



## **Statera solar farm and battery storage proposal, located between Chickerell, Portesham and Upwey (aka Chickerell Solar and Battery Storage)**

The AONB Team has been receiving requests for feedback on a proposal referred to as Chickerell Solar Farm and Battery Storage, which has been the subject of publicity and community consultation. The site identified includes a substantial amount of land between Chickerell, Portesham and Upwey – indeed, we are told that this would be the largest solar farm in the country if consented. The proposal includes a number of land parcels, including locations within Dorset AONB and its immediate setting. We attended a recent public event in Portesham to gather information on the proposal, speak with the developer and improve our understanding of likely impacts. This position statement is based on the information we have seen to date and is informed by our knowledge of the affected landscape. Overall, we believe that the envisaged proposal will be unable to achieve consent and therefore recommend that an application is not submitted.

The AONB Team's role in these matters is to advise the decision-making body on impacts to the protected landscape. In this case, due to the proposed large-scale of the proposal, the consenting process would be via the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) route, whereby the is examined by the Planning Inspectorate, rather than the Local Planning Authority. More information on the process is available here: <https://infrastructure.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/>

The AONB Partnership recognises the climate and ecological emergency and supports renewable energy developments when these can be accommodated without significant harm to the landscape. However, we believe the protected landscape can better respond to the climate and ecological emergency through nature recovery and increased soil carbon storage, rather than through industrial-scale renewable energy production. As over 75% of England is outside AONBs and National Parks, we consider that there are likely to be alternative suitable locations for projects of this scale.

Dorset AONB was designated in 1959. The primary purpose of the AONB designation is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape. Alongside National Park status, AONB designation is the highest level of landscape protection available within England and Wales. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000) confirmed the significance of AONBs and created improved arrangements for their management, including:

- Section 85 places a statutory duty on all 'relevant authorities' to have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing natural beauty when discharging any function affecting land in AONBs.

- Section 89 places a statutory duty on local planning authorities to act jointly to produce a Management Plan for each AONB in their administrative area.

The AONB Team is also currently engaged in a high number of consultations for solar farms, particularly within the setting of the designated area. The Team is not fundamentally opposed to solar farms and the AONB Management Plan confirms that we will support renewable energy production when compatible with the purpose the designation. Whilst we have accepted other applications in the AONB and its setting, including some major developments, the very large scale of the Statera proposal and its location partly within the AONB are highly significant barriers to achieving consent. Overall, the development that is envisaged is highly likely to face difficulties in relation to key protective policies and it is most unlikely that there are going to be compelling exceptional reasons for using the selected site and causing significant harm to the AONB.

Being an NSIP, the government's National Policy Statements (NPSs) for Energy are of relevance. Other planning considerations include the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and documents such as the AONB's Management Plan. Both NPS and NPPF contain what can be described as an 'exceptional circumstances test', which relates to major developments within AONBs. Although major developments that are in the public interest can sometimes achieve consent, particular attention should be paid to the need for a development, alternative ways of meeting this need (including developing outside of an AONB), and the potential to moderate impacts. NPPF has also been updated in recent years, placing greater emphasis on the need for development in the setting of designated landscapes to be sited and designed to avoid and reduce impacts.

The need for renewable energy developments is not in dispute. However, the siting of this proposal and its foreseeable impacts upon landscape character and visual amenity are major challenges. Being located in the AONB and its immediate setting, there is a duty on decision makers to consider the likely impacts on this sensitive, nationally protected landscape. Protecting the AONB is an issue to which substantial weight must be applied.

An immediate observation, which we have already communicated to the developer, is that the alternatives to the development have not been explained. It is understood that the development would be linked to the National Grid substation at Chickerell. Given this point of connection, the siting of the bulk of solar farm substantially to the north of the substation, toward and within the AONB, neither minimises the transmission distance for the generated energy or maximises the potential buffer between the AONB and the development site. Furthermore, the applicant has not provided information on other alternatives, which could include alternative sites across the UK, or the use of multiple smaller sites, either within Dorset or elsewhere.

The location of the site within open countryside, characterised by a series of limestone ridges and clay vales, raises significant questions about where impacts could be moderated to an acceptable level. Notably, the area being considered includes land where a solar farm has previously been refused, as per planning application 1/D/13/000772, which was rejected by the former West Dorset District Council. This refused site encompassed south sloping land

close to Dairy House Coppice, which is within the setting of the AONB, to the north of Nottingham Lane. Panels were proposed across the mid-lower slopes of a ridgeline, alongside the planting of new hedgerows, as well as allowing existing hedges to grow taller, in an attempt to achieve screening. The reason for refusal was: "The proposal would be intrusive within the agricultural and rural landscape character of the surrounding area taking account of the proposal itself and cumulative impact of nearby solar farm development. The proposal would have a significant adverse visual impact from adjacent, local and wider views which due to the scale of the proposal and topography of the site could not be satisfactorily mitigated; and would be harmful to the natural beauty of the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the distinctive characteristics of the landscape."

The decision was appealed, which resulted in the Planning Inspectorate upholding the reason for refusal (appeal reference APP/F1230/A/14/2210945), noting that the benefits of the proposal would be outweighed by the impacts. This past application, which was far, far smaller than that presently being considered, was judged by a planning inspector to interrupt the consistent pattern of open agricultural land along the slopes of a ridge in the setting of the AONB, resulting in a discordant feature that would harm views into the designated area. The Inspector reviewed the mitigation proposed and found this to be unable to overcome concerns about the impacts of the scheme, noting that: "This appeal scheme cannot have anything other than a negative impact on the intrinsic value of an open landscape". The concerns about this earlier refusal would foreseeably be 'scaled-up' in relation to this NSIP.

The need to demonstrate exceptional circumstances for the use of the identified site appears to be an insurmountable hurdle to achieving consent. Progressing this major proposal is likely to be costly and time-consuming, both for the applicant and the parties with an interest in the proposal. We consider there to be a high probability that the development would not achieve permission and that the output of the considerable work required would not serve to boost renewable energy production. Consequently, it is our advice to the applicant that they should fundamentally reconsider the proposals, rather than to progress an application.

*Dorset AONB Team, January 2023*