

PLANNING APPLICATION FOR DEVELOPMENT OF A GROUND MOUNTED SOLAR FARM AND ASSOCIATED INFRASTRUCTURE

**LAND AT MANOR FARM, NOKE, OXFORDSHIRE,
OX3 9TU**

PLANNING, DESIGN & ACCESS STATEMENT

ON BEHALF OF OXFORD NEW ENERGY

**TOWN & COUNTRY PLANNING ACT 1990 (AS AMENDED)
PLANNING AND COMPULSORY PURCHASE ACT 2004**

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CONTENTS:

	Page No:
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. SITE CONTEXT	5
3. BACKGROUND TO THE APPLICANT	12
4. PRE-APPLICATION & DESIGN EVOLUTION	14
5. THE PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT	16
6. PLANNING POLICY CONTEXT	20
7. ASSESSMENT OF THE PROPOSAL	31
8. CONCLUSIONS AND THE PLANNING BALANCE	57

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This Planning, Design and Access Statement has been prepared by Pegasus Group on behalf of Oxford New Energy (the “**Applicant**”). Full planning permission is sought for a ground mounted solar farm and associated infrastructure on land at Manor Farm, Noke, Oxfordshire (the “**Site**”). The Site is shown on the Site Location Plan which forms part of the planning application submission. For context, shareholders of Oxford New Energy include the landowner of the Site and experienced solar developer Green Nation.

1.2 The application description is as follows:

“Development of a ground mounted solar farm incorporating the installation of solar PV panels, associated infrastructure and access, as well as landscape planting and designated ecological enhancement areas.”

1.3 The development proposal would provide up to 26.6 megawatts (MW) of installed electrical energy generation capacity through the deployment of ground mounted solar arrays. The proposal would deliver significant environmental benefits for the area assisting in reducing carbon emissions, combating climate change and ensuring local energy security. This would assist with delivering the Council’s commitments under the declared Climate Emergency and Climate Action Framework 2020. In light of developments in the world over 2021-22, it will also make an important contribution to national energy security, by reducing the requirement for imported oil and gas, as set out in the Government’s April 2022 British Energy Security Strategy.

1.4 The issues relevant to the assessment of the application proposal are set out in this Statement. The sections are divided into the following:

- **Section 2 – The Site and Surrounding Area** – a description of the Site and its surrounding environment, with reference to supporting information contained with the application.
- **Section 3 – Background to the Applicant** – an introduction to the Applicant.
- **Section 4 – Pre-application & Design Evolution** – a summary of the pre-application consultation undertaken with the Council and local

community and associated implications to the evolution of the scheme's design.

- **Section 5 - The Proposed Development** – a description of the proposal and its design, having regard to the development parameters, submitted drawings, and future operation of the Site.
- **Section 6 – Planning Policy** – an outline to the relevant planning policies and guidance to the planning application.
- **Section 7 – Assessment of the Proposal** – an assessment of the application proposals against the Development Plan, and relevant material considerations such as the NPPF.
- **Section 8 – Conclusions and the Planning Balance** – provides the concluding comments in relation to the application proposal.

1.5 Between February and June 2020, Pegasus Group engaged in formal pre-application discussions with officers in the Planning Department of Cherwell District Council. A summary of this engagement with Cherwell District Council is set out in the Consultation Statement submitted with this application, along with a summary of engagement with the local community and key stakeholders. As part of the formal pre-application discussions, Cherwell District Council confirmed that an Environmental Impact Assessment would not be required for the proposal.

1.6 In accordance with statutory and local requirements, and with regard to the advice received as part of the abovementioned pre-application discussions; the following supporting material is submitted alongside this Statement, which will enable a full assessment of the proposals to be undertaken:

- **Site Location Plan - Drawing No. P19-2636_22**
- **Topographical Survey**
- **Geophysical Survey**
- **Development Framework Plan - Drawing No. P19-2636_003_1 Rev M**

- **Detailed specifications drawings produced by Green Nation:**
 - PV Module Elevation and Cross Section – Drawing No. GN-NK-PLA-03 Rev 00
 - Inverter Station Elevations and Plan – Drawing No. GN-NK-PLA-04 Rev 00
 - 40' Spares Container Elevations & Plan – Drawing No. GN-NK-PLA-06 Rev 00
 - Private Substation Elevations and Plan – Drawing No. GN-NK-PLA-07 Rev 00
 - DNO Substation Elevations and Plan – Drawing No. GN-NK-PLA-08 Rev 00
 - CCTV Detail – Drawing No. GN-NK-PLA-09 Rev 01
 - Fence Detail – Drawing No. GN-NK-PLA-10 Rev 00
 - 20' Welfare Container Elevations & Plan – Drawing No. GN-NK-PLA-11 Rev 00

- **Detailed Soft Landscape Proposals - Sheets 1-7 produced by Pegasus Group:**
 - Sheet 1 of 7 - Drawing Ref. P20-2636_14G
 - Sheet 2 of 7 - Drawing Ref. P20-2636_15G
 - Sheet 3 of 7 - Drawing Ref. P20-2636_16G
 - Sheet 4 of 7 - Drawing Ref. P20-2636_17G
 - Sheet 5 of 7 - Drawing Ref. P20-2636_18G
 - Sheet 6 of 7 - Drawing Ref. P20-2636_19G
 - Sheet 7 of 7 - Drawing Ref. P20-2636_20G

- **Illustrative Landscape Sections A-C - Drawing Ref. P19-2636_21A**

- **Photomontages**
- **Connection Power Line Constraints Map - Drawing Ref. P19-2636_004-1**
- **Agricultural Land Quality Survey (ALC) Report produced by Land Research Associates**
- **Arboricultural Report & Method Statement produced by Wharncliffe Trees and Woodland Consultancy**
- **Archaeology & Built Heritage Assessment produced by Pegasus Group**
- **Construction Traffic Management Plan produced by Pegasus Group**
- **Consultation Statement produced by Pegasus Group**
- **Ecological Appraisal and Biodiversity Metric produced by BSG Ecology**
- **Flood Risk Assessment & Drainage Strategy produced by Nijhuis Industries**
- **Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment produced by Pegasus Group**
- **Network Availability Assessment April 2021 produced by Narec Distributed Energy**
- **Confidential Viability Assessment produced by Green Nation**

1.7 This Planning, Design and Access Statement will assess in detail all the planning aspects associated with the application proposals, with reference to the above supporting information which forms the planning application. It will be shown that the proposals are in overall accordance with national and local planning policy, and the achievement of sustainable development. Accordingly, it is respectfully requested that planning permission be granted.

2. SITE CONTEXT

- 2.1 The total application site, including land to be used for solar panels and access, as well as land for landscaping, proposed ecological enhancements and access, comprises 43.78ha of agricultural land, located in Oxfordshire. The Site consists of predominantly Grade 3b agricultural land, and therefore does not fall within the definition of 'best and most versatile agricultural land', in line with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). The wider surrounding area is largely agricultural land, consisting of open fields and vegetative field boundaries, separating the Site from nearby settlements. The village of Noke is located to the south of the Site, the village of Islip to the west and the village of Oddington to the north. The Site is located approx. 3.5km to the east of Kidlington and approx. 4.5km to the north of the built-up area of Oxford. The Site lies within the Oxford Green Belt in the context of the Development Plan for the area.
- 2.2 The Site is bordered to the north by the River Ray corridor as it splits into two distinct water courses, the River Ray and the New River Ray, with agricultural land beyond. To the east of the Site is a mature tree and hedgerow boundary and a bridleway route, with agricultural land and Otmoor RSPB Reserve beyond. To the south is the settlement of Noke from which the proposed development is accessed, with agricultural land and associated mature tree and hedgerow boundaries between the settlement and the main part of the Site proposed for ground mounted solar development. The western boundary of the Site is defined by further existing mature field boundary hedgerows and trees, with agricultural land beyond.
- 2.3 Buildings associated with Logg Farm, including the farmhouse and a number of large agricultural buildings are located 200-350 metres from the Site to the north, separated by mature vegetation including vegetation along the River Ray corridor. Beyond, to the north, the nearest residential properties within Oddington are located approx. 600 metres from the Site. The main part of the Site proposed for solar development is located within fields positioned 500 - 1,000 metres north of the nearest dwellings within Noke, the nearest of which is Manor Farm from which the owner of the Site resides. All other residential properties in the surrounding area are located more than 1km from the Site. This Statement assesses the impact on the amenity of local residents; and the impact of the proposal from overall landscape and visual terms is assessed in full detail within the accompanying Landscape & Visual Impact Assessment.

- 2.4 A public footpath (ref. 309/1/10) extends north of the village of Noke passing through the centre of the Site in a general north-south trajectory; before heading east in a general east-west trajectory along the northern boundary of the Site; and then heading north in a general north-south trajectory connecting to the village of Oddington. A public bridleway (ref. 209/16/10) lies adjacent to the north-eastern site boundary (adjacent to proposed ecological area), which extends from Oddington to the north and continues south towards the eastern edge of Noke. There are several other Public Rights of Way within the vicinity of the Site which extend across the wider landscape. The Oxfordshire Way recreational route lies approx. 750m south of the main area of the Site proposed for solar development. The construction access track of the proposals runs through a section of the Oxfordshire Way recreational route on its approach to the settlement of Noke.
- 2.5 The Site is currently accessed from Noke to the south via an existing agricultural access track from Manor Farm which connects to the abovementioned public footpath ref. 309/1/10. The proposal utilises this existing access as the operational access route of the development. Other agricultural accesses exist with connections to the Site, including to the west of Noke via the main vehicular access road into Noke from the B4027 which connects to the west. This alternative access point will be used for the temporary construction access for the development.
- 2.6 The topography of the Site rises gradually from the northern boundary adjacent to the River Ray corridor towards the south-west. Levels sit at circa 56-59m AOD along the northern and eastern site boundaries. These levels rise to the south-west gradually to form a localised soft 'dome' in the south-western part of the main site area, rising to circa 65m AOD.
- 2.7 The eastern and northernmost parts of the Site along the River Ray corridor are located within Flood Zones 2 and 3, however due to the nature of the development this would not preclude the proposal. The majority of areas within Flood Zones 2 and 3 are to be used for landscape planting, ecological enhancements or continued agricultural use. The rest of the Site is located within Flood Zone 1. The flood risk and drainage considerations of the proposal are discussed further in this Statement and the submitted Flood Risk Assessment & Drainage Strategy.

- 2.8 The Site is currently of low ecological value, consisting of arable land under intensive agricultural production, with hedgerow boundaries also under intense management. There are no statutory ecology sites within or adjacent to the Site. However, the non-statutory Otmoor Conservation Target Area (CTA) does touch the eastern part of the Site, and the Otmoor RSPB Reserve is located nearby to the east of the Site. Other non-statutory ecological sites in the area are identified and assessed in the submitted Ecological Appraisal. The submitted Ecological Appraisal also discusses the potential for protected and notable species on and around the Site, with associated detailed phase 2 ecological surveys having been carried out in relation to great crested newts, breeding birds and wintering bird species. Full ecological considerations and potential impacts are discussed in detail within the accompanying Ecological Appraisal and discussed further in this Statement.
- 2.9 As referred to already, there are a large number of trees and hedgerows on and around the Site, mostly positioned around existing agricultural field boundaries. The main species of tree on the Site are English Oak and Crack Willow. The submitted Arboricultural Report & Method Statement provides further details of the Site's trees and assesses the impact of the proposal on the trees.
- 2.10 There are no designated heritage assets on the Site itself, though there are several designated heritage assets in the wider area, including statutory listed buildings at Manor Farm and within Noke. These include three Grade II Listed buildings which comprise Manor Farm, namely the Grade II Listed Manor Farmhouse (National Heritage List of England ref. 1193475), the Grade II Listed Farm Building (NHLE ref. 1193487) and the Grade II Listed Barn (NHLE ref. 1046552); as well as the Grade II Listed Rectory Farmhouse (NHLE 1046554). The Islip Roman Villa Scheduled Monument (NHLE ref. 1015161) is located approximately 350 metres south-west of the Site. The Islip Conservation Area is located approx. 800 metres to the west of the Site. The heritage considerations of this application are outlined in detail in the submitted Archaeology & Built Heritage Assessment and discussed further in this Statement.

Relevant Planning History

- 2.11 There is no relevant planning history for this Site. There are a number of ground mounted solar farms located in the immediate locale and wider surrounding area, including sites located within the Green Belt. Relevant planning history of some applications for solar farms in Cherwell District include the following:

- **Application Ref. 19/01046/F** - *Development of a ground mounted solar park incorporating the installation of solar PV panels, associated infrastructure and new access (Woodstock Road, Yarnton, Oxford, OX5 1PQ)* – **Approved 30th October 2019**
- **Application Ref. 18/02026/F** - *Ground Mounted Solar Panel System (Brasenose Barn, Oxford Road, Steeple Aston, Bicester)* – **Approved 12th February 2019**
- **Application Ref. 17/00371/F** - *Installation of a 250kw ground mount solar array (Manor Farm, Twyford Road, Twyford Adderbury, Banbury)* – **Approved 7th June 2017**
- **Application Ref. 15/00570/F** - *Erection of 5MW PV Solar Farm and associated infrastructure (Hill Farm, Hill Farm Lane, Duns Tew, Bicester)* – **Approved 16th October 2015**
- **Application Ref. 14/00786/F** - *Construction of a Solar Farm with on-site equipment rooms and plant, access improvement and on-site tracks, security fencing and thermal imaging system, landscaping and associated works (Land Parcel 9827, South East of Yarnton and North of Woodstock Road, Yarnton, Oxfordshire)* – **Approved 24th October 2014**
- **Application Ref. 14/00565/F** - *Installation of ground mounted photovoltaic solar arrays to provide circa 12.5MW generation capacity together with inverter stations; landscaping; stock fencing; security measures; access gate; and ancillary infrastructure; and ecological zone (Land South of New Stone House, Main Street, Wendlebury)* – **Approved 17th July 2014**
- **Application Ref. 13/01027/F** - *Construction of a solar farm with on-site equipment rooms and plant, security fencing, landscaping and associated works (Land at Rowles Farm, Bletchingdon, Oxfordshire)* – **Refused 7th October 2013**
 - **Appeal Ref. APP/C3105/A/13/2207532** against the refusal to grant planning permission relating to application ref. 13/01027/F – **Allowed 17th April 2014**

- 2.12 It is notable in the appeal noted above (appeal ref. APP/C3105/A/13/2207532 – land at Rowles Farm), that the Inspector undertook a balancing exercise when determining the appeal; weighing the harm to the Green Belt (which in that instance was given substantial weight) as well as other harm identified (which in that instance was a moderate harm in terms of landscape impact); against the benefits of the scheme, which in that case included the significant scale in terms of the production of renewable energy (from a 13MW scheme in that instance), as well as the assistance to the ongoing viability and stability of a rural business (related to the agricultural landowner). When undertaking this balancing exercise, the Inspector concluded that the considerable benefits of the proposal clearly outweighed the harm by reason of inappropriateness, and the other harm identified. As such, the Inspector concluded that very special circumstances had been shown and the impacts of the proposal were (or could be made) acceptable, and therefore the proposal complied with the NPPF and the Development Plan (which are similar to the current NPPF and relevant Green Belt Development Plan policy).
- 2.13 This approach of balancing the specific benefits of a solar farm proposal, against the specific harm that would accrue, has been repeated in a number of other application and appeal decisions for solar farms located in the Green Belt, throughout the country.
- 2.14 In this regard it is pertinent to consider recent decisions for solar farms in the Green Belt within other local planning authority areas, which non-exhaustively includes the following:
- **Application Ref. P20/S4360/FUL** (South Oxfordshire District Council) – *Installation of renewable led energy generating station comprising ground mounted photovoltaic solar arrays and battery-based electricity storage containers together with substation, inverter/transformer stations, site accesses, internal access tracks, security measures, access gates, other ancillary infrastructure, landscaping and biodiversity enhancements* (Land to South West of Cowley Substation Nuneham Courtenay) – **Approved 11th January 2022**

Summary

The approved development comprises a 45MW ground mounted solar farm on agricultural land. The proposal has panels next to and visible from a main road and there are existing public rights of way running through the site. In addition to

being located within the Green Belt, the site contains a proportion of best & most versatile agricultural land, and also represents EIA development with an Environmental Statement forming part of the application. The Committee Report notably states;

"Officers attach significant weight to the fact that the development is inappropriate development in the Green Belt. Further weight is attached to the harm caused by the development to the openness because of the presence of structures on land that is currently agricultural and free from obstruction. The harms identified to heritage assets ... are also taken into account, and some weight is attributed to that harm. Limited weight is given to the loss of agricultural land due to the temporary nature of the proposal. The impact on the footpaths is also given some weight, however, this has been suitably mitigated by the proposals..."

In favour of the development, significant weight is attributed to the need to provide additional energy from renewable sources and the considerable wider environmental benefits associated with increased production from renewable sources... Some limited weight is given to the time limited and non-permanent nature of the installation, however, the suggested lifespan of 40 years is a significant period. The decommissioning of the infrastructure would allow a return to farmland. Some moderate weight is also given to the ecological enhancements proposed... The proposal would deliver a biodiversity net gain of 38.99% through habitat improvements and new habitats created.

.....It is the Officer's opinion that the very special circumstances that weigh in favour of the development in this case are:

- the proximity to a substation that has capacity,*
- its temporary nature,*
- that the site is well screened from wider views*
- proposed planting will further screen the site*
- the contribution to low carbon energy generation*
- the net gain in biodiversity*

On balance, officers consider that the harm caused by this proposal by reason of inappropriate development in the Green Belt is outweighed by the very special circumstances as set out above.

.....The proposed solar farm would generate 45MW of renewable electricity which would be supplied to the National Grid, and the proposed battery stores would allow the export of energy to be evened out across the peaks and troughs of generation and demand. This would be a significant contribution towards addressing the Climate Emergency that the Council has declared, and towards meeting local and national policy on reducing carbon emissions and addressing climate change."

The above comments raise a number of similar considerations for this application, including the attribution of weight to harms and benefits in the planning balance. It is considered that the harm of this approved development is higher than the harms resulting from this application, related to harm to heritage assets and from

the loss of some best & most versatile agricultural land, which would not be applicable to this application.

- **Application Ref. 21/00834/FUL** (Brentwood Borough Council) - *Construction and operation of a solar farm together with all associated works, equipment and necessary infrastructure* (Park Farm, Dunton Road, Herongate, Brentwood) – **Approved 23rd December 2021**

Summary

The approved development comprises a 30MW ground mounted solar farm located in the open countryside with no neighbouring built development and with existing public rights of way running through the site. At Planning Committee, the Council attached significant weight to addressing local and national climate change and renewable energy generation targets, as well as attaching weight to the biodiversity net gains of the proposal (which are less than the gains being proposed in relation to the proposal for this application). These benefits were deemed to outweigh the harm of the proposal, including the harm to the Green Belt, representing the necessary very special circumstances to allow approval of the application.

- **Application Ref. 21/00605/FUL** (Rochford District Council) - *Construct Solar Farm With Ancillary Development to Include Battery Storage* (South Fambridge Hall, Fambridge Road, South Fambridge) – **Approved 15th December 2021**

Summary

The approved development comprises a 49.9MW ground mounted solar farm on 70ha of agricultural land. At Planning Committee, the Council determined that the public benefits of the provision of renewable energy outweighed the harm of the development, including the harm to the Green Belt. In a similar regard to the proposal the subject of this application, the site was one of only a few locations in the area that had capacity to provide viable connection to the grid network, which formed part of the very special circumstances of the proposal.

3. BACKGROUND TO THE APPLICANT

- 3.1 Shareholders of Oxford New Energy (the Applicant) include the landowner of the Site and experienced solar developer Green Nation. The Applicant proposes to develop the Site for use as a solar farm with an electrical generation capacity of up to 26.6MW, along with ancillary infrastructure and construction and operational accesses to the Site, which would utilise existing agricultural access routes from south of the Site.
- 3.2 Based in Somerset, Green Nation was established in 2011 and has developed and managed solar farms and worked with hundreds of owners to put solar on houses, schools, and commercial buildings. The Green Nation office houses a team that specialise in project management, asset management, business development, finance and legal affairs. The team have firm relationships with landowners, local communities, suppliers and local authorities, and manages 28 solar farms across the country.
- 3.3 Green Nation play their part in tackling climate change and achieving targets for decarbonised power generation, identifying sites with a suitable and viable connection to the electricity grid and designing solar farms to blend into the countryside, causing no disturbance and making no noise.
- 3.4 Further information about Green Nation can be found on its website; <https://greennation.co.uk/>.
- 3.5 This proposed scheme would not only have significant environmental benefits associated with the proposed scale of renewable energy generation, assisting in reducing carbon emissions, combating climate change and ensuring local energy security; it would also provide social and economic benefits to the local area.
- 3.6 Green Nation has actively engaged and worked with the local community in the many months leading up to the submission of this planning application. This is set out in more detail in the accompanying Consultation Statement.
- 3.7 In response to comments made at Parish Meetings, the Applicant has committed to creating an extra wide corridor between an existing hedge and the solar farm along the north-south public footpath through the site, and to creating a new permissive footpath on the eastern edge of the solar farm, significantly improving the options for local walkers.

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- 3.8 In conjunction with the Landowner, the Applicant will set up an annual community benefit payment for 20 years for the benefit of the immediate community in Noke.
- 3.9 Green Nation has also said it will dedicate a percentage of income to providing a wider community benefit, particularly in relation to projects that address progress to net zero and fuel poverty.
- 3.10 Green Nation has spent a considerable amount of time in discussions regarding the selling of a substantial stake in this project to a local Oxfordshire based renewable energy community organisation. It has not been able to complete an agreement prior to this application, a demonstration of the significant challenge for community organisations buying into large modern solar farm schemes, not least the timescales required for them to raise the necessary funds. Green Nation will continue to look at community-led investment models to further deepen community involvement in the scheme.

4. PRE-APPLICATION & DESIGN EVOLUTION

- 4.1 As discussed above, Green Nation is committed to involving the local community and delivering high quality public consultation as part of their projects. As such, consultation regarding the proposed solar farm was undertaken with the local community in February and March 2021 as part of an organised pre-application public consultation exercise. This had followed pre-application discussions with Cherwell District Council about the proposals, on behalf of the agricultural landowner of the Site, which took place between February and June 2020. The public consultation exercise and associated implications to the evolution of the scheme is discussed in detail in the accompanying Consultation Statement.
- 4.2 Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the public consultation exercise comprised a leaflet and website, both with 'reply to' facilities, with no physical public exhibition able to take place. Dialogue was initiated with local Parish Councils/Meetings and a number of meetings have taken place between Green Nation and the Parish Meetings of both Noke and Oddington in the lead up to this application, most recently in September 2021. Direct detailed discussions have also been held with the RSPB.
- 4.3 A total of 19 postal responses and 62 web responses were received as part of the organised public consultation exercise, which equates to a response rate of approx. 10%. This is considered a reasonable response rate to a pre-application consultation. Comments generally focused on the location and scale of the proposed development (including the Green Belt location); ecology; public footpaths including the Oxfordshire Way; visual impact; flood risk; access; transport impact; community benefits; and the benefits of renewable energy. Overall, the responses received provided a mixture of reactions and raised a number of issues; and provided a number of suggestions that have been taken into consideration as part of the proposed development submitted with this planning application. The submitted Consultation Statement addresses all of the issues raised from the comments received.
- 4.4 The consultation exercise has led to amendments to the proposed scheme in order to address comments received. This includes amendments being made to the proposal to reduce the scale of the developable area; and amendments to the proposed layout to allow greater offset between the development and existing footpaths as well as increased landscape and planting buffers, which addresses specific concerns expressed that the footpaths would feel 'enclosed' for users as a

result of the development. A permissive path is also included as part of the proposal as requested by local residents, in order to provide an alternative walking route between Noke and Oddington. Revised access arrangements, including utilising an existing access track for the proposal's operational access and having a separate temporary construction access route utilising temporary access matting, is also now proposed related to concerns of introducing a new access road in the countryside. Extensive ecological enhancements are also included, including specific ecology areas to the north and north-east, with proposals guided by discussions with RSPB. The submitted Consultation Statement provides further, more detailed commentary on the changes made to the proposals in response to comments made throughout the pre-application consultation process.

5. PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

Use

- 5.1 The proposed development comprises a solar farm with an approximate installed electrical energy generation capacity of up to 26.6 megawatts (MW), through the deployment of ground mounted solar arrays, as well as associated infrastructure and access.
- 5.2 The proposed development is shown clearly on the accompanying Development Framework Plan and will constitute the construction of photovoltaic (PV) arrays laid out in rows running from east to west across the main part of the Site, separated by existing field boundaries to be retained and enhanced, with aforementioned public footpath (ref. 309/1/10) running through the centre of the Site. All existing hedgerows forming field boundaries have been retained, other than at a few access points for the development and permissive path. The submitted Arboricultural Report & Method Statement assesses the impact of the proposed development on trees and hedgerows in detail.
- 5.3 The proposed development will be temporary in nature, as is the case with many solar farms. It is proposed to have a lifespan of 40 years. The PV arrays will be assembled on a framework that will be driven into the soil, ensuring relatively low impact on existing ground conditions and without the need for deep foundations or piling. It will not involve significant infrastructure requirements or operation post-installation and will require minimal traffic movements via the proposed operational access, limited to maintenance and ongoing operational requirements. Due to the minimal intrusion of the development, when the panels and associated equipment are to be removed at the end of their lifespan, the land will be able to simply revert to full agricultural use with minimal disruption. In this respect, the proposed scheme will result in a less permanent impact than most other forms of development, including some alternative methods of renewable energy production.
- 5.4 The proposal includes designated ecology enhancement areas to the north and north-east of the Site along the River Ray corridor. This, along with the proposed overall landscape proposals with extensive planting proposed around the perimeter of the development parcels, will allow the achievement of significant biodiversity net gains with an overall gain for habitats of 50.44% and a specific gain of 6.14% for hedgerow habitats.

- 5.5 The Site comprises of predominantly Grade 3b (moderate quality) agricultural land and therefore does not fall within the definition of 'best and most versatile agricultural land', in line with the NPPF. It is located within a relatively rural setting, surrounded by agricultural fields, with small settlements nearby. Some continued agricultural use around the panels will be retained, which will comprise sheep grazing.
- 5.6 If Cherwell District Council is to play a role in renewable energy generation, then the need for such developments on appropriate sites will continue. By their nature, ground mounted solar farms such as this, generally need to be located outside of urban areas and within the open countryside, where the capacity to support such development exists, both in terms of land area capacity and grid connection capacity. Further detail is provided below regarding the scale of new solar development that will be required in order to meet the UK Government's decarbonisation objectives. This will be equivalent to 200 solar farms the size of this development every year between now and 2035. This Statement, and the accompanying documents, set out why it is considered that the application site is well suited to accommodate the proposed use.

Scale and Appearance

- 5.7 The proposed development comprises the installation of solar panels securely fixed onto steel frameworks for support and arranged into arrays. The development will consist of approx. 47,300 no. 540Wp PV modules. The solar arrays would have a maximum height of 2.8 metres. A specification drawing of the solar modules is submitted with this application providing elevation and cross section views. The framework will be driven into the soil, ensuring relatively low impact on existing ground conditions and without the need for deep foundations and piling. This would minimise any ground disturbance and allow for sheep grazing during the lifetime of the development. This approach also ensures that once the proposal has reached the end of its operational lifetime, the land could revert to full agricultural use.
- 5.8 It is proposed that the solar farm will be connected to the electricity grid network via a cable connection to an existing 33kv electricity powerline infrastructure to the north-west of the Site, as shown on the submitted Development Framework Plan. This provides a viable connection to the proposed development, based on the scale of development proposed. Further details of the viability considerations

of the scale of the development are set out with the accompanying Viability Assessment.

- 5.9 The proposed development also includes a spares cabin, a welfare cabin, switchgear station, a DNO cabin, stations containing inverters and associated infrastructure, as well as perimeter fencing and associated CCTV for security reasons. Specification drawings of these elements are submitted with this application showing their scale and appearance. The proposed locations of these elements are shown on the submitted Development Framework Plan. The location of these items has been carefully considered to locate the inverters and associated infrastructure (which can generate some limited noise) in the centre of the Site far away from the public footpath to minimise any possible amenity impact. The DNO cabin and customer switchgear station are located at the Site's southern entrance allowing ease of access for commercial / operational requirements. The spares cabin and welfare cabin are located to the west of the public footpath which transects the Site. The cabins are screened by landscaping from the footpath and due to their functions will not generate any noise or other amenity concerns.

Access

- 5.10 The main operational vehicular access to the Site is proposed via an existing agricultural access track from the unnamed road to the south of the Site which connects the B4027 to the village of Noke. This access route runs past Manor Farm and connects with public footpath ref. 309/1/10 connecting to the main part of the Site to the south as shown on the submitted Development Framework Plan.
- 5.11 The proposed temporary construction traffic access is via an existing gated agricultural access point from the road leading into Noke, located to the west of Noke before reaching the village. The use of a temporary construction access route has been a direct response from feedback received during the public consultation process. The construction access route will use temporary construction matting, before reaching the main access route described above, to allow it to be taken up with limited disruption following the construction phase, with the land along this route to continue in full agricultural use. The purpose of the temporary construction access is to avoid construction vehicle traffic going through the village of Noke. A temporary construction compound area will be required during the construction phase, which will last 3-6 months. The compound will be fully removed after the construction phase with the land along in this

location to continue in full agricultural use. The location of the temporary construction compound and temporary construction traffic access route are shown on the submitted Development Framework Plan.

- 5.12 A new permissive footpath is proposed as part of this development offering an alternative walking route between Noke and Oddington responding to requests raised by local residents during the aforementioned pre-application public consultation exercise. The permissive path connects to public footpath ref. 309/1/10 to the north of the Site and connects to bridleway ref. 209/16/10 to the south-east of the Site. The proposed development has also been designed to retain existing public rights of way in the area, with minimal disruption during the construction phase. In response to feedback during the public consultation exercise, wide open landscaping areas are provided along public footpath ref. 309/1/10 which runs through the site, between the footpath and the solar farm, providing a more open feel for walkers compared to the existing scenario when crops are growing high right up to the boundary of the footpath route.

Landscape

- 5.13 The proposal includes extensive areas of new tree, hedgerow, shrub and grassland planting, providing significant arboricultural and ecological gains and providing mitigation in landscape and visual terms. The detailed landscape scheme carefully considers the arboricultural, ecological and landscape & visual considerations of the proposals, along with the commercial requirements of the proposal.
- 5.14 The impact upon the local landscape has been given careful consideration in the design of this proposal and this is discussed in detail within the accompanying Landscape & Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA).
- 5.15 Detailed landscape drawings are submitted with this application which show how the proposed landscape planting will be delivered in order to achieve the mitigation requirements set out in the LVIA, with specific species shown. Detailed sections have also been produced and submitted which illustrate how the proposal will look along the public footpath that transects the Site, having regard to concerns raised by local residents at the pre-application consultation stage that the footpath could feel 'enclosed' by the development. Similarly, photomontages have also been produced to illustrate how the proposal will look from various identified sensitive viewpoints.

6. PLANNING POLICY CONTEXT

- 6.1 In accordance with Section 38 (6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, applications for planning permission must be determined in accordance with the Development Plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.
- 6.2 The development proposals take into account a wide range of planning policies at the national and local levels. This section provides an overview of the planning policies and guidance which have been identified to be of relevance. The credentials of the proposals are assessed against the different policy themes and specific policies in the following sections.

DEVELOPMENT PLAN

- 6.3 The Development Plan for the area consists of the Cherwell Local Plan 2011-2031 Part 1 (adopted July 2015) and the saved policies of the Cherwell Local Plan 1996 (adopted November 1996).

Cherwell Local Plan 2011-2031 Part 1 (adopted July 2015)

- 6.4 In the context of the adopted Cherwell Local Plan Part 1, the Site is located within the Green Belt.
- 6.5 **Policy PSD1** states that when considering development proposals, the Council will take a proactive approach to reflect the presumption in favour of sustainable development contained in the NPPF.
- 6.6 **Policy ESD 1** sets out the need to mitigate and adapt to climate change. One of the identified strategic aims identified within the listed bullet point criteria states that this will include promoting the use of decentralised and renewable or low carbon energy where appropriate, in line with policies ESD4 and ESD5.
- 6.7 **Policy ESD 2** states that the Council will promote an 'energy hierarchy' in order to achieve carbon emissions reductions, which includes a priority to making use of renewable energy.
- 6.8 **Policy ESD 5** relates to renewable energy, and states that the Council supports renewable and low carbon energy provision wherever any adverse impacts can be addressed satisfactorily. The potential local environmental, economic and community benefits of renewable energy schemes will be a material consideration in determining planning applications. The policy states that planning applications involving renewable energy development will be encouraged provided that there

is no unacceptable adverse impact, including cumulative impact, on the following issues, which are considered to be of particular local significance in Cherwell:

- **Landscape and biodiversity impacts, including designations, protected habitats and species, and Conservation Target Areas**
- **Visual impacts on local landscapes**
- **Historic environment including designated and non-designated assets and their settings**
- **The Green Belt, particularly visual impacts on openness**
- **Aviation activities**
- **Highways and access issues, and**
- **Residential amenity**

- 6.9 **Policy ESD6** relates to sustainable flood risk management and states that development proposals will be assessed according to the sequential approach and where necessary the exceptions test as set out in the NPPF and NPPG, with site specific flood risk assessments required to accompany all development proposals located in flood zones 2 or 3.
- 6.10 **Policy ESD7** states that all development will be required to use sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) for the management of surface water run-off. Flood Risk Assessments (FRA) should determine how SuDS can be used on particular sites and to design appropriate systems.
- 6.11 **Policy ESD10** seeks the protection and enhancement of biodiversity and the natural environment achieved by a range of criteria such as seeking a net gain in biodiversity, encouraging the protection of trees with an aim to increase the number of trees in the District, and requiring relevant habitat and species surveys and reports to accompany planning applications.
- 6.12 **Policy ESD11** relates to Conservation Target Areas. The supporting text sets out that there are ten Conservation Target Areas within Cherwell District. The Site covers part of the Otmoor Conservation Target Area. The policy sets out that where development is proposed within or adjacent to a Conservation Target Area, biodiversity surveys and a report will be required to identify constraints and opportunities for biodiversity enhancements. Development which would prevent

the aims of a Conservation Target Area being achieved will not be permitted. Where there is potential for development, the design and layout of the development, planning conditions or obligations will be used to secure biodiversity enhancement to help achieve the aims of the Conservation Target Area.

6.13 **Policy ESD13** states that opportunities will be sought to secure the enhancement of the character and appearance of the landscape, particularly in urban fringe locations, including the planting of woodlands, trees and hedgerows.

6.14 **Policy ESD14** states that the Oxford Green Belt will be retained in order to:

- **Preserve the special character and landscape setting of Oxford**
- **Check the growth of Oxford and prevent ribbon development and urban sprawl**
- **Prevent the coalescence of settlements**
- **Assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment**
- **Assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land**

6.15 The policy states that development proposals within the Green Belt will be assessed in accordance with Government guidance contained within the NPPF and NPPG.

6.16 **Policy ESD15** states that new development will be expected to complement and enhance the character of its context through sensitive siting, layout and high-quality design. Where development is in the vicinity of any of the District's distinctive natural or historic assets, delivering high quality design that complements the asset will be essential. It requires proposals to conserve, sustain or enhance designated and non-designated 'heritage assets' (as defined in the NPPF) including buildings, features, archaeology, conservation areas and their settings, and ensure new development is sensitively sited and integrated in accordance with advice in the NPPF and NPPG.

6.17 **Policy ESD16** seeks the protection and enhancement of the Oxford Canal corridor. The biodiversity value of the canal corridor will be protected and

proposals which would be detrimental to the character or appearance of the Oxford Canal Conservation Area will not be permitted.

- 6.18 **Policy ESD17** states that the District's green infrastructure network will be maintained and enhanced, which includes rights of way.

Cherwell Local Plan 1996 (adopted November 1996)

- 6.19 A number of policies contained in the adopted Local Plan 1996 were 'saved' beyond 27 September 2007 until such time as they are replaced by the emerging Cherwell Local Plan 2040, following its adoption. Whilst many policies have been replaced, the adopted Cherwell Local Plan 2011-2031 Part 1 lists those policies which are retained. The saved policies remain relevant to development proposals in the District, as long as they are consistent with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

- 6.20 **Policy C8** states that sporadic development in the open countryside, including developments in the vicinity of motorway or major road junctions will generally be resisted.

- 6.21 **Policy C28** states that control will be exercised over all new development to ensure that the standards of layout, design and external appearance are sympathetic to the character of the urban or rural context of that development.

Cherwell Local Plan 2011-2031 – Partial Review Oxford's Unmet Housing Need (Adopted 7th September 2020)

- 6.22 A partial review of the adopted Cherwell Local Plan 2011-2031 (Part 1) has been undertaken to meet the unmet housing needs of Oxford. The Plan was adopted 7th September 2020.

- 6.23 The Plan identifies areas of land proposed to be removed from the Green Belt including land identified within allocated strategic development sites. It also identifies land to be removed from the Green Belt and safeguarded beyond the Plan period.

- 6.24 The scope of the Plan is limited to only meeting the unmet housing needs of Oxford and as such it does not contain any policies directly relevant to the provision of renewable energy developments regardless of their associated importance.

OTHER MATERIAL CONSIDERATIONS

National Planning Policy Framework: NPPF

- 6.25 The applicant has given consideration to national policy contained in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). The NPPF outlines some key policies that support aspects of this application. The NPPF identifies that the purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development, and has three overarching objectives: economic, social and environmental.
- 6.26 As part of this focus on sustainable development, the NPPF states the environmental objective of sustainable development is to contribute to protecting and enhancing our natural, built and historic environment; including making effective use of land, helping to improve biodiversity, using natural resources prudently, minimising waste and pollution, and mitigating and adapting to climate change, including moving to a low carbon economy.
- 6.27 The NPPF states that the planning system should “*support the transition to a low carbon future in a changing climate*” and support renewable and low carbon energy and associated infrastructure (**paragraph 152**).
- 6.28 Notably **paragraph 2** highlights that planning law requires that planning policies and decisions must reflect relevant international obligations and statutory requirements. In this context, the Paris Agreement 2015 and the Climate Change Act 2008 (as amended) set out the United Kingdom’s obligation in relation to combatting climate change.
- 6.29 With regard to supporting a prosperous rural economy, **paragraph 84** states that planning policies and decisions should enable the development and diversification of agricultural and other land-based rural businesses.
- 6.30 **Section 13** sets out policy guidance in relation to protecting Green Belt land. **Paragraph 147** states that inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances. **Paragraph 148** clarifies that very special circumstances will not exist unless the potential harm to the Green Belt by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm, is clearly outweighed by other considerations. **Paragraphs 149 and 150** set out the forms of development deemed not inappropriate in the Green Belt. **Paragraph 151** says that when located in the Green Belt, elements of many renewable energy projects will comprise inappropriate development and in such cases, developers will need to demonstrate very special circumstances if

projects are to proceed. However, the NPPF states that such very special circumstances may include the wider environmental benefits associated with increased production of energy from renewable sources.

- 6.31 **Paragraph 152** states that *“planning should help to: shape places in ways that contribute to radical reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, minimise vulnerability and improve resilience; encourage the re-use of existing resources.....and support renewable and low carbon energy and associated infrastructure”*.
- 6.32 **Paragraph 155** states that to help increase the use and supply of renewable and low carbon energy and heat, plans should provide a positive strategy for energy from these sources, that maximises the potential for suitable development, while ensuring that adverse impacts are addressed satisfactorily (including cumulative landscape and visual impacts).
- 6.33 **Paragraph 156** states that local planning authorities should support community-led initiatives for renewable and low carbon energy, including developments outside areas identified in local plans or other strategic policies that are being taken forward through neighbourhood planning.
- 6.34 **Paragraph 158** confirms that, when determining planning applications for renewable and low carbon development, local planning authorities should not require applicants to demonstrate the overall need for renewable or low carbon energy and should recognise that even small-scale projects provide a valuable contribution to cutting greenhouse gas emissions. It states that LPAs should approve the application if its impacts are (or can be made) acceptable.
- 6.35 **Section 14** provides guidance in relation to planning and flood risk, which states that inappropriate development in areas at risk of flooding should be avoided by directing development away from areas at highest risk. Where development is necessary in such areas, the development should be made safe for its lifetime without increasing flood risk elsewhere.
- 6.36 **Section 15** relates to conserving and enhancing the natural environment. **Paragraph 174** states that planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by minimising impacts on and providing net gains for biodiversity. **Paragraph 180** states that opportunities to improve biodiversity in and around developments should be integrated as part of their design, especially where this can secure measurable net gains

for biodiversity or enhance public access to nature where this is appropriate.

6.37 The NPPF also includes guidance on conserving and enhancing the historic environment, including considering potential impacts. **Paragraph 199** states that when considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset's conservation (and the more important the asset, the greater the weight should be), irrespective of whether any potential harm amounts to substantial harm, total loss or less than substantial harm to its significance.

6.38 **Paragraph 202** states that; *"where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use"*.

National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG)

6.39 The NPPG provides further guidance for the determination of planning applications for large scale ground-mounted solar photovoltaic farms, such as this.

6.40 Paragraph 013 (Reference ID 5-013-20150327 – Revision date 27th March 2015) of the Renewable and Low Carbon Energy section notably states the following:

"The deployment of large-scale solar farms can have a negative impact on the rural environment, particularly in undulating landscapes. However, the visual impact of a well-planned and well-screened solar farm can be properly addressed within the landscape if planned sensitively".

6.41 The NPPG also sets out the particular factors a local planning authority will need to consider when assessing large scale solar farms, which include:

- **encouraging the effective use of land by focussing large scale solar farms on previously developed and non-agricultural land, provided that it is not of high environmental value;**
- **where a proposal involves greenfield land, whether (i) the proposed use of any agricultural land has been shown to be necessary and poorer quality land has been used in preference to higher quality land; and (ii) the proposal allows for continued**

agricultural use where applicable and/or encourages biodiversity improvements around arrays;

- **that solar farms are normally temporary structures and planning conditions can be used to ensure that the installations are removed when no longer in use and the land is restored to its previous use;**
- **the proposal's visual impact, the effect on landscape of glint and glare and on neighbouring uses and aircraft safety;**
- **the extent to which there may be additional impacts if solar arrays follow the daily movement of the sun;**
- **the need for, and impact of, security measures such as lights and fencing;**
- **great care should be taken to ensure heritage assets are conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance, including the impact of proposals on views important to their setting. As the significance of a heritage asset derives not only from its physical presence, but also from its setting, careful consideration should be given to the impact of large scale solar farms on such assets. Depending on their scale, design and prominence, a large scale solar farm within the setting of a heritage asset may cause substantial harm to the significance of the asset;**
- **the potential to mitigate landscape and visual impacts through, for example, screening with native hedges;**
- **the energy generating potential, which can vary for a number of reasons including, latitude and aspect.**

6.42 Further advice of the NPPG states that the approach to assessing cumulative landscape and visual impact of large-scale solar farms is likely to be the same as assessing the impact of wind turbines. However, in the case of ground-mounted solar panels it should be noted that with effective screening and appropriate land topography the area of a zone of visual influence could be zero.

The Climate Change Act 2008 (as amended)

- 6.43 The Climate Change Act 2008 is the basis for the UK's approach to tackling and responding to climate change. It requires that emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases are reduced and that climate change risks are adapted to. In 2019 the Government amended the Climate Change Act to commit the UK to achieving net zero by 2050.
- 6.44 The Climate Change Act requires the government to set legally-binding 'carbon budgets' to act as stepping-stones to 2050. A carbon budget is a cap on the amount of greenhouse gases emitted in the UK over a five-year period.
- 6.45 The latest (sixth) Carbon Budget was published in April 2021 and enshrined in law in June 2021. This commits the UK Government to reduce emissions by 78% by 2035 compared to 1990 levels, which builds upon the previous commitment to reduce emissions in 2030 by at least 68% compared to 1990 levels. The latest Carbon Budget outlines scenarios for meet these targets on the path to net zero, which includes a range for wind and solar energy generation to provide 75-90% of the total electricity supply. Under the 'balanced net zero pathway' scenario solar generation will need to increase from 10 TWh in 2019 to 60 TWh in 2035 and 85 TWh in 2050.
- 6.46 On 7th October 2021, the UK Government committed to bring forward the date to decarbonise the electricity system to 2035.
- 6.47 The presumed new target of 85 TWh of solar output by 2035 will require solar generation capacity of ~94 GWp. As of the date of this application, the UK has 14 GWp of solar capacity. On average, 6 GWp per annum will need to be installed to reach this level.
- 6.48 Every non-urban district within England and Wales will need to contribute to the required growth in capacity. Solar power generation will be particularly concentrated in the southern half of England and in Wales, while wind power generation will be more common in northern England.
- 6.49 Green Nation is very actively involved in the development of rooftop solar installations. It also works in ground-mounted solar because it knows the large majority of new solar capacity will need to be in the form of solar farms in order to achieve the UK's generation targets.

6.50 Recent events and spikes in the price of natural gas, oil and electricity have starkly demonstrated how important solar power, and renewable energy in general, are to bring energy security and price stability as well as to the achievement of net zero.

Cherwell District Council Climate Emergency Declaration & 2020 Climate Action Framework

6.51 Cherwell District Council has declared a Climate Emergency. As part of this, the Council has committed to:

- *Ensuring that Council operations and activities are net zero by 2030*
- *Doing their part to achieve a net zero carbon district by 2030 and lead by example.*

6.52 The 2020 Climate Action Framework sets out Cherwell District Council's approach to tackling the Climate Emergency with a stated commitment for the Council to fully play their part in enabling a zero-carbon district by 2030. The Framework states that Cherwell District Council is a signatory to OxLEP's Oxfordshire Energy Strategy which aims to reduce emissions in Oxfordshire by 50% by 2030 setting a pathway to achieving net zero by 2050 stating that this will require 5 times more solar power than currently, amongst a range of other measures such as new housing meeting the highest energy standards. With the commitment to reach net zero by 2030, the Framework recognises that Cherwell District Council must go further than this including a further "*increase in commercial and residential solar power in the district*".

British Energy Security Strategy April 2022

6.53 The Government's April 2022 British Energy Security Strategy policy statement forms the Government's latest plan to boost Britain's energy security following rising global energy prices and volatility in international markets.

6.54 The Strategy outlines new national commitments to 'supercharge' clean energy and accelerate deployment, with an aim to see 95% of Great Britain's electricity usage from low carbon sources by 2030. It outlines a quicker deployment of nuclear, wind, solar, and hydrogen energy production. The Strategy states that the Government expects a five-fold increase in solar energy generation deployment by 2035. It states that the Government will continue supporting the effective use of land by encouraging large scale projects on lower value land

where possible and ensure projects are designed to avoid, mitigate, and where necessary, compensate for the impacts of using greenfield sites. It outlines an ambition of 70GW of solar energy generation by 2035.

Emerging Local Policy

Cherwell Local Plan 2040

- 6.55 Cherwell District Council are currently undertaking a review of the adopted Local Plan. Once adopted, the Cherwell Local Plan 2040 will replace the current adopted Cherwell Local Plan 2015 and 'saved' policies of the Cherwell Local Plan (1996). The Council undertook a Community Involvement Paper Consultation in July-September 2020. This Paper did not contain any proposals or policy options. It is anticipated that the next stage of the Local Plan Review will contain issues and options.

Oxfordshire Plan 2050

- 6.56 As part of the Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal agreement with the Government, the six Oxfordshire authorities (Cherwell District Council, Oxford City Council, Oxfordshire County Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council), have committed to producing a joint statutory spatial plan (JSSP), known as the Oxfordshire Plan 2050.
- 6.57 The Oxfordshire Plan will provide an integrated strategic planning framework and evidence base to support sustainable growth across the county to 2050, including the planned delivery of new homes and economic development, and the anticipated supporting infrastructure needed.
- 6.58 The Initial Regulation 18 consultation of this Plan took place in February/March 2019. Part 2 of the Regulation 18 consultation took place until the 8th October 2021.
- 6.59 Under 'Infrastructure Considerations', the 'Introducing the Oxfordshire Plan' document acknowledges that the existing grid for distributing energy around Oxfordshire is constrained. It also sets out that the Oxfordshire Plan must facilitate a shift towards lower energy demand and low carbon forms of energy development.

6.60 Notably the 'Introducing the Oxfordshire Plan' Consultation Report, which summaries responses received to the Plan's previous consultations, states that:

"Climate change was cited as the biggest issue that needs to be addressed and it was suggested that this should be central to the Oxfordshire Plan's vision. It was suggested that the Oxfordshire Plan should recognise that there is a climate emergency and should take positive steps to address this. It was suggested that the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 should not only be considering climate change adaption and resilience, but proactively seeking to manage Oxfordshire's contribution to climate change, with a focus on achieving zero carbon or carbon neutral standards. It was suggested that Oxfordshire should be aspiring to be a world leader in terms of addressing climate change."

7. ASSESSMENT OF THE PROPOSAL

Principle of the Development

- 7.1 The proposed development comprises a solar farm located on large open fields at Manor Farm, Noke, with an approximate installed electrical energy generation capacity of up to 26.6 megawatts (MW), through the deployment of ground mounted solar arrays. The proposed development is shown on the accompanying Development Framework Plan (P19-2636_003_1 Rev M). As described in Section 5 of this Statement, in addition to the solar arrays, the proposal includes associated infrastructure, including inverter stations, containers and cabins such as the DNO cabin, and access tracks, as well as extensive areas of new planting and ecological enhancements and a new permissive footpath. The Site covers a total area of approx. 43.78ha (within the submitted red line) of which approx. 30ha will accommodate the ground mounted solar development areas contained within three distinct development parcels contained within proposed perimeter fencing. The remaining areas comprise the access routes, permissive path and the extensive areas of landscape planting and designated ecological enhancement areas.
- 7.2 The NPPF is clear at paragraph 158 that applicants do not need to demonstrate or justify the overall need for renewable or low carbon energy projects and recognises the valuable contribution they make in cutting greenhouse gas emissions, even related to small scale projects. It is also clear that applications for renewable and low carbon development schemes should be approved if their impacts are (or can be made) acceptable.
- 7.3 Despite this context, where the need for a scheme such as this is not required to be demonstrated, it is considered important to emphasise the very clear and significant benefits of this proposal, particularly when assessing any impacts that the proposal might have as part of the overall planning balance, in line with the determination of applications referenced in Section 2 of this Statement.
- 7.4 The proposal would make a significant contribution to local and national energy policy objectives and legislation relating to renewable energy, as referenced already in this Statement. As discussed, Cherwell District Council has declared a climate emergency and has committed to doing their part to achieve a net zero carbon district by 2030. The Council has outlined an associated Climate Action Framework (2020) which recognises that a significant increase in both

commercial and residential solar power in the District is necessary, in order to achieve this target. Indeed, the Climate Action Framework 2020 recognises that to even meet the OxLEP's Oxfordshire Energy Strategy target of a 50% reduction in emissions in Oxfordshire by 2030 (to which Cherwell District Council is a signatory) there will need to be five times more solar power than currently generated (as of 2020). In this context, it is also important to reiterate that the UK Government's latest (sixth) legally binding Carbon Budget enshrined in law in June 2021, commits the UK to reduce emissions by 78% by 2035 compared to 1990 levels, which builds upon the previous commitment to reduce emissions in 2030 by at least 68% compared to 1990 levels. This is further emphasised by the Government's April 2022 British Energy Security Strategy. It is therefore clear in this local and national context that even when assessed against the minimum legally binding targets, a significant increase in solar generated power, amongst other necessary measures, is needed immediately in order to try and reach 2030 targets and beyond. Given that Cherwell District Council have declared that they aim to go beyond the minimum targets, then the need for schemes such as this is even more pressing.

- 7.5 The need to support the transition to a low carbon future in a changing climate and the need to encourage the development of renewable energy resources are core principles of the NPPF. As set out in Section 6 of this Statement, paragraphs 152 and 155 of the NPPF provide clear support for low carbon and renewable energy development, as well as policies ESD1, ESD2 and ESD5 of the adopted Cherwell Local Plan, highlighting the clear environmental benefits of such development. The emerging Oxfordshire Plan 2050 recognises the essential need to facilitate a shift towards lower energy demand and low carbon forms of energy development. The associated Oxfordshire Plan 2050 Consultation Report has highlighted that respondents to the Plan have cited climate change as the biggest issue that needs to be addressed and have suggested that this should be central to the Oxfordshire Plan's vision. Respondents to the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 have also suggested that Oxfordshire should be aspiring to be a world leader in terms of addressing climate change.
- 7.6 In addition, the proposal will provide local energy security. This will reduce the potential vulnerabilities associated with the distribution of other (often non-renewable) energy supplies, which can have significant knock-on effects to the functionality of the local and national economy, which has the potential to only become worse over future years.

- 7.7 For clarity, the proposal will generate energy equivalent to powering around 7000 homes annually. It will help save approx. 12,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions per year.
- 7.8 As highlighted in Policy ESD5, renewable energy schemes can also provide economic and community (social) benefits. As explained in previous sections, the proposal will provide clear benefits for the local community with the Applicant working to incorporate local group(s) as part of the project and setting up an annual community benefit payment for 20 years to the immediate community in Noke. The proposal will also provide on-site improvements as part of the scheme which will also benefit the local community, including the proposed creation of a new permissive footpath responding to direct requests from local residents for such a path during the pre-application consultation exercise.
- 7.9 In addition to direct benefits to the local community, as well as the clear environmental benefits associated with the generation of renewable energy; the proposal will also assist the ongoing viability and stability of a rural business by providing rural diversification, supporting the agricultural landowner. The proposal will greatly assist the agricultural landowner to reduce the seasonal risks and variations involved in farming, providing a viable and stable income that can be used to support other aspects of the agricultural business.
- 7.10 Paragraph 156 of the NPPF is clear that local planning authorities should support community-led initiatives for renewable and low carbon energy. In this instance, the proposal represents a renewable energy scheme in which the Applicant is working closely with the local community. The community and economic benefits of this proposal to the local area are supported by policy ESD5 of the adopted Local Plan and paragraph 84 of the NPPF, promoting the development and diversification of agricultural land-based rural business. Paragraph 81 is clear that significant weight should be placed on the need to support economic growth and productivity through the planning system. This proposal would comprise sustainable economic growth, with additional benefits to the local community as outlined. These community and economic benefits represent material considerations in the determination of this application.
- 7.11 In addition to these benefits, as outlined in this report and discussed in more detail below, the proposal will also provide extensive new tree, hedgerow, shrub and grassland planting, with designated ecological enhancement areas proposed, including new wetland habitat to the north-east of the Site. These areas will have

significant ecological and arboricultural benefits, with the proposal assessed to deliver an overall gain for habitats of 50.44% and a specific gain of 6.14% for hedgerow habitats as set out in the accompanying Ecological Appraisal.

- 7.12 This therefore highlights the valuable contribution that this scheme would make, with very clear and significant environmental, economic and social benefits accruing. Having regard to local and national planning policy, it is also important to assess the potential impacts of the proposal.
- 7.13 As noted already, the Site is located within the Oxford Green Belt. It is also located on Grade 3b agricultural land which is not included in the definition of 'best and most versatile' (BMV) agricultural land which is protected by planning policy. This section therefore assesses below the principle of the proposed development against relevant local and national planning policy related to the Green Belt and use of agricultural land. However, having emphasised the clear benefits of the proposal above, it is also important to set out the need for this location for the proposed development having regard to the site selection process required for large ground mounted solar farms such as this. This forms as a material consideration for the application and part of the 'very special circumstances' when assessing the application against local and national Green Belt policy.
- 7.14 The most important aspect of developing a ground mounted solar farm involves connecting to the electricity grid network. Without a suitable and viable grid connection, there is no means of exporting, and therefore utilising, the renewable energy generated. In addition to finding sites that have access to a suitable and viable grid connection with adequate capacity for the development, it is also imperative that a site is physically capable of accommodating the development in terms of land area and topography. As such, these factors (suitable and viable grid connection capacity, and land capacity) are the starting point for any site selection process for a ground mounted solar farm. With reference to these two crucial factors Green Nation has sought to find suitable sites within Cherwell District that can deliver a suitable and viable ground mounted solar farm.
- 7.15 As referenced in the emerging Oxfordshire Plan 2050, with regard to Section 6 above, the electricity grid network in Oxfordshire is constrained. The Network Availability Assessment, submitted with this application, has investigated the latest capacity of the local electrical grid network, and the potential for the development proposal to be brought forward elsewhere in Cherwell District,

including on land outside of the Oxford Green Belt. This has identified and confirmed the severe grid capacity constraints in the area and identified that only one substation (at Headington) is capable of accommodating the required connection to support the proposed development within Cherwell District. Correspondingly, the relevant Distribution Network Operator (DNO), SSE, have offered a connection on the Bicester – Headington 33kV feeder power line that runs through his Site connecting to the Headington substation to the south. As noted in the accompanying Network Availability Assessment, this connection is very close to the maximum allowable at the Headington substation and is realistically the last significant generation connection that will be made in the Cherwell District authority area for the foreseeable future. As noted in the submitted Viability Assessment, further significant constraints in the National Grid network have also been recently identified in 2022, which means that this Site is one of only a few locations in Oxfordshire as a whole that will be able to connect to the electricity network before 2028, further highlighting the importance of this project in delivering local and national renewable energy generation and Climate Change targets.

- 7.16 As a result of these findings, an assessment of the only available / unconstrained power line (the Bicester – Headington 33kV feeder power line) has been carried out, to see if there is any potential to connect along this power line, outside of the Oxford Green Belt. The accompanying Connection Power Line Constraints Map, referenced within the Network Availability Assessment and Viability Assessment, shows key, high level constraints that would preclude development on land. It does not take into consideration all potential constraints, such as agricultural land classification or significant landscape & visual constraints, that might also preclude development on further investigation. The key findings of this map, with consideration to the Network Availability Assessment, is that just north of the Site the connection power line becomes an underground cable, which as noted in the Network Availability Assessment, would not provide a viable connection potential to the grid. Then, moving further north, the connection line becomes an overhead line again, however the connection line then follows the Oxford-Bicester railway line through to the settlement of Bicester and forthcoming employment and housing allocations to the south of Bicester. As shown on the map, this includes part of the connection line which falls outside of the Green Belt. As per the findings and recommendations of the Network Availability Assessment, due to the 'phenomenon' known as 'rise of earth potential' (RoEP) and due to current safety

standards related to this phenomenon, it is not possible to provide a safe and viable connection to the line within the identified RoEP area. There is therefore no potential for the proposal to be brought forward outside of the Green Belt, on agricultural land either side of the connection line within the RoEP area, and then where the line deviates from the railway line, and no longer comprises a RoEP area, closer to Bicester, land is constrained either side of the line by existing and future / allocated housing and employment development, with no land area free and suitable to accommodate this proposal.

- 7.17 It is clear from the Network Availability Assessment and the associated Connection Power Line Constraints Map that there are no suitable sites outside of the Oxford Green Belt that could accommodate this proposal. This therefore contributes to the very special circumstances of the proposal with regard to the local and national policy related to the Green Belt, as discussed further below.
- 7.18 The accompanying Viability Assessment sets out the justification for the scale of the proposed development. The Assessment discusses the difficult context that the solar industry has been in following the abolition of key Government subsidies in 2015 but explains that the growth of the global solar industry over the last 6 years has enabled technological advances to continue and reduce the cost per Watt to build a solar farm. The margins remain tight but, in conjunction with strong investor backing, the solar power industry is now in a position to make an important contribution to increase renewable generation capacity in support of local and national renewable energy generation and climate change objectives.
- 7.19 The Viability Assessment sets out that there are significant fixed costs involved with the project, including the costs related to connection to the grid. When construction costs are included, the overall cost of the development will be at least £15.3 million. In order to secure funding, the proposal needs to be viable with an average output of 900 MWh/MW of capacity with a power price of £45/MWh or less and operating costs of £17,000-20,000/MW of capacity per annum. It is worth noting that during the Covid-19 pandemic power prices were well below £45/MWh as demand was reduced. Most operators assume average prices over the life of a solar farm will not be that low, but long-term pricing is unpredictable and this is illustrative of the risk associated with this type of development. The Viability Assessment concludes that a further reduction in the scale and scope of this project (beyond the changes already done following the pre-application and public consultation stages) would push the payback period to

beyond 23 years rendering the project unviable and unable to obtain the required investment.

7.20 As noted earlier in this Statement, in response to comments received from the Council at the pre-application stage and local residents at the public consultation stage, the Applicant has reduced the scale / coverage of the proposed solar farm as much as possible, resulting in the proposal the subject of this application. Provided the proposed scale is achieved, Green Nation believe that the proposal would be viable throughout its planning life. Any further reduction in the scale of project would render it unviable and mean it would not be able obtain the required investment, and therefore the scale of the proposed development is the minimum required to achieve a viable scheme.

7.21 The Viability Assessment therefore provides justification of the scale of the proposed development and the Network Availability Assessment and associated Constraints Map provides evidence of the need for the proposed development to be located at this Site.

Green Belt

7.22 Paragraphs 149 and 150 of the NPPF set out the forms of development deemed not inappropriate in the Green Belt. Policy ESD14 of the adopted Cherwell Local Plan is consistent with national policy. The proposed development does not fall into any of the identified categories in this context and therefore represents 'inappropriate development' in the Green Belt. As such with reference to paragraph 147 of the NPPF, 'very special circumstances' are required in order for this application to be approved. Paragraph 151 of the NPPF states that elements of many renewable energy projects will comprise inappropriate development however the necessary 'very special circumstances' may include the wider environmental benefits associated with increased production of energy from renewable sources.

7.23 In line with national and local policy, the proposed development is, by reason of its inappropriateness, 'harmful' to the Green Belt and should only be approved where 'very special circumstances' can be demonstrated. In line with Paragraph 148 of the NPPF and policy ESD14, very special circumstances will not exist unless the potential 'harm' to the Green Belt, by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm, is clearly outweighed by other considerations.

- 7.24 The recent approved planning applications for solar farm proposals within Green Belt locations referenced in Section 2 of this Statement, highlights cases where the environmental benefits of the production of renewable energy have been a fundamental consideration in the 'very special circumstances' for those applications, with limited other benefits being needed in addition, to outweigh the harm to the Green Belt, and any other harm.
- 7.25 Paragraph 137 of the NPPF states that the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence. It is accepted that the development would reduce openness as a previously open field would be developed for photovoltaic panels and associated infrastructure. In addition, the proposal would involve the development of part of the countryside that is currently undeveloped and would thus constitute encroachment into the countryside, contrary to one of the five purposes of the Green Belt (the third purpose), outlined in the NPPF, and correspondingly the encroachment into the countryside would cause harm to the Green Belt.
- 7.26 The other four purposes of the Green Belt are set out at paragraph 138 of the NPPF. The first, to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas, is not relevant to the proposed development as it is not adjacent to any large built-up area. This also applies to the second purpose, to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another. The fourth purpose is to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns. The proposed development is not located in close proximity to a historic town or urban area (such as Oxford). The fifth purpose, to assist in urban regeneration, is also not relevant for the site as this large ground mounted solar farm cannot be located in an urban area, as discussed in this overall section.
- 7.27 Returning to the essential characteristics of the Green Belt, openness and permanence; it is acknowledged that the proposal would compromise openness, however this would not be permanent due to the restricted lifespan of the proposed development. Once the development has reached the end of its lifespan the solar arrays can be removed, and the land returned to its former full agricultural use. The proposals would therefore not have a permanent 'harm' to openness.
- 7.28 As referenced above, Paragraph 151 of the NPPF is clear that 'very special circumstances' may include the wider environmental benefits associated with the increased production of energy from renewable sources. As set out above, this

proposal for an up to 26.6MW solar farm, would make a valuable contribution to local and national energy policy objectives and legislation relating to renewable energy and climate change; and ultimately provide very clear and significant environmental, economic and social benefits to the area. These clear and demonstrable benefits contribute to the very special circumstances of this proposal with regard to Development Plan and national Green Belt policy discussed above.

- 7.29 Having regard to the Development Plan and national Green Belt policy, it is necessary to balance the benefits and very special circumstances against any harm to the Green Belt which the proposal would cause, plus any other harm. In carrying out this balancing exercise, substantial weight should be given to harm to the Green Belt in accordance with paragraph 148 of the NPPF, with harm attributed by reason of inappropriateness, as well as the inherent harm to the openness of the Green Belt and encroachment into the countryside.
- 7.30 The proposal is considered to be acceptable in landscape and visual terms as discussed further below and in the accompanying LVIA. The degree of harm that the proposal would cause in landscape & visual terms would be limited, which in the balancing exercise should be given moderate weight. The proposal is also considered to be acceptable in heritage terms as discussed further below and in the accompanying Archaeology & Built Heritage Assessment. The proposed development within the Site is anticipated to result in a very minor level of harm to the significance of the Grade II Listed heritage assets at Manor Farm, through changes to their setting. In the balancing exercise this should be given limited weight.
- 7.31 It is notable that planning permission pursuant to application ref. 13/01027/F, referenced in this Statement, was approved in 2014 at appeal (ref. APP/C3105/A/13/2207532), at a nearby site at Rowles Farm located approx. 2 km to the north of the Site. Although related to a different scheme, the Rowles Farm site has some similar characteristics to this Site in terms of its physical characteristics, including notably in landscape and visual terms such as its proximity to public rights of way (with PRoW running through that site) and the potential for direct views. The appeal was also determined in a very similar context in terms of both Development Plan and national planning policy related to the Green Belt which has remained largely unchanged for many years. The Inspector considered that the very special circumstances of the Rowles Farm solar park proposal overcame the harm to the Green Belt, and other harm, in the

planning balance. In this regard, and with consideration to the criteria contained under policy ESD5 of the adopted Local Plan Part 1 and criteria contained in paragraph 013 of the Renewable and Low Carbon Energy section of the NPPG, there are a number of site specific considerations weighing in favour of this proposal, including the acceptable (subject to mitigation in certain circumstances) impacts in relation to matters such as landscape and visual impact; residential amenity and aircraft safety, including from glint and glare; impact on any heritage assets; highway impact; and flood risk; all discussed later in this section relating to each individual matter. Furthermore, as noted already and discussed in more detail later in this section, the proposal will have significant arboricultural and ecological benefits.

- 7.32 Significant weight can be attributed to the sustainable credentials of the proposal, including the wider environmental benefits associated with increased production of energy from renewable sources. These sustainability credentials also include the limited and acceptable impact in relation to landscape and other environmental considerations referenced above. Significant weight can also be attributed to the economic and community benefits of the proposal, identified above, with the proposal delivering a new permissive footpath as requested by local residents, as well as contributing to the local rural economy, assisting with the future viability and stability of a rural farming business. Significant weight can also be attributed to the significant arboricultural and ecological benefits resulting from this proposal.
- 7.33 In summary, it is accepted that the proposal would cause 'harm' to the Green Belt by reason of inappropriateness and because of the reduction in openness it would involve. In addition, there would be a limited degree of inevitable 'harm' to the landscape, to which moderate weight is attached, and a very minor level of 'harm' to the significance of the Grade II Listed heritage assets at Manor Farm, through changes to their setting, to which limited weight is attached. However, the proposal, and therefore any harm, would be temporary and reversible. In carrying out the balancing exercise it is considered that the substantial weight attributed to the harm to the Green Belt, the moderate weight attributed to the limited harm to the landscape and the limited weight attributed to the very minor harm to the significance of the Grade II Listed heritage assets at Manor Farm is outweighed by the identified very special circumstances of this particular proposal; namely:

- **The scale of generation of renewable energy – assisting in reducing carbon emissions, combating climate change and ensuring local energy security. This would assist with delivering the Council’s commitments under the declared Climate Emergency and Climate Action Framework 2020, and responding to the enormous price increases and threats to the supply of imported oil and gas seen in recent months;**
- **The necessary and justifiable location and scale of the proposed development; with no suitable non-Green Belt sites in the District which could accommodate the proposal due to grid connection and land area constraints; and with the scale of the proposal the minimum required to achieve a viable development;**
- **The development delivering benefits to the local community through ongoing community involvement in the project and delivery of on-site improvements such as the new permissive footpath which would benefit local people;**
- **The significant ecological and arboricultural benefits of the proposal, delivering significant biodiversity net gains and designated ecological enhancement areas;**
- **Assisting with the ongoing viability and stability of a rural business through rural diversification;**
- **The use of non-BMV (Best and Most Versatile) agricultural land;**
- **The non-permanent nature of the development, with some agricultural use (sheep grazing) maintained during the lifespan of the development; and**
- **The number of identified site-specific environmental considerations weighing in favour of the proposal, discussed in detail below.**

7.34 The considerable benefits of the proposal, as outlined above, clearly outweigh the identified harm to the Green Belt and any other harm, and therefore constitute the necessary very special circumstances required to accord with Development Plan and national Green Belt policy.

Use of Agricultural Land

- 7.35 Large scale ground mounted solar farms, such as this proposal, almost exclusively need to be located outside of urban areas and within the countryside, where the capacity to support such development exists, as is the case in this instance. As mentioned, the Site provides adequate capacity in terms of grid connection and total site area, in addition it provides suitable land orientation and local solar irradiation levels to accommodate the proposed development. As detailed above, the grid constraints in the area have meant that the proposal can only be brought forward along the Bicester – Headington 33kV feeder power line and due to other constraints related to suitable land capacity unconstrained by other development proposals, and technical & viability constraints, there are no non-Green Belt locations along this power line that could accommodate this proposal.
- 7.36 The NPPF states that where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary (as is the case here), areas of poorer quality land should be preferred to those of a higher quality, with proposals needing to avoid Best & Most Versatile (BMV) agricultural land. As set out in this Statement, BMV agricultural land comprises land within grades 1, 2 and 3a of the Agricultural Land Classification (ALC). The ALC Report submitted with this application confirms that the overall Site comprises sub-grade 3b agricultural land and therefore does not fall within the definition of BMV land, representing poorer quality land.
- 7.37 It is also notable that the proposed use of the Site as a solar farm does not preclude use for agricultural purposes alongside. After construction, it is proposed that sheep grazing will occur between the solar arrays (within the perimeter fencing). This will form part of the long-term maintenance and management of these areas of the Site assisting in managing the grassland around the panels.
- 7.38 The proposal is also a temporary change of use of the Site and, due to the minimal intrusion of the development, will mean that when the panels and associated equipment are removed at the end of the 40-year lifespan, the land will be able to revert to agricultural use. This distinguishes the proposal from many other more permanent developments, including alternative methods of renewable energy production.
- 7.39 It is therefore the case that the temporary use of this lower quality agricultural land is both necessary and acceptable in planning policy terms. The proposal therefore should not be resisted simply based on its position within the open

countryside which includes the limited regard to be had to the provisions of the now outdated saved policy C8 of adopted Cherwell Local Plan 1998 which is largely irrelevant to a scheme such as this.

- 7.40 Overall, it is clear that the proposed development would represent sustainable development, with regard to the three objectives of sustainable development, which is the primary purpose of the planning system.
- 7.41 With regard to the above assessment of the principle of the proposed development, it is clear that the proposal would accord with relevant NPPF and NPPG policy, including that relating to the delivery of renewable energy development and combatting climate change; the Green Belt; use of agricultural land; providing economic growth; and delivering sustainable development. In this regard the proposal will also accord with policies PSD1, ESD1, ESD2, ESD5 and ESD14 of the adopted Cherwell Local Plan Part 1.

Landscape & Visual Impact

- 7.42 The landscape and visual considerations of this proposal have been an integral part of the inception and evolution of this development, with the proposal truly representing a landscape-led approach to its design and layout.
- 7.43 Through pre-application discussions with the Council, it was mentioned that the Site includes "*important views towards Islip Conservation Area and St Nicholas Church*" as well "*as extensive views over the area from the scarp to the south*". The pre-application response also noted the location of the Site adjacent to a "*Special Landscape Area*" however this designation is not found in any adopted policy. Although not a specific landscape planning designation it is acknowledged that the Site is in the Green Belt and interacts with the local public right of way (PRoW) network.
- 7.44 The Site is currently in agricultural use with vegetation patterns present, including native hedgerows and hedgerow trees, which are characteristic of an agricultural area. The area to the north is characterised by the River Ray. In the wider landscape, the settlement of Noke predominantly comprises residential use and so do other nearby settlements such as Islip and Oddington.
- 7.45 As noted already, the Site is bisected by a public footpath (ref. 309/1/10) which runs north-south through the centre of the Site and partly along the northern boundary. A public bridleway (ref. 209/16/10) lies adjacent to the north-eastern site boundary and the Oxfordshire Way recreation route lies circa 750m south of

the main area of the Site proposed for solar development. The 'Access' part of this section below, deals in greater detail with the relationship between construction traffic and public footpaths, including discussions with Oxford County Council Footpath Officers.

- 7.46 The LVIA sets out that the Site lies within a 'transitional' area which is 'separated' from the wider agricultural landscape. The Site is located in an area already subject to influence from infrastructure features such as overhead wires and electricity pylons which further separates the Site from the wider landscape. The Site also benefits from mature vegetation, notably along the northern and eastern site boundaries which provides strong physical and visual containment. The Site is also located on relatively low-lying land with the land rising to the south of the Site towards the village of Noke.
- 7.47 The development envelope for the Site has been informed by landscape and visual analysis. The development envelope is contained within three existing field enclosures and allows for at least a 10m buffer from the River Ray corridor. The area is characterised by low-lying landform and has been set back from the south-western boundary to allow an existing view from public footpath ref. 309/1/10 to be retained towards the Church of St Nicholas in Islip. This view was identified as important during pre-application discussions with the Council and has been specifically considered when drawing up the development envelopes. As shown on the accompanying Development Framework Plan, the solar panel arrays are split into several areas to allow existing field boundaries and associated vegetation to be retained and enhanced.
- 7.48 Access route proposals were significantly altered following comments received from residents of Noke village during the aforementioned pre-application consultation process. The proposed construction access has been designed so as to avoid larger construction vehicles needing to pass through Noke village. It uses existing roads and tracks where possible and temporary construction matting to prevent any physical development and change of character over the route. Operational access will use existing roads and tracks in order to prevent any change of character.
- 7.49 The landscape scheme retains and enhances the existing hedgerow and tree network as much as possible. The existing vegetation network has been somewhat fragmented and lost, therefore such networks will be enhanced with new native planting along site boundaries, in accordance with published guidance

and policy. This approach provides screening to the proposed development alongside arboricultural and ecological benefits. Enhancements are also proposed alongside the aforementioned public footpath which bisects the Site including buffers between the existing hedgerow and security fencing which allows for an additional double row of hedgerow planting with adequate space for future growth and maintenance. This will minimise visual impact on the footpath and provide additional foraging and ecological connectivity. A perimeter offset from the security fencing and existing & proposed tree and hedgerow planting is proposed to be planted with biodiverse grassland planting which is advocated by the Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study on land adjacent to watercourses.

- 7.50 The north-eastern and eastern parts of the Site are located in a Conservation Target Area and are therefore proposed for ecological enhancements, with designated wetland habitat proposed in the north-east corner which will enhance biodiversity. Details of this have been informed through collaborative pre-application talks with RSPB. These areas set the development further west and will therefore avoid short distance views of potential development from the public bridleway to the east.
- 7.51 In visual terms, the greatest degree of visual impact will be from those passing through the PRow network through the Site itself as well as from elevated receptors. This also includes short-distance views from the Oxfordshire Way as it extends west from the settlement of Noke, the visual effects of which lessen as it continues north-west due to the falling elevation. The LVIA discusses the proposed mitigation to screen the proposed development, particularly relative to the footpaths. The majority of other views towards the Site are generally screened fully or in part by existing or proposed vegetation. Short-distance views also generally include the electricity pylons and overhead wires, and the majority are also within the context of existing built form.
- 7.52 A detailed landscaping scheme is submitted with this application which has been carefully designed to balance arboricultural, ecological and landscape & visual considerations. This includes extensive landscape buffers around the development parcels with evergreen planting included to provide year-round screening. The detailed specifications of planting proposed will provide material screening of the development from the implementation of the landscaping scheme, with screening improving further as the planting establishes over the years. Photomontages are submitted with this application which illustrate how the proposal will look in year 1 (at implementation) and then at year 10 of the development, from various key

identified viewpoints. Detailed sections have also been produced and submitted which illustrate how the proposal will look along the public footpath that transects the Site, having regard to concerns raised by local residents at the pre-application consultation stage that the footpath could feel 'enclosed' by the development as described in the accompanying Consultation Statement. This demonstrates the significant offset proposed between the development and the PRow network, and the level of planting proposed in between, including grassland areas directly adjacent to the central PRow through the Site to provide a wide, open feel along much of the route. The southern part of the public footpath through the centre of the Site is already enclosed on both sides by existing hedgerow vegetation. The northern section has an existing hedgerow on the western side of the footpath and open fields to the east which can be planted with high crops up to the footpath boundary. It is at this point that the proposal has provided wide areas of open grassland and then tree and shrub planting to the east of the footpath to retain an open feel along this section of the footpath route, whilst still screening the proposed development to the east. The existing hedgerow to the west of this section of the route, to be enhanced with further planting, will screen the development to the west.

- 7.53 The LVIA concludes that given the limited adverse landscape and visual effects identified in the LVIA, the context of the Site close to existing built development and infrastructure and acknowledging the limited impact on the rural aspects of the landscape; the proposed development is considered acceptable in landscape and visual terms. In this regard the proposal accords with policies ESD5, ESD13 and ESD17 of the adopted Cherwell Local Plan Part 1 and the relevant provisions of national planning policy.

Heritage

- 7.54 There are no designated heritage assets within the Site. The accompanying Archaeology & Built Heritage Assessment sets out that the closest designated heritage assets are the three Grade II Listed Buildings which comprise Manor Farm, the Grade II Listed Rectory Farmhouse, Islip Roman Villa Scheduled Monument and Islip Conservation Area. These heritage assets have been carefully considered during the inception and evolution of this proposal. St Nicholas Church, Islip has also been carefully considered, particularly in terms of the visual relationship from the Site.

- 7.55 The Manor Farm listed buildings are the closest designated heritage assets however due to the severance of the historic functional association following the conversion of the former farm buildings to residential use, and the retention of the closest agricultural land to the buildings, the minor change in setting is only anticipated to result in a very minor level of harm to the significance of the assets. The harm is clearly less than substantial and lies at the lowermost end of this spectrum.
- 7.56 Due to the lack of intervisibility, distance from the Site and cessation of the former farm buildings' agricultural function, the Site is not considered to make any contribution to the heritage significance of the Grade II Listed Rectory Farmhouse.
- 7.57 The Islip Conservation Area is located approx. 800-900m from the Site. The combination of distance and the fact that identified key views will be unaffected by the proposals, means that the proposal scheme is not anticipated to harm the significance of the Conservation Area or any identified heritage asset within it.
- 7.58 A moderate amount of earlier prehistoric heritage is recorded in the vicinity of the Site, including two possible ring ditches, visible as cropmarks >12m south of the Site. Given the recorded heritage in the vicinity, and some undated cropmarks within the Site, the Site is considered to have moderate potential for archaeological remains from the prehistoric period. The posited line of a Roman road is recorded as running through the east of the Site, having been identified through cropmarks. Cropmarks are certainly visible within the southern part of the Site, however it remains uncertain as to whether this represents the line of a former road or another linear feature e.g. ditch/enclosure. Additional cropmarks visible to the east may be associated and/or related to drainage. Several geophysical anomalies have been identified, and Romano-British pottery was observed within the south of the Site during a geophysical survey. The anomalies are interpreted as potentially representing a Romano-British settlement site, along with possible industrial activity. A possible Romano-British pottery working Site is recorded immediately to the south of the site, however this appears to have been mislocated, and relates to a site to the south-east. On the basis of the possible Roman road, geophysical survey, and recorded heritage in the vicinity, the Site is considered to have high potential for Romano-British and/or Iron Age archaeological remains.

- 7.59 The site is considered to have very low potential for significant archaeological remains from the medieval period onwards.
- 7.60 There is currently no evidence to suggest that archaeological remains will be present within the Site which are of Schedulable quality or are of a significance to preclude development.
- 7.61 Islip Roman Villa is a scheduled monument located approx. 700m south of the main part of the Site. Its remains survive wholly below ground having been discovered through excavation and aerial photography. The heritage significance of the asset is largely embodied in the buried remains, but elements of its setting make a lesser contribution. This includes any other buried features associated with the villa.
- 7.62 If any archaeological remains survive within the Site they could be considered to contribute to the heritage significance of the Scheduled Monument through setting. This would be a very minor contribution at most. Potential associated harm from the proposed development could however be mitigated, either through archaeological works or by in situ preservation, should remains be identified. This will be informed by further archaeological works being done at the Site with any mitigation able to be covered by a suitably worded planning condition.
- 7.63 The proposed development within the Site is anticipated to result in a very minor level of harm to the significance of the Grade II Listed heritage assets at Manor Farm, through changes to their setting. This harm is clearly less than substantial and lies at the lowermost end of this spectrum. As per paragraph 202 of the NPPF, such harm does not preclude development, but should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposals. The proposed development is not anticipated to result in harm to the significance of any other heritage assets identified in the wider vicinity. The proposal will therefore accord with the provisions of national planning policy and with policies ESD5 and ESD15 of the adopted Cherwell Local Plan Part 1.

Access, Highways & Public Rights of Way

- 7.64** A Construction Management Traffic Plan (CMTF) is submitted with this application and assesses the potential transport impacts associated with the proposal.
- 7.65 The main operational vehicular access to the Site is proposed via an existing agricultural access track from the unnamed road to the south of the Site which connects the B4027 to the village of Noke. This access route runs past Manor

Farm and connects with public footpath ref. 309/1/10 connecting to the main part of the Site to the south as shown on the submitted Development Framework Plan. Once operational, the solar farm will be associated with around one visit to the site per week by 4x4 or small van. These vehicles are of a size already using the road through Noke village and therefore the operational access is considered suitable.

- 7.66 The proposed temporary construction traffic access is via an existing gated agricultural access point from the road leading into Noke, located to the west of Noke before reaching the village. The construction access route will use temporary construction matting, before reaching the main access route described above, to allow it to be taken up with limited disruption following the construction phase, with the land along this route to continue in full agricultural use. The purpose of the temporary construction access is to avoid construction vehicle traffic going through the village of Noke. A temporary construction compound area will be required during the construction phase, which will last 3-6 months. The compound area will be of suitable size for an articulated vehicle to enter and turn in a forward gear. The compound will be fully removed after the construction phase with the land in this location to continue in full agricultural use. The location of the temporary construction compound and temporary construction traffic access route are shown on the submitted Development Framework Plan.
- 7.67 The proposed temporary construction route will require construction vehicles, including HGVs, to cross PRow 260/6/10, known locally as the Oxfordshire Way, around 160 metres north of Noke Village Road. The landowner already uses this route with agricultural vehicles and crosses the PRow at this point. However, for the duration of the construction phase, mitigation and management procedures will be put in place for this crossing point. This will include signage, fencing, banksmen and ensuring that ramblers have priority at all times. The principle of this approach has been agreed with PRow officers at Oxfordshire County Council (OCC).
- 7.68 From Manor Farm, footpath ref. 309/1/10 follows the alignment of the track which bisects the Site. An application to temporarily divert the footpath (using a Temporary Traffic Regulation Order) will be submitted if planning permission has been granted and in advance of the construction phase. During the construction phase, the southern extents of the footpath will be diverted to the other side of the hedgerow within land under the landowner's control, as illustrated in the CTMP. A width of 1.8 metres will be maintained for the footpath for the duration

of the diversion. The principle of the diversion has been agreed with PRow officers at OCC.

- 7.69 A new permissive footpath is proposed as part of this development offering an alternative walking route between Noke and Oddington responding to requests raised by local residents during the aforementioned pre-application consultation exercise. The permissive path connects to public footpath ref. 309/1/10 to the north of the Site and connects to bridleway ref. 209/16/10 to the south-east of the Site.
- 7.70 The CTMP concludes that the level of traffic during the temporary 3–6 month construction phase is not considered to be material and it is considered that this will not have a detrimental impact on the safety or operation of the local or strategic highway network. This is also the case for the operational access arrangements. The CTMP demonstrates that there is no highway safety pattern or problem in the vicinity of the site. With the mitigation proposed within the CTMP implemented, there is no reason why the proposals would result in any highway safety issue. Consequently, the proposal accords with policies ESD5 and ESD17 of the adopted Local Plan and the provisions of national planning policy.

Amenity Impact

- 7.71 Buildings associated with Logg Farm, including the farmhouse and a number of large agricultural buildings are located 200-350 metres from the Site, separated by mature vegetation including vegetation along the River Ray corridor. Beyond, to the north, the nearest residential properties within Oddington are located approx. 600 metres from the Site. The main part of the Site proposed for solar development is located within fields positioned 500 - 1,000 metres north of the nearest dwellings within Noke, the nearest of which is Manor Farm in which the owner of the Site resides. All other residential properties in the surrounding area are located more than 1km from the Site.
- 7.72 The proposed solar panels would be fixed in place into the ground, rather than following the daily movements of the sun. The panels are also designed not to cause any glint or glare. The proposal will therefore not cause a distraction or cause glint or glare to local residents, road users or passing aircraft.
- 7.73 The proposals will not give rise to issues around noise, traffic (discussed further above), air quality, odours or electromagnetic disturbance, and this applies to most solar farms given their nature. For context, the data specification sheet of

the proposed inverters is submitted with this application, which confirms that these will generate a limited degree of noise. This confirms that noise levels at a 10m distance from the proposed inverters will be 63dB(A), which is equivalent to a normal conversation noise level. The nearest inverter to areas within the public realm (in this case the PRow through the centre of the Site) is located approx. 70 metres away. Noise from the inverters at this point will therefore be undiscernible. No noise will be generated from the solar panels.

- 7.74 As discussed above, the design of the proposed development has been carefully considered to minimise visual impact through retention of existing vegetation as much as possible with enhanced native planting proposed to reinforce boundary trees and hedgerows and help further screen the development from the surrounding area. The planting along the PRow network has been carefully designed to maintain an appropriate environment for users of the footpath network.
- 7.75 In terms of the construction period, the accompanying CTMP demonstrates that the levels of traffic generated will not be material and plans are proposed to manage the traffic to protect the amenity of local residents. If considered necessary, a suitably worded condition relating to construction and decommissioning stages could be provided to safeguard the amenity of local residents.
- 7.76 The proposed development is therefore considered to be acceptable in amenity terms. The proposal would therefore accord with the relevant criteria of policy ESD5 of the adopted Local Plan Part 1 and with relevant provisions of the NPPF and NPPG.

Arboriculture

- 7.77 The proposed development has been carefully designed to avoid conflict with existing trees and hedgerows. An Arboricultural Report & Method Statement (ARMS) is submitted with this application which assesses the existing trees and hedgerows at the Site and the potential impact from this proposal.
- 7.78 As set out in this Statement, the proposal includes extensive areas of new tree, hedgerow, shrub and grassland planting, providing significant arboricultural and ecological gains and providing mitigation in landscape and visual terms. The detailed landscape scheme carefully considers the arboricultural, ecological and

landscape & visual considerations of the proposals, along with the commercial requirements of the proposal.

- 7.79 The ARMS concludes that provided that the Method Statement proposed in the submitted ARMS is implemented, the proposals will have a negligible impact on existing trees and hedgerows. The Method Statement sets out how installation work at the Site should be completed to avoid having any negative impact on existing trees and hedgerows. The recommendations of the Method Statement can be secured by way of an appropriately worded planning condition. The extensive new planting proposed will then provide significant arboricultural gains for the Site.
- 7.80 The proposed development is acceptable in arboricultural terms, with enhancements resulting from new planting. The proposal would therefore accord with the relevant criteria of policies ESD5 and ESD10 of the adopted Local Plan Part 1; as well as with relevant provisions of the NPPF and NPPG.

Ecology

- 7.81 An Ecological Appraisal (EA) accompanies this application. The EA confirms that there are no statutory sites within or adjacent to the Site. The closest statutory site is the Woodeaton Wood Site of Special Scientific Importance (SSSI) located 1.2km south of the Site. The Otmoor Conservation Target Area (CTA) is a non-statutory designation which includes some of the eastern and north-eastern parts of the Site. The Otmoor Local Wildlife Site and RPSB Reserve is located nearby to the east.
- 7.82 The Site is currently of low ecological value, consisting of arable land under intensive agricultural production, with hedgerow boundaries also under intense management. There are no statutory ecology sites within or adjacent to the Site. However, the non-statutory Otmoor Conservation Target Area (CTA) does touch the eastern part of the Site, and the Otmoor RSPB Reserve is located nearby to the east of the Site. Other non-statutory ecological sites in the area are identified and assessed in the submitted Ecological Appraisal. The submitted Ecological Appraisal also discusses the potential for protected and notable species on and around the Site, with associated detailed phase 2 ecological surveys having been carried out in relation to great crested newts, breeding birds and wintering bird species. Full ecological considerations and potential impacts are discussed in detail within the accompanying EA.

- 7.83 The proposed planting and habitats to be created are shown on the submitted detailed landscape drawings, which have been used to assess the ecological considerations of this proposals within the submitted EA.
- 7.84 The areas around the solar arrays will be seeded to grassland once the solar array is installed. This will be allowed to establish and will then be grazed by sheep. The proposals for the remainder of the Site include a range of new planting and habitats including wetland and grassland areas, hedgerows and trees as well as enhancements to existing habitat areas to increase their biodiversity value and the value for protected species. Details of the treatment of different areas are set out in Section 4 of the EA. The recommendations set out in the EA regarding grassland and scrub habitat creation on what is currently arable land, along with an appropriate management plan, have been carefully considered to have a beneficial impact, which works towards delivering the aims of the Otmoor CTA.
- 7.85 In terms of protected species, the EA identifies that the Site has potential to support species including great crested newts and various breeding and wintering birds. The existing trees and hedgerows are proposed to be retained and provide the most suitable habitat for many of the identified species. Along with suitable mitigation measures and precautionary principles as set out in the EA, the proposal is acceptable in terms of the safeguarding of protected species. Indeed, subject to the implementation of the planting scheme proposed and mitigation measures set out in the EA, the overall proposal will have material benefits to a number of species including badgers, hedgehogs, brown hare, harvest mice, dormice, bats, reptiles, invertebrate species and the overall breeding bird community. Subject to the implementation of the mitigation measures set out in the EA, the proposal will not have a detrimental impact on otter, water vole, great crested newts and the overall wintering bird community.
- 7.86 The proposed development includes significant ecological enhancements including the aforementioned proposed wetland habitat at the Site, which has been guided through collaborative pre-application discussions with the RSPB. The EA demonstrates the achievement of significant biodiversity net gains with an overall identified gain for habitats of 50.44% and a specific gain of 6.14% for hedgerow habitats.
- 7.87 The public consultation exercise undertaken with the local community highlighted concerns from residents regarding the proximity of the Site to the RSPB Otmoor

Reserve with concerns that the proposals would result in birds strike with the solar panels. The ecology consultant (BSG) who produced the submitted EA has also separately produced a report into the potential ecological impacts of ground-mounted photovoltaic solar panels in the UK¹. This report was produced prior to any involvement of BSG in this project. The report concluded that the majority of studies have taken place in the USA, and that bird mortalities have been seen there almost exclusively on large concentrated solar systems. These systems are a completely different technology from the solar PV system proposed in this application. In particular, they include high towers that are heated to a very high temperature by reflective panels, causing some risk to birds through collision or singeing. The solar PV systems employed in the UK, do not have towers, do not include components at high temperatures exposed to wildlife, and use panels that have anti-glare coatings in order to best absorb light and minimising any risk of collision. The main issue identified is displacement of birds due to habitat alteration and this issue is addressed in the submitted EA in relation to this proposal with the proposal providing mitigation and new habitat areas.

- 7.88 Nocturnal winter bird surveys have been carried out during the winter of 2021/22 and the results will follow shortly as part of a report to be submitted during the determination of this application.
- 7.89 The proposal will protect and enhance the River Ray corridor to the north, as well as the existing green infrastructure across the Site. The proposals will also secure significant biodiversity enhancements that will help achieve the aims of the Otmoor CTA. The proposed designated ecological enhancement areas around the River Ray will deliver an ecological corridor to harmonise with the Otmoor RSPB Reserve to the east. The submitted EA shows that the proposal will protect and enhance the biodiversity and natural environment of the Site and surrounding area.
- 7.90 The proposed development is therefore considered to be acceptable in ecological terms, with clear ecological enhancements identified. The proposal would therefore accord with the relevant criteria of Policy ESD5 and with policies ESD10, ESD11, ESD16 and ESD17 of the adopted Local Plan Part 1; as well as with relevant provisions of the NPPF and NPPG.

¹ <https://www.bsg-ecology.com/the-potential-ecological-impacts-of-ground-mounted-photovoltaic-solar-panels-in-the-uk/>

Flood Risk

- 7.91 Parts of the Site fall within Flood Zones 2 and 3 as identified on the Government's Flood Map for Planning service. These areas are along the Site's northern and eastern boundaries. The majority of the Site is within Flood Zone 1.
- 7.92 With consideration to Table 2 (flood risk vulnerability classification) of the Flood Risk and Coastal Change' section of the NPPG, the proposal is classified as 'essential infrastructure' in flood risk terms. Essential infrastructure is deemed appropriate within Flood Zones 2 and 3, subject to an Exception Test, as set out in Table 3 (flood risk vulnerability and flood zone 'compatibility') of the 'Flood Risk and Coastal Change' section of the NPPG. The panels located in the areas identified as at risk should be set at the worst case 1 in 1000yr flood level. This will ensure the development is safe from flooding across the lifetime of its development.
- 7.93 The accompanying Flood Risk Assessment (FRA) has considered the Exception Test and Sequential Test and demonstrates that the proposed development satisfies both tests.
- 7.94 The FRA sets out that the extent of impermeable areas introduced by the proposal across the Site is relatively small. Any additional runoff will correspondingly be small and can more than adequately be managed by appropriate Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS). Therefore, the proposal will have no impact on nearby watercourses and neighbouring areas of land. Details of the proposed mitigation measures for the development are set out in the submitted FRA.
- 7.95 The panels will be supported by piles which are adequately spaced to allow for the free flow of water between them. The security fencing mesh sizing will ensure free flow of water through the fence. The solar panels are on a sloped frame meaning water falling onto the panels will run off and flow/infiltrate in the sheltered 'rain shadow area' underneath the down-slope modules. In order to promote infiltration across the Site, a system of swales is proposed to manage the surface water runoff.
- 7.96 Subject to the implementation of appropriate mitigation measures set out in the FRA, the FRA concludes that the flood risks of the development to the Site and surrounding area can be suitably mitigated. The proposal would therefore accord with the relevant criteria of policy ESD5 and with policies ESD6 and ESD7 of the

adopted Local Plan Part 1; as well as with relevant provisions of the NPPF and NPPG.

8. CONCLUSIONS

- 8.1 The proposal consists of a solar farm providing up to 26.6 megawatts (MW) of installed electrical energy generation capacity through the deployment of ground mounted solar arrays, plus associated infrastructure and access, as well as landscape planting and designated ecological enhancement areas.
- 8.2 The overall application site consists of Grade 3b agricultural land and therefore, in line with national guidance, avoids using 'best and most versatile' agricultural land. Furthermore, the proposal will allow continued use of the Site for some agricultural purposes, with sheep grazing proposed around the solar arrays. The proposal is also temporary in nature, with the development having a 40-year lifespan.
- 8.3 The proposal will provide social and economic benefits to the local community which includes assisting with the ongoing viability and stability of a rural business through rural diversification and providing a new permissive footpath as part of this proposal, providing an alternative walking route between Noke and Oddington. The proposal will also deliver extensive new planting areas and ecological enhancements, including designated ecological areas, which will deliver significant arboricultural and ecological benefits to the area.
- 8.4 This Statement also emphasises the benefits and pressing need for renewable energy schemes such as this, in assisting in reducing carbon emissions, combating climate change and ensuring local energy security, as well as meeting local and national climate change and renewable energy targets. The existing targets for solar power set by the UK Government suggest a need for 70-94 GWp of solar power generating capacity in the coming years, equivalent to 3,000 or more solar farms of the scale of this proposal. The heightened awareness of the need for energy security only strengthens that demand.
- 8.5 By their nature, large scale ground mounted solar farms such as this, generally need to be located outside of urban areas and within the countryside, where the capacity to support such development exists. The Site provides adequate capacity in terms of grid connection and total site area, and provides a suitable land orientation and local solar irradiation levels, to accommodate the proposed solar scheme and associated infrastructure. The submitted Viability Assessment provides justification of the scale of the proposed development in order to deliver a viable development, and the submitted Network Availability Assessment and

associated Constraints Map provides evidence of the need for the proposed development to be located at this Site. Notably, there is an absence of potential alternative brownfield and non-Green Belt sites in the area that could deliver this proposal.

- 8.6 The Site is located in the Oxford Green Belt. With regard to the Development Plan and national Green Belt policy, the proposal represents 'inappropriate development' in the Green Belt and therefore 'very special circumstances' must be demonstrated to outweigh the harm to the Green Belt that the proposal would cause, plus any other harm. In carrying out this balancing exercise, substantial weight should be given to harm to the Green Belt in accordance with paragraph 148 of the NPPF, with harm attributed by reason of inappropriateness, as well as the inherent harm to the openness of the Green Belt and encroachment into the countryside. The proposal is considered to be acceptable in landscape and visual terms as discussed further below and in the accompanying LVIA. The degree of harm that the proposal would cause in landscape & visual terms would be limited, which in the balancing exercise should be given moderate weight. The proposal is also considered to be acceptable in heritage terms as discussed further below and in the accompanying Archaeology & Built Heritage Assessment. The proposed development within the Site is anticipated to result a very minor level of harm to the significance of the Grade II Listed heritage assets at Manor Farm, through changes to their setting. In the balancing exercise this should be given limited weight.
- 8.7 It is notable that planning permission pursuant to application ref. 13/01027/F, referenced in this Statement, was approved in 2014 at appeal (ref. APP/C3105/A/13/2207532), at a nearby site at Rowles Farm located approx. 2 km to the north the Site. Although related to a different scheme, the Rowles Farm site has some similar characteristics to this Site in terms of its physical characteristics, including notably in landscape and visual terms such as its proximity to public rights of way (with PRoW running through that site) and the potential for direct views. The appeal was also determined in a very similar context in terms of both Development Plan and national planning policy related to the Green Belt which has remained largely unchanged for a large number of years. The Inspector considered that the very special circumstances of the Rowles Farm solar park proposal overcame the harm to the Green Belt, and other harm, in the planning balance. In this regard, and with consideration to the criteria contained under policy ESD5 of the adopted Cherwell Local Plan Part 1 and

criteria contained in paragraph 013 of the Renewable and Low Carbon Energy section of the NPPG, there are a number of site specific considerations weighing in favour of this proposal, including the acceptable (subject to mitigation in certain circumstances) impacts in relation to matters such as landscape and visual impact; residential amenity and aircraft safety, including from glint and glare; impact on any heritage assets; highway impact; and flood risk; all discussed in this Statement relating to each individual matter. Furthermore, as noted already, the proposal will provide significant arboricultural and ecological benefits.

8.8 Significant weight can be attributed to the sustainable credentials of the proposal, including the wider environmental benefits associated with increased production of energy from renewable sources. These sustainability credentials also include the limited and acceptable impact in relation to landscape and other environmental considerations referenced above. Significant weight can also be attributed to the economic and community benefits of the proposal, identified above. Significant weight can also be attributed to the significant arboricultural and ecological benefits resulting from this proposal.

8.9 It is accepted that the proposal would cause 'harm' to the Green Belt by reason of inappropriateness and because of the reduction in openness it would involve. In addition, there would be a limited degree of 'harm' to the landscape, to which moderate weight is attached, and a very minor level of 'harm' to the significance of the Grade II Listed heritage assets at Manor Farm, through changes to their setting, to which limited weight is attached. However, the proposal, and therefore any harm to the Green Belt, would be temporary and reversible. In carrying out the balancing exercise it is considered that the substantial weight attributed to the harm to the Green Belt and the moderate weight attributed to the limited harm to the landscape and the limited weight attributed to the very minor harm to the significance of the Grade II Listed heritage assets at Manor Farm is outweighed by the identified very special circumstances of this particular proposal; namely:

- **The scale of generation of renewable energy – assisting in reducing carbon emissions, combating climate change and ensuring local energy security. This would assist with delivering the Council's commitments under the declared Climate Emergency and Climate Action Framework 2020, and responding to the**

enormous price increases and threats to the supply of imported oil and gas seen in recent months;

- **The necessary and justifiable location and scale of the proposed development; with no suitable non-Green Belt sites which could accommodate the proposal due to grid connection and land area constraints; and with the scale of the proposal the minimum required to achieve a viable development.**
- **The development delivering benefits to the local community through ongoing community involvement in the project and delivery of on-site improvements such as the new permissive footpath which would benefit local people;**
- **The significant ecological and arboricultural benefits of the proposal, delivering significant biodiversity net gains and designated ecological enhancement areas;**
- **Assisting with the ongoing viability and stability of a rural business through rural diversification;**
- **The use of non-BMV (Best and Most Versatile) agricultural land;**
- **The non-permanent nature of the development, with some agricultural use (sheep grazing) maintained during the lifespan of the development; and**
- **The number of identified site-specific environmental considerations weighing in favour of the proposal, discussed in detail in this Statement.**

8.10 The considerable benefits of the proposal, as outlined above, clearly outweigh the identified harm to the Green Belt and any other harm, and therefore constitute the necessary very special circumstances required to accord with Development Plan and national Green Belt policy.

8.11 Overall, this Statement has demonstrated that the proposed development is compliant with the provisions of both national and Development Plan policy. It is considered that there are no reasons why planning permission should be

withheld, and therefore it is respectfully requested that planning permission is granted.