Fairy Hill Solar Farm, Compton Dando:

Planning Statement

Date: 27 November 2023

For: Bath and West Community Energy

Ref: eg211118

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ABBREVIATIONS

BANES	Bath and North East Somerset
BWCE	Bath and West Community Energy
PV	Photovoltaic
MW	Megawatts
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
LVIA	Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
EMR	Electricity Market Reform
Km	Kilometre
m	Metre

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 This planning statement has been prepared in support of a planning application for a new solar farm on an agricultural field outside of the village of Compton Dando.

1.2 The application is made by Bath and West Community Energy (BWCE). BWCE is a community benefit society, established in June 2010. BWCE's vision is for a local area able to supply decreasing local energy demand with increasing generation from renewable energy, driven by collective action and community ownership. BWCE's local areas covers Bath & North East Somerset (BANES) and parts of Wiltshire and South Gloucestershire.

1.3 The planning application is accompanied by technical reports and assessments necessary to demonstrate the acceptability of the proposals. This planning statement draws information from those reports and other relevant sources to provide information specifically regarding the proposals' correspondence with BANES development plan policies, in the context of national legislation, policy and guidance.

1.4 The location and extent of the site are shown in **Figure 1**.

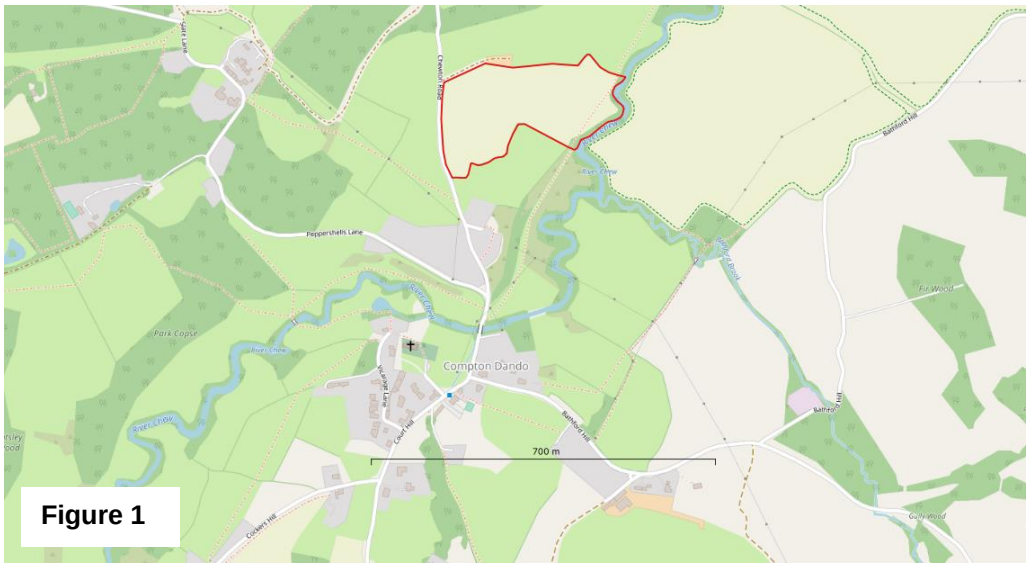

Figure 1

1.5 The application is supported by documents addressing all relevant design, planning and environmental matters including:

- Completed Application Form;
- Completed Land Ownership Certificate;
- Completed Agricultural Holdings Certificate;
- Site Location Plan;
- Perimeter Fence Details;
- Solar PV Elevations;
- Proposed Layout Plan;
- Design and Access Statement
- Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment
- Flood Risk Assessment;
- Agricultural Land Classification report;
- Ecological Impact Assessment, Biodiversity Net Gain Assessment and Outline Ecological Management Plan;
- Tree Constraints Plan.

1.6 These supporting documents assess the potential environmental effects of the development proposal. They provide a comprehensive assessment of potential impacts on all potential environmental receptors that were scoped into the application. They identify where avoidance and mitigation measures have been adopted and where there are opportunities for the development to provide environmental enhancements.

1.7 The proposed development is not a *Schedule 1* development under the Environmental Impact Assessment regulations and therefore does not automatically require an EIA. It is an installation for the production of electricity of more than 0.5 hectares, and therefore constitutes a project under category 3(a) of Schedule 2 of the EIA regulations.

1.8 An EIA screening report was submitted, requesting a screening opinion from BANES in June 2022. The screening report set out how the potential environmental impacts of the development proposal have been assessed according to standard guidance. BANES provided a screening response on 30th August 2022, which confirmed that the project is not EIA development.

1.9 In accordance with *The Town and Country Planning Act 1990 Section 70(2)* and *The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004*, the application should be determined by the Local Planning Authority (Bath and North East Somerset Council) with regard to the provisions of the Development Plan. In this case, the relevant Development Plan comprises the Core Strategy, the Placemaking Plan and the Local Plan Partial Update. The development plan must be understood as a whole. This approach to construing policy is endorsed in case law judgments; notably that of Sullivan J in Rochdale [R v Rochdale MBC *ex parte* Milne [2001] reported at 81 P&CR 365]. In this case, Sullivan J concluded that in assessing compliance with the development plan it is not necessary to comply with all policies; there will be some core or site-specific policies that take precedence over others. In other words, there will be dominant policies which guide the development proposal.

1.10 The application is for Full planning consent and is accordingly supported by sufficiently detailed information to enable Bath and North East Somerset Council (BANES) to assess the application. The application is based upon the maximum likely development scenario. As technology in solar farms is rapidly advancing, small details regarding the specifications of the components will be subject to design by an appointed contractor. The application is for temporary use of the land for the purposes of the construction, operating and decommissioning of the solar farm within a period of 30 years.

2 THE SITE AND SURROUNDINGS

Location and Context

2.1 The site is located approximately 500m north of Compton Dando in the Bath and North East Somerset council area. The Ordnance Survey grid reference for the centre of the site is ST647651. The site comprises a single agricultural field that slopes from the Fairy Hill Road on its western boundary down to the River Chew along its eastern boundary.

2.2 Vehicular access to the field is via a farm gate off the Fairy Hill road. The gate is set back from the carriageway and enters the field through a wide gap in the boundary hedge with good visibility north and south along the road.

2.3 A Public Right of Way (BA8/84) crosses the eastern boundary of the site (Figure 2). This footpath leads to / from Compton Dando village to the south, along the River Chew and (via a pair of connected bridleways – BA27/66 and BA27/65) into Keynsham to the north. The Public Right of Way is entirely outside of the footprint of the solar farm and would be unaffected by the proposals.

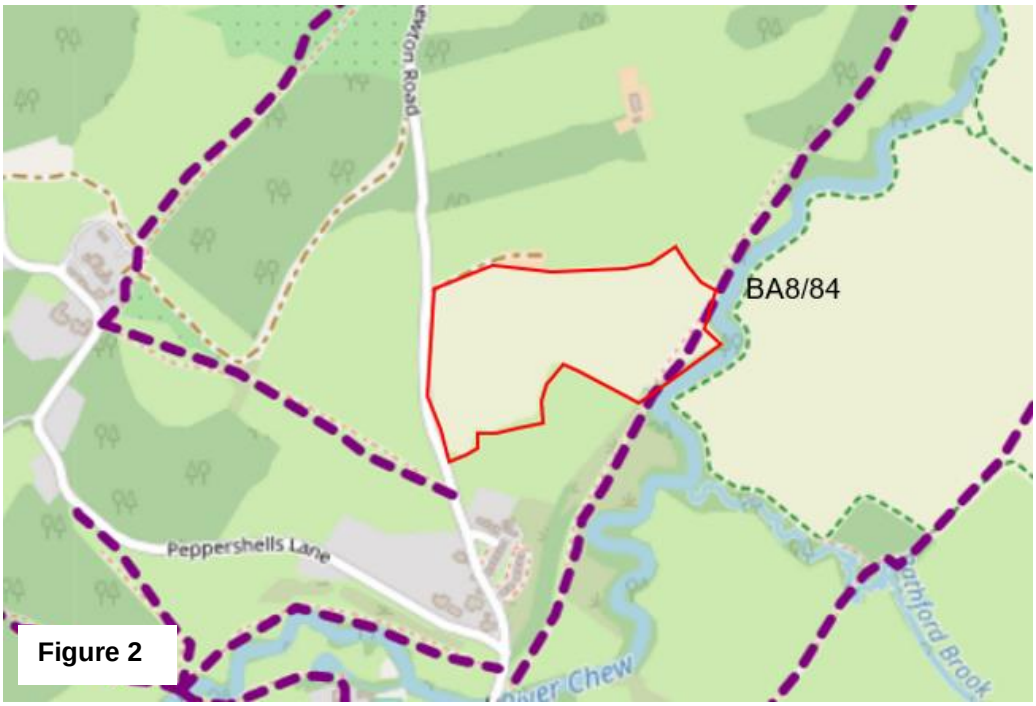

Figure 2

3 THE DEVELOPMENT PROPSOSAL

Development Description

3.1 The layout of the proposed solar fam is illustrated in **Figure 3** (then original of which is submitted with the planning application).

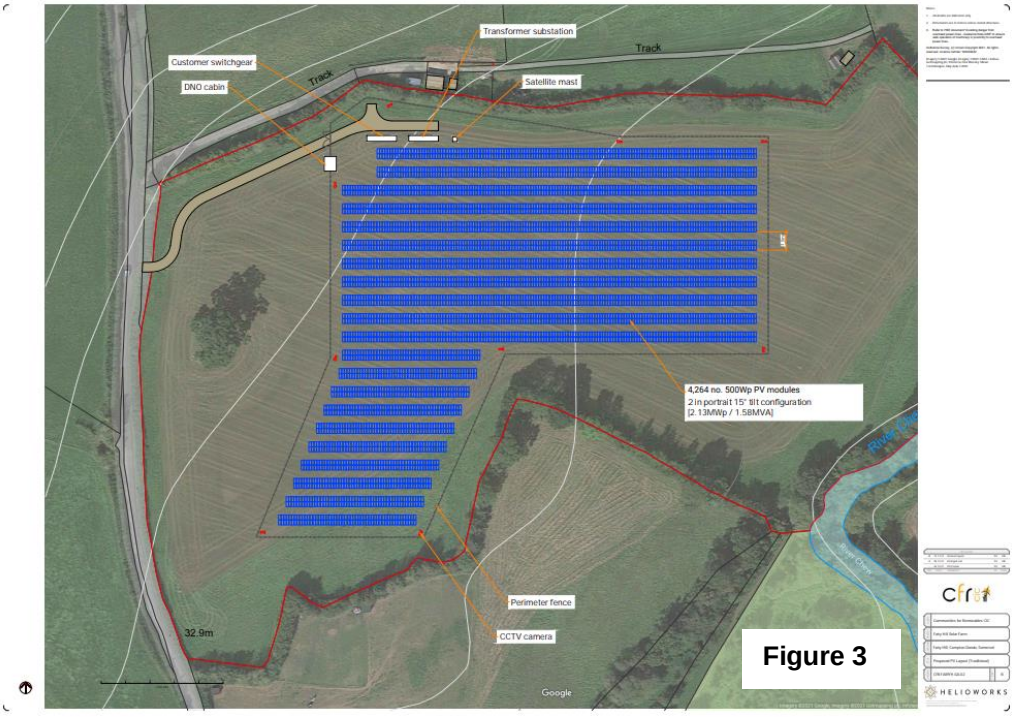

Figure 3

3.2 The generating capacity is estimated to be approximately 2.1MW over an area of approximately 2ha. The installed capacity will depend on the technology available at the time of construction. The layout has taken into account topography, ground conditions, ecology, landscape and visual elements of the environment. The layout has also been adjusted to take account of feedback from the local community.

3.3 The solar panels will be orientated to face the south on static frames, with a clearance above ground at the lower (front) edge of approximately 0.7m and a height at the higher (rear) edge of up to 1.908m, at an angle of approximately 15 degrees. The dimensions of each individual panel will be selected prior to construction to take advantage of the most efficient technology available on the market at the time.

3.4 The solar panels will be connected to inverters in order to convert the direct current electricity that they generate into alternating current for use in the electricity grid. The inverters will be housed in a small building approximately the size of a shipping container (approximately 2.5m high, 2.5m wide and 12m long). 'String inverters', which are connected to cabling underneath and between the panels, can be used instead of a central inverter building depending on technical design resolution later in the project. The solar farm also requires the construction of a switchroom building and underground cabling to connect into the electricity grid via cabling under the road to a connection point south of the field in which the solar farm would be located.

3.5 The solar array and associated infrastructure will not be publicly accessible and will be set behind security fencing that will be approximately 2m high. This typically consists of galvanised steel mesh fencing with wooden posts and a 100mm gap at the bottom for wildlife.

3.6 Construction of the solar farm is expected to take approximately four months to complete. Once installed, the solar farm will operate for a period of 30 years. During operation the site is monitored externally and there are no permanent staff on site.

3.7 There will be no artificial lighting on site during operation of the solar farm. Security cameras will use infra-red imaging and the infrastructure within the permitter fence does not need to be illuminated.

3.8 Scheduled on-site activities will consist of annual vegetation management, regular inspection and cleaning of the panels, and servicing, maintenance or replacement of parts as required.

3.9 Once the operational lifetime of the solar farm is complete, it will be possible to remove the panels and above-ground infrastructure and return the site to an alternative use. Any below-ground footings or cabling can either be secured and left in-situ or removed, depending on whichever is the most environmentally appropriate option.

4 THE NEED FOR THE DEVELOPMENT

Climate Change and Renewable Energy

4.1 The background to the drive to increase the use of renewable sources of energy has its roots in the recognition that the burning of fossil fuels has an adverse effect on global climate, and that global measures are required to deal with it. Energy supply was the second largest contributor to the UK's overall greenhouse gas emissions in 2019 (21%, compared with over 25% from transport emissions)[1]. The main source of emissions from the energy sector is the combustion of fuels in electricity generation from power stations.

4.2 The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is the United Nations body for assessing the science related to climate change. Its Sixth Assessment report published in 2021 concludes:

i It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land. Widespread and rapid changes in the atmosphere, ocean, cryosphere and biosphere have occurred.

ii The scale of recent changes across the climate system as a whole and the present state of many aspects of the climate system are unprecedented over many centuries to many thousands of years.

iii Human-induced climate change is already affecting many weather and climate extremes in every region across the globe. Evidence of observed changes in extremes such as heatwaves, heavy precipitation, droughts, and tropical cyclones

iv Global surface temperature will continue to increase until at least the mid-century and that global warming of greater than 2°C will be exceeded unless deep reductions in carbon dioxide (CO2) and other greenhouse gas emissions are achieved.

[1] 2019 UK Greenhouse Gas Emissions, Final Figures, published 2nd February 2021 by Department for Busines, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

4.3 The UK Government summarised the IPCCs advice in the following way; *if we fail to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, the floods and fires we have seen around the world this year will get more frequent and more fierce, crops will be more likely to fail, and sea levels will rise driving mass migration as millions are forced from their homes. Above 1.5°C we risk reaching climatic tipping points like the melting of arctic permafrost – releasing millennia of stored greenhouse gases – meaning we could lose control of our climate for good'*

4.4 In response, the UKs Net Zero Strategy published in October 2021 sets out its approach to cutting emissions by at least 68% by 2030 on 1990 levels, and reaching net zero by 2050. It also commits *to 'take action so that by 2035, all our electricity will come from low carbon sources…*'. This brings forward the previous government commitment in the Energy White Paper to a fully decarbonised power system by 15 years. The same strategy goes on to say that *'low-cost, net zero consistent electricity system is most likely to be composed predominantly of wind and solar generation…'*.

4.5 BANES declared a climate emergency in March 2019, and identified increasing local renewable energy generation as one of their priorities to help reach the goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2030.

5 NATIONAL LEGISLATION, PLANNING POLICY AND GUIDANCE

The Climate Change Act 2008

5.1 The Climate Change Act 2008 established long-term statutory targets for the UK to achieve reductions in greenhouse gases by 2050 against a 1990 baseline. The Act originally set a legally binding target of an 80% cut in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

5.2 On 12th June 2019, as a direct response to the climate change emergency declaration, the Government laid the draft Climate Change Act 2008 (2050 Target Amendment) Order 2019 to amend the Climate Change Act 2008 by introducing a target for at least a 100% reduction of greenhouse gas emissions (compared to 1990 levels) in the UK by 2050. This is otherwise known as a net zero target because some emissions can remain if they are offset by removal from the atmosphere and/or by trading in carbon units.

5.3 The proposed solar farm would produce around 2183 MWh/year of renewable energy each year, equivalent to the energy required to power approximately 606 homes. It is therefore an appropriate project with reference to this Act.

Net Zero Strategy 2021

5.4 The UK Committee on Climate Change advises the government on progress on tackling climate change. In May 2019, the Committee on Climate Change published its Net Zero report which responded to a request from the Governments of the UK, Wales and Scotland, asking the Committee to reassess the UK's long-term emissions targets. The report identifies that the supply of low-carbon power must continue to expand rapidly if the UK is to meet its carbon targets. The government's Net Zero Strategy has responded by committing to **fully decarbonise the power system by 2035**

5.5 The proposed solar farm would contribute to the expansion of the supply of low-carbon power and is thus in accordance with the Net Zero Strategy and the advice of the Committee on Climate Change.

Net Zero in the Power Sector

5.6 The National Infrastructure Commission (NIC), official advisor to the Government on Infrastructure, has published a report (Net-Zero Opportunities for the Power Sector, March 2020) setting out the key infrastructure requirements needed to meet the UK's 2050 net-zero target, including the amount of renewable energy development that would need to be deployed.

5.7 The NIC recommends that in meeting this target, the UK's energy mix needs to be made up of around 90% renewables. To achieve this would require a significant increase in installed capacity across the UK, including over nine times the current installed capacity of solar technologies.

5.8 The proposed project is therefore in accordance with the aims of the Net Zero strategy.

National Planning Policy and Guidance

5.9 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), revised on 5th September 2023, recognises the need for a reduction in the UK's carbon emissions, which can be met in part through increased renewable energy generation.

5.10 The NPPF is underpinned throughout by a presumption in favour of sustainable development. The presumption in favour of sustainable development informs planning decisions and assumes that consent will be granted unless material considerations indicate otherwise. The demonstrable need for solar energy to contribute to sustainable development should therefore be given significant weight when assessing this planning application.

5.11 Planning Practice Guidance on Determining Planning applications (last updated 1 September 2015) sets out what may be a material consideration. Paragraph 8 of the guidance states

> *"A material planning consideration is one which is relevant to making the planning decision in question (e.g. whether to grant or refuse an application for planning permission). The scope of what can constitute a*

material consideration is very wide and so the courts often do not indicate what cannot be a material consideration. However, in general they have taken the view that planning is concerned with land use in the public interest, so that the protection of purely private interests such as the impact of a development on the value of a neighbouring property or loss of private rights to light could not be material considerations".

5.12 **Paragraph 152** of the NPPF states that:

The planning system should support the transition to a low carbon future in a changing climate, taking full account of flood risk and coastal change. It should help to: shape places in ways that contribute to radical reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, minimise vulnerability and improve resilience; encourage the reuse of existing resources, including the conversion of existing buildings; and support renewable and low carbon energy and associated infrastructure.

5.13 The NPPF goes on to state in **Paragraph 156** that:

Local planning authorities should support community-led initiatives for renewable and low carbon energy, including developments outside areas identified in local plans or other strategic policies that are being taken forward through neighbourhood planning.

5.14 And in **Paragraph 158**:

When determining planning applications for renewable and low carbon development, local planning authorities should:

a) not require applicants to demonstrate the overall need for renewable or low carbon energy, and recognise that even small-scale projects provide a valuable contribution to cutting greenhouse gas emissions; and

b) approve the application if its impacts are (or can be made) acceptable

5.15 The NPPF sets out the considerations that should be made in planning decisions when assessing whether a development is, or can be made, acceptable.

5.16 Section 11 sets out how planning policies and decisions should make effective use of land. **Paragraph 119** states:

> *Planning policies and decisions should promote an effective use of land in meeting the need for homes and other uses, while safeguarding and improving the environment and ensuring safe and healthy living conditions*.

5.17 The temporary use of agricultural land to directly address the national priority for decarbonising energy production would be an effective use of this land.

5.18 **Paragraph 126** places an emphasis on ensuring that development is well-designed to provide "*high quality, beautiful and sustainable buildings and places*". The proposed solar fam has been designed in accordance with the relevant guidance for the design of solar farms and has responded to the unique characteristics of the site and its surrounding environment, to provide landscape and biodiversity benefits in addition to its sustainable production of renewable energy.

5.19 **Paragraph 159** requires that:

> "*Inappropriate development in areas at risk of flooding should be avoided by directing development away from areas at highest risk (whether existing or future). Where development is necessary in such areas, the development should be made safe for its lifetime without increasing flood risk elsewhere.*

5.20 The proposed development is in Flood Zone 1, meaning the site is not in an area at high risk of flooding. The application is accompanied by a Flood Risk Assessment, which demonstrates that it would not increase flood risk elsewhere, in accordance with **Paragraph 167**.

5.21 **Section 15** sets out the framework for ensuring that planning decisions will contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment. This includes (key topics of specific relevance to this site are highlighted in bold):

> *a) protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, sites of **biodiversity** or geological value and soils (in a manner commensurate with their statutory status or identified quality in the development plan);*
>
> *b) recognising the **intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside**, and the wider benefits from natural capital and ecosystem services – including the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land, and of trees and woodland;*
>
> *c) maintaining the character of the undeveloped coast, while improving **public access** to it where appropriate.*
>
> *d) minimising impacts on and providing **net gains for biodiversity**, including by establishing coherent ecological networks that are more resilient to current and future pressures;*
>
> *e) preventing new and existing development from contributing to, being put at unacceptable risk from, or being adversely affected by, unacceptable levels of **soil, air, water or noise pollution** or land instability. Development should, wherever possible, help to improve local environmental conditions such as air and water quality, taking into account relevant information such as river basin management plans; and*
>
> *f) **remediating and mitigating despoiled, degraded, derelict, contaminated and unstable land**, where appropriate.*

5.22 The project's potential impacts on biodiversity are addressed in the Ecological Impact Assessment submitted with the application, and the net gains for biodiversity are set out in a Biodiversity Net Gain report, both of which demonstrate that there would be no significant impacts on biodiversity and a net gain in biodiversity. The impacts on the landscape are described in the Landscape

and Visual Impact Assessment that accompanies the application, which finds that there would be no substantial harm to landscape character or visual amenity. Measures to avoid potential impacts on soil, water or as a result of noise are set out in the Construction Environmental Management Plan submitted with the application.

National Planning Practice Guidance

5.23 The Government's online planning practice guidance for renewable and low carbon energy states:

> "*Increasing the amount of energy from renewable and low carbon technologies will help to make sure the UK has a secure energy supply, reduce greenhouse gas emissions to slow down climate change and stimulate investment in new jobs and businesses. Planning has an important role in the delivery of new renewable and low carbon energy infrastructure in locations where the local environmental impact is acceptable*."

5.24 It also goes onto note that:

> "*Community initiatives are likely to play an increasingly important role and should be encouraged as a way of providing positive local benefit from renewable energy development.*"

5.25 The PPG also notes the importance of "*well-planned and well-screened*" solar development proposals to address the potential visual impacts of renewable energy development. Particular considerations include ensuring that the proposed use is on poorer quality land (which is the case here) and that the development will not preclude continued agricultural use (which is also the case here).

5.26 The development proposal for a community solar farm in a well-screened location is therefore fully in accordance with this planning guidance.

6 LOCAL PLANNING POLICY

Development Plan

6.1 The BANES Development Plan comprises:

- Bath and North East Somerset Core Strategy, adopted July 2014;
- Bath and North East Somerset Council's Placemaking Plan, adopted July 2017; and
- The Local Plan Partial Update adopted on 19th January 2023.

6.2 An increase in the provision of renewable energy was recognised as one of BANES 'Key Strategic Issues' in the Core Strategy. Policy CP3 of the Core Strategy commits to providing 275MW of renewable energy capacity, 110MW of that via electricity production by 2029. Low carbon and renewable energy are also at the heart of the Core Strategy in Objectives 1 and 2. This development proposal therefore contributes directly to this key strategic issue.

6.3 Polices of the Core Strategy and Placemaking Plan and the Local Plan Partial Update, as set out in the District-wide Strategy and Policies (January 2023) relevant to the application are:

- Policy SD1: Presumption in Favour of Sustainable Development
- Policy CP3: Renewable Energy
- Policy CP5: Flood Risk Management
- Policy SU1: Sustainable Drainage
- Policy SCR4 Community Renewables Schemes
- Policy CP6: Environmental Quality
- Policy D2: Local Character & Distinctiveness
- Policy D6: Amenity
- Policy HE1: Historic Environment
- Policy HE2: Somersetshire Coal Canal and the Wansdyke

- Policy NE2: Conserving and Enhancing the Landscape and Landscape Character
- Policy NE3: Sites, Habitats and Species
- Policy NE3a: Biodiversity Net Gain
- Policy NE4: Ecosystem Services
- Policy NE5: Ecological Networks and Nature Recovery
- Policy NE6: Tres and Woodland Conservation
- Policy CP7: Green Infrastructure
- Policy NE1: Development and Green Infrastructure
- Policy CP8: Green Belt
- Policy GB1: Visual Amenities of the Green Belt
- Policy RE2: Agricultural Development
- Policy RE3: Farm Diversification
- Policy RE5: Agricultural Land

6.4 Section 7 of this planning statement addresses the developments siting with the green belt, and compliance with the development management polices is covered in Section 8.

7 DEVELOPMENT IN THE GREEN BELT

Planning Policy Context

7.1 The site is within the Bristol & Bath Green Belt and the Forest of Avon Community Forest, the Bristol, Avon Valleys and Ridges National Character Area (NCA 118) and the Chew Valley Landscape Character Area.

7.2 The purposes of designating the Green Belt are to:

1. Check the unrestricted sprawl of Bath and Bristol
2. To prevent the merger of Bristol, Keynsham, Saltford and Bath
3. To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment.
4. To preserve the setting and special character of Bath
5. To assist in urban regeneration of Bath and Bristol by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land
6. To preserve the identity and existing character of the towns, villages and hamlets within the green belt

7.3 The objectives for the use of land in the green belt are:

1. To provide opportunities for access to the open countryside for the urban populations of Bath, Bristol, Keynsham and Norton Radstock
2. To provide opportunities for outdoor sport and outdoor recreation near Bath, Bristol and Keynsham.
3. To retain attractive landscapes and enhance landscapes.
4. To improve damaged or derelict land.
5. To secure nature conservation interests.
6. To retain land in agricultural, forestry and related uses.

7.4 The proposed site is in the 'southern green belt', which is of most importance for preserving the identity and character of towns, villages and hamlets2 (point 2 above).

7.5 The relevant Plan Policies are Policy CP8: Green Belt and Policy GB1: Visual Amenities of the Green Belt. Policy CP8 states:

[2] Bath and North East Somerset Green Belt Review, Stage 1 Report. Arup, 2013.

"*The openness of the Green Belt will be protected from inappropriate development in accordance with national planning policy.*"

7.6 Policy GB1 states:

"*Development within or conspicuous from the Green Belt should not prejudice but seek to enhance the visual amenities of the Green Belt by reason of its siting, design or materials used for its construction*."

7.7 The principle that solar developments can be acceptable within the southern Green Belt has been established elsewhere in BANES (e.g. planning reference 14/01895/FUL; 14/00424/FUL and 21/04881/FUL). At a national level, recent planning appeals have also verified that solar farms can be consented within green belt land subject to the benefits outweighing the harms. A 49.9MW scheme in Essex was recently allowed at appeal (appeal reference APP/W1525/W/22/3300222). The planning inspector acknowledged that such a large-scale scheme in combination with other recently consented schemes would reduce openness and have some visual impact but that the benefits of delivering renewable energy in the midst of a climate emergency outweighed those harms.

7.8 The following sections elaborate on the potential effects of the current proposal on the openness of the green belt and give evidence as to the features of the application that would contribute to the demonstration of 'very special circumstances'. With reference to Sullivan J. in R (Basildon DC) v FSS [2004] EWHC 2759 (Admin), this includes features which in themselves may not be 'very special', but which when taken together present an overall coherent set of very special circumstances.

Effect on Openness

7.9 Effects on openness of the Green Belt are considered in relation to both visual and spatial aspects. They are considered first in regard to the relevant purposes of designated the southern green belt:

- With reference to the first purpose of the green belt designation (checking the unrestricted sprawl of Bath and Bristol), the construction of the proposed solar farm would not result in any urban sprawl.

- With reference to the second purpose of the green belt designation, the proposed solar farm would not have any effect on neighbouring towns merging into one another, by virtue of the nature of the development (i.e. it is not urban development) and because it is not located between the mentioned settlements.

- In reference to the third purpose, as the proposal is not for urban development it would not result in 'encroachment' of urban development into the countryside. The presence of solar panels and infrastructure would nevertheless result in the expansion of developed form into the countryside.

- With regard to preserving the setting and special character of Bath, the Landscape and Visual Impact assessment accompanying the planning application demonstrates that there would be no significant impacts on heritage features and therefore no impact on the setting and special character of Bath.

7.10 The site is currently farmland, and the development proposal would introduce development into a new area from a spatial perspective. The spatial scale of the development is however relatively modest in that it occupies only part of one field. Furthermore, the development would be screened by vegetation and would be removed at the end of its lifetime such that there would be no permanent effect on the openness of the green belt.

7.11 The development would not contribute to the green belt purpose of encouraging development onto previously developed land. However, there are not sufficient areas of previously developed land within BANES to accommodate the amount of solar energy generation required to meet the net zero and renewable energy targets. Around 70% of the land outside of urban areas is within the green belt, and there is therefore a need for some renewable energy generation to be

located within green belt land if the targets are to be met to address the climate emergency.

7.12 The development proposal would therefore result in modest encroachment into the green belt and a modest reduction in openness and would therefore conflict with the purposes of the green belt and the relevant portions of **Policy CP8** and **Policy GB1**. The effects on encroachment and openness would be mitigated by virtue of the siting of the development, its scale and the proposed long-term management of the site and surrounding hedgerows. The harm to the green belt and conflict with the relevant policies carry weight in the planning decision-making process. The following section sets out the ways in which aspects of the development proposal mitigate against this consideration and demonstrate the 'very special circumstances' necessary to overcome it.

Very Special Circumstances

7.13 The potential harm to the green belt can be outweighed by other considerations that result in 'very special circumstances'. These considerations can include the need for the development and its relative contribution to a locally-recognised need and to other environmental objectives and outcomes. The need for the development is clearly demonstrated in the national-level legislation, policy and guidance as set out in Section 5 of this document and by the key strategic issues in the Core Strategy and the declaration of the climate emergency.

7.14 The table below sets out how the scheme specifically addresses the Very Special Circumstances criteria set out in **Policy SCR4**.

Table 7-1 Very Special Circumstances

Criteria in Policy SCR4	Assessment
a) The contribution to achieving the targets set out in Policy CP3 of the Core Strategy to increase the level of renewable electricity and heat generation in the district.	The solar farm would provide 1.9% of the 110MW target for electricity generation imposed by BANES Policy CP3. It would not be possible for BANES to meet its renewable energy targets without renewable development within Green Belt or AONB land, as over 70% of the BANES administrative area is designated Green Belt and there is not sufficient non-green belt land available to meet the targets in Policy CP3.
b) The contribution that will be made to local and national renewable energy and carbon reduction targets.	The proposed solar farm is estimated to be able to provide 2183MWh/year. This is an important step in the village reaching net zero by 2030.

Criteria in Policy SCR4	Assessment
c) Social and economic benefits. For example, local job creation opportunities; raising the quality of life in rural areas through diversification of agricultural land and generating an alternative income for farmers.	The proposal includes devoting substantial areas of land around the solar arrays to habitat enhancement and landscaping that have been agreed with the local community through consultation and engagement events. These benefits are available and accessible to local communities through the public footpath access points and provide a range of benefits in terms of engagement with the natural environment and encouraging healthy exercise through the provision of a permissive pathway around the site. The proposal also includes interpretation for the local community to engage with the solar scheme and understand the background to and need for solar renewables. The scheme will also generate income for the landowner, a local farm with other land that is farmed within the parish whose business employs local people. Surplus income from the project will go into a fund supporting community benefits to reduce carbon emissions and fuel poverty in the Parish of Compton Dando. The project would generate around £5,000 per year to go into the BWCE community fund, at least 50% of which would be prioritised towards local carbon reduction or fuel poverty projects.
d) The temporary nature of the renewable energy development and the ability to restore land to its original condition at the end of the project's life.	The solar farm will be temporary and the site can be completely restored to its original use on completion.

Criteria in Policy SCR4	Assessment
e) Contributions to improving the biodiversity, public amenity and soils in the vicinity of the scheme	The proposed habitat enhancements and habitat creation measures would provide over the 10% biodiversity net gain required by planning policy, as measured using the Defra Metric, contributing to local and national targets for halting the decline in biodiversity. The site currently comprises arable land of low ecological distinctiveness and is therefore ideal for providing ecological enhancements without adversely affecting any existing ecology.

Conclusion

7.15 The development proposal will result in harm to the openness of the green belt in terms of encroachment of development and a reduction in openness that conflicts with Policy CP8 and Policy GB1.

7.16 However, the development contributes to all the criteria set out in Policy SCR4 regarding very special circumstances, by delivering a substantial contribution to local objectives for renewable energy, carbon reduction community benefits and nature conservation. By meeting a clearly demonstrated need (which is identified in national policy and directly in the BANES Local Plan) and by addressing the very special circumstances, the benefits outweigh the level of harm to the green belt. This conclusion would be in line with other recently consented solar schemes in BANES and in line with recent planning appeal decisions relating the provision of solar farms (including examples of a much larger scale) within green belt land.

7.17 The text of Policy SCR4 notes that even where very special circumstances outweigh harm to the green belt, applications may still only be permitted if there are no unacceptable impacts on the significance of designated and non-designated heritage aspects. This test is met for this project, and the assessment of this is set out in detail in the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment that accompanies the application. This and other development management matters are addressed in the following sections.

8 DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT

Relevant Considerations

8.1 In the context of the nature, location, scale and extent of the proposed solar farm and the Development Plan, the key development management considerations (aside from the green belt) are:

- Sustainability Principles
- Responding to Climate Change
- Environmental Quality
- High Quality Design
- Historic Environment
- Landscape
- Nature Conservation
- Sustaining a Buoyant Rural Economy

8.2 The following sections set out information in relation to these considerations.

Sustainability Principles

8.3 As set out in the NPPF, sustainability is considered in economic, social and environmental terms.

8.4 In economic terms, the development proposal provides local economic benefits (as set out above in relation to criteria C of Policy SCR4) as well as the wider economic benefits of the purchase, supply, installation and maintenance of the solar farm materials and systems. Where possible, local suppliers will be used for groundworks, supply of groundworks and landscaping materials, and labour. During construction there will be associated economic benefits from spend within local businesses on food, fuel etc. The operation of the solar farm also supports long-term employment in contracting and maintenance industries.

8.5 The social benefits of the scheme are set out in Table 7-1, above. These include helping to meet the village's net zero targets and the community benefits from access to the landscaped areas around the solar farm.

8.6 The proposal offers substantial environmental gains from committing the whole field to sown grass (as opposed to rotational cropping) with benefits for flood risk, water quality and biodiversity in particular.

8.7 The proposed development will deliver economic, social and environmental gains and under these terms meets the definition of sustainable development and is in accordance with the NPPF and **Policy SD1** and therefore benefits from the presumption in favour of sustainable development.

Responding to Climate Change

8.8 The proposed development directly responds to the national and BANES climate emergencies and the transition to a net zero economy. With reference to **Policy CP3**, BANES state that they will particularly encourage ground mounted solar energy. The proposed site is within the identified in Policy CP3 as having High to Medium potential for Band A ground mounted solar development. The land at Fairy Hill is not functionally linked to any nationally protected sites and meets the other pre-requisites of the policy as set out below:

a. The site is not Best and Most Versatile agricultural land – it is classified as Grade 3b

b. The site is not within a Special Area of Conservation bat sustenance zone, and it will introduce grazed pasture into a field currently used for arable crops and will thus improve the landscape for foraging bats of all species.

c. The proposal will not result in the loss of any hedgerow or woodland connectivity – through long-term management it will secure improved habitat corridors.

d. The proposal will not result in the loss of deterioration of any Priority Habitats and will provide enhancement to the River Chew and surrounding hedgerows (which are Priority Habitats).

e. The proposal will meet current best practice standards and guidelines on protection and enhancement of biodiversity as set out in the ecological assessments accompanying the application.

8.9 The proposals also meet the wider more generic pre-requisites of Policy CP3 as follows:

a. The proposals balance wider environmental social and economic benefits with renewable energy generation, as set out in particular in Table 7-1 in relation to **Policy SCR4**.

b. As set out in the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment and ecological assessments that accompany the application, the proposal will not result in any significant adverse effects on biodiversity, landscape and visual receptors or any protected landscapes.

c. The impacts of the proposal on heritage assets are set out in detail in the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment accompanies the application.

d. The proposal is supportive of land diversification as it allows the farm business to diversify whilst maintaining agriculture as its core activity.

e. The proposal provides a biodiversity net gain well beyond the 10% required by this policy, as well as multi-functional green infrastructure linked to the River Chew.

f. The land can be returned to its original use on completion of the solar development lifetime. A decommissioning plan can be secured via a suitably worded planning condition.

8.10 The development proposal is also able to demonstrate significant community support. BWCE provides a sustainable business model that is in place and is already delivering the types of community benefits that this scheme offers on other solar schemes in the region.

Flood Risk Management

8.11 The proposed development is located entirely within Flood Zone 1 and the flood risk to the solar farm infrastructure is very low. Details of this are provided in the Flood Risk Assessment that accompanies the planning application.

8.12 The development will result in a negligible increase in impermeable ground and includes landscape creation and maintenance proposals that will reduce runoff

from the site to below current rates. This will in turn provide benefits for water quality in the River Chew. The development is therefore in accordance with the NPPF and **Policy CP5** and **Policy SU1** as it avoids development in areas at high risk of flooding and includes a sustainable drainage system in the form of berms and landscaping that will reduce surface water runoff and will not contribute to flood risk elsewhere.

Environmental Quality

8.13 The proposed development does not conflict with the objectives of **Policy CP6,** and it supports the nature conservation objectives of the policy.

8.14 The High Quality Design aspects of Policy CP6 are more relevant to urban development than they are to rural renewable energy schemes. Nevertheless, the scheme has been designed to a high standard and will incorporate features that protect the surrounding environment through choice of materials, finishes and landscaping.

8.15 The proposals will not conflict with the objectives of Policy CP6 to protect and conserve the Historic Environment. The LVIA concludes that the proposal will only have impacts on the experiential quality of the public right of way but no landscape impacts beyond this. The impacts on users of the public right of way have been addressed through extensive community consultation to develop a landscaping scheme that offers community benefits. The proposals do not therefore conflict with the objectives of Policy CP6 to protect and conserve landscape character and quality.

8.16 The extensive biodiversity benefits of the proposal (as set out in the technical reports accompanying the planning application) are in accordance with the nature conservation objectives of CP6.

8.17 An assessment of the proposal against the criteria of **Policy D2** is presented below:

1. The development has positively responded to the site context by siting the panels in the eastern part of the site (the layout was adjusted following initial consultation), retaining the existing large

mature oak and enhancing the landscaping around the public right of way.

2. The development proposal does not have any effect on areas of poor design.
3. The development is not in an urban setting and this criteria is not relevant to the proposal.
4. The design enhances natural features by improving hedgerow boundaries and enhancing the landscaping around the River Chew to provide benefits for flood risk, water quality and nature conservation.
5. The development contributes to the local social context by providing safe and attractive open space for residents and walkers.
6. The development is not relevant to local architectural styles and this criteria is not relevant to the proposal.
7. The landscape boundary treatments are appropriate to the local area.

8.18 The proposal is also in accordance with **Policy DP6** as far as this applies, as it provides multi-functional open amenity space for the local community.

Historic Environment

8.19 The proposals do not conflict with the requirements of **Policy HE1** to protect and conserve the historic environment, and there will be no harm to any heritage assets (designated or non-designated).

8.20 There is no intervisibility between the site and any Listed Buildings. The nearest Scheduled Ancient Monuments are Compton Dando bridge (which is screened from the development site), sections of the Wansdyke (from which small parts of the site may be glimpsed at distance but the LVIA concludes the effect on views will be negligible and there will be no impact on this heritage asset) and Stantonbury Camp (from which the development will be barely visible, the visual effect would be negligible and there would be no impact on this heritage asset).

Given the absence of harm to the Wansdyke, the proposals are also in accordance with **Policy HE2**.

8.21 There are two Designated Parks and Gardens within 5km of the site but given the distance and landform there is no intervisibility with the site and there would be no impact upon them.

8.22 Woolard Conservation area is 2.7km away from the site and given the distance and landform there is no intervisibility with the site and there would be no impact upon the Conservation Area.

8.23 The site has been in use as arable farmland for a substantial length of time and there is no evidence to suggest that the proposals would have any impact on buried assets.

Nature Conservation

8.24 The proposed solar farm will convert an arable field of very limited ecological value into a landscaped area consisting of species-rich grassland, edge-habitats, shrubs and trees. This project will therefore contribute to the nature conservation objectives and requirements of the development plan policies.

8.25 The project's position close to the River Chew presents an opportunity to enhance green infrastructure in accordance with the objectives of **Policy CP7** and **Policy NE1**. This has been incorporated into the landscaping proposals so as to enhance the value of the green corridor for wildlife and amenity uses.

8.26 The development proposal will enhance local landscape character (through the proposed planting), landscape features (the boundary hedgerows) and seeks to enhance local distinctiveness through the choice and design of species for the landscape planting. There will be impacts on local landscape character at the site level (through the introduction of built form into an open field) but the LVIA finds that these impacts are not significant, and the proposal will not significantly impact important views. The impacts on landscape character of introducing new built form (the solar panels and infrastructure) are therefore mitigated by the landscape planting and management proposals and therefore would not conflict with the requirements of **Policy NE2**.

8.27 The development will not result in significant harm to biodiversity, in accordance with the requirements of **Policy NE3**, and it exceeds the requirements of **Policy NE3a** to deliver 'an appropriate net gain'.

8.28 In accordance with the requirements of **Policy NE4**, the proposal will deliver ecosystem services including, but not limited to:

1. **Regulating services**: climate regulation (by reducing fossil fuel consumption for energy production) improvements to water quality and hydrology.
2. **Provisioning services**: vast increase in pollinator habitats compared with the baseline, improved soil health as well as fruit trees and shrubs incorporated into the landscape proposals.
3. **Cultural services**: amenity space for local communities
4. **Supporting services**: habitat provision for a wide range of wildlife including bats, birds and invertebrates.

8.29 The proposed landscaping will contribute to the local ecological network along the River Chew in particular, in accordance with the requirements of **Policy NE5** and it protects trees and hedgerows in accordance with **Policy NE6**.

Rural Economy

8.30 The proposals do not conflict with the first two requirements of **Policy RE2** and are in accordance with the third requirement as they do not have an adverse effect on the operation of an agricultural business – in fact they will generate income to support an existing agricultural business and allow the land to continue to be in agricultural use, albeit for sheep grazing as opposed to cereals. The proposals will also not lead to fragmentation of an agricultural business and will support agricultural function, ecological function and habitat integrity. The proposals are also in accordance with the relevant requirements of **Policy RE3** and **Policy RE5**. Whilst they will alter the agricultural function of the holding, they will overall support the function of the farm business (which includes other land in the locality).

Conclusion

8.31 The development proposals are in accordance with, and in most cases positively contribute to, the majority of development management policies. They are in line with the sustainable development and climate change policies of the development plan as well as policies relating to flood risk management, environmental quality and nature conservation. There are no significant impacts that would strongly conflict with policies relating to the historic environment.

9 CONCLUSIONS

9.1 The proposed application for a community solar farm on the outskirts of Compton Dando will meet a nationally recognised development need within an area that is identified in the development plan as suitable for this type of development.

9.2 The proposals offer benefits to the local community, the natural environment and green infrastructure substantially beyond the current land use, and they will support a local agricultural business.

9.3 Solar farms are an inappropriate form of development within the green belt that would introduce built form into an otherwise rural area and impact upon its openness, however they do not conflict with the core purposes of green belt designation. The proposals are fully in accordance with the criteria set out in the development plan to demonstrate the very special circumstances necessary to counteract the potential harm to the green belt.

9.4 The benefits of the proposals, not least in delivering clean renewable energy to meet a specific local objective during a climate emergency, therefore mitigate against the harm to the green belt and on balance are in accordance with the objectives and policy requirements of the BANES Core Strategy, Placemaking Plan and Local Plan Partial Update.