

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Planning Committee

1 October 2014

AUTHOR/S: Planning and New Communities Director

Application Number: S/1615/14/FL

Parish(es): Sawston

Proposal: Solar Farm and Associated Development

Site address: Land North of Dales Manor Business Park,
West Way

Applicant(s): Sawston Solar Farm Ltd.

Recommendation: Delegated Approval (as amended)

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

Committee Site Visit: Yes

Departure Application: No

Presenting Officer: Karen Pell-Coggins

Application brought to Committee because: Major Application of Local Interest

Date by which decision due: 27 October 2014

Executive Summary

1. This proposal is for a new 28 MW solar farm with associated equipment covering an area of approximately 49 hectares of agricultural land located in the Green Belt and on grade 3A agricultural land to the north east of the village of Sawston. The proposal would represent inappropriate development that is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt in policy terms. It would also have an impact on the Green Belt and countryside but this is not considered to be unacceptable adverse visual impact that would significantly harm the character and appearance of the area as the development would be satisfactorily mitigated by additional landscaping. The development is also not considered to result in the loss of the best and most versatile agricultural land, harm landscape character, damage the setting of heritage assets, destroy important archaeological evidence, result in the loss of important trees and hedges, harm

biodiversity interest, increase flood risk, be detrimental to highway safety, adversely affect the amenities of neighbours or seriously harm the amenity of public footpaths. However, renewable energy development receives very considerable support in national and local planning policy. The proposal would power approximately 8,500 homes and offset 12,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions that would increase the supply of renewable energy to reduce the impact of climate change. Therefore, on balance, the public benefits of the scheme in respect of renewable energy production are considered represent very special circumstances that outweigh the harm to the Green Belt through inappropriateness due to encroachment and a loss of openness in addition to other limited visual harm.

Site and Proposal

2. The site is located outside the Sawston village framework and within the Green Belt and countryside. It measures approximately 49 hectares in area and is situated within the East Anglian Chalk Landscape Character Area on grade 3A (good to moderate) agricultural land. It consists of two fields in arable use in an L shape with fairly flat topography. The eastern, southern and western boundaries partly comprise hedges. The northern boundary comprises a chain link fence with some groups of trees. A public footpath runs along the eastern boundary of the site. A drainage ditch lies in the north western corner of the site. The site lies within flood zone 1 (low risk). The River Granta County Wildlife Site lies to the north. The Sawston Hall Site of Special Scientific Interest lies to the south west. The site lies immediately to the north east of the village of Sawston and 1.7km to the west of the village of Babraham. Both villages comprise conservation areas and number of listed buildings including churches. Church Farmhouse on Sawston Road is a grade II listed building that lies 860 metres to the south east of the site and Babraham Hall is a grade II listed building that lies 1.2km to the north east of the site. North Farm is a residential property that is situated immediately to the south west of the site. The Dales Manor Business Park is situated immediately to the south of the site that includes a site allocated for residential development.
3. This full planning application, received on 1 July 2014 as amended, proposes the installation of 28MW of solar photovoltaic panels along with inverter/transformer buildings, a substation, customer room, control room, cable route, connection pole, construction compound, access tracks, security fence and pole mounted CCTV cameras for a temporary period of 25 years. The photovoltaic panels would be mounted on steel frames that are angled at 25 degrees to face south. There would be arrays of panels running east to west across the site. They would have a maximum height of approximately 2.7 metres and be set approximately 6 metres apart. 3.5 metre wide access tracks would be provided within and around the fields to the construction compound at the entrance to the site on the western boundary. The compound would consist of a substation, customer room and storage room along with a hard surfaced area. The substation would measure 6.6 metres in length x 5.1 metres in width x 3.4 metres in height. The customer room would measure 6.1 metres in length x 2.4 metres in width x 2.8 metres in height. The control room would measure 4.0 metres in length, 2.4 metres in width x 2.3 metres in height. The transformer/ inverter buildings would measure 12.2 metres in length x 2.4 metres in width x 3 metres in height. Within the site there would be 19 further transformer/ inverter buildings erected at regular intervals within the fields to serve the panels. A security fence that measures 2.2 metres in height and consists of timber posts with steel wire in a deer stock design would surround the site. A number of CCTV poles at a height of 2 metres would be erected around the perimeter of the site. The underground cable route would run from the substation to a new connection pole adjacent to the existing overhead power line to the north west. The pole would measure 10 metres in height. Access to the site would be via an existing field access

adjacent the existing access to the sewage works off Cambridge Road and a new section of access to link to the site.

Planning History

4. S/1389/14/E1 - Screening Opinion for Solar Farm - EIA not required.

Planning Policy

5. **South Cambridgeshire Local Development Framework (LDF) Core Strategy DPD, adopted January 2007**
ST/1 Green Belt
6. **South Cambridgeshire Local Development Framework (LDF) Development Control Policies DPD, adopted July 2007**
DP/1 Sustainable Development
DP/2 Design of New Development
DP/3 Development Criteria
DP/7 Development Frameworks
GB/1 Development in the Green Belt
NE/2 Renewable Energy
NE/4 Landscape Character Areas
NE/6 Biodiversity
NE/11 Flood Risk
NE/15 Noise Pollution
NE/16 Emissions
NE/17 Protecting High Quality Agricultural Land
CH/2 Archaeological Sites
CH/4 Development Within the Setting of a Listed Building
TR/1 Planning for More Sustainable Travel
7. **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
NH/8 Mitigating the Impact of Development in and adjoining the Green Belt
NH/14 Heritage Assets
H/1 Allocations for Residential Development at Villages
CC/2 Renewable and Low Carbon Energy Generation
CC/6 Construction Methods
CC/9 Managing Flood Risk
SC/11 Noise Pollution
SC/12 Contaminated Land
TI/2 Planning for Sustainable Travel
8. **South Cambridgeshire LDF Supplementary Planning Documents (SPD):**
Listed Buildings SPD - Adopted July 2009
Trees & Development Sites SPD - Adopted January 2009
Landscape in New Developments SPD - Adopted March 2010
Biodiversity SPD - Adopted July 2009
District Design Guide SPD - Adopted March 2010

Consultation by South Cambridgeshire District Council as Local Planning Authority

Original Submission

9. **Sawston Parish Council** – Recommends refusal and makes the following comments: -
 - i) The site lies wholly within the Cambridge Green Belt and it is therefore contrary to National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, Para. 91) which states that ‘When located in the Green Belt, elements of many renewable energy projects will comprises inappropriate development. In such cases, developers will need to demonstrate very special circumstances if projects are to proceed.’ The developer has not demonstrated very special circumstances.
 - ii) The proposed development would occupy Grade 3a agricultural land. This comes within the ALC land classification of best and most versatile agricultural land (grades 1,2 and 3a). The NPPF (Para.112) indicates that there should be a presumption against development of agricultural land in this category.
 - iii) The development would be clearly visible from Babraham Footpath No. 10 (Babraham Road to Rowley Lane) and from the public amenity land controlled by the Magog Trust (Stapleford). The application will therefore have a deleterious effect on countryside recreational amenity.

10. **Babraham Parish Council** – Recommends refusal and makes the following comments: -
 - i) In Green Belt land.
 - ii) Loss of very high grade agricultural land.
 - iii) Can be seen from Babraham and Gog Magog Trust land so against the view of the surrounding public amenity land.

11. **Conservation Officer** – Comments are awaited.

12. **Ecology Officer** – Objects to the application as it is not as good for biodiversity as it should be. With some relatively minor tweaking and provision of further details this application can provide more for biodiversity, and ensure that its construction and operational impacts are kept to a minimum. Wildflower seeding should be across the whole of the developed area, the site has much potential to erect further nest boxes for bird and for bats, the operational access appears to cut through a small area of woodland and this is not welcomed when an alternative route clearly exists, the route of the transfer cable to the grid appears to cut across a small ditch habitat and it is not clear if that particular ditch had been assessed for water vole, the parcel of existing grassland in the north west of the site has been retained but this grassland should be enhanced to make it richer in flora, this area of land also contains a shallow ditch and this wetland feature should be enhanced to create a widen ditch/pond habitat it appropriate to complement the orchard habitat with additional fruit tree planting, the provision of log piles is welcomed but it is request that log and rubble piles also be placed beneath the panels to aid the movement of small animals across the site, the use of badger gates is not welcomed as they are unlikely to be used by any other animals but the provision of gaps beneath the fence is welcomed, the tree belt to the north should include taller species and new oaks should be planted to complement those already growing, and the scheme does not propose any ecological monitoring and a scheme this large should be able to demonstrate that through the course of its operation it has increased the site’s biodiversity.

13. **Trees and Landscapes Officer** – Comments are awaited.

14. **Landscape Design Officer** – Has no objections and welcomes the proposed landscape mitigation measures but comments that an allocation for residential development H/1:a and H/1:b has been allocated within and adjacent to the Dales Manor Business Park as per South Cambridgeshire Local Plan Proposed Submission July 2013. H/1:a – this site has been identified within the Dales Manor Business Park and adjacent to the proposed Solar Farm. The solar farm would have a significant impact upon the proposed housing development and associated uses. To mitigate the proposed works a landscape buffer (minimum of 10m of native trees and shrubs) would be essential on the Southern boundary of the solar farm. H/1:b – this has been identified to the east of Dales Manor Business Park. The proposed solar farm would have a low impact upon the proposed housing development and associated uses. There is an existing specie rich mature hedge line between the H/1:b and the solar farm. This is to be retained and infilled with a native hedgerow and trees by the applicant. Requests conditions in relation to hard and soft landscape works, details of all existing trees, scrub and hedgerows on the land including information of those are to be retained or removed, details of tree / hedgerow protection measures, a five year replacement planting for both trees and shrubs upon completion, a scheme of no-dig construction within the Root Protection Area, boundary treatments, provision of bat brick/boxes and nest boxes and provision of log piles, hedgehog and insect houses.
15. **Policy Team** – Sets out the relevant national and local policy framework for the development. Comments that to the south west and adjoining the proposed solar farm is land at Dales Manor Business Park which is allocated in Policy H/1a of the submitted Local Plan (March 2014) for residential development with some light industrial and office uses. The NPPF (paragraph 216) states that decision makers may give weight to policies in emerging plans according to the stage of plan preparation, extent of unresolved objections, and the degree of consistency with the policies in the NPPF. It is considered that some weight can be given to Policy H/1a as a material consideration given the balance of representations made and the nature and significance of the objections to the policy. It is considered that limited weight can be given to Policy CC/2 in view of the nature and significance of the objections to the policy.

The development as currently proposed would have a significant adverse impact on the proposed residential use on land at Dales Manor Business Park. The site layout plan shows the photovoltaic panels, which are 2.7 m in height, covering the whole site, with the panels facing in a southerly direction and running in a west-east grid pattern. The site layout plan and planting strategy plan show that the south western boundary of the proposed development (adjoining Dales Manor Business Park) will be formed of a transparent tensile steel deer fence (2.2 m in height), the existing hedgerow (approx. 4-5 m in height), infill planting, and CCTV cameras at regular intervals (approx. 2.1 m in height). The proposed solar farm layout would therefore have an impact on the design and layout of the proposed residential development, which may result in a reduction in the area of the site and therefore the number of dwellings that could be accommodated. Given the Council's current housing land supply position, it is important that this site, which is a brownfield site and on the edge of one of the most sustainable settlements in the district, is able to be delivered and is not adversely impacted on by a proposed development on adjoining land.

The Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) submitted with the planning application does not consider the landscape and visual effects of the proposed solar farm on the adjoining proposed residential development on land at Dales Manor Business Park. Section 6.3 of the LVIA only considers Dales Manor Business Park in its current employment use, and does not make any assessment of the impacts on the proposed residential use. As this assessment has not been undertaken, only limited mitigation has been proposed along the boundary between these two

proposed developments. It is considered that the applicant should be required to update the LVIA to include information on the landscape and visual effects of the proposed solar farm on the proposed adjoining residential development.

The adverse impacts on the proposed adjoining residential development could be reduced by amending the proposed scheme to include a larger planted landscaping buffer within the solar farm site of at least 10 m between the photovoltaic panels and the boundary of the proposed residential development. The exact nature and design of the landscape buffer should be agreed with the Council's Landscape Design Officer. This along with the significant landscape buffer required by Policy H/1a will help to mitigate the adverse impacts of the proposed solar farm on the adjoining proposed residential development.

16. **Environmental Health Officer** – Comments that having observed the supporting documentation associated with this consultation, I am mindful of North Farm being very close to the southern boundary of the development site. Whilst I acknowledge that the mini-substation is positioned on the western boundary of the development site, I feel it prudent to request for an acoustic assessment detailing potential noise breakout from the site, also taking in account whether there may be any noise emanating from transformer invertors, which are situation close to North Farm.
17. **Contaminated Land Officer** – Comments that the land is arable with no obvious signs of potential contamination. Suggests a condition to ensure that any contamination found on the site during development is subject to a remediation strategy to ensure there is no risk to receptors.
18. **Local Highway Authority** – Recommends refusal on the grounds insufficient information has been submitted with the application with regards to the access details and access design. The following information is required: -
 - i) Plan showing access from the site onto the public adoptable highway, the Highway Authority would request a width of 6m for the first 20m.
 - ii) The required visibility splays on the submitted plan in full and in both directions.
 - iii) The turning radii and swept path analysis using the larges vehicle that will be delivering to the site.
19. **Environment Agency** – Has no objections in principle to the flood risk assessment and states that the surface water drainage for the site is acceptable but requires conditions in relation to a scheme for the maintenance and provision of the surface water drainage scheme to ensure that there is no increased in the risk from flooding. This needs to include regular monitoring and review of the scheme. In addition, although filter trenches have been incorporated around the building, the consideration of French drains or similar is required around the panels to encourage surface water to dissipate. Requests informatives in relation to pollution control.
20. **Cambridgeshire County Council Historic Environment Team** – Comments that an archaeological desk-based assessment has been compiled for a 1km radius around the site, which describes evidence contained in the Cambs Historic Environment Record (HER) covering this area of Sawston parish. However, wider HER searches provide greater context detail for the application area and extends the results already gained in the desk-based assessment, demonstrating a dominance of Roman-period archaeological evidence in the vicinity of the site, much of which was encountered in various campaigns for the expansion of Babraham Institute to the east. Here cemeteries (MCB17624) and extensive Late Iron Age and Roman settlement (eg MCB17449) form a dense mosaic on the north side of the river, while cropmarked evidence is known to be located on the south side too. Saxon remains were excavated in the northern floodplain by St Peter's Church (Babraham), which

included a sunken floor building with spindle whorls, pottery and a cruciform brooch (CAU report 597). Earlier prehistoric evidence is known from lithic scatter sites throughout the area, but no distinctive settlement cores have yet been established. The medieval manorial lands of Dales Manor, at the centre of which was a manorial moated house enclosure, lies just south of the application area. Given that the site lies in an area of archaeological sensitivity, recommends that the site is subject to archaeological evaluation prior to a planning decision being made on the application.

21. **Cambridgeshire County Council Rights of Way Team** – Comments that Restricted Byway No. 10 Sawston runs alongside the application site and Public Bridleway No. 12 runs adjacent to the site. The proposal is not likely to greatly affect these rights of way since the site access is on the other side of the solar farm site but it is requested that all solar panels are to be placed 2 metres from the edges of Restricted Byway No.10 to protect this Public Right of Way. States that the British Horse Society should be consulted as the glare from solar panels could startle horses. Requests informatives in relation to points of law with regards to the right of way.
22. **British Horse Society** – Comments are awaited.
23. **Natural England** – Comments that the application site is in close proximity to the Dernford Farm and Sawston Hall Sites of Special Scientific Interest. The development is not considered to damage or destroy the interest features for which these sites have been notified.

Considers that the proposed development is unlikely to lead to significant and irreversible long term loss of best and most versatile agricultural land, as a resource for future generations. This is because the solar panels would be secured to the ground by steel piles with limited soil disturbance and could be removed in the future with no permanent loss of agricultural land quality likely to occur provided the development is undertaken to high standards. Although some components of the development, such as construction of a sub-station, may permanently affect agricultural land this would be limited to small areas. In the short-term we recognise that it is likely that there will be a loss of potential agricultural production over the whole development area. Comments that the Authority should consider whether the proposals involve any smaller scale or temporary losses of BMV agricultural land with reference to Paragraph 112 of the National Planning Policy Framework.

Solar farm developments offer excellent opportunities to create new habitats, and especially “priority habitats” listed under s41 of the NERC Act 2006. In particular, solar farms are ideally suited to creating new grassland habitats, which can be created among the rows of solar panels. If not already provided, the applicant should be encouraged to prepare a habitat creation plan (which should include measures to create suitable soil conditions / arable reversion techniques), suggested species mix for sowing, and details of how new habitats will be managed (e.g. grazing / mowing). Other priority habitats that could be created or enhanced depending on site conditions, are hedgerows, ponds, and arable field margins. We suggest that a habitat creation plan also references any existing local sites recognised for their nature conservation interest, such as SSSIs and Local Wildlife Sites.

The application may provide opportunities to incorporate features into the design which are beneficial to wildlife, such as the incorporation of roosting opportunities for bats or the installation of bird nest boxes. The Authority should consider securing measures to enhance the biodiversity of the site from the applicant, if it is minded to grant permission for this application in accordance with Paragraph 118 of the National Planning Policy Framework.

The application may provide opportunities to enhance the character and local distinctiveness of the surrounding natural and built environment; use natural resources more sustainably; and bring benefits for the local community, for example through green space provision and access to and contact with nature. Landscape characterisation and townscape assessments, and associated sensitivity and capacity assessments provide tools for planners and developers to consider new development and ensure that it makes a positive contribution in terms of design, form and location, to the character and functions of the landscape and avoids any unacceptable impacts.

24. **National Grid** – Has no objections.

Additional Information

25. **Environmental Health Officer** – Comments that the development would not result in any undue disturbance from noise.
26. **Local Highways Authority** – Comments that the swept path drawing is acceptable .

Representations by members of the public

27. 11 letters have been received from local residents in relation to the application. They have made the following comments: -

Support

- i) Welcomes planting to ensure the development blends into the surroundings.
- ii) Planting would support enhance the habitat.
- iii) Supports green energy.
- iv) Pleased to see continued use of land for agricultural purposes. Sheep grazing would remove the need for pesticides that would improve soil quality.
- v) Parish funds would help the community and the long term rewards would outweigh the limited initial impact.
- vi) Makes sense that electricity supply is generated and supplied locally.
- vii) The land currently has low quality soil which gives poor yields of crops.
- viii) Less agricultural movements and traffic to the farm.
- ix) Low visual impact.
- x) Future for the UK's renewable energy market as dual use.
- xi) Enhanced biodiversity.

Objections

- i) Within the Green Belt and ugly blot on countryside already eroded by development. Views from public footpaths would be spoilt.
- ii) Further substantial erosion of Green Belt in addition to football club. Cumulative impact is significant and detrimental.
- iii) Loss of agricultural land for food production for 25 years.
- iv) Impact upon outlook from dwelling and garden.
- v) Decrease in quality of life.

Representations by the Applicant's Agent

28. The adjacent proposed allocation for residential development is likely to be allocated in the forthcoming policy document. However, the document is not yet adopted and therefore only carries limited weight as a material consideration. Furthermore, a planning application for the residential development will be required once the plan

has been formally adopted. Any planning application submitted will need to take into account the relationship with the adjacent solar farm and any cumulative impact associated with the development.

29. The layout, design and mitigation of the housing development can be devised to take into account the adjacent solar farm development (if approved). As you will be aware, no layout or designs have been proposed for this neighbouring site thus far. At this stage it is not considered reasonable or appropriate to impose requirements for modification to a current planning application (Sawston Solar Farm) in respect of the recommended landscape buffer. Similarly the LVIA should only consider reasonably foreseeable developments within any assessment of cumulative impact. Given that the planning policy document has not been adopted it is not considered that the neighbouring site/development has a status of 'reasonably foreseeable'. The timescale of this sites development is not known either and in this respect it is relevant to consider the temporary nature of the proposed solar farm. Any planning application for residential development would need to consider cumulative impact and this would address any potential harm and not visa versa. The existing draft allocation cannot be considered as 'planned' development as the plan has not yet been accepted/approved by the Secretary of State. The existing screening afforded to the site by existing hedgerows is considered sufficient to ensure that the amenity of occupiers of any potential development at this site is protected.

Material Planning Considerations

30. The key issues to consider in the determination of this application are whether the principle of development is acceptable in the Green Belt and countryside and impact of the development upon the character and appearance of the area, best and most versatile agricultural land, biodiversity, trees/landscaping, heritage assets, flood risk, highway safety, neighbour amenity and public footpaths.

Principle of Development in the Green Belt

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

Other Harm

Character and Appearance of the Area

34. The site currently consists of open agricultural land. The introduction of a significant scale of arrays of solar panels and buildings would encroach into undeveloped land outside the village framework. It would substantially change the character and appearance of the landscape from being open and rural in character to being industrialised in character. However, it is unlikely to have any adverse visual impacts from the main public viewpoints on Sawston Road and the rights of way surrounding the site due to the low height and new planting that is proposed along the boundaries to screen the development. It is also not considered to have an adverse visual impact from public viewpoints further afield at the Magog Downs and near Wandlebury due to the long distance views, view of the rear of the panels, planting and proximity to the village.
35. The site is located within the East Anglian Chalk Landscape Character Area. The distinctive features of this area are the gently undulating arable landscape with large fields bounded by hedges and occasional small groups of woodland. Although the development is not necessarily compatible with the existing landscape qualities of the area as the open arable landscape would be lost, the development would retain some of the the characteristic features and provide additional planting that would be designed to ensure it is in keeping with the visual qualities of the area. The development is not therefore considered to have an unacceptable impact upon landscape character.
36. The nearest approved solar farm to the site is at Great Wilbraham that is located a significant distance away so that it would not be visible within the same public viewpoint or within a limited distance when travelling along the same road. Whilst it is noted that it would be visible from the same public viewpoint at Magog Downs along with the Wadlow Wind Farm, it would not be within the same viewing direction that would result in an unacceptable visual impact.
37. The development when viewed cumulatively with the approved football club application under reference S/2239/13/FL on a nearby site is not considered to significantly detract from the character and appearance of the area given the low height and new planting that would screen it from public viewpoints close to the site and the significant distance and siting on the edge of the village when viewed from further afield.

Loss of Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land

38. The site is situated on 49 hectares of agricultural land with a grade 3A Agricultural Land Classification. This is considered as the best and most versatile agricultural land.
39. Paragraph 112 of the NPPF states that local planning authorities should take into account the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land. Where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, local planning authorities should seek to use areas of poorer quality land in preference to that of a higher quality.
40. The National Planning Policy Guidance 2014 (NPPG) advises that when determining applications for large solar farms, local planning authorities will need to consider encouraging the effective use of land by focussing such developments on previously developed and non-agricultural land provided that it is not of high environmental value. It also indicates that where the use of greenfield land is proposed, consideration should be given to whether the use of agricultural land has been shown to be necessary and that poorer quality land has been used in preference to higher quality land.

41. The applicant states that there are no buildings in single ownership with adequate roof/ open space with an appropriate grid connection that could provide a 28MW solar farm and whilst there are many brownfield sites within the district, there are no sites that are available on the open market and even if they were the land values in the region would ensure that they are not viable for solar farms given the high housing demand in the area. Examples of these sites are Bourn Airfield and Waterbeach Barracks that are both being put forward for residential development in the emerging Local Plan.
42. The applicant further states that an exceptionally high proportion of land in Cambridgeshire comprises the best and most versatile agricultural land of grade 1, 2 and 3a and only 2.2% of land in the whole of Cambridgeshire comprises agricultural land of grades 4 and 5 and the majority of that land is located adjacent the Great River Ouse within the high risk flood zone or adjacent to wildlife areas associated with the river.
43. In addition, the land is not considered to produce high yields of crops due to soil droughtiness as a result of the combination of the soil and climatic characteristics on the site that limits its quality to the grade 3A classification.
44. Furthermore, the proposal would include an agricultural use and would not result in the irreversible loss of this land given that it would include a condition to ensure that it is returned to its original agricultural use when there is no further need for the development. The land would be laid to grass on the site and although it is noted that it would not be cropped, there will be the opportunity to use the land for sheep grazing or biodiversity gain to retain the agricultural use throughout the life of the development. Further information is to be submitted to demonstrate that the land would continue to be used for agricultural purposes. This would be similar to a scheme that was allowed upon appeal on the same grade of agricultural land.
45. Given the above and that the district of South Cambridgeshire comprises wholly agricultural land with a grade 2 or 3 classification, the district would not be able to contribute towards the renewable energy targets set out by the government without the use of greenfield land.

Biodiversity

46. The habitats on the site comprise a mixture of arable land, pasture, trees, hedgerows and a ditch. It is located 100 metres to the south of the River Granta County Wildlife Site and 1.2km from the Sawston Hall Meadows Site and Special Scientific Interest.
47. The habitats on the site are considered of low ecological value. The ditch on the site is not considered to provide a suitable Great Crested Newt habitat. There is a pond adjacent to the site that is fairly new. Access is not available but a survey carried out in the area in 2013 did not record any presence of Great Crested Newts so it is considered unlikely that the development would adversely affect this protected species. The ditches on the site contain some water vole potential but the shallow water would be suboptimal for this species. There would be no otter or white clawfish potential due to the water levels or the water not flowing at a sufficient rate. The hedgerow margins and woodlands would contain a suitable habitat for bats and birds and these would be retained within the development. The four oak trees on the northern boundary have bat roosting potential and would be protected. The grassland and ditches may support reptiles but no evidence was found on the site. No badger setts were identified on the site and there were no signs of badgers moving across the site.

48. The development would incorporate mitigation measures such as the erection of bat and bird boxes, bee hives, fence gaps, log piles, native tree and hedgerow planting, wildflower seeding and grassland management that would retain the habitats and increase the biodiversity of the site. Any clearance of vegetation would also take place outside the bird nesting season. However, further information will be submitted to address the ecology officer's concerns. The development is not therefore considered to result in the loss of any important habitats for protected species. The development would also not harm the features of interest of the nearby County Wildlife Site or Site of Special Scientific Interest as a result of the distance from these sites.

Landscaping/Trees

49. The development would be unlikely to result in the loss of any important trees or hedges that contribute to the visual amenity of the area providing a condition is attached to any consent for protection purposes. A significant landscaping scheme would also be attached as a condition of any consent in order to mitigate the impact of the development upon its surroundings. Further information will be submitted to address the Landscape Officer's comments.

Heritage Assets

50. The nearest listed buildings are located at Church Farmhouse that lies 860 metres to the south west of the site and Babraham Hall that is located 1.2 km to the south east of the site. The development is not considered to damage the setting of the listed buildings given that the development is separated by open land and there would be screening along the boundaries. The setting of the conservation areas and listed buildings within the villages of Sawston and Babraham are also not considered to be adversely affected given the significant distance from the site.
51. The site is located within an area of archaeological sensitivity and the development has the potential to to harm undesignated heritage assets of historic interest. The applicant is working with Cambridgeshire County Council Historic Environment Team on a scheme of trial trenching to determine the extent and significance of any remains and any mitigation measures to ensure that any important remains are protected. This would be a condition of any consent.

Flood Risk

52. The site is located approximately 100 metres to the south of the River Granta. It lies within Flood Zone 1 (low risk) but adjacent to Flood Zones 2 and 3 (medium and high risk). There is a drain on the site.
53. The Flood Risk Assessment submitted with the application sets out the surface water drainage strategy for the site that includes infiltration trenches adjacent the buildings. These are considered acceptable. However, the Environment Agency has also requested details of additional drains to be provided within the panels and the maintenance of the scheme to ensure that there is no increase in the risk of flooding. These would be conditions of any consent.

Highway Safety

54. Access to the site during and after construction would be via the existing field access adjacent to the access to the sewage works off Cambridge Road in Sawston. This is the main road into the village from the Sawston bypass and has a speed limit of 60 miles per hour. There is a layby adjacent to the access.

55. The Construction Traffic Management Plan submitted with the application shows the access route to the site during construction and demonstrates that vehicles would access the site via the A1301 and not need to travel through nearby villages. During the 12 week construction period, the traffic generation is estimated at a maximum of 15 HGV/LGV deliveries per day. There would also be movements from site personnel that would be a maximum of 50 trips per day. When construction is complete, the traffic generation to maintain the development is very low. Whilst it is acknowledged that there would be a significant number of traffic movements during the construction period, the development is not considered to result in a level of traffic generation to and from the site that would be detrimental to highway safety given the position of the access and visibility, the route taken, the space for the vehicles to access junctions along the route and the management of the traffic to the site. Further information has been submitted to address the concerns of the Local Highways Authority. A condition would be attached to any consent to agree the details set out in the Construction Traffic Management Plan.
56. A temporary compound would be provided on site for vehicles to park off the public highway during the construction period.

Residential Amenity

57. The site is located in close proximity to the residential property known as North Farm.
58. Whilst it is noted that the development would be sited adjacent the whole of the northern boundary of the property and close to the eastern boundary of the property that would mean it would be visible from the first floor windows of that dwelling, it is not to result in a significant loss of outlook given that there would be a distance of approximately 100 metres to the development and there would be open countryside beyond. It would also not lead to a loss of outlook to the garden as the main sitting out area is close to the dwelling and the development would be low in height with additional screen planting along the boundary.
59. Noise from the development is mostly from fans that keep the inverters cool when working at capacity in daylight hours. The noise levels would be approximately 37dBA at a distance of 100 metres that is the closest part of the curtilage of North Farm. This is equivalent to 'slightly louder than a quiet library whisper'. The dwelling is 150 metres from the inverter and therefore the noise would be lower. It should also be noted that there would be additional screening along the boundary and the prevailing wind would assist in moving the noise away from the property. The development is not therefore considered to result in a significant increase in the level of noise and disturbance in the area that would harm the amenities of the neighbour. A condition would be attached to any consent to ensure that any construction deliveries and noisy works are restricted to between 08.00 hours and 18.00 hours on weekdays, between 08.00 hours and 13.00 hours on Saturdays and at no time on Sundays and Bank Holidays in order to protect residents from noise and disturbance.
60. Although it is noted that the development would be located adjacent site H/1a that is allocated for residential development in the emerging Local Plan and some weight can be attached to this policy due to the lack of objections and the stage of the plan making process, it is not considered to prejudice the development of this site. This is because the policy states that one of the development requirements is a significant landscape buffer along the eastern boundary of the site where it adjoins farmland to provide a soft green edge to the village. The existing screening would add to that buffer and along with the 5 metre gap for the access road and fence, this would ensure that the panels would not have an adverse impact upon properties that would

result in a reduction in the amount of land on the site available for residential purposes.

Other Matters

61. A public footpath runs along the eastern boundary of the site that leads from Babraham Road in Sawston to Sawston Road in Babraham, the A1307 and Stapleford.
62. Although it is noted that the development would project close to the boundary of the site with the public footpath, there would be a gap of approximately 5 metres from the footpath to the panels and significant screen planting along the boundary that would ensure that the development would not harm the amenity of users of the public footpath.

Very Special Circumstances

63. The proposal would represent inappropriate development that is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt in policy terms through encroachment and a loss of openness. Any harm to the Green Belt amounts to substantial harm. Furthermore the visual impact of the development would result in limited harm. Very special circumstances therefore need to be put forward that outweigh the harm through inappropriateness and any other harm to the Green Belt.
64. Renewable energy developments receive very considerable support in national and local planning policy. Paragraph 91 of the NPPF states that very special circumstances may include the wider environmental benefits associated with the increased production of energy from renewable sources.
65. Paragraph 93 states that planning plays a key role in helping shape places to secure radical reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, minimising vulnerability and providing resilience to the impacts of climate change, and supporting the delivery of renewable and low carbon energy and associated infrastructure. This is central to the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.
66. Paragraph 97 states that when determining planning applications, local planning authorities should: not require applicants for energy development to demonstrate the overall need for renewable or low carbon energy and also recognise that even small-scale projects provide a valuable contribution to cutting greenhouse gas emissions; and approve the application if its impacts are (or can be made) acceptable.
67. The proposal would bring forward benefits of a significant scale in terms of the production of 28MW of renewable energy. This would meet the power needs of approximately 8,500 homes and offset 12,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions that would increase the supply of renewable energy and reduce the impact of climate change.
68. The development would bring social, environmental and economic benefits. The social benefits would include the improvement in the health of the local population through the production of clean and renewable energy that would reduce the amount of fossil fuels used and contribute towards a low carbon economy. It would also provide educational opportunities for local schools and some community pride through the village contributing towards climate change. The environmental benefits would be the use of unlimited natural resources to generate electricity and the improvement in the biodiversity of the site through the creation of additional habitats that would encourage wildlife to the area. The economic benefits would include the

creation of jobs during the construction period and locally generated electricity with less wastage due to a more efficient connection to the grid.

69. These benefits would be substantial and above those where an appeal was allowed for a solar farm that provided less power supply within the Green Belt.

Conclusion

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

Recommendation

71. It is recommended that the Planning Committee grants officers delegated powers to approve the application (as amended) subject to the following conditions and informatives: -

Conditions

- i) The development hereby permitted shall be begun before the expiration of 3 years from the date of this permission.
(Reason - To ensure that consideration of any future application for development in the area will not be prejudiced by permissions for development, which have not been acted upon.)
- ii) The development hereby permitted shall be carried out in accordance with the following approved plans: Drawing numbers to be confirmed.
(Reason - To facilitate any future application to the Local Planning Authority under Section 73 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.)
- iii) The development, hereby permitted, shall be removed and the land restored to its former condition or to a condition to be agreed in writing by the Local Planning Authority on or before 25 years of the date of the first operational use of the development in accordance with a scheme of work submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority.
(Reason - Approval of the proposal on a permanent basis would be contrary to Policy NE/2 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007 and the land should be reinstated to facilitate future beneficial use.)
- iv) All development must be removed from site within 6 months of the solar farm ceasing to be operational.
(Reason - The application site lies in the open countryside and it is important that once the development has ceased the site is brought back into a full agricultural use in accordance with the provisions of the NPPF and policy NE/2 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007.)
- v) No development shall take place until full details of both hard and soft landscape works have been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. These details shall include indications of all existing trees and hedgerows on the land and details of any to be retained, together with measures for their protection in the course of development. The details shall also include specification of all proposed trees, hedges and shrub planting, which shall include details of species, density and size of stock.

(Reason - To ensure the development is satisfactorily assimilated into the area and enhances biodiversity in accordance with Policies DP/2 and NE/6 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007.)

- vi) All hard and soft landscape works shall be carried out in accordance with the approved details. The works shall be carried out prior to the occupation of any part of the development or in accordance with a programme agreed in writing with the Local Planning Authority. If within a period of five years from the date of the planting, or replacement planting, any tree or plant is removed, uprooted or destroyed or dies, another tree or plant of the same species and size as that originally planted shall be planted at the same place, unless the Local Planning Authority gives its written consent to any variation.

(Reason - To ensure the development is satisfactorily assimilated into the area and enhances biodiversity in accordance with Policies DP/2 and NE/6 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007.)

- vii) In this condition "retained tree" means an existing tree which is to be retained in accordance with the approved plans and particulars; and paragraphs (a) and (b) below shall have effect until the expiration of 5 years from [the date of the first occupation of the dwellings hereby approved].

(a) No retained tree shall be cut down, uprooted or destroyed, nor shall any retained tree be topped or lopped other than in accordance with the approved plans and particulars, without the written approval of the Local Planning Authority. Any topping or lopping approved shall be carried out in accordance with the relevant British Standard.

(b) If any retained tree is removed, uprooted or destroyed or dies, another tree shall be planted at the same place and that tree shall be of such size and species, and shall be planted at such time, as may be specified in writing by the Local Planning Authority.

(c) The erection of fencing for the protection of any retained tree shall be undertaken in accordance with the approved plans and particulars before any equipment, machinery or materials are brought on to the site for the purposes of the development, and shall be maintained until all equipment, machinery and surplus materials have been removed from the site. Nothing shall be stored or placed in any area fenced in accordance with this condition and the ground levels within those areas shall not be altered, nor shall any excavation be made, without the written consent of the Local Planning Authority.

(Reason - To protect trees which are to be retained in order to enhance the development, biodiversity and the visual amenities of the area in accordance with Policies DP/1 and NE/6 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007.)

- viii) No development approved by this permission shall be commenced until a finalised scheme for the maintenance and provision of surface water drainage works has been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The scheme shall include:- Clear details of the ownership and responsibility of maintenance of all drainage on site including SUDS elements for the lifetime of the development. The scheme shall be implemented in accordance with the approved details before the development is completed.

(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.)

- ix) No development shall take place on the application site until the implementation of a programme of archaeological work has been secured in accordance with a written scheme of investigation which has been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority.
(Reason - To secure the provision of archaeological excavation and the subsequent recording of the remains in accordance with Policy CH/2 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007.)
- x) The development shall be carried out in accordance with the Traffic Management Plan reference (to be confirmed).
(Reason - In the interests of highway safety in accordance with Policy DP/3 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007.)
- xi) The development shall be carried out in accordance with the Biodiversity Management Plan reference (to be confirmed).
(Reason - To achieve biodiversity enhancement on the site in accordance with adopted Policies DP/1, DP/3 and NE/6 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007.)
- xii) No development shall commence until precise details of the scheme for the agricultural use of the site during the operation of the development has been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local planning Authority. The development shall be carried out in accordance with the approved details and thereafter maintained throughout the operation of the development.
(Reason - To ensure the continued use of the site for agricultural purposes.)
- xiii) 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.)
- xiv) Notwithstanding the provisions of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 (or any order revoking and re-enacting that Order with or without modification), no development within Class A of Part 6 of Schedule 2 of the Order shall take place unless expressly authorised by planning permission granted by the Local Planning Authority in that behalf.
(Reason – To safeguard the Green Belt in accordance with Policy GB/1 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007.)
- xv) During the period of construction, no power operated machinery shall be operated on the site before 0800 hours and after 1800 hours on weekdays and before 0800 hours and after 1300 hours on Saturdays, nor at any time on Sundays and Bank Holidays, unless otherwise previously agreed in writing with the Local Planning Authority.
(Reason - To minimise noise disturbance for adjoining residents in accordance with Policy NE/15 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007.)

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

- South Cambridgeshire Local Development Framework Development Control Policies DPD 2007

- South Cambridgeshire Local Plan Submission March 2014
- South Cambridgeshire Supplementary Planning Documents
- National Planning Policy Framework 2012
- Planning File Reference S/1615/14/FL

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