

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Planning Committee

2 July 2014

AUTHOR/S: Planning and New Communities Director

Application Number: S/0098/14/FL

Parish(es): Bassingbourn

Proposal: Change of use of land from (1) agriculture to (2) mixed use for agriculture and use for the generation of renewable energy (solar)

Site address: Land to the south of Bury Farm, Spring Lane

Applicant(s): Push Energy Ltd

Recommendation: Delegated Approval

Key material considerations: Principle, Landscape Character, Loss of Agricultural Land, Heritage Assets, Biodiversity, Flood Risk, Highway Safety, Residential Amenity, Archaeology

Committee Site Visit: Yes

Departure Application: No

Presenting Officer: Paul Sexton

Application brought to Committee because: Major Application of Local Interest

Date by which decision due: 18 April 2014

Planning History

1. S/1765/13/E1 - Screening Opinion for Solar Farm - EIA not required.

Planning Policy

2. **South Cambridgeshire Local Development Framework (LDF) Development Control Policies DPD, adopted January 2007**
 - DP/1 Sustainable Development
 - DP/2 Design of New Development
 - DP/3 Development Criteria
 - DP/7 Development Frameworks
 - NE/2 Renewable Energy
 - NE/4 Landscape Character Areas
 - NE/6 Biodiversity

NE/11 Flood Risk
NE/14 Lighting Proposals
NE/15 Noise Pollution
NE/16 Emissions
NE/17 Protecting High Quality Agricultural Land
CH/2 Archaeological Sites
TR/1 Planning for More Sustainable Travel

3. **Submission Local Plan (March 2014)**

S/7 Development Frameworks
HQ/1 Design Principles
NH/2 Protecting and Enhancing Landscape Character
NH/3 Protecting Agricultural Land
NH/4 Biodiversity
CC/2 Renewable and Low Carbon Energy Generation
CC/6 Construction Methods
CC/9 Managing Flood Risk
TI/2 Planning for Sustainable Travel

4. **South Cambridgeshire LDF Supplementary Planning Documents (SPD):**

Trees & Development Sites SPD - Adopted January 2009
Landscape in New Developments SPD - Adopted March 2010
Biodiversity SPD - Adopted July 2009

Consultations

5. **Bassingbourn Parish Council** – Recommends approval of the application as originally submitted. Comments on the amended details will be reported.
6. **Royston Town Council** – No objections, but concerns in respect of the Preliminary Landscape and Visual Appraisal document, paragraph 2.5 where Johnson Matthey was mentioned.
7. **North Hertfordshire District Council** – no comments received.
8. **Local Highway Authority** – objected to original proposal for the use of South End as access to the site. Comments on the revised access route from Spring Lane are awaited, however there is unlikely to be an objection in principle.
9. A condition will be required to ensure that a condition survey is carried out of the access route before works commence as the developer will be responsible for the repair of any damage to the adopted public highway that may be caused as a result of the operations. All deliveries to the site should be made outside of peak times to avoid conflict with the peak hour traffic along the access roads.
10. **Landscapes Officer** – does not object in principle, but requires additional planting, particularly at the southern end of the site. The site is likely to be seen in conjunction with Bury Farm at Melbourn and therefore cumulative impact should be assessed. Further comments on cumulative impact will be provided at the meeting.
11. **Trees Officer** – No objection subject to retention/protection of existing boundary planting.
12. **Environment Agency** – No objection. There are some concerns regarding surface water drainage from solar panel farms as they are relatively new and have no long term management records to date. In general, a field with impermeable panels is

going to behave differently to an agricultural field without panels. It is not really known what may happen over time as these solar farms are relatively new.

13. Whilst the soils in this area are fairly well-drained owing to the general calcareous coarse and fine loamy soils over chalk rubble, there could still be the tendency for intense rainfall to have concentrated run-off between panels. In view of this, as with other current applications for Solar Farms, there should be an ongoing inspection using a simple check sheet to ensure that any problems with run-off are picked up at an early stage.
14. It is recommended that a surface water drainage condition is appended to any consent, so that a dynamic strategy or inspection regime can be provided, which should include a check sheet, an example of which is provided.
15. The developer should address risks to controlled waters from contamination at the site, following the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework and the Environment Agency Guiding Principles for Land Contamination.
16. **Cambridgeshire County Council Historic Environment Team** – does not object in principle but requests any decision on the application is delayed until further appropriate archaeological evidence has been provided.
17. An archaeological desk-based assessment (DBA) has been undertaken, it does not attempt to discuss the impact that the application may have upon the settings of the Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire scheduled monuments that are in proximity to the site, despite this being a requirement of NPPF (para 128). Furthermore, despite this application area being located at the county and district border with Hertfordshire and North Herts District, no appraisal of the Hertfordshire historic environment has been made.
18. The DBA does demonstrate the lack of archaeological information from the Cambridgeshire area, but does not consider this in relation to the similar lack of examination that has occurred in this part of South Cambridgeshire, which is the principal reason why so little is known from the area. That said, the gently undulating chalk landscape of this this area of the Cambridgeshire/Hertfordshire border contain numerous Bronze Age barrows (burial monuments), and fewer Neolithic long barrows and henge/ceremonial monuments. These were located in number and in proximity to the Icknield Way route, a Neolithic route that followed the line of the chalk geology from Norfolk, across the Chilterns to Wiltshire, and examples of scheduled barrows are known from the next field to the west of the application area (eg Historic Environment record refs MCB 4240, 4012, 4249, SM ref CB99). Those that are known survive(d) either as earthworks until relatively recently, or have been seen on aerial photographs when conditions of ripening crops and good flight angles combine to produce a good aerial image of the monuments in the landscape. Notably absent from the record are the contemporary settlements that are notoriously harder to locate, hence our understanding of the density and character of settlement of this period is poorly understood.
19. The Icknield Way passes by the site to the south, in the area of the Baldock Rd (A505), its route broadly followed and added to in later periods by long-distance medieval ways, such as Avenell Way that passes through the site in its northern part.
20. In order to prevent unnecessary damage to further burial monuments, which can contain between 1 and 20 burials, sometimes with varying numbers of later cremations reusing the earlier monument, and whose location may not yet be known, it is recommended that archaeological work is undertaken to present evidence that

will indicate the presence or absence of remains such as these for which a mitigation strategy should be approved as part of any planning consent. This would allow for the avoidance of impacts upon the remains either by defining embargoed areas, or by altering the foundation of the PV panels - to mount them on concrete shoes in the areas where any significant archaeological remains are present.

21. **Ecology Officer** – No objections.
22. **Environmental Health** – No comments.
23. **Campaign to Protect Rural England – Hertfordshire** – objects as the development would have an adverse impact on the important views northwards and north-eastwards across the Cam Valley from the extensive important chalkland common of Therfield Heath and the Hertfordshire Way.
24. The Landscape and Visual Appraisal (LVA) confirms that the proposed solar panel array will be seen from elevated positions to the south on Therfield Heath. However it includes a photograph which is unrepresentative of views from the Heath as it is taken from a point far below much of the Heath.
25. Contrary to paragraph 7.3 of the LVA, there could not be a clearer change in character at the A505 between the urban industrial area of Royston and the open countryside beyond it. This change in character is important and would be compromised by the introduction of what would appear, in views from the south, as a continuous rectangle of glass because of the tilt of the arrays and the distance between them.
26. The site is an elongated north to south rectangle, that will be seen as an entirely alien feature extending into open countryside when viewed from the Heath. The impact will be far from the minimal significance claimed application, and cannot be accommodated in the landscape.

Representations

27. The occupier of Bury Farm, to the north of the site, comments that the visual impact of the proposal on Bury Farm and Walnut Tree Cottage has been vastly underestimated. The statement that the proposal will have a visual impact 'mainly on locations not commonly frequented by many people' is untrue. Ashwell Street is used by many on a regular basis, and is a loved and valued amenity in the locality.
28. The statement that the 'location is not considered particularly attractive countryside' is subjective, but untrue. The proposed planting on the north boundary of the site to minimise the impact on Bury Farm is inadequate.
29. The occupier of 16 Knutsford Road, Bassingbourn supports the application.
30. Comments on the revised details will be reported.

Planning Considerations

Site and Proposal

31. The 25.9ha site is located outside of any village framework and within the countryside. It is an elongated strip of undulating agricultural land, situated immediately to the north of the A505 at Royston, and south of the village of Bassingbourn. The site is bounded by a public footpath on its west boundary, which

runs from the Icknield Way (Ashwell Street), which runs east-west 140 metres north of the site, south to the A505 and across into Royston. There is some existing planting on the north, east and west boundaries, but this is intermittent. As amended, the site extends to the boundary with the A505, where planting is again intermittent.

32. As amended, access to the site will be via Spring Lane, a narrow rural lane, into the eastern end of Bassingbourn and then east to the A1198. The closest residential properties to the site are Bury Farmhouse and Walnut Tree Cottage, which front Ashwell Street, 135m north of the site boundary. The front of these properties look towards the site. Highfield Farm, which comprises a series of residential properties, and former agricultural buildings now used as Business Park, is 260m to the east.
33. This full planning application, as amended by revised site plan received on 20 June 2014, proposes the installation of a 14.4MW solar photovoltaic farm along with 12 inverter houses, 6 transformers, a grid connection cabinet, a comms cabinet and a substation, for a temporary period of 25 years. There will be a 1.8m high wire stock security fence and low level CCTV cameras.
34. The photovoltaic panels will be mounted on steel frames that are angled to face south. There would be 1,152 arrays of panels (approx. 55,300 panels), running east to west across the site that measure up to 215m in length. Each panel would measure approximately 1.65m x 0.94m, and have a maximum height of 2.0m, and be angled at 20 degrees. The panels would be composed of modules with a dark blue/grey appearance, the face of which will be treated with a non-reflective coating, which will reduce glare to a minimum.
35. An access track would run along the west boundary. The inverters/transformers, grid connection/comms cabinets would be along the west boundary. These have a maximum height of 2.5m, with the substation/control room occupying the biggest footprint at 40m². An underground route for the cable that connects the panels to the National Grid power line from the south west corner of the site, along the boundary of the A505 for a distance of 1km, to connect to an existing substation. The construction period is anticipated to be a total of 16 weeks, split into 2 phases.
36. The application states that the proposed installation will generate enough electricity to power approximately 3,240 homes.
37. The application is accompanied by a Design and Access Statement, Landscape and Visual Appraisal, Flood Risk Assessment, Transport Statement, Archaeological Desk Based Assessment, Ecological Appraisal, Statement of Community Involvement, and a Construction Management Plan.
38. 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.

Key Considerations

39. The key issues to consider in the determination of this application are whether the principle of development is acceptable in the countryside and impact of the development upon the character and appearance of the area, archaeology, biodiversity, flood risk, highway safety or other matters.

Principle of Development in the Countryside

40. The proposal represents a major development for the generation of renewable energy and as such receives considerable support from national and local planning policy.
41. Nationally the NPPF has as one of its 12 core principles the requirement to support renewable resources. Reference is made throughout the NPPF to the support of sustainable development and renewable energy whilst paragraph 98 clarifies that applications for energy development ought not to be required to demonstrate the need for renewable energy.
42. The Government's commitment to electricity generation by renewable sources is set out in the Renewable Energy Strategy, and in particular the target that 15% of national electricity production should be derived from renewable sources by 2020. This target has been maintained under the Coalition Government.
43. Locally the development plan comprises the adopted Core Strategy and Development Control Policies DPD. The Core Strategy has as two of its four objectives the effective protection and enhancement of the environment, and the prudent use of natural resources. Policy DP/7 of the Development Control Policies DPD states that outside village frameworks, only development for agriculture, horticulture, forestry, outdoor recreation and other uses that need to be located in the countryside will be permitted. Policy NE/2 relates to renewable energy and advises the district council will support proposals to generate energy from renewable sources subject to compliance with general sustainable development principles and additionally be able to connect efficiently to existing infrastructure and for provision to be made for the removal of facilities from site should the facility cease to be operational.
44. The site is located within the countryside. The installation of a solar farm is considered to represent appropriate development within the countryside providing given that there are no suitable brownfield sites available in the area of the scale required and the proposal would allow the land to continue to be used for agricultural purposes through grazing.

Impact on Landscape Character and Appearance of the Area (including cumulative impact)

45. The site currently consists of open undulating arable land, which rises to the south from Spring Lane, then falls away to the south, before rising again towards the Royston bypass. There is some existing planting on the east and west boundaries of the site, but this is absent in sections. The introduction of large arrays of solar panels and buildings would significantly change the character and appearance of the landscape from being open and rural in character to being semi-industrialised in character.
46. However, although the site will be viewed from the adjacent public footpath network, including the Icknield Way to the north, and from the elevated Therfield Heath to the south, it is not considered that there will be any significant adverse visual impact, provided that suitable additional landscaping is provided.
47. From the marked viewing point on Therfield Heath the site is set to the north east, and is therefore in a similar line of site to the commercial buildings at Highfield Farm off the A1198, and has the western end of the industrial estate on the edge of Royston in the foreground. Although the proposed panels will face south and extend this area of more urban development, the remainder of the countryside vista from the Heath will remain. The panels will not intrude above the existing skyline, and will therefore not have the same visual impact as some other forms of renewable energy

generation. The amended site includes additional land between the panels and the A505, which will allow for significant additional planting.

48. The potential cumulative impact of the proposals on the landscape also needs to be considered. Planning consent was granted at the May meeting for the construction of a 45ha solar farm development on land associated with Bury Lane Fruit Farm to the north east (S/2616/13/FL). That site is approximately 2.5km from the current site, although it is separated by the A1198 and the railway line. There will no views from the site itself, although there may be distant views of the Bury Lane site from the higher sections of Therfield Heath.
49. A further application for a 25ha solar farm development, on land north of the A505 and west of the A10, was received on 13 June, and is currently awaiting validation. The boundary of this site, which has been the subject of pre-application discussions and EIA screening, will be approximately 1km from the current site. There may be some views between the two sites, although these will be restricted by the A1198 and the sewage works adjacent to part of the boundary of the A505/A10 site. It will be possible to view part of the A505/A10 site from Therfield Heath, although the view from this point will be limited.
50. 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 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.
51. Officers are therefore of the view that the immediate landscape impact of the proposed site can be suitably mitigated, subject to additional planting, but will report the further assessment of potential cumulative impact at the meeting.

Loss of Agricultural Land

52. The site covers 25.6 hectares of arable land, and forms part of the Cokenach Estate Ltd, Barkway. The majority of the site is Grade 2, with a small part Grade 3. The proposal is not considered to result in the irreversible loss of this land given that it could be returned to its original agricultural use when there is no further need for the development. The land would be laid to grass on the site and although it is noted that it would not be cropped, there will be the opportunity to use the land for sheep grazing or biodiversity gain.

Heritage Assets

53. The site will be viewed from Therfield Heath, which contains a number of scheduled monuments in the form of Bronze Age barrows. Officers are of the view that the assessment above in respect of the potential landscape impact when viewed from Therfield Heath, can be applied to the impact on the heritage asset. When landscaped the solar farm will have limited adverse impact on the setting of the barrows. The installation represents a static feature in the landscape, and therefore has less of an impact on other potential forms of renewable energy generation, such as turbines

Biodiversity

54. The development is not considered to result in significant ecological impacts and would provide biodiversity gain. However, a condition requiring appropriate measures to secure ecological enhancement would be attached to any consent.

Flood Risk

55. The site is located within Flood Zone 1 (low risk). The submitted Flood Risk Assessment demonstrates that the development would be unlikely to increase the risk of flooding to the site and the surrounding area. However, a surface water drainage condition should be attached to any consent to ensure that there is an adequate surface water strategy at the site to deal with any issues during intense rainfall. The scheme should include reference to the checklist by the Environment Agency to monitor possible longer term effects.

Highway Safety

56. Access to the site was originally proposed from South End, Bassingbourn, then along High Street through the village to the A1198. The route through South End would mean traffic having to pass the Village College and negotiate the difficult junction with High Street, where visibility to the west is particularly restricted. Traffic would then have to travel through Bassingbourn High Street, which at times becomes congested, before accessing the A1198.
57. The revised route takes traffic along Spring Lane, joining High Street to the east, at a junction where visibility is far greater than at South End. Spring Lane serves residential development either side, before becoming a narrow track out of the built-up area of the village.
58. The applicant states that there will be 2 phases of construction over a 16-week period, with an average of less than 2 large vehicles arriving on site first thing in the morning and departing in the evening, during the construction period. Hours of movement can be controlled to protect residential amenity.
59. The Highway Authority opposed access via Spring Lane, but is of the view that access as now proposed is acceptable in highway safety terms, subject conditions.

Residential Amenity

60. The site is located 135 metres from the nearest residential properties. In the amended scheme the applicant is proposing significant new planting at the north end of the site, in order to minimise visual impact of the development on these properties. As a result the first line of panels will be approximately 200 metres from these properties. Officers are of the view that the additional planting proposed will adequately mitigate visual impact on residential amenity.
61. A condition will be required in relation to power operated plant and machinery and noisy works given the relatively close proximity of the site to residential properties.

Archaeology

62. Officers are of the view that the matters raised by the County Council's Historic Environment Team can be addressed by a condition requiring further archaeological investigation work prior to the commencement of development. If areas within the site are found to be of high archaeological significance then suitable mitigation measures can be agreed, which could include the installation of panels on concrete shoes in order to minimise ground works

Other Matters

58. 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. A condition would be attached to any consent to ensure that any material brought onto the site is not contaminated.
59. Solar farms contribute towards economic growth due employment opportunities during the planning and installation stages.

Conclusion

60. The development is of a kind that receives very considerable support in national and local planning policy and that, following the guidance in the National Planning Policy Framework there must be a strong presumption in favour of it.
61. The proposal would have an impact on the countryside but this is not considered to be unacceptable adverse visual impact that would harm the character and appearance of the area as the development can be satisfactorily mitigated by additional landscaping. The development is also not considered to harm landscape character, damage the setting of heritage assets, destroy important archaeological evidence, result in the loss of important trees and hedges, harm biodiversity interests, cause a flood risk, be detrimental to highway safety or adversely affect the amenities of neighbours.
62. Therefore, on balance, the benefits of the scheme in respect of renewable energy production are considered to outweigh the harm over the temporary loss of agricultural productivity.

Recommendation

63. Subject to the consideration of any comments received in respect of the revised details, it is recommended that the Planning Committee grants officers delegated powers to approve the application subject to the following conditions: -
1. 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.)
 2. The development hereby permitted shall be carried out in accordance with the following approved plans: Drawing numbers 09/SK001, 009/PA00D, 09/PA003, 09/PA004 09/PA005, 09/PA006.
(Reason - To facilitate any future application to the Local Planning Authority under Section 73 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.)
 3. The development, hereby permitted, shall be removed and the land former condition or to a condition to be agreed in writing by the Local Planning Authority on or before 25 years of the date of this permission 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.)

4. 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.)
5. No development shall take place until details of the materials to be used in the construction of the external surfaces of the buildings hereby permitted have been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. Development shall be carried out in accordance with the approved details.
(Reason - To ensure the appearance of the development is satisfactory in accordance with Policy DP/2 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007.)
6. 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.)
7. 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.)
8. 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.)
9. Prior to the commencement of any development, a scheme for the provision and implementation of surface water drainage including monitoring arrangements shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The scheme shall be constructed and completed in accordance with the approved plans prior to the occupation of any part of the development or in accordance with the implementation programme agreed in writing with the Local Planning Authority.
(Reason - To ensure a satisfactory method of surface water drainage and to prevent the increased risk of flooding in accordance with Policies DP/1 and NE/11 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007.)
10. No development shall commence until a detailed scheme for the importation of any soil onto the site has been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The Plan shall be implemented in accordance with the approved details.
(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.)
11. 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.)
12. Scheme of ecological mitigation.
13. Restriction on hours of working during the construction phase
14. Implementation of Traffic Management Plan
15. Archaeological investigation

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

- South Cambridgeshire Local Development Framework Development Control Policies DPD 2007
- South Cambridgeshire Local Plan Submission March 2014
- South Cambridgeshire Supplementary Planning Documents
- National Planning Policy Framework 2012

- Planning File Reference S/0098/14/FL

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