

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Planning Committee

6 August 2014

AUTHOR/S: Planning and New Communities Director

Application Number: S/1067/14/FL

Parish(es): SHINGAY-CUM-WENDY

Proposal: Solar Farm and Associated Equipment

Site address: Vine Farm, High Street

Applicant(s): Vine Farm Solar

Recommendation: Minded to Approve (as amended) –
(Secretary of State Call-in)

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

Committee Site Visit: Yes

Departure Application: No

Presenting Officer: Nigel Blazeby

Application brought to Committee because: Major Application of Local Interest

Date by which decision due: 8 August 2014

Update to the report

Following the publication of the report the application has been called-in by the Secretary of State.

The Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) has stated that should the committee be minded to approve the application then the Secretary of State will consider the application against the call in policy set out in the Ministerial Statement of the 26 October 2012. DCLG has stated that a decision notice should not be issued until the Secretary of State has had time to consider the application but should the committee refuse the application then the Secretary of State would have no further action to take.

Paragraphs 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 18, 19 and 21 - Consultation by South Cambridgeshire District Council as Local Planning Authority

Amended Plans

1. **Shingay-cum-Wendy** – Comments are awaited and will be reported verbally at the meeting.
2. **Croydon Parish Council** – Has the following comments: -
 - i) Permission for Solar Farms at Bassingbourn, Wimpole and Croydon has already been given; these are within (approximately) a three mile radius of the proposed site. Is another installation in such close proximity really necessary?
 - ii) The extra construction traffic movements on the busy main road and unsuitable minor road could lead to extra congestion and damage to the highway.
 - iii) Council appreciates that the size of the installation has been reduced, but is still of the opinion that it will destroy both the character and landscape of Wendy and the views from the surrounding area.
 - iv) The montage is created at the ground level of the installation. Council believes that the installation will be visible from Croydon village and also from the ridge where the historic Clopton Way is found.
 - v) Council also commented that it would be appreciated if the Planners took some notice of the comments made by the local Councils; these are the people who do have local knowledge and care about their locality.
3. **Bassingbourn Parish Council** – Recommends approval subject to the comments of Shingay-cum-Wendy Parish Council.
4. **Conservation Officer** – Comments that the original concerns in relation to the screening of the panels on the northern and north western boundaries and western side of the footpath have been addressed and although the panels were suggested to be moved to the south of the farmstead and this has not been carried out, the mitigation is considered reasonable. However, has concerns in relation to the views from Wimpole Hall Historic Park and Garden and has requested further studies. Welcomes the amended plans as this reduces the impact of the development upon the village, its listed buildings and Protected Village Amenity Area.
5. **Ecology Officer** – Has no objections. Comments that expert advice has been sought from a bat specialist in relation to the impact of the development upon the rare barbastelle bat population that is evident at Wimpole and Eversden Woods that is situated within close proximity of the site and that the development would not result in the loss of valuable habitat features or lead to an alien feature that would negatively impact upon the bats. However, considers that the construction phase could be disruptive and requests conditions to control working hours to ensure there would be no artificial lighting on the site and it is not lighted when the development is operational. Further comments that the scale of the development would deliver biodiversity gain and a scheme of ecological monitoring should be secured for a wide range of species. Pre-development surveys for bat activity need to be sought to assess any changes. The site has been subject to an appropriate level of ecological assessment to determine the impact of the development. Further surveys are not considered necessary providing the barn, rough grassland, field margins, hedgerows stream corridors and woodland are fully retained which is the case. The planting of

new hedgerows and gapping up existing hedgerows, provision of bat boxes, retention of a wildlife corridor, reptile habitats and species rich grassland under the panels would deliver habitat enhancement and aid the movement of animals across the site. Further details are required on the wildflower mix of the grassland and a condition is suggested to achieve this. Details are also required on the management of the grassland if sheep cannot be obtained. Two main badger setts have been identified and 30 metre buffer zones retained around them to enable badgers to move across the site. Gaps would be retained in the lower section of the fence at regular intervals to enable movements of animals into the fields and this detail should be secured by condition. The badger setts are active and trails have been identified within the site. A condition should be attached to any consent to agree an update survey for badgers prior to the development to conserve foraging routes and repeat surveys post development. An ecological management plan is required to secure the ecological enhancements proposed as part of the development. The presence of reptiles on the site is considered to be low and no surveys are required. There is potential for an interesting habitat within the reptile mitigation area. The impact upon the bird population is likely to be positive given that the species rich grassland would provide an increased range of foraging than at present. A condition is requested to achieve the erection of bird boxes within the trees. The barn owl box is noted. The development is beneficial to amphibians as connectivity across the landscape would be improved. Refuge piles are requested beneath the arrays to improve the development. No great crested newts are known to be present in this area and surveys are not required. The species rich grassland would improve the habitat for invertebrates. There is no direct impact upon the streams due to the proposed buffer zones and as such the impact upon water voles and otters is neutral. The habitats could be improved through management of vegetation so that the stream is unshaded. A tree and shrub management scheme should be incorporate into the ecological management plan. The wildlife corridor that incorporates the badger setts is welcomed but could be improved further through widening and removal of the footpath.

6. **Trees and Landscapes Officer** – Has no objections in principle but has some concerns in relation to the location of trenching and CCTV cameras which are unknown and comments that trenching can be destructive and CCTV could have an impact upon trees as a result of the vision splay required.
7. **Landscape Design Officer** – Comments that most of the original comments have been addressed. The removal of field 5 from the scheme is welcomed and the addition of large areas of tree screening along the north and eastern edges could screen some open views of the development. However, considers that it is important that dense tree planting is not employed in all areas to ensure that the landscape quality on the edge of the village is retained along with the longer views across the river valley landscape. Requests further details on how the permissive pathways and public rights of way will work. Suggests some additional woodland planting at the north east and north west ends of the existing woodland along the North Ditch, low level scrub alongside the north edge of the existing woodland, the retention of open fields to the west of Wendy and enhancements to the landscape in the form of strengthening of existing existing and planting of new hedges along the south west of the public right of way, orchard planting to the north east of the public right of way and hedge and tree planting along the northern edge of field 2. Request further details on the wildlife corridor including cross sections to show how the feature will work with the existing mature hedgerow, field margins and the footpath. Notes that the layout of the field corridors may need to be different due the characteristics of each area. Comments that the permissive footpaths and rights of way need to be attractive and suggests glades are created along the paths at changes in direction and at junctions

with other paths. More details are required to show how the paths will work in terms of view towards the development. Suggests an additional permissive path to be provided along the southern boundary of field 1 to link with the existing public right of way. Impacts of the cameras may limit planting and this needs to be considered. Details are required for the species, mixes, stock sizes, planting densities, spacing, protection and aftercare for all planting. Details are required to show the protection of existing trees and hedgerows during construction.

8. **Environment Agency** – Has reviewed its position following submission of further information from local residents and objects to the proposal. Considers that the flood risk for the site itself would be shallow although it could be exacerbated by the solar farm and therefore there is some doubt on the impacts. Requests a revised flood risk assessment to address the issues and demonstrate that mitigation can be provided for any potential increased risk to adjacent properties from the development. The sequential test also needs to be carried out.
9. **English Heritage** – Comments that the amended plans do not change its original comments.
10. **Natural England** – Has no further comments.

Paragraph 23 - Representations

11. The agent has responded to the consultation comments received as follows: -

Response to Conservation Officer

Views between the site and the grade I listed Wimpole Hall and its park

The Conservation Officer has requested more detail on the “potential views” to and from Wimpole Hall and Parkland.

The visual effect on the Wimpole Estate is assessed in paragraph 6.3.7 of the landscape and visual impact assessment. Agreed viewpoints 2 and 3 are within the Wimpole Estate and photographs from these viewpoints are presented in figures 8 and 9 of the LVIA. The photographs taken from these viewpoints show that the proposed development would be screened by the intervening layers of vegetation. The LVIA concludes that the effects on visitors of the Wimpole Estate would be of negligible magnitude and minimal significance.

The cultural heritage assessment assesses the effect on the significance of Wimpole Hall and its park. Page 31 of the assessment states that

“Although the solar farm is predicted to be visible from key locations within the park the degree of visual change is considered to be negligible and the panels will be screened by intervening vegetation (LDA Design 2006:51). The hall will remain the visually dominant feature within the park in views from the north across the hall and parkland, the avenue and folly castle will remain the dominant landscape features in views from the hall. It is not currently possible to distinguish the land use of the PDA from within the park due to the distance from the main part of the park and due to screening by roadside vegetation and woodland at the southern end of the avenue; as such no harm to the significance of the park or the hall is predicted.”*

*predicted by the Zone of Theoretical Visibility Study (ZTV). The ZTV does not take in to account any localised features such as small copses, hedgerows, mature trees or buildings and therefore gives an exaggerated impression of the extent of visibility.

The actual visibility on the ground will be noticeably less than that suggested by the ZTV as illustrated by the photographs taken in figures 8 and 9 of the LVIA.

Response to Landscape Officer

Proposed planting/wildlife corridor/permissive paths/bridleways

The layout incorporates significant buffer zones to existing landscape features and therefore will not entail the removal of trees and hedgerows. The suggestions proposed by the Landscape Officer can be dealt with under condition: further detail and refinement can be added to the mitigations and enhancements plan (drawing 3737_005A) and a detailed landscape and ecology management plan (LEMP) will set out management prescriptions for the landscape and ecological features and footpaths within and adjacent to the development. This will cover the construction, operation and decommission periods. They will be prepared by suitably qualified specialists and agreed with Council Officers, including the Landscape and PRow Officers. The detailed drawing and LEMP will address the questions on detailed management and planting issues raised by the Landscape Officer. As such, it is proposed the detailed mitigations and enhancements plan and LEMP is agreed by a suitable pre-commencement planning condition.

Cabling and security cameras

Security cameras will be located inside the security fence and each will monitor a single field only (facing inwards). The type of mitigation planting will not therefore be restricted by the security cameras. The cameras will be erected on approx. 2 metre tall poles - a similar height to the proposed deer fencing. As such, they would be screened or obscured in many cases by boundary screening. The cable runs together with all other development will be set away from boundary trees and hedgerows. If necessary, a selected tree survey can be carried out post-determination in order to inform the best routes for cables.

Management of sheep grazing

Unusually for solar farms, the solar farm developer is also the landowner and therefore will continue to be responsible for farming the site. He is familiar with local farming practices in the area and as such we can be confident that sheep will be available to graze the site.

Response to Environment Agency

The EA originally recommended approval subject to conditions but in response to a third party representation, the EA have submitted an objection due to "insufficient information to be able to fully assess the potential increased flood risk to adjacent properties." The proposed measures have been previously accepted by the EA as ensuring flood risk will not be increased off-site. As such, it is not clear from the EA letter why flood risk off site will be increased if the solar farm itself is not increasing flood risk. The EA is currently reviewing the response and will report back to us tomorrow.

Response to the Cambridgeshire County Council Rights of Way Team

In relation to the concerns about the conflict between the PRow and construction traffic, please note paragraphs 2.9.2 – 2.9.4 of the construction traffic management plan which state that

"Construction vehicle drivers would be made aware of the potential for pedestrians to be using the paths and informed that they must give way to rights of way users at all

times. Equally, signs would be erected at either end of the public footpaths notifying users of construction traffic associated with the solar farm. Large vehicles currently use the access to Vine Farm and the measures proposed for the construction period would offer an improvement to the safety of public rights of way users over the existing situation.”

Paragraph 45 – Other Matters

12. The site is not designated within the adopted Local Development Framework or new Local Plan as an Important Countryside Frontage.

Paragraph 52 - Recommendation

13. Minded to approve (as amended) (Secretary of State Call-in) subject to the receipt of a satisfactory Flood Risk Assessment and any additional conditions requested by the Ecology Officer, Landscape Design Officer and Trees and Landscapes Officer.

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