

Design Review Report

Prosiect Maen Hir Solar Energy and Storage,
Ynys Môn Isle of Anglesey

DCFW Ref: 323

Meeting of 17th April 2024



Review Status

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CONFIDENTIAL

17th April 2024
1st May 2024
Renewable Energy Infrastructure
Ynys Môn Isle of Anglesey
N323
Pre-planning/PINS DCO Submission

Key Points

- This is a project of considerable scale and there is a more compelling narrative to be uncovered and communicated as part of the project development and its place in the context of the long term.
- There is a need to understand the relationship between the developing design principles and policy, in particular that set out with the relevant NPS, applicable to the DCO process alongside the Welsh policy context.
- We consider that some of the design principles are likely to need to be generic and others specific and their evolution and application should address this.
- We would like to see how the design principles are applied to different landscapes and contexts (see related point above), and their effectiveness tested in relation to achieving the stated vision and objectives. Evidence of a landscape led design response should be drawn upon.
- Further explanation is needed as to how the competing demands of technical requirements and standards, versus balance with the design principles will be managed. This management of the balance also applies to the ecological ambitions and farming practice.

Consultations to Date

This is the first Design Review with the Design Commission for Wales as part of the project team consultation. A series of review meetings is anticipated.

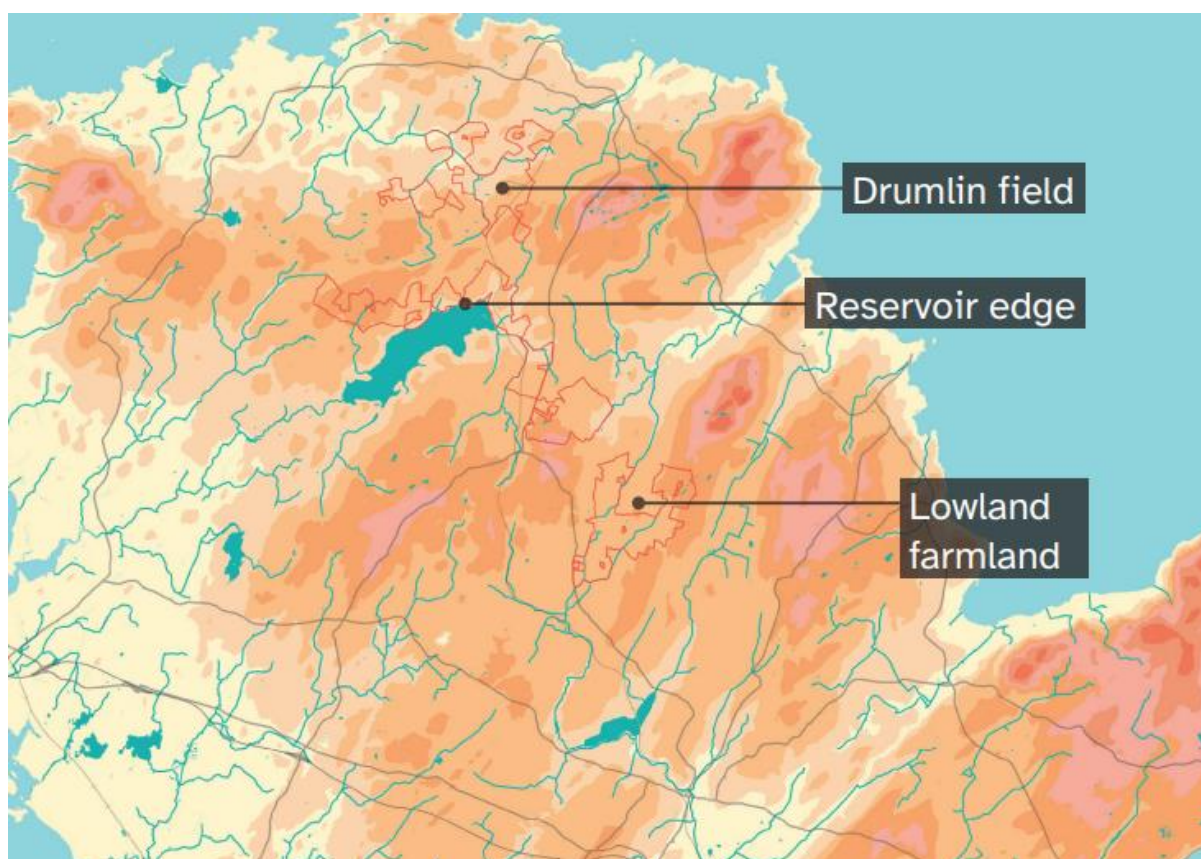
The Proposal

The Prosiect Maen Hir Solar Energy and Storage proposal is categorised as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) requiring a Development Consent Order (DCO) via the Infrastructure Planning Inspectorate. The Site is proposed for a solar generating station with a capacity of over 350MW, with energy storage.

Key elements include:

- Solar PV Arrays
- Project Substation
- Battery Energy Storage System (BESS)
- Accesses
- Temporary construction compounds
- Enhancement and mitigation
- Community Solar PV Array (~5MW)

The project is intended to form a key part of the Isle of Anglesey Council's (IoACC) Energy Island Programme, which seeks to put the Island at the forefront of low carbon energy research, development, production and servicing, with the intention of bringing economic, community and environmental benefits.



Map showing the site and context

Context

The site is located in the north of the Island, comprising approximately 1,234 hectares (ha) of land, in four main land parcels. The northern parcel includes the former Shell site at Rhosgoch. The two central parcels border Llyn Alaw and Llandyfrydog, and the southern parcel lies to the north of Llangefni, all within the administrative boundary of the Isle of

Anglesey County Council. The site and surrounding area contain a variety of landscape types covering four character areas: Amlwch and Environs, North West Anglesey, Dulas Bay Hinterland, and West Central Anglesey. The design team state that *'the habitats in some measure support landscape character and are typically characterised by improved grassland, grazed by cattle and sheep, with some small areas of arable. Field boundaries include hedges, dry stone walls and cloddiau. Semi-natural vegetation includes semi-improved grasslands, marshy ground (including fen habitat), neutral and acid grasslands. Large woodland blocks and forestry plantations are not characteristic, and tree cover tends to be restricted to copses and shelterbelts, linear woodlands defining field boundaries, and associated with wetlands/streams. Many woodland copses are isolated in agricultural land, and around farms. Notable areas of regenerating woodland/scrub are associated with the former Shell site and along the former railway.'*

Main Points

The Design Commission welcomes the opportunity for early engagement with these proposals and this first meeting was helpful in setting out the stage at which the client and design team are now at in the Development Consent Order (DCO) application process. The project is one of scale and, whilst not without its challenges, represents a considerable opportunity to contribute to renewable energy generation, to Ynys Môn's ambitious concept for the 'energy island' and to capture long term community benefits, not least a positive landscape legacy.

For future reference we encourage even earlier consultation, especially early dialogue on site selection and consideration of alternatives, which are design activities where value can be added. In this case where the technological aspects are relatively flexible, albeit around an appropriate economic connection distance to a proposed National Grid Supply or connection point – there may be the opportunity to better link selection of parts or whole land holdings to key strategic objectives, rather than running the risk the latter are used post-site selection to rationalise site layout and design. Early engagement involving National Grid could still be useful regarding technology, location and design.

Design Principles

Currently the majority of the emerging design principles are generic and there is a need to test which may be appropriately generic, applicable across the piece, and where developing more specific principles will be required. This is a key task for the current and subsequent design development stage.

There is also a need, for design development and for stakeholder consultation, to explore (draw and design) what the practical application of these principles will do and look like in real locations selected from each of the identified landscape types.

We would expect the design principles to be integral to the design and project objectives, which in turn should reflect national policy. The design objectives should also respond to early forms of engagement with key project and technical stakeholders. It should be possible to establish from the outset what such stakeholders consider are the strategic landscape, visual and ecological objectives for this part of Ynys Môn. For example, to restore or conserve habitats or key views, or to encourage recreational access or most importantly, whether to accept or promote landscape change, or to actively work to avoid it. These objectives may not be common across the whole study area. From careful consideration of these, specific design principles should and could then be prioritised and more definitively developed.

Design Development

The timeline set out in the presentation was helpful but would benefit from refinement so as to be clear about each stage of the project – what tasks are completed and what are not.

The commitment to responding to the Welsh policy context is noted in terms of the Well-being of Future Generations Act; Welsh planning policy and guidance as well as priorities for Net Benefit for Biodiversity and the Welsh Government approach to solar arrays in the context of agricultural land - <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-08/best-and-most-versatile-agricultural-land-and-solar-pv-arrays.pdf>. However this suggests the next stage of work will need to define and describe how the approach will be manifest in practice.

At this stage considerable amounts of information are being gathered as required by the consenting process and for understanding the capacity of the available land. However the team will now need to move much further into more refined design thinking and testing, drawing on the information gathered, so as to refine priorities and proposals for energy generation, connections and storage, and the finer design response appropriate to the issues of landscape character and sensitivity, topography, visibility and repair that will enable a positive legacy. This design work is essential for the next step, for defining potential for long term benefits and for capturing the landscape and biodiversity renewal ambitions expressed.

There is a need for a boldness of design approach at this scale to avoid the dangers of focus on minutiae and we encourage the team to pursue this given the scale of the project and the land management that will be necessary, now and in the future. Testing of future scenarios will be a useful exercise as part of this design development work as a whole.

Welsh Government guidance directs that the design of solar farms is fundamentally a landscape design problem. The reading and interpretation of the landscape setting should therefore inform every stage in the design process including brief development, establishing design principles, option formulation and evaluation and the final design. Design principles must be tested against design proposals to establish their relevance and effect.

In assessing the landscape setting the urgent need to address environmental degradation, and the damaging impact of many current agricultural land management practices on wildlife and water courses should be fully analysed. Establishing how solar farms could form part of a solution to these pressing problems could provide a compelling part of the advocacy for such major changes to the Welsh landscape.

Stakeholders and strategic coordination

Key stakeholders will be important to this project if the ambition for wider long term benefit is to be met. Local authorities, land owners, businesses and community stakeholders will all need to be fully engaged to help inform and shape the proposals at the earliest opportunity. We understand preliminary work is in progress in this area and look forward to understanding more about how this is being done.

Next Steps

The Design Commission would welcome further engagement and recommends a series of at review meetings ideally two more – one of which would be useful in early June and another later in the summer. In preparation the Design Commission advises that the team prepares with a focus on the key points raised at the outset of this report, in particular the approach to the design principles and how they will be used and resolving the creative tensions of a Welsh policy context in an English consenting process.

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A Welsh language copy of this report is available upon request.

Attendees

Client:	Katy McGuinness, Lightsource BP
Design Team:	Alister Kratt, LDA, Peta Donkin, LDA Kris Hindaugh, LDA, Lewis Turner LDA
Planning Inspectorate:	Hefin Jones – PINS Jake Stephens – PINS
Observing:	Owain Llewellyn, Student Vicky Robinson, PEDW Chris Sweet, PEDW Robert Sparey, PEDW

DCFW Design Review Panel

Chair:	Ewan Jones
Panel:	Simon Power - Lead Panellist Andrew Linfoot Simon Richards Steven Smith Carole-Anne Davies, Chief Executive, DCFW Jen Heal, Deputy Chief Executive, DCFW Max Hampton, Design Advisor, DCFW

Declarations of Interest

Panel members, observers and other relevant parties are required to declare ***in advance*** any interests they may have in relation to the Design Review and meeting Agenda items. Any such declarations are recorded here and in DCFW's central records.

Ewan Jones is co-chair of the DCFW Design Panel and has worked with LDA, in his capacity as Partner at Grimshaw, on several projects however there is no current professional relationship that has a bearing on this proposal.

Andrew Linfoot noted that Jacobs have worked with members of this team but that to the best of his knowledge there are no current relationship that have a bearing on this proposal.

Alistair Kratt of LDA is a member of the DCFW Design Review Panel but was representing LDA at this meeting.