

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Planning Committee

11 May 2011

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S/0319/11 - CROYDON

Continued use as agricultural land and erection of new solar farm of up to 5mw of generating capacity, comprising the installation of solar voltaic panels and associated infrastructure including electrical inverter and transformer cabins, switch gear and meter housing, access track, fencing, security cameras and landscaping at Land at Valley Farm, South of Lower Road, Croydon for Vogt Solar Limited

Recommendation: Delegated Approval

Date for Determination: 25th May 2011

Site and Proposal

1. The application site is located in the Parish of Croydon and approximately 1km to the south east of Croydon village, south of the B1042, Lower Road that forms the sites northern boundary. The A1198 is approximately 1km to the west of the site and the village of Shingay-cum-Wendy is approximately 500m to the immediate south. The site lies outside any village framework within the countryside and is proposed on agricultural land with a grade 3 classification. The site has an area of approximately 14.2 hectares comprising an agricultural field. The proposed access point is located in the northwest corner of the application site. The land lies within flood zone 1. There is a change in levels across the site where the site slopes from north to south towards the flood plain of the River Rhee. The northwest corner is 27m AOD 26m in the northeast, 23 m in the southwest and 22m AOD in the southeast corner.
2. The boundaries of the application site are predominately made up of trees, hedges and fencing. The northern boundary of the site runs along the B1042; along this stretch of road comprise various developments. Opposite the application site entrance is a group of three dwellings comprising Croydon Old Farm, Valley Cottage and The Beeches. 400m due east is Valley Farm itself and a cluster of single storey farm buildings, which were converted, to offices. Lower Manor Farm and the single storey house called Toll Bar lay approximately 400m further to the west and comprise a mixture of residential and commercial units.
3. The western boundary of the entire application site runs parallel with a public footpath (number18), this footpath continues north of the Lower Road to Croydon as footpath 20/21 and south to Wendy.
4. The full application, received on the 17th February 2011, seeks consent for a solar energy farm. This includes the installation of solar panels, with on site plant and machinery, access routes, security fencing and landscaping, and

associated works. The proposal seeks to create a farm with an electrical output of 5MWp. This requires 890 mounting frames, each of which would hold 24 solar panel modules, totalling 21360 modules in total. The panels would be arranged in 46 rows running east to west across the application site. They would be mounted at 30° from the ground to maximise solar gain, and would total 2.7m from the ground at the highest point.

5. Four transformer and inverter cabinets are proposed within the site on concrete bases. The former would measure 2.2m by 3.2m with a height of 2.9m, whilst the latter would measure 7.5m by 3m with a height of 2.8m. A single grid connection cabinet is also proposed, to measure 2.4m by 3m with a height of 2.4m. This would be located towards the northwest corner of the site as the electricity would be exported by a new underground cable to be connected to an existing substation located to the north of Croydon.
6. A 2m high security fence is proposed around the whole site, with one strand of barbed wire proposed at the top to increase the fence to 2.1m in height. Two maintenance roads are proposed on the site, these are proposed to be between 3-4.5 m wide and not hard surfaced. A temporary car park and materials storage area is proposed during the construction period and would be established in the field to the east of the site (opposite Valley Court offices). This would be reinstated to agricultural following completion of the construction works, which is expected to take approximately 4 months. New native 'rapid' species hedges are proposed around the perimeter of the site on the north, south and west boundaries, full details of which are included in the landscape proposal plan.
7. The application is accompanied by a Planning Statement (including Sustainability and Health Impact details), a Design and Access Statement, a Phase I Habitat and Ecological Scoping Survey, a Flood Risk Assessment, a Noise and Vibration Assessment, A Historic Environment Assessment, an Assessment of potential for impact on Aviation report, a Transport Statement and a Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment.

Planning History

8. None relevant to this application

Policies

9. **National Planning Guidance:** Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 1: Delivering Sustainable Development, PPS Planning and Climate Change – Supplement to PPS1, PPS7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas, PPS22: Renewable Energy & PPG24: Planning and Noise.
10. **Local Development Framework Development Control Policies (LDF DCP) 2007:** **DP/1** Sustainable Development, **DP/2** Design of New Development, **DP/3** Development Criteria, **DP/4** Infrastructure and New Development, **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/17** Protecting High Quality Agricultural Land, **CH/2** Archaeological Sites and **TR/1** Planning for More Sustainable Travel.
11. **East of England Plan 2008:** **ENG1** Carbon Dioxide Emissions and Energy Performance and **ENG2** Renewable Energy Targets

12. **Biodiversity SPD** – adopted July 2009, **Landscape in New Developments SPD** – adopted March 2010 & **District Design Guide SPD** – adopted March 2010.
13. **Circular 11/95 – The Use of Conditions in Planning Permissions:** Advises that conditions should be necessary, relevant to planning, relevant to the development permitted, enforceable, precise and reasonable in all other respects.
14. **Circular 05/2005 - Planning Obligations:** Advises that planning obligations must be relevant to planning, necessary, directly related to the proposed development, fairly and reasonably related in scale and kind and reasonable in all other respect.

Consultations

15. **Croydon Parish Council** recommend refusal for the following reasons:
 - a) **Visual impact.**

Although the site is on flat land, and behind fencing and proposed hedging, the local topography means that the whole site of 21,360 solar modules with associated infrastructure including electrical inverter and transformer cabins, switchgear and meter housing, access track, 2.1 metre wire fencing, and security cameras, will be highly visible from a number of locations, including footpaths 10, 18, 20, and 21, houses at and around Old Farm, the many houses on higher land in Croydon High Street as well as houses outside Croydon parish, especially in Shingay cum Wendy, and from High Street, Croydon Road, and Lower Road itself.
16. The appearance of the solar farm would be on an "industrial scale" of approximately 15 hectares in otherwise open farmland, which is at the core of this rural village community. This incongruous and alien development will be especially damaging to the view from bordering houses and footpaths, which have recently been promoted by the village by way of a new footpath map. Although natural hedging is planned to be planted as a screen, this will have no beneficial effect for view points on higher land at all, and for six months of the year when there are no leaves, will be of minimal value as a screen - a precedent is the electrical transformer site in Wimpole on the A603 which has a mature screen of similar species providing little, if any screening in the winter months.
17. The Parish Council believes that the recent decision to reject the nearby Arrington Wind Farm Test Mast, Appeal Ref: APP/W0530/A/10/2141457 is particularly relevant, as the scale and visual impact of the proposed solar farm is far greater than the single test mast under that consideration - Para 21 is particularly relevant:
18. The appeal site is close to a number of public rights of way giving access to and providing views of the surrounding area. Concern is expressed that it would represent an intrusive feature in what is otherwise an open agricultural view, broken only by occasional lines of hedge and tree planting along field boundaries and by the area of woodland

19. We ask the planning committee visit the site and also to view the site from Croydon High Street to see how the view and landscape would be affected if the solar farm were approved. In addition, the Conservation Officer should be asked to review the application from both the aspect of the landscape and wildlife.

20. **b) Road safety.**

This is a major concern. The thirty nine accidents and six fatalities in recent years along the B1042 close to the site is well documented elsewhere, and local people will all tell the same story of near misses and dangerous manoeuvres of traffic (car and lorry) at high speed along this fast stretch of very busy road. The siting of the proposed solar farm with its inevitable high "distraction factor" for drivers is very worrying.

21. The recent development of businesses along this stretch of road has already had an impact and made matters worse. As discussed above, the proposed screening will have little or no effect for at least the winter, six months of the year, or for higher vans and lorries which will have line of sight over the hedging to the reflective panels. The access to the site as shown by the company's own photographic montage is an open invitation for further driver distraction as there would be no screening there at all, and it is close to a bend on the road. It is the local residents who naturally use this road most and it is the duty of the Parish Council to point out to SCDC how alarmed local people are about this increased danger.

22. Based on these concerns, the Parish Council request that an independent traffic survey be carried out by SCDC to assess the impact of the site on the B1042, which has been of long standing concern to this Parish Council.

23. **c) Noise pollution**

This is a difficult subject on which to find hard, easily understood data, to assess the impact of the noise from fans and machinery. What we do believe however, is that the measurement of ambient and predicted noise levels in dB are based on averages over a period, and do not reflect the fact that the noise will vary with peaks and troughs, the nuisance value of which cannot be assessed by averages alone. The village has long experience of low level, yet annoying noise pollution from the sub-station in the village. Although the humming sound emanated is not loud, and has been reduced after much complaining, it is still a nuisance to some residents. We believe we have good reason to fear similar issues for nearby houses to the proposed solar farm.

24. The council and public also expressed concerns regarding the presentation and interpretation of the noise data in the applicant's report, and Council requests that the Environmental Health Officers inspect and review the data provided.

25. The Parish Council has also been approached with concerns over flooding which is well known to local residents, despite some Environment Data not reflecting this,

26. It was also commented that it seemed a shame to use perfectly good arable land for a solar farm, when there are doubtless brownfield sites that could be utilised.

27. Croydon Parish council does not object to solar farms per se. However, in this case and for the reasons stated above, the Parish Council believes this to be an unsuitable site.
28. **Shingay-cum-Wendy Parish Council** comments had not been received at the time of writing this report.
29. The **Council's Acting Environmental Health Manager** has studied the noise and vibration assessments and considers it as extremely thorough, addressing concerns raised at pre-application stage. It is also considered that if the electrical equipment is housed within enclosures it will significantly reduce the noise emissions from the sources stated in 1.1 of the submitted report. No objections are raised and the scheme recommended for approval subject to the following condition: The approved use shall be operated in accordance with the submitted RPS report titled Croydon Solar Farm, Noise and Vibration Assessment, Corydon, South Cambridge on behalf of VOGT Solar Limited dated 04 February 2011, Project No. JAL 6311.
30. The **Council's Contaminated Land (Scientific) Officer** raises no objection to the proposed scheme.
31. The **Local Highways Authority** notes that following detailed pre-application discussions the proposed Transport Statement is acceptable to the Local Highway Authority and should mitigate as far as possible the impact of traffic generated by the short but intense construction phase.
32. The **Council's Landscape Officer** - The Landscape and visual impacts are probably greater than suggested by the Applicant's landscape and visual impact assessment, which assess the impact as Minor Adverse or Negligible. I feel the impacts would mainly range from range from Minor Adverse to Moderate Adverse. This is because the proposed development is a very large scheme, composed of regular, uniform elements. It will certainly be noticed particularly from Lower road and intermittently from local areas of high ground.
33. The impact of the development will be most keenly seen from the properties on Lower Road, The southern side of Croydon High Street, and from public rights of way north and south of Croydon village.
34. There may be views to the development from the grounds of Wimpole Hall, which is 40m above the application site. To the west of the Hall avenues look southwest directly towards the site, although these would be long views at about 2700m distance.
35. However, in principal I feel that the proposed development could be accommodated within wide valley floor landscape, which is open, low lying and regular in character. Historically this has long been the case, with old maps showing few trees and hedges dividing large fields once away from the river to the south. Although the valley floor is largely open, there are existing blocks of woodland to the west, and given an appropriate landscaping scheme, the development could establish a similar character to these valley floor woodlands.

36. To address the adverse impacts, I would like to see more extensive mitigation proposals, particularly in relation to the proposed planting along the northern and eastern boundaries.

Landscape Character

37. The development would be by far the largest element in the local landscape and the proposed change in character could only be partially mitigated. The local Landscape character south of Croydon is distinctive and is Moderately Sensitive to change. The degree of change would also be Moderate. In the Early years of the development the effect on the Landscape Character will be Moderate Adverse, lessening to Minor Adverse as the boundary planting becomes established. However, although some long views along the valley bottom and the wide sense of scale will be lost, an extensive planting scheme will be in accordance with the Cambridgeshire Landscape Guidelines Proposals for both the Chalklands and Western Claylands Landscape Character Areas. (The site lies on the boundary)

Visual Impact

Views from the North and West

38. The most significant visual impacts will be experienced from the dwellings at Toll Bar and the new dwelling at Lower Manor Farm to, and by the users of lower Road, the footpath running along the western boundary, and the public rights of way running south from Croydon High Street.
39. At paragraph 6.15 it is stated that only views from ground floor windows have been considered, this approach being in line with the Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact assessment (GLVIA) which states that –
- “When considering views from windows, views from rooms normally occupied during waking / daylight hours are generally deemed to be more important than those used for sleeping, from which only occasional views may be obtained.”
40. However, the guidelines do not state that views from first floor windows should not be considered, and in its present form the visual impact of the development from some ground floor and first floor rooms, from the road and from the closer footpaths could be assessed as ‘Major Adverse’. This would be due to the Sensitivity of the Receptors (High and Medium) the distance to the development (Close, less than 500 metres) and the magnitude of change (Major – ‘The proposed changes form a dominant or immediately apparent feature within views that would significantly affect the character of the view)
41. Other receptors to the North and West (dwellings on Croydon High street and public rights of way north and south of the High Street) would experience Minor Adverse to Moderate Adverse visual impacts, particularly from first floor windows. The existing roadside hedge to the north of the road noted at 6.18 will not screen the site as suggested.

A robust planting plan will help to mitigate the visual impact of the extensive runs of fencing and once established will screen much of the development, including views from higher ground to the north. The local landscape will remain substantially altered however. Long views and the continuous valley floor will be broken and replaced with what appears to be a block of woodland and hedging.

Views from the East

42. There are some views to the site from Croydon Road to the east of the village. Paragraph 6.20 states that views from locations on the Bridleway will be Minor Adverse to negligible. I would suggest that these would be minor adverse to moderate adverse. The development will certainly be noticeable, and the effect of the screening vegetation will be to reduce the 'depth of field' in the view ie visually joining the vegetation on either side of the valley.

Views from the south

43. There are few views to the site from the village of Wendy or Elecks Lane due to the river corridor vegetation and field and roadside hedges.

There will be close views of the development from the southern section of the Croydon-Wendy footpath and these will be Major Adverse to Moderate Adverse with similar effects to those described viewed from the north and west described above. Again planting will help to lessen the impact of the fencing and solar panels, eventually resembling a woodland block. The views from the footpath will remain substantially altered however, with the wide views to the east lost.

Summary of Landscape and Visual Impacts

44. The landscape impact will be Moderate Adverse falling to Minor Adverse as the mitigating planting matures. Visual impact will range from Minor to Major adverse.
45. It should be possible to mitigate the landscape and visual effects with a strong planting scheme around the perimeter. These hedges and blocks of planting will add to biodiversity and support recommendations described in the Cambridgeshire Landscape Guidelines.
46. However the historically open valley bottom landscape will be substantially altered, particularly when viewed from close to the development. There will be a loss of depth of vision when the development is viewed from higher ground, as the mitigating planting will visually merge vegetation on either side of the valley.
47. Recommendations - The proposed hedgerow planting will need to be more substantial along eastern and particularly the northern boundaries. The northern planting will screen the development from Lower Road, local properties, Croydon Village, Croydon Road and public rights of way to the north. It is important that this planting contains some tree planting to break up the regular appearance of the long stretches of fence and ranks

of solar cells. Some additional planting will be required in addition to that shown on plan R1481-800-05

48. **Natural England - Ecology** The site proposed for development is not located in proximity to any statutory nature conservation sites and no such sites are likely to be affected. We advise that the local Wildlife Trust (The Manor House, Broad Street, Cambourne, Cambridge, CB23 6DH) is consulted with respect to non-statutory wildlife designations.
49. The landscaping proposals include planting of new native species hedgerows and sowing of a native grassland mix across the site. Field margin grasslands would be retained. As the site is currently arable farmland of limited ecological value the landscaping plans would enhance the value of the site to wildlife. In terms of the new hedgerows it would be beneficial to include elm in the species to be planted. This would benefit species such as white spotted pinion moth, a UKBAP species, which feeds on elm. Should the application be approved Natural England advises that a Biodiversity Management Plan is produced. This should ensure impacts of construction on wildlife are minimised, provide details of how the site will be managed to benefit biodiversity and specify monitoring protocols to assess the effectiveness of habitat creation and site management. Natural England would be willing to advise on the content of this document.
50. With regards to the potential impact of the development on protected species you are advised to consult Natural England's standing advice for guidance on survey and mitigation requirements. This can be found at: <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/planningtransportlocalgov/spatialplanning/standingadvice/default.aspx>
51. **Landscape** - Natural England is not a statutory consultee for landscape conservation on this application, however we note the following points. Natural England is generally satisfied with the results of the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA). This identifies that there would be minor adverse impacts to landscape character and a number of visual impacts. Visual impacts are to highways, rights of way and to some dwellings and places of business. Some of the visual impacts are classed as major in the short term but all diminish to minor / negligible in the long term once hedgerows planted as screening mature.
52. In terms of the selected viewpoints we have not been able to undertake any site visits. The viewpoints chosen appear reasonably representative for the surrounding area, we do note however that the ground continues to rise steeply to the north of Croydon and there may be views to the south from several rights of way in this area. The LVIA does not include a mapped Zone of Theoretical Visibility; this would have been useful in choosing suitable viewpoints and demonstrating that their coverage was adequate. The photographs and photomontages are generally helpful in considering the visual impacts of the proposal but the photographs used for the photomontages were taken in poor light, which makes their interpretation difficult.
53. The **Council's Ecology Officer** raises no objections. A thorough ecological assessment has been provided concluding no significant impact upon local biodiversity. The application will deliver significant biodiversity

gains in the form of 1387m of native hedgerow and 12 hectare of tussock grassland. The final details of the grassland's management are yet to be determined, as such a condition should be used to secure the full details of the grassland establishment and future management regime.

54. The **Environment Agency** notes the site lies within low risk category flood zone 1. There is no objection in principle to the proposal. Conditions regarding surface water drainage and pollution control have been included should the scheme be recommended for approval.
55. The **County Archaeology Team** notes the site has a high archaeological potential. Known sites in the vicinity include a medieval moat and associated earthworks to the north (Historic Environment Record Numbers 01220, 00933), the deserted medieval village of Wendy and a further moated site to the south (HER 09518, 01223). Extensive evidence for ridge and furrow traces of medieval agriculture in the vicinity adds to the identified pattern of medieval land use. There is also evidence for Roman activity with a possible Villa identified to the immediate east of the site (HER 09185). This is part of a broader pattern of Roman land use and settlement, which includes the nationally important site of Arrington Bridge to the east (Scheduled Monument Number CB86). It is likely that elements of these Roman and medieval landscapes extend into the proposed development area. Archaeological remains of potential national importance could be impacted by the proposed scheme.
56. We would strongly recommend that the site be subject to an archaeological evaluation, to be commissioned and undertaken at the expense of the developer, and carried out prior to the granting of planning permission. The evaluation results should allow for the fuller consideration of the presence/absence, nature, extent, quality and survival of archaeological remains within the development area. An informed judgement can then be made as to whether any planning consent would need to include provisions for the recording and, more importantly, the preservation of important archaeological remains in situ.
57. The **County Council Countryside Access Team** notes that no public rights of way would be affected by the proposal but highlights in its comments points of law relating to the public right of way and the potential to carry out works with regard to underground cables.
58. **English Heritage** - have no objection in principle to the scheme and it appears from the application that the development is unlikely to have an impact on the setting of any heritage assets in the area. Our one concern is that the visual mitigation, which consists of hedges planted along the perimeter, will not be fully effective to screen the development until it has grown. This is likely to be after a period of 5-10 years. In our view it is important to explore with the developer all possible measures to adequately screen the development in the early years. We need to ensure that the areas with the most vulnerable views are protected as soon as possible.
59. No comments have been received from the Ramblers Association, the East of England Regional Assembly, the East of England Development Agency and the Council for the Protection of Rural England. Comments have also not been received from the Sustainability Officer, the Economic Development Officer, Drainage Manager, the Ancient Monuments Society, Gransden

Airfield, Bassingbourn Barracks, the Conservation Officer and Ecology Officer. The consultation periods for these consultees had expired at the time of writing.

Representations

60. In total there have been 9 representations made objecting to the proposed scheme. These have come from residents and users of the office buildings in the surrounding vicinity.
61. One major complaint was that there was not enough notification. However, the application was advertised in the local press, in total 9 site notices were erected around the application site and in the villages of Croydon and Shingay-cum-Wendy, of which both Parish Councils were notified. For those who wanted to make representations were able to do so in the statutory 21 days either from the date of the site notice or from the receipt date of the correspondence. Both Shingay and Croydon Parish Council were given extra time based on the delivery dates of its correspondence. A public exhibition was held by the applicants where residents and employees could attend and ask questions.
62. The following issues raised are as follows:

Highway safety

- a) Highway safety concerns - the road has a history of fatalities and this would be a major distraction along an already dangerous road
- b) construction stage would add to this
- c) the laying of cable in a dangerous stretch of road - How will this be managed?
- d) At the exhibition the applicant was unaware of how dangerous this stretch of road was, what confidence can we have in the rest of the application?
- e) Traffic calming required

63. Landscaping

- a) the proposal would dominate the landscape
- b) Croydon village is set on relatively high ground and the view from the village looking down would be ruined.
- c) Proposed fence surround not in keeping
- d) the hedge mitigation proposed will never be adequate
- e) blot on the landscape
- f) fast grow species already out of character with general open landscape
- g) Earth bunds may be better
- h) lights, surveillance cameras and containers are proposed to be screened by already inadequate hedging
- i) security requirements are likely to be high creating potential for increased security measures that will in turn have an adverse impact on the landscape further still.
- j) potential sprawl of development on neighbouring fields
- k) surrounding footpaths negatively impacted
- l) photomontage indicates only one line of hedging and not the 3 rows proposed in the landscaping scheme - further clarification required.

64. Noise

- a) Noise disturbance from the development

- b) the noise assessment was carried out at an industrial unit where background noise is much higher than average
- c) lack of survey data and questions robustness of application
- d) will the enclosure close to the entrance emit noise?
- e) properties not within the village framework must be considered regarding noise also - seems to be an oversight in the Noise Assessment.

65. Flooding

- a) drainage is poor in this area and whilst the development is not in the flood zone localised flooding does occur and this will exacerbate it.
- b) a more thorough FRA is required that addresses local flooding

66. Other

- a) clarification that the land use will continue to be agricultural land
- b) how can the surrounding area be safeguarded against similar development
- c) the collectors could be sited further into the ground
- d) the panels are available in reduced sizes - why not use smaller ones?
- e) devalue property
- f) inappropriate location

Planning Comments

67. The key issues to be considered for the determination of this application are the principle of development, the impact upon the surrounding countryside, the impact upon the amenity of the occupiers of the adjacent residential properties and business units, the impact upon users of aviation, the impact on the historical environment, the impact upon highway safety, the loss of agricultural land and ecology considerations.

The Principle of Development

68. In accordance with Policy DP/7 outside urban and village frameworks, only development for agriculture, horticulture, forestry, outdoor recreation and other uses which need to be located in the countryside will be permitted. The proposed development does not adhere to the principle of this criterion and is therefore a departure from this policy. Notwithstanding the above, Policies ENG1 and ENG2 of the East of England Plan 2008 identify a need to meet regional and national targets to reduce climate change emissions and the development of new facilities to provide energy from renewable sources. However, while the Plan remains part of the development plan, the Secretary of State's intention to revoke this is a material consideration to be taken into account. Nonetheless, Policy NE/2 states that the District Council will grant planning permission for proposals to generate energy from renewable sources, subject to proposals according with the development principles set out in Policies DP/1 to DP/3. The proposed development is considered to accord with Policy NE/2 as it would meet the following criteria:

- The proposal would be connected efficiently to the national grid infrastructure;
- The proposal and its ancillary facilities can be removed and reinstatement of the site, should the facilities cease to be operational;

69. South Cambridgeshire has greater levels of sunshine than the UK average and Policy NE/2 states that solar power can make a significant contribution to

renewable energy generation. In light of this the District Council seeks to reduce the use of fossil fuels, opportunities to increase the proportion of energy, especially electricity, generated from renewable sources will be permitted unless there is clear adverse impact on the environment or amenity of the area.

70. The Government aims to put the UK on a path to cut its carbon dioxide emissions by some 60% by 2050, and to maintain reliable and competitive energy supplies. The development of renewable energy is considered to be an important part of meeting this aim and as such, there has been greater emphasis on 'positive planning', which facilitates renewable energy developments.
71. One of the key principles of Planning Policy Statement 22: 'Renewable Energy' is that "renewable energy developments should be capable of being accommodated throughout England in locations where the technology is viable and environmental, economic, and social impacts can be addressed satisfactorily". It also states that "the wider environmental and economic benefits of all proposals for renewable energy projects, whatever their scale, are material considerations that should be given significant weight in determining whether proposals should be granted planning permission." Members should also be aware that paragraph 20 of PPS Planning and Climate Change – Supplement to PPS1 regarding renewable energy generation, states "planning authorities should not require applicants for energy development to demonstrate either the overall need for renewable energy and its distribution, nor question the energy justification for why a proposal for such development must be sited in a particular location". It also adds local planning authorities should "avoid stifling innovation including by rejecting proposals solely because they are outside areas identified for energy generation".
72. In light of the above it is considered that subject to the other material considerations discussed below the proposed development whilst departing from Policy DP/7 should be actively encouraged.

The Impact upon the Surrounding Countryside

73. The Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment concludes that the proposal would not have a materially significant adverse impact upon the landscape. The survey notes that the landscaping proposals would reduce short and medium term 'Moderate Adverse' impacts upon Valley Farm and Toll Bar, 'Major Adverse' impacts upon footpath 18 and 'Moderate Impacts' upon the B1042 Lower Road to no more than 'Minor Adverse' significance in the long term.
74. The Landscape Officer says the development will have a greater impact than the applicants have suggested, but given the scale of the landscape and surprisingly limited views the development could possibly be integrated into the landscape.
75. It will change the landscape - and it will be noticeable. According to old maps the valley bottom has always been open with few trees, and the fence and panels will alter the landscape by closing off the long views to the south and east and introducing very regular forms and a large block of planting

76. It is important to have a strong area of planting to the north, so I have suggested that the proposed hedge is replaced with a hedge and triple row of trees to give a staggered filtered view.
77. It would also be very beneficial to have some off - site tree planting to the west and south - does the applicant have control of this land? The impact of a 780m length of fence and hedge here from the public footpath will need breaking up and some variation in height
78. A condition can be added to ensure that adequate landscaping is provided, including in the additional areas described by the Landscape Officer. Such planting would again be achieved through a landscaping condition.

Impact upon the Amenity of the Occupiers of the Adjacent Residential and Business Units

79. There are a small number of residential dwellings and business use locations around the site. There are three residential properties located on the north of the B1040 close to the access point of the application site. These are Croydon Old Farm, Valley Cottages and The Beeches.
80. All three residential units are two-storey, with numerous openings at ground and first floor levels in the front elevations. The outlook from the ground floor windows is currently on to planting within the residential curtilages, which does not allow direct views through to the application site. The planting is a mixture of deciduous and evergreen species and therefore would allow only limited views through during winter months. The first floor openings would allow views over and through the hedgerow; these openings are approximately 100m south from fascia to the field beyond. The solar panels closest the road are less than 10 m from the proposed hedge screening, making a distance of approximately 115m between the closest of the three dwellings and the proposed panels. Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment states when considering views from windows, views from rooms normally occupied during daylight hours are generally deemed more important than those used for sleeping, from which only occasional views may be obtained.
81. Other residential properties known as Toll Bar and Lower Manor Farm are located approximately between 350-400m west of the application site. It is considered that the views of the solar farm will be more oblique for these units; particularly Lower Manor Farm house which is located to the rear of its ancillary business units allowing only oblique views from first floor. Toll Bar is a single storey property, again allowing only oblique views across the open field to the west of the application site.
82. The business uses are primarily located at Valley Farm; the closest unit being Valley Farmhouse itself sited approximately 80m northeast at its closest point. The business units are sited slightly further northeast and benefit from some tree screening that filters views when looking south towards the site. It is considered that the proposed mitigation will aid this also.
83. There is no denying the outlook from these windows would change substantially as a result of the development. The retention of a private view is not a material planning consideration, and the impact upon the landscape is noted above. Given the height of the proposals at 2.7m to the nearest point, I

do not consider that the panels would appear overbearing when viewed from the dwellings or business units. Whilst there would be a serious change to the outlook from these properties, I do not consider that any harm caused is serious enough to warrant a reason for refusal in its own right. Any approval would require a landscape scheme, and this may allow the potential for further planting along the western boundary of the site to further screen views. It is noted that additional planting would reduce further resident's outlook, but based on the comments of the landscape officer this may not be appropriate in this instance. Further planting would also further screen the proposed boundary fence.

Noise and Vibration impact

84. It is stated in the submitted report that it is not the panels themselves that are the sources of noise but the electrical equipment associated with the development. The equipment is to be housed within enclosures to help reduce the noise emissions from these sources, of which there are 3 main sources across the site. The significant sources of noise will be cooling fans for the equipment containers. Responding to energy generation the noise emissions will only occur in the daytime. Significant operational vibration effects are unlikely and therefore no further assessment has been carried out. The report concludes that the effects would be of less than 'marginal significance' during the daytime in accordance with the methodology contained within BS4142 and there would be no change in daytime ambient $L_{Aeq,16h}$ noise levels at the noise sensitive (residential) receptors.
85. The EHO officer has commented that there are no objections with the proposed scheme subject to the development being carried out in accordance with the submitted noise assessment. It is considered that the noise emissions from this development do not warrant a reason for refusal.

Impact upon Aviation

86. The applicant has provided an assessment of the impact of flying operations. It concludes that solar photovoltaic panels are designed to absorb rather than reflect light, and reflected light (2%) would be significantly less than sun glare than from direct sunlight.
87. A consultation letter was sent to Gransden Airfield and Bassingbourn Barracks and no response was made. Members will be updated on any comments received. There are examples of panels located adjacent to airfields, such as in Adelaide Airport, Australia, which suggest that there should be no objection in principle.

Impact on the Historical Environment

88. The site is not located in a designated Conservation Area. The proposal was, however, submitted with a Historic Environment Assessment that aims to address the impact the development would have on the various Scheduled Ancient Monuments (SAMs) within the vicinity. All SAMs are of national significance. There are no SAMs within the application site, however there are three located nearby. These comprise the Arrington Bridge Romano-British site (CB86) located approximately 1km to the east, the moated site of medieval 'Preceptory of Knights Hospitaliers (CB108) approximately 1.3km to the south of the River Rhee and the Deserted Village of Clapton (CB45)

located approximately 1km north west north of Croydon House. The assessment concludes that the impact of the development is neutral to all surrounding SAMs.

89. The comments from the Conservation Manager not yet been received at the time of writing the report.

Impact upon Highway Safety

90. A Transport Statement that provides details on construction methods and details of the anticipated construction programme for the solar farm supports the application. Construction is expected to last 16 weeks. The predicted number of Heavy Commercial Vehicles (HCV's) expected to visit the site during this time period is 93, totalling 186 HCV traffic movements. An expected 34 HCV movements are expected in the peak week (construction week 8). A mobile crane would also be needed to transfer the inverters from the lorry to the site. There would be between 40 and 70 staff on site during construction, which would arrive at the site on their own accord.
91. The comments from the Local Highways Authority are noted. The Construction Method Statement is a good basis for analysis. The Local Highways Authority has not requested any further information.
92. The objections raised with regard to this road being a danger hotspot have also been referred back to the Local Highway Authority and an update response will be provided prior to the meeting or verbally on the day.
93. Glare and distraction are raised in the Transport Statement under Part 2, within paragraphs 2.7- 2.10. The panels will be facing south, away from the B1042 and therefore unlikely that glare will be problematic to drivers. Additionally the solar panels are primarily absorptive and designed to minimise reflection.
94. The applicant has stated that parking for workers during the construction phase would be available on land adjacent the site, in land to the east of the application site. This has not been shown in plan form, and a condition can ensure a designated parking area is used to ensure no parking takes place along the B1042. However, if this is not in the ownership of the applicant there is little control. Confirmation is being sought from the agents with regard to this and Members updated accordingly.

Loss of Agricultural Land

95. Agricultural land is classified into five grades numbered 1-5, where grade 1 is excellent quality agricultural land, and grade 5 is very poor quality agricultural land. The majority of the site is grade 3 (good to moderate quality) agricultural land. Grade 3 land is described as "land with moderate limitations which affect the choice of crops, timing and type of cultivation, harvesting or the level of yield. Where more demanding crops are grown yields are generally lower or more variable than on land in grades 1 and 2", whereas grade 2 land is "land with minor limitations which affect crop yield, cultivations or harvesting. A wide range of agricultural and horticultural crops can usually be grown but on some land in the grade there may be reduced flexibility due to difficulties with the production of the more demanding crops such as winter harvested vegetables and arable root crops. The level of yield is generally

high but may be lower or more variable than grade 1”
(<http://www.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/landmanage/land-use/documents/alc-guidelines-1988.pdf>).

96. Planning Policy Statement 7 (Sustainable Development in Rural Areas) states that the presence of the best and versatile agricultural land should be taken into account alongside other sustainability considerations. It does add that significant development of agricultural land should seek to use areas of poorer quality land. Policy NE/17 of the LDF DCP 2007 states that the District Council will not grant planning permission for development which would lead to the irreversible loss of Grades 1, 2 or 3a agricultural land unless (criterion b) sustainability considerations and the need for the development are sufficient to override the need to protect the agricultural value of the land.
97. The proposal would require a lot of works to the land. The frames for the photovoltaic panels would need to be pinned into the ground, the transformer and inverter units would be set on concrete bases, and there would be a need for trenches to be built underground for cables to run. There would be disruption to the soil during the use. However, it is considered a temporary use, albeit for potentially 25 years, after which the land can be restored back to agricultural. The development would not therefore be “irreversible” as noted in the policy. Whilst there would be disruption to the land, it could be reverted back to agricultural following the removal of the development. Although the siting of such development on poorer quality agricultural land would be preferred, I do not consider the development would cause any long-term loss of grade 2 and 3 agricultural land.

Ecology Considerations

98. The application is supported by a Phase I Habitat and Ecological Scoping Survey, which drew a number of conclusions following an investigation of the site. The arable field, field margins, cereal field margins and hedgerows are considered priority habitat, and care should be taken to ensure minimum impact to these areas. It is recommended the land be kept under arable management to keep the site clear of vegetation and thus supporting breeding birds. The solar panels may deter some bird species using the site, although only a small number of ground nesting birds would use the site, so any loss is not considered significant.
99. The comments from Natural England and the Council’s Ecology Officer are noted. Whilst the Scoping Survey does provide information about potential impacts upon the site, a condition seeking a Biodiversity Management Plan is suggested, and can be justified in order to ensure the minimal risks and habitat to be created are done to an agreed plan. A condition should also be added to confirm the management of the land following erection of the panels.

Other Matters

100. Planning for Renewable Energy, a Companion Guide for Planning Policy Statement 22 (Renewable Energy) notes that there would be direct economic benefit for such proposals from the creation of jobs for the installation and maintenance of solar panels.
101. The comments from the County Archaeology Team are noted and have been forwarded to the agent, it is requested that the applicants carry out the

necessary works prior to a decision being made. Members will be updated accordingly following a response from the agent.

Conclusion

102. The application needs to balance the benefits of the creation of a renewable energy project against the harm that it would create to the countryside and the residential amenity of the occupiers of the adjacent dwellings. It is my view that the balance lies in favour of the approval subject to safeguarding conditions set out below.

Decision/Recommendation

103. Delegated approval, subject to any relevant updates received prior to the presentation of the application before Members. If approved, conditions would be required regarding the start time for implementation, the plans to be approved, the construction phase method statement, parking for workers during construction, a Biodiversity Enhancement Plan, a detailed landscape plan and implementation condition, archaeological investigation, noise levels, management of the land during use, and decommissioning and land restoration details.

Informatives

Given the level of proposed Heavy Commercial Vehicles (HCV) using the B1042, the Local Highways Authority would require that a condition survey be undertaken with a representative of the Local Highways Authority and that any damage caused by the increased HCV traffic will be repaired at the developer's expense.

The granting of planning permission does not constitute a permission or license to carry out any works within, or disturbance of, or interference with, the public highway, and that a separate permission must be sought from the Local Highways Authority for such works.

Any culverting or works affecting the flow of a watercourse requires the prior written consent of the Environment Agency under the terms of the Land Drainage Act 1991/Water Resources Act 1991. The Environment Agency seeks to avoid culverting and its consent for such works will not normally be granted except as a means of access. The granting of planning approval must not be taken to imply that consent has been given in respect of the above.

Paragraphs 5.18 of the Phase I Habitat and Ecological Scoping Survey suggest pre-development monitoring of the site is carried out to determine whether there are any nesting birds present within the existing hedgerows. Such monitoring is to be encouraged, with the results made available to the Council.

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

- Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 1: Delivering Sustainable Development, PPS Planning and Climate Change – Supplement to PPS1, PPS7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas, PPS22: Renewable Energy & PPG24: Planning and Noise

- Local Development Framework Development Control Policies 2007.
- East of England Plan 2008
- Biodiversity SPD – adopted July 2009, Landscape in New Developments SPD – adopted March 2010 & District Design Guide SPD – adopted March 2010.
- Circular 11/95 – The Use of Conditions in Planning Permissions
- Circular 05/2005 - Planning Obligations
- Planning Ref Files: S/0319/11

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