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Development and Conservation
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Date: 12 May 2025
Our ref: 03775

For the attention of: Planning Department, planning.control@north-herts.gov.uk

Application ref: 25/00446/SO
Location: Land South of A507 at Westfield Common, Clothall Road, Clothall
Proposal/Description: Screening Opinion (Regulation 6) on a proposed development of a Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) and co-located solar farm, associated infrastructure, access, biodiversity enhancement and landscaping

Thank you for consulting with Place Services on the above Screening Opinion. This letter sets out our consultation response on the landscape impact of the application and how the proposal relates and responds to the landscape setting and context of the site.

This review is based on a desktop study with a site visit of the above-referenced application and its submitted documents, and a site visit carried out on the 01/05/2025. Our Landscape comments are as follows:

Site Context:

The site is located to the west of Cumberlow Green village and comprises a large number of arable fields separated by tree, hedgerow and ditch lined boundaries. The undulating farmland site also contains Coldash Wood and Rydals Wood (Ancient Woodlands) and some small copses. The A507 road runs along the northeastern boundary, and a historic byway runs along the southwestern boundary. The northern section of the site is located within the Green Belt.

Potential Landscape and Visual Effects:

The Screening Opinion has been supported by the submission of an EIA Screening Opinion Request by Lanpro, for the Westfield Energy Conservation Park (February 2025). The information submitted is limited to the above-named document and a red line boundary, and therefore the following landscape comments are not definitive.

Landscape Character

Para 6.2.2 refers only to National Character Area (NCA) 86 South Suffolk and North Essex Clayland. The site is located within both the Weston – Green End Plateau (no. 222) LCA and the Upper Beane Valley Tributaries (no. 221) LCA of the North Hertfordshire and Stevenage Landscape Character Assessment.

Key characteristics of LCA 221 include; a bowl like landform comprising steeply sloping chalk valley sides incised by a network of water courses, arable land use, irregular pattern, of medium to large sized fields, scattered hedgerows and waterside trees, small blocks of relict ancient woodland on the upper slopes, narrow winding lanes and sparse settlement.

Key characteristics of LCA 222 include the plateau landform, predominantly arable land use, extensive mature woodland cover and hedgerow trees, organic pattern of field enclosures associated with irregular network of winding lanes.

As part of a submitted LVIA, we advise that LCA 221 and 222 are considered as landscape receptors and are fully assessed throughout the submitted LVIA.

We also advise that the Site and the Surrounding Context are also considered as landscape receptors.

At present, the only submitted information regarding the layout is the red line boundary. The Landscape Mitigation Design comments indicate the intention to retain all existing hedgerows, trees and vegetation which forms the landscape structure however this is not yet confirmed by an accompanying plan. Individual, compartmentalised elements of the landscape will hopefully be conserved within this development. However, the LVIA does not recognise the potential experience and impacts on these collective landscape features which form the rolling undulating rural character which is notable in this area. Therefore, the above LCAs and the Site and Surrounding Context must be included as receptors.

The solar development will introduce an industrial character into an area of the landscape which is largely free from development. Between the surrounding villages, there are large extents of views from roads and public rights of way (PRoW) of the rolling arable countryside. Based on only limited information, we judge that the effects on the experience of the rural character could be significant.

Visual Effects

Two Public Rights of Way (PRoW) run through the centre of the site (PRoW Clothall FP 019 and 020) providing panoramic 360-degree views of the application site. Both PRoWs have a very rural feel away from nearby villages and the A507. The undulating landform provides variety in the extent of views across the landscape, offering some long-distance views to the west across the River Beane. Whilst there are some detracting features such as the pylons which cross the site, the character is very rural and therefore significant effects are anticipated for users of these routes.

The Byway Open to All Traffic (BOAT) Clothall BY 012 runs along the western site boundary. The BOAT also forms a section of the Weston Golden Jubilee Walk. The BOAT is largely characterised as an elevated and enclosed linear route with extensive tree and

hedgerow planting lining both sides, limiting views to the surrounding landscape. There are however sections of the BOAT that have limited vegetation on the eastern side and therefore afford open views of the rolling arable landscape within the site. The BOAT is a very sensitive visual receptor where development in proximity to this route would detract from the rural character. We would also anticipate significant effects would arise from development located close to the BOAT, or proposals which would obscure the long-distance views.

Elevated PRoWs are also located to the south of the site at Restricted Byway Clothall RB 21, providing open views towards the site. The route connects Weston to Luffenhall and Cromer via the BOAT. The elevated views from the PRoW are more sensitive to development as strong views are currently obtained of the Ancient Woodland sited on the horizon to the north and rolling arable landscape.

Although a fast-moving road, the A507 is a sensitive receptor in this instance. Strong views are obtained of the undulating arable landscape with some opportunities for over 180-degree views of the site. This includes at the vehicular entrance close to the north of the site. The extent of the view that could be affected by development, in combination with the adjacent proposed solar farm (3/24/2245/FUL), may have significant visual effects on the character of this rural landscape which is currently largely unaffected by industrial development.

Cumulative Effects

We note the identification of 3/24/2245/FUL Land To The West Of The A507 Between Cottered And Cromer Hertfordshire SG9 9PU within the East Herts Council district, which has not yet received a decision. Cumulative visual and landscape effects are anticipated considering the adjacency of the two solar farms on the A507, which runs between the two adjacent applications.

For users of the A507, sequential views of the two solar farms will be experienced from a number of viewpoints. Users travelling on the A507 will be adjacent to solar farm development for about 3.3km combined, therefore resulting in several minutes of experiencing the development from a series of locations along one route. We therefore judge that there may be significant cumulative effects for users on the A507.

There are also some locations on the A507 where both solar farms may be perceptible in a single view. For example, the northern entrance to the lane which divides the two solar farm developments will afford views of both adjacent schemes, particularly noting the proposed battery storage which will be located within this view.



Figure 1: View from A507 of lane between two solar schemes (Google Maps)

Landscape Mitigation Design:

The battery storage is proposed to be located in the southeastern corner of the site. We agree that locating the battery storage in the lower elevation areas of the site is preferable, as there are more opportunities for mitigation. We also note that the road to the east edge of the site is well-vegetated offering more screening than some other areas of the site.

Based on a site visit, we did observe the strong open views of the southeastern fields from PRow Clothall 020 looking east and southeast. Any proposed mitigation to reduce the visual impact of the battery storage from this PRow would obscure the longer distant views over the River Beane valley and therefore considered detrimental to the landscape character.

The “Expansive open areas of arable farmland” and plateau which is locally exposed are key visual characteristics of the relevant LCAs.



Figure 2: View south along PRow Clothall 020 with site to left



Figure 3: View east from PRow Clothall 020

We also note that some houses are located south of Cumberlow Green and are therefore close to the southeastern parcels proposed for battery storage. We advise that the locations of battery storage are set away from any residential development to limit the noise pollution and visual impact arising from this infrastructure.

We note that the following areas are precluded from development:

- fields on the north western part of the Site either side of the access from the A507 along the northern boundary
- the northern section of the most easterly field (closest to Cumberlow Green)

Without an accompanying plan, it is not prescriptive where these areas are specifically located. We do however agree that areas surrounding residential development should be excluded from solar development with a generous buffer.

We agree that the existing structural vegetation across the site should be enhanced and strengthened to improve the condition and also further screen the proposed development from visual receptors.

The BOAT (also the Weston Golden Jubilee Walk) on the western site boundary is one of the most sensitive receptors to development. The character of the BOAT is very identifiable and therefore the surrounding landscape must be conserved to retain the varied views obtained by people using this recreational route. The mitigation suggests that screening and/or set-backs are proposed along the western boundary. Whilst large sections of the BOAT are enclosed by tree and hedgerow vegetation on both sides, the section of the BOAT which runs alongside the site offers distinctive open views of the rolling arable countryside and Ancient Woodlands which provide variety and memorable views. We therefore discourage a reliance on vegetative screening along the BOAT to limit the visual impacts of the solar development, as this would have adverse effects on the experience of the landscape character and the longer distance views which open up along this section. Solar panels and associated infrastructure should therefore be set back so not to interrupt these rolling farmland views.



Figure 4: Enclosed character of the BOAT along some sections of the route



Figure 5: Views open up along sections of the BOAT to provide distance views

We also advise that the guidelines for the local LCA are also considered within the development proposals, as these will be more specific than the NCA guidelines.

EIA Screening Considerations

Para 7.2.2 states that the site is 206ha, although includes large areas of biodiversity enhancements. EIA Regulations refer to the total area of the development site and therefore it exceeds the 50ha of the Schedule 2 threshold.

As per Para 6.2.20, the proposed development may not give rise to significant effects on the fabric of the landscape owed to no direct impacts on the hedgerows, trees or landform, however we disagree that significant effects will not occur within the Site, or to the Local Character. This is owed to the site being very characteristic of the relevant LCAs, where the expansive open areas of arable farmland are part of the visual and sensory experience of the landscape, which will be adversely impacted by the proposed development type. This is further enhanced by the lack of industrial development currently within the landscape, with the exception of the pylons that cross through.

Panoramic views and 180-degree views are available from a number of publicly accessible receptors, where the views are also of characteristic rolling countryside. We have concerns that significant effects may arise from an assessment on the impact of these views within a submitted LVIA.



Figure 6: View from PRoW Clothall FP 019 in centre of the site

We also have concerns with the notion that ‘visibility of the site is restricted to its immediate surroundings’ (Para 6.2.21). The proposed site is 206ha with some views afforded across the entire extent of the 206ha site, containing many layers of hedgerows and fields. Whilst there is some visibility restrictions noted to the north and east, we would not describe the visibility as restricted, since some longer distance views are afforded from one side of the site to the other. The below photo shows views from the Restricted Byway south of the site, across the landscape to the A507 on the opposite side of the site.



Figure 7: View from Restricted Byway to the south

Views are also obtained of the site from the Cottered South Loop, the Weston Golden Jubilee Walk and the Weston Circular trails. These are notable routes which may have some tourist or increased recreation interest and may therefore be more sensitive to development and change.

Screening may be used to reduce some of the visual effects associated with the development of the site. Considering the very open character, we have concerns that significant effects may arise from the mitigation measures proposed and the reduction in open views of the characteristic open rolling landscape which is noted within this area.

We also have concerns with the summary in Para 6.2.22 where the cumulative landscape and visual effects are described as highly localised and contained within the immediate landscape context of the Beane Valley. Whilst the below image (Google Maps) shows descent into the Beane Valley, the A507 follows the edge of the two solar farms for 3.3km which may be judged as having significant sequential effects on this route.



Figure 8: View of adjacent solar farm application from Cottered Airfield A507 with 25/00446/SO application in background (Google Maps)

Conclusion

Overall, we judge that there is reasonable likelihood of landscape and visual significant effects from a number of affected receptors.

We are unable to ascertain if significant effects would occur without an LVIA, or a plan which dictated which areas of the development would be affected by industrial development features. However, based on the sensitivity of the site and immediate context, and several visual receptors, we anticipate that significant effects occur. This is also given the scale of the proposed site and the proximity of an adjacent solar farm which would impact upon a large portion of the A507.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any queries in relation to this advice.

Place Services – Landscape Team

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Place Services provide landscape advice on behalf of North Herts Council.

Please note: This letter is advisory and should only be considered as the opinion formed by specialist staff in relation to this particular matter.