

Blandford Hill Eco Hub

Statement of Community Involvement

May 2021



Prepared by Cratus Communications on behalf of Naturalis Energy Developments Limited

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Executive Summary

Naturalis Energy Developments Limited (“Naturalis”), a joint venture between renewable energy companies REG Power Management and Falck Renewables, has undertaken a programme of public consultation to outline and shape their plans for the Blandford Hill Eco Hub near the village of Winterborne Whitechurch, Dorset. The project is situated along the A354 (Blandford Hill) and comprises a c. 15 MWp solar farm, a c. 3MW battery storage facility, rapid and ultrarapid charging infrastructure for up to 19 electric vehicles, public rest facilities including public conveniences, a small café, shop and seating area within a single storey building located to the west of a covered walkway and canopy.

Pre-application public consultation activity for the proposals has included:

- distribution of 1,533 leaflets to households around the proposed development site, to make residents aware of the proposals, to invite them to the online consultation event and to provide them with a hard-copy response form;
- provision of Freephone number 0800 25 45 185, dedicated project email address BlandfordHillEcoHub@pegasusgroup.co.uk and Freepost address *Freepost Middlemarch Consultation* to enable various two-way communication channels for the public so they could provide feedback free of charge, either digitally or through traditional means;
- provision of a project website, www.blandfordhillecohub.co.uk, outlining the proposals and providing contact details, an online feedback form as well as the opportunity to view the recorded online consultation event;
- issuing of a press release to local newspapers announcing the proposal and the online consultation event;
- hosting a public consultation event, held online due to Covid-19 restrictions;
- a virtual presentation and Q&A session with Winterborne Whitechurch Parish Council; and
- following up letters and emails to questions and comments received throughout the public consultation process.

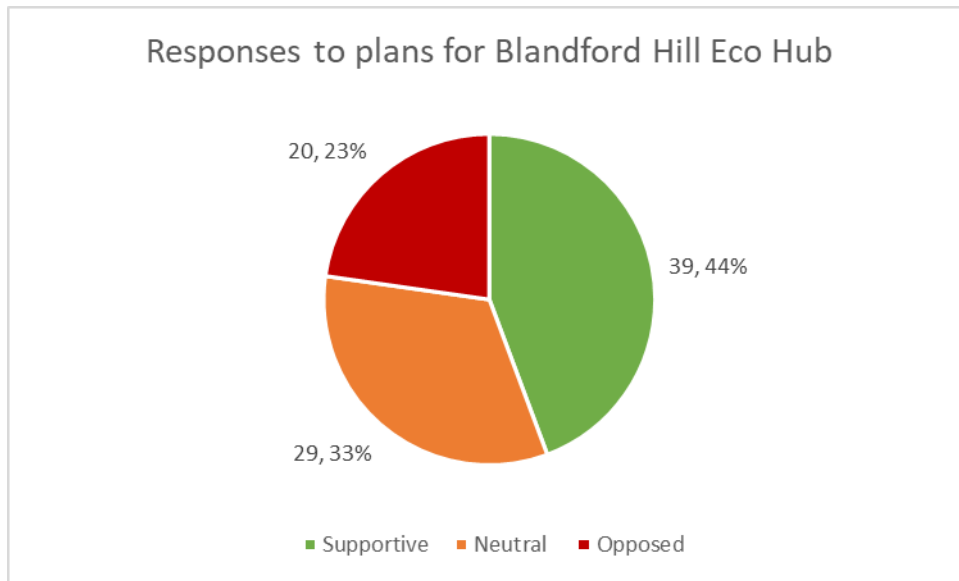
Local residents and their elected representatives were invited to attend the online public consultation event on Thursday 4th March 2021 from 5.30 until 7.00pm. Due to ongoing Covid-19 restrictions on social gatherings, the event was hosted as a webinar where members of the project team presented the various relevant aspects of the proposal and were on hand to answer questions. The proposal was set out during the online consultation event using a power point presentation which the project team

presented to for just over half an hour. This was followed by approximately an hour's question and answer session, with the project team providing information in response to feedback from members of the public. Questions were collated in a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document and made available on the project website as well as in hard copy, on request, for those not online.

A recording of the online consultation event has been uploaded onto the project website where it is available to watch, in particular for those local residents and representatives who were unable to attend the live event on the day. The various feedback channels, both traditional and digital, remain in place to provide members of the public with the opportunity to comment and ask questions throughout the planning process.

At the time of writing (30 April 2021), 66 individual responses have been received through the Freepost address, the website, the project email address and the Freephone number. The online event attracted 42 attendees, of whom 22 identifiable individuals provided comments and questions, resulting in an overall total of 88 individual responses.

33% of those (29 responses) have been classified as neutral in nature, 23% (20) raise concerns / are opposed to the plans and 44% (39) express supportive comments.



The main issues raised focus on the proposed location for the Blandford Hill Eco Hub, i.e. whether it would be better positioned on brownfield land, in the nearby towns of Blandford or Dorchester, or next to one of the existing solar farms in the vicinity; the perceived impact on local road traffic and landscape/loss of greenspace/impact on the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The project team have responded to these and a large number of other questions. Supporters mentioned aspects such as cleaner driving, taking a step towards the future and opportunities for trade and employment.

A number of respondents have made constructive suggestions for the project, such as using natural materials to give the project a more rural look; offering alternatives to mobile phone payment for battery charging due to the fact that reception can be patchy; and community benefit ideas such as a speed camera in Winterborne Whitechurch, solar modules fitted to the roof of nearby Dunbury Church of England Academy and free EV charging for local residents.

The project team has considered the comments received and is working to ascertain where and how comments can be taken on board. Throughout the planning process the team will continue to answer questions and feedback from the local community.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Community consultation is at the heart of Naturalis' approach to project development, not only in the pre-application stage, but for the duration of the project. This document outlines the consultation that has been undertaken prior to the submission of the planning application, the feedback received and forthcoming consultation activities.
- 1.2 Naturalis' public consultation programme was informed by the Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) of Dorset Council, which embraces public engagement. The Council's SCI (2020) encourages applicants to carry out pre-application discussions. It states: "*Anyone seeking planning permission is encouraged to talk to those likely to be affected by the proposal and consider their views before submitting an application.*" Naturalis has looked to carry out their consultation programme in line with this principle whilst also adhering to Covid-19 restrictions.

2 Consultation activities

Project website

- 2.1 In order to utilise the opportunity to establish an ongoing presence for the development online, a dedicated project website was prepared: www.blandfordhillecohub.co.uk and launched on 29th January 2021. The website provides an overview of the proposals, a News and Downloads section, and details on how visitors to the page can engage with the consultation. The recording of the digital consultation event can be viewed on the home page and the website provides Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and an online feedback form.
- 2.2 The website was advertised on the leaflets that were distributed in the local area and in the press release that was issued to local media prior to the consultation event. The website content can be viewed in appendix 1.

Freephone, project email and Freepost

- 2.3 To ensure that stakeholders can easily get in touch with Naturalis' project team about any matters relating to the proposed development, a number of free-of-charge communication channels have been provided (in addition to the project website); Freephone number 0800 25 45 185, dedicated email address blandfordhillecohub@pegasusgroup.co.uk and Freepost address FREEPOST MIDDLEMARCH CONSULTATION.
- 2.4 These communication channels were advertised through the consultation leaflet, the website and the press release that was issued to local media.

Consultation leaflet

- 2.5 The leaflet for the proposed revised development is a double-sided A3 size full colour document that is designed to inform local residents about the proposals and to invite them to the (then) upcoming online public consultation event. It provides a site map in order for residents to understand which parcel of land is referred to, as well as contact details should they wish to get in touch and a feedback form to respond to the consultation using the regular postal system.
- 2.6 The leaflet was circulated around the proposed development site, to all 1,533 addresses that are present in a 5km radius around the site. The leaflet can be viewed in appendix 2.

Press release and social media promotion

- 2.7 A press release about the proposals and the consultation event was issued to local and regional media The Dorset Echo, Bournemouth Echo, Daily Echo, Dorset Online, Blackmore Vale Magazine, New Milton & Lymington Advertiser & Times and The News on 19 February 2021. The press release can be viewed in appendix 3.
- 2.8 The project website and consultation event were further publicised by local, Blandford Forum-based community newspaper Forum Focus that uploaded a link to the project website onto their social media platform (<https://www.facebook.com/page/106903857647554/search?q=eco%20hub>) which is followed by 596 residents.

Online public consultation event

- 2.9 The primary aims of the online consultation event were to provide information about the proposed development, to receive feedback that could inform the development of the proposals and to allow members of the public to ask the project team questions and comment on the draft proposals.
- 2.10 Due to Covid19 restrictions on social gatherings it was felt appropriate to hold the community consultation event online, minimising any health risk to members of the public. The online event was hosted live via online webinar platform Zoom on Thursday 4th March from 5.30pm until 7pm. In order to allow as many attendees as possible, the link to the webinar was made directly accessible to members of the public by providing a 'Join Here' button on the home page of the project website, connecting to the online event.
- 2.11 The webinar consisted of a presentation by the project team, setting out the key aspects of the proposals, which took about half an hour, followed by a question and answer session of approximately one hour. The presentation covered a variety of topics, including the need for EV charging infrastructure, the site and its opportunities and constraints, the planning context, how the eco hub would function and what benefits would be associated with the project. Naturalis and their consultants were on hand to discuss the draft proposals and answer any questions. The presentation slides are shown in appendix 4.

- 2.12 To make the content of the online consultation accessible for residents who were not able to attend the live event, a recording has been uploaded onto the dedicated project website along with an easily downloadable version of the presentation slides. It can be viewed on www.blandfordhillecohub.co.uk. For the purpose of this report a number of stills have been taken which can be viewed in appendix 5.
- 2.13 A Frequently Asked Questions document has been put together, providing answers to questions asked and issues raised, which is available online as well as available in hard copy (on request) for those who are not online but wish to engage in the consultation exercise. The FAQ document is available in appendix 6.

3. Summary of consultation feedback

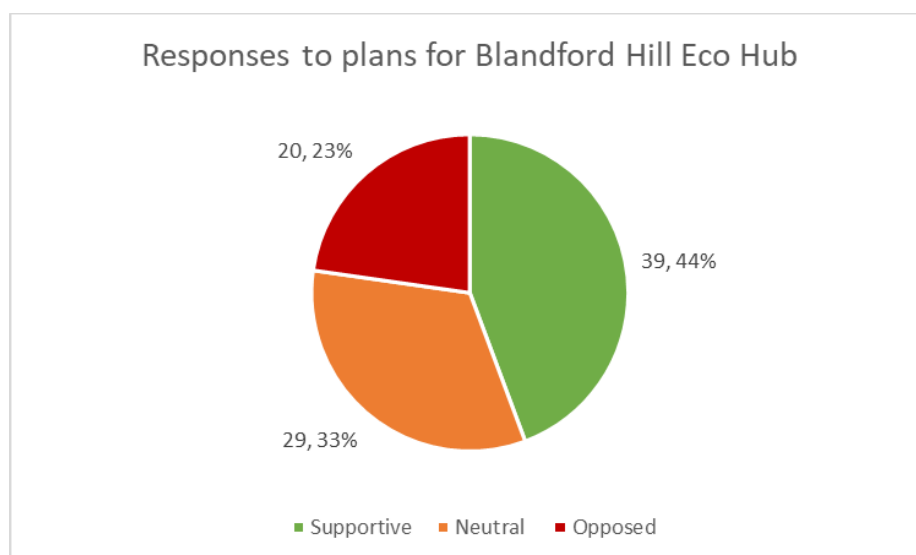
Overall responses

- 3.1 At the time of writing this report (30 April 2021), a total of 88 individual responses have been received through the various feedback channels. 22 of those are individual responses provided during the online consultation event, 41 are hard copy response forms sent to the Freepost address, 10 of which are project website feedback forms, 8 are emails and there were 7 calls to the Freephone number. Copies of the submitted feedback forms - hard copy as well as online - emails and consultation event feedback can be found in appendix 7. Personal identification details have been removed in accordance with GDPR guidance.
- 3.2 Feedback received from the consultation included comments that were made in relation to perceived issues and concerns about the proposed development, as well as neutral statements and questions and supportive remarks.
- 3.3 Feedback has been categorised into three categories - supportive, neutral and opposed – based on the comments included in the response. Duplicate responses (individuals who have responded more than once) have been counted as one, to avoid skewing totals one way or the other. Apart from where the respondent has clearly indicated their stance one way or the other we have sought to interpret fairly the view that is being expressed.
- 3.4 Overall feedback for Naturalis’ Blandford Hill Eco Hub proposal can be summarised as follows:

Table 1: Overall summary of feedback received

	Leaflet	Online Feedback Form	Event	Email	Freephone	Total	%
Supportive	25	5	1	3	5	39	44%
Neutral	1	4	20	3	1	29	33%
Opposed	15	1	1	2	1	20	23%
Total	41	10	22	8	7	88	100%

Figure 1: Overall summary of feedback received



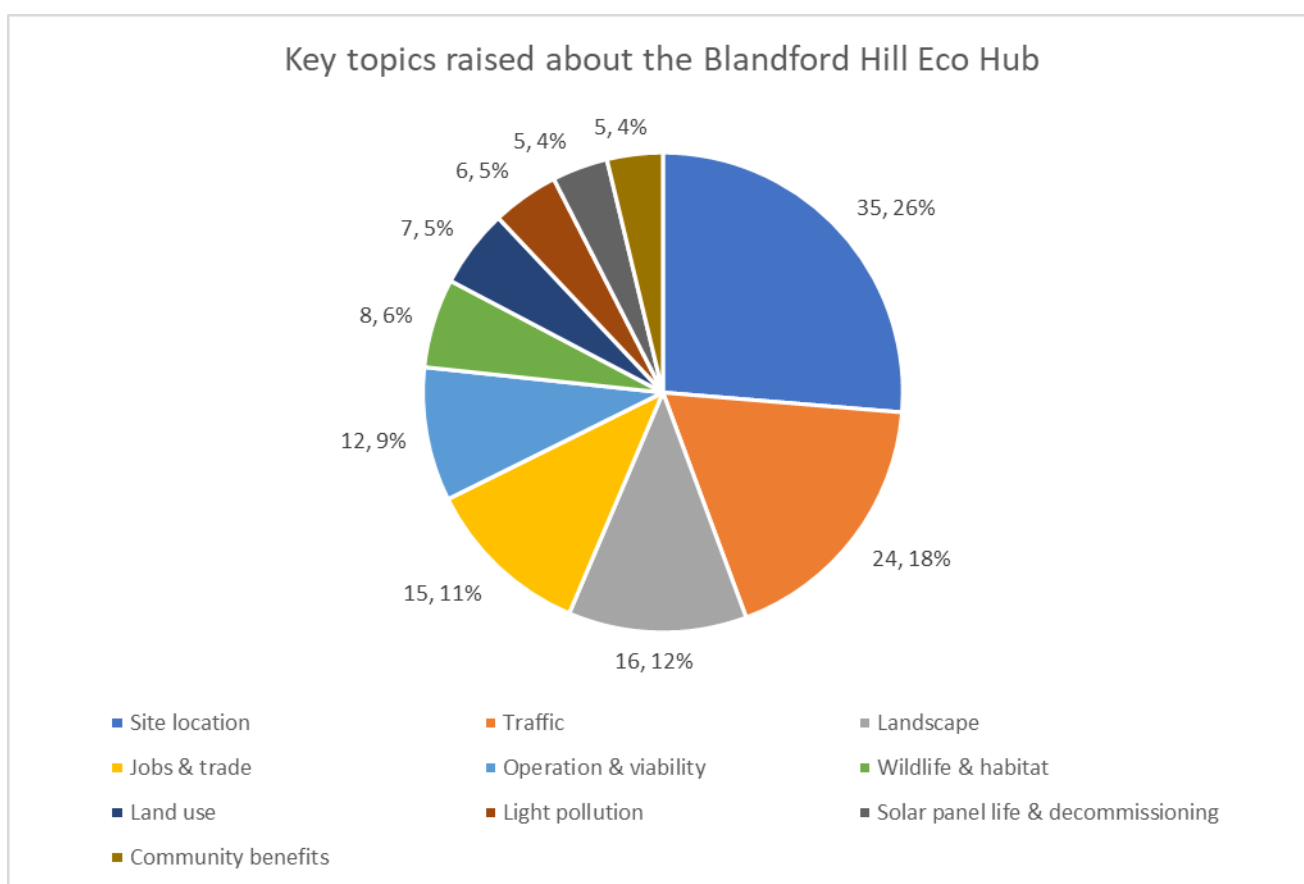
3.5 There were clear trends in the feedback received from the consultation exercise. Comments on the same key topics have been clustered into categories. They are presented in the below table and figure, in order of frequency of reference by individual respondents. Further questions and comments that were made fewer than 5 times have not been categorised as frequent. Appendix 7 contains the full overview of responses received, all have been anonymised in accordance with GDPR guidance.

Table 2: Frequent questions and comments about the proposals

	Topic	Number of responses	%
1	Questions and comments about the proposed location of the eco hub	35	26%
2	Questions and comments about traffic, access and road safety issues	24	18%
3	Questions and comments about landscape, loss of greenspace and potential impact on the AONB	16	12%
4	Questions and comments about opportunities for employment and trade in the rural economy	15	11%
5	Questions and comments about how the eco hub would operate and project viability	12	9%
6	Questions and comments about potential impact on wildlife and habitats	8	6%
7	Questions and comments about the use of agricultural land for the eco hub	7	5%
8	Questions and comments about potential light pollution	6	5%

9	Questions and comments about the life of solar panels and the decommissioning of the site	5	4%
10	Questions and comments about community benefits associated with the eco hub development	5	4%
Total		133	100%

Figure 2: Frequent questions and comments about the proposals



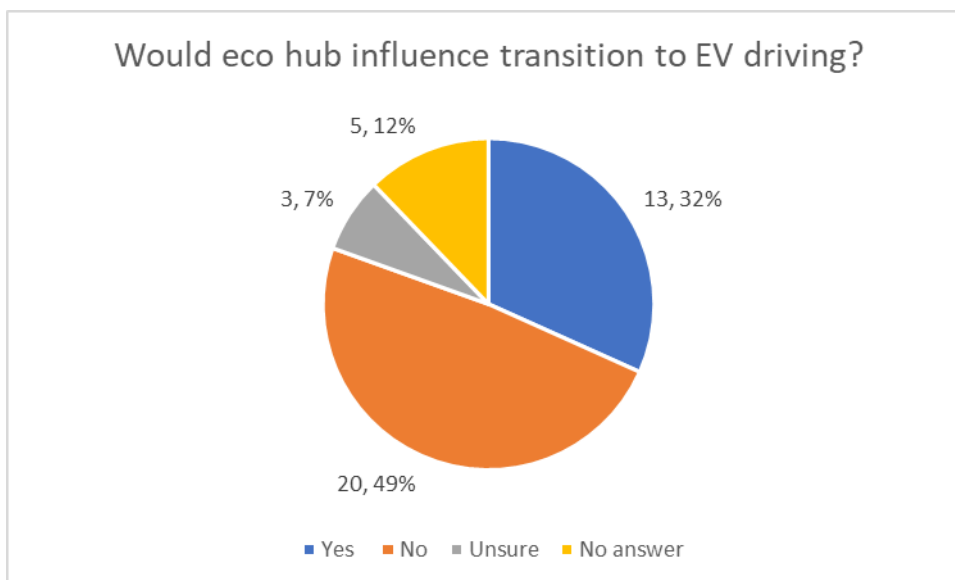
3.6 The three key topics that were most frequently raised by respondents include the proposed site location for the eco hub, traffic and the potential impact on the landscape, greenspace and the nearby Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Respondents wondered whether the eco hub would perhaps be better sited on a brownfield site or in busier areas such as within the towns of Blandford or Dorchester, along the A31 or A35 or adjacent to an existing solar farm, supermarket or an existing petrol station. These three topics were mentioned 75 times, representing well over half (56%) of comments made and questions asked about aspects of the proposed development.

3.7 15 individuals mentioned or enquired about job and trade opportunities at the eco hub, for example staffing the shop or café, or supplying organic coffee and other eco products. How the eco hub would function and whether the plans constitute a viable business proposition

was mentioned 12 times (9%), at times followed by questions about what decommissioning plans would be put in place. Other topics mentioned multiple times included how any impacts on wildlife and habitats would be minimised, whether agricultural land should be used for an eco hub, whether there would be light pollution and what could be done about that and what potential there is for community benefit funding.

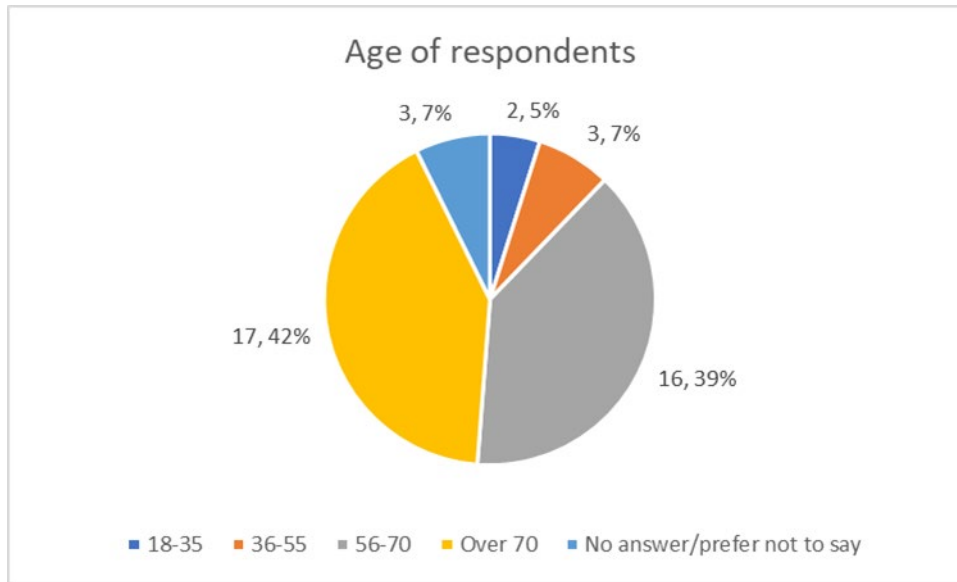
- 3.8 Constructive suggestions for the project team’s consideration to be taken on board in the proposals included the design of flint stone buildings in order to make the battery storage facility more ‘rural’ looking and better fitting within its surroundings; the provision of a local shop as the village currently doesn’t have one; a variety of ways to pay for electric vehicle charging because of the patchy nature of mobile phone reception locally and suggestions for community benefits such as a speed camera to be installed and free EV charging for local residents. Respondents also suggest that care is taken that competitive pricing is maintained for charging to ensure that EV drivers will feel incentivised to use the hub.
- 3.9 The feedback form of the consultation leaflet included a few more questions, including whether or not the arrival of rapid charging infrastructure in their area would influence respondents’ willingness to switch to electric driving. Out of 41 feedback forms received, 20 respondents (49%) said it would not, for a number of reasons. Some already drove an EV, others said that if they had one, they would charge it at home, because in rural areas most people are in the fortunate position to have their own drive, or at work or at the supermarket. 13 respondents (32%) said it would influence them towards EV driving, as it would be convenient to have a rapid charger nearby. However, a large number of respondents said that the cost of electric vehicles is the main decisive factor than the availability of local public infrastructure, and more people would switch to EV’s once the prices start coming down. 3 respondents (7%) were unsure and 5 (12%) didn’t answer the question.

Figure 3: Responses to what impact the arrival of the eco hub may have on electric driving



- 3.10 Asked about their age, the vast majority of respondents (81%) answered that they were 56 years old or over, totaling 33 responses. 12% of respondents (5) said they were between 18 and 55 years old and 7% (3) didn’t answer or preferred not to say.
- 3.11 It is possible that the relatively high number of responses from people over 56 is a fair reflection of the local population, however it could also be suggested that this demographic is more likely to engage in consultation than younger people in any case, in particular using a more traditional method (i.e. returning a hard copy form through the post).

Figure 4: Age of respondents



- 3.12 35 out of 41 respondents (85%) indicated that they would like to receive updates on the project's progress. 4 respondents (10%) do not wish to be updated and 2 (5%) did not provide an answer.
- 3.13 Both hard copy and online feedback forms asked respondents in what capacity they responded to the consultation. 39 respondents answered that they provided feedback as local residents, 1 answered on behalf of a business and 2 didn't answer or preferred not to say.

4. Response to consultation feedback

4.1 Specific aspects of the proposals have frequently been raised in the feedback, as identified in table 1 in the previous section. Below is a summary of the consideration given to a number of these key points:

Table 2: Responses to frequently made comments

Topic	Project Team Response
Site location	<p>The site is situated along the A354 which is part of the Primary Route Network of England which “...designates roads between places of traffic importance across the UK, with the aim of providing easily identifiable routes to access the whole of the country.” It is therefore a well-used and important road, providing an accessible location for EV-drivers.</p> <p>EV numbers will increase rapidly over the coming years. In November 2020, the Government announced a ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel cars from 2030. At the moment there are insufficient charging facilities locally and those that exist typically comprise low-power chargers, in small numbers, in local towns. Research shows that unless charging facilities are provided in rural areas, rural communities will be left behind on EVs. This project plugs a regional gap in charging facilities and helps re-balance the current bias towards more populated areas.</p> <p>The site itself has a variety of characteristics which makes it suitable for the proposed eco hub. It provides a safe new access point through the existing layby, it is outside any landscape or ecological designated areas and it is close to a suitable electrical grid connection point. Sites with suitable grid infrastructure for multiple rapid and ultra-rapid EV charging points are scarce, and sites that also have the potential for an adjacent renewable energy generator, like the solar farm, are even scarcer. With the forecasted rise in EV use we expect that similar EV charging infrastructure will start to come forward in more locations, but whether or not they will comprise a solar farm and battery storage facility as well, like the Blandford Hill Eco Hub proposal, remains to be seen.</p>

<p>Traffic and access</p>	<p>The hub is expected to have only a small effect on local traffic levels. At first, the number of EVs on the road will still be relatively small in comparison to petrol and diesel cars and the number of EVs that may make a detour to charge at the hub will be limited as well. However, the total number of cars on the road is forecasted by the Government to rise between 11 and 43% over the next 30 years, and – since the sale of new petrol and diesel cars will be banned from 2030 – a growing number of those will be EVs. The hub will therefore be able to serve a growing number of EVs that would be passing by in any event. At the moment, data shows that around 6,500 cars and light vehicles pass the site each day. Even when the lowest forecasted increase in cars is taken into consideration, the hub is expected to be a viable proposition at this location.</p> <p>The access to the eco hub has been carefully designed by our specialist highways consultants, following guidance for such development and based on detailed consultation with Dorset Council’s highways department. The access was specifically located where a large layby has been in existence for many years, so the principle of leaving the main carriageway at that location is well established.</p>
<p>Landscape and AONB impact</p>	<p>Part of the documentation that will be submitted along with the planning application is a comprehensive Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA). As part of this report a series of photoviews will be prepared alongside a Screened Zone of Theoretical Visibility plan. These will help to show what the project would look like from certain locations and how visible it would be, to inform the assessment of the proposals and consider fully the landscape context within which the proposed development lies. The LVIA and the photoviews will be available for public viewing, including on Dorset Council’s planning portal. The site benefits from good natural screening through existing boundary vegetation, including established hedges and mature trees, which will be retained. The project team has prepared a landscape strategy and planting plans which propose further enhancement of the existing hedges, to enhance the quality of habitat they provide to local wildlife, which will also further reduce the project’s visibility.</p>
<p>Opportunities or jobs and trade</p>	<p>During construction, we expect the hub to create up to 117 temporary jobs over a period of 3-6 months. Once operational it is estimated that the scheme will support around 8 permanent direct and indirect jobs in Dorset and the wider regional economy, including jobs relating to the EV charging station, café and shop. Naturalis is happy to hear from local traders who are interested in supplying the eco hub with their services and/or goods. Interested parties are invited to get in touch with the project team and details will be kept on file for further discussion at the appropriate time.</p>
<p>Operation and viability</p>	<p>The roughly 15MWp solar farm would generate electricity while emitting no carbon dioxide. This electricity feeds into the 3MW battery storage facility, where it gets stored. Excess renewable energy would be fed through underground cables into the local grid network at the existing Winterborne Kingston substation approximately 1 mile south of the site.</p> <p>The battery storage would be connected to the EV charging infrastructure at the hub, providing rapid charging for up to 19 cars. Stored power from the batteries can then be used to charge the batteries of the electric vehicles visiting the hub. Like the solar farm, the battery storage facility would be</p>

	<p>connected to the local grid network. It can provide power to the network as well as temporarily take excess electricity from the grid, therefore helping to balance supply and demand, supporting grid stability in the local area. Once operational, the solar farm would generate approximately 15.8 million kWh (kilowatthour; energy “units”) per year - roughly equivalent to the annual electricity consumption of 4,000 average homes or equivalent to a journey of 47 million miles in a typical EV.</p> <p>The café/shop element will have fairly typical trading hours (perhaps 07h00-19h00, 7 day per week) although the EV charging element will be open for longer periods, potentially 24/7. This will be agreed at a later date with Dorset Council, should the project obtain planning consent. Petrol and diesel vehicles will be able to use the hub’s 27 car parking spaces, which will be provided to replace the parking lost through the removal of the existing lay-by. The construction of the hub, subject to planning permission being granted, is planned for 2023. The project is expected to operate for 40 years.</p>
Wildlife and habitats	<p>The eco hub will be carefully designed to minimise effects on existing wildlife, both diurnal and nocturnal. However, the site is currently in agricultural use providing a relatively species-poor ecology. A habitat management scheme will help improve local biodiversity with the aim of a net gain, for example by establishing a wildflower meadow which attracts insects and provides food for small mammals and birds.</p>
Land use	<p>An Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) Report has been undertaken for the site, which classes the site to be Grade 3 a and b, which is good to moderate quality. However, the stoniness of the site is mentioned as a limiting factor. There is a real need for project such as the Blandford Hill Eco Hub, now that the number of electric vehicles (EVs) on the UK’s roads is set to rise exponentially. Rural areas should not be left behind when it comes to the availability of EV charging infrastructure (as they often were with the roll-out of broadband) and it is vital that sufficient numbers of powerful, reliable and accessible public EV chargers are available along main transport links such as the A354. Sites such as this one where EV charging can be combined with renewable energy generation and battery storage, powering the charging facility with green electricity whilst also having a connection to the local grid network, are hard to find. Because of the identified need and the scarcity of suitable sites, it is believed that the development of the eco hub on Grade 3 a and b agricultural land would be justified. It is hoped that sites can be found to develop similar installations across the country to support the sustained growth of EVs in the UK.</p>
Light pollution	<p>Using modern lighting techniques and technologies, light pollution would be minimised within the requirements for providing a safe environment for EV charging. The proposed canopy will help to reduce light pollution, ensuring the lighting will shine down and not up into the sky. The design will be sensitive to the rural location in which the hub would be situated.</p>
Solar panel life and decommissioning	<p>The solar panels will last for at least 40 years. At the end of its expected 40-year lifespan, the site would be fully decommissioned, and this will incorporate all elements; solar farm, charging infrastructure and battery storage facility and associated infrastructure such as the seating area etc. The detailed decommissioning arrangements would be expected to be</p>

	included in the list of planning conditions associated with any future planning permission. Nearer the time of decommissioning, a decision would be made as to how much of the underground infrastructure should be taken away, given that the environmental disturbance may be significant if it is to be removed after 40 years. That said, the project is completely reversible and all aspects could be fully removed if that is the preferred option at the time.
Community benefits	If and when the project is built, Naturalis would provide funding for local projects and is asking the community to come forward with ideas. We have already been asked to consider adding solar panels to the south-facing roofs at Dunbury Church of England Academy in Winterborne Whitechurch. Others have raised the current concern of cars speeding through the village and supporting the provision of a speed camera could also be considered, for example.

- 4.2 Responses are being sent to those who asked questions during the consultation process. Where possible, responses are sent electronically in order to reduce the use of paper.
- 4.3 The proposals have evolved over time and have been reshaped in response to consultation responses from statutory consultees as well as members of the public. Key changes include the reduction in the height of the café/shop building from two storey to single storey, the addition of hedgerow and tree planting and landscaping and the addition of a permissive footpath to the site which will connect to the existing footpath E32/7, providing pedestrian access to the shop and café from the settlement of Winterborne Whitechurch.
- 4.4 Naturalis will ensure that local residents and stakeholders who have asked to be kept updated about the project continue to be involved in the process and are kept informed of the proposals' progress through the planning system.
- 4.5 Future consultation activities may include further updates and direct engagement with interested parties through planning and potentially beyond, for example a presentation to the Dorset Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP).

Appendices