

ITEM NO: 1 NO. OF APPENDICES: 2

Ref: RB2025/0603

Report Title	Whitestone Solar Farm – Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project
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1.0 Background and Current Status

- 1.1 Members will recall that the Whitestone Solar Farm proposal is being progressed as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP), requiring a Development Consent Order (DCO) from the Secretary of State under the Planning Act 2008 rather than determination by RMBC. As a host authority, RMBC is a statutory consultee throughout the NSIP process and not the decision maker.
- 1.2 Following acceptance of the application by the Planning Inspectorate (PINS), Interested Parties were invited to submit Relevant Representations identifying the principal issues they wish the Examining Authority to consider during the examination.
- 1.3 RMBC submitted a Relevant Representation prepared by Stantec which is attached at Appendix 1.
- 1.4 Following the close of the Relevant Representation period, the Examining Authority issued a Rule 6 Letter, published on the Planning Inspectorate website on 6 October 2026, setting out the procedural arrangements for the examination, including the Preliminary Meeting, Initial Assessment of Principal Issues and examination timetable, which is attached at Appendix 2.

2.0 Summary of Relevant Representations

- 2.1 The Council's Relevant Representation identifies a number of matters that it considers should be subject to scrutiny during the examination process. The issues raised are extensive and technical in nature and include, but are not limited to:
 - Green Belt and Grey Belt considerations.
 - Landscape and visual impacts.
 - Agricultural land quality and the loss of Best and Most Versatile (BMV) land.

- Ecology and biodiversity impacts.
- Heritage and archaeological impacts.
- Highways and transportation matters.
- Public rights of way.
- Flood risk and drainage.
- Noise, vibration and air quality.
- Glint and glare impacts.
- Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) safety and operation.
- Socio-economic considerations.
- Draft Development Consent Order (DCO) provisions and requirements.
- Cumulative impacts and assessment methodology.

2.2 Whilst the Council recognises the contribution the proposal could make towards renewable energy generation and national net zero objectives, it maintains that a number of significant issues remain unresolved and require further assessment through the examination process.

3.0 Principal Issues Identified by the Examining Authority

3.1 Following consideration of the Relevant Representations received, the Examining Authority has undertaken an Initial Assessment of Principal Issues for examination. The matters identified by the Examining Authority broadly reflect the issues raised by interested parties and include, but are not limited to:

- Green Belt considerations.
- Landscape and visual effects.
- Heritage and archaeology.
- Ecology and biodiversity.
- Agricultural land and soils.
- Traffic and transport.
- Water environment and drainage.
- Glint and glare.
- Population and human health.
- Battery storage and related safety matters.

- Need for the development.
 - Alternatives and site selection.
- 3.2 The Initial Assessment of Principal Issues is not intended to be exhaustive, and additional matters may be considered by the Examining Authority as the examination progresses. However, it provides a clear indication of the subjects that are likely to receive particular focus throughout the examination process

4.0 The Rule 6 Letter

- 4.1 A Rule 6 Letter is a procedural document issued under Rule 6 of the Infrastructure Planning (Examination Procedure) Rules 2010 and establishes how the examination will be conducted. It includes the draft timetable, hearing notifications, procedural directions, statements of common ground requirements and submission deadlines.
- 4.2 A copy of the letter is appended for information.

5.0 Key Examination Milestones

- 5.1 The Rule 6 Letter, which was published on the Planning Inspectorate's National Infrastructure Planning website on 6 October 2026, contains the full examination timetable and procedural directions issued by the Examining Authority.
- 5.2 Whilst Members are encouraged to refer to the appended Rule 6 Letter for the full programme of examination events and deadlines, a brief summary of the principal examination stages is provided below.
- 5.3 Preliminary Meeting
The Preliminary Meeting is scheduled for Tuesday 10th November and represents the formal start of the examination process and is chaired by the Examining Authority. The purpose of the meeting is not to consider the planning merits of the proposal but to establish the procedures, timetable and arrangements for the examination.
- 5.4 Start of Examination
Following the Preliminary Meeting, the examination formally commences. The examination is principally a written process during which Interested Parties are invited to submit evidence, comments and responses in accordance with deadlines established by the Examining Authority.
- 5.5 Local Impact Report
One of the Council's most important submissions will be the Local Impact Report (LIR), which provides a comprehensive assessment of the likely impacts of the proposed development on the Rotherham Borough area.

5.6 Statements of Common Ground

Throughout the examination, the Council and Applicant will continue to engage in the preparation of Statements of Common Ground identifying matters that have been agreed and those that remain outstanding.

5.7 Hearings

The Examining Authority may convene Issue Specific Hearings, Open Floor Hearings and, if necessary, Compulsory Acquisition Hearings to consider matters requiring further discussion. Wednesday 11th and Thursday 12th November are set aside for these, with a further 3 days set aside between Tuesday 9th and Thursday 11th February 2027.

5.8 Written Questions

At the conclusion of the examination period, the Examining Authority will prepare its report and recommendation to the Secretary of State, who will then determine whether development consent should be granted.

5.9 Close of Examination

At the conclusion of the examination period, the Examining Authority will prepare its report and recommendation to the Secretary of State, who will then determine whether development consent should be granted or refused. The close of the Examination is scheduled for 9th April 2027.

6.0 **Next Steps**

6.1 Officers, supported by the Council's consultants, Stantec, will continue to actively participate in the Development Consent Order examination process on behalf of the Authority. A significant focus over the coming months will be the preparation and submission of the Council's Local Impact Report, which will provide a comprehensive assessment of the likely impacts of the proposed development on the Borough and represent one of the Council's principal pieces of evidence during the examination. The Local Impact Report will draw upon specialist technical advice across a range of disciplines and will identify both the beneficial and adverse impacts of the proposal from a local perspective.

6.2 Alongside preparation of the Local Impact Report, the Council and Stantec will continue to engage with the Applicant and other relevant parties in order to progress Statements of Common Ground. These documents are an important part of the examination process and are intended to identify those matters where agreement has been reached, together with any issues that remain outstanding. As the examination progresses, Statements of Common Ground will be updated to reflect ongoing technical discussions and will assist the Examining Authority in focussing its consideration on the principal matters in dispute.

- 6.3 The Council will also be required to review and respond to examination documents submitted by the Applicant, respond to Written Questions issued by the Examining Authority and provide technical evidence on matters where concerns remain unresolved. In addition, officers and consultants may be required to attend and participate in Issue Specific Hearings, Open Floor Hearings and any other examination events convened by the Examining Authority. This will ensure that the Council's position and the potential impacts of the proposal upon the Borough are fully represented throughout the examination process.
- 6.4 Further reports will be presented to Planning Board at key stages of the examination in order to keep Members informed of progress, emerging issues and any significant developments arising from the Council's ongoing participation in the process. Members will therefore continue to receive updates as the examination progresses towards the Examining Authority's recommendation and the eventual decision by the Secretary of State.