

Westhide Solar Power Proposal: Consultation Update December 2021

Over the past few weeks we have been reviewing and incorporating feedback we received during the last round of consultation, including via the October drop-in event in Withington, into our proposals.

As a result of consultation, we have made further changes to the site design. A copy of the final site design masterplan is included with this update. Please also see further explanatory notes below. Please note, it may be difficult to see some of the detail in printed A4 format but the masterplan will also be available to view electronically on the project website.

Having finalised the site design, we have also been preparing all the remaining reports and supporting documentation for the submission of the planning application. **This has taken longer than originally anticipated due to Covid-related absences across the board, including in our own development team and several of the environmental consultants working on this project.**

We are submitting the planning application to Herefordshire Council this month. Please see further information below on planning timings. As soon as our application has been registered and validated, we will contact everyone again with the planning reference number and issue all the final documents on the project website.

1. Final design

The final design contains circa 34.6MW of installed capacity and could generate enough clean electricity to power circa 12,500 homes – equivalent to around 38% of the number of households in the Hereford locality. A scheme of this size could save around 8,500 tonnes of CO₂ annually.¹

In addition to the wider environmental benefits, the proposed scheme entails a significant amount of ecological benefits on a more localised scale:

- The creation of circa 48 hectare of species-rich grassland

¹ The environmental benefit figures are based on 34.6MW of installed solar PV, operating with a 12% capacity factor, a Typical Domestic Consumption Value (TDCV) for a medium-use household of 2900kWh per annum (Ofgem 2020), UK government figures on the carbon emissions for homes on the average energy fuel mix (2019) and 2011 Census figures.

- 1.25km of new hedgerow, 2.2km of hedgerow enhancement and circa 190 new trees planted across the site
- The provision of wild bird seed mix in 0.5 ha of the site
- The incorporation of 10 bat boxes, 10 bird boxes and 5 reptile hibernacula

Herefordshire Council has requested an exact Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) calculation as part of our submission. The BNG for Westhide shows that in relation to the existing site area the scheme will bring an impressive **134% net gain for habitat**, and a **62% net gain for hedgerows**.

Please find enclosed the final site design masterplan. **Contour lines have been added to the design, as requested by several residents**. It should hopefully now be clearer to see that panels located in the eastern fields have been sited *north* of the highest elevation.

2. Additional issues we have addressed

2.1 Screening planting

Further additions have been incorporated to the screening planting proposals, especially along the southern boundaries of the site.

Details on recommended plant species and their locations will be found in the Landscape Mitigation & Enhancement Plan (LMEP), which is being submitted as part of the planning application. The LMEP will be made available on the project website in due course.

2.2 Noise

Prior to the consultation event in October our noise consultants carried out some initial noise modelling, which showed that our scheme was compliant with staying below existing background noise levels at the nearest residential properties.

Having had further discussions around the noise concerns of some of the residents, it was agreed that we would do further checks to ensure the most robust assessment possible. As such, additional data was sought from various manufacturers (of central inverters), relating to the latest research/measurements (including octave/spectral data). This new detailed data has subsequently been incorporated into our noise assessment.

Based on the range of models of central inverters currently on the market and the availability of design configurations/modifications for those, **our final noise assessment still shows that the scheme achieves compliance, i.e. it will not increase the background noise levels at third-party properties**.

As a measure of reassurance, the final noise report provides us as the developer with a *maximum* noise level that our scheme would be allowed to generate whilst still ensuring that existing background noise levels at third-party properties remain unchanged.

This leaves us with a degree of design flexibility with respect to the final technical selection, meaning that we either use lower noise central inverters, or if using higher level ones, then applying noise reduction modifications to the inverters.

If the scheme obtains planning permission, the final design and operational scheme will have to adhere to these limits.

The final noise report will be available as part of the planning application.

2.3 Substation location

We have decided to move the substation further north into the site to further minimise visual impact from the proposal. The field housing the original substation location (referred to in planning documents as Field B) will no longer be used for the scheme.

2.4 Permissive path routing

Incorporating feedback from the drop-in event, we have added a southern entry/exit point to the permissive path (along the operational access track for the scheme), increasing local interconnectivity, and adding a total of circa 4.5km of walking asset to the locality of Westhide.

Please see the final masterplan for the routing of the permissive path.

2.5 Community benefit fund

Community consultation is a key facet of our approach to development and we look to ensure that our proposals reflect the feedback received during consultation. As part of the feedback we have received during the consultation process at Westhide, we have had requests to consider the possibility of including a community benefit fund as part of the scheme.

Having reviewed the feasibility of doing so, we are pleased to confirm that we will be offering a community benefit fund alongside our proposal at Westhide.

The proposed fund will be based on a rate of £350 per installed MW on an annual basis for a period of 10 years. This means that based on the current design, which has an installed capacity of 34.6MW, the annual payment would come to £12,110, amounting to a total of £121,100 over the course of 10 years.

This rate is very much in keeping with the emerging industry standard in the post-subsidy solar sector (i.e. for schemes developed after 2016) which appears to be in the £200-300/MW range.

It should be noted that depending on the nature of the community proposals seeking funding from the community benefit fund, there may also be match-funding opportunities available from other sources, which could increase the size of the fund significantly.







The Westhide community benefit fund will be ring-fenced for spending on projects that improve sustainability and education in the local community.

We have contacted the parish council in relation to the governance and administration of the fund.

3. Project overview and timeline

Please see below for an up-to-date overview of the project and its expected timeline going forward.

The planning application is being submitted this month. We will contact residents as soon as the application has been validated by Herefordshire Council and has been given a planning reference number.

Date	Consultation		Environmental & Technical		Planning
Nov/Dec 2021	Comments are incorporated and site design is finalised		Final reports are produced		Final planning application documents are produced
					
Dec 2021					Planning application is submitted
					
Dec 2021/Jan 2022	Public exhibition is held to present the final planning application to the local community				Planning application is validated (checked to meet required standards)
					

2022					Planning application is determined
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4. Further consultation

We will contact residents and councillors as soon as the application has been validated and assigned a planning reference number and upload all the validated planning documents and reports onto the project website.

We do not see planning submission as the end of our consultation with the local community and encourage everyone to continue contacting us with any issues or queries in relation to the development, especially having reviewed the planning application documents.

We will seek to continue incorporating feedback into our proposals post-planning, especially should the planning application be approved.

Public exhibition

It is our intention to host a public exhibition on the submitted proposals once the application has been validated. This is likely to be in January 2022.

We would expect to hold the exhibition at Withington Village Hall. However, the current Covid situation appears to be deteriorating and the Government has already introduced some additional measures in relation to social contact.

If Government guidance changes significantly over the coming weeks, it may be decided that the exhibition is held virtually, to ensure everyone's safety.

We will review the situation in January and be in touch with information on the exhibition in due course.