

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Planning Committee

3 December 2014

AUTHOR/S: Planning and New Communities Director

Application Number:	S/1240/14/FL
Parish(es):	Meldreth
Proposal:	Installation of solar panels on farm land for the production of electricity
Site address:	Land at 1 Station Road, Meldreth, Royston, SG8 6JP
Applicant(s):	Mr P Burlton
Recommendation:	Approval
Key material considerations:	Principle of development, landscape impact, highway safety, impact on the public right of way, residential amenity.
Committee Site Visit:	No
Departure Application:	No
Presenting Officer:	David Thompson
Application brought to Committee because:	The officer recommendation is contrary to the views of two Parish Councils
Date by which decision due:	8 October 2014

Planning History

None relevant to the determination of this planning application

Planning Policies

1. *National*

2. National Planning Policy Framework

Adopted Local Development Framework, Development Control Policies

DP/1 Sustainable Development

DP/2 Design of New Development

DP/3 Development Criteria

NE/2 Renewable Energy

NE/17 Protecting High Quality Agricultural Land

NE/6 Biodiversity

3. *Draft Local Plan*

CC/1 Mitigation and adaptation to climate change
CC/2 Renewable and Low Carbon Energy Generation
HQ/1 Design Principles
NH/3 Protecting Agricultural Land
NH/4 Biodiversity

4. *Supplementary Planning Document(s)*

District Design Guide SPD – adopted 2010

Consultations

5. **Meldreth Parish Council** - Recommends refusal. Objects to the application on the following grounds:
- Concerned about the proliferation of solar farms in the area and the visual impact that the proposal would have within the landscape
 - Suggest locating the panels on the buildings at Valley Farm
6. **Melbourn Parish Council** – Recommends refusal. Objects to the application on the following grounds:
- The site is currently an open agricultural field with a well-used footpath linking Melbourn and Meldreth. The site will straddle this and can only be accessed across the footpath
 - The proposed site is unsympathetically located and would be visible from many public locations i.e. the adjacent footpath, Station Road, the railways bridge and Meldreth Station and footbridge.
 - Its location is adjacent to the A10 underpass footpath which has anti-social implications
7. **Local Highway Authority** – no objections subject to conditions being imposed relating to the access routes for the individual elements of the panels, details of traffic management during the construction of the development and arrangements for servicing the development once installed.

Representations

None received

Planning Comments

8. The application site is land to the north east of Valley Farm. The site forms the south western corner of a large agricultural field which is screened by a dense coverage of trees on the southern boundary. Tree coverage screening the eastern end of the range of buildings within the farm form the western boundary of the site
9. The applicant seeks full planning permission for the installation of 600 solar panels. The scheme has been amended from 4 long rows (spanning 100 metres) to 8 shorter rows (spanning 45 metres). The applicant has indicated that Laurel

heather plants would be planted along the north western edge of the site to screen the development from wider views.

Principle of development

10. Section 10 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) relates to renewable energy development. Paragraph 98 states that when determining applications for renewable energy, local planning authorities should:
11. 'Not require applicants to demonstrate the overall need for renewable energy and recognise that 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.'
12. Policy NE/2 of the Local Plan states that schemes to generate energy from renewable energy sources subject to compliance with the design policies of the plan and the following criteria:
13. That the proposal can be connected efficiently to existing national grid infrastructure unless it can be demonstrated that that energy generation would be used on site to meet the needs of a specific end user and that the proposal makes provision for the removal of facilities and re-instatement of the site, should the facilities cease to be operational.'
14. The proposal would primarily generate electricity that would be used to power the adjacent farm buildings, with excess energy being sold to the grid. The proposed scheme of 600 panels would generate 150kw of energy, saving 63,22kg CO₂. The proposal would make a contribution to the reduction of greenhouse gas emission and would primarily be used by a specific end user. The development would maximise the use of renewable energy sources by replacing the electricity from the grid which currently supplies the farm buildings with solar powered energy and therefore accords with policy DP/1 of the LDF.
15. The field is classified as grade 2 agricultural land. Policy NE/17 of the Local Plan and policy NH/3 of the emerging Local Plan state that development that would lead to an irreversible loss of grade 1, 2 or 3a agricultural land unless:
 - a. Land is allocated for development in the Local Development Framework
 - b. Sustainability considerations and the need for the development are sufficient to override the need to protect the agricultural value of the land.
16. The land is not allocated for development. However, there are sustainability benefits in terms of the renewable energy to be generated by the scheme. The development would take up a relatively small part of the overall field and would be located in the corner adjacent to the access to the farm buildings. The value of the overall agricultural land is considered not to be compromised by the development and the loss of land is considered not to be of a scale that would be detrimental to the viability of the farm business.
17. In addition, a condition requiring the removal of the panels from the site once they cease to be used for the purpose of generating electricity ensures that if the benefit of renewable energy is lost, the land must be restored to its current condition i.e. back to agricultural land. The sustainability benefits are therefore considered to override the need to preserve the parcel of land.

18. The principle of the development is therefore considered to accord with local and national planning policy.

Landscape impact

19. Policy DP/2 of the LDF requires development not to have an adverse impact on the countryside or landscape character. The scheme has been amended to significantly reduce the width of the development. The revised formation would site the group of panels within close proximity of the tall established tree coverage on the southern and western boundaries of the site.
20. As a result, when viewed from the public footpath which runs north-south through the field, the development would be seen tucked into the corner of the field and in relatively close proximity to the farm buildings. The northern most point of the proposed arrangement would not extend north of the existing collection of farm buildings. Given the modest depth of the incursion of the group of buildings into the field, it is considered that the revised layout would not result in development that would have an overbearing impact on the character of the landscape or be obtrusive in public views.
21. The position of the panels in relation to existing development also helps to reduce the impact of the scheme from higher level views from the bridge on Station Road (to the north west) and the access up to the railway station at the northern end of the public right of way. From these views, the landscaping proposed would assist in reducing the impact on the wider landscape to an acceptable degree.
22. Meldreth Parish Council have raised concerns about the cumulative impact of solar farm development in this part of the district. It is considered that this proposal is significantly different from these solar farms for two reasons. Firstly, in terms of scale, this proposal would be substantially smaller than the commercial scale of the proposed solar farms that the Parish Council are referring to. The smaller scale allows the development to be sited and arranged so as to minimise the landscape impact and logically takes advantage of the natural screening provided by the established trees on the boundary.
23. Secondly, the scheme needs to be sited close to the existing farm buildings because the purpose is to provide the farm with a renewable energy power source, with only excess energy being sold to the grid. There is a discernible local benefit from this proposal therefore which is not reliant on being viable as a commercial entity in its own right.
24. Given that the system used to mount the solar panels would be marginally over 2 metres in height at the tallest point, it is considered that the proposed landscape planting along the north western boundary would provide an effective screen when viewing the site from the adjacent footpath. Whilst introducing planting set in from the boundaries of the field, the proposed landscaping would tie in with the existing planting on the northern edge of the farm buildings and as such would not result in an incongruous addition to the character of the site and its surroundings.
25. A condition relating to the number of trees to be planted, their exact position and details of how the landscaping shall be maintained is recommended to ensure that the additional planting forms an effective screen of the proposed development.

26. A condition requiring the development to be removed from the site once the development ceases to be used for renewable energy production and details of a landscape restoration scheme can also be conditioned to ensure that the long term impact of the development is mitigated should it become redundant.

Impact on the right of way

27. Melbourn Parish Council have expressed concerns about the potential impact of the development on the safe use of the adjacent public right of way. The applicant does have a right of way over this to gain access from the group of farm buildings. A method statement detailing measures to be undertaken during the construction process has been submitted which indicates that materials will not be transported across the route during times when trains are at the station and that members of the construction team will marshal the route to ensure that the route remains unobstructed at all times. The development itself will be completely clear of the right of way, there would be no permanent infringement on the ability to use the route.

Alternative siting

28. Meldreth Parish Council have also made comment that the possibility of siting the panels on the roofs of the farm buildings should be considered before a ground mounted array in the field is considered. Officers have put this point to the applicant who has responded that the more modern buildings within the group that are structurally of sufficient strength to have the panels fitted to the roof already host them. The remaining buildings are not considered to be capable of supporting the weight of the panels and therefore this is not a viable option.

Impact on highway safety

29. The Highway Authority has not raised any objections to the scheme, subject to details relating to the installation and management of the group of panels being included on the decision notice should planning permission be granted. The array would not be visible from the A10 immediately to the south due to the height and density of the trees on the boundary. The proposal would therefore not contravene policy DP/3 of the LDF, which requires development not to have an adverse impact on highway safety.

Residential amenity

30. The proposed location and arrangement of the panels ensures that there would not be a detrimental impact on the residential amenity of neighbouring properties, the closest of which are located on Station Road on the opposite side of the existing group of farm buildings.

Conclusion

31. The principle of the development is considered to be acceptable as the solar panels would increase the supply of renewable energy and primarily be used to power the adjacent farm buildings. The siting and scale of the proposal is considered not to harm the character of the surrounding landscape and would take advantage of the pre-existing established tree planting which provides screening from the south and west. The supplementary planting proposed would not be conspicuous when viewed within the context of the wider landscape. The proposal would not harm highway safety or the amenity of neighbouring residents.

32. The proposal is therefore considered to accord with the relevant policies of the LDF, the emerging Local Plan and the NPPF.

Recommendation

33. Having regard to applicable national and local planning policies, and having taken all relevant material considerations into account, it is recommended that the application be granted Planning Permission, subject to conditions relating to the following matters:

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: APB-02 Rev A and APB-03 stamped 'Amended 16 Jun 2014'.
(Reason - To facilitate any future application to the Local Planning Authority under Section 73 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.)
3. 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.)
4. 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.)
5. Prior to the commencement of development, a Highway Method Statement shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The Method Statement shall detail, as a minimum the following information:
 - i. The proposed access routes for the individual elements of the solar panels.
 - ii. The proposed traffic management for the delivery of the individual elements of the solar panels

- iii. The proposed modifications to the adopted public highway that may be required to enable the solar panels to be delivered to site.
 - iv. The servicing arrangements for the solar panels after installation. The development shall then be carried out in strict accordance with the approved Highway Method Statement.
(Reason - In the interest of the safe and efficient operation of the adopted public highway in accordance with Policy DP/3 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007.)
6. The development shall be carried out in complete accordance with the installation method statement submitted with the planning application.
(Reason - In the interest of maintaining open access to the adjacent public right of way, in accordance with Policy DP/3 of the adopted Local Development Framework 2007.)
7. Once installed, should the solar panels not be used for the production of energy for a period of six months, the panels, support structures and associated buildings and works shall be removed in their entirety and the land shall be restored to its former condition in accordance with a scheme of work submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority.
(Reason - To prevent the retention of development in the countryside that is not being used for its intended purpose in accordance with Policy DP/7 and to reinstate the use of high grade agricultural land in accordance with Policy NE/17 of the adopted Local Development Framework.)

Background Papers

Where [the Local Authorities \(Executive Arrangements\) \(Meetings and Access to Information\) \(England\) Regulations 2012](#) require documents to be open to inspection by members of the public, they must be available for inspection: -

- (a) at all reasonable hours at the offices of South Cambridgeshire District Council;
- (b) on the Council's website; and
- (c) in the case of documents to be available for inspection pursuant to regulation 15, on payment of a reasonable fee required by the Council by the person seeking to inspect the documents at the offices of South Cambridgeshire District Council.

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

- 1. South Cambridgeshire Local Development Framework Core Strategy DPD 2007
- 2. South Cambridgeshire Local Development Framework Development Control Policies DPD 2007
- 3. South Cambridgeshire Local Development Framework SPDs
- 4. National Planning Policy Framework 2012
- 5. South Cambridgeshire Draft Local Plan 2013
- 6. Planning File Reference: S/1240/14/FL

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