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Date: XXX July 2023
Our Reference: IEMD/SK/XXXX/ESOConsultation



**WOKINGHAM
BOROUGH COUNCIL**

Shute End
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Tel: (0118) 974 6000

Dear National Grid ESO,

RESPONSE OF WOKINGHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL TO NATIONAL GRID ESO'S CONSULTATION REGARDING CONNECTIONS REFORM

As Executive Member for Climate Emergency and Resident Services, I write from and on behalf of Wokingham Borough Council in response to your consultation on Connections Reform.

In the first instance we would like to thank you for allowing the opportunity to review your proposals for reform and to make comment. In particular, and from experience, we share the concerns regarding the ability of the existing connections process to deliver upon the Government's aspirations to decarbonise the grid by 2035. We strongly agree that reform is required to 'unblock' the delivery of shovel-ready schemes and commend your commitment to working with the industry to take the actions identified as necessary to ensure that the situation improves rapidly and significantly.

In the second instance therefore we would like to offer support to the proposals and to any further measures that may be identified through the consultation that will actively improve the connections process for all stakeholders.

To set context for our submissions, Wokingham Borough Council is a Unitary Authority located in the east of Berkshire. We declared a climate emergency in July 2019 which commits us to playing as full a role as possible in reducing our carbon footprint to be net carbon zero by 2030. Our Climate Emergency Action Plan sets out the planned steps on our journey towards achieving this goal, including increasing generation of renewable energy through investing in solar farms.

To this effect we have committed significant resource to securing planning permission for a 29MWP solar farm, securing vacant possession, appointing a contractor, and had been working in good faith against a DNO connection offer to deliver the facility in advance of 2026. We have also initiated feasibility work on two more council owned sites that we believe are capable of accommodating large scale solar farm installations. This represents a significant commitment from the Council and these projects could help play a significant role in the ambitions set out in the Government's 'Powering Up Britain' manifesto; namely to quintuple solar power and to have fully decarbonised the power system by 2035.

It was therefore with incredible frustration that in April we received a variation offer from the DNO specifying a new connection date of 2037; due to upgrades now required at the transmission level before the project could connect to the grid.



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Please note, this letter is an opinion of an officer of this council only which is of an advisory nature, and is given without prejudice to any formal decision taken in respect of development of the above site under the Town and Country Planning Act. Should you require any further information, please feel free to contact me on the direct dial number listed above.

As you will appreciate, Wokingham Borough Council has already spent significant money on this project in good faith. The Council has also made certain assumptions around revenue generation, which during a time of austerity has helped inform key decisions around budgeting for key council services over the coming years. Unless reform is enacted to the current connection process to unblock the delivery of shovel-ready solar farms such as ours, then not only will Wokingham and central Government fail to deliver against their respective climate emergency action plans, but council services will also be negatively impacted.

As a public organisation, we are accountable to our residents and auditors and are required to provide sound and transparent reasoning for our decision making around budget spend. Without a degree of confidence in the connection process then Wokingham (and other local authorities) will not be able to make sound decisions on the funding and delivery of these important solar projects. In such circumstances the projects will simply fall away, as assets and budgets will need to be reappropriated to other uses/services which offer our residents better value.

We note and are encouraged by your comments that through 5-point plan it is expected that the majority of existing projects will see improvements in connection dates of between 2-10 years. Whilst we absolutely support the reform and appreciate the need for due process, we would urge for swift resolution and therefore earlier certainty around connection dates and delivery. We would also emphasise that there is notable difference between those projects that were given a long connection date from the outset, and those, like us, who had been formally offered an earlier connection date and had progressed accordingly, only to subsequently have that date pushed back. Projects like ours, that have already entered into contract on the basis of previously/formally agreed connection dates, carry significantly more risk and therefore should be prioritised in getting earlier certainty on revised (earlier) connection dates. We suspect Wokingham will not be the only stakeholder in this position.

As a local authority we are keen to work with the industry as proactively as possible to facilitate the delivery of our solar farm projects. To this effect we have already established positive relationships with the DNO and yourselves, but we are nevertheless cognisant that reforms to the connection process are required if we are to achieve a positive resolution. We are keen therefore to support your reforms as best we can to positively influence the delivery of Wokingham's solar farms.

I trust the above suitably summarises Wokingham's position; and our detailed response to you targeted questions is included at appendix A of this letter. With this in mind please do not hesitate to contact me if you feel there is anything specifically that you think Wokingham Borough Council can contribute to your work and to supporting the reforms.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Kerr
Executive Member for Climate Change and Resident Services

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Appendix A – Technical Responses.