

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Planning Committee

5 March 2014

AUTHOR/S: Planning and New Communities Director

Application Number: S/2616/13/FL

Parish(es): Meldreth

Proposal: Development of solar photovoltaic panels and ancillary structures including; field transformers, auxiliary transformer, inverter housing, communication room, district network operator building, switch room building, access tracks, security fencing and security cameras

Site address: Bury Lane Fruit Farm, Melbourn Bypass, Meldreth, Roston, SG8 6DF

Applicant(s): EW Pepper Ltd

Recommendation: Approval

Key material considerations: Principle of development; Impact upon the landscape character; Ecology; Flood Risk; Highway Issues; Impact upon Residential Amenity; Archaeology; Landscaping; Loss of Agricultural Land; Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and Other Considerations

Committee Site Visit: Yes

Departure Application: No

Presenting Officer: Andrew Fillmore

Application brought to Committee because: The officer recommendation is contrary to the views of the Parish Council

Date by which decision due: 19 March 2014

Updates to the Report

Agenda report paragraph 9 – Consultation response from Meldreth Parish Council

The Parish Council's full comments were not reported and are now attached as appendix 1.

Agenda paragraphs 35- 39 – Landscape Impact

The parish council state there is no mention of a suggestion that the scheme could be improved, and local opposition reduced, if the southern field was removed from the scheme as suggested in pre-application advice.

While the omission of the field would reduce the overall landscape impact, the Council's Landscape Officer has considered the overall impact to be acceptable subject to conditions set out in the main report.

Agenda report paragraph 55 – Loss of Agricultural Land

The Parish Council is concerned that due to the size of this application it should be looked at as part of the whole solar development within the South Cambs area from the standpoint of how much arable farm land should be lost or what it considers is the fair burden that should be placed on the landscape. The parish council believes this point has not been fully addressed in paragraph 55 of the main report so it is not clear how the planning committee will debate this issue.

In response, officers recognise this is a legitimate concern, but is one that is incrementally difficult to deal with. The officer's report refers to existing plan policy which seeks to prevent the "irreversible" loss of high quality (i.e Grades 1, 2 or 3a) agricultural land. This policy is effectively repeated in the emerging Local Plan. As the loss here would not be irreversible (confirmed by proposed condition 11), there is no conflict with the development plan on this point.

Paragraph 112 of the NPPF suggests that where "significant" development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, planning authorities should seek to use areas of poorer quality land in preference to that of higher quality. Recently published national best practice guidance on large-scale ground solar arrays similarly advises that a clear justification on the benefits a development would have for the land to be taken out of full agriculture use would have to be demonstrated..

The 25 year period of loss and the change of use from crop production to grazing are therefore significant factors if repeated across large areas of the district. Nonetheless, in the absence of any adopted policy approach and the sustainability credentials arising from the renewable energy produced, officers do not consider a refusal of planning permission on this point alone could be substantiated.

Members should also note that this is a "major" application which, if determined at the meeting, will help meet the important targets set by central government in the determination of planning applications.

Agenda report paragraph 55 – Other material considerations

Members are asked to note that the parish council is disappointed there is no mention of its concern that Meldreth residents, as a result of what it believes was misinformation on the location of the site, did not have timely information on the public consultation that took place in Meldreth.

Contact Officer: Andrew Fillmore – Senior Planning Officer
Telephone: (01954) 713180