

Land East of Hawksworth and North-West of Thoroton Landscape Review

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Version Control

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1 Introduction

This report has been prepared by Robert Browne, Chartered Landscape Architect, in response to a brief from Rushcliffe Borough Council. The report reviews landscape related documents submitted in support of planning application 22/02241/FUL for a 49.9MW solar farm on a 94.24ha site on land east of Hawksworth and north-west of Thoroton, Nottinghamshire. In addition, the report considers whether the landscaping proposals illustrated on the submitted landscape masterplan will be sufficient to mitigate the landscape and visual effects of the development in the long term.

In order to provide an opinion on the proposed development, a site visit was undertaken to make observations on the site character, the visibility of the site and the potential landscape impact of the proposals.

2 Application Documents

The following submitted documents that describe the design, landscape and visual impact, and mitigation of the proposals have been reviewed:

- Infrastructure Layout 04668-RES-LAY-DR-PT-005 REV 6 – RES (November 2022).
- Landscape & Ecological Management Plan (Overall) NEO00782_023I REV D – Neo Environmental (November 2022).
- Landscape and Visual Assessment – Neo Environmental (November 2022)
- Design and Access Statement - Neo Environmental (November 2022)

3 Proposed Site Layout

Submitted drawings show access to the solar farm is to be achieved from a new access point to the south of Field 8. This links to a network of internal trackways throughout the site.

Proposed solar panels are predominantly organised into large field clusters (fields numbered 1-9 on Figure 3 of the Design and Access Statement). The vast majority of the existing site is in use for agriculture. The landscape and visual assessment (LVA) states that proposed structures would be offset by 5m from the nearest existing and proposed hedgerows, woodland, drainage ditches and surface water. A considerable area of Field 5, in the north-east corner of the site, as well as a small portion of Field 1, adjacent to Hawksworth, have been excluded from the development.

Associated infrastructure shown on drawings includes:

- 1 substation compound

- 2 spare parts containers
- 28 Inverter substations
- 14 areas inverter substation hardstanding
- 7.499km of 2.4 high deer fencing
- 98 3.5m high CCTV posts
- A 4/5m wide access road
- 4.995km of 1x1m cable trenching
- 2 temporary construction compounds

Proposed planting within the scheme includes 2.5km of new hedgerow and multiple areas of woodland planting. There is also an area of wildflower grass proposed within Field 5. In addition, there are proposed biodiversity enhancement features including bird boxes, bat boxes, hedgehog houses, herptile hibernacula, invertebrate hotels, and bee banks.

4 Review of the Submitted Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA)

4.1 Methodology and Baseline Assessment

The LVA submitted with the application considers the landscape effects of the development and the potential visual impact. The report includes a methodology in line with the Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment, Third Edition (GLVIA3) and provides the necessary level of information for a development of the size proposed.

The report identifies an initial 5km study area, before correctly justifying a reduced scope based on results from a digital Zone of Theoretical Visibility (ZTV). This is a robust approach. Within the reduced 2km study area, the LVA presents a thorough description of baseline character, referencing the necessary precedent landscape character studies at multiple scales. One aspect of the baseline assessment that I would disagree with is the description of the site being “located in a semi-rural setting”. Although it is situated between two settlements, the site is overwhelmingly rural in character.

Using the descriptions provided in Table 1.1 of the LVA methodology, I agree that the site and surroundings hold a ‘medium’ landscape value. Whilst I agree with the LVA assessment, it is now common practice to use Technical Guidance Note 02-21 Assessing Landscape Value Outside National Designations, published by the Landscape Institute in 2021, to assist with assessment of value. Utilising this newer guidance would encourage a finer grained assessment of landscape value.

In terms of landscape susceptibility, the LVA assesses the site and surroundings to hold 'medium' susceptibility to the proposals. I disagree with this. The character of the site and surroundings shows minimal influence from built development. Although the proximity to two settlements and presence of electricity pylons are contributing elements, the area is distinctly undeveloped rural land. I therefore assess the area to hold 'high' susceptibility to change using the descriptions in Table 1.3 of the LVA methodology.

The LVA assesses 'medium' value combined 'medium' susceptibility to equate to a 'medium' assessment of landscape sensitivity. Despite disagreeing with the susceptibility assessment offered within the LVA, I do believe the description of 'medium' sensitivity within Table 1.4 of the LVA methodology best describes the site and surroundings.

4.2 Landscape Effects

The submitted LVA offers a description of potential landscape effects that would arise from the development. I do not agree with the 'medium' level of landscape effects predicted for the site. There would be a total loss or large scale damage to the key characteristic of the site being rural agricultural land. There would also be the addition of new features that will substantially alter the character. It is therefore my opinion that the magnitude of landscape change should be assessed as 'high' using the descriptions provided in Table 1.8 of the LVA methodology. Coupled with the 'medium' sensitivity of the site, this would lead to a 'major to moderate' landscape effect on the site as opposed to the 'moderate adverse' level identified within the LVA.

I agree with the assessment of landscape effects on the wider Landscape Character Unit (LCU) 25: South Nottinghamshire Farmlands: Aslockton Village Farmlands; 'moderate adverse' in Year 1, reducing to 'minor adverse' by Year 10. I also agree that surrounding LCUs will not experience landscape effects.

One area of landscape effects that I do not believe has been considered within the LVA is the change to the setting of Hawksworth and Thoroton. The proximity of the site to both settlements means that it plays an important role in their setting. Currently the rolling fields contribute to the strong rural context provided for each village. Whilst it is clear that some positive measures have been taken to reduce the extent of the proposed solar farm during the course of the design process, the current proposals will introduce considerable built form to the undeveloped rural landscape. The scale of the solar farm is still well at odds with the existing settlements. The setting of Hawksworth will be more adversely affected, with a perceivable change to the north and east. The setting of Thoroton would experience less character change, but would not be completely unaffected.

It is important to note that predicted landscape effects will not be permanent, as the solar farm will have an operational lifespan of 40 years. Therefore, effects should be considered to be long-term, but reversible. Nevertheless, the submitted LVA underestimates the predicted effects on the landscape character of the site and fails to address changes to the landscape setting of Hawksworth and Thoroton.

4.3 Visual Effects

When considering visual effects of the proposals, the LVIA uses representative viewpoints that were agreed in advance with the Local Authority, this is good practice.

Consideration of the assessments provided for each representative viewpoint is given below:

- Viewpoint 1 – agreed.
- Viewpoint 2 – not agreed. Mitigation planting would cause more than a subtle change to the view. Longer distance views to sloping topography and the wider countryside would be replaced by short-distance views to new woodland planting. Using the descriptors in Table 1.9 of the LVA methodology, this represents a 'medium' magnitude of visual effect as opposed to 'low' stated within the report. This equates to a 'moderate' adverse visual effect.
- Viewpoint 3 – agreed.
- Viewpoint 4 – not agreed. Mitigation planting will partially change the composition of the view, with the loss of characteristic views to wider countryside. This represents a 'medium' magnitude of visual effect as opposed to 'low' stated within the report. This equates to a 'moderate' adverse visual effect.
- Viewpoint 5 – not agreed. The labelled photo for Viewpoint 5, showing the existing view, illustrates the open views available along the bridleway between Fields 1 and 2. The photomontage visualisation included as Figure 1.10 of the LVA shows the extensive change predicted for the composition of the view. The mitigation planting from the development would become the dominant feature of the view. This would also create an uncharacteristic narrow field channel, at odds with the general field pattern in the area. This would represent a 'high' magnitude of visual effect as opposed to 'low' stated within the report. This equates to a 'major to moderate' adverse visual effect.
- Viewpoint 6 – agreed. However, there are sections along the bridleway within Field 5 where people will experience a higher level of visual effect due to the closer adjacency to mitigation planting [refer to my

Viewpoint A in Appendix B]. Proposed woodland mitigation planting will also restrict views to Thoroton and specifically the spire of St Helena's Church from parts of the PRoW. This is correctly identified as a sensitive view within the LVA.

- Viewpoint 7 – agreed.
- Viewpoint 8 – agreed.

The LVA also includes a series of photomontage visualisations aimed at illustrating the predicted visual effects of the scheme. I have some reservations about the locations selected for these visualisations. Viewpoint 1 (Figure 1.8), Viewpoint 4 (Figure 1.9), and Viewpoint 6 (Figure 1.11) are shown from locations adjacent to set-back areas within the development. Although they are useful to show that the set-back areas will reduce the visual prominence of development within certain views, they do not illustrate some of the shorter distance effects that may be experienced from parts of the bridleway that traverses the site. For example, visualisations produced from points further east between Fields 1 and 2, in the middle of Field 4, and further west in Field 5 would help to illustrate the full range of predicted visual effects. This would be particularly useful in better understanding the visual containment caused by mitigation planting, restricting more open views to the rural surroundings.

The submitted Design and Access Statement (DAS) states, "PV solar panels were also removed in the north eastern section of field 5 to preserve southerly views towards the church spire of St Helena's in Thoroton and to give additional set-back distance from the Bridleway route running across the north of the site" (DAS Para 1.47, Page 16). I do not believe the proposed exclusion area is large enough to achieve this. Even with the exclusion, PV panels, fencing, and inverters shown in fields 7 and 9 will still introduce built form to much of the rural setting to Thoroton as appreciated from the PRoW. This will be apparent until proposed woodland planting in Field 5 matures. After the woodland has established, views to Thoroton from the PRoW will be restricted by mitigation planting. It is important to note that this effect will potentially outlive the operational phase of the solar farm unless there are plans to remove mitigation planting following decommissioning, which is unlikely.

In summary, it is my opinion that the submitted LVA underestimates the predicted level of visual effects. Although proposed mitigation planting will screen the solar panels over time, it will also act to restrict characterisitc views to open countryside.

5 Conclusions

This report has been commissioned to provide an independent assessment of the landscape impact of the proposals for a 49.9MW solar farm on a 94.24ha site on land east of Hawksworth and north-west of Thoroton, Nottinghamshire. The scheme has been examined by reviewing the submitted documents and my own observations of the site and surroundings.

The LVA submitted with the application considers the landscape effects of the development and the potential visual impact. The report includes a methodology in line with the Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment, Third Edition (GLVIA3) and provides the necessary level of information for a development of the size proposed. It also references the necessary precedent landscape character studies. I have raised a minor point about the methodology used to assess landscape value, as it is now common practice to use the Landscape Institute's Technical Guidance Note 02-21. Nevertheless, I agree with the LVA that the 'medium' value assessment is appropriate. However, it is my opinion that the susceptibility of the site and surroundings is 'high' in contrast the 'medium' level identified within the report. The LVA assesses 'medium' value combined 'medium' susceptibility to equate to a 'medium' assessment of landscape sensitivity. Despite disagreeing with the susceptibility assessment offered within the LVA, I do believe the description of 'medium' sensitivity within Table 1.4 of the LVA methodology best describes the site and surroundings overall.

When considering the landscape effects of the proposed development, I agree that effects on the wider Landscape Character Unit (LCU) 25: South Nottinghamshire Farmlands: Aslockton Village Farmlands will be 'moderate adverse' in Year 1, reducing to 'minor adverse' by Year 10. I also agree that surrounding LCUs will not experience landscape effects. I do not agree with the 'medium' level of landscape effects predicted for the site. There would be a total loss or large scale damage to the key characteristic of the site being rural agricultural land. There would also be the addition of new features that will substantially alter the character. It is therefore my opinion that the magnitude of landscape change should be assessed as 'high' using the descriptions provided in Table 1.8 of the LVA methodology. Coupled with the 'medium' sensitivity of the site, this would lead to a 'major to moderate' landscape effect on the site as opposed to the 'moderate adverse' level identified within the LVA. I also believe that effects on the rural settings to Hawksworth and Thoroton have not been fully considered. The scale of the solar farm is well at odds with the existing settlements. The setting of Hawksworth will be more adversely affected, with a perceivable change to the north and east. The setting of Thoroton would experience less character change, but would not be

completely unaffected. It is therefore my opinion that the submitted LVA underestimates the predicted effects on the landscape character of the site and fails to address changes to the landscape setting of Hawksworth and Thoroton.

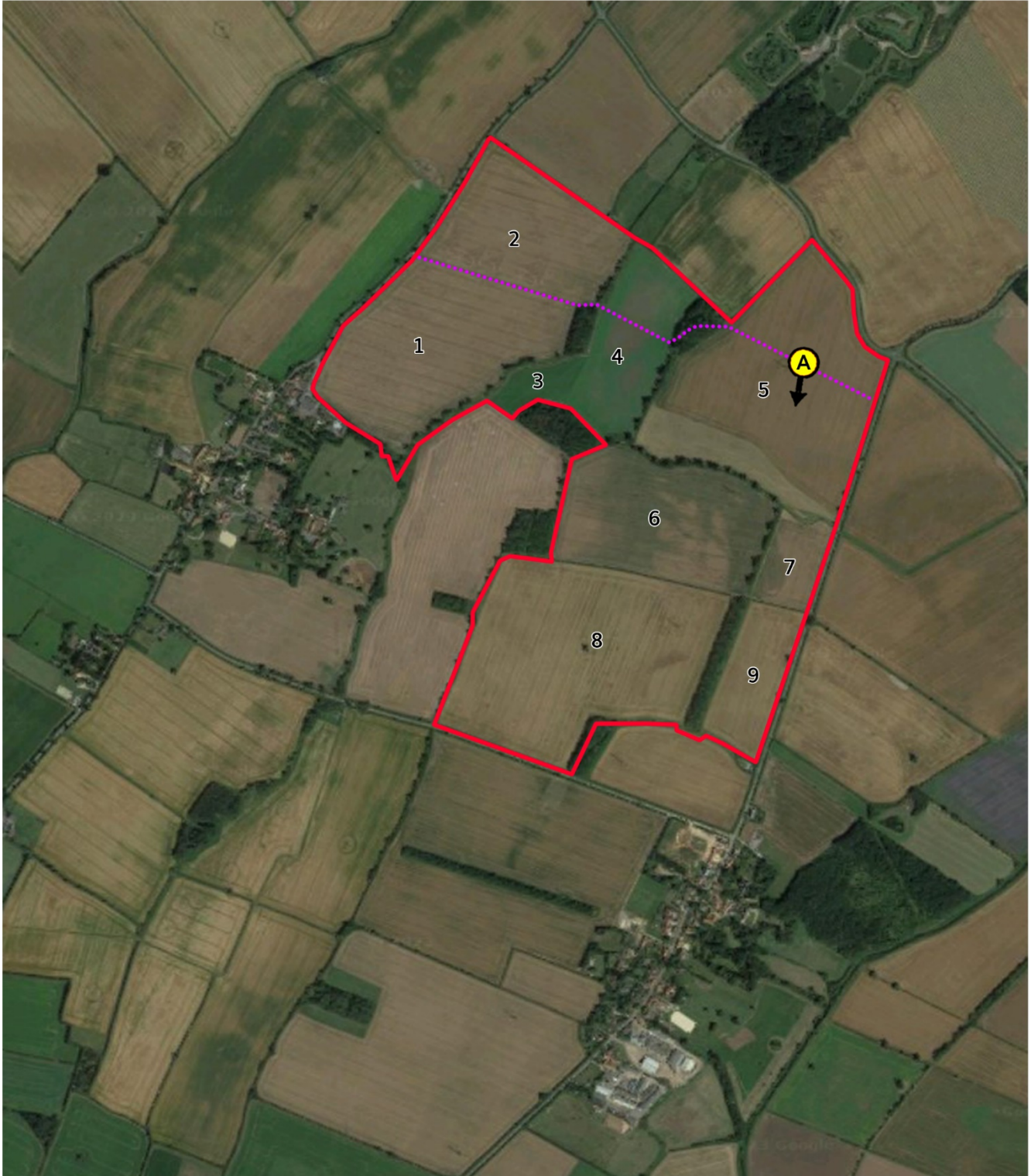
In relation to the predicted visual effects of the proposals, I agree with the specific assessment of visual effects from four of the eight representative viewpoints. However, I assess there to be a greater level of visual effects than those predicted within the LVA from Viewpoints 2, 4, and 6. I also believe that Viewpoint 5 does not fully represent the visual effects that will be experienced by receptors along the bridleway in Field 5. If taken further west, greater visual effects would be predicted.


Many of the points of disagreement relating to levels of visual effect relate to proposed mitigation planting. It is my opinion that in many places, although the mitigation planting will screen built elements of the proposed development, it will also obscure views to the wider rural context. This will replace open countryside views with contained views of native hedge planting. In Field 5, woodland mitigation planting will also restrict views to Thoroton and specifically the spire of St Helena's Church from parts of the PRow. This is correctly identified as a sensitive view within the LVA.

It is therefore my opinion that the LVA also underestimates the predicted visual effects of the proposed development. Although mitigation planting will screen the proposed solar panels over time, it will also act to restrict characteristic views to open countryside.

6 Appendices

6.1 Appendix A – Photo Location Plan



 Public bridleway within the site boundary

6.2 Appendix B – Viewpoint Photos

Photo A – View from the public bridleway in Field 5, looking south towards Thoroton

← Approximate extent of proposed development →



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