



Harthill with Woodall Parish Council



Village Hall
Winney Hill
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20th May 2025

For The Attention of
Environmental Advisor on behalf of the Secretary of State
The Planning Inspectorate
Environmental Services
Operations Group 3
Temple Quay House
2 The Square
Bristol,
BS1 6PN

Dear Redacted ,

Planning Inspectorate Reference - EN0110020

Planning Act 2008 (as amended) and The Infrastructure Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017 (The EIA Regulations) – Regulations 10 and 11
Application by Whitestone Net Zero Ltd (the applicant) for an Order granting Development Consent for the Whitestone Solar Farm (the proposed development)
Scoping consultation and notification of the applicant's contact details and duty to make available information to the applicant if requested

Harthill with Woodall Parish Council reviewed the information relating to the above application and scoping consultation and would like to make the following comments.

Request for reduction in the size of the application

Role of Parish Council's as a consultee

NSIPs are large-scale developments that are considered nationally important. Despite their scale, they **directly impact local communities**, often in rural or semi-rural areas where **parish councils** operate.

- Parish councils provide valuable local detail that might otherwise be overlooked in national-level decision-making.
- Their local knowledge can highlight issues that might not be evident to planning officials or developers.
- Their input helps ensure that localised environmental, social, and economic impacts are considered within a strategic national framework.
- Their unique strength lies in deep local knowledge—from flood risks and wildlife habitats to transport issues and cultural heritage. They represent the democratic voice of small communities, making them vital to well informed planning decisions.

Volume of Parishes in one application

Harthill with Woodall Parish Council is concerned about the scale of Whitestone Solar Farm Development.

Parish councils offer a critical grassroots perspective in planning, helping to protect local identity, environment, and community well-being. In the NSIPPS framework, their input is formally included but Council is concerned that the sheer volume of this project will diminish local input and the numerous parishes that this will impact will not have their individual knowledge heard.

Harthill with Woodall Parish Council would like to understand how it might seek the equivalent of rule 6 status in relation to any hearing.

Difficulties if navigating the NSIPPS Framework due to the size of Whitestone

Small parish councils operate with limited funds, part time clerks and volunteer councillors. In contrast, developers like Whitestone have a large legal and consultancy team preparing technical documentation. We are only at the start of the process and the documents that we were asked to review and comment on total over 450 pages, making it difficult for small councils to respond effectively.

Cost rather than community driven

The proposed development is too large in scale for this area, and its different parts are spread across several boroughs that have little or no geographical or community connection. These locations do not form a coherent or natural site and combining them into a single project seems more about convenience than reflecting the reality on the ground. Each area has its own distinct character, priorities, and local concerns, which risk being overlooked when treated as one large scheme. A development of this size and spread should be properly assessed in terms of its individual and cumulative impacts on the specific communities it affects.

Resources and Engagement

We are concerned that Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council may not have the capacity and resources necessary to effectively deal with a project of this size alongside daily workload.

We would also like to see a clear commitment from the scheme promoter – Whitestone Net Zero Limited – to work closely with all consultees, statutory bodies, and directly affected communities

ahead of the statutory consultation. Recent communication about the application amendments was shared in an online session with two fixed dates. An appeal for additional sessions was refused.

Conclusion

Harthill with Woodall Parish Council would respectfully ask the Planning Inspectorate to consider splitting this application into three separate applications, based on geography and local relevance. The current proposal spans a wide area and crosses multiple boroughs and parishes, each with its own local character, priorities, and planning context. Treating it as one large application makes it difficult for Parish Councils to fully understand and engage with the specific impacts relevant to their communities. Dividing the project into more manageable, clearly defined sections would allow for more meaningful consultation, better local scrutiny, and a fairer planning process for those most affected.

Council do not believe the areas are Geographically contiguous or logically connected, nor are they functionally interdependent, other than the fact that they feed into Brinsworth, they do not appear to rely on each other to operate. Council recently drove to meet Councillors from Conisbrough Park Parish Council and also met with representatives from the Save our Greenbelt Group. This was a 30-minute drive from Harthill. This hi-lights that parts of the proposed NSIP are located a considerable distance apart and adds to concerns about the lack of geographic cohesion in the application. From a local perspective, it feels less like a single, unified infrastructure project and more like a collection of separate developments being grouped under one umbrella. It is clear that our concerns about not being heard on such a vast development are shared by other Parishes, parishioners and community groups.

Scoping Document

Tourism

The scoping document appears to under-recognise the scale, nature, and economic value of tourism within the local and surrounding rural community. While tourism may not be characterised by large-scale attractions, it plays a vital and often dispersed role in sustaining local businesses, employment, and rural services. Visitors are drawn to the area for its landscape, tranquillity, heritage, and recreational opportunities—factors that are particularly sensitive to the type and scale of development proposed.

The document fails to account for rural and community-based tourism, including day visitors, walkers, cyclists, wildlife enthusiasts, and those seeking heritage or cultural experiences. These forms of tourism are often informal and dispersed, yet collectively they contribute significantly to the local economy and quality of life.

Harthill and Woodall have the benefit of beautiful ponds open to fishing, outdoor swimming and sailing amongst other water activities. Our walks are published on 6 maps and our play area and picnic benches are visited by families from surrounding areas. Harthill has its own bowling green and Leisure Centre, a wonderful Church and an active Village Hall. It is unusual for Parishes as small as Harthill with Woodall to be able to sustain a cluster of shops and two public houses. Tourism is part of the reason that this is possible.

The Environmental Impact Assessment should include a fuller and more accurate consideration of local tourism, reflecting how visitors use and value the rural landscape. Changes to character, access, or tranquillity can have a real impact on the area's appeal to tourists and, in turn, on the local economy.

Council would also suggest that any assessment should look at tourism in the broader context of Wales Ward when considering the proposed solar project. Our area boasts fantastic attractions such as Gulliver's Theme Park, Rother Valley Country Park, various cyclist groups, and the Waleswood Camping Site. Additionally, our rich Domesday history continues to draw visitors from across the country.

It's also important to note that Harthill with Woodall Parish Council and Wales Parish Council are both based within Wales Ward, further emphasizing the community's local governance and interest in preserving our area's character and appeal.

These elements are integral to the larger Rother Valley initiative within RMBC, which aims to promote tourism and celebrate our stunning rural landscape. RMBC has invested heavily in this initiative, recognizing its importance to the local economy and community.

However, there is concern that the scale of the proposed solar project could potentially undermine these efforts and impact the future of our area's tourism appeal.

Viewpoint

We note that the viewpoint map included in the scoping document appears to have been produced without a thorough understanding of the local landscape. It gives the impression of being desk-based, rather than informed by direct experience of the site and its surroundings. Given the rural nature of this area and the importance of visual impact in the assessment of this scheme, we would strongly encourage the developer to undertake more extensive on-site visits and field assessments. This would ensure that key viewpoints are properly identified, including those valued by the local community but not necessarily captured through desk-based mapping. A more comprehensive understanding of the site's topography, sightlines, and public vantage points is essential to produce a meaningful Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA).

Canal

Harthill and Woodall play a vital supporting role in the functioning of the Chesterfield Canal through Harthill Reservoir, which was constructed in the 1770s specifically to supply water to the canal. The reservoir collects and stores rainwater from the surrounding catchment area and releases it into the canal system as needed to maintain water levels, particularly during dry periods when navigation and ecological balance would otherwise be disrupted.

This historic linkage highlights the integrated relationship between Harthill's rural environment and wider regional infrastructure. The reservoir remains an operational and essential part of the canal's water management system today, making Harthill and Woodall important, if often overlooked, contributors to the ongoing viability of this heritage waterway.

With the potential run off of water from Solar Panels and associated infrastructure, Council would ask that the Canal & River Trust are added as a statutory consultee to Whitestone 3 if they have not been added already.

Safety

Council wishes to highlight the importance of ensuring that the scoping report thoroughly addresses the potential environmental impacts of fires associated with battery energy storage systems (BESS). In light of the growing number of fire incidents at similar facilities in recent months, it is vital that the report includes a detailed assessment of fire risks and their potential consequences for air quality, local ecosystems, and public health. In view of the increase in occurrence, this should include a review of current safety standards and a consideration of whether more rigorous safety testing and certification processes are warranted. The Environmental Impact Assessment should also address fire prevention strategies, containment systems, and emergency response measures to ensure that risks are minimised and appropriately managed.

Lack of information

At this stage, we note that the precise location of key elements of the proposed infrastructure—such as the battery storage facility—has not yet been confirmed. Without this critical locational information, it is difficult to provide fully informed comments on the proposed scoping document. The absence of defined infrastructure locations limits our ability to assess potential environmental impacts, and the relevance or adequacy of the topics proposed for assessment.

Cumulative Disruption

The Parish has experienced significant cumulative disruption in recent years due to a number of major infrastructure and development projects, including the windfarm, NPG power cable installations, fracking proposals, Canal & River Trust spillway construction, water pipe replacement works, and ongoing new housing developments. Given this context, we are particularly concerned about the potential for further impacts on our community, and we would expect these cumulative effects to be recognised and addressed in the environmental assessment.

Cumulative impact of other local developments

Harthill with Woodall Parish Council is also concerned about the cumulative impact that the Whitestone Solar Farm, together with a number of other nearby developments, may have on our local area and Rotherham as a whole.

While each project on its own may seem manageable when assessed, we are now seeing a growing number of solar farms, battery storage facilities, and related infrastructure being proposed or approved in the area — all of which could have a much greater combined effect on our landscape, local environment, and communities than is currently being acknowledged.

We strongly believe that the Environmental Statement for this application must take full account of these other schemes, even if they are smaller or not considered nationally significant. Many of them are very close to Whitestone and affect the same roads, fields, views, wildlife habitats, and people.

We would like to see a proper cumulative assessment that includes:

- A full list of all other similar developments in the area, including those that are already built, approved, or in the planning system;
- A careful look at how these projects together could change the rural character of our landscape;
- Consideration of the combined impacts on local wildlife, especially where multiple sites might affect the same species or habitats;
- Attention to construction disruption, especially if several schemes go ahead around the same time and bring increased traffic, noise, or disturbance to nearby villages;
- Any potential pressure on local roads, rights of way, or community infrastructure from multiple developments happening close together.

We feel it is essential that these smaller projects are not overlooked simply because they are not classed as NSIPs. Our community experiences the effects of all of them, and the cumulative burden needs to be properly understood and addressed.

Mental Health

Harthill with Woodall Parish Council also wishes to raise the issue of potential impacts on mental health and wellbeing arising from changes to the visual environment. While the areas affected may not constitute formally accessible green space, the open rural landscape and natural views contribute significantly to the sense of place and quality of life for local residents. The introduction of large-scale infrastructure—such as solar panels, battery storage units and associated developments—could lead to a substantial change in the character of the landscape. This visual intrusion may have a detrimental effect on mental wellbeing, particularly for those who value the current rural outlook as part of their daily living environment. Public Health England's 2020 review, *Improving Access to Greenspace*, highlights that greener environments are associated with better mental health outcomes, including reduced levels of depression, anxiety, and fatigue, and enhanced quality of life for both children and adults. We believe this aspect warrants fuller consideration within the Environmental Impact Assessment.

Timescales

Looking ahead to the forthcoming stages of the process, we respectfully ask that consideration is given to the timeframes provided for Parish Councils to review and comment on future documentation. Unlike principal authorities, Parish Councils do not receive funding or technical support from the developer and we would hope to be given access to the reports instructed by RMBC when they become available. To ensure that local knowledge and community perspectives are properly reflected, we would welcome sufficient time being built into future consultation periods to allow Parish Councils to access, understand, and respond to the documents. The sheer size of the area that these reports will cover could result in vital local information being omitted.

Summary

Overall, based on information provided to date, Harthill with Woodall Parish Council is concerned that this development will destroy the character of our small parish and remove valued areas of greenbelt land. Council therefore wants to be able to fully engage in the consideration of this application.

In conclusion, Harthill with Woodall Parish Council respectfully asks that the Planning Inspectorate to give full and proper consideration to the points raised in this letter. While we understand the national importance of infrastructure projects of this scale, the current approach of combining multiple geographically dispersed sites into a single application risks overlooking localised impacts, community identities, and specific planning contexts. It also compounds the resource issues that Parish Council's face when reviewing relevant documents. We therefore strongly urge that this project be broken down into three separate applications to ensure more effective consultation, clearer scrutiny, and a fairer planning process for each affected community.

Council believes that this approach would align more closely with the principles set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), particularly around early and meaningful engagement, recognising distinct local character, addressing cumulative impacts, and promoting health and wellbeing. We believe a more locally responsive, transparent, and phased process is essential to ensure that small communities like ours are fully heard and represented in decisions that will affect our environment and way of life for many years to come.

Yours Sincerely,

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Clerk – Harthill with Woodall Parish Council
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