

# TOPIC-BASED STATEMENT OF COMMON GROUND (Landscape)

BETWEEN

GREEN SWITCH CAPITAL LIMITED (the Appellant),

BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL (the LPA)

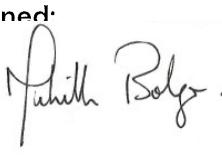
& BENTLEY PARISH COUNCIL (the Rule 6 party)

## SECTION 78 APPEAL BY GREEN SWITCH CAPITAL LIMITED

## LAND AT GROVE FARM AND LAND EAST OF THE RAILWAY LINE, BENTLEY

### PROPOSAL:

FULL PLANNING APPLICATION – CONSTRUCTION OF A SOLAR FARM (UP TO 40MW EXPORT CAPACITY) WITH ANCILLARY INFRASTRUCTURE AND CABLING, DNO SUBSTATION, CUSTOMER SUBSTATION AND CONSTRUCTION OF NEW AND ALTERED VEHICULAR ACCESSES

Signed: 	Signed: 	Signed: 
Name: Michelle Bolger	Name: Alison Farmer	Name: Jon Mason
On behalf of: Babergh District Council (the Local Planning Authority)	On behalf of: Bentley Parish Council (the Rule 6 party)	On behalf of: Green Switch Capital Ltd (the Appellant)
Date: 26/01/2026	Date: 26/01/2026	Date: 26/01/2026

# 1. Introduction

## **Purpose of this Statement of Common Ground**

This Topic-Specific Statement of Common Ground (SoCG) has been prepared to identify and clarify the areas of agreement and disagreement between the main parties in relation to landscape and visual matters for the Grove Farm Solar proposal. Its purpose is to assist the Planning Inspector by narrowing the issues in dispute, confirming the matters that are agreed, and setting out those that remain under discussion or require determination.

## **Parties to the Statement**

The parties to this statement are Jon Mason of Axis, representing the Appellant; Michelle Bolger of MBELC, representing Babergh District Council (the Local Planning Authority); and Alison Farmer of AFA, representing Bentley Parish Council (the Rule 6 Party).

## 2. The Appeal Site and Surroundings

2.1. This section briefly summarises the key landscape-character characteristics of the Appeal Site and its immediate surroundings, without repeating the general site description in the Overarching SoCG.

### Agreed

2.2. The site and immediate surroundings form part of the Shotley Peninsula, a relatively flat plateau landscape dissected in places by river valleys where topography becomes more pronounced.

2.3. Arable fields in the wider area range from medium-large scale, with blocks of woodland and hedgerows providing localised enclosure in places.

2.4. There is evidence of historic field boundary loss / hedgerow removal or decline, contributing to a simpler, more open field structure in parts of the immediate area.

2.5. Wooded horizons and woodland blocks are a notable component of the immediate setting, including ancient woodland.

2.6. The historic cluster of buildings/heritage assets and associated vegetation patterns around St Mary's Church / Bentley Hall to the north, along with isolated historic buildings contribute to local landscape character.

2.7. Historic lanes, and historic lanes fossilised into PRoWs also contribute to the character of the immediate landscape.

2.8. Linear infrastructure (including the railway corridor and pylons) is present within the local landscape context, particularly to the east of the site.

### Disputed

2.9. The policy/status implications of the APA is a matter of dispute (see Section 9).

### **3. Relevant Policy and Guidance Context**

- 3.1. The relevant national and development plan policy framework is set out at Overarching SoCG Section 7 (Planning Policy) and is not repeated.
- 3.2. The landscape and visual matters agreed between the Appellant and LPA (including GLVIA3 as the basis for the LVIA) are set out at Overarching SoCG §8.22–8.32.
- 3.3. The principal landscape/visual issues in dispute between the Appellant and the LPA are identified at Overarching SoCG §9.1 (items 4–9).

## 4. Approach to LVIA

### Agreed

4.1. Matters relating to the LVIA approach (including GLVIA3 compliance, Place Services response, and the APA/LP18(3) point) are agreed as set out in **Overarching SoCG §§8.22–8.26**.

### Disputed

#### **D1: Whether omission of the APA/LP18(3) is material to the LVIA's reliability**

4.2. **Appellant:** omission is not material to the LVIA's conclusions on effects.

4.3. **LPA:** omission is material and the LVIA conclusions should not be relied upon without an examination of the APA context and the implications of LP18(3).

4.4. **Rule 6:** omission contributes to under-appreciation of what matters and why and calls into question the judgements reached in the LVIA .

#### **D2: Whether this is a “valued landscape”**

4.5. **Appellant:** the receiving landscape is not a “valued landscape” in NPPF terms; LVIA value/sensitivity approach in the LVIA is appropriate.

4.6. **LPA:** the receiving landscape is a valued landscape and has been identified as such in a number of independent studies. / higher value than presented in the LVIA or the appellant's evidence for the inquiry.

**Rule 6:** the receiving landscape has been identified as a valued landscape many times through independent studies demonstrating consensus over time.

#### **D3: Importance of Effects (operational/residual)**

4.7. **Appellant:** effects are limited in extent and reduce materially over time with mitigation.

4.8. **LPA:** effects are most significant on the site and the immediately adjoining landscape but remain significantly adverse even after mitigation establishes.

**Rule 6:** effects are localised and most significant on the site and immediately adjoining landscape and adverse.

#### **D4: Whether relevant Landscape Institute technical guidance is fully applied (value/sensitivity transparency)**

4.9. **Appellant:** LVIA has been prepared in accordance with GLVIA3 and provides an appropriate basis for conclusions.

4.10. **LPA:** LVIA does not, in the LPA's view, fully apply relevant LI technical guidance on landscape value (including TGN O2/21), affecting transparency/robustness of value and sensitivity judgements.

4.11. **Rule 6:** LVIA does not contain a transparent assessment of landscape value and lacks an understanding of the qualities of the area on which judgements should be based.

**D5: LVIA treatment of hedgerow/tree planting (mitigation/enhancement) and whether it is beneficial in landscape terms**

4.12. **Appellant:** hedgerow/tree planting is appropriate and beneficial in landscape terms, responding to historic boundary loss and strengthening landscape structure over time (including reinstatement of historic boundaries where relevant).

4.13. **LPA:** planting may reduce some views over time, but the Council does not accept that it results in "enhancement"/a positive legacy or that it removes the underlying landscape character harm.

4.14. **Rule 6:** proposed planting is inappropriate in character terms and would introduce adverse effects in its own right affecting valued characteristics.

## 5. Embedded Mitigation

### Agreed

- 5.1. Embedded landscape mitigation and quantified landscape elements are agreed as set out in **Overarching SoCG §§8.29–8.32** and scheme description **§§3.23–3.30** (including decommissioning and retention of planted features).
- 5.2. The Parties record that the Council's and Rule 6 Party's landscape evidence has been discussed to limit overlap/duplication, whilst maintaining independent professional opinions.

### Disputed

#### **D6: Whether the proposed planting is appropriate mitigation in landscape character terms (or whether it creates harm in its own right)**

- 5.3. **Appellant:** planting/structure is restorative, responding to hedgerow loss, strengthening landscape structure, and helping effects reduce over time.
- 5.4. **LPA:** planting may screen some views, but it would not restore the valued historic rural character and is not accepted as "enhancement" or a "positive legacy" in landscape terms.
- 5.5. **Rule 6:** mitigation planting would not fully mitigate the effects of the proposed development and would alter the grain and pattern of the landscape in the long-term changing landscape character/valued qualities.

#### **D7: Growth/establishment assumptions and the timescale for mitigation to become effective**

- 5.6. **Appellant:** boundary hedgerows are expected to provide effective screening within ~5 years
- 5.7. **LPA:** even when proposed planting has established (10 years or more) current landscape character would not be restored.
- 5.8. **Rule 6:** mitigation would take at least 10 years and possibly longer to achieve screening and would not replicate established local hedge character.

#### **D8: Whether the hedgerow framework meaningfully reflects historic boundaries/grain**

- 5.9. **Appellant:** a high proportion of hedgerow reinstatement is aligned with historic boundaries, reinstating a more appropriate field scale/grain.
- 5.10. **LPA:** hedgerows do not reinstate the historic grain of the landscape; new planting responds to the solar layout/buffers and would not re-establish historic character once the scheme is removed.
- 5.11. **Rule 6:** only some hedgerows follow historic lines; additional hedgerows/linear woodland introduce an altered grain (including east–west emphasis).

#### **D9: Whether the mitigation is landscape-led and whether it would reduce landscape effects over the lifetime of the development**

- 5.12. **Appellant:** mitigation is presented as landscape-led embedded mitigation responding to character objectives and delivering a longer-term structural legacy.

5.13. **LPA**, the Council considers that the landscape proposals would not reduce landscape effects during the lifetime of the development and that even when they are established, they would not enhance the landscape character.

5.14. **Rule 6**: planting would not mitigate the effects of the proposed development in the short to medium term and would introduce adverse effects to landscape qualities.

#### **D10: Decommissioning – what remains**

5.15. **Appellant**: the scheme is reversible, with infrastructure removed at decommissioning and land capable of restoration; retained planting would leave a positive legacy in landscape structure.

5.16. **LPA**: even allowing for decommissioning, the retained planting/access-related changes would not reinstate the former historic character/experience.

5.17. **Rule 6**: only the solar array fields are stated to return to arable; changes (including pasture/compartmentalisation and planting) are permanent/uncharacteristic and not in keeping with the historic landscape pattern.

## 6. Landscape Baseline

6.1. Landscape Character Context – National to Local is as follows:

Assessment	Landscape type (LT)	Landscape character area (LCA)
National Level		
National Character Area (NCA)	n/a	NCA 82: Suffolk Coast and Heaths
County and District Level		
Suffolk County Landscape Character Assessment Joint Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Council Landscape Guidance 2015	Ancient Estate Claylands Ancient Estate Farmlands Rolling Valley Farmlands	
Local Level		
Shotley Peninsula and Hinterland Landscape Character Assessment		Shotley Peninsula Plateau Samford Valley

## 7. Effects on Landscape

7.1. The respective positions on landscape character assessment are as follows:

	The Council's Assessment	Rule 6 Assessment	The Appellant's Assessment
<b>Receptor – The site and its immediate landscape</b>			
<b>Value</b>	High	High	Medium/High
<b>Susceptibility</b>	Medium/high	Medium/High	Medium/High
<b>Sensitivity</b>	Medium/high	Medium/High	Medium/High
<b>Magnitude of change</b>	Medium	Medium	Medium reducing to small over time
<b>Significance of effects on completion</b>	Moderate–Major adverse	Moderate–Major adverse	Moderate to Major adverse
<b>Significance of effects after 15 years</b>	Moderate–Major adverse	Moderate–Major adverse	Minor to Moderate adverse

## 8. Effects on Visual Amenity

8.1. For the purposes of this SoCG, it is agreed that neither the Council's landscape witness nor the Rule 6 landscape witness has undertaken a separate, LVIA-style "viewpoint-by-viewpoint" visual assessment exercise supported by their own additional visualisations/photomontages; rather, each has used the Appellant's LVIA viewpoint material to differing degrees.

8.2. The Council's witness undertakes a receptor-led assessment of visual effects. She considers the LVIA visualisations to be less helpful than they could have been and identifies that additional viewpoint coverage/visualisations would have assisted, including omission of a viewpoint for the access from Church Road to the west and omission of a viewpoint for the access from Potash Lane (and related omissions). No additional visual material is supplied by the Council to fill this gap.

8.3. It is agreed that the key visual receptors are local (lane users, PRoW users and nearby residents) and that visual effects of the solar farm components will reduce as planting establishes.

## **9. Conclusion and summary of matters remaining in dispute**

- 9.1. This Topic-Specific Statement of Common Ground records the agreed position and remaining differences between the Appellant, the Local Planning Authority and the Rule 6 Party in relation to landscape and visual matters for the Grove Farm Solar proposal.
- 9.2. It is to be read alongside (and without duplicating) the Overarching SoCG.
- 9.3. The following ten matters remain in dispute:

**D1. Whether omission of the APA / JLP Policy LP18(3) is material to the LVIA's reliability**

**D2. Whether the receiving landscape is a "valued landscape"**

**D3. Importance of Effects (operational/residual)**

**D4. Whether relevant Landscape Institute guidance on value/sensitivity (including LI TGN O2/21) has been fully applied and whether the value/sensitivity reasoning is sufficiently transparent**

**D5. LVIA treatment of hedgerow/tree planting: (mitigation/enhancement) and whether it is beneficial in landscape terms**

**D6. Whether the proposed planting is appropriate mitigation in landscape character terms (or whether it creates harm in its own right)**

**D7. Growth/establishment assumptions and the timescale for mitigation to become effective**

**D8. Whether the hedgerow framework meaningfully reflects historic boundaries/grain**

**D9. Whether the mitigation is primarily landscape-led and whether it would reduce landscape effects over the lifetime of the development**

**D10. Decommissioning: what remains.**

## 10. Description of the Development – Not agreed

10.1. The LPA and Rule 6 party consider it is helpful for the built elements of the development to be quantified as they are not quantified in Section 3 of the Overarching SoCG.

10.2. The figures below have been derived from the application drawings and have not been verified by the applicant.

- Solar panels – From drawing CD A27 the width of the solar module is 7.2m and appears to comprise 3 panels. The length varies but appears to be one of 3 different modular lengths – 30m, 20m and 10m. The totals of the modular units are as follows:
  - Lengths of 30m = 646No – total length = c. 19,380m
  - Lengths of 20m = 57No – total length = c. 1140m
  - Lengths of 10m = 33No – total length = c. 330mThis gives rise to a total of 62,550 solar panels across the site
- Transformers = 11 No
- Access track = c. 2010m / 2.01km
- Perimeter fencing = c. 3580m / 3.58km
- Cameras (if located at 100m intervals) = c. 36No
- Cameras (if located at 50m intervals) = c. 72No