

8 December 2021

Report to: South Cambridgeshire District
Council Planning Committee

Lead Officer: Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development

20/01564/FUL – Balsham Ward/ West Wratting Parish (Land to the South East Of Burton End, West Wickham)

Proposal: Mixed use of agricultural and solar farm

Applicant:

Key material considerations:

- Principle of Development - Renewable Energy
- Heritage Assets
- Natural Assets
- Agricultural Land
- Character and Appearance of the Countryside
- Landscape Character
- Neighbour Amenity
- Highway safety
- Flood Risk

Date of Member site visit: N/A

Is it a Departure Application?: No

Decision due by: 10 December 2021

Application brought to Committee because: Local Interest

Presenting officer: Karen Pell-Coggins

Executive

Summary

1. This full planning application proposes the mixed use of a solar farm and agricultural grazing land on a site outside of the West Wratting and West Wickham development frameworks and in the countryside. The site is situated on grade 2 agricultural land and in the South Suffolk and North Essex Clayland National Character Area in landscape terms. The topography of the area is gently undulating.
2. The site measures 1.7 hectares in area. The solar farm would provide 1 megawatt of energy to power approximately 650 local homes. It would comprise solar panels in rows orientated east to west up to a height of 2.5 metres. Ancillary substation and inverter buildings would have a height of up to 3.5 metres. Landscaping in the form of hedgerows would surround the site.
3. The development would provide renewable energy for a number of local homes which would make an important contribution towards climate change and attracts significant weight. It would also provide an agricultural grazing use and enhance biodiversity which can be given moderate weight.
4. However, the development is considered to result in the loss of the best and most versatile agricultural land which can be given significant weight and adversely affect the character and appearance of the countryside and distinct open and rural landscape character of the area which would also attract significant weight.
5. The adverse impacts of the development are, on balance, considered to outweigh the benefits of the development. Members are therefore recommended to refuse the application.

Relevant Planning History

6. None

Planning Policies

7. **National Guidance**

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) 2021
National Planning Practice Guidance
National Design Guide 2019

8. **South Cambridgeshire Local Plan 2018**

S/3 Presumption in Favour of Sustainable Development
S/7 Development Frameworks

CC/2 Renewable and Low Carbon Energy Generation
CC/7 Water Quality
CC/8 Sustainable Drainage Systems
CC/9 Managing Flood Risk
HQ/1 Design Principles
NH/2 Protecting and Enhancing Landscape Character
NH/3 Protecting Agricultural Land
NH/4 Biodiversity
NH/5 Sites of Biodiversity or Geological Importance
NH/7 Ancient Woodlands and Veteran Trees
NH/14 Heritage Assets
TI/2 Planning for Sustainable Travel
TI/3 Parking Provision

9. **Supplementary Planning Documents (SPD's)**

Greater Cambridge Sustainable Design and Construction - Adopted January 2020
Cambridgeshire Flood and Water - Adopted November 2016
District Design Guide - Adopted March 2010
Landscape in New Developments - Adopted March 2010
Biodiversity - Adopted July 2009
Trees and Development Sites - Adopted January 2009

Consultation

10. **West Wratting and West Wickham Parish Council** – Supports the application described in the Planning Statement dated 24 March 2021 with the following conditions: -
- i) The existing sight lines at the crossroads of Common Lane, The Common and Skippers Lane must not be compromised. We believe that moving the new hedgerow a modest amount into the site would ensure this.
 - ii) We welcome that in the Planning Statement (paragraph 3.50) the applicant "has actively sought an Insurance indemnity will be put in place to restore the site once the temporary period of the planning consent has expired". We wish to see the presence of the decommissioning reinstatement bond as a precondition to work commencing on the site.
 - iii) We consider that the use of Large Good Vehicles (LGV) during construction would be harmful to the smaller villages. We wish to see the use of large vans wherever possible instead of Large Good Vehicles as described in the Planning Statement (paragraph 3.15).
 - iv) The LPA consider whether it would be appropriate for the local communities to "gain some form of community benefit" from the operation of this solar farm as recommended in paragraph 66 of the UK Solar Strategy Part 2. We note the precedent of Wadlow Wind farm Community Fund operating in West Wratting and neighbouring parishes.

Previous comments

Further to our responses in July 2020, West Wickham Parish Council and West Wrating parish Council do not support this application.

As noted in our original response, it remains contrary to South Cambridgeshire adopted Local Plan Policy CC/2 Renewable and Low Carbon Energy Generation.

Contrary to section CC/2 1.a. this application will lead to the loss of high quality agricultural land. We note that the applicant wishes to classify the land as 'mixed use of agricultural and solar farm,' justified by the offer of grazing sheep on the site once construction is complete. Grazing of livestock is not characteristic of this area, which is dominated by arable farming. The land would no longer be available as Grade 2 arable land, self evidently it would be less versatile, thus would represent a loss of the 'best and most versatile' agricultural land.

Correspondence between the applicant and planning officer appears to have been selectively copied, without attribution, from the 2015 article solar farms on agricultural land- light at the end of the tunnel? By Stephen Tromans QC, Philippa Jackson and Jon Darby. The Parish Council also notes the article references Planning update Statement UIN HCWS488, by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, but this was omitted from this correspondence. The minister states, "we want it to be clear that any proposal for a solar farm involving the best and most versatile agricultural land would need to be justified by the most compelling evidence". The Parish Council's do not believe this application has reached this high evidential standard. We respectfully draw the planning officers attention to the factors described in this statement that should be considered for this application. We emphatically agree with the minister:

"Meeting our energy goals should not be used to justify the wrong development in the wrong location and this includes the unnecessary use of high quality agricultural land. Protecting the global environment is not an excuse to trash the local environment"- Mr Eric Pickles, March 2015.

The e-mail to the planning officer on 25 November 2020 states "In regard to the site subject of this application, the land has not been farmed for over 30 years". This is demonstrably false. Aerial imagery from the Get Mapping Millennium Map taken between 1999 and 2001 clearly shows the land was cultivated 20 years ago.

Contrary to section CC/2 1.b. this application will lead to adverse impacts on the landscape.

We disagree with the assessment of the landscape as 'ordinary'. The author has cited the 'intrusive commercial warehouses' repeatedly (Sections 7.4, 10.10, 11.4, 13 and 15.3) in the assessment as principal detractors, offsetting the attractive features of the landscape and lowering the sensitivity to the

development. Using the presence and appearance of these warehouses to diminish the landscape character is to fundamentally misunderstand the history of these structures and the importance of the former WW2 airfield to the Parishes.

The two buildings that feature prominently in the vicinity of the site are examples of B1 and T2 aircraft hangers from RAF Wratting Common, originally named RAF West Wickham. They have been sensitively modernised for commercial use and still resemble their original design. RAF Wratting Common is an important part of the modern history and character of the Parishes. The silhouette of a Lancaster Bomber, that flew humanitarian sorties from the airfield features prominently on the West Wickham and Weston Colville village signs. The ensign and roll of honour are displayed in St Marys Church, West Wickham, and there are annual well-attended memorial services at the memorial at Weston Wood farm, which was installed by the community in 1989. These buildings do not diminish the landscape in the eyes of the community, they provide an important visual link to the history of the area.

We believe that the LVIA description for the classification for this area “development is primarily functional including housing estates, business parks, or urban fringe land uses” is not appropriate for this site. The Parish Council’s believe this landscape is characteristic of the area and of ‘Good Quality’.

The site screening proposed is for hedgerows maintained at 2m in height. The elevation plans show the solar arrays are approximately 2.5m in height and the substation 2.9m in height. They will still be clearly visible from all directions and an obvious industrial presence in the landscape.

We support the SCDC appointed landscape architect’s conclusion from 14 July 2020 that this site “is not capable of accommodating the development”. Even with the proposed mitigation this application will have an adverse impact on the landscape.

Contrary to section 1.c. no provision has been submitted for decommissioning the site.

As discussed in House of Commons Briefing Paper 07434, we believe that it is essential that a decommissioning or reinstatement bond is agreed with the Local Planning Authority. This will guarantee funding to restore the land back to its present state at the end of its operational life. We do not believe an undertaking between the developer and landowner, who could be one and the same, is sufficient to guarantee the site is cleared in the vent of financial failure.

Contrary to section 1.d. the developers have not engaged effectively with the local community.

The developer agent had a single meeting with the representatives from West Wickham and West Wratting Parish Councils in August 2019. None of the

concerns raised then have been addressed in this application. No attempt has been made to engage with the wider community. The Department for Energy and Climate Change UK Solar Strategy foreword states “Local communities must be willing partners to solar expansion: not just consulted, but respected.” Part 2 of the Strategy also says that developments should, “provide good opportunities for local communities to influence decision that affect them and gain some form of community benefit” noting, “there can also be problems where local communities see no benefit but consider that they bear amenity issues”. The applicant has not stated how local parishes derive any economic, environmental or societal benefit from this development whatsoever.

Both Parish Council’s have significant concern over road safety at the crossroads of Common Lane, The Common and Skippers Lane.

In July 2020, we raised concerns that any screening of the site would impair sight lines south east along Skippers Lane. The revised proposal confirms this.

This junction has been the site of several serious road traffic collisions including 2 fatal accidents in 2013. This resulted in significant public expenditure to improve the safety of this junction by offsetting the crossroads. It should be noted that the speed of traffic travelling along Skippers Lane and The Common has not been reduced.

By overlaying the proposed planting plan with recent aerial imagery the problem can be clearly seen. Using a 2.4m setback (as per CD123 Geometric design of at-grade priority and signal-controlled junctions, section 3.8) we estimate the sight line is approximately 125m. Table 2.10 of CD109 Highway Link Design recommends a desirable minimum stopping sight distance (SSD) of 215m for a design speed of 100kph, which would be appropriate for a long straight section of national speed limit highway. The ‘one step below’ point of 160m is not achieved. To make 125m meet the ‘desirable’ SSD the design speed would have to be reduced to 70kph i.e a 40mph speed limit. Alternatively, the screening could be moved south west into the site by approximately 5 metres.

11. Landscape Design Officer – Objects to the application, as amended.

Comments that the applicant has submitted a planting plan in support of the application. Development would include the provision of a mixed native hedgerow around the perimeter of the site other than access requirements.

Again, my concerns have not been addressed. Hedging around the site would need to be approx. 2m high to screen solar panels to reduce any adverse landscape character effects.

The landscape mitigation works would themselves appear inconsistent, incongruous with the local landscape characteristics which is broadly large open agricultural fields, woodland blocks, with isolated commercial warehouses, farmsteads or houses.

Harm to the local landscape character would be significantly adverse, unacceptable and contrary to policies Policy S/2: Objectives of the Local Plan and NH/2 Protecting and Enhancing Landscape Character. These policies seek to ensure that all new development respects, retains or enhances the local landscape character and would not have adverse effects upon the landscape and views.

Previous comments

Objects to the application.

As part of the application, the applicant has included a Landscape and Visual Appraisal which I have considered within my consultation response.

I would disagree with the applicant's assessment that both landscape impacts and visual impacts would be considered minor and local based on the following criteria:

The site is approx.. 900m from the existing settlement edge of West Wickham. It is surrounded by large open agricultural fields with woodland blocks. Agricultural fields are generally open and exposed which enables long distant views. This is in contrast to the small scaled fields or paddocks bordered by hedgerows which are generally found around settlement edges.

The applicant has proposed landscape mitigation measures comprising a boundary hedgerow with a temporary brushwood screening to reduce adverse impacts. However, these works would appear inconsistent, isolated and incongruous with the local landscape characteristics.

The local landscape primarily comprises large agricultural fields, woodland blocks with isolated commercial warehouses, farmsteads or houses. Development of solar panels does not reflect similar developments within or adjacent to the site particularly within the rural countryside.

The proposals constitute a noticeable change to the feature or key characteristics and attributes of the landscape area, resulting in a conspicuous loss or alteration to existing landscape features and forming a new feature in the landscape.

PROW There are 2no. PROW's which would be affected by the development. 253/19 Bridleway located to the south of the site. This connects Skippers Lane with Burton End and approx.. 425m from the site. Views are high due to lack of boundary vegetation. 253/10 Footpath located to the west and south west of the site which connects West Wickham with the countryside beyond. Views are limited due to mature hedgerow planting

The development would form a noticeable change to the views, forming a conspicuous new feature in the view that partially contrasts with other features

in the view. The site is located at 120m AOD a relatively high point within this area. Due to its open nature and flat topography wide views are available and development would be a noticeable change in view.

Even with landscape mitigation measures the harm would be significantly adverse, unacceptable and contrary to policies Policy S/2: Objectives of the Local Plan and NH/2 Protecting and Enhancing Landscape Character. These policies seek to ensure that all new development respects, retains or enhances the local landscape character and would not have adverse effects upon the landscape and views

Original comments

The site lies in an area which has no national or local designations and as such does not fall within the scope of valued landscapes under Paragraph 170 of the National Planning Policy Framework. The site is located outside the Conservation Area, the existing village development framework and does not form part of the Greenbelt.

There are no Public Rights of Way running through or immediately adjacent to the site boundaries. There are no TPO's within or adjacent to the site which could be affected by the development.

At National Level the site is situated within the National Landscape Character Area (NCA) 86: South Suffolk and North Essex Clayland. At local level the site is situated within The South-East Claylands as assessed by SCDC within District Design Guide SPD March 2010. This is an undulating area reaching 100 – 120 meters in height on the hilltops. A scattering of farmsteads and small settlements interspersed with farm woodlands, contribute to landscape character. The field sizes are mostly large, but are united by the gently rolling landform and woodland. Smaller fields, landscape and woodlands closer to edges of settlements give a more intimate scale. An historic irregular field pattern remains; Earthbanks are a distinctive feature along with some roadsides, reflecting ancient hedge and bank field boundaries; a few still retain their hedges. Long open views extend to wooded skylines, and sometimes village rooftops and church towers. The area has a surprisingly remote, rural character.

Landscape and visual effects

Existing vegetation – No details have been included within the application outlining the existing vegetation and how it will be protected and retained or enhanced. The site is an irregular shaped small scale field, approx.. 120AOD @ 1.8 hectares. It is rough grassland, low lying with ditches upon the northern and western boundaries. The site is bordered by Skippers Lane upon the northern boundary with Burton End upon the western boundary. The site is surrounded by large scale agricultural fields with some block woodlands and typical of the rural local landscape character. Views both wide and local are high however, visual amenity views are negligible. The

Proposal - The features that will be introduced include the installation of a solar farm and associated infrastructure including access. No details have been included outlining landscape mitigation works. The site is not capable of accommodating the development. Development would result in material harm to the surrounding countryside's landscape character and views from both the wider and local area. The development does not respect, retain or enhance the local landscape character and would have adverse effects upon the landscape and views. The proposal would be contrary to Policy S/2: Objectives of the Local Plan and Policy NH/2: Protecting and Enhancing Landscape Character.

12. **Trees and Landscapes Officer** – Has no objections, as amended.

Previous comments

Has no objections but the following observations: -

Hedgerows on or adjacent to site: None

Tree and hedgerow information: I would have thought a boundary hedgerow would have been installed to screen all this equipment. Hedgerows down the road look like they are thorn with bramble. A hornbeam and beech hedgerow would screen the works throughout the year and be low maintenance once established. The bramble will come naturally.

13. **Ecology Officer** – Has no objections, as amended, subject to conditions.

Comments that the applicant has submitted a response to my previous comments. It provides a reasonable explanation as to why great crested newts can be scoped out and is acceptable.

Suggests conditions in relation to all ecological measures and/or works to be carried out in accordance with the details contained in the Preliminary Ecological Appraisal and a Landscape and Ecological Management Plan (LEMP).

14. **Sustainability Officer** – Has no objections.

Comments that I have now looked over all the drawings submitted in relation to the installation of a solar farm consisting of 4,580 solar panels and associated infrastructure. Other than some basic drawings, the applicant has provided very little information relating to the scheme.

The applicant must be aware that Local Plan Policy CC/2 states that: Planning permission for proposals to generate energy from renewable and low carbon sources, with the exception of proposals for wind turbines, will be permitted provided that the development does not have any adverse impacts on the surrounding natural and heritage assets and the development can be connected efficiently to existing national energy infrastructure.

It also asks that developers make plans for the decommissioning of equipment once it reaches the end of its operational life, ensuring restoration of the site, and that developers have engaged with the local community.

Paragraph 4.15 of Chapter 4 of the South Cambridgeshire Local Plan states that... “technologies need to be located on-site or close to the energy users.”

The applicant will need to provide more information relating to how they intend to achieve compliance with the requirements of CC/2 as outlined above.

- 15. **Environmental Health Officer** – Has no comments.
- 16. **Contaminated Land Officer** – Has no comments.
- 17. **Local Highways Authority** – Has no objections in principle, as amended, subject to conditions.

Comments that the following design and management information is still required- detail the same access for maintenance narrowed down to 5m x for a minimum length of 5m and the access to be constructed with adequate drainage measures to prevent surface water run off onto the adjacent public highway. A standalone document must be submitted in the form of a method statement.

Requires conditions in relation to the proposed access routes for the individual elements of the solar panels and a traffic management plan, the proposed servicing arrangements for the solar panels once they have been installed, the vehicular access from the existing carriageway edge shall be laid out and constructed in accordance with a detailed engineering scheme to include the provision of a metalled/sealed surface for a minimum length of 10m from the existing carriageway edge, and a scheme to show the access to be constructed with adequate drainage measures to prevent surface water run off onto the adjacent public highway. Also requests an informative with regards to works to the public highway.

- 18. **County Transport Team** – Comments that the applicant has not submitted any transport information to accompany this application. However, given the nature of the proposal we consider the majority of traffic associated with this development will be during the construction phase.

In this case, we request a note is submitted by the applicant outlining how much traffic the development is anticipated to generate after full build out and during the construction phase and where they anticipate such traffic will come from.

- 19. **Lead Local Flood Authority** – Has no objections, as amended, subject to conditions.

Comments that the revised Surface Water Drainage report (Amazi Consulting Ltd, Ref: AMA832 Rev A dated: 26 April 2021) demonstrates that surface

water from the proposed solar farm can be managed through the use of filter drains being installed throughout the solar farm every other PV row. This is to capture and assist in infiltrating the surface water back into the ground. Surface water from the ancillary structures will be connected into the filter drains for infiltration. The proposed maintenance track will be constructed with gravel to allow surface water to pass into the ground below.

Requires conditions in relation to a detailed surface water drainage scheme for the site based on the agreed report, details for the long term maintenance arrangements for the surface water drainage system, and measures indicating how additional surface water run-off from the site will be avoided during the construction works. Also requests an informative with regards to ordinary watercourse consent and pollution control.

20. **Environment Agency** – Has no objections, as amended, subject to conditions.

Comments that the proposed development site is located upon a principal aquifer and within a source protection zone (SPZ3 or total catchment zone) designated for the protection of public water supply. It is highly vulnerable to pollution as contaminants entering groundwater at the site may contaminate the aquifer and the protected water supply. The site is considered to be of high sensitivity and could present potential pollutant/contaminant linkages to controlled waters.

Requires conditions in relation to a contamination remediation strategy, verification report following completion of any remediation, contamination not previously identified, and a surface water drainage strategy. Also requests informatives with regards to pollution prevention.

21. **Anglian Water** – Has no comments.
22. **Cambridgeshire County Council Historic Environment Team** – Has no objections or requirements for an archaeological investigation condition.
23. **Natural England** – Has no comments.

Representations from members of the public

24. Four letters of representation have been received from the occupiers of No. 15 Burton End, West Wickham and Nos. 33, 59 and 61 The Common, West Wrating. The following concerns have been raised: -
- i) Visual impact- industrial in nature, attractive rural character, visible from long distances across open countryside, high point in landscape, hedge lower than buildings, change character of WW2 airfield.
 - ii) Highway safety- increase in traffic, dangerous road junction would be obscured, distraction to road users, possible reflection from solar panels, impact upon cyclists and pedestrians.

- iii) Not an appropriate scale of scheme for use, other renewable energy projects in the parish.
- iv) National grid connection.
- v) Not currently arable land and a valuable area for wildlife.
- vi) Not notified of application and can see the site.

Site and Surroundings

- 25. The site is located 800 metres to the north east of the village of West Wickham and 2km to the south east of the village of West Wrating, outside of any development framework and in the countryside. It is situated to the south east of the junction of Burton End, The Common, Skippers Lane, and Common Road. The site measures 1.8 hectares in area and currently comprises an area of grassland and scrubland. The topography of the site falls to the south. The site is classified as grade 2 (good quality) agricultural land and is within the It lies within flood zone 1 (low risk).
- 26. The site is surrounded by open arable land. There is a public right of way from Burton End to Skippers Lane to the south. The nearest buildings are former WW2 hangers 150 metres to the south and 350 metres to the south east. The topography of the surrounding land is gently undulating. It falls to the south before rising again towards West Wickham. It rises to the east. It falls to the north and west towards West Wrating. Rands Wood is a County Wildlife Site and Ancient Woodland that lies 750 metres to the west. The nearest residential properties are on The Common, 450 metres to the west.

Proposal

- 27. The proposal seeks a mixed use for the site through the installation of a solar farm and agricultural grazing land. The solar farm would produce 1 megawatt of renewable energy to power approximately local 650 homes. It is proposed for a temporary period of 26 years. The development would comprise 4580 solar panels in 22 rows orientated in an east to west direction across the site and angled 20 degrees to face south. The rows would be situated 5 metres apart and measure 2.5 metres in height. They would be dark grey/dark blue/black in colour. Access to the site would be from Burton End in a central position on the western boundary. A DNO substation and client switchroom would be situated either side of the access and an inverter would be situated in the centre of the site. The DNO substation would measure 3.529 metres in height, the client switchroom would measure 2.9 metres in height, and the inverter would measure 2.356 metres in height. The agricultural land would be grazed by sheep. Landscaping would comprise native species hedgerows along the boundaries of the site and a mix of grass (80%) and wildflowers (20%) within the site.

Planning Assessment

28. The key issues to consider in the determination of this application are the principle of renewable energy development and the impacts of the development upon heritage assets, natural assets, agricultural land, the character and appearance of the area, landscape character, neighbour amenity, highway safety, and flood risk.

Principle of Development – Renewable Energy

29. The Climate Change Act 2008 sets out UK's committed targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing energy generation from renewable sources. These are: -
i) an 80% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 (from 1990 levels);
ii) a 26% reduction in carbon dioxide emissions by 2020 (from 1990 levels);
and
iii) sourcing 15% of its energy from renewable sources by 2020 (in 2010 3.3% of UK energy came from renewable sources).
30. The 2008 was amended in June 2019 to set a target of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.
31. The recent UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) was to generate action to secure global net zero carbon by 2050 and limit global warming to 1.5 degrees in order to tackle climate change.
32. The countries were asked to come forward with ambitious 2030 emissions reductions through the following measures: -
i) accelerate the phase-out of coal;
ii) curtail deforestation
iii) speed up the switch to electric vehicles
iv) encourage investment in renewables.
33. Paragraph 152 of the National Planning Policy Framework states that the planning system should support the transition to a low carbon future in a changing climate and support renewable and low carbon energy and associated infrastructure.
34. Paragraph 158 states that when determining planning applications for renewable and low carbon development, local planning authorities should:
a) not require applicants to demonstrate the overall need for renewable or low carbon energy, and recognise that even small-scale projects provide a valuable contribution to cutting greenhouse gas emissions; and
b) approve the application if its impacts are (or can be made) acceptable.
Once suitable areas for renewable and low carbon energy have been identified in plans, local planning authorities should expect subsequent applications for commercial scale projects outside these areas to demonstrate that the proposed location meets the criteria used in identifying suitable areas.

35. The National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG) sets out the particular planning considerations that relate to large scale ground-mounted solar photovoltaic farms.
36. It states that the deployment of large-scale solar farms can have a negative impact on the rural environment, particularly in undulating landscapes. However, the visual impact of a well-planned and well-screened solar farm can be properly addressed within the landscape if planned sensitively.
37. Particular factors a local planning authority will need to consider include:
- i) encouraging the effective use of land by focussing large scale solar farms on previously developed and non-agricultural land, provided that it is not of high environmental value;
 - ii) where a proposal involves greenfield land, whether (i) the proposed use of any agricultural land has been shown to be necessary and poorer quality land has been used in preference to higher quality land; and (ii) the proposal allows for continued agricultural use where applicable and/or encourages biodiversity improvements around arrays. See also a speech by the Minister for Energy and Climate Change, the Rt Hon Gregory Barker MP, to the solar PV industry on 25 April 2013 and written ministerial statement on solar energy: protecting the local and global environment made on 25 March 2015.
 - iii) that solar farms are normally temporary structures and planning conditions can be used to ensure that the installations are removed when no longer in use and the land is restored to its previous use.
 - iv) the proposal's visual impact, the effect on landscape of glint and glare (see guidance on landscape assessment) and on neighbouring uses and aircraft safety;
 - v) the extent to which there may be additional impacts if solar arrays follow the daily movement of the sun.
 - vi) the need for, and impact of, security measures such as lights and fencing.
 - vii) great care should be taken to ensure heritage assets are conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance, including the impact of proposals on views important to their setting. As the significance of a heritage asset derives not only from its physical presence, but also from its setting, careful consideration should be given to the impact of large scale solar farms on such assets. Depending on their scale, design and prominence, a large scale solar farm within the setting of a heritage asset may cause substantial harm to the significance of the asset;
 - viii) the potential to mitigate landscape and visual impacts through, for example, screening with native hedges;
 - ix) the energy generating potential, which can vary for a number of reasons including, latitude and aspect.

38. The Written Ministerial Statement dated 25 March 2015 states the following: -

The National Planning Policy Framework includes strong protections for the natural and historic environment and is quite clear that local councils when considering development proposals should take into account the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land. Yet, some local communities have genuine concerns that when it comes to solar farms

insufficient weight has been given to these protections and the benefits of high quality agricultural land. As the solar strategy noted, public acceptability for solar energy is being eroded by the public response to large-scale solar farms which have sometimes been sited insensitively.

Meeting our energy goals should not be used to justify the wrong development in the wrong location and this includes the unnecessary use of high quality agricultural land. Protecting the global environment is not an excuse to trash the local environment. When we published our new planning guidance in support of the Framework, we set out the particular factors relating to large scale ground mounted solar photovoltaic farms that a local council will need to consider. These include making effective use of previously developed land and, where a proposal involves agricultural land, being quite clear this is necessary, and that poorer quality land is to be used in preference to land of a higher quality.

We are encouraged by the impact the guidance is having but do appreciate the continuing concerns, not least those raised in this House, about the unjustified use of high quality agricultural land. In light of these concerns we want it to be clear that any proposal for a solar farm involving the best and most versatile agricultural land would need to be justified by the most compelling evidence. Of course, planning is a quasi-judicial process, and every application needs to be considered on its individual merits, with due process, in light of the relevant material considerations.

39. Policy S/7 of the Local Plan states that outside development frameworks, only allocations within Neighbourhood Plans that have come into force and development for agriculture, horticulture, forestry, outdoor recreation and other uses which need to be located in the countryside or where supported by other policies in this plan will be permitted.
40. Policy CC/2 of the Local Plan states that planning permission for proposals to generate energy from renewable and low carbon sources, with the exception of proposals for wind turbines, will be permitted provided that:
 - a. The development, and any associated infrastructure, either individually or cumulatively with other developments, does not have unacceptable adverse impacts on heritage assets (including their settings), natural assets, high quality agricultural land, the landscape, or the amenity of nearby residents (visual impact, noise, shadow flicker, odour, fumes, traffic);
 - b. The development can be connected efficiently to existing national energy infrastructure, or by direct connection to an associated development or community project, or the energy generated would be used for on-site needs only;
 - c. Provision is made for decommissioning once the operation has ceased, including the removal of the facilities and the restoration of the site; and
 - d. Developers have engaged effectively with the local community and local authority.
41. The site is located outside the development framework and in the countryside.

42. The solar farm would produce 1 megawatt of energy that would power approximately 650 local homes. The need for renewable energy is not required to be demonstrated and the development is supported in policy terms in the countryside providing the scheme would comply with the criteria in Policy CC/2 above and any other material considerations.

Grid Connection

43. The solar farm would be located approximately 320 metres to the south west of the electricity substation and National Grid connection point.

Decommissioning

44. The solar farm would be temporary for a 25 year period. The site would then be decommissioned unless planning permission is granted for the use beyond this period. Conditions are recommended to be attached to any consent to ensure that the use is for a temporary period of 25 years and that once the development has ceased, it is decommissioned, the facilities removed, and the land reinstated to its former sole agricultural use.

Community Engagement

45. The developers have met with West Wrating and West Wickham Parish Council's prior to the submission of the application.

Heritage Assets

46. Section 66 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 states that in considering whether to grant planning permission [for development which affects a listed building or its setting, the local planning authority shall have special regard to the desirability of preserving the building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses.
47. Section 72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 states that with respect to any buildings or other land in a conservation area, special attention shall be paid to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of that area.
48. The site is located approximately 800 metres from the nearest listed buildings at Nos. 27 and 29 and The Vicarage, Burton End in West Wickham and 900 metres from Brook Farmhouse, 57 The Common in West Wrating.
49. The site is located approximately 1.7km from the West Wickham conservation area and 2.8km from the West Wrating conservation area.
50. The development is not considered to harm the significance of the above designated heritage assets given the distance from the site and that the settings to these assets are limited to the rural and open countryside immediately surrounding the buildings.

51. The site is located existing with close proximity to two former WW2 hangers and on land that was formerly an airfield. However, the West Wickham draft neighbourhood plan has not identified the former airfield and hanger buildings as non-designated heritage assets. Whilst the development would have an impact which is regrettable, the development is not considered to harm this historic feature.
52. The development is not considered to harm any features of archaeological interest.

Natural Assets

53. The site comprises a fallow area of arable field with ruderal herbaceous plants and scattered self-seeded shrubs/immature trees. There is a scattered row of native shrubs along the western boundary. A dry ditch aligns the northern and western boundaries. The surrounding landscape is dominated by arable fields.
54. An Ecological Report has been submitted with the application. A number breeding birds and a barn owl dropping was found on site. There were no trees on the site suitable for bats roosts. The site has a low potential for foraging bats. There was no evidence of badgers on the site. A brown hare was observed on the site. The site had negligible potential for reptiles. There were no ponds within 500 metres of the site although the site has a habitat appropriate for great crested newts. The ditches were dry and not suitable for water voles.
55. Given the low ecological value of the site, no further surveys or mitigation are considered necessary and the development would consequently not adversely affect protected species. However, precautionary measures such as sensitive external lighting, removal of vegetation outside the bird breeding season, and spaces of at least 4 metres between the panels are recommended and should be followed.
56. Rands Wood is a County Wildlife Site and Ancient Woodland situated approximately 750 metres to the west of the site.
57. The development is not considered to adversely affect the biodiversity features and interest of these sites.
58. The development would not result in the loss of any trees or landscaping that are important to the visual amenity of the area.
59. The development would provide new landscaping in the form of native hedgerows and grass and wildflower planting which would result in a net gain in biodiversity at the site.

Agricultural Land

60. The site is classified as grade 2 (good quality) agricultural land. However, it has not been used for arable purposes for approximately 20 years.
61. Policy NH/3 of the Local Plan states that planning permission will not be granted for development which would lead to the irreversible loss of Grades 1, 2 or 3a agricultural land unless:
 - 1a. Land is allocated for development in the Local Plan;
 - b. Sustainability considerations and the need for the development are sufficient to override the need to protect the agricultural value of the land.
 2. Uses not involving substantial built development but which take agricultural land will be regarded as permanent unless restricted specifically by condition.
 3. When considering proposals for the change of use or diversification of farmland, particular consideration shall be given to the potential for impact upon Priority Species and Habitats.
62. The NPPG encourages the effective use of land by focussing large scale solar farms on previously developed and non-agricultural land, provided that it is not of high environmental value and where a proposal involves greenfield land, whether the proposed use of any agricultural land has been shown to be necessary and poorer quality land has been used in preference to higher quality land; and the proposal allows for continued agricultural use where applicable and/or encourages biodiversity improvements around arrays.
63. The Written Ministerial Statement 2015 that any proposal for a solar farm involving the best and most versatile agricultural land would need to be justified by the most compelling evidence.
64. The development would provide 1 megawatt of energy that would power 650 local homes. It is not disputed that there is a significant need for renewable energy to contribute towards climate change.
65. The applicant's agent has advised that the substation 320 metres from the site has been identified with available capacity and a connection has been secured subject to planning permission.
66. A site search has been carried out within 6 km radius around the substation. This distance was selected due to the need limit the costs of longer grid connections and third party land negotiations.
67. No available brownfield sites have been identified within the search area that are available to the applicant due to land ownership issues.
68. The district brownfield land register has been consulted. The three largest sites at Cambourne, Waterbeach barracks and Oakington Barracks have been deemed unsuitable due to development allocations, proximity of a solar farm, and unknown ownership. The other larger sites have been ruled out as a result of development allocations. The other sites are too small.

69. The rural areas in the region have large swathes of high quality agricultural land.
70. The DEFRA Agricultural Land Classification map shows that the district of South Cambridgeshire has a mix of grade 2 (very good) and grade 3 (good to moderate) quality agricultural land. There is a very small amount of grade 4 (poor agricultural land).
71. No information has been submitted on the location or capacity of grid connections in the district and limited information has been submitted on the potential sites considered within 6km of the selected grid connection.
72. Within 6km of the grid connection point to the east of the A11 and west of the village of West Wratting and Balsham, there is an area of grade 3 (good to moderate) agricultural land. This is considered suitable for such development which is evidenced by permission being granted for a solar farm at Great Wilbraham and a wind farm at West Wratting. However, no evidence has been submitted to show that this area has been explored. In addition, there is very limited evidence to show that existing brownfield sites in the area have been explored.
73. Whilst some information has been provided in relation to potential sites, it is considered that further information needs to be provided to demonstrate that there is compelling evidence that justifies the development on the best and most versatile agricultural land.
74. It is noted that the land is not currently used for arable purposes and the development would introduce a mixed agricultural use and solar farm. However, the land is still good quality agricultural land that appears to have the potential to be used for arable purposes. A period of 25 years with a use for grazing only would represent a significant period of time.
75. Although a number of appeal decisions have been referenced in relation to the above issue advising that there is not a need for a sequential assessment, these were dated prior to the Written Ministerial Statement dated March 2015. An appeal decision following the Written Ministerial Statement from the Secretary of State reference APP/P2365/W/15/3011997 for land at Tawdside Farm, 32 Deans Lane, Lathom, Ormskirk, Lancashire, L40 4BL dated January 2016 states the following: -

“In accordance with the NPPF and PPG, the 1st question to ask is whether or not the use of agricultural land is necessary. This exercise should demonstrate that no suitable brownfield land or non-agricultural land is available within a reasonable search area. There is no national or local guidance when defining a study area and each case should be considered on its own merits taking into account both planning and operational constraints. The PPG at paragraph ID 5-003 confirms that whilst local authorities should design their policies to maximise renewable and low carbon energy, there is no quota which the Local Plan has to deliver. Therefore, there is no need to site renewable energy development in a particular local authority in order to meet a local green

energy quota. Subsequently, there is no reason why a search area cannot extend beyond the borough boundaries.

In any event, the appellant has not provided details of a search for alternative sites. Whilst the company would appear to have dismissed the Borough's urban areas, there is no consideration of brownfield sites within the Green Belt or industrial areas both within the Borough and a reasonable distance outside of it. Consequently, the appellant has not demonstrated the use of agricultural land is necessary."

76. The above decision demonstrates that although a sequential assessment is not required, a considerable amount of evidence needs to be submitted to demonstrate that alternative sites on lower grade land have been considered. This is also not limited to land within the district. Notwithstanding the above and in any case, each application needs to be determined upon its own merits.
77. It is not disputed that there is a significant need for renewable energy to contribute towards climate change. However, the small scale of the development and the contribution towards renewable energy together with the limited information submitted in relation to more appropriate sites are not considered to outweigh the loss of the best and most versatile agricultural land.

Character and Appearance of the Countryside and Landscape Character

78. The site is located in the open countryside in a prominent position at the crossroads of Burton End, The Common, Common Road and Skippers Lane. It has a distinct rural character.
79. The site is situated in the South Suffolk and North Essex Clayland National Character Area as identified by Natural England. The main characteristics of this area include: -
 - i) An undulating chalky boulder clay plateau is dissected by numerous river valleys, giving a topography of gentle slopes in the lower, wider valleys and steeper slopes in the narrower upper parts.
 - ii) Fragments of chalk give many of the soils a calcareous character, which also influences the character of the semi-natural vegetation cover.
 - iii) Lowland wood pasture and ancient woodlands support the dormouse and a rich diversity of flowering plants on the clay plateau. Large, often ancient hedgerows link woods and copses, forming wooded skylines.
 - iv) The agricultural landscape is predominantly arable with a wooded appearance. There is some pasture on the valley floors. Field patterns are irregular despite rationalisation, with much ancient countryside surviving. Field margins support corn bunting, cornflower and brown hare.
 - v) Roman sites, medieval monasteries and castles and ancient woodlands contribute to a rich archaeology. Impressive churches, large barns, substantial country house estates and Second World War airfields dot the landscape, forming historical resources.

- vi) There is a dispersed settlement pattern of scattered farmsteads, parishes and small settlements around 'tyes' (commons) or strip greens and isolated hamlets. The NCA features a concentration of isolated moated farmsteads and numerous well-preserved medieval towns and large villages.
- vii) A strong network of public rights of way provides access to the area's archetypal lowland English countryside.

80. The site is situated in the South East Clayland Landscape Character Area as set out in the District Design Guide. It is described as follows: -

'This is an undulating area reaching 100 – 120 meters in height on the hilltops. A scattering of farmsteads and small settlements interspersed with farm woodlands, contribute to landscape character. The field sizes are mostly large, but are united by the gently rolling landform and woodland. Smaller fields, landscape and woodlands closer to edges of settlements give a more intimate scale. An historic irregular field pattern remains; Earthbanks are a distinctive feature along with some roadsides, reflecting ancient hedge and bank field boundaries; a few still retain their hedges. Long open views extend to wooded skylines, and sometimes village rooftops and church towers. The area has a surprisingly remote, rural character.'

The main features of this area are: -

- i) An undulating boulder clay landform, dissected by small stream valleys.
- ii) Predominantly arable farmland with a wooded appearance.
- iii) Trees and woodlands appear to join together to create a wooded skyline, with some bare ridgelines

81. The solar farm would comprise rows of solar panels measuring 2.5 metres in height and ancillary buildings that measure up to approximately 3.5 metres in height.
82. The introduction of solar arrays with a uniform and industrial design and dark modern materials would contrast with the overall informal, gently undulating, open, and green rural character and appearance of the site.
83. Whilst the landscaping scheme would partially mitigate the impact of the development upon its surroundings, the development would be highly visible above the hedgerows when viewed from the surrounding roads and public right of way. This would be particularly apparent when travelling north on the road from West Wickham due to the fall in land levels. Notwithstanding the above, the landscaping is not considered appropriate to the character of the area.
84. The existing WW2 hangers are not considered to detract from the overall rural character and appearance of the area and provide historic features that reflect the former use of the land as an airfield.
85. The solar farm is consequently considered to result in a visually incongruous and intrusive urban form of development that would be completely out of character with the surrounding open countryside and rural landscape and

adversely affect the distinct character and appearance of the countryside and landscape character.

Neighbour Amenity

- 86. The site is situated approximately 450 from the nearest residential properties.
- 87. The development is not considered to adversely affect the amenities of neighbours.

Summary

- 88. The proposal would preserve heritage assets, enhance natural assets, and safeguard the amenities of neighbours. It would therefore comply with Policies NH/14, NH/4, NH/5, NH/7 and HQ/1 of the Local Plan in relation to these considerations.
- 89. However, it is considered to adversely affect the landscape and rural character and appearance of the countryside and result in the loss of the best and most versatile agricultural land. It would therefore be contrary to Policies S/7 CC/2, NH/2, NH/3 and HQ/1 of the Local Plan in relation to these considerations.

Other Matters

Highway Safety

- 90. The site would be accessed off Burton End. This is a mainly straight road that leads from West Wickham to surrounding villages. It has a speed limit of 60 miles per hour. The junction of Burton End with The Common, Skippers Lane and Common Road is situated 130 metres to the north.
- 91. The construction period of the solar farm would be approximately 6 weeks. The traffic movements during construction are set out below: -
 - i) 6- 10 small vans per day
 - ii) 2 flatbed trucks for welfare and compound (week 1)
 - iii) 3 articulated lorries for structure (week 3)
 - iv) 3 articulated lorries for panels and 1 articulated lorry for buildings (week 5)
- 92. The construction of the development would result in a maximum of 14 movements in week 5. The route of construction traffic would be via the A11 turning off at the Balsham Road junction towards the site. There is likely to be a similar amount of traffic during decommissioning. During, operation, traffic movements would be limited to a van providing occasional maintenance of the solar farm.
- 93. The design of the access, as amended, would measure at least 5 metres in width for a distance of 20 metres from the road. It would then reduce to 3 metres in width between the substations and inverter buildings. Visibility splays measuring 2.4 metres x 215 metres would be provided on both sides of the access. This is acceptable.

94. However, the Local Highways Authority has requested that this access is narrowed to at least 5 metres in width for a distance of 5 metres from the road when construction has been completed to restrict the use of the site by heavy vehicles. This is considered necessary in the interests of highway safety and is recommended to be a condition of any consent.
95. The landscaping is not considered to obstruct visibility from Burton End on to Skippers Lane as a splay measuring 2.4 metres x 215 metres can be provided.
96. Conditions are recommended to be attached to any consent in relation to precise details of the construction route for the delivery of the individual elements of the solar panels, a detailed traffic management plan for delivery of the individual elements of the solar panels, servicing arrangements for the solar panels, and the access to be constructed with adequate drainage measures. Also requests an informative with regards to works to the public highway.
97. The conditions would control the route and times of construction traffic, contractors unloading, loading, manoeuvring and parking during construction, and the control of debris on the public highway.
98. The development would not result in a significant amount of traffic that would adversely affect the capacity and functioning of the public highway and the design of the access is acceptable. The proposal is not considered to be detrimental to highway safety.
99. The proposal would therefore comply with Policies TI/2 and TI/3 of the Local Plan and paragraph 111 of the NPPF.

Flood Risk

100. The site is located within flood zone 1 (low risk).
101. A Surface Water Drainage report has been submitted with the application. There are existing watercourses along the northern and western boundaries of the site. The site falls north to south.
102. The site is not at significant risk of flooding from fluvial sources.
103. Surface water from pluvial sources will be managed on site through the introduction of filter drains between every other row of panels to capture and assist in infiltrating the surface water back into the ground. Surface water from the ancillary structures will be connected into the filter drains for infiltration. The proposed maintenance track will be constructed with gravel to allow surface water to pass into the ground below. These measures would ensure that there is no localised channelling of rainfall that would increase flood risk to the surrounding area.

104. Conditions are recommended to be attached to any consent to secure a detailed surface water drainage scheme, long term maintenance of the surface water drainage scheme, and a surface water measures during construction.
105. The proposal would therefore comply with Policies CC/7, CC/8 and CC/9 of the Local Plan.

Community Benefit

106. There are no development plan policies that require the provision of a community benefit. This a matter between the developer and the parishes.

Notification

107. A site notice has been displayed on the site and the nearest buildings to the development have been notified of the application. The residential properties in The Common and Burton End are situated a significant distance from the site and are not required to be notified of the application.

Planning balance and conclusion

108. The development would provide renewable energy for a number of local homes which would make an important contribution towards climate change and attracts significant weight. It would also provide an agricultural grazing use and enhance biodiversity which can be given moderate weight.
109. However, the development is considered to result in the loss of the best and most versatile agricultural land which can be given significant weight and adversely affect the character and appearance of the countryside and distinct open and rural landscape character of the area which would also attract significant weight.
110. The adverse impacts of the development are, on balance, considered to outweigh the benefits of the development.

Recommendation

111. Officers recommend that the Planning Committee refuse the application for the following reasons: -
 1. The introduction of solar farm comprising of arrays and buildings with a uniform and industrial design and dark modern materials would contrast with the overall informal, gently undulating, open, and green rural character and appearance of the site. The development would be highly visible above the hedgerows when viewed from the surrounding roads and public right of way. This would be particularly apparent when travelling north on the road from West Wickham due to the fall in land levels. The solar farm is consequently considered to result in a visually incongruous and intrusive urban form of development that would be

completely out of character with the surrounding open countryside and rural landscape and adversely affect the distinct character and appearance of the countryside and landscape character. The proposal is therefore contrary to Policies S/7, CC/2, NH/2 and HQ/1 of the South Cambridgeshire Local Plan 2028 that require developments to respect and retain or enhance the local character and distinctiveness of the local landscape and of the individual National Character Area in which it is located and preserve or enhance the character of the local urban and rural area and respond to its context in the wider landscape.

2. The introduction of a solar farm on grade 2 agricultural land would result in the loss of the best and most versatile agricultural land. Insufficient information has been submitted to demonstrate that the use of high quality agricultural land is necessary rather than poorer quality agricultural land. The proposal is therefore contrary to Policy CC/2 and NH/3 of the South Cambridgeshire Local Plan 2028 that resist developments which would lead to the irreversible loss of Grades 1, 2 or 3a agricultural land unless sustainability considerations and the need for the development are sufficient to override the need to protect the agricultural value of the land.

Refused Plans:

2019.37.100	Location Plan
19/37/100A	Block Plan
19/37/102	Inverter Details
19/37/103	Client Substation
19/37/104	DNO Substation
1233-01	Planting Plan

Background Papers

Planning application reference 20/01564/FUL

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