SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO:	Planning Committee	1 October 2014
AUTHOR/S:	Planning and New Communities Director	

Application Number:	S/1427/14/FL
Parish(es):	Melbourn
Proposal:	Solar Farm and Associated Development
Site address:	Land Between Railway and Sewage Disposal Works, Royston Road
Applicant(s):	Solar Planning Ltd.
Recommendation:	Delegated Approval (as amended)
Key material considerations:	Countryside Landscape Character Heritage Assets Archaeology Ecology Biodiversity Trees and Landscaping Flood Risk Public Footpaths
Committee Site Visit:	Yes
Departure Application:	No
Presenting Officer:	Karen Pell-Coggins
Application brought to Committee because:	Major Application of Local Interest
Date by which decision due:	30 September 2014

Executive Summary

1. This proposal, as amended, is for a new 14 MW solar farm with associated equipment covering an area of approximately 26.6 hectares of grade 2 agricultural land located to the north of the A505 Royston bypass, east of the A1198 road and sewage works, south of the Harcamlow Way public footpath and west of the Cambridge to London railway line and A10 road. The development is of a kind that receives very considerable support in national and local planning policy and that, following the guidance in the National Planning Policy Framework there must be a strong presumption in favour of it. The proposal would have an impact on the countryside but this is not considered to be unacceptable adverse visual impact that would significantly harm the character and appearance of the area as the development would be satisfactorily mitigated by additional landscaping. The development is also not considered to harm landscape character, damage the setting

of heritage assets, destroy important archaeological evidence, result in the loss of important trees and hedges, harm biodiversity interest, increase flood risk, be detrimental to highway safety, adversely affect the amenities of neighbours or seriously harm the amenity of public footpaths. Therefore, on balance, the public benefits of the scheme in respect of renewable energy production are considered to outweigh any identified modest harm arising from the development such as the limited visual harm and temporary loss of agricultural productivity.

Site and Proposal

2. The site is located outside of any village framework and within the countryside. It is situated immediately to the north of the A505 Royston bypass, 400 metres to the east of the A1198 road and immediately to the east of a sewage disposal works, 400 metres to the south of the Harcamlow Way public footpath, and 200 metres to the west of the A10 road and immediately to the west of the Cambridge to London railway line. The site, as amended, measures approximately 26.6 hectares in area and comprises two arable fields. The smaller western field is fairly level with tall hedges and woodland along part of the northern and southern boundaries and along the the western boundary. The larger eastern field slopes down from south east to north west with the northern part of the field of fairly level topography. There is a tall hedge along part of the eastern boundary and a continuous hedge along the western boundary with the smaller field. The northern boundary has rough grassland within which are settlement lagoons belonging to the adjacent sewage works. A ditch runs between the two fields. The site has a grade 2 (very good) agricultural land classification and is situated in the East Anglian Chalk Landscape Character Area. The Holland Hall (Melbourn) Railway Cutting Site of Special Scientific Interest runs along the eastern boundary of the site. There is a Scheduled Ancient Monument to the east of the A10. It lies within flood zone 1 (low risk).

3. This full planning application, received on 1 July 2014 as amended, proposes the installation of 14MW of solar photovoltaic panels along with inverter/transformer buildings a substation, storage building, control room, construction compound, access tracks, security fence and pole mounted CCTV cameras for a temporary period of 25 years. The photovoltaic panels would be mounted on steel frames that are angled at 20 degrees to face south. There would be arrays of panels running east to west across the site. Each panel array would measure approximately 3.77 metres x 9.950 metres. They would have a maximum height of approximately 2.3 metres and be set approximately 4 metres apart. 3.5 metre wide access tracks would be provided within the fields to the construction compound at the entrance to the site on the western boundary of the small field. The substation compound would consist of a DNO building, control room and storage room. The DNO building would measure 11.5 metres in length x 5.3 metres in width x 3.7 metres in height. Within the site there would be eight groups of transformer/ inverter buildings erected at regular intervals centrally within the fields to serve the panels. They would measure 6.50 metres in length x 2.3 metres in width x 2.9 metres in height and 4.51 metres in length x 1.4 metres in width x 2.9 metres in height. A security fence that measures 2 metres in height and consist of timber posts with steel wire in a deer stock design would surround the site. A number of CCTV poles at a height of 4 metres would be erected around the perimeter of the site. Access to the site would be via the existing access to the sewage works off the A505 Royston bypass.

Planning History

4. S/1517/13/E1 - Screening Opinion for Solar Farm - EIA not required.

Planning Policy

5. **South Cambridgeshire Local Development Framework (LDF) Development Control Policies DPD, adopted January 2007**
DP/1 Sustainable Development
DP/2 Design of New Development
DP/3 Development Criteria
DP/7 Development Frameworks
NE/2 Renewable Energy
NE/4 Landscape Character Areas
NE/6 Biodiversity
NE/11 Flood Risk
NE/15 Noise Pollution
NE/16 Emissions
NE/17 Protecting High Quality Agricultural Land
CH/2 Archaeological Sites
TR/1 Planning for More Sustainable Travel

6. **Submission Local Plan (March 2014)**
S/7 Development Frameworks
HQ/1 Design Principles
NH/2 Protecting and Enhancing Landscape Character
NH/3 Protecting Agricultural Land
NH/4 Biodiversity
NH/8 Mitigating the Impact of Development in and adjoining the Green Belt
NH/14 Heritage Assets
CC/2 Renewable and Low Carbon Energy Generation
CC/6 Construction Methods
CC/9 Managing Flood Risk
SC/11 Noise Pollution
SC/12 Contaminated Land
TI/2 Planning for Sustainable Travel

7. **South Cambridgeshire LDF Supplementary Planning Documents (SPD):**
Trees & Development Sites SPD - Adopted January 2009
Landscape in New Developments SPD - Adopted March 2010
Biodiversity SPD - Adopted July 2009
District Design Guide SPD - Adopted March 2010

Consultation by South Cambridgeshire District Council as Local Planning Authority

Original Submission

8. **Melbourn Parish Council** – Recommends refusal and makes the following comments: -
i) Overdevelopment of this type of facility, if passed this will make 5 solar farms within 2km of Royston and Melbourn.
ii) We are concerned that there appears to be no reference to the involvement of District network Operators in this application which we believe may have relevance where there are several solar farms being fed in to the national grid in a small area.
iii) Little or no short or long term employment prospects or use of local contractors.

9. **Bassingbourn Parish Council** – Comments are awaited.

10. **Meldreth Parish Council** – Comments are awaited.

11. **North Herfordshire District Council** – Recommends that consultation is undertaken with Therfield Parish Council, the Conservators of Therfield Heath and Herfordshire County Council as the Local Highways Authority on the proposal and that account is taken of the views of the planning committee report and minutes from this Council when formulating a decision. Please see Appendix for a copy of the report and minutes.

12. **Royston Town Council** – Objects to the application and comments that it is inappropriate to site a solar farm within 100 metres of Royston as it is on one of the main gateways into the market town and would not improve the outlook of the town. It would be on prime agricultural land, in a prominent position and could be seen from Therfield Heath. The view from the Heath across the Cambridgeshire plain is important and should not be spoiled.

13. **Conservation Officer** – Comments are awaited.

14. **Ecology Officer** – Has some concerns and considers that the application needs to be improved to be able to recommend approval. Comments as follows: -
    i) The creation of bare ground buffer zones adjacent to the southern boundary and SSSI is welcomed. As this area does not contain any solar farm structures I see no reason why it should be enclosed within the security fencing. The fence line should be amended to prevent it encompassing the habitat buffer.
    ii) The Habitat Management Plan (HMP) states that the central ditch should be cleared to improve its habitats. I do not agree with this, the ditch never conveys water long enough for it to development a wetland interest. The scrub habitat that it currently has is locally more important in terms of representing a hedgerow and should be retained entirely as cover for animals. This statement should be removed from the HMP.
    iii) The site plan shows roads traversing the site. Can it please be confirmed that these roads will be simple grass tracks seeded with wildflower mixes so as not to look any different to other parts of the site. If not, a lot of land take between the arrays will become road.
    iv) The planting of hedges and gapping up of hedges is welcomed. The northern most point of this site has space that appears to be unused. Why can't some trees be planted here? They would not be shading the panels. Similar spaces exist along much of the northern boundary of the site and near to the ditch.
    v) The ditch appears to be entirely enclosed by security fencing. This is not acceptable as it is viewed as a wildlife corridor that enables animals to move from the STW towards the triangle soakaway area. Larger scale drawings may be required to show how the fencing can be arranged without enclosing the ditch. The security fencing should be moved back from the ditch to retain a wider corridor. This corridor should have further tree planting within it.
    vi) It is not clear within the HMP what is the difference between Management Area 1A and 1C, for example how would a taller growth be achieved in C compared to A when both are using the same seed mix on the same soil?
    vii) The HMP Fig1 has used wrong labelling. It make reference to "section E" being adjacent to the SSSI yet in the text I read this as "section B" this needs correcting.
    viii) The HMP states that section A is to be seeded with EM6 but does not clarify what the mix is for areas B and C.
    ix) The size of this site makes it suitable to use some different seed mixes in order to further increase gain for wildlife. For instance, the buffer planting at the west of the site could include bird seed mixes and/ or pollen rich mixes. Can consideration be given to this type of mix where it is away from the SSSI.

x) The section “additional measures” should remove reference to the pasque flower. This very rare plant will not colonise this site.

xi) We require full details of the fence lifting measures (such as drawing detailing the size and form of the gaps) and locations of where they are to be located. At other sites entire sections of fencing have been raised by ~200mm.

xii) I am unclear as to what the proposed cutting regime of section A is, can this please be specified.

xiii) The size of this site makes it suitable to house more than just 9 bat boxes and 10 bird boxes. For example, a barn owl or kestrel box could be erected at the rear of this site. More boxes, specifying the type please.

xiv) The section “ground preparation” states that the site will be soil stripped to reduce its fertility prior to seeding. This is welcomed, can the applicant please confirm where the spoil will be stored as it provides further habitat creation opportunities such as raised flower banks.

xv) The area has an extensive rabbit population. Rabbit control should also be included within the HMP otherwise the rabbits will reach problem numbers where they damage the establishing flora and adjacent crops.

xvi) During the establishment phase of the grassland it is necessary to keep the sward regularly topped in order to control annual weeds. I would expect the plan to include a statement recommending monthly topping of vegetation during the phase year of vegetation establishment.

xvii) There is no need to remove the collected grass cuttings from a site this big. Space should be found for their permanent stock piling in order to create breeding sites for animals such as grass snakes. A location near the ditch or triangle soakaway could be suitable.

xviii) Monitoring of the site is welcomed. The statement should also specify that a summary monitoring report will be provided to the LPA for their consideration. Ecological monitoring should continue on a 2 year basis for the duration of the project or until it is agreed that no further wildlife changes are occurring. The bat and bird boxes should be checked as part of the monitoring regime. The success of the seed mix establishment should be measured partly against the presence of those species contained within the mix and expected to be growing.

xix) The indicative management programme table of actions is a useful guide and will be fully reviewed once further amendments have been made to the HMP.

xx) The placement of wood and rubble piles beneath arrays across the site would aid the use of the site by small animals.

15. **Trees and Landscapes Officer** – Comments are awaited.

16. **Landscape Design Officer** – Has no objections subject to additional soft planting works to reduce the visual impact from the existing residential development to the South of the site and the Icknield Way Path to the North of the Site. The Habitat Management Plan (page 5) Ground Preparation –“top layer of soil should be removed to reduce fertility” this is highly unlikely to occur due to cost and should be removed from the document.

The proposed solar farm (S/1427/14/FL) at Royston Road, Melbourn will produce cumulative Landscape and visual impacts when combined with other proposed solar developments in the immediate area –
S/0098/14/FL South of Bury Farm, Bassingbourn
S/2616/13/FL Bury Lane Fruit Farm, Meldreth
S/1898/14/FL Muncey’s Farm, Melbourn
S/1902/14/FL Black Peak Farm, Melbourn (less effects)

i) Landscape Effects

The application site and the three adjacent proposed solar sites lie an average of 1000m apart, and if all constructed will take a significant portion (approximately 20%-25%) of the existing farmland between Bassingbourn, Melbourn and Royston. A change of land use and character– from agricultural to semi-industrial - on this scale can be assessed as significant cumulative landscape effects.

ii) Visual Effects

Direct combined visual effects - where two or more of the developments will be visible in a single view - are likely to be limited by distance and the presence of other landscape features (eg vegetation and the built areas of Royston)

Direct combined views will be possible from the SSSI Heathland to the south of Royston, and particularly the long Barrow SAM area. Here Bury Farm, the Application site and Muncey's Farm will be visible at distances of between 1Km and 3KM. Impacts will be lessened by distance and the industrial areas at the edge of Royston which lie between the Heathland and the Application site. They will remain significant and visible features in the landscape however as views from the heath are valued, and the receptors (walkers, horse riders etc) are considered to be sensitive to changes in the views.

Direct combined visual effects will be available from the railway heading north-east, although the receptors (train passengers) will be less sensitive to change.

Cumulative visual effects in succession – where the viewer has to turn his/her head to see the various developments.

Successive visual impacts will be experienced from several locations including the A1198 the A10 and the railway, although again significance could be said to be low due to distance and the low sensitivity of receptors.

Sequential cumulative visual effects are likely to be more significant in this area. Sequential effects occur when the receptor has to move to another viewpoint or moves along regularly used routes such as major roads or popular paths.

Sequential effects were not considered in the applicants LVIA.

Sequential effects will be highly noticeable to travellers on the A505 and on the railway, experiencing views to two or more developments in quick succession.

The most significant visual effects however will be experienced by travellers on local footpaths and rights of way such as the Hamcarlow Way where walkers and horse riders will pass close to Bury Farm, the application site and Bury Lane Fruit Farm developments within a 3KM walk. The developments will form an appreciable part of the view, and it will be obvious that this area of landscape has been changed.

iii) Mitigation

It will not be possible to completely mitigate the landscape and visual effects of the application site and the other proposed developments. The rising land, views from elevated positions and the time taken for any proposed screening to take effect (5-10 years estimated) mean that the development will remain highly visible in the landscape for a number of years. The Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact

Assessment (Third Edition) notes that developments with a life expectancy of over 10 years should be regarded as 'long term'.

In view of the above I would suggest the following:-

a) Proposed solar development in this area of South Cambridgeshire has now reached its limit, and that further solar developments close to the application site will be difficult to accommodate.
b) The application site and other local developments will require a robust and carefully implemented and well maintained landscape scheme to sit comfortably in the landscape.
c) Suggest the following additions to the applicants points on the submitted mitigation plan:
    - Points 1:3, 2.2 and 2.4 – More planting is needed – more of a narrow woodland block than a hedgerow.
    - Points 2.3 and 2.7 – Do not appear to be under applicant's control. Alternatives needed?
    - Point 1.4 – Significant large tree planting to the east of this site – there is space and will mitigate direct views to rising land from the A505.
    - Point 2.6 – This needs to be a strong hedgerow with regular hedgerow trees within it.

17. **Environmental Health Officer** – Comments are awaited.

18. **Contaminated Land Officer** –Comments that a condition in relation to a contamination investigation is not required but agrees to allow for gas venting in any small structures on the site as a precautionary measure.

19. **Local Highway Authority** – Comments are awaited.

20. **Environment Agency** – Objects to the application as the Flood Risk Assessment is not acceptable. Comments that there are some reservations regarding surface water drainage from solar panel farms as they are relatively new and have no long term management records to date.

    In general, a field with impermeable panels in it is going to behave differently to an agricultural field without panels. Although the site is considered to be within Flood Zone 1, we have some concerns regarding the surface water drainage proposals. The soils in the area proposed for the panels are understood to be relatively permeable. However, the site slopes down from south-east to north-west by at least 15 metres. Where a solar development is proposed, the FRA is expected to take account of site specific conditions, including the area of the site, soil conditions, the rainfall catchment and the design of the development to determine any impacts on flood risk. The submitted FRA does consider most of these aspects.

    However, there is the potential for drainage patterns on site to change as a result of the solar development. The main change could be that surface water run-off is concentrated on certain parts of the site as it falls from the panels themselves which will be arranged in long, linear rows across the site. Due to the way the panels are angled, the water could run down the hill slope, creating flow routes and pooling at the bottom of the slope. There is no evidence to date to suggest that these flow routes will always occur but there has been at least one solar farm drainage failure in the area and a precautionary approach should be considered. Due to the relatively steep contours across the site it is felt that surface water drainage should be incorporated. It is considered that any changes to drainage patterns on site could be mitigated by swales/french drains and scrapes created on and/or across the site, which will help to intercept rainwater and slow down any concentrated flows on site,

in the event that preferential flow routes are created or rivulets form. A retention basin or pond at the bottom of the hill slope would help to collect the surface water run-off. Another option is to have grass under the solar panels, but an inspection regime would be needed to ensure the grass is maintained but a pond, swale or equivalent would be the preferred method.

Any Drainage Strategy should be dynamic so that it can be refined over time and include an inspection regime.

21. **English Heritage** – Comments that the application should be determined in accordance with national and local policy guidance and the on the basis of the Council's specialist conservation advice.

22. **Cambridgeshire County Council Historic Environment Team** –Comments are awaited.

23. **Cambridgeshire County Council Rights of Way Team** – Comments are awaited.

24. **Natural England** – Comments that the application it is satisfied that the development would not damage or destroy the interest features of the Holland Hall (Melbourn) Railway Cutting Site of Special Scientific Interest.

Considers that the proposed development is unlikely to lead to significant and irreversible long term loss of best and most versatile agricultural land, as a resource for future generations. This is because the solar panels would be secured to the ground by steel piles with limited soil disturbance and could be removed in the future with no permanent loss of agricultural land quality likely to occur provided the development is undertaken to high standards. Although some components of the development, such as construction of a sub-station, may permanently affect agricultural land this would be limited to small areas. In the short-term we recognise that it is likely that there will be a loss of potential agricultural production over the whole development area. Comments that the Authority should consider whether the proposals involve any smaller scale or temporary losses of BMV agricultural land with reference to Paragraph 112 of the National Planning Policy Framework.

Solar farm developments offer excellent opportunities to create new habitats, and especially "priority habitats" listed under s41 of the NERC Act 2006. In particular, solar farms are ideally suited to creating new grassland habitats, which can be created among the rows of solar panels. If not already provided, the applicant should be encouraged to prepare a habitat creation plan (which should include measures to create suitable soil conditions / arable reversion techniques), suggested species mix for sowing, and details of how new habitats will be managed (e.g. grazing / mowing). Other priority habitats that could be created or enhanced depending on site conditions are hedgerows, ponds, and arable field margins. We suggest that a habitat creation plan also references any existing local sites recognised for their nature conservation interest, such as SSSIs and Local Wildlife Sites.

The application may provide opportunities to incorporate features into the design which are beneficial to wildlife, such as the incorporation of roosting opportunities for bats or the installation of bird nest boxes. The Authority should consider securing measures to enhance the biodiversity of the site from the applicant, if it is minded to grant permission for this application in accordance with Paragraph 118 of the National Planning Policy Framework.

The application may provide opportunities to enhance the character and local distinctiveness of the surrounding natural and built environment; use natural

resources more sustainably; and bring benefits for the local community, for example through green space provision and access to and contact with nature. Landscape characterisation and townscape assessments, and associated sensitivity and capacity assessments provide tools for planners and developers to consider new development and ensure that it makes a positive contribution in terms of design, form and location, to the character and functions of the landscape and avoids any unacceptable impacts.

25. **Campaign to Protect Rural England** – Objects to the application on the grounds that there are concerns that the cumulative effect of this proposal with the Bassingbourn proposal (S/0098/14/FL) would lead to a reduction in visual amenity of the countryside north of the bypass when viewed from Therfield Heath, an area of Common Land of at least sub-regional importance for recreation. Comments that the viewpoint in the Landscape and Visual Impact assessment from Therfield Heath is at a low point and away from much of the Common Land and the Hertfordshire Way that runs along the southern edge of the heath. The heath sits on sharply rising land and the bypass is prominent in views northwards and north eastwards. Any land hungry artificial structures such as solar farms arrays would be conspicuous in and detrimental to views of land north of the A505 because they will be as an entirely alien feature extending into open countryside when viewed from the heath. The solar farm would also result in the long term loss of grade 2 agricultural land that is among the best and most versatile in the country.

26. **Highways Agency** – Has no objections.

27. **Network Rail** – Comments that it is satisfied that the development would not cause any glint or glare issues in regards to the adjacent railway. However, requests informatives in relation to drainage, fencing and landscaping.

Representations by members of the public

28. One letter of objection has been received from a resident of Melbourn that considers the location inappropriate on the edge of Royston, that the Authority has already authorised more than a sufficient number of solar farms recently, loss of precious agricultural land, vandalism of the countryside and .

Material Planning Considerations

29. The key issues to consider in the determination of this application are whether the principle of development is acceptable in the countryside and impact of the development upon the character and appearance of the area, the setting of heritage assets, biodiversity, ecology, archaeology, flood risk, highway safety, neighbour amenity and public footpaths.

Principle of Development in the Countryside

30. The proposal represents a major development for the generation of renewable energy and as such receives considerable support from national and local planning policy.

31. Nationally the NPPF has as one of its 12 core principles the requirement to support renewable resources. Reference is made throughout the NPPF to the support of sustainable development and renewable energy whilst paragraph 98 clarifies that applications for energy development ought not to be required to demonstrate the need for renewable energy.

32. The Government's commitment to electricity generation by renewable sources is set out in the Renewable Energy Strategy, and in particular the target that 15% of national electricity production should be derived from renewable sources by 2020. This target has been maintained under the Coalition Government.

33. Locally the development plan comprises the adopted Core Strategy and Development Control Policies DPD. The Core Strategy has as two of its four objectives the effective protection and enhancement of the environment, and the prudent use of natural resources. Policy DP/7 of the Development Control Policies DPD states that outside village frameworks, only development for agriculture, horticulture, forestry, outdoor recreation and other uses that need to be located in the countryside will be permitted. Policy NE/2 relates to renewable energy and advises the district council will support proposals to generate energy from renewable sources subject to compliance with general sustainable development principles and additionally be able to connect efficiently to existing infrastructure and for provision to be made for the removal of facilities from site should the facility cease to be operational.

34. The site is located within the countryside. The installation of a solar farm is considered to represent appropriate development within the countryside providing that there are no suitable brownfield sites available in the area of the scale required and the proposal would not result in the permanent loss of high quality agricultural land.

Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land

35. The site covers 26.6 hectares of arable land. Natural England states that the site has an agricultural land classification of grade 2 (very good).

36. Whilst the use of brownfield or previously developed land is considered more appropriate and the preference for the development of solar farms rather than greenfield land as per the application site, it is difficult to find such land available that could accommodate the scale of the development and have low land values to enable the scheme to be commercially viable. The whole of the district comprises grade 2 and 3 agricultural land so it would be difficult to contribute to renewable energy in the area without the use of some of this land. A sequential study has been submitted that has assessed a significant number of sites in the area. Brownfield and previously developed land sites have been ruled out for reasons such as allocations for new development and existing uses. Lower grade agricultural land sites have all been ruled out for reasons such as a having a greater rural character, more open landscape, undulating topography, orientation to the north, limited area of land, effects upon the setting of villages, existing uses, the presence of residential properties, the proximity to footpaths, significant environmental constraints such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest and listed buildings, and higher risk flood zones. Without the use of greenfield land, the district would not be able to contribute towards the renewable energy targets set out by the government.

37. Furthermore, the proposal is not considered to result in the irreversible loss of this land given that it could be returned to its original agricultural use when there is no further need for the development. The land would be laid to grass on the site and although it is noted that it would not be cropped, there will be the opportunity to use the land for sheep grazing or biodiversity gain to retain the agricultural use throughout the life of the development.

Character and Appearance of the Area

38. The site currently consists of open arable land. Whilst it is noted that the introduction of a significant scale arrays of solar panels and buildings would substantially change the character and appearance of the landscape from being open and rural in character to being industrialised in character, it is unlikely to have adverse visual impact from the main public viewpoints surrounding the site. This is as a result of the low height and new planting that is proposed along the boundaries to screen the development and mitigate its impact upon the landscape from close views from the A505 and location adjacent the town of Royston and screening from longer distance views on Therfield Heath.

39. The nearest approved solar farms to the site where the cumulative impact of the development needs to be taken into consideration are at Bassingbourn and Meldreth. There are also two current applications for solar farms in Melbourn that need to be taken into account. It is clear from the Landscape Officer's comments that the development would be viewed cumulatively with the other solar farms in the area from public viewpoints on Therfield Heath and the Harcamlow Way. Although these impacts cannot be completely mitigated, the development is considered acceptable due to the longer distance views and siting on the edge of Royston providing there is a robust landscaping scheme. This would be a condition of any consent.

40. The site is located within the East Anglian Chalk Landscape Character Area. The distinctive features of this area are the gently undulating arable landscape with large fields bounded by hedges and occasional small groups of woodland. Although the development is not necessarily compatible with the existing landscape qualities of the area as the open arable landscape would be lost, the development would retain some of the the characteristic features and provide additional planting that would be designed to ensure it is in keeping with the visual qualities of the area. The development is unlikely to have an unacceptable impact upon landscape character.

Heritage Assets

41. The site is not located in close proximity to any listed buildings or conservation areas and the nearest Scheduled Ancient Monument is situated a significant distance away. The development is not therefore considered to harm any heritage assets.

42. The comments of the Cambridgeshire Historic Environment Team are awaited but given the approach taken with similar developments in the district, it is likely that an archeological evaluation of the site will be required prior to the determination of any application to ensure that the development would not result in the loss of any important archaeological remains. Any recommendation is therefore subject to this evaluation unless indicated that a condition would be justified for an investigation post the decision but prior to the commencement of any development.

Biodiversity

43. The site is located immediately adjacent the Holland Hall (Melbourn) Railway Cutting Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The habitats on the site comprise a mixture of arable land, grassland, trees, hedgerows and a ditch.

44. The habitats on the site are considered of low ecological value. The ditch on the site is dry and not considered to provide a suitable habitat for species such as the Great Crested Newt or water vole. The trees and hedgerow would contain a suitable habitat for bats and birds and these would be retained within the development. The

grassland may support reptiles but no evidence was found on the site. There was evidence of badger activity on the site and

45. The development would include mitigation measures such as a 30 metre wide buffer adjacent the SSSI and 8 metre buffer between the fence and hedgerows, fence gaps to allow the movement of wildlife, native tree and hedgerow planting, wildflower seeding and grassland strips. Any clearance of vegetation would also take place outside the bird nesting season. Any open excavation and materials stored on the site would be covered overnight to prevent use by badgers.

46. Additional information has been submitted to address the Ecology officer's concerns. This includes a revised Biodiversity Management Plan. The amendments to the scheme are likely to be satisfactory and would lead to the protection of the features of the habitats on the site and the adjacent Site and Special Scientific Interest and increase biodiversity interest on the site. However, confirmation on the acceptability of the scheme is awaited from the Ecology Officer.

Landscaping/Trees

47. The development would be unlikely to result in the loss of any important trees or hedges that contribute to the visual amenity of the area providing a condition is attached to any consent for protection purposes. A significant landscaping scheme would also be attached as a condition of any consent in order to mitigate the impact of the development upon its surroundings.

Flood Risk

48. The site is located within Flood Zone 1 (low risk). A ditch runs through the site along the boundary between the eastern and western fields.

49. The comments of the Environment Agency are acknowledged and additional information has been submitted to address its concerns in relation to surface water drainage at the site along with mitigation measures in the form a swale/filter drain alongside each road that would intercept overland flows and a swale at the bottom of the site that will intercept any overland flow and divert any water to a 5 metre wide detention/infiltration basin in the north west corner of the site. This scheme is likely to be satisfactory and the development would not result in an increase in the risk of flooding to the site and surrounding area. However, confirmation that the surface water drainage measures are acceptable is awaited from the Environment Agency.

Highway Safety

50. Access to the site during and after construction would be via the existing access to the sewage works off the A505 Royston bypass. This is a dual carriageway with a speed limit of 70 miles per hour. There is a slip road with a sharp left turn. The access route to the site during construction is likely to be on main roads such as the A505 and A10 and it would be unlikely that vehicles would need to travel through nearby towns and villages.

51. During construction, the traffic generation is estimated at a maximum of 83 HGV movements per day. There would also be movements from site personnel. When construction is complete, the traffic generation to maintain the development is estimated at one or two visits every quarter. Whilst it is acknowledged that there would be a significant number of traffic movements during the construction period, this would be in the short term and the development is not considered to result in a level of traffic generation to and from the site that would be detrimental to highway

safety given the capacity of the road, position of the access and visibility, the route taken to the site and the management of the traffic to the site. However, confirmation of the acceptability of the access is awaited from Hertfordshire County Council as the Local Highways Authority. A condition would be attached to any consent to agree the details set out in the Construction Traffic Management Plan.

52. A temporary compound would be provided on site for vehicles to park off the public highway during the construction period.

Residential Amenity

53. The site is located a significant distance from the nearest residential properties and is not considered to result in a loss of amenity. No Noise Impact Assessment is required to be submitted with the application as the low noise levels from the development would not be audible outside the site area.

Conclusion

54. The development is of a kind that receives very considerable support in national and local planning policy and that, following the guidance in the National Planning Policy Framework there must be a strong presumption in favour of it.

55. The proposal would have an impact on the countryside but this is not considered to be unacceptable adverse visual impact that would harm the character and appearance of the area as the development would be satisfactorily mitigated by additional landscaping. The development is also not considered to harm landscape character, significantly damage the setting of heritage assets, destroy important archaeological evidence, result in the loss of important trees and hedges, harm biodiversity interests, increase flood risk, be detrimental to highway safety or adversely affect the amenities of neighbours.

56. Therefore, on balance, the benefits of the scheme in respect of renewable energy production are considered to outweigh any harm from the visual impact and temporary loss of agricultural productivity.

Recommendation

57. It is recommended that the Planning Committee grants officers delegated powers to approve the application (as amended) subject to the comments of the Environment Agency, Local Highways Authority, Cambridgeshire County Council Historic Environment Team and Ecology Officer and the following conditions and informatives:

Conditions

i) The development hereby permitted shall be begun before the expiration of 3 years from the date of this permission.
(Reason - To ensure that consideration of any future application for development in the area will not be prejudiced by permissions for development, which have not been acted upon.)

ii) The development hereby permitted shall be carried out in accordance with the following approved plans: Drawing numbers to be confirmed.
(Reason - To facilitate any future application to the Local Planning Authority under Section 73 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.)

iii) The development, hereby permitted, shall be removed and the land restored to its former condition or to a condition to be agreed in writing by the Local Planning Authority on or before 25 years of the date of the first operational use of the development in accordance with a scheme of work submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority.
(Reason - Approval of the proposal on a permanent basis would be contrary to Policy NE/2 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007 and the land should be reinstated to facilitate future beneficial use.)

iv) All development must be removed from site within 6 months of the solar farm ceasing to be operational.
(Reason - The application site lies in the open countryside and it is important that once the development has ceased the site is brought back into a full agricultural use in accordance with the provisions of the NPPF and policy NE/2 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007.)

v) No development shall take place until full details of both hard and soft landscape works have been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. These details shall include indications of all existing trees and hedgerows on the land and details of any to be retained, together with measures for their protection in the course of development. The details shall also include specification of all proposed trees, hedges and shrub planting, which shall include details of species, density and size of stock.
(Reason - To ensure the development is satisfactorily assimilated into the area and enhances biodiversity in accordance with Policies DP/2 and NE/6 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007.)

vi) All hard and soft landscape works shall be carried out in accordance with the approved details. The works shall be carried out prior to the occupation of any part of the development or in accordance with a programme agreed in writing with the Local Planning Authority. If within a period of five years from the date of the planting, or replacement planting, any tree or plant is removed, uprooted or destroyed or dies, another tree or plant of the same species and size as that originally planted shall be planted at the same place, unless the Local Planning Authority gives its written consent to any variation.
(Reason - To ensure the development is satisfactorily assimilated into the area and enhances biodiversity in accordance with Policies DP/2 and NE/6 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007.)

vii) In this condition "retained tree" means an existing tree which is to be retained in accordance with the approved plans and particulars; and paragraphs (a) and (b) below shall have effect until the expiration of 5 years from [the date of the first occupation of the dwellings hereby approved].

(a) No retained tree shall be cut down, uprooted or destroyed, nor shall any retained tree be topped or lopped other than in accordance with the approved plans and particulars, without the written approval of the Local Planning Authority. Any topping or lopping approved shall be carried out in accordance with the relevant British Standard.

(b) If any retained tree is removed, uprooted or destroyed or dies, another tree shall be planted at the same place and that tree shall be of such size and species, and shall be planted at such time, as may be specified in writing by the Local Planning Authority.

(c) The erection of fencing for the protection of any retained tree shall be undertaken in accordance with the approved plans and particulars before any equipment, machinery or materials are brought on to the site for the purposes of the development, and shall be maintained until all equipment, machinery and surplus materials have been removed from the site. Nothing shall be stored or placed in any area fenced in accordance with this condition and the ground levels within those areas shall not be altered, nor shall any excavation be made, without the written consent of the Local Planning Authority.

(Reason - To protect trees which are to be retained in order to enhance the development, biodiversity and the visual amenities of the area in accordance with Policies DP/1 and NE/6 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007.)

viii) Prior to the commencement of any development, a scheme for the provision and implementation of surface water drainage including monitoring arrangements shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The scheme shall be constructed and completed in accordance with the approved plans prior to the occupation of any part of the development or in accordance with the implementation programme agreed in writing with the Local Planning Authority.
(Reason - To ensure a satisfactory method of surface water drainage and to prevent the increased risk of flooding in accordance with Policies DP/1 and NE/11 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007.)

ix) The development shall be carried out in accordance with the Traffic Management Plan reference (to be confirmed).
(Reason - In the interests of highway safety in accordance with Policy DP/3 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007.)

x) The development shall be carried out in accordance with the Biodiversity Management Plan reference (to be confirmed).
(Reason - To achieve biodiversity enhancement on the site in accordance with adopted Policies DP/1, DP/3 and NE/6 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007.)

xi) No development shall take place on the application site until the implementation of a programme of archaeological work has been secured in accordance with a written scheme of investigation which has been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority.
(Reason - To secure the provision of archaeological excavation and the subsequent recording of the remains in accordance with Policy CH/2 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007.)

xii) No external lighting shall be provided or installed within the site other than in accordance with a scheme which has been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority.
(Reason -To minimise the effects of light pollution on the surrounding area in accordance with Policy NE/14 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007.)

Background Papers: the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report:

- South Cambridgeshire Local Development Framework Development Control Policies DPD 2007

- South Cambridgeshire Local Plan Submission March 2014
- South Cambridgeshire Supplementary Planning Documents
- National Planning Policy Framework 2012
- Planning File Reference S/1427/14/FL, S/0098/14/FL, S/2616/13/FL, S/1898/14/FL & S/1902/14/FL

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