

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Planning Committee

5 November 2014

AUTHOR/S: Planning and New Communities Director

Application Number: S/1687/14/FL

Parish(es): THRILOW

Proposal: Solar Farm and Associated Development

Site address: Land to the East of Church Street

Applicant(s): G.R. Smith

Recommendation: Delegated Approval

Key material considerations: Green Belt
Countryside
Landscape Character
Heritage Assets
Archaeology
Ecology
Biodiversity
Trees and Landscaping
Flood Risk
Public Footpaths

Committee Site Visit: No.

Departure Application: Yes

Presenting Officer: Karen Pell-Coggins

Application brought to Committee because: Major Application of Local Interest

Date by which decision due: 12 November 2014

Executive Summary

1. This proposal is for a new 8.5 MW solar farm with associated equipment covering an area of approximately 32.43 hectares of agricultural land located in the Green Belt and on grades 3A and 3B agricultural land to the east of the village of Thriplow. The proposal would represent inappropriate development that is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt in policy terms. It would also have an impact on the Green Belt and 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 result in the loss of the best and most versatile agricultural land, 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. However, renewable energy development receives very considerable support in national and local planning policy. The proposal would power approximately 2500 homes and offset 3650 tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions that would increase the supply of renewable energy to reduce the impact of climate change. Therefore, on balance, the public benefits of the scheme in respect of renewable energy production are considered represent very special circumstances that outweigh the harm to the Green Belt through inappropriateness due to encroachment and a loss of openness in addition to other limited visual harm.

Site and Proposal

2. The site is located outside of any village framework and within the Green Belt and countryside. It measures approximately 32.43 hectares in area and is situated within the East Anglian Chalk Landscape Character Area on grades 3A and 3B (good to moderate) agricultural land. The site consists of four fields to the east of Church Street. The topography is gently undulating. The fields are separated by hedges and a hedge runs along the southern boundary. The eastern edge of the site has a number of shallow depressions. A large area of woodland lies beyond. The northern and eastern boundaries are mainly open. The site is situated 600 metres to the east of the village of Thriplow that comprises a conservation area and a number of listed buildings including the grade II* listed St Georges Church, and 300 metres to the north west of the village of Heathfield and the North Camp of Duxford Imperial War Museum site that comprises a conservation area and a number of listed buildings. It lies immediately to the west of the Thriplow Peat Holes and Thriplow Hummocky Fields Sites of Special Scientific Interest. It also lies 175 metres to the west of the Roman Settlement South of Chronicle Hills Scheduled Ancient Monument and 750 metres to the south east of the Enclosures and Linear Trackways of Newton Scheduled Ancient Monument. Public rights of way (bridleways) run along The Drift through the centre of the site, along the southern boundary of the site, and along part of the eastern boundary of the site. The Hoffer Brook and Thriplow Pit angling pond is situated to the east. The site lies within flood zones 1, 2 and 3 (low, medium, and high risk). The land falls gently to the south east.
3. This full planning application, received on 13 August 2014 as amended, proposes the installation of 8.5MW of solar photovoltaic panels along with transformer buildings, inverter buildings, a DNO building, client substation, a communications building, a site transformer, a storage building, access tracks, security fence and pole mounted CCTV cameras for a temporary period of 30 years. The photovoltaic panels would be mounted on steel frames that are angled at 25 degrees to face south. There would be arrays of panels running east to west across the site. They would have a maximum height of approximately 1.8 metres and be set 4.1 metres apart. Access tracks would be provided along the western boundary and within the fields. Within the site there would be a group of three inverter and transformer buildings to serve the panels. The transformer buildings would measure 6.1 metres in length x 2.5 metres in width x 2.6 metres in height. The inverter buildings would measure 5.6 metres in length x 1.3 metres in width x 2.3 metres in height. The DNO building, client switch room building, a communications building, a site transformer and a storage building would be situated in the north western corner of the site. The DNO building would measure 4.4 metres in length x 3.9 metres in width x 3 metres in height. The client switchroom building would measure 4.4 metres in length x 3.9 metres in width x 23 metres in height. The communications building would measure 7.2 metres in length x 3 metres in width x 2.4 metres in height. The site transformer would measure 6.1 metres in

length x 2.5 metres in width x 2.6 metres in height. The storage building would measure 3 metres in length x 2.5 metres in width x 2.6 metres in height. A security fence that measures 2 metres in height and consists of timber posts with steel deer fencing would surround the site. A number of CCTV poles at a height of 3 metres would be erected around the perimeter of the site. Access to the site would be via the existing access to KWS off Gravel Pit Hill. The solar farm will connect to an existing substation to the north close to Newton.

Planning History

5. S/2090/13/FL - Solar Farm and Associated Development - Withdrawn
S/1883/13/EI - Screening Opinion for Solar Farm - EIA not required.

Planning Policy

6. **South Cambridgeshire Local Development Framework (LDF) Core Strategy, adopted January 2007**
ST/1 Green Belt
7. **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
GB/1 Development in the Green Belt
GB/2 Mitigating the Impact of Development in the Green Belt
NE/2 Renewable Energy
NE/4 Landscape Character Areas
NE/6 Biodiversity
NE/7 Sites of Biodiversity or Geological Importance
NE/11 Flood Risk
NE/14 Lighting Proposals
NE/15 Noise Pollution
NE/16 Emissions
NE/17 Protecting High Quality Agricultural Land
CH/2 Archaeological Sites
CH/4 Development Within the Setting of a Listed Building
CH/5 Conservation Areas
TR/1 Planning for More Sustainable Travel
TR/2 Car and Cycle Parking Standards
8. **Proposed Submission Local Plan (July 2013)**
S/4 Cambridge Green Belt
S/7 Development Frameworks
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/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

TI/2 Planning for Sustainable Travel
TI/3 Parking Provision

9. **South Cambridgeshire LDF Supplementary Planning Documents (SPD):**
Development Affecting Conservation Areas SPD - Adopted January 2009
Listed Buildings SPD - Adopted July 2009
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

10. **Thriplow Parish Council** – Recommends approval and makes the following comments: -

“Thriplow Parish Council has held an extraordinary parish council meeting at which members of the public were given an opportunity to speak and ask questions. These questions were directed at representatives from the site owners who were present. Unfortunately the developers were not represented.

The prevailing mood of the members of the public, who attended the meeting, was not in favour of the application.

Thriplow Parish Council is, at present, depleted by the recent resignation of two parish councillors reducing it to 7 instead of the usual 9. Of the 7 remaining members, 1 councillor could not be present whilst another declared an interest and took no part in the proceedings.

The remaining parish councillors gave the following views:

One councillor was not against the application. She did not find it to be offensive. It does mean that there will be no houses on the site for the next 25 years. She believes there is more noise from the A505 and other roads than there will be from the site. She also took note that of the 800+ eligible to attend the meeting only some 12 had come along. She felt that there was not a big enough number present to persuade her of a majority against the project and voted to recommend acceptance.

Another councillor said that he generally supported the principle of solar farms and found the arguments opposing it unconvincing. He voted to recommend acceptance provided there is a provision for a community benefit.

Another councillor agreed that the proposal was not too offensive. The part of the proposal south of The Drift would only be visible from Heathfield. It will be difficult to see anything from the village north of The Drift. He is in favour of the principle of solar farms and recognises the need for renewable energy. They are the best way of getting it. He is opposed to wind farms. Solar farms blend in much better. After 25 years the area will revert to agricultural land. He voted to recommend acceptance.

Another councillor is against the proposal and voted not to recommend acceptance. The area is Green Belt land and valuable as such. These spaces are needed and should be kept. Both settled parts of the parish look out onto Green Belt land Thriplow looks out onto the land and Heathfield backs onto it.

The remaining councillor said that he has not changed his mind since the last meeting to discuss the previous proposal. He said that in his opinion the proposal will not enhance the area by making it more attractive or accessible. The proposal cannot improve it. He is also concerned about what happens at the end of the life of the development and the return of the land to its present state. He would be happier if there was a guarantee of this by way of a Sinking Fund. The proposed hedges would not screen the development for at least 8 years. Why is a hawthorn hedge proposed. He would like a more suitable hedge bearing in mind the elevation. He cannot see a solar farm would improve and have a positive impact upon the area. The Green Belt is there to protect the area.

Thriplow Parish Council decided by 3 to 2 to recommend acceptance of the proposal.”

11. **Whittlesford Parish Council** – Has no recommendation and comments that the outcome of the Thriplow PC meeting is awaited.
12. **Conservation Officer** – Comments are awaited.
13. **Ecology Officer** – Comments that an ecological assessment of the site has been undertaken and much consideration appears to have been given to the conservation of the rare grass poly plant and nationally rare fairy shrimp. The habitat creation measures would deliver habitat gain for the the two important species and other aspects of biodiversity conservation subject to a site wide ecology management plan. The application has been improved from the previously submitted plan and a condition should be attached to any consent to secure the proposed mitigation measures.
14. **Trees and Landscapes Officer** – Has no objections in principle to the proposal and comments that the tree report of Hayden’s arboricultural consultants of 17 September 2013 is a trustworthy source of data on the trees and any strategy for the protection of trees within that report should be followed.
15. **Landscape Design Officer** – Comments are awaited.
16. **Environmental Health Officer** – Comments that the development would not have significant adverse impacts upon neighbours through noise and disturbance.
17. **Contaminated Land Officer** –Comments that a condition in relation to a contamination investigation is not required.
18. **Local Highway Authority** – Requests a routing agreement that shows the site will only be accessed via the existing private access to KWS from Gravel Pit Hill that is served by a priority junction off the A505. Also requires any damage to highway verges to be repaired.
19. **Environment Agency** – Has no objections and comments that the Flood Risk Assessment is satisfactory. Confirms that the impact upon groundwater levels to the adjacent Site of Special Scientific Interest is acceptable. Requires conditions to ensure that the development is carried out in accordance with the mitigation measures in the Flood Risk Assessment and works within the vicinity of its pipeline. Also requests an informative in relation to habitat enhancement.
20. **English Heritage** – Comments that the development would not cause harm to the significance of heritage assets in the vicinity notably the grade II* listed St George

Church in Thriplow subject to the retention of a gap in the hedge along The Drift near Hoffer Brook to maintain the view towards the church. It would also not harm the setting of the Roman Settlement South of Chronicle Hills Scheduled Ancient Monument.

21. **Cambridgeshire County Council Historic Environment Team** – Comments that the site is undergoing an archaeological evaluation and there is a localised presence of archaeological features in one part of the site. Has no objections in principle but further information in relation to mitigation measures is required before confirmation of details. Requests a condition to be attached to any consent.
22. **Cambridgeshire County Council Rights of Way Team** – Comments that Public Bridleway No.4 Thriplow runs through the middle of application site, Bridleway No.7 runs alongside the eastern edge of the site and Bridleway No.8 runs along the southern boundary.

The planning layout shows that the applicant intends to plant additional hedges alongside these bridleways to reduce visual impacts of the development. Welcomes this measure and would like this to be made a planning condition if this application is granted. Aware of a horseriding group who have expressed concern about the possibility of glare from the solar panels startling horses. Points out that it will take a number of years for hedges to grow to a suitable height to shield the development from horse riders, horses and other path users. Requests that temporary fencing with shielding netting is erected alongside all Bridleways and these are maintained until the hedges are of suitable state to shield users from the visual impact of the solar farm. Requests that all hedgerows are planted at the very least 1.5 metres away from the edge of the bridleway, and would appreciate that these hedges are planted as far back as possible to reduce any “boxed in” feeling for any users of these Bridleways. We would be happy to assist the applicant if they require any clarification of the extent of these Bridleways on the ground. Requests these distances to be included as planning conditions if the application is granted.

The proposal uses a section of Bridleway No.8 as part of the site access. The site is going to take considerable numbers of heavy construction vehicle movements to construct. The planning application does not make reference to Bridleway No.8 so the applicant is reminded of the position of this Public Right of Way. Sharing this bridleway with construction traffic is going to generate some conflict with users. The surface of Bridleway No.8 is concrete and is may be able to withstand this additional usage for a short period. Nonetheless, it is an offence to damage the surface of a Public Right of Way, and the applicant should repair any damage caused to the Bridleway if this occurs. Notes that the applicant is proposing to plant additional shielding alongside this bridleway to reduce visual impacts. Welcome this measure and again requests that these are planted 1.5 metres away from the edge of the Bridleway edge.

Bridleway No.4 passes through the centre of the development site and construction vehicles will need to cross. Along with Bridleway No.8 requests that traffic management measures are included on all construction access and crossing points during the construction works so that the public can continue to have safe prioritised passage. The nearby fishing lake also Bridleways No. 4 & 7 for site access; it is understood that they pay a commuted sum towards the upkeep of this Bridleway for vehicular access. Invites the applicant to consider a similar contribution towards future maintenance of all the Bridleways.

23. **British Horse Society** – Comments are awaited.

24. **Natural England** – Comments that the development would not damage or destroy the interest features of the Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI's). Although the Thriplow Peat Holes SSSI borders the site to the east, a 75 metre buffer is likely to ensure that works would not adversely affect the interest features. A plant (grass poly) listed under Schedule 8 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, as amended, associated with the Thriplow Hummocky fields SSSI is present on the site. The mitigation measures appear well considered and would be likely to result in a minor beneficial situation for this species through the improvement of its habitat. However, there are issues that need to be clarified in relation to the law and licensing. There are no concerns in relation to the fairy shrimp which were not found during the survey, but the mitigation measures would support the species if its moves onto the site in the future. The Phase 1 survey carried out in accordance with best practice guidelines and there are no concerns in relation to breeding or farmland birds, great crested newts, bats, reptiles or other protected species providing all mitigation is carried out as suggested. The application may provide opportunity to incorporate features into the design that are beneficial to wildlife such as bird and bat boxes.

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.

25. **Campaign for the Protection of Rural England** – Objects to the application on the grounds that the site is in the Green Belt and it is not an acceptable use for the land, the business interests of the applicant are not a very special circumstance, would result in the introduction of an alien feature that would urbanise the countryside and lead to a loss of openness that would undermine the function of the Green Belt and the rural setting of Cambridge, and loss of amenity to public footpaths.
26. **IWM Duxford** – Comments that some items in the Glint and Glare Report are incorrect and are made without confirmation with IWM Duxford. There are minor risks in relation to reflection and this could lead to a distraction to pilots if not briefed (air displays).

Representations by members of the public

27. 48 letters have been received from residents of the local area that object to the application for the following reasons: -
- i) Scale and height of development;
 - ii) Inappropriate development in the Green Belt and no exceptional circumstances;
 - iii) Visual impact, encroachment and loss of openness to Green Belt and landscape;
 - iv) Amenity of footpaths and bridleways;
 - v) Safety issues from access via footpath and bridleway and obstruction;
 - vi) Impact upon surface of public rights of way;
 - vii) Hazard to the safety of horses using bridleway through noise and flooding;
 - viii) Construction traffic through village with narrow roads and no footpaths;
 - ix) Unofficial use of access on to Church Street;
 - x) Loss of moderate/high grade agricultural land;
 - xi) Division of the communities of Heathfield and Thriplow;

- xii) Flood risk;
- xiii) Efficiency of panels and electricity output small;
- xiv) Would save little CO2;
- xv) Increase in energy prices;
- xvi) Health impact- no reports into noise, air pollution or electromagnetic fields;
- xvii) Light pollution;
- xviii) Contamination to water supply;
- xix) No environmental assessment submitted with application;
- xx) Glare to aircraft from Duxford airfield and vehicular traffic on the A505;
- xxi) Reflection and impact upon birds;
- xxii) Impact upon heritage assets particularly the church in Thriplow;
- xxiii) Impact upon archaeology;
- xxiv) Impact upon wildlife and Sites of Special Scientific Interest;
- xxv) Landscaping would take time to mature;
- xxvi) Detriment to nearby properties;
- xxvii) Future state of site if development ceases to be used and responsibility;
- xxviii) Maintenance programme;
- xxix) Brownfield sites and buildings more appropriate for development;
- xxx) Better sites under same ownership;
- xxxii) Location- prone to vandalism and theft;
- xxxii) Higher crime risk in area;
- xxxiii) No financial or employment benefit to local community;
- xxxiv) Commercial benefit to landowner;
- xxxv) Parish Council vote unfair as did not reflect views of a large number of residents against the proposal;
- xxxvi) Not correct amount of ecological, archaeological and sound testing carried out;
- xxxvii) Impact on electricity service in area;
- xxxviii) Lack of information;
- xxxix) Inadequate consultation by developers; and,
- xl) Loss of value to properties.

28. Two letters have been received from residents in the local area that support the application for the following reasons: -
- i) Reduction in carbon emissions and reliance on foreign fossil fuel supplies;
 - ii) Power to a large number of homes;
 - iii) Green form of energy with a small carbon footprint;
 - iv) Modern, innovative technology with low maintenance;
 - v) Lack of brownfield land of scale required to be cost effective;
 - vi) Dual use of land with agriculture such as sheep grazing;
 - vii) Vegetation for enhancing wildlife habitats;
 - viii) Limited visual impact in comparison to wind turbines;
 - ix) Urgent national need for green energy; and,
 - x) Agricultural land is not particularly productive.
29. Thriplow Village Society – Has concerns in relation to the impact on footpaths, rare plants close to the Site of Special Scientific Interest, wildlife and a greenfield site.
30. A letter has been received from an environmental lawyer that considers that the screening opinion does not meet the criteria set out in the regulations and case law. This matter will be considered further by officers and members will be updated at the meeting.

Material Planning Considerations

31. The key issues to consider in the determination of this application are whether the proposal would represent inappropriate development in the Green Belt in principle; whether the proposal would cause any other harm in terms of the character and appearance of the area, best and most versatile agricultural land, biodiversity, trees/landscaping, heritage assets, flood risk, highway safety, neighbour amenity and public footpaths; and whether any very special circumstances have been demonstrated that would clearly outweigh the harm to the Green Belt through inappropriateness and any other harm identified.

Principle of Development in the Green Belt

32. The site is located outside the Thriplow and Heathfield village frameworks and within Green Belt and countryside.
33. Paragraph 87 of the National Planning Policy Framework 2012 (NPPF) states that inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances. Paragraph 88 continues by stating that when considering any planning application, local planning authorities should ensure that substantial weight is given to any harm to the Green Belt. 'Very special circumstances' will not exist unless the potential harm to the Green Belt by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm, is clearly outweighed by other considerations. Paragraph 91 further states that when located in the Green Belt, elements of many renewable energy projects will comprise inappropriate development. In such cases developers will need to demonstrate very special circumstances if projects are to proceed. Such very special circumstances may include the wider environmental benefits associated with increased production of energy from renewable sources.
34. The installation of a solar farm on this site would represent inappropriate development that is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt in policy terms. Substantial weight is attached to this in principle harm.

Other Harm

Character and Appearance of the Area

35. The site currently consists of open agricultural land. The introduction of a significant scale of arrays of solar panels and buildings would encroach into undeveloped land outside the village framework. However, it would be separated from both Thriplow and Heathfield villages and is not considered to result in the coalescence of these settlements. The development would substantially change the character and appearance of the landscape from being open and rural in character to being industrialised in character. However, it is unlikely to have any adverse visual impacts from the main public viewpoints on the rights of way surrounding the site due to the low height and new planting that is proposed along the boundaries to screen the development. It is also not considered to have an adverse visual impact from public viewpoints further afield on the A505 due to limited long distance views.
36. 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 not therefore considered to have an unacceptable impact upon landscape character.

37. The nearest approved solar farm to the site is at Great Wilbraham that is located a significant distance away so that it would not be visible within the same public viewpoint or within a limited distance when travelling along the same road.

Loss of Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land

38. The site is situated on 32.43 hectares of agricultural land with grades 3A (60%) and 3B (40%) Agricultural Land Classification. Grade 3A is considered as the best and most versatile agricultural land.
39. Paragraph 112 of the NPPF states that local planning authorities should take into account the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land. Where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, local planning authorities should seek to use areas of poorer quality land in preference to that of a higher quality.
40. The National Planning Policy Guidance 2014 (NPPG) advises that when determining applications for large solar farms, local planning authorities will need to consider encouraging the effective use of land by focussing such developments on previously developed and non-agricultural land provided that it is not of high environmental value. It also indicates that where the use of greenfield land is proposed, consideration should be given to whether the use of agricultural land has been shown to be necessary and that poorer quality land has been used in preference to higher quality land.
41. The applicant states that a comprehensive site selection exercise has been undertaken and there are no suitable brownfield sites or greenfield sites with grade 4 (poor) agricultural land classification available in proximity to a point of connection that could accommodate the proposed solar farm. The grid in South Cambridgeshire has a full capacity and a new point of connection would require significant investment in infrastructure and it unlikely that further capacity could be made available in the short term.
42. An exceptionally high proportion of land in Cambridgeshire comprises the best and most versatile agricultural land of grade 1, 2 and 3a and only 2.2% of land in the whole of Cambridgeshire comprises agricultural land of grades 4 and 5 and the majority of that land is located adjacent the Great River Ouse within the high risk flood zone or adjacent to wildlife areas associated with the river.
43. In addition, the land is not considered to produce high yields of crops due to water logging as a result of the combination of the soil and climatic characteristics on the site that limits its quality to the grades 3A and 3B classification.
44. Furthermore, the proposal would include an agricultural use and would not result in the irreversible loss of this land given that it would include a condition to ensure that it is 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.

45. Given the above and that the district of South Cambridgeshire comprises wholly agricultural land with a grade 2 or 3 classification, the district would not be able to contribute towards the renewable energy targets set out by the government without the use of greenfield land.

Biodiversity

46. The site is located close to the Thriplow Peat Holes and Thriplow Hummocky Fields Sites of Special Scientific Interest. The development is not considered to damage the interest features of the designated areas. Details of the drainage of the site have been submitted that demonstrates that the development would not have an adverse impact upon the ecology of the wetland Thriplow Peat Holes Site of Special Scientific Interest and the Thriplow Hummocky Fields Site of Special Interest that comprises the nationally rare grass poly and nationally uncommon fairy shrimp species.
47. The pingo ponds (depressions) on site are of high ecological interest due to their proximity to the Sites of Special Scientific Interest. Surveys have confirmed the presence of grass poly in some areas of the site and potential in other areas. No fairy shrimp has been recorded through surveys on the site but there is potential for this species. Other habitats on the site comprise arable land, pasture, trees, hedgerows, a ditch and a pond that have a lower ecological value. The pond and ditch on the site are not considered to provide a suitable Great Crested Newt habitat. The hedgerow margins and woodlands would contain a suitable habitat for bats and birds and these would be retained within the development. The grassland and ditches may support reptiles. No badger setts were identified on the site.
48. The development would incorporate mitigation measures such as a buffer zone around the pingo ponds to protect the grass poly and fairy shrimp, native tree and hedgerow planting, wildflower seeding and grassland management that would retain the habitats and increase the biodiversity of the site. Any clearance of vegetation would also take place outside the bird nesting season. The development is not therefore considered to result in the loss of any important habitats for protected species. An ecological management plan to include the requests of the Ecology Officer would be a condition of any consent.

Landscaping/Trees

49. 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 and in particular the public rights of way close to the site.

Heritage Assets

50. The site is located within the setting of a number of listed buildings and conservation areas in the village of Thriplow and the North Camp of the Duxford Imperial War Museum. The proposed development is considered to damage the setting of the most important heritage asset, the grade II* Church of St George that is situated to the north east of the village of Thriplow and the conservation area. The significance of the church is enhanced by its setting on a topographically prominent plateau and creates a visual landmark when viewed from the surrounding public rights of way. The significance of the conservation area is its open landscape setting that gives links between the village and church. The existing public right of way along 'The Drift gives

uninterrupted views towards the church across an open and undulating attractive rural landscape. The development has now been designed so that it would not harm the significance of church through the retention of its open setting from public viewpoints along The Drift providing the gap in the hedge remains.

51. The site is located within the setting of the Roman Settlement South of Chronicle Hills Scheduled Ancient Monument and the Enclosures and Linear Trackways of Newton Scheduled Ancient Monument. The development has now been designed so that it would not harm the setting of the Roman Settlement South of Chronicle Hills Scheduled Ancient Monument that is of national interest due to its archaeology.
52. The site is located within an area of high archaeological potential and it has the potential to harm undesignated heritage assets of historic interest through excavation in connection with the development. The site is currently undergoing an archaeological evaluation and a Written Scheme of Investigation has recently been submitted that sets out mitigation measures to ensure the archaeological remains found are preserved. A condition would be attached to any consent to secure these protection works.

Flood Risk

53. The site is located to the south of the Hoffer Brook and a watercourse runs along the eastern boundary of the site. It lies mainly within Flood Zones 1 (low risk) but also has a small part within Flood Zones 2 and 3 (medium and high risk). Surface water drainage at the site would be as the existing filtration rate. Areas of groundwater flooding may affect low lying areas but this would be increased by the development as the main structures would be located on higher ground away from this area. The submitted Flood Risk Assessment demonstrates that the development would not increase the risk of flooding to the site and the surrounding area.
54. It should be noted that it is important that the drainage of the site remains as existing as the hydrology of the area is essential to the features of the adjacent Sites of Special Scientific Interest.

Highway Safety

55. Access to the site during and after construction would be via the private access track measuring 3.5 metres in width serving KWS Ltd. off Gravel Pit Hill. Gravel Pit Hill is a long straight road with a speed limit of 60 miles per hour. There are visibility splays of 2.4 metres x 215 metres in each direction on to Gravel Pit Hill.
56. The Construction Traffic Management Plan submitted with the application shows the access route to the site during construction and demonstrates that vehicles would access the site via the A505 and not need to travel through nearby villages. During the 18 week construction period, the traffic generation is estimated at 440 large heavy vehicle movements for the delivery of the panels and 460 small light vehicle movements from site personnel. When construction is complete, the traffic generation to maintain the development is very low. Whilst it is acknowledged that there would be a significant number of traffic movements during the construction period, 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 position of the access and visibility, the route taken, the space for the vehicles to access junctions along the route and the management of the traffic to the site. A condition would be attached to any consent to agree the details set out in the Construction Traffic Management Plan.

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

Residential Amenity

58. The site is located close to a number of residential properties within the villages of Thriplow and Heathfield. The development is not considered to result in a significant increase in noise and disturbance, environmental pollution, or electromagnetic fields that would seriously harm the amenities of the occupiers of these properties. Noise pollution would be limited to that from fans used to cool the inverter buildings in the day and a hum from the transformers. These noise levels would be in the daytime only and would not be audible to receptors 100 metres away that is significantly closer than the nearest residential properties. The development is not therefore considered to result in a significant increase in the level of noise and disturbance in the area that would harm the amenities of neighbours.
59. The development is not considered to result in an unduly overbearing impact or loss of outlook that would adversely affect the amenities of occupiers of these properties. This is due to the low height of the development and distance from the residential properties. The loss of a private view is not a planning consideration.

Public Rights of Way

60. There is a bridleway (no. 4) that runs across and bridleways (nos. 7 and 8) that run along part of the eastern boundary and the southern boundary of the site. The development would be highly visible from the public rights of way that cross and surround the site. This visual prominence would have a negative impact upon the views and surroundings of the countryside that contribute to the enjoyment of the walkers and horseriders that use the public rights of way. However, the impact upon The Drift public right of way maintains the most important views and would be reduced further from landscaping over time. The impact upon the public right of way from Heathfield would be reduced through landscaping only over time. These measures are considered to adequately mitigate the impact of the development upon the public rights of way providing a condition is attached to any consent to secure the landscaping. A temporary fence has been requested to shield users of the public rights of way from glare as a result of the development. However, this is not considered reasonable as the panels are unlikely to cause glare that would affect horses as they are constructed from non-reflective material.
61. The access to the site would run along part of a bridleway (no. 8). This is an existing hard surfaced access that has a width of approximately 3 metres and a speed limit of 30 miles per hour. Although it is noted that there would be an increase in the level of traffic using the access particularly during the construction period, the development is not considered to adversely affect the safety of the users of the public right of way as vehicles would be travelling at low speeds, there is a grass verge either side of the access that would provide a safe refuge for the users of the public right of way, and passing places would be provided for vehicular traffic using the access. Permission is required from Cambridgeshire County Council Rights of Way Team to use a public right of way as a means of access.

Other Matters

62. The site is not situated on land that is subject to contamination and the development is not considered to lead to land or water contamination that would cause a risk to the health of nearby receptors.

63. The development would meet the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection (ICNIRP) 1998 guidelines in relation to electromagnetic fields and the panels would not lead to any harmful emissions.
64. Duxford Airfield is located to the south of the site and has a runway that is orientated east to west. The development would be unlikely to result in a significant amount of glint or glare that would cause a severe risk to aircraft given that the panels would be dark blue in colour and designed to be non-reflective to maximise solar gain through absorption (less than 9% would be reflected and glass and water have higher reflection rates), they would be situated a significant distance away, and any rainwater would be likely to run off the panels given their angle. There would not be any glint or glare to traffic or residential properties as this is reflected skywards.
65. The Environment Agency has a discharge pipeline that runs under the site and provides an important supply of water to the Thriplow Peat Holes Site of Special Scientific Interest. The applicant has agreed to work with the EA to ensure that the development would not damage the pipeline and this would be a condition of any consent.
66. A condition would be attached to any consent to agree any external lighting scheme to ensure that it would not harm the amenity of the Green Belt.
67. An Environmental Impact Assessment Screening Opinion was submitted to the Local Planning Authority prior to the submission of the application. It was determined that the impacts of the development would not be sufficiently significant to require an Environmental Statement to be submitted with the application.
68. Whilst the output from the development may be less than from a power station, it is considered a cleaner form of energy that would reduce the impact of climate change.
69. The impact upon energy prices that may provide a financial benefit to the local community and electricity production is not known. However, these are not planning considerations that can be taken into account the determination of the application.
70. The development would not impact upon the use of the nearby lake by the angling club.
71. Given the above objections in relation to the impact of the development upon the character and appearance of the Green Belt and countryside, the setting of designated heritage assets, and the important archaeological remains in the area, the development is not considered to result in other harm.

Very Special Circumstances

72. The proposal would represent inappropriate development that is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt in policy terms through encroachment and a loss of openness. Any harm to the Green Belt amounts to substantial harm. Furthermore the visual impact of the development would result in limited harm. Very special circumstances therefore need to be put forward that outweigh the harm through inappropriateness and any other harm to the Green Belt.
73. Renewable energy developments receive very considerable support in national and local planning policy. Paragraph 91 of the NPPF states that very special

circumstances may include the wider environmental benefits associated with the increased production of energy from renewable sources.

74. Paragraph 93 states that planning plays a key role in helping shape places to secure radical reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, minimising vulnerability and providing resilience to the impacts of climate change, and supporting the delivery of renewable and low carbon energy and associated infrastructure. This is central to the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.
75. Paragraph 97 states that when determining planning applications, local planning authorities should: not require applicants for energy development to demonstrate the overall need for renewable or low carbon energy and also recognise that even small-scale projects provide a valuable contribution to cutting greenhouse gas emissions; and approve the application if its impacts are (or can be made) acceptable.
76. The proposal would bring forward benefits of a significant scale in terms of the production of 8.5MW of renewable energy. This would meet the power needs of approximately 2500 homes and offset 3650 tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions that would increase the supply of renewable energy and reduce the impact of climate change.
77. The applicants have stated that it is necessary to locate the development on this site in the Green Belt due to the lack of brownfield sites and greenfield sites of a lower agricultural grade, land availability and for an efficient connection to the National Grid. This specific site was selected to minimise the impacts upon the purposes of including land within the Green Belt. The impact upon the openness of the Green Belt is not considered unduly harmful given the long narrow north to south orientation that is situated adjacent a woodland to the east. Other land owned by the applicants has constraints in relation to the siting within the setting of a Scheduled Ancient Monument and area of high archaeological potential, current use for farming, closer proximity to residential properties, and greater visual impact. The site is available immediately and a connection has been made to the national grid.
78. The development would bring social, environmental and economic benefits. The social benefits would include the improvement in the health of the local population through the production of clean and renewable energy that would reduce the amount of fossil fuels used and contribute towards a low carbon economy. It would also provide educational opportunities for local schools and some community pride through the village contributing towards climate change. The environmental benefits would be the use of unlimited natural resources to generate electricity and the improvement in the biodiversity of the site through the creation of additional habitats that would encourage wildlife to the area. The economic benefits would include the creation of jobs during the construction period and locally generated electricity with less wastage due to a more efficient connection to the grid.

Conclusion

79. Therefore, as a result of the above balancing exercise, the benefits of the scheme in respect of renewable energy production are considered to represent sustainable development that would amount to very special circumstances that would outweigh the substantial harm to the Green Belt through inappropriateness due to encroachment and a loss of openness along with the limited visual harm identified.

Recommendation

80. It is recommended that the Planning Committee grants officers delegated powers to approve the application (as amended) subject to the comments of the Local Highways Authority and Cambridgeshire County Council Historic Environment Team 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 30 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) 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.)
- ix) No development shall commence until a revised Biodiversity Management Plan has been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The developments shall be carried out in accordance with the approved details.
(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.)
- x) The development shall be carried out in accordance with the Flood Risk Assessment reference (to be confirmed).
(Reason - To prevent the increased risk of flooding in accordance with Policies DP/1 and NE/11 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007.)

- xi) The development shall be carried out in accordance with the Written Scheme of Investigation Archaeological Evaluation reference (to be confirmed).
(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 References S/1687/14/FL, S/2080/13/FL and S/2363/13/FL

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