropriate development in the Green Belt and is therefore harmful to the Green Belt in accordance with the Local Plan. **Appeal was allowed and planning permission granted subject to conditions by the Planning Inspectorate:**

			"Although modest in scale, the appeal scheme would make a valuable contribution to cutting greenhouse gas emissions, by increasing the opportunity to store energy, and this also attracts substantial weight.". *"National policy advises that developments should be located where impacts are, or can be made, acceptable. I consider that the location of the proposed development, adjacent to an existing substation and agricultural buildings, together with the existing and proposed landscaping means that this would be the case here. Additionally, whilst the proposed development would be located at the site for a number of years, it is reversible and capable of being removed from the site."*

1.7 Very Special Circumstances & Need for the Proposed Development

The NPPF advises that inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances.

The following section of this report identifies the benefits associated with the Proposed Development and ultimately the very special circumstances which outweigh the potential harm to the Green Belt.

1.7.1 Climate Change

Climate change is the greatest challenge facing our society. Planning plays a key role in contributing to both mitigation and adaptation to climate change, through decision making on the location, scale and character of development[18]. This is further emphasised within Paragraph 8 of the NPPF, which makes it clear that 'mitigating and adapting to climate change' is a core planning objective.

[18] Town and Country Planning Association & RTPI (2018) Rising to the Climate Crisis – A guide for Local Authorities on Planning for Climate Change. Available online: RSE.22 - Rising to the Climate Crisis - A guide for Local Authorities on Planning for Climate Change | Oxford City Council

In May 2019, the UK Parliament passed a non-binding motion declaring a climate emergency. The definition of which is *"a situation in which urgent action is required to reduce or halt climate change and avoid potentially irreversible environmental damage resulting from it."*[19]

In response to the Climate Change Committee 'Net Zero Technical Report'[20], the Climate Change Act 2008 (2050 Target Amendment) Order came into force on 27th June 2019. This amended the previous legally binding target to reduce UK greenhouse gas emissions from 80% to 100% by 2050, based upon 1990 levels.

At the local level, Stafford Borough Council (SBC) declared a climate emergency in July 2019 stating that the Council's aim is *"to create a green, healthy and resilient Stafford Borough where everyone can thrive, by limiting the impacts of climate change and meeting our climate change and green recovery commitments"*[21].

Staffordshire County Council (SCC) also aim to achieve net zero emissions by 2050 across all aspects of the Council's service provision and estate. SCC published a Climate Change Action Plan 2021-2025[22] which details actions that are needed to either stop carbon emissions, develop a way to remove carbon already in the atmosphere or help businesses and communities prepare for the impact of climate change.

1.7.2 Low Carbon Energy Generation

Increasing the amount of energy produced from renewable and low carbon technologies will reduce the dependence on fossil fuels. It will also help to make sure the UK has a secure energy supply and reduce greenhouse gas emissions which will slow down climate change, a key Government priority.

The Energy White Paper: Powering out Net Zero Future was published in December 2020. The White Paper states that the UK energy system is still largely dominated by the use of fossil fuels, which will need to change dramatically by 2050 if the net zero target is to be achieved. Decarbonising the energy system over the next thirty years means replacing – as far as it is possible to do so – fossil fuels with clean energy technologies such as renewables. The UK Government are not planning for any specific technology solution; however, the future generation mix will comprise a low-cost, net zero consistent system, likely to be composed predominantly of wind and solar, alongside complementary technologies such as battery storage. The White Paper states *"we will need sustained growth in the capacity of these sectors in the next decade to ensure that we are on a pathway that allows us to meet net zero emissions in all demand scenarios."*

At a local level, SBC have published a Climate Change and Green Recovery Strategy 2020-2040[23] which details the importance of renewable energy when considering ways to limit the effects of climate change. SCC have published a Climate Change Strategic Development Framework[24] which sets out five delivery themes in order to deliver the Council's vision of achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050: Waste, Organisational Carbon Reduction, Air Quality, Natural Environment and Behaviour Change. The increased utilisation of renewable energy is noted as one of the priorities in Organisational Carbon Reduction in order to aid in reducing the carbon footprint of SCC's services.

As a whole, the Proposed Development would make a significant contribution towards these targets as it will have a maximum generation capacity of 30MW which has the potential to power approximately 8,000

[19] Oxford Learners Dictionaries: Climate Emergency Definition. Available online: climate-emergency noun - Definition, pictures, pronunciation and usage notes | Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com
[20] Climate Change Committee (2019) Net Zero Technical Report. Available online: Net Zero - Technical Report - Climate Change Committee (theccc.org.uk)
[21] Stafford Borough Council: Climate Change and Green Recovery. Available online: Climate Change and Green Recovery | Stafford Borough Council (staffordbc.gov.uk)
[22] Staffordshire County Council: Climate Change Action Plan 2021-2025 (revised 2022). Available online: CCAP 3 (staffordshire.gov.uk)
[23] Stafford Borough Council: Climate Change and Green Recovery Strategy 2020-2040. Available online: Climate Change Strategy (staffordbc.gov.uk)
[24] Staffordshire County Council: Climate Change Strategic Development Framework (2021). Available online: COP2263 Climate Change Strategic Development Framework (staffordshire.gov.uk)

average UK homes[25]. The carbon offset for the Proposed Development is approximately 16,900 tonnes/year[26].

The Proposed Development also includes for battery storage, therefore allowing the storage of the energy generated by the solar panels during times of low demand for export to homes during times of high demand.

1.7.3 Energy Security

The British Energy Security Strategy (BESS)[27] was published in April 2022 to address energy security across the UK, highlighting our vulnerability to international oil and gas prices and identifying the need to reduce dependence on imported oil and gas. As set out within the BESS, increasing the proportion of electricity generated from renewable sources, reduces the exposure of the UK to volatile fuel markets. The BESS identifies the need to be bolder in the *"removing of red tape that holds back new clean energy developments and exploit the potential of all renewable technologies."*

In relation to solar, the BESS identifies that there is currently circa 14GW of solar capacity in the UK, split across various scales of development, ranging from large scale to smaller scale roof-mounted solar. It is expected that solar development will need to increase five-fold by 2035 to achieve net zero targets, which would result in an additional 70GW of solar generation across the UK.

In order to increase the deployment of solar across the UK, the BESS seeks to consult on *"amending planning rules to strengthen policy in favour of development on non-protected land, while ensuring communities continue to have a say and environmental protections remain in place. We will continue supporting the effective use of land by encouraging large scale projects to locate on previously developed, or lower value land, where possible, and ensure projects are designed to avoid, mitigate, and where necessary, compensate for the impacts of using greenfield sites."*

Of particular importance to the Proposed Development is the support for the co-location of solar alongside other functions, such as agriculture and storage.

1.7.4 Economic

Paragraph 82 of the NPPF states that the Government is committed to ensuring that the planning system does everything it can do to support sustainable economic growth. Paragraph 84 of the NPPF is also supportive of economic growth in rural areas and as part of this states that local plans should promote the development and diversification of agricultural and other land-based rural businesses.

The Proposed Development would contribute to the diversification of the current function of the farms at the Application Site, increasing their profitability as farming businesses and ultimately providing more economic security to the landowners than the existing agricultural activities. This support for *"ongoing viability and stability of a rural business"* was considered an important determining factor in an appeal decision for a 10MW solar farm development on land at Rowles Farm, Bletchington which is situated within the Oxfordshire Green Belt (appeal ref. APP/C3105/A/13/2207532)[28].

Furthermore, the Proposed Development would allow the site to remain in agricultural use with enough land beneath and between the arrays to remain accessible for livestock purposes such as sheep grazing. There is also potential to support economic growth from the Proposed Development through the creation

[25] The homes equivalent figure has been calculated by taking the predicted annual electricity generation of the site (based on RES assessments) the Proposed Development has a predicted capacity factor of 11.2% and dividing this by the annual average electricity figures from the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) showing that the annual UK average domestic household consumption is 3,509 kWh (December 2022).

[26] The Carbon offset calculation is 39.9GWh (average annual yield over 40 years) x 424 = 16,900 tonnes/year. *RES uses DESNZ's "all non-renewable fuels" emissions statistic of 424 tonnes of carbon dioxide per GWh of electricity supplied in the Digest of UK Energy Statistics (July 2023) Table 5.14 ("Estimated carbon dioxide emissions from electricity supplied"). Carbon reduction is calculated by multiplying the total amount of electricity generated by the solar farm per year by the number of tonnes of carbon which fossil fuels would have produced to generate the same amount of electricity).*

[27] HM Government (2022) British Energy Security Strategy. Available online: British Energy Security Strategy (publishing.service.gov.uk)

[28] UK Government: The Planning Inspectorate: Appeal Decision (Appeal Ref: APP/C3105/A/13/2207532). Available online: Microsoft Word - mimeattach.bin (hertsmere.gov.uk)

of jobs associated with the ongoing maintenance onsite at the solar farm, as well as a number of other indirect jobs associated with the construction and decommissioning of the Proposed Development.

1.8 Environmental Benefits

1.8.1.1 Landscape Enhancement

Natural England, in their Technical Information Note (TIN) 101: Solar Parks: maximising environmental benefit[29] highlights the opportunities for solar farm developments to offer biodiversity and landscape enhancement measures, particularly sites which are considered to be of low biodiversity value.

A Landscape and Ecology Management Plan (LEMP) has been developed for the Proposed Development and incorporated into the design, submitted alongside the planning application as Figure 19: Landscape and Ecology Management Plan (LEMP) and Figure 20: Landscape and Ecology Management Plan (LEMP) Layout Enlargement. The LEMP has been prepared based upon the existing baseline environmental conditions onsite and includes measures that are proposed as part of the development to mitigate the potential for landscape and visual effects of the Proposed Development and to enhance habitats on site. The following measures are identified in the LEMP:

- Hedgerow has been proposed on the southern boundary of Field 13 and Field 15in order to strengthen the boundary and screen any views to solar panels or construction vehicles from the village of Fulford at the Application Site.
- Hedgerow and tree planting has been introduced in Field 3 and Field 4 to reduce visibility to the solar panels as well as the substation, telecommunications mast and AC storage compound, reducing visual effects and preserving setting.
- Proposed hedgerow planting along the PRoWs (Fulford 12 and Fulford 15 Category C Footpaths) located in Field 17 and Field 14 to reduce effects on visual amenity of users. Hedgerow would also be introduced and managed in order to reduce visual effects on the users of the PRoW that crosses the northern part of the site (Fulford 26 Footpath).
- Hedging and wildflower meadow introduced in Field 17 to reduce effect on the visual amenity of PRoW users.
- Proposed hedgerow and tree planting introduced to replace the hedgerow removed to construct the road access on Saverely Green Road. The introduction of this planting will also aid in reducing visual effects on road users and visual receptors located beyond the Application Site Boundary to the south-east.
- Trees would be planted on the northern boundary at Field 1 in order to screen potential views from the north including residential properties at Gorsty Birch and the PRoW to the north that is adjacent to the Application Site Boundary (Fulford 26 Footpath).
- Trees would be planted to the west of Field 18 in order to screen views to solar panels from the nearby PRoW and residents located in the most elevated parts of Fulford. Tree and hedgerow would be planted and managed on the western boundary (including Field 5, Field 7 and Field 10) to help screen potential views from the west including properties on the east site of Stallington, users of Stallington Road and users of the footpath between Stallington and Fulford (Fulford 3 Footpath).
- The existing mature perimeter hedgerow of the entire site would be maintained to a minimum of 3.5m in order to help screen potential views towards the site generally.

The Proposed Development is proposed to create approximately 1.4 km of hedge, enhance approximately 1km of hedge and plant approximately 138 trees within approximately 1km of hedge.

1.8.1.2 Biodiversity Enhancement

The LEMP also incorporates biodiversity enhancement measures as identified throughout the completion of the Preliminary Ecological Appraisal (PEA) and Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) Assessment. The BNG Assessment has been undertaken in accordance with the DEFRA Statutory Biodiversity Metric Calculator (Natural England, 2023) and identifies quantifiable and measurable biodiversity enhancement to be implemented across the Application Site, alongside the renewable energy generation. The calculations

[29] Natural England (2011) Technical Information Note (TIN) 101: Solar Parks: maximising environmental benefit. Available online: [ARCHIVED CONTENT] Solar parks: maximising environmental benefits - TIN101 (nationalarchives.gov.uk)

have indicated that the Proposed Development would result in an overall biodiversity net gain of 74.20% for habitat units and a biodiversity net gain of 22.04% for hedgerow units.

1.8.1.3 Agricultural Land

Due to the nature of the Proposed Development, construction will only occur over a small area of the Application Site, including the posts for the solar arrays, access tracks and foundations for associated infrastructure. Typically, this covers around 5% of the land for a solar farm. The remainder of the land will be able to be maintained for agricultural purposes throughout the operational phase. This is proposed to take place in the form of sheep grazing. This is due to the spacing being maintained between the rows of solar PV arrays and the set-back distances being maintained between the deer fencing of the solar farm and the field boundaries and drainage channels.

As a consequence, agricultural land would not be permanently lost as a result of construction or operation, as the land can continue in agricultural use alongside the production of electricity, in the form of sheep grazing, and the Proposed Development has a very limited footprint. The Proposed Development is also temporary and very easily reversed, unlike traditional bricks and mortar developments, which form permanent additions to the countryside.

1.9 Summary

It is acknowledged that the Proposed Development constitutes inappropriate development in the Green Belt. In relation to the five purposes of the Green Belt, the Proposed Development does not constitute typical 'bricks and mortar' development and would not result in urban sprawl or coalescence of settlements. In addition to this, the Proposed Development would not impact on the ability of the area of Green Belt to preserve openness and would aid in preventing urban sprawl. In fact, the Proposed Development would prevent encroachment of permanent development for a period of up to 40-years.

Significant weight should be attributed towards the demonstrable very special circumstances identified, including:

- Mitigate against climate change;
- Low carbon energy generation;
- Support energy security;
- Economic benefits;
- Landscape enhancement including a proposed approximate creation of 1.4km of hedge, enhanced 0.98km of hedge and plant trees within 0.96km of hedge;
- BNG of 74.2% for habitat units and BNG of 22.04% for hedgerow units; and
- Protection of agricultural land.

On balance, it is concluded that the benefits of the Proposed Development and the very special circumstances identified clearly outweigh the potential limited harm to the Green Belt. Therefore, in accordance with national and local planning policy, the planning application for the Proposed Development should be supported by the local planning authority and approved.

Section 2.0: Summary and Conclusion

The Application Site lies within the boundary of Stafford Borough Council (SBC) on land to the northeast of Fulford, Staffordshire.

There are a number of key points and advantages in favour of the Proposed Development which require to be considered when reaching a decision on this planning application, including:

- The installation of the Proposed Development is to generate a renewable source of electricity, contributing towards the transition to a low carbon economy.
- The installation of battery storage units at the Application Site will allow for electricity to be stored until it is required. Therefore, this can allow excess electricity generated from the solar panels to be used at a later time when these sources are not available.
- The Proposed Development will aid the council in achieving their vision of net zero emissions by 2050 through increasing the utilisation of renewable energy in SBC.
- The Proposed Development will have a maximum generation capacity of 30MW which has the potential to power up to 8,000 UK homes.
- The Proposed Development will contribute to the diversification of the current function of the farms at the Application Site, increasing their profitability as farming businesses and ultimately providing more economic security to the landowners than the existing agricultural activities.
- It will allow the site to remain in agricultural use with enough land beneath and between the arrays to remain accessible for livestock purposes such as sheep grazing.
- Has the potential to support economic growth through the creation of jobs associated with the ongoing maintenance onsite at the solar farm, as well as a number of other indirect jobs associated with the construction and decommissioning of the Proposed Development.
- Increased energy security in the UK, through the generation of a clean, renewable source of electricity.
- Limited likely effects upon the local environment and nearby residential receptors.
- It is a reversible form of development allowing the land to be restored to original condition (and in some cases better condition) following the operational phase.
- The land comprises 95.68% ALC Grade 3b (which is not classed as best and most versatile land). The agricultural land quality at the Application Site can be enhanced by resting the land from more traditional intensive farming methods.
- A BNG increase of 74.2% habitats units and 22.04% hedgerow units can be achieved.
- Landscape enhancement measures proposed includes the implementation of proposed native species trees, proposed wildflower seed mix at the PRoWs, proposed grassland and enhanced grassland and proposed native species hedge maintained to >3.5m.
- The Proposed Development is proposed to create approximately 1.4 km of hedge, enhance approximately 1km of hedge and plant approximately 138 trees within approximately 1km of hedge.
- The Public Rights of Way crossing the Application Site Boundary will remain open and available for use during construction, operation and decommissioning, maintaining accessibility at the Application Site.

The Proposed Development would not result in any significant adverse environmental impacts and would provide the opportunity to bring ecological and landscape enhancements to the surrounding area. The Proposed Development would also help boost economic growth and support new employment opportunities, therefore complying with the NPPF.

In conclusion, the Proposed Development would not result in unacceptable environmental effects, whilst the benefits of the proposal are substantial, such that they clearly outweigh any negative harm on the Green Belt. All specialist and environmental assessments undertaken have concluded there will be minimal impact from the Proposed Development to the environment. Therefore, the Proposed Development is considered to be a sustainable development for the purposes of the NPPF and ultimately compliant with the Local Development Plan and emerging SBLP, due to its assessment as very special circumstances.

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