

Dear Member of the Planning Committee

Solar Farm at Childerley – S/1714/15/FL

Next Wednesday 3 February you will be determining the above application for probably the largest solar farm in the country. Your officer's report recommends approval but we consider that this conclusion has been reached as a result of an incorrect interpretation of national planning policy with regard to solar farms.

Your officer's report in point 1 of the Executive Summary states:

The development is of a kind that receives very considerable support in national and local planning policy and that, following the guidance in the National Planning Policy Framework there must be a strong presumption in favour of it.

Unfortunately the National Planning Policy Framework is not the most recent interpretation of national policy and the more up to date Planning Policy Guidance and the Written Ministerial Statement (WMS) of March 2015 clearly set out the Government's position that solar farms should be sited on either previously developed / non-agricultural land or roofs of non-domestic buildings.

The detail of these policies is contained within the Boxworth Parish Council consultation response which is shown in full in the Officer's report.

The WMS states that:

Meeting our energy goals should not be used to justify the wrong development in the wrong location and this includes the unnecessary use of high quality agricultural land. Protecting the global environment is not an excuse to trash the local environment. When we published our new planning guidance in support of the framework, we set out the particular factors relating to large scale ground mounted solar photovoltaic farms that a local council will need to consider. These include making effective use of previously developed land and, where a proposal involves agricultural land, being quite clear this is necessary and that poorer quality land is to be used in preference to land of a higher quality.

*We are encouraged by the impact that the guidance is having but do appreciate the continuing concerns, not least those raised in this House, about the unjustified use of high quality agricultural land. In light of these concerns we want it to be clear that any proposal for a solar farm involving the best and most versatile agricultural land would need to be justified by the **most compelling evidence** (our bold).*

Since this planning guidance was implemented it has been reinforced by a number of recovered appeal decisions for solar farms determined by the Secretary of State. Two recent, January 2016, were refused partly because the appellant had not robustly demonstrated that the use of best and most versatile (BMV) agricultural land was necessary. More detail from these decisions is included in our most recent consultation response to supplementary information submitted by the applicant on 19 January, attached to this e-mail. It should be noted that your officer would not have seen this latest response before writing her report as the consultation period does not finish until Tuesday.

The application before you is 85% comprised of best and most versatile agricultural land – a total of 77 hectares. Interestingly in the two appeal decisions the area of BMV was only 17 hectares. This proposal is for probably the largest area ever put under solar panels with virtually all on BMV. The Dry Drayton consultation response highlights their concern about the size of the solar farm (bigger than Bar Hill) and significantly bigger than first planned. There is no justification in the application as to why the scheme is so big and the probable reason is to maximise profit.

Given that national planning guidance requires the most compelling evidence it is obviously vital that there is a robust and thorough assessment of potential alternative non-agricultural sites. However, there is no credible assessment carried out by the applicant who has ignored commercial buildings and limited the search area to a 7.4km radius of the power line that will connect the scheme to the grid. The two appeal decisions show clearly that this is totally insufficient and the assessment should have covered, as a minimum Cambridgeshire if not the East Region. The Appellant's consultants responsible for the assessment cite examples of other work where the methodology was acceptable. However these all relate to 2014, much smaller schemes, prior to

the new planning guidance, where the requirement for demonstrating need was much lower.

Further arguments showing how other factors put forward in your officer's report as mitigation, such as the lack of low quality agricultural land in the District, the size of the scheme and its reversibility can be given no weight in this determination are contained in the initial Boxworth consultation shown in your officer's report.

There can be no doubt that this application should be refused on the conflict with Framework policy and PPG guidance in that it has not been shown that the use of BMV agricultural land is necessary.

The access route for construction is now proposed to be through Childerley Hall. This is welcomed but this requirement has not been reflected in the conditions. Indeed there remains a condition (i) relating to Battlegate Road which seems at conflict with the stated intention that Battlegate Road will not be used for construction or maintenance work. A specific condition preventing any use of Battlegate Road needs to be inserted if permission is granted.

Recent appeal decisions for much smaller schemes have been dismissed due to significant harm being caused to landscape character, recreational amenity and cultural heritage. The height and scale of solar panels is similar from one scheme to another and with this site being located in one of the tranquil areas of countryside near Cambridge, with a well-used footpath running through the solar farm itself and a Grade II* listed building and Grade II Registered Park and Garden on the immediate boundary the finding that any impacts are not significant and acceptable seems questionable. We believe that there will be significant harm caused by a massive solar farm in this location and this harm warrants refusal.

Overall there can be no question that this scheme, located as it is on high quality agricultural land, conflicts directly with national policy. There is no compelling evidence to show why such a huge scheme is needed or that there are no better alternatives in the wider east of the country. There will be significant harm and we ask that you refuse this application.