

FAO: Jack Sargeant

Clerk, Scopwick and Kirkby Green Parish Council

By email only

Wednesday 10 May 2023

Dear Jack,

Springwell Solar Farm

Thank you again for submitting Scopwick and Kirkby Green Parish Council's response to our non-statutory consultation.

This included a number of questions. We felt it would be helpful to answer these before the next stage of consultation. Our responses are set out below by theme.

We are responding on the basis of the early plans that we published as part of our non-statutory consultation. Where the parish council has asked about matters of detailed design, we have provided as much detail as is available at this stage.

We will publish updated plans and more information relevant to these questions as part of a further consultation later in the year and once our application has been made.

How we will assess environmental effects

- *Will surveys conducted on the land for example audits of biodiversity, wildlife, or soil erosion, would these be independent and made available to the public?*

As part of the Development Consent Order (DCO) process, we must carry out an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for Springwell. This will assess the potential effects, both positive and negative, that Springwell could have on the environment and will ensure that we consider them as we develop our plans.

These assessments will look at a range of topics such as cultural heritage, landscape and visual impact, flood risk and ecology over the whole of Springwell's lifetime – from construction, through operation, to decommissioning.

We recently received advice from the Planning Inspectorate on which assessments we should carry out in relation to Springwell, through a document called a Scoping Opinion. This was informed by consultation carried out by the Planning Inspectorate with statutory bodies such as Historic England and Natural England, as well as the parish council.

All of the assessments we carry out are undertaken by suitably qualified professionals. We will publish some of the early findings of our assessments and the methods we are using to carry them out in a Preliminary Environmental Information Report (PEIR) as part of the next stage of consultation, with further detail included later as part of the Environmental Statement which will form part of our DCO application.

Biodiversity, land management and pollinators

- *Can the applicant confirm they will only under-sow with appropriate plant species, native to the UK and where possible of local provenance?*
- *How would the applicant minimise bare areas of soil and the risk of soil loss?*
- *How would pollinator rich, wildflower meadows be created between and beneath the solar arrays and adjacent field margins?*
- *Can the applicant confirm that only fine grasses will be used to encourage colonisation by wild herbs?*
- *Could winter wild bird seed mixes be sown in a high proportion of the Springwell mitigation areas and bird counts be undertaken annually?*
- *Would active steps be taken to promote commercial beekeeping and honey collection?*
- *Would the applicant ensure that all management activities are established and verified by an independent local wildlife organisation, e.g., Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust?*
- *Can these management reports be open to public view?*

We are responding to these questions together, as they all relate to the way we will manage the land required for Springwell to promote biodiversity.

Some of the questions are detailed and we are not yet at a stage where we can respond to them. This is generally because we are still carrying out the surveys that will inform the way we design and manage Springwell to promote biodiversity.

We have already made an overall commitment to delivering a substantial 'net gain' in biodiversity. We are also committed to:

- Retaining existing trees and woodland, with buffers from solar development.
- Retaining existing hedgerow and ditch networks where possible and manage these to boost biodiversity.
- Creating new habitats to support farmland birds such as skylark and grey partridge and animals such as brown hares.
- Retaining and improving local wildlife sites, creating new grassland habitat.

We need to understand more about the species and habitats already at Springwell before we can share more detail on other ways that we will manage it. At the next stage of consultation, we will provide further information on the biodiversity and landscaping design, informed by the findings of our ecological surveys and assessments, as well as our discussions with statutory bodies such as the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust.

If consented, Springwell would be managed throughout its operational lifetime by a team of staff who would ensure all elements of Springwell are monitored and maintained, including ecological enhancements. These would be managed in line with an Operational Landscape and Ecology Management Plan (LEMP). We will submit an Outline LEMP as part of our DCO application. This will include more detail about our approach to ecological enhancements and arrangements for monitoring and maintenance.

We continue to welcome suggestions from the community on any specific ecological enhancements or community initiatives that could be included as part of Springwell.

Landscape and visual impact

- *Can the applicant demonstrate and increase buffer zones between the solar panels and the villages of Scopwick and Kirkby Green to protect the landscape and views?*
- *How will solar panels be screened from view? With more trees and hedging?*
- *Where there are public rights of way and footpaths passing through the development how would the applicant provide for increased buffering (on both sides of the path) with additional trees and hedging to obscure the solar panels from view?*
- *Where fields currently do not possess hedges, how would natural screening be accelerated?*
- *Can more detail of the style of fencing and posts be provided alongside what measures are taken to permit movement of local wildlife, especially hares and deer?*
- *What are the intentions for use of camera systems alongside solar fence lines and what measures are in place to avoid overlooking of areas of public access?*

We are responding to these questions together as they all relate to the way we will manage potential impacts from Springwell on landscape and views.

While solar farms are low-lying in nature, we recognise that they represent a change to what is currently there. Our aim is to design a layout for Springwell that is sensitive to surrounding communities and responds to the distinctive character of the local environment, with this process guided by design principles we have developed.

We have already committed to:

- Protecting the amenity of homes and villages, with buffers and setbacks separating them from solar panels.
- Retaining existing trees and woodland, with buffers from solar development.
- Retaining existing Public Rights of Way and permissive footpaths within the Springwell site.
- Respecting the history and settings of local historic and cultural sites, responding to the distinctive character of the local environment.

We are currently carrying out assessments of the effect Springwell would have on a range of public viewpoints around the Springwell site. We have also been meeting with residents close to Springwell and visiting their properties to assess the effect from residential properties.

At the next stage of consultation, we will publish an updated design for Springwell which will take into account the feedback we have received to date and the initial results of our assessments. That will include more detail on measures like planting and screening. We will also publish the early findings of our assessments of potential impacts on landscape and views in the PEIR.

Similarly, we have not yet decided the type of fencing we would use or the exact locations of CCTV around the edges of Springwell. We will confirm this as part of our detailed design for Springwell. Typically, most solar farm projects use light deer fencing for security, but some areas of Springwell such as the substations and battery storage systems will require more robust fencing.

Health and Safety

- *Is there a health and safety issue with the lithium batteries?*
- *Would there be implications for local fire and emergency services?*

Battery storage technology is safe and makes use of tried and tested technology, much of which we use in our day-to-day lives. While battery storage at Springwell would be larger in scale, we would build safety measures into our battery design, including for example, self-contained units for each battery and fire safety infrastructure.

This is something we already do at the battery storage sites we manage around the country. We will be working with Lincolnshire Fire and Rescue and the Health and Safety Executive, along with other relevant statutory bodies, throughout the development of Springwell.

During operation, Springwell would be managed by a team of permanent staff to ensure all elements of Springwell are monitored and maintained, including the battery storage.

Community benefit

- *What would be the scale and duration of this contribution to the parish?*
- *Current community infrastructure projects include a cycle path to Blankney and restoration of the limestone beck through Scopwick by the East Mercia Rivers Trust.*
- *Could a village support fund be enabled to subsidise energy costs and provide grants for items such as roof-top solar power, home storage batteries and EV car chargers to both public and residential properties?*

We invest in our projects and the communities where we operate for the long-term and remain involved in projects over their lifetime from development, construction and operation, all the way through to decommissioning. All our onshore wind and solar sites in the UK have a dedicated community fund to spend on local initiatives during development and over their operational lifetimes.

As part of our consultation, we asked for suggestions on local initiatives that could be supported by Springwell over its lifetime. We are currently reviewing all the suggestions that we received and will continue to develop our community benefit offer, which we will present more detail on at the next stage of consultation.

Next steps

I hope this is helpful. We will continue to liaise with local councils ahead of our statutory consultation, which we anticipate holding later this year.

Please do get in touch should you like further information on any of the above.

Kind regards,

Tim Wheeler

Development Project Manager