### Purpose of the project

The project requirements were to design and seek permission under the TCPA 1990 and the EIA Regs 2011 for a utility-scale solar farm to be owned and operated by a community energy enterprise. The scheme would sit next to an already consented and operational, privately developed solar farm, Berwick Solar Farm; indeed the original Berwick site included the Cuckmere site, but was removed from the larger scheme due to Heritage issues, which were subsequently resolved after the Berwick scheme was approved. Due to the necessity to submit a separate application for Cuckmere following some delays, cumulative issues and effects to South Down National Park were core EIA issues.

### Key Issues

- The principal EIA issue was an objection to the proposal by the National Park Authority on the basis of unacceptable cumulative visual effects to the essential qualities of the Park.
- The Park Authority had previously agreed to the Cuckmere site as part of the larger Berwick scheme; their refusal in opinion arose on account of the interim build-out of several other solar farms, including Berwick, along the northern margins of the Park which were delivered whilst the Cuckmere site was undergoing design and EIA.
- Despite previous consultations with the Park Authority, which indicated their support, a holding objection was lodged in the post submission phase of the application, pending submission of SEI on cumulative effects and inclusive of the necessity for cumulative photomontages. The Park Authority subsequently objected.
- Materiality of positive biodiversity benefits needs to be highlighted to and acknowledged by the planning authority as often they can go unregarded.

### Description of the project

Community solar farm scheme with an installed capacity of 3.5MW, located in southern England on the northern margins of South Downs National Park. The scheme would connect to the local electricity distribution network and export approx. 4 Gigawatt Hours annually.

Scheme requirements included 13,000 panels on multiple solar tables, no. 3 inverters, no. 1 on-site substation, access track from main highway, construction / laydown area, and underground cabling. Scheme approved in February 2017.
Lessons learnt
The learning points arising from this project included:

- Biodiversity enhancement measures often have a double benefit resulting in added value to the environment whilst also presenting measures to mitigate visual impact. For Cuckmere, new and improved hedgerow stocking along critical boundaries (into which visual and Heritage receptors would have potentially harmful views of the development) successfully resolved the concerns of Historic England on ‘setting’ impacts to a SAM and the planning authority was satisfied that planting would effectively screen the scheme from critical National Park viewpoints.

- The inclination on habitat screening proposals is to seek fast growing species that would have quicker visual screening effects. On this project, although slower growing, species of local providence were preferred as they augmented the landscape character elements and accorded to species encouraged under biodiversity action plans. Accordingly, the proposed species had ‘planning merit’, thus improving the overall benefits of the scheme.

Lessons learnt cont. -

- An objection from a major consultee, particularly a National Park, can be concerning. It is useful therefore to spend some time picking apart the basis of the objection to understand if it is reasoned and with merit. Often EIA coordinators, following extensive engagement on a specific scheme, will be better able to judge whether the grounds for objection are reasonable, and, if not, how best to challenge them with the determining authority. On this occasion, we were able to demonstrate that the Park Authority were acting irrationally as they failed to grasp the fundamentals of reductions in visibility over distance and the effectiveness of the screening proposals.

- Ensure the determining authority accepts the material benefits of habitats proposals not just for visual screening and impact mitigation, but for their contribution to biodiversity and landscape character.

Contact details
Mr Michael Phillips
Principal Consultant,
Dulas Ltd, Unit 1, Dyfi Eco Park,
Machynlleth, Powys, SY20 8AX.
01654 705000
michael.phillips@dulas.org.uk

For access to more EIA case studies and hundreds of non-technical summaries of Environmental Statements visit:
www.iema.net/qmark