9 AGRICULTURAL LAND

9.1 Introduction

9.1.1 This Chapter considers the potential effects of the Proposed Development on the agricultural land use of the site. In particular the Chapter considers the agricultural land quality of the site and the extent to which the Proposed Development will result in the temporary loss of "Best and Most Versatile" agricultural land for the operational lifetime of the Proposed Development.

9.1.2 The Chapter has been prepared by Pegasus Group informed by an Agricultural Land Classification Report prepared by Soil Environment Services Limited, which is included at **Appendix 9.1**.

9.2 Assessment Approach

9.2.1 The key receptor considered in respect of agricultural land is agricultural land quality and the potential effects on the land quality as a resource. Land of Grades 1, 2 and 3a of the Agricultural Land Classification (MAFF, 1988) are defined as "Best and Most Versatile" in the NPPF (September 2023).

Methodology for Assessment of Significance

9.2.2 The assessment of significance is assessed using the methodology set out in the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment (IEMA) Guide "A New Perspective on Land and Soil in Environmental Impact Assessment" (February 2022). This Guide, whilst not compulsory for an ES, sets out a suggested methodology for EIA. The significance of effects is assessed based on a combination of the sensitivity of the resource; the magnitude of the effect; and therefore the significance of the effect.

9.2.3 The impact magnitude in the IEMA Guide (Table 3) is based on the "permanent, irreversible loss of one or more soil functions or soil volumes (including the permanent sealing or land quality downgrading)". A footnote to Table 3 in the IEMA Guide also states "temporary developments can result in a permanent impact if resulting disturbance or land use change causes permanent damage to soils." It is the physical disturbance or damage that might cause the effect. The assessment therefore considers whether there is permanent sealing or downgrading of agricultural land as a result of the proposals.

9.2.4 Under the IEMA Guide the methodology considers the permanent sealing of land or ALC downgrading of more than 20 hectares to be a major adverse magnitude of impact. It considers losses of 5 – 20 ha to be a moderate adverse magnitude and losses of less than 5 ha to be minor adverse magnitude.

9.2.5 The IEMA methodology considers land of ALC Grades 1 and 2 to be of very high sensitivity, and land of Subgrade 3a to be of high sensitivity.

9.2.6 The IEMA methodology does not define the threshold of effects which should be considered significant. For the purpose of this assessment therefore significant effects are considered to apply to for any loss of Grades 1 and 2 land over 5 hectares and any loss of Subgrade 3a over 20 hectares.

9.3 Baseline Conditions

9.3.1 Agricultural land quality is assessed by use of the system of Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) devised by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF). This is a methodology, last revised in 1988, that classifies land according to the extent to which its inherent physical or chemical characteristics impose long-term limitations on agricultural use.

9.3.2 The ALC system divides land into five grades 1 to 5, with grade 3 divided into subgrades of 3a and 3b. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (2023) places Grades 1, 2 and 3a within the definition of the 'best and most versatile agricultural land' (BMV). Natural England in their Technical Information Note TIN 049 (2012) estimates that 42% of agricultural land in England is within the BMV category.

9.3.3 An ALC survey of the site was undertaken by Soil Environment Services Limited in October 2022, with further details set out in Appendix 9.1. It should be noted that the site boundary at the time of the ALC was undertaken was larger than that now proposed. It should also be noted that the area where it is understood that the grid connection works are likely to take place was not surveyed as, the works in this area would only be for a very limited temporary period, with agricultural used restored promptly thereafter.

9.3.4 The ALC survey identified the presence of Grade 2, 3a and 3b land across the earlier site boundary. This information was used to help inform the current planning application site boundary of approximately 57ha, which is made up of approximately 1 hectare of Grade 2, 1 hectare of Grade 3a and the remaining 55 hectares of Grade 3b. This is shown on **Figure 9.1**.

9.4 Assessment of Likely Significant Effects

9.4.1 The potential for adverse effects on agricultural land (both on soils and land quality) is greatest during the construction phase. The trafficking of agricultural land by construction vehicles and machinery, the timing of work on soils and the timing and methodology of cable laying will therefore be required to be carried out in accordance with industry good practice and methodologies tailored specifically for the soils within the site. It is unlikely that soil quality or agricultural land quality will be adversely affected, however, even if the land is trafficked when conditions are not ideal.

9.4.2 It is generally accepted that the installation and operation of solar panels does not adversely affect the ALC grading. Consequently, only those areas of land proposed for the fixed ancillary equipment should be treated as lost for the duration of the Proposed Development. The footprint of these ancillary elements would only cover a very small proportion of the site, including the Grade 2 and 3a land.

9.4.3 The area of Grade 2 land within the site to be impacted would be far less than the 5 hectares significance threshold and the impact on Grade 2 land is therefore not considered to be significant. Similarly, the area of Grade 3a land to be impacted within the site would be far less than the 20 hectares significance threshold and the impact on Grade 2 land is therefore also not considered to be significant.

9.5 Mitigation, Enhancement and Residual Effects

9.5.1 Throughout the iterative design process consideration has been given to utilising low-grade land before BMV land. This lead to the removal of a large area of Grade 2 land to

the south-east of the current site boundary. Also, the removal of an area of land to the north of the site due to its potential archaeological value, was also advantageous in that it removed an area of Grade 2a agricultural land. This mitigation prevented any loss of Grade 2 or 3a land that might otherwise have resulted in significant impacts.

9.6 Summary

9.6.1 This Chapter considers the potential effects of the Proposed Development on the agricultural land use of the site. In particular the Chapter considers the agricultural land quality of the site and the extent to which the Proposed Development will result in the temporary loss of "Best and Most Versatile" agricultural land for the operational lifetime of the Proposed Development.

9.6.2 An ALC survey of the site was undertaken by Soil Environment Services Limited in October 2022. The ALC survey identified the presence of Grade 2, 3a and 3b land across the earlier site boundary. This information was used to help inform the current planning application site boundary of approximately 57ha, which is made up of approximately 1 hectare of Grade 2, 1 hectare of Grade 3a and the remaining 55 hectares of Grade 3b. This mitigation prevented any loss of Grade 2 or 3a land that might otherwise have resulted in significant impacts.