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# Environmental Statement

## Volume 1: Non-Technical Summary

Stokes Lane Solar Farm Limited

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# Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Environmental Impact Assessment Approach	1
3. Proposed Development Description	2
4. Landscape and Visual	3
5. Cultural Heritage	5
6. Summary and Conclusion	6

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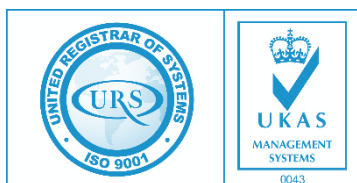
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## 1. Introduction

Stokes Lane Solar Farm Limited (the 'Applicant') is seeking planning permission under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 to develop the Stokes Lane Solar Farm (the 'Proposed Development').

The site of the Proposed Development (the 'Proposed Development Site') is located on land north and south of Rookery Farm Lane, south of the village of Monk Sherborne, North of Basingstoke. It is centred at Grid Reference 460512, 155345 and covers a total area of c. 87.5 hectares. The Proposed Development Site lies wholly within the planning authority area of Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council.

The Proposed Development would comprise of the installation and operation of ground-mounted solar photovoltaic (PV) panels fixed to a dual-axis solar tracking system, and associated infrastructure including access roads, substation, cabling, power stations, control room; a Distribution Network Operator (DNO) station; storage containers; security fencing and CCTV; and temporary construction compound.

The Proposed Development would have a generating capacity of up to 28 megawatts (MW) and includes the grid connection cable route beyond the main solar farm site.

### 1.1 The Applicant

The Applicant is a renewable energy development company committed to investing in the BDBC area through renewable energy projects and making a positive contribution to national and international renewable energy, and carbon emission reduction targets with local community benefits and additional outcomes that renewable energy development can bring.

### 1.2 Land Use

The Proposed Development Site comprises five large arable fields. The fields are joined by common access tracks, and consist of a series of interlinked agricultural fields, enclosed by typical field boundary hedgerows which contain occasional trees.

### 1.3 Purpose of the Environmental Statement

The Environmental Statement presents the findings of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process by describing the Proposed Development, the current conditions at the Proposed Development Site and the likely significant environmental effects which may result from the Proposed Development.

Where appropriate, measures designed to avoid, reduce or offset potentially significant effects are proposed (mitigation measures) and residual effects (those effects that are expected to remain after mitigation) are described.

The findings and conclusions of the EIA are summarised in this Non-Technical Summary which is intended to allow anyone with an interest in the Proposed Development to understand and access information on its potential environmental effects.

## 2. Environmental Impact Assessment Approach

EIA is a systematic process used to inform consenting authorities of the potential environmental implications of a development by collecting baseline information about the existing environment and the determining of the potential effects of the development on the environment.

Where significant negative (adverse) effects are identified, reduction of these effects is then sought by changing the design or applying mitigation measures. Any remaining adverse residual effect after mitigation has been applied would then be considered.

The Proposed Development falls under Schedule 2 of the EIA Regulations<sup>1</sup> and an EIA has been undertaken following an EIA Screening Opinion issued by Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council.

The scope of the EIA was determined through a Scoping Opinion from Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council as outlined in Chapter 1 of the Environmental Statement. Through this process it was confirmed that the Environmental Statement would include an assessment for the following environmental disciplines:

- Landscape and Visual; and
- Cultural Heritage.

The planning application for the Proposed Development is also supported by other documents and standalone environmental assessments outside of the EIA process and this Environmental Statement.

### 3. Proposed Development Description

The Proposed Development would comprise the installation and operation of a ground-mounted solar PV farm and associated infrastructure with a generating capacity of up to approximately 28MW.

The layout of the Proposed Development is presented in **Figure 1.2: Site Layout Plan** in **Volume 4** of the ES.

The Proposed Development would comprise:

- A series of linear rows (also known as arrays) of PV solar modules;
- Four power stations;
- Internal access roads;
- Cabling;
- Customer and DNO substations;
- Spare parts containers;
- Security fencing and CCTV;
- A temporary construction compound; and
- Enhanced landscaping.

The solar farm would use state-of-the-art polycrystalline PV modules. The modules ensure optimal use of solar irradiation and perform very efficiently at different angles to the sun. The PV modules would generate electricity with no air emissions, no waste production and no water use.

The Proposed Development would take approximately 12 months to construct. The Proposed Development would have an operational lifespan of 40 years after which it would be decommissioned and removed, and the Proposed Development Site restored to its original condition.

Primary access to the Proposed Development would be taken from two new priority junctions from Rookery Farm Lane. Site access point 1 is an existing field access, to access the area of the Proposed Development Site west of Rookery Farm Lane and is on the outside of a bend so visibility splays are maximised in each direction from the access point. Site access point 2 is located on the

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<sup>1</sup> The Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017.

east side of Rookery Farm Lane and would see the formation of a new access junction to serve the development.

A designated construction route has been identified for this development, which is via the A339 from the east, before a right turn on to Rookery Farm Lane where the Proposed Development Site would be accessed from. No construction traffic would arrive from the west of the A339.

## 4. Landscape and Visual

A landscape and visual impact assessment (LVIA) has been undertaken for the Proposed Development, following best practice guidance, including the 'Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment' produced by the Landscape Institute and the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment.

The LVIA has considered the potential effects on landscape and visual receptors, including landscape character, designated and protected landscapes, and visual amenity within a 5km study area and a detailed 2km study area for assessment. The LVIA has assessed the effects during construction and operation of the Proposed Development following the first year of operation and when mitigation has established after 15 years.

The Proposed Development includes substantial landscape, biodiversity and green infrastructure enhancements within set back areas where panels have been removed to reduce visibility. These setbacks and enhancements have been designed to integrate the development into its landscape context and bring notable environmental enhancements to the Proposed Development Site setting and the landscape fabric across the Proposed Development Site.

### 4.1.1 Landscape Effects

The assessment of landscape effects found that the majority of effects on landscape character, landscape designations and other protected landscapes beyond the immediate Proposed Development Site setting, would not be significant as a result of the Proposed Development. This includes effects relating to both the construction and operation of the Proposed Development.

Effects on landscape character would be greatest within the Proposed Development Site and its immediate context, generally within approximately 500m but principally focussed to the northeast and southwest, where the landscape would change from having an agricultural character to containing low lying built forms, albeit retaining the ability for low intensity sheep grazing around solar arrays. Effects would diminish swiftly beyond these points, as the Proposed Development would be largely screened by combinations of landform and the network of established intervening vegetation.

All relevant and notable direct and indirect effects would arise within the northeastern sections of the Landscape Character Area (LCA) 16: Basingstoke Down where they are more influenced by a mix of other surrounding landscape and urban influences and forms a transitional landscape between more distinctive landscape areas to the north and south, including the North Wessex Downs National Landscape (formerly the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty). At these points, there would be some Significant Adverse effects on completion in the short term.

The remaining western and southern sections of the LCA and wider scale extent of the surrounding character area would remain unaffected and it would only influence at the immediate setting of the Proposed Development Site within the northern and eastern sections of the LCA closer to Basingstoke.

With the establishment of the mitigation and enhancements, this would reduce the magnitude and significance of effect to **Not Significant** in the medium to long-term with an enhanced landscape structure. The proposed mitigation measures would help to integrate the proposals into the landscape to a greater extent and to reduce perception of the Proposed Development in the surrounding landscape. This would also address key issues noted in local guidance for “*Weakened hedgerow structure across the more extensive, open landscape types*”; and “*Decline in extent of unimproved chalk grassland and sheep pasture*” and ‘*low biodiversity levels*.”

#### 4.1.2 Visual Effects

Visual effects resulting from the Proposed Development would be greatest for receptors on the Proposed Development Site boundaries (PRoW and residents on Stokes Lane) and its immediate vicinity (PRoW), where the Proposed Development would be visible in immediate views or through and over layers of intervening vegetation, principally within 500m to the northeast and southwest.

The Proposed Development would not be clearly discernible from the large majority of properties or areas of settlement or key routes through the immediate study area of the assessment. The exceptions to this would be from isolated points on the southwestern edges of Sherborne St John alongside the A430 where there would be some potential for views to the western sections of the Proposed Development Site in field 3 but between mature field boundary vegetation which filtered the majority of the view.

From more distant elevated points, visibility levels would be generally more limited where small sections of the Proposed Development Site would potentially be visible from points to the west in wider panoramas which embrace a wide variety of natural and built features on the edges of Basingstoke.

The area benefits from a large scaled arable farmland context on the edges of Basingstoke with a range of other large scale land use and built forms present. The area also benefits from a reasonable vegetative network at key points to the east, north and west that, in combination with the topography, helps to screen and / or contain views to varying degrees. The existing vegetative network of the Proposed Development Site would be retained and enhanced with additional planting and relaxation of management regimes allowing vegetation to grow out.

A wide range of environmental enhancement areas would be included within the Proposed Development. These would extend to around a quarter of the total Proposed Development Site area and include landscape fabric enhancements, biodiversity and amenity improvements, green infrastructure proposals and mitigation planting. These measures would help to reinforce further screening and enhance landscape fabric and views. Farmland would also be retained within the most visible sections of the Proposed Development Site within approximately 15% of the Proposed Development Site.

Some short term Significant Adverse effects are anticipated for visual receptors on some adjacent boundary points where open views are available and within the immediate setting to the east and northeast up to approximately 500m. These include users of PRoW and the nearest residents on Stokes Lane and, at an isolated southern edge of Sherborne St John. Once mitigation planting has matured, medium to long-term effects to these areas would reduce and would be Not Significant.

Outside these areas, the Proposed Development would either be screened from visual receptors by tiers of vegetation within the landscape, or the development would form a very limited change in more distant elevated views from the south, being seen in the context of a patchwork of farmland and in the context of other urban land uses and elements in the surrounding context adjacent to the Basingstoke.

#### 4.1.3 Effects on Designated Landscapes

There are no landscape designations within the Proposed Development Site or within 200m of the Proposed Development Site that would be directly affected by the Proposed Development. While the North Wessex Downs National Landscape lies within the wider study area to the south of the Proposed Development Site, the potential for views to and from the Proposed Development Site from key receptors within the National Landscape would be limited and the potential for effects on the key characteristics, special qualities and the setting of this nationally designated area would be limited.

#### 4.1.4 Cumulative Effects

While there would be some potential for cumulative effects, the contribution of the Proposed Development would not be a notable factor. It is worth noting that the separate location of the Proposed Development Site to the north of the A339 has limited visible overlap from sensitive receptors and that the assessed cumulative sites would sit in different sections of the large-scale arable farmland that is influenced by a range of natural and built features and the urban setting to Basingstoke.

### 5. Cultural Heritage

The cultural heritage assessment identifies the archaeological and cultural heritage value of the Proposed Development Site and assesses the potential for direct physical and setting effects on heritage assets resulting from the construction, operation and decommissioning of the Proposed Development. This chapter also identifies measures that are proposed to mitigate predicted adverse effects.

National planning policies and planning guidance as well as local planning policies require that account is taken of potential effects upon heritage assets by proposed developments and that where possible such effects are avoided. Where avoidance is not possible these policies require that any significant effects on heritage assets be minimised or offset.

It is predicted that there would be direct effects on non-designated heritage Assets 105, 107, 113, 116, 162, 173 and 174. Significant effects have been assessed on Assets 116 and 174. A detailed piling plan, which outlines the locations of the proposed piling locations within the Proposed Development Site would be produced for these areas post-consent, secured through a condition to the planning permission, which would aim to minimise impacts upon these assets by ensuring that piles were placed sensitively.

Where this does not prove feasible, archaeological excavation of these assets would be undertaken to preserve them by record. The level of effect on Asset 113 would be Minor Adverse and Not Significant as the Proposed Development has been designed to avoid the majority of features associated with this asset. However, an archaeological excavation, via a suitably worded planning condition, would be undertaken on aspects of Asset 113 subject to impact by the Proposed Development.

Asset 162 is an example of medieval or post-medieval ridge and furrow. Surviving ridge and furrow remains form a low but noticeable percentage of farmland across the UK. Therefore they can be considered to be of Negligible importance. Therefore it is recommended that the area of Asset 162 is subject to a watching brief during any groundworks, which would comprise excavation, that would impact these remains.

A watching brief would be maintained on groundbreaking works which would comprise excavation near or within a 50m buffer of known non-designated heritage assets within the Proposed Development Site. Archaeological monitoring and recording, otherwise known as a watching brief is a formal programme of observation, investigation and recording conducted during works carried out for non-archaeological reasons, where there is a possibility that archaeological deposits may be disturbed or destroyed.

It is also recommended that a watching brief would be undertaken on any groundbreaking works which would be undertaken along or crossing Stokes Lane (Asset 173).

The purpose of the watching brief would be to identify archaeological remains which would be subject to direct impacts by the Proposed Development. The purpose of the watching brief would also assess their significance and to mitigate any impact upon them either through avoidance or, if preservation in situ is not warranted, through preservation by record.

If significant archaeological remains are identified during the watching brief there is the potential that further works, such as excavation and post-excavation analyses, could be required. Details of mitigation would be agreed with County Archaeological Services in consultation with Basingstoke and Deane District Council through a Written Scheme of Investigation.

Where avoidance and minimisation is not possible, the proposed mitigation would not remove the impact but it would ensure that the impact is offset by ensuring preservation by record. As such there would be minimal loss of information content.

The level of any potential effect on previously unrecorded remains cannot be quantified at present as the value of any further assets which may be present on the Proposed Development Site are, by their very nature, unknown.

However, should any previously unrecorded significant remains be identified on the Proposed Development Site during the implementation of the mitigation measures, then this would allow for avoidance of impacts, or where this is not possible for excavation of the features, to ensure preservation by record. Any such works would also contribute to an overall understanding of the local historic environment and may therefore create a beneficial legacy.

Impacts upon the settings of designated assets such as World Heritage Sites, Listed Buildings, Scheduled Monuments, Conservation Areas, Registered Battlefields and Registered Parks and Gardens are a material consideration in the planning process.

Potential operational effects on the settings of designated heritage assets within 2km of the Proposed Development Site have been considered as part of this assessment. No significant setting effects have been identified.

The possibility of cumulative effects has also been assessed. No significant cumulative effects have been identified.

## 6. Summary and Conclusion

The Applicant is seeking planning permission for the Stokes Lane Solar Farm and underground grid connection route.

An EIA has been conducted to assess the potential environmental effects of the Proposed Development and this Non-Technical Summary summarises the findings of the Environmental Statement submitted with the Applicants planning application. The EIA includes the following technical assessments:

- Landscape and Visual; and

- Cultural Heritage.

Best practice measures would be used to control the potential effects of construction activities through the implementation of a Construction Environmental Management Plan that would be secured by condition on any planning permission for the Proposed Development.

The only significant residual effects established through the EIA and reported in this Environmental Statement relate to a small number of Landscape and Visual effects on receptors located close to the Proposed Development Site, and landscape effects on the host Landscape Character Area, Basingstoke Down, during the Construction Phase and one year into the operation of the Proposed Development. Once mitigation planting has matured, medium to long-term effects to these areas would reduce and would be Not Significant.

It is acknowledged in paragraph 1.7.2 of the National Policy Statement for Energy (EN-1) that the development of new energy infrastructure, at the scale and speed required to meet the current and future need, is likely to have some negative effects on landscape / visual amenity. However, in general it should be possible to mitigate satisfactorily the most significant potential negative effects and in this case the harm can be mitigated to an acceptable level.

All other residual effects identified within this Environmental Statement are determined to be 'not significant' in EIA terms.

The significance of all potential effects has been reduced as far as practicable through input into the design process and design modifications wherever feasible, together with the specification of bespoke mitigation and enhancement measures (e.g., Construction Environmental Management Plan and mitigation planting).