

Agenda Item 40.

Application Number	Expiry Date	Parish	Ward
200711	11.12.2020	Arborfield Newlands	& Arborfield

Applicant	Wessex Solar Energy
Site Address	Swallowfield Road Arborfield, RG2 9JX
Proposal	Full planning application for Installation of a Solar park to include 40000 solar photovoltaic panels, 11 inverter/transformer cabins, a single control building and associated works to include vehicle access and fencing with Environmental Statement.
Type	Full
PS Category	006
Officer	Mark Croucher
Reason for determination by committee	Major application

FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Planning Committee on Wednesday, 9 December 2020
REPORT PREPARED BY	Assistant Director – Place

SUMMARY
<p>The proposal is for the installation of a solar farm across 4 agricultural fields comprising 19.66 hectares (ha). It includes the erection of approximately 40,000 PV panels on mounted frames, which will be used to export up to 14 MW (AC) of renewable electricity into the regional electricity grid; equivalent to providing 3,736 households with renewable energy annually.</p> <p>The application site is previously undeveloped agricultural land within the countryside to the north of Farley Hill and between Swallowfield and Arborfield.</p> <p>The application must be determined against the development plan as whole and there are planning policies and considerations that pull in different directions.</p> <p>The provision of renewable solar energy is an important local and national policy objective and the proposed development will help to achieve this. The council has announced a climate emergency and produced Climate Emergency Action Plan which supports the provision of solar energy. The development would also result in economic benefits. The principle of renewable energy provision results significant weight in favour of the development.</p> <p>The proposal of this scale will inevitably result in some landscape impact and this weighs against the proposal.</p> <p>The development will be partially located on Best and Most Versatile (BMV) agricultural land (grade 3a) and this also weigh negatively in the planning balance, although Natural England have not objected to the use of BMV land.</p> <p>The other material considerations are broadly policy compliant and have neutral weight in the planning balance.</p>

Overall weighing these factors in the planning balance, it is considered that the proposed benefits of renewable energy provision would be significant and outweigh the impacts and therefore be in accordance with the development plan as a whole.

PLANNING STATUS

- Countryside
- Grade 3 and 4 agricultural land
- Setting of Grade II & Grade II* listed building
- Flood Zone 1
- Surface Water Flooding
- GC Newt Consultation Zone
- Local Wildlife Site
- PRow
- SSSI Impact Risk Zones
- Safety Hazard Areas MAH Pipelines
- Ancient Woodland Consultation Zone

RECOMMENDATION

In consideration of the Environmental Statement which has been received under the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017, the committee authorise the GRANT OF PLANNING PERMISSION subject to the following:

A. Prior completion of a legal agreement pursuant to section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended) to secure an Employment Skills Plan. If the Agreement is not completed within 3 months of the date of this resolution, Planning Permission will be refused unless the Operational Manager for Development Management in consultation with the Chairman of the Planning Committee agree to a later date.

B. Conditions and informatives:

Conditions:

1. The development hereby permitted shall be begun before the expiration of three years from the date of this permission.

Reason: In pursuance of s.91 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended by s.51 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004).

Approved details

2. This permission is in respect of the submitted application plans and drawings numbered / titled Plan A, Plan B, Figure 4.1, Figure 4.2A, Figure 4.2B, Figure 4.3, Figure 4.4, Figure 4.5 and Figure 4.6. The development shall be carried out in accordance with the approved details unless otherwise agreed in writing by the local planning authority.

Reason: For the avoidance of doubt and to ensure that the development is carried out in accordance with the application form and associated details hereby approved.

Period of consent

3. The planning permission hereby granted is for a period of 40 years electricity generation, after which electricity generation is to cease, the solar panels and all ancillary infrastructure are to be removed from the site and the land is to be restored to a favourable condition in accordance with the details approved under condition 4 of this permission. Written confirmation of the date of commissioning of the development (defined as the date on which the solar farm is put into active operation for the generation of electricity) shall be submitted to the local planning authority within one month of that date.

Reason: To safeguard the landscape and its visual amenity.

Land Restoration

4. No later than 12 months from the first generation of electricity, the following schemes shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority: (i) a scheme detailing the removal of all surface elements of the photovoltaic solar farm and any foundations or anchor systems to a depth of 300 mm below ground level; (ii) a scheme detailing the restoration and aftercare of the land; and (iii) a timetable for completion of the removal and restoration works. The schemes shall be implemented within 12 months of the date of the last electricity generation and shall be completed in accordance with the approved timetable.

Reason: To safeguard the landscape and its visual amenity.

External materials

5. Before the development hereby permitted is commenced, samples and details of the materials to be used in the construction of the external surfaces of the building/s shall have first been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. Development shall not be carried out other than in accordance with the so-approved details.

Reason: In the interest of visual amenity.

Landscape and Trees

6. Before the development hereby permitted is commenced details of all boundary treatment(s) shall first be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. The approved scheme shall be implemented prior to the first occupation of the development or phased as agreed in writing by the local planning authority. The scheme shall be maintained in the approved form for so long as the development remains on the site.

Reason: In the interest of visual amenity and mitigating the impact on the setting of heritage assets.

7. No trees, shrubs or hedges within the site which are shown as being retained on the approved plans shall be felled, uprooted wilfully damaged or destroyed, cut back in any way or removed without previous written consent of the local planning authority; any trees, shrubs or hedges removed without consent or dying or being severely damaged or becoming seriously diseased within 5 years from the

completion of the development hereby permitted shall be replaced with trees, shrubs or hedge plants of similar size and species unless the local planning authority gives written consent to any variation.

Reason: In the interest of visual amenity, mitigating the impact on the setting of heritage assets and maintain the biodiversity of the site.

8. Prior to the commencement of the development, full details of both hard and soft landscape proposals shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. These details shall include, as appropriate, proposed finished floor levels or contours, means of enclosure, car parking layouts, other vehicle and pedestrian access and circulation areas, hard surfacing materials and minor artefacts and structure (e.g. furniture, play equipment, refuse or other storage units, signs, lighting, external services, etc). Soft landscaping details shall include planting plan, specification (including cultivation and other operations associated with plant and grass establishment), schedules of plants, noting species, planting sizes and proposed numbers/densities where appropriate, and implementation timetable.

All hard and soft landscape works shall be carried out in accordance with the approved details prior to the occupation of any part of the development or in accordance with a timetable approved in writing by the local planning authority. Any trees or plants which, within a period of five years after planting, are removed, die or become seriously damaged or defective, shall be replaced in the next planting season with others of species, size and number as originally approved and permanently retained.

Reason: In the interest of visual amenity, mitigating the impact on the setting of heritage assets and maintain the biodiversity of the site.

9. a) No development or other operation shall commence on site until an Arboricultural Method Statement and Scheme of Works which provides for the retention and protection of trees, shrubs and hedges growing on or adjacent to the site in accordance with BS5837: 2012 has been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. No development or other operations shall take place except in complete accordance with the details as so-approved (hereinafter referred to as the Approved Scheme).
- b) No operations shall commence on site in connection with development hereby approved (including any tree felling, tree pruning, demolition works, soil moving, temporary access construction and or widening or any other operation involving use of motorised vehicles or construction machinery) until the tree protection works required by the Approved Scheme are in place on site.
- c) No excavations for services, storage of materials or machinery, parking of vehicles, deposit or excavation of soil or rubble, lighting of fires or disposal of liquids shall take place within an area designated as being fenced off or otherwise protected in the Approved Scheme.
- d) The fencing or other works which are part of the Approved Scheme shall not be moved or removed, temporarily or otherwise, until all works including external works have been completed and all equipment, machinery and surplus

materials removed from the site, unless the prior approval in writing of the local planning authority has first been sought and obtained.

Reason: To secure the protection throughout the time that the development is being carried out of trees shrubs or hedges growing within or adjacent to the site which are of amenity value to the area, and to allow for verification by the local planning authority that the necessary measures are in place before development and other works commence

10. Prior to the commencement of the development a Landscape Management Plan, including long term design objectives, management responsibilities, timescales and maintenance schedules for all landscape areas, other than privately owned, domestic gardens, shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. The landscape management plan shall be carried out as approved.

Reason: In order to ensure that provision is made to allow satisfactory maintenance of the landscaping hereby approved.

Archaeology

11. No development shall commence until a programme of archaeological work has been implemented in accordance with a written scheme of investigation, which has been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority.

Reason: The site is identified as being of archaeological potential. Investigation is required to allow preservation and recording of any archaeological features or artefacts before disturbance by the development.

Drainage

12. Prior to the development being first brought into use, full details of a sustainable drainage scheme and management/maintenance plan for the site shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The sustainable drainage scheme shall be managed and maintained thereafter in accordance with the agreed management and maintenance plan.

Reason: This is to prevent increased flood risk from surface water run-off.

Highways

13. No works shall commence on site until a Construction Traffic Management Plan (CTMP) has been submitted to the LPA and approved in writing. The CTMP should include the details contained within the draft CTMP dated July 2020 (ASP005) as well as full details of the location of wheel washing facilities; details of street sweeping; a detailed green travel plan; cycle parking, traffic management and a detailed construction schedule to include not only construction vehicles but day to day travel of construction workers.

Reason: In the interests of highway safety & convenience and neighbour amenities. Relevant policy: Core Strategy policies CP3 & CP6.

14. No works shall commence on site until a Construction Environmental Management Plan (CEMP) has been submitted to the LPA and approved in writing. The CEMP should include the details contained within the draft CEMP dated July 2020 (ASP004) as well as any additional information contained within an updated and approved Construction Traffic Management Plan. The details hereby approved shall be fully implemented.

Reason: In the interests of highway safety & convenience and neighbour amenities. Relevant policy: Core Strategy policies CP3 & CP6.

15. No works can commence on site until the access has been constructed in accordance with details (including the use of permeable and bonded material) to be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority.

Reason: In the interests of highway safety and convenience and to avoid spillage of loose material onto the highway. Relevant policy: Core Strategy policies CP3 & CP6.

16. The construction accesses to the site shall be stopped up and abandoned, and the footway and/or verge crossings shall be re-instated within one month of the completion of the new access in accordance with details to be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority.

Reason: In the interests of highway safety and convenience. Relevant policy: Core Strategy policies CP3 & CP6.

17. No works on site shall commence until the details of the post construction access has been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority and that prior to the start of operations, the new access so-approved has been provided in full accordance with the approved details.

Reason: In the interests of highway safety and convenience Relevant policy: Core Strategy policies CP3 & CP6.

Pipeline(s)

18. Prior to the commencement of the development hereby approved, the applicant shall demonstrate in writing to the Local Planning Authority that the proposed development will not impact the safety of existing gas and other pipelines. Any safety recommendations shall be fully implemented in accordance with the approved details.

Reason: In the interest of safety.

Informatives:

1. The applicant is reminded that this approval is granted subject to conditions which must be complied with prior to the development starting on site. Commencement of the development without complying with the pre-commencement requirements may be outside the terms of this permission and liable to enforcement action. The information required should be formally submitted to the Council for consideration with the relevant fee. Once the details

have been approved in writing the development should be carried out only in accordance with those details. If this is not clear please contact the case officer to discuss.

2. This permission should be read in conjunction with the legal agreement under section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act, the obligations in which relate to this development.
3. The Local Planning Authority has acted positively and proactively in determining this application by assessing the proposal against all material considerations, including planning policies and any representations that may have been received.

PLANNING HISTORY: None

SUMMARY INFORMATION

For Commercial

Site Area: 19.72 Hectares

Previous land use: Agriculture

Number of jobs created: 50 part time

Existing parking spaces: 0

Proposed parking spaces: 0

CONSULTATION RESPONSES

WBC Highways	No objection subject to conditions
WBC Conservation Officer	No objection subject to conditions
WBC Landscape and Trees	No objection subject to conditions
WBC Environmental Health	No objection with no conditions
WBC Public Rights of Way	No objection with no conditions
WBC Planning Policy	No objection with no conditions
WBC Drainage	No objection subject to conditions
WBC Climate Emergency Officer	No objection with no conditions
Berkshire Archaeology	No objection subject to conditions
Natural England	No objection
Historic England	No requirement to be consulted
CLH (oil) Pipeline	Objection – the applicant must consult with CLH Pipeline
SEE Networks	No objection
SGN (Gas) Pipeline	Objection, a high pressure pipeline runs across the site.
Gigaclear (broadband)	No objection

REPRESENTATIONS

Town/Parish Council:

Arborfield & Newland Parish Council:

- Support the provision of renewable energy. [para 5 – 14]

- The development should comply with the Neighbourhood Plan and Village Design Statement. [para 4, 5, 12, 15 & 37]
- Industrialisation of agricultural land. [para 26 – 40]
- Ecological impact. [para 69 – 73]
- Environmental Impact. [para 26 – 40 & 69 – 73]
- Other sites would be more suitable. [para 15 - 21]
- Trees, hedges and bridleways should be protected. [para 26 – 40]
- The land should be restored to its former state. [see conditions 3 & 4]

Swallowfield Parish Council:

- This application proposes an industrial site on hugely visually important countryside to the residents of Farley Hill. [para 26 – 40]
- The landscape of the site is hugely valued. [para 26 – 40]
- It would be highly visible. [para 26 – 40]
- The land is better quality than is recommended by government guidance. [para 15 - 21]
- The site is important to local wildlife. [para 69 – 73]
- There is no guarantee that it would be returned to a rural landscape after 40 years. [para 26 – 40]
- The site is prone to flooding. [para 53 – 54]
- There are better lower grade options nearby. [para 15 - 21]

Local Members:

Cllr Gary Cowan:

- Construction traffic will impact the road surfaces. [para 50 – 52]
- The local roads flood. [para 53 – 54]
- Power lines should be underground to maintain the character and appearance of the area. [para 26 – 40]
- Fast broadband and mains water should be offered to local properties. [Officer Note: this is not proposed and is not a material consideration]

Neighbours: 89 letters of objection which are summarised as follows:

- Negative impact on neighbouring properties. [para 41 – 49]
- There are more suitable locations. [para 22 – 24]
- Impact on the countryside. [para 26 – 40]
- It would be located on a greenfield site. [para 12 – 14 & 26 – 40]
- Proliferation of development in the area. [para 26 – 40]
- Negative impact on biodiversity. [para 69 – 73]
- Exacerbate existing flooding on the area. [para 53 – 54]
- Solar farms should be in brownfield sites. [para 22 – 24]
- The site is greenbelt. [officer note: the site is not part of the designated Green Belt but the land can be considered as 'greenfield' because it is previously undeveloped]
- Local roads are narrow and not suitable for large vehicles or increased traffic. [para 50 – 52]

- Continuing loss of agricultural land in this area has had a dramatic impact on the landscape. [para 26 – 40]
- The visual impact from surrounding footpaths and Farley Hill would be dreadful. [para 26 – 40]
- Industrialisation of the site. [para 26 – 40]
- It is prime/high grade agricultural land. [para 15 - 21]
- Wildlife will be blocked by security fencing. [para 69 – 73]
- The applicant has not consulted the community well. [Officer note: the application has been advertised correctly]
- It would set a precedent for more development. [Officer note: this application has to be considered on its individual merits]
- It will be highly visible. [para 26 – 40]
- The site is close to an area of special character. [Officer note: there are no Areas of Special Character close to the site. The nearest being approximately 1km to the east at Arborfield Cross and 1km to the south at Farley Hill]
- The development would look ugly. [para 26 – 40]
- The landscape is valued by residents. [para 26 – 40]
- The site is not designated for development. [para 12 – 14]
- It has not been demonstrated that the development of 3a agricultural land has been fulfilled. [para 15 - 21]
- Farley Hill is an ancient settlement dating back to the Saxon period. [para 59 - 68]
- Insufficient neighbour consultation. [Officer note: the application has been advertised correctly]
- It would be visible from the surrounding footpaths and byways which area well used. [para 26 – 40]
- The access track will introduce significant hard surfacing. [para 26 – 40]

3 letters in support which are summarised as follows:

- Excellent use of land for future natural renewable energy supply. [para 3 – 11]
- The land is presumably now of poor agricultural value. [para 15 - 21]
- The future needs to be considered and this would be a local clean energy source. [para 3 – 11]
- Although this may not be the prettiest thing to look at, it is renewable energy and is a good use of land not being farmed at the moment. [para 26 – 40]
- It can be removed when it is no longer required. [conditions 3 & 4]

APPLICANTS POINTS

A Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment was completed which concluded it will have limited adverse landscape and visual impacts and those that do occur initially will be mitigated by the proposed landscape design and long term management of the site for landscape quality and biodiversity.

Although some of the proposed solar park site has been identified as having an Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) of 3a, the solar park does not represent a permanent non-agricultural use in the same way as housing, and, once decommissioned, the site will be available once more for agricultural use including arable or pasture. Some of the site is partially ALC Grade 3b falling outside of the best and most versatile agricultural land.

During the operation of the solar park, the land will be effectively regeneratively farmed. It will be sown as pasture for grazing by sheep, with appropriate native wildflowers also included within the seeding mix. This is a preferred method of management for biodiversity improvements employed, by amongst others, the National Trust. The soil and land quality will be largely unaffected, and the proposed additional drainage and restorative farming practices may even improve the longer term quality of the land resulting in higher crop yields once the site is returned to agricultural use.

The detailed traffic impact assessment concludes with reference to swept path analysis, that the roads, which are already used by large farm vehicles are suitable for the construction vehicles that will be used. A Construction Traffic Management Plan has been produced and demonstrates that the use of these roads does not represent any additional safety risk providing the highway code is adhered to by all vehicles and pedestrians.

As detailed within the submitted Flood Risk Assessment, the proposed solar park site is not identified as being at risk of flooding.

A detailed glint and glare assessment has been completed using computer modelling techniques and assessing the potential for glint at specific representative receptors taking into account the location of the receptors in relation to the site, their topography and potential vegetative screening.

Due to the distance between the site and the nearest sensitive receptors, combined with the continually moving nature and short duration of the construction activities, there will be no significant noise impacts as a result of the proposed development.

There will be no significant impacts upon any habitats or species were identified by the Ecological Impact Assessment (EclA). A variety of ecological enhancements are proposed across the site which will in fact improve it for a range of species. In addition, the site fence will be designed to allow the continued movement of small mammals such as badgers and foxes across the site through badger gates or similar sized gaps at regular intervals along the fence line.

The proposal will produce clean renewable energy in accordance with local and national policy and the benefits of the scheme outweigh any adverse impacts.

PLANNING POLICY		
National Policy	NPPF	National Planning Policy Framework
Adopted Core Strategy DPD 2010	CP1	Sustainable Development
	CP2	Inclusive Communities
	CP3	General Principles for Development
	CP4	Infrastructure Requirements
	CP5	Housing mix, density and affordability
	CP6	Managing Travel Demand
	CP7	Biodiversity
	CP9	Scale and Location of Development Proposals

	CP10	Improvements to the Strategic Transport Network
	CP11	Proposals outside development limits (including countryside)
Adopted Managing Development Delivery Local Plan 2014	CC01	Presumption in Favour of Sustainable Development
	CC02	Development Limits
	CC03	Green Infrastructure, Trees and Landscaping
	CC04	Sustainable Design and Construction
	CC05	Renewable energy and decentralised energy networks
	CC06	Noise
	CC07	Parking
	CC08	Safeguarding alignments of the Strategic Transport Network & Road Infrastructure
	CC09	Development and Flood Risk (from all sources)
	CC10	Sustainable Drainage
	TB12	Employment Skills Plan
	TB21	Landscape Character
	TB23	Biodiversity and Development
	TB24	Designated Heritage Assets
	TB25	Archaeology
Arborfield and Barkham Neighbourhood Plan	IRS1	Preservation of Separation of Settlements
	IRS2	Recognise, Respect and Reserve Identity and Rural Setting of Settlements
	IRS3	Protection and Enhancement of the Natural Environment and Green Spaces
	IRS4	Protection and Enhancement of the Historic Character of the Area
	TC3	Conditional Support for Businesses in the Countryside and Agriculture
	AD5	Address Local Flood Risk Management
	GA1	Minimise Additional Traffic on Unsuitable Roads
Arborfield and Newland Village Design Statement	VDS	
Supplementary Planning Documents (SPD)	BDG	Borough Design Guide – Section 4

PLANNING ISSUES

Description of Development:

1. The proposal relates to the installation of a solar farm across 4 agricultural fields comprising 19.66 hectares (ha). It includes the erection of approximately 40,000 PV panels on mounted frames, which will be used to export up to 14 MW (AC) of renewable electricity into the regional electricity grid; equivalent to providing 3,736 households with renewable energy annually.
2. The proposed photovoltaic panels will be 2.43 metres high. In addition to the photovoltaic panels, a control room will be erected, 11 inverter buildings, security fencing and access tracks. The Inverter cabins will be 3.18m height by 2.4m wide and 8.7 metres long. The control building will be 4.5 metres high by 3m wide and 7m long. The Security fencing would be 2.5 metres high mesh.

Principle of Development:

3. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) has an underlying presumption in favour of sustainable development which is carried through to the local Development Plan. The Managing Development Delivery Local Plan (MDD) Policy CC01 states that planning applications that accord with the policies in the Development Plan for Wokingham Borough will be approved without delay, unless material considerations indicate otherwise.
4. The development plan for this application consists of the Core Strategy, MDD Local Plan and the Arborfield and Barkham Neighbourhood Plan.

Renewable Energy

5. The principle of renewable energy infrastructure is strongly supported in the development plan and NPPF and this results in significant weight in favour of the development.
6. Starting with the local policy context, MDD Local Plan policy CC05 states '*local opportunities to contribute towards decentralised energy supply from renewable and low-carbon technologies will be encouraged*'. Part 3 of the policy states '*proposals for renewable energy and decentralised energy works, including wind turbines, must demonstrate that:*
 - a) *They are appropriate in scale, location and technology type;*
 - b) *Are compatible with the surrounding area, including the impact of noise and odour;*
 - c) *Do not have a damaging impact on the local topography and landscape;*
 - d) *There is no significant impact upon heritage assets, including views important to their setting;*
7. Turning to national policy, Section 14 of the NPPF refers to meeting the challenge of climate change and paragraph 148 states that the planning system should support the transition to a low carbon future.
8. NPPF paragraph 154 further states that '*when determining planning applications for renewable and low carbon development, local planning authorities should:*

*a) not require applicants to demonstrate the overall need for renewable or low carbon energy, and recognise that even small-scale projects provide a valuable contribution to cutting greenhouse gas emissions; and
b) approve the application if its impacts are (or can be made) acceptable. Once suitable areas for renewable and low carbon energy have been identified in plans, local planning authorities should expect subsequent applications for commercial scale projects outside these areas to demonstrate that the proposed location meets the criteria used in identifying suitable areas.'*

9. The council has declared a Climate Emergency and the Climate Emergency Action Plan was published in January 2020. This sets out the objective to provide solar farms in order to achieve the goal of carbon neutrality by 2030.

10. The Council's Climate Emergency Officer has recommended that the application is approved and advised:

In the case of this development, the proposed solar farm would be capable of generating enough electricity to power 3,736 residential properties.

[...]

The council recognises the need for the generation of low carbon, renewable energy generation and the transition to a sustainable low carbon economy as a way to address the potential impacts of climate change. The proposal, therefore, represents an opportunity to contribute towards this need and to the Council's climate change agenda.

11. Overall, the principle of renewable energy development is supported by local and national policy. It is relevant that the NPPF does not state that there should be no adverse impacts from renewable energy development, only that the impacts should be acceptable. This is echoed by the advice of the Council's Planning Policy Team who advise that the principle of development *'is supported by national and local policy, subject to there being no unacceptable impacts.'*

Development within the countryside

12. The development plan does not allocate sites or identify suitable areas for renewable and low carbon energy. Each application for renewable energy use needs to be assessed on its merits against the development plan as a whole and the impact on the landscape.

13. Policy CP11 states that development will not normally be permitted outside of settlement limits apart from the exceptions set out in the policy. The proposal would not fall within any of these exceptions and is contrary to this policy.

14. As set out above policy CC05 of the MDD Local Plan does not preclude renewable energy provision within the countryside but it does emphasis that such proposals should not 'damage' the landscape and approve applications where the impact can be made 'acceptable'.

Best and Most Versatile (BMV) agricultural land

15. Policy CP1 states that planning permission will be granted for development proposals that avoid areas of Best and Most Versatile (BMV) agricultural land. Policy TC3 of the Neighbourhood Plan refers to protecting BMV land. Para 170 of the NPPF refers to the natural environment and recognising the natural and capital benefits of BMV land.
16. The Planning Practice Guidance for solar development states the local authorities will need to consider that *‘where a proposal involves greenfield land, whether (i) the proposed use of any agricultural land has been shown to be necessary and poorer quality land has been used in preference to higher quality land; and (ii) the proposal allows for continued agricultural use where applicable and/or encourages biodiversity improvements around arrays.’*
17. BMV land is classed as grades 1 – 3a. Grade 3b is considered moderate quality and grades 4 and 5 are deemed poor and very poor quality.
18. The Applicant’s supporting information states that the land comprises of grade 3a and 3b. Approximately 58% of the land is grade 3a (BMV land) and the remaining areas 3b and 4.
19. Natural England have considered the loss of BMV land and have raised no objection. They have stated:

‘Our main point would be the use of Best and Most Versatile (BMV) soils on site for this development purposes, however given the fact that only around half or less is grade 3a we wouldn’t have any objection to the site being used as proposed. There is an opportunity to maintain the best quality soils for future use once the site has been in use for its planned life span and as such the decommissioning is a key element of the proposals and would need to ensure the site can be cleared and returned to a state that could allow it to be used for agriculture again in the future.’
20. Neighbour objection letters have correctly pointed out that the Applicant’s initial assessment of BMV land did cover all of the application site. The applicant has since clarified the 58/42 percent split between 3a (BMV land) and 3b/4 is correct. Natural England have considered this up-to-date information and have confirmed that their position remains the same and they do not object on the basis of harm to BMV land.
21. No objection is therefore raised regarding the principle of this development being partially located on grade 3a agricultural land.

Alternative sites
22. Whilst it is well established that each planning application should be considered on its individual merits, the Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) for solar development states where a proposal involves greenfield land, the Local Planning Authority should consider *‘the proposed use of any agricultural land has been shown to be necessary and poorer quality land has been used in preference to higher quality land’*.
23. Local residents have also raised objections stating that alternative sites should be considered for this type of development.

24. The applicant has submitted a '*Site Selection and Consideration of Alternative Sites*' report which sets out the rationale for the solar farm to be located on this site. The report takes into account a number of environmental and particle constraints for other potential sites. It states that the electricity generated would typically need to be connected to the 33kv network, the further away the site is from this network the greater the costs and impact on viability. The reports concludes that the proposed location is suitable and also viable.

Conclusion on principle of development

25. Overall there are policies which pull indifferent directions. The delivery of renewable energy is supported by both local and national policy but this needs to be weighed against any landscape impact and loss of BMV land. These considerations are set out in greater details in the following sections of this report. The planning balance is set out in the conclusion section.

Impact on Character and appearance of the area:

26. The Wokingham Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) shows majority of the site falling within the landscape area J2 *Arborfield and Barkham Settled and Farmed Clay*, whilst the south eastern section is within area L2 *Farley Hill Wooded Sand and Gravel Hills*.

27. Area J2 is described in the 2004 LCA as a landscape of moderate quality with moderate character on moderate condition. A 2019 update to the LCA also identifies that this landscape area is still in moderate condition.

28. Area L2 is described in the 2004 & 2019 LCA as a landscape of overall high quality with strong character in moderate/good condition. The high quality landscape of area L2 broadly coincides with the rise in levels to the east across the site.

29. The site is divided by Castle Hill and the western parcel of land in relatively flat. It is surrounded by traditional field boundary trees and hedgerows. There are glimpsed views into this section of the site from the surrounding roads and public bridleway to the south. Views into the site would be more apparent in winter months when the vegetation loses its foliage.

30. The eastern part of the site rises in level to the east and is more visible than the area to the west. There would be views from a byway to the south and Castle Hill. A footpath parallel to the eastern boundary provides good views of the site and the surrounding landscape. Whilst there is a hedgerow along the boundary, there are expansive views across the site due to the undulating nature of the eastern part of the land and the landscape in general at this point.

31. The applicant has submitted a Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) which concludes that the proposal would result in some harm but mitigating planting would be a benefit.

32. The Council's Tree and Landscape Officer raises no objection to the proposed application and advised:

'The siting of the panels within the site have been carefully considered and moved away from the northern edge of the site to limit views from the properties to the north including Clays, Bartlett's Farm and White's Farm. This in combination with the existing topography of the site and additional planting as shown on the Landscape Masterplan drawing, will further reduce the visual effects of the panels

[...]

The additional planting will also be consistent with the landscape strategy within the WBLCA for LCA J2 which is the typical landscape character of the area'

33. Notwithstanding the above, in the officer's planning judgement there would be some harm to the character and appearance of the landscape. The additional planting proposed by the applicant would mitigate the impact of the solar farm but not entirely and the policy context is clear that even without views into a site, the impact on the intrinsic character of an area must still be taken into account.
34. There are several relevant factors that impact the weight attached to the landscape harm. First the landscape has no special designation and it is not defined as Valued Landscape, although it does not mean that the landscape is without value. The overall landscape character areas in which the site falls within is described in the councils LCA has moderate and high quality.
35. The applicant has agreed condition 3 that would grant permission for a 40 year period where afterward the equipment and development on site would be removed and the landscape returned to a favourable condition (condition 4). The landscape impact can therefore be considered as temporary but it must be acknowledged that the development would still be in situ for a considerable period of time.
36. The proposal would result in no significant lasting physical changes to the landscape, apart from the additional planting proposed to mitigate the scheme which the council's landscape officer advises is a benefit. As stated however, it is material that the development would still be in situ for a considerable period of time.
37. Policy CP11 of the Core Strategy and IRS1 of the Neighbourhood Plan refer maintaining the separation of individual settlements. The site fall within an area of countryside between Arborfield Cross and Arborfield Garrison to the east and Swallowfield to the west. The site would be detached from any settlement and would maintain the current separation between these settlements.
38. Local objection letters have raised objections regarding the impact in the landscape.
39. Overall, there would be some landscape harm. Whilst this would be partially mitigated by additional landscaping, it would not entirely mitigate the negative impacts of the development on the landscape. The 40 year condition can be given weight in decision making process but the development would still be in situ for a considerable period.
40. The impact of the landscape harm is weighed in the planning balance section of the report along with the positive benefits of the proposal.

Residential Amenities:

41. The nearest properties are a small coalescence of buildings to the north of the site along Swallowfield Road.
42. The edge of site would be approximately 210m away from the nearest residential boundary. Given the limited height of the development on site there would be no detrimental impacts with regard to loss of light or overbearingness.
43. Glint and glare from Solar Panels can impact residents; however in this case, the proposed development would not result in a detrimental impact. The applicant has submitted an assessment of glint and glare in an Environmental Statement which concludes that the proposal would not detrimentally impact any residents. The proposed panels would be angled to face southwards and the nearest houses are located to the north. There is some intervening vegetation between these properties and the site.
44. The Environment Health Team has considered the potential for glint and glare and raise no objection, stating that views *'of the site by residents is limited currently by vegetation and the proposals include improving screening of the site from view by adding further vegetation.'* Recommended landscape conditions 6 - 10 secure the retention of existing vegetation and trees and the strengthening of these features.
45. The development would be visible from these properties from certain viewpoints but there is no right to a view and as detailed above, it is considered that the visually perceivable effects would have an acceptable impact on resident's amenity.
46. There would be very limited noise from the operation phase of the development. As set out above, the location of the solar panels, inverters and control room are located away from neighbouring residents and these features do not generate appreciable levels of noise. The site would be mainly controlled remotely and there would not be significant comings and goings from workers.
47. The proposed construction phases of the development has the potential to result in greater noise and disturbance. A Noise Assessment has been submitted and the Council's Environmental Health Team has considered this and raised no objection.
48. The development phase would be managed by a Construction Environmental Management Plan (CEMP) that would incorporate measures to mitigate noise and disturbance. This is recommended by condition 14.
49. Overall the proposal would not result in an unacceptable impact on resident's amenity.

Access and Movement:

50. The main vehicle entrances into the site would be via Castle Hill and would utilise existing field accesses. The solar farm will be equipped with a computer control system that will continuously monitor site and it would be typical unmanned for day-to-day operations. Traffic to and from the site would be limited to maintenance vehicles and engineers. The proposed use would generate very minimal levels of traffic and would not detrimentally impact the capacity of the highway network or result in any safety implications.

51. Given the use would be monitored remotely by computer systems, there are no designated parking spaces on the site. There would however be ample opportunities for on the site for informal parking from maintenance/service vehicles.
52. The Council's Highway Engineer raises no objection and advised that traffic from the operation phase would not result in a detrimental highway impact. They have recommended that a CEMP must be submitted to ensure that the construction phase does not result in a detrimental impacts to the highway network (condition 14). It is also recommended that conditions 15 -17 are required.

Flooding and Drainage:

53. The site is Flood Zone 1 where the risk of fluvial flooding low. There are areas at risk from surface water flooding across some parts of the site and also along Swallowfield Road and Castle Hill.
54. The solar panels would have limited physical attached to the ground and the porosity of the fields would not be substantially impacted. The applicant has submitted a Flood Risk Assessment and the Council's Drainage Engineer has raised no objection to the proposed application subject to recommended condition 12 ensuring a sustainable drainage system is implemented.

Impact on Trees:

55. There are mature trees around the periphery of the site and the individual field boundaries. None are subject to Tree Preservation Orders (TPO) but they do have positive value to the landscape. To the south of the site is Ancient & Semi-Natural Woodland.
56. None of the trees are proposed to be felled. An Arboricultural Report (15789/RP) has been provided to support the application which confirms this. The council's Tree Officer has considered the application and raised no objection subject to a final Arboricultural Method Statement, recommended by condition 9, to ensure trees and their roots are not damaged during construction.

Environmental Health:

57. There are no areas classed as potentially contaminated on the site and there proposed development would not result in significant earth works. The Environmental Health Team has considered the application and raises no objection, stating; '*the assessment show that the risk of contamination and of impact on the development is very low and therefore there is no objection*'.
58. There are no adverse air quality impacts expected due to the construction or operation of the site. The Environmental Health Team has advised that measures to minimise dust should be incorporated into a CEMP which is secured by recommended condition 14.

Heritage Assets:

59. Paragraph 194 of the NPPF advises that where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits.
60. Policy CC05 refers to renewable energy development and states development must demonstrate *'there is no significant impact upon heritage assets, including views important to their setting'*.
61. There are no designated heritage assets on the site itself but to the north is a grade II* listed building called Bartlett's Farmhouse and a grade II listed property to the north of Swallowfield Road called White's Farmhouse. These heritage assets would be located approximately 260m away from the nearest cluster of solar panels.
62. The Council's Conservation Officer has considered the application and advised that the harm to the setting of these listed buildings would be less than substantial:
- 'The proposals are likely to impact on certain views of the two listed farmhouses as the site is visible in some of those views from along Swallowfield Road however the potential visible intrusion of the solar panels in such views to the diminishment of the otherwise rural setting of these designated heritage assets, it would have to be concluded that any adverse visual harm to the setting of these buildings would be of a limited nature such as to be very much classed as towards the lower range of less than substantial harm.'*
63. The Conservation Officer has advised that this harm falls at the lower end of 'less than substantial' and this impact is therefore not considered significant with respect to policy CC05.
64. It is concluded in the planning balance section of this report that the benefits of the solar farm outweigh any adverse impacts and therefore the proposal does not conflict para 194 of the NPPF which states the harm should be weighed against the public benefits.
65. The Schedule Ancient Monument of Kennedy's Farm is 380m to the north and the listed property Old Dunnings is 420m to the west. Both are considered sufficiently distant from the application site that the intervening topography and vegetation (and other buildings in the case of Old Dunnings) mean views to and from these particular designated heritage asset would not be affected by the proposed solar park.

Archaeology:

66. An Archaeological Statement submitted by the applicant concludes that there are no known heritage assets within the site. The route of a Roman Road is postulated across the site but no evidence for this road has been recorded.
67. The application has been considered by Berkshire Archaeology who raise no objection to the proposal and advise:

'The area within the red line boundary is agricultural land of significant area (19.66ha) and is previously undeveloped. The absence of archaeological evidence is therefore not evidence for the absence of buried remains. However

it is noted that, considered in its entirety, the proposed development will not have major and widespread below ground impacts.

[...]

On this basis, Berkshire Archaeology is in agreement that the impacts of the development can be mitigated by a programme of archaeological work'

68. The application would have an acceptable Archaeological impact subject to condition 11 which recommends a Scheme of Archaeological Investigation.

Ecology:

69. The site is previously undeveloped agricultural fields. It is located next to and the borough's great crested newt (GCN) consultation zone (to the west), and, is adjacent to three areas of woodland which are Local Wildlife Sites (LWS).

70. The applicant's supporting information includes an Environmental Statement, Landscape and Ecological Management Plan (LEMP) and Construction Environmental Management Plan (CEMP).

71. The Council's Ecologist has assessed the proposal and advises that no objection is raised regarding the impact on biodiversity/ecology, stating:

'The proposals are unlikely to adversely affect any protected species (subject to works being carried out in accordance with the submitted CEMP) and will result in the creation of new priority habitats (hedgerows, swales and species-rich grassland) and habitats for protected and priority species including bats, nesting birds, invertebrates and herpetofauna. The creation of these habitats will offset any adverse effects of the works to install the Solar Park and are considered likely to result in a net-gain for biodiversity. Furthermore, the implementation of protective and precautionary measures will ensure that priority habitats, LWS and other features of ecological value will not be adversely affected during works or operations on site.'

72. Natural England have been consulted and also raise no objection. In addition to their comments set out in the Principal of Development section of this report, they also advise *'the proposal to keep all of the existing trees and hedgerows is welcomed'*.

73. The application is recommended for approval subject to conditions 6 and 10 which ensures the development will be carried out in accordance with the recommendations set out in the submitted information. These recommendations include additional planting, re-enforcing existing hedgerows and sowing native wildflowers to create grassland habitats.

Employment Skills:

74. An Employment Skills Plan is required by MDD Local Plan policy TB12 due to the size of the application site. The applicant has agreed to enter into a legal agreement to secure local employees or a payment in lieu to fund local apprenticeships and training.

Other Matters:

75. CLH Pipeline have objected because the application site is in close proximity to an existing oil pipeline and the proposal may obstruct maintenance. The location of the pipeline is outside of the application site and broadly follows the route of the byway to the south. The nearest panel would be at least 20m from the pipeline and therefore this matter can be satisfactorily dealt with by Condition 18, which recommends the applicant resolves this issue with the pipeline operator prior to commencement.
76. There are high pressure pipelines across the site and SCG have provisionally objected based on the proximity of these pipelines. Their response advises that it is an *'initial/scoping out work only'* and when *'your planning has been approved and works on site are due to start, another request for information and updated maps must be made via our on-line system as a planned works enquiry.'*
77. The layout of the site has taken into consideration the location of the high pressure gas pipeline and there are no solar panels or infrastructure over this section. Given the response from SCG is scoping work, it is considered appropriate to recommend condition 18 to ensure the applicant has satisfactorily addressed the concerns from SGN regarding the proximity of the pipeline.

The Public Sector Equality Duty (Equality Act 2010)

In determining this application the Council is required to have due regard to its obligations under the Equality Act 2010. The key equalities protected characteristics include age, disability, gender, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief. There is no indication or evidence (including from consultation on the application) that the protected groups identified by the Act have or will have different needs, experiences, issues and priorities in relation to this particular planning application and there would be no significant adverse impacts upon protected groups as a result of the development.

CONCLUSION AND PLANNING BALANCE

The application should be determined against the development plan as whole.

For large scale and EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment) development, it is not uncommon to have policies with competing aims that must be weighed in the planning balance. The benefits of the scheme are therefore weighed against the harm.

Starting with the impact on the landscape, the proposed development would result in some harm in this regard. The landscape has no formal designation but valued features of the site would be impacted. The harm would be partially mitigated by additional landscaping and to some extent the temporary 40 year period of the application. However it must be acknowledge that a 40 year permission would still be for a considerable period of time. Overall this impact has weight in the overall planning balance.

The provision of renewable energy is an important local and national objective which is supported in the development plan and NPPF. In addition, the council has announced a climate emergency and produced Climate Emergency Action Plan which supports the provision of renewable energy. This benefit holds significant weight in favour in the planning balance.

The applicant has also advised of that the proposal would result in economic benefits stating *'the proposed development represents a total investment of the order of £6.7million in isolation, a proportion of which will be spent in the local area, primarily on civil and electrical contractors'*. The applicant will also be required to enter into a legal agreement to secure an employment skills plan.

The use of BMV agricultural land (3a) weighs negatively against the proposal although it is relevant that Natural England have not objected to this aspect of the proposal.

The less than substantial harm to the heritage assets means that the proposal complies with policy CC05 of the MDD Local Plan and the Council's Conservation Officer has not objected to the proposal for heritage reasons.

The other material considerations set out in this report are policy compliant and broadly hold neutral weight in the planning balance.

Overall weighing these factors in the planning balance, it is considered that the proposed benefits of the proposal would be significant and outweigh the harmful impacts, thus it is in accordance with the development plan as a whole.

The application is therefore recommended for approval subject to the recommended conditions and completion of a legal agreement.