

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Planning Committee

3 February 2016

AUTHOR/S: Planning and New Communities Director

Application Number: S/1714/15/FL

Parish(es): Dry Drayton

Proposal: Solar Farm and Associated Development

Site address: Land East and West of Battlegate Road, Childerley Farm

Applicant(s): Big60Million Ltd.

Recommendation: Delegated Approval

Key material considerations: Countryside
Agricultural Land Classification
Renewable Energy
Landscape Character
Heritage Assets
Archaeology
Ecology
Biodiversity
Trees and Landscaping
Flood Risk
Public Footpaths
Highway Safety
Neighbour Amenity

Committee Site Visit: 2 February 2016

Departure Application: No

Presenting Officer: Karen Pell-Coggins, Principal Planning Officer

Application brought to Committee because: Major Application of Local Interest

Date by which decision due: 2 October 2015 (Extension of Time Agreed)

Update to Report

Paragraph 1 – Executive Summary

1. The latest guidance in a Written Ministerial Statement (WMS) dated March 2015 that reflects guidance in the National Planning Practice Guidance emphasises that the strategy for solar energy underlines the importance of focusing growth on domestic and commercial roof space and previously

developed land. Where a proposal involves agricultural land, it should be clear that it is necessary that poorer quality land is used in preference to land of a higher quality. Any solar farm involving the best and most versatile agricultural land would need to be “justified by the most compelling evidence”.

Paragraph 5 - National Guidance

2. National Planning Practice Guidance - Renewable and Low Carbon Energy
What are the particular planning considerations that relate to large scale ground-mounted solar photovoltaic Farms? (Paragraph: 013 Reference ID: 5-013-20150327)
Written Ministerial Statement – Solar Energy: Protecting the Local and Global Environment – 25 March 2015

Speech by the Minister for Energy and Climate Change, the Rt Hon Gregory Barker MP, to the solar PV industry on 25 April 2013

Paragraph 10 - Consultation

3. **Boxworth Parish Council** – Please see attached appendix.

Members will be updated verbally of any further consultation comments received prior to the meeting.

Paragraph 53 - Planning Assessment

4. The applicant has submitted an Alternative Site Assessment as part of the application that considers if there are any potentially more suitable sites situated on previously developed / non-agricultural land; or lower grade agricultural land (i.e. Grade 4 and below). This takes into account the advice in the NPPG and Ministerial Statement.
6. Commercial rooftops are not considered because there are no known rooftops of sufficient size in the area and it is considered that assessing the potential for development of multiple rooftops is not comparable or realistic when considered relative to a ground-mounted solar farm.
7. The methodology utilised to carry out the assessment is split into the following:-
 - i) definition of the search area;
 - ii) analysis of previously developed / non-agricultural land;
 - iii) analysis of lower grade agricultural land;
 - iv) long-list filtering to create a short list of sites; and
 - v) assessment of the short-list.
8. The search area is based on the requirement to connect the solar farm to the local electricity distribution network. A solar farm without a feasible grid connection is not viable. UK Power Networks, has provided a point of connection approximately 750m to the north-west of the site. There is sufficient capacity along the overhead line that runs for approximately 27 km between substations at Little Barford and Histon
9. An assessment of connection costs against possible output were undertaken. This determined that a connection anywhere along the 27 km overhead line

up to a distance of 7.37 km (from the overhead line) would be commercially viable. This is defined as the search area.

10. The search area covers land in a number of districts and is not restricted to South Cambridgeshire. Sites were assessed in relation to their constraints and size. This determined whether there were any feasible alternatives. 72 previously developed sites and 8 lower grade agricultural land sites were assessed. 71 of the 80 sites were ruled out as they would not be of sufficient size. The remaining nine sites were assessed further in relation to the following criteria: -
 - i) Is the land likely to be available, e.g. on the market or proposed for another use?
 - ii) Is the topography favourable?
 - iii) Distance from the potential point of connection – is the potential point of connection on-site or further away?
 - iv) Are there obstacles between the site and point of connection?
 - v) Shape of the site – is it regular/irregular?
 - vi) Is the land clear and developable?
 - vii) Are there any footpaths crossing the site?
 - viii) Flood risk areas - Zone 1.
 - ix) Any other relevant considerations?
11. A number of reasons have been put forward to justify the reasons why the development is necessary on this particular site and why the other sites on the list cannot be developed. The evidence submitted is considered substantial and is considered to reflect the guidance in the WMS and Planning Practice Guidance in determining whether development of this greenfield site is appropriate.
12. Whilst the comments of Boxworth Parish Council in relation to two Inspectors decisions are noted, each application site and its context will inevitably be different. To that extent each application needs to be determined upon its own merits. As the inspector notes in the second appeal decision mentioned by the parish Council, a WMS is capable of being a material consideration and the weight to be attached to a material consideration is a matter of judgement for the decision maker.
13. If that judgement concludes that the proposal is not justified by the most compelling evidence, this will clearly weigh against the proposal. It is not necessarily tantamount to refusal and will need to be weighed in the balance with all of the other material considerations. These have been set out in the main report. As rehearsed in paragraphs 7 – 11 above, officers have concluded that the evidence on the use of alternative sites is comprehensive and does not justify refusal on the grounds that the information is inadequate.

Paragraph 71- Planning Assessment

13. The Construction Traffic Management Plan confirms that access to the site is via St Neots Road. Condition i requires further details the proposed signage on the public highway, staff travel pick-up points and level of the traffic movements associated with the contractor parking to be agreed and would not change the access route. The development would need to be carried out in accordance with this document and no further condition is necessary.

Paragraphs 74 and 75- Planning Assessment

14. Paragraphs 74 and 75 should be deleted. The access route for vehicles for maintenance of the site during operation would be via St Neots Road as per the construction and decommissioning route.

Paragraph 86 – Conditions

15. The condition survey required by condition j relates to 5 metres either side of the crossing point on Battlegate Road.

Report Author:

Karen Pell-Coggins
Telephone Number:

Principal Planning Officer
01954 713230