

Agenda Item 36.

Application Number	Expiry Date	Parish	Ward
211081	29 October 2021 (ext)	Barkham	Barkham

Applicant	Wokingham Borough Council
Site Address	Barkham Farms (High Barn Farm and part of Brook Farm and Rooks Nest Farm), Barkham RG40 4EX
Proposal	Full application for EIA development for the proposed installation of a new 52ha solar farm for a temporary period of 25 years including underground grid connection between site and Electricity Distribution Centre, laying of internal access road, the erection of substation building security fencing and associated landscaping with approximately 2.9ha of tree planting for carbon sequestration
Type	Full
Officer	Simon Taylor
Reason for consideration by Planning Committee	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Major application (> 1 hectare) 2) EIA development 3) Council application on Council owned land <p>The final determination is subject to further consideration by the Secretary of State (SoS). This report and the Committee's recommendation will be forwarded to the SoS for review. The initial 'call-in' is attached to this report.</p>

FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Planning Committee on Wednesday 8 September 2021
REPORT PREPARED BY	Assistant Director – Place

SUMMARY

Wokingham Borough Council declared a Climate Emergency in July 2019, which commits the Council to playing as full a role as possible in reducing our carbon footprint to be net carbon zero by 2030. The Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan was published in January 2020. Section 3 includes opportunities such as the Council using "its own land holdings and assets to increase the contribution of renewable energy to the grid electricity supply through the creation of solar farms and the installation of solar panels on buildings where possible."

The subject application forms a key part of meeting this obligation. It involves a 52-hectare solar farm on agricultural land (High Barn Farm, Brook Farm and Rooks Nest Farm) owned by Wokingham Council at Barkham Ride and Commonfield Lane, Barkham. It includes the installation of 67,340 solar photovoltaic panels, inverters, five transformers and cabins, a sub-station and grid connection to a site 2km to the north on Barkham Road with vehicle access through the site, 2.4m high fencing around the perimeter and associated lighting and CCTV.

It also includes the planting of 10,947 trees as a carbon sequestration project across 2.9ha of land at the very south of the site and improvements to the public footpath network by linking the south through the site to existing footpaths around Church Lane in the north. The lifespan of the solar panels is 25 years whereby the use will be decommissioned and the site reverted to its current state. As part of more recent amendments to the scheme, 5.5 ha of agricultural land will also be retained for the existing tenant farmer.

The application is an EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment) application and has been subject to a screening process. It was consulted to approximately 3,300 nearby residents with 68 submissions (11 for, 1 neutral and 56 against). Barkham Parish Council have given conditional support though the neighbouring parish councils at Finchampstead and Wokingham Town have both raised objection. The Secretary of State has asked to review the application prior to determination to decide whether or not to call in the application.

The application has been subject to amendments and reconsultation in August 2021. Following these changes and the submission of additional information, no objections have been raised (subject to conditions) by the Council's Highways Officer, Ecology Officer and Drainage Officer. The Council's Trees Officer maintains some reservations in relation to the impact from Rooks Nest Wood but otherwise conforms support. The Council's Rights of Way Officer has also sought additional ancillary works and the Council's Conservation Officer raises objection in relation to the proximity to the collection of heritage assets near Barkham Square. Externally, no objections are raised by the Environment Agency and Natural England but Historic England maintain their objection on the same grounds as the Council's Conservation Officer.

The primary issues that have been identified with the scheme are:

- Use of Grade 2 and 3a Best and Most Versatile (BMV) agricultural land
- Visual harm to the rural landscape and whether there is sufficient mitigation to offset impacts
- Encroachment of development between Finchampstead and Arborfield
- Harm to the setting and in views of the listed buildings and scheduled monument at Church Lane
- Potential harm to nearby archaeological artefacts from construction works
- Hedgerow loss along Barkham Ride
- Traffic implications during the construction phase, including from deliveries along Barkham Street and roadworks to Barkham Road

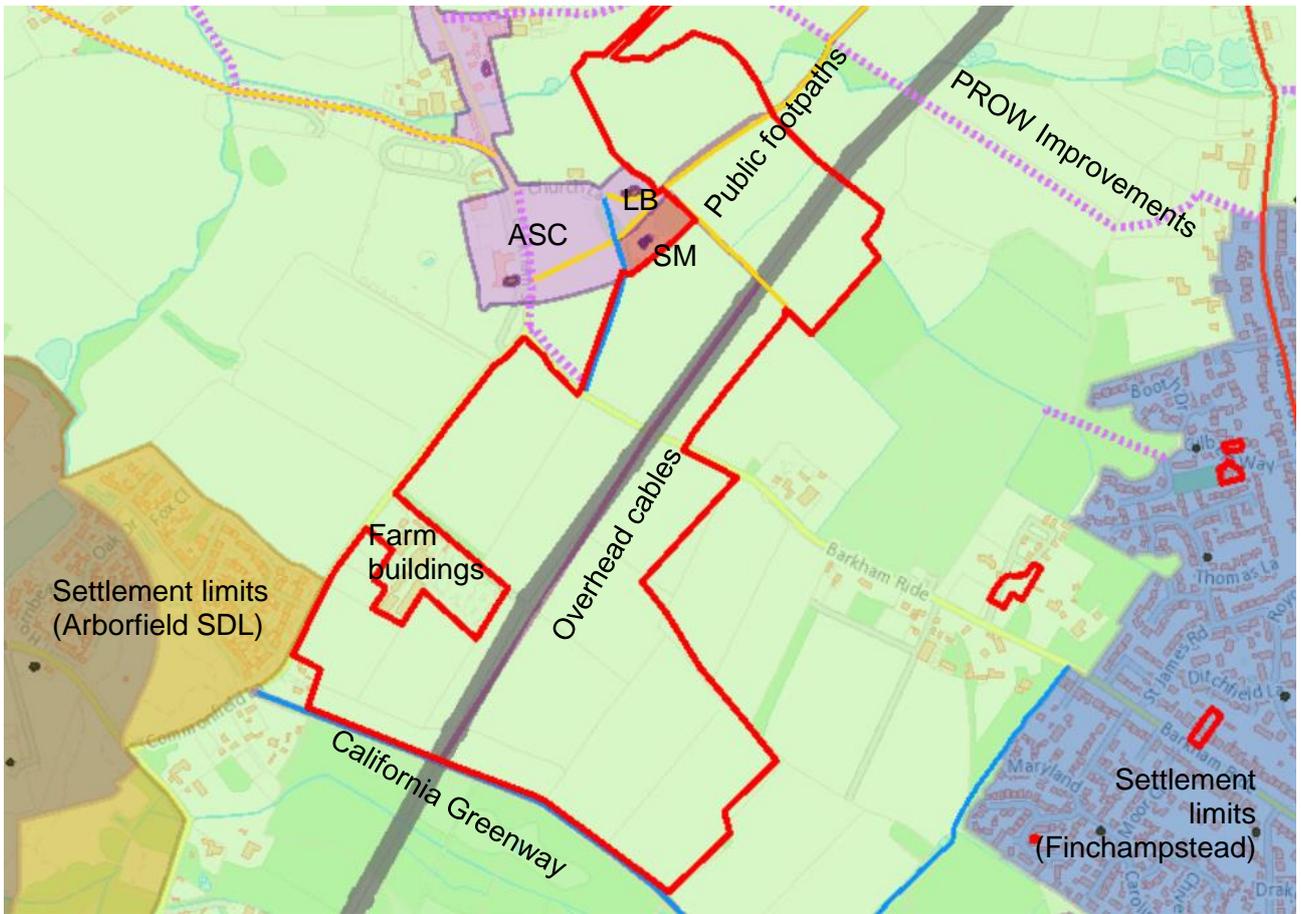
There are planning policies and considerations that pull in different directions and when weighing the overall planning balance between the aforementioned impacts and the significant benefits of the schemes in terms of achievement of the stated aims and objectives of the Council with respect to reducing carbon emissions, the application weighs in favour of the latter. Conditional approval is therefore recommended, subject to the following more specific conditions:

- Temporary permission for 25 years (Condition 3) and submission of remediation and decommissioning details for the end of its lifespan (Condition 28)
- Landscaping details relating to ground levels, soft landscaping, tree protection and management responsibilities (Conditions 4-7)
- Heritage information boards within the Greenway (Condition 8)
- Greenway details as required in Conditions 10 and 11
- Highways crossing details, a Construction Traffic Management Plan and Construction Environmental Management Plan (Conditions 11-14)
- Restrictions on HGV deliveries in Condition 26
- Ecological details in a Landscape Environmental Management Plan, Construction Environmental Management Plan, lighting details and ecological permeability measures in Conditions 14-16
- Details of CCTV, external materials and lighting (Conditions 17-19)

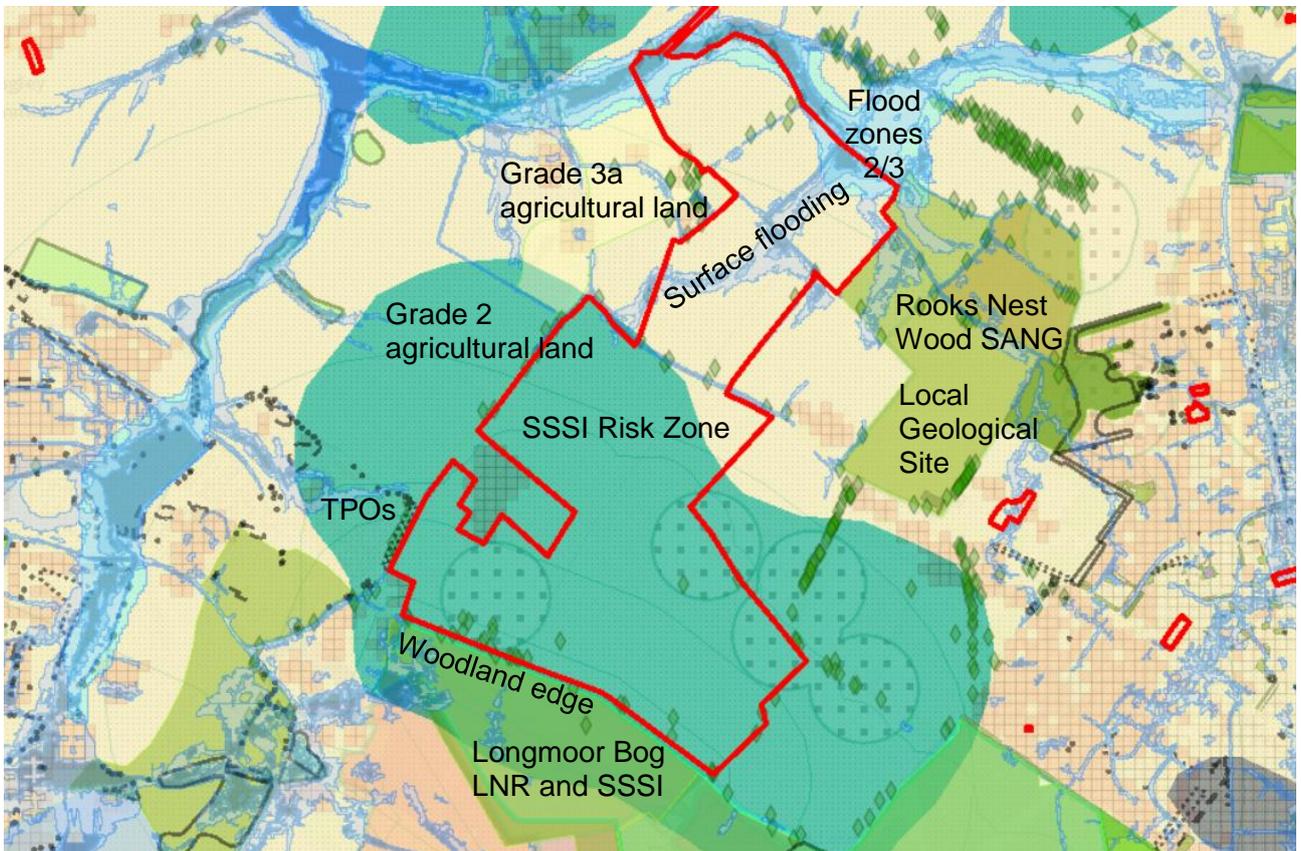
- Final drainage details in Condition 20
- Additional measures to protect against any identified adverse glare (Condition 22)
- Communications Plan for resident liaison (Condition 23)
- Noise measures to protect against night time disturbance in Condition 24

PLANNING CONSTRAINTS AND STATUS

- Countryside (except Barkham Road)
- WBC owned land (High Barn Farm, Brook Farm and Rooks Nest Farm)
- Public Rights of Way
 - Bridleway BARK BR 14 I along southern boundary
 - Restricted byway along Commonfield Lane
 - Bridleway BARK BR 11 II from Barkham Road and to Church of St James
 - Footpath BARK FP 10A I through northern end of site
 - Proposed new route from Barkham Road to Church Lane
- Overhead cable and pylon buffer zone (north-south through site) and connecting to Electricity Substation 10032930533
- Burghfield Major Nuclear Site Consultation Zone (12km zone)
- Flood Zone 2 (along Barkham Brook at northern end of site)
- Land liable to surface flooding (along Barkham Brook at northern end of site)
- Potentially contaminated land consultation zone (part of Barkham Road)
- Nitrate vulnerable zone (surface water)
- Tree Preservation Orders (lining Barkham Road)
- Veteran trees (interspersed through site and along Barkham Road)
- Green Route (Barkham Road)
- Agricultural land (Grade 2 to the south and Grade 3a to the north)
- Bat consultation zone
- Bat roost suitability
- Badger sett consultation zone (two separate areas to the south and two areas along Barkham Road)
- Site of Special Scientific Interest Impact Risk Zone
- Site of Special Scientific Interest (Longmoor Bog adjoining to the south)
- Rooks Nest Woods SANG (adjoins to the east)
- Local wildlife site (to the east and south and near Barkham Road)
- Thames Basin Heath Special Protection Area (5km zone)
- Priority habitat (woodland to the south and grassland)
- Local Geological Sites (LGSs): Barkham Iron-Rich Streams (to the east)
- Local Nature reserve (adjoining to the south)
- Barkham Church and Manor Area of Special Character (adjoins to the west)
- Scheduled Monument (Church Farm and Moat adjoins to the north west)
- Adjacent to Listed Buildings (Grade II Church Cottage, Grade II Church of St James, Grade II Barkham Square adjoin or in proximity to the west)
- Building of Traditional Local Character (Brook Farm House within proximity to the west)
- Arborfield Garrison Strategic Development Location (adjoins to the south west)
- Sites to the west and east recommended for inclusion in the Local Plan update
- Farnborough Aerodrome consultation zone
- Heathrow Aerodrome wind turbine safeguarding zone
- Bounded by a non-classified road and adopted highway (except Barkham Road which is a classified road)



Built constraints (Key: SM – Scheduled Monument, ASC – Area of Special Character, LB – Listed building)



Natural constraints

(Key: Veteran trees shown in green diamonds). Note: The agricultural grade classification has been updated March 2021 as part of this application. See paragraph 25 for further details)

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. Receipt of confirmation from the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government that he does not wish to call the application in for determination.

B. Prior completion of a legal undertaking to secure an Employment Skills Plan. If the undertaking is not submitted and agreed 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.

C. The following conditions and informatives

Conditions

1) Timescale

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).

2) Approved details

This permission is in respect of the following plans:

Plan number	Rev	Drawing title	Dated
70074897-XX-XX-DP-008-P03	P03	Site Location Plan	24 March 2021
70074897-XX-XX-DP-005-P01	P05	Site Access Visibility Splays	19 August 2021
70074897-XX-XX-DP-006A-P02	P02	Swept Path Analysis – Site Construction South Access	12 July 2021
70074897-XX-XX-DP-006B-P02	P02	Swept Path Analysis – Site Construction North Access	12 July 2021
70074897-XX-XX-RN-001	0	PV Mounting Cross Section	13 January 2021
70074897-XX-XX-RN-002	P06	PV layout	26 July 2021
70074897-XX-XX-RN-003	0	Road And Trench Cross Section	25 January 2021
70074897-XX-XX-RN-004	0	PV Fencing, CCTV, Mast and Gate Scheme	25 January 2021
70074897-XX-XX-RN-005	0	MV Transformer Layout	8 February 2021
70074897-XX-XX-RN-006	0	Substation Building Footprint	25 January 2021
70074897-XX-XX-TP-010	P02	Site Layout Plan	27 July 2021
BFSF-WSP-XX-DR-LA-001	P02	Environmental Masterplan	27 July 2021
BFSF-WSP-12-XX-DR-DI-100171	P03		24 March 2021

BFSF-WSP-12-XX-DR-DI-100172	P03	Proposed Long Section	24 March 2021
BFSF-WSP-12-XX-DR-DI-100173	P03	(Sheets 1-5)	24 March 2021
BFSF-WSP-12-XX-DR-DI-100174	P03		24 March 2021
BFSF-WSP-12-XX-DR-DI-100175	P03		24 March 2021
WSP-70074897-DR-001	P03	Drainage Constraints Plan	27 July 2021
WSP-70074897-DR-002	P03	Surface Water Drainage Strategy	27 July 2021

The development shall be carried out in accordance with the approved details unless other minor variations are agreed in writing after the date of this permission and before implementation with 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.

3) Temporary permission

With the exception of the Greenway improvements, tree and hedgerow planting and associated works, the planning permission hereby permitted is for a maximum period of 25 years of electricity generation, after which electricity generation is to cease. The solar panels and all ancillary infrastructure including fencing, are to be removed from the site and the land is to be restored to a favourable condition at the end of this 25-year period in accordance with the details approved under condition 4 of this permission. The same provisions apply if electricity generation permanently ceases prior to the end of the 25-year period.

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 long-term landscape and visual amenity of the countryside and to allow for agricultural use in the future.

Relevant policy: NPPF Section 15, Core Strategy policies CP1, CP3 and CP11 and Managing Development Delivery Local Plan Policies CC03 and TB21.

4) Ground and building levels

Prior to the commencement of development (inclusive of below ground works), hereby permitted, a plan prepared to scale of not less than 1:500 showing details of existing and proposed finished ground levels (in relation to a fixed datum point) shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. The approved scheme shall be fully implemented prior to the first generation of electricity.

Reason: To ensure a satisfactory form of development relative to surrounding buildings and landscape.

Relevant policy: Core Strategy policies CP1 and CP3 and Managing Development Delivery Local Plan policy TB21.

5) Landscaping details

Prior to the commencement of development (inclusive of below ground works), hereby permitted, full and final details of the hard and soft landscaping scheme shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority.

These details shall include the details in the Environmental Masterplan numbered BFSF-WSP-XX-DR-LA-001, Rev P02, amended to include

- a) Dispersed planting in the area to the south east of Church Cottages
- b) Additional hedgerow to the south of Barkham Ride as this boundary is relatively open
- c) Additional hedgerow to the south-east of the Greenway separating the open area through which the Greenway will pass from the PV panels to the south-east
- d) Replacement hedgerow behind visibility splays for new accesses off Barkham Ride

and include the following additional provisions, as appropriate:

- a) Proposed finished levels or contours
- b) Car parking layouts and vehicle and internal road access, including any level changes and surfacing
- c) Hard surfacing materials and minor artefacts and structures
- d) Planting specification (including cultivation and other operations associated with plant and grass establishment), schedules of plants noting species, sizes, numbers, and densities
- e) Means of enclosure, including elevations of fencing and gates
- f) Planting plan
- g) Implementation timetable, including earlier planting in and around the heritage assets at Church Cottages
- h) Details as include in the Biodiversity Net Gain Assessment – Update, WSP (ref: 70069260) Appendix 6-7, dated August 2021

All hard and soft landscape works shall be carried out in accordance with the approved details 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 interests of visual amenity, to secure a biodiversity net gain and for mitigation of the impact on the setting of heritage assets.

Relevant policy: NPPF Sections 15 and 16, Core Strategy policies CP1 and CP3 and Managing Development Delivery Local Plan policies CC03, TB21, TB24 and TB26.

6) Landscape management

Prior to the commencement of the development hereby permitted, a landscape management plan, including long term design objectives, management

responsibilities, timescales, and maintenance schedules for all landscape areas, shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. The landscape management plan shall be carried out as approved for the 25-year lifespan of the development.

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

Relevant policy: Core Strategy policy CP3 and Managing Development Delivery Local Plan policies CC03 and TB21

7) Tree protection

Prior to the commencement of the development hereby permitted, an Arboricultural Method Statement and Scheme of Works shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. It shall provide for the retention and protection of trees, shrubs and hedges growing on or adjacent to the site in accordance with BS5837: 2012 has. 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).

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.

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.

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.

Relevant policy: Core Strategy policy CP3 and Managing Development Delivery Local Plan policies CC03 and TB21.

8) Interpretative boards

Prior to the commencement of the development hereby permitted, details of interpretive heritage information boards to be installed along the Greenway and detailing the significance of Church Cottages and associated heritage assets shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority, The details shall include the type of board, location and information contained within the boards. The approved boards shall

be fully installed prior to the first generation of electricity and maintained therefore for the life of the Greenway.

Reason: To provide historical information of the heritage assets at Church Lane for users of the Greenway.

Relevant policy: NPPF Section 16 and Managing Development Delivery Local Plan policy TB24 and TB25.

9) Archaeological investigation

Prior to the commencement of the development hereby permitted, including any landscaping, stripping and other ground preparation, a comprehensive programme of archaeological investigation shall be implemented, in accordance with a written scheme of investigation first submitted to and approved by the local planning authority.

The written scheme of investigation should allow for post-investigation assessment and analysis, and provision for publication of results and archiving. The results of the archaeological investigations shall inform the production of a mitigation strategy, to be approved by the local planning authority prior to the commencement of the development. The mitigation strategy will outline appropriate means of mitigating the impact of the development on archaeological assets identified and may include preservation by record through further archaeological investigation, and preservation in situ of significant archaeology, to be achieved via redesign, engineering solutions or relocation of elements of the development.

Any further phases of archaeological investigation or recording will require the approval of an additional written scheme of investigation.

The development shall take place in accordance with the mitigation strategy, to ensure proper treatment of archaeological assets surviving within the site

Reason: The site is within an area of high archaeological potential, as demonstrated by archaeological assessment and the Berkshire Historic Environment Record.

Relevant policy: NPPF Section 16, Core Strategy Policies CP1 and CP3 and Managing Development Delivery Local Plan Policy TB25.

10) Rights of way details

Prior to the commencement of the development hereby permitted, details of works to existing and proposed rights of ways, including the greenway through the site, shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. These details shall include but not be specifically limited to:

- a) Existing and proposed levels
- b) Widths and alignment (including the Greenway being setback from the hedgerow at the northern end of the site to allow growth without continued maintenance
- c) Directional signage
- d) Surfacing, including of spurs and connecting paths (including the laying of an aggregate path (type 1 granite and dust) for a 15m length of Footpaths 8 and 10A from the Greenway

- e) Construction timetable and details of temporary closures of existing footpaths and alternate access where necessary
- f) Measures to safeguard the implementation of a bridleway link between Bridleway 11 and the approved greenway, including soil and ground cover
- g) Measures in accordance with the findings of the solar glint and glare assessment in Condition 22
- h) Temporary and permanent post and rail fencing

Reason: To ensure satisfactory implementation of the greenway and associated infrastructure for the benefit of local users.

Relevant policy: NPPF Paragraph 100 and Core Strategy Policies CP1, CP3, CP6 and CP11.

11) Crossing across Barkham Ride

Notwithstanding the details shown on the approved plans, prior to the commencement of the development hereby permitted, full details of the pedestrian crossing across Barkham Ride shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority.

The crossing point shall be designed to facilitate the safe crossing of pedestrians, cyclists and horse riders and incorporate a signalised crossing (eg a Pegasus crossing), unless otherwise agreed with the local planning authority. The crossing point shall thereafter be provided in accordance with the details approved.

Reason: To ensure the delivery of a safe crossing of Barkham Ride that does not unduly impact upon other important elements of the scheme, such as ecology and landscape views.

Relevant policy: Core Strategy Policies CP1, CP3 and CP6.

12) Construction of access

Prior to the commencement of the development hereby permitted, the accesses shall be constructed in accordance with details (including the use of permeable and bonded material) 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 and to avoid spillage of loose material onto the highway.

Relevant policy: Core Strategy policies CP3 and CP6.

13) Construction Traffic Management Plan

Prior to the commencement of the development hereby permitted, a Construction Traffic Management Plan (CTMP) shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. The CTMP should include the principles contained within the draft CTMP dated March 2021 in addition to full details of the following:

- a) Location of wheel washing facilities
- b) Routing of construction traffic
- c) Details of street sweeping

- d) A detailed green travel plan
- e) Cycle parking
- f) Traffic management
- g) A detailed construction schedule to include construction vehicles and day to day travel of construction workers

The development is to be undertaken in strict accordance with the approved document for the life of the construction period.

Reason: In the interests of highway safety and convenience and neighbour amenities.

Relevant policy: Core Strategy policies CP3 and CP6.

14) Construction Environmental Management Plan

Prior to the commencement of the development hereby permitted, a Construction Environmental Management Plan (CEMP) shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. The CEMP shall include the details contained within the draft CEMP dated March 2021, the additional information contained within an updated and approved Construction Traffic Management Plan as required by Condition 13 and details of the avoidance and mitigation measures for protected species as set out in the Environmental Statement Addendum table 4.2. The development is to be undertaken in strict accordance with the approved document for the life of the construction period.

Reason: In the interests of highway safety and convenience and neighbour amenities.

Relevant policy: Core Strategy policies CP3 and CP6.

15) Landscape Environmental Management Plan

Prior to the commencement of the development hereby permitted, a landscape and ecological management plan (LEMP) shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. The content of the LEMP shall accord with the aims and objectives of management with the provision of biodiversity net gain for a minimum period of 30 years, as per the submitted Biodiversity Net Gain Assessment – Update, WSP, ref: 70069260 Appendix 6-7, August 2021. More specifically, it shall include the following:

- a) Description and evaluation of features to be managed.
- b) Ecological trends and constraints on site that might influence management.
- c) Aims and objectives of management.
- d) Appropriate management options for achieving aims and objectives.
- e) Prescriptions for management actions.
- f) Preparation of a work schedule (including an annual work plan capable of being rolled forward over a five-year period).
- g) Details of the body or organization responsible for implementation of the plan.
- h) Ongoing monitoring and remedial measures.
- i) Details of the legal and funding mechanism(s) by which the long-term implementation of the plan will be secured by the developer with the management body(ies) responsible for its delivery

- j) Where the results from monitoring show that conservation aims and objectives of the LEMP are not being met), how contingencies and/or remedial action will be identified, agreed, and implemented so that the development still delivers the fully functioning biodiversity objectives of the originally approved scheme.

The approved plan will be implemented in accordance with the approved details.

Reason: In order to secure a biodiversity net gain.

Relevant policy: NPPF paragraph 174.

16) Ecological Permeability

Prior to the commencement of the development hereby permitted, a detailed scheme to maintain the ecological permeability of the site (especially with regard to badgers, brown hare, and hedgehogs) shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. The mitigation and contingency measures contained within the plan shall be implemented in accordance with the approved plan unless otherwise approved in writing by the local planning authority.

Reason: to ensure that the proposal is in accordance with Section 41 NERC Act re. UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Species (Species of Principal Importance), and complies with Planning Policies for Wildlife including CP7 of the Wokingham Borough Core Strategy (2010) and TB23 of the Wokingham Borough Managing Development Delivery (2014)

17) Closed Circuit Television

Prior to the commencement of the development, hereby permitted, details of all closed-circuit television (CCTV) across the site shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. This shall include numbers, location and direction of cameras and the associated poles, including elevations.

Reason: To protect the character of the countryside and rural setting.

Relevant policy: NPPF Section 15, Core Strategy policies CP1, CP3 and CP11 and Managing Development Delivery Local Plan Policy TB21.

18) Materials and colours

Prior to the commencement of the development, hereby permitted, details of the materials and colours of the of the external surfaces of the transformer and substation buildings shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. The development shall not be carried out other than in accordance with the so-approved details.

Reason: To ensure that the external appearance of the building is satisfactory and complements the countryside and rural setting.

Relevant policy: NPPF Section 15, Core Strategy policies CP1, CP3 and CP11 and Managing Development Delivery Local Plan Policy TB21.

19) External lighting details

Prior to the commencement of the development hereby permitted, an external lighting strategy shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. The strategy shall:

- a) Identify those areas/features on site that are particularly sensitive for protected species, including bats and that are likely to cause disturbance in or around their breeding sites and resting places or along important routes used to access key areas of their territory, for example, for foraging
- b) Show how and where external lighting will be installed (through the provision of appropriate lighting contour plans and technical specifications) so that it can be clearly demonstrated that areas to be lit will not disturb or prevent the above species using their territory or having access to their breeding sites and resting places
- c) Include details of lighting, being sensor activated, building mounted lighting at the substation and transformer buildings

All external lighting shall be installed in accordance with the specifications and locations set out in the strategy, and these shall be maintained thereafter in accordance with the strategy. Under no circumstances should any other external lighting be installed without prior consent from the local planning authority, including during the construction phase.

Reason: In the interests of amenity.

Relevant policy: NPPF Section 15, Core Strategy policies CP1, CP3, and CP11 and Managing Development Delivery Local Plan policy TB21.

20) Drainage strategy

Prior to the commencement of the development hereby permitted, a detailed Drainage Strategy shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The Strategy shall be supported by evidence of ground conditions and modelling of the scheme to demonstrate it is technically feasible and will protect existing assets at St James Church and retain existing water flows and levels within the moat around Church Cottages, Where applicable, it should demonstrate that it adheres to the NPPF, Non-statutory technical Standards for Sustainable Drainage, Building Regulation H and local policy.

The drainage scheme shall be carried out in accordance with the approved details. Where surface water requires disposal offsite the applicant must provide evidence of consent to discharge/connect through 3rd party land or to their network/system/ watercourse.

Reason: To ensure the development is provided with a satisfactory means of drainage and thereby preventing the risk of flooding.

Relevant policy: NPPF Section 14, Core Strategy policy CP1 and Managing Development Delivery Local Plan policies CC09 and CC10.

21) Underground infrastructure

Prior to the commencement of the development hereby permitted, a report

demonstrating there will be no adverse impact upon the safety of existing pipelines and other infrastructure shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. Any identified safety recommendations shall be fully implemented in accordance with the approved details during the construction phase.

Reason: In the interest of safety and uninterrupted connections to workers and local residents.

22) Glare mitigation for footpath users

Prior to the commencement of the development hereby permitted, the solar glint and glare assessment (ref: 70074897-021, Rev 3) prepared by WSP and dated 24 March 2021 is to be updated to take account of likely impacts upon footpath users of existing public rights of way and the approved Greenway and submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. Where issues are identified, mitigation is to be agreed with the local planning authority and implemented in accordance with the approved details prior to the first generation of electricity.

Reason: To protect footpath users against unnecessary glint and glare

Relevant policy: Core Strategy policies CP1 and CP3.

23) Communication Plan

Prior to the commencement of the development hereby permitted, a Communications Plan shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority, The Plan shall specify methods for communicating with local residents, including the creation of a liaison group to meet in accordance with an agreed schedule and a name and telephone number for residents to contact should any issues arise during the construction period. The scheme shall be implemented as approved until the final completion of the development.

Reason: To minimise disturbance to neighbours during construction works.

24) Noise control

Prior to the commencement of the development hereby permitted, a scheme specifying the provisions to be made for the control of noise (and low-level humming) emanating from substation on Barkham Ride shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. The approved scheme shall be fully implemented prior to the first generation of electricity and maintained for the life of the development.

Reason: To protect the occupiers of nearby premises from unreasonable noise levels.

Relevant policy: NPPF Section 15, Core Strategy policies CP1 and CP3 and Managing Development Delivery Local Plan policy CC06.

25) Internal access roads

With the exception of the bonded surfacing at the main entrance as required in Condition 12, the internal access roads hereby permitted shall be constructed from porous gravel thereafter be so maintained.

Reason: To prevent increased flood risk from surface water run-off and to protect the character of the countryside setting.

Relevant policy: NPPF Sections 14 and 15, Core Strategy Policies CP1, CP3 and CP11 and Managing Development Delivery Local Plan policies CC09, CC10, CC)3 and TB21.

26) Hours of work and deliveries

No work relating to the development hereby approved, including preparation prior to building operations, shall take place other than between 8am-6pm Monday to Friday and 8am-1pm Saturdays and at no time on Sundays or Bank or National Holidays

No deliveries shall be taken in or dispatched from the site outside these working hours. In addition, no deliveries involving HGVs are to occur outside the hours of 9am-3pm unless otherwise stated in the agreed Construction Traffic Management Plan (CTMP) in Condition 13 or in the agreed Construction Environmental Management Plan (CEMP) in Condition 14 or otherwise agreed with the local planning authority .

Reason: To protect the occupiers of neighbouring properties from noise and disturbance outside the permitted hours during the construction period.

Relevant policy: Core Strategy policies CP1 and CP3 and Managing Development Delivery Local Plan policy CC06.

27) Removal of temporary access

The temporary construction accesses to the site shall be stopped up and abandoned, and the footway and/or verge crossings, where relevant, shall be reinstated 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 prior to its removal.

Reason: In the interests of highway safety and convenience and neighbour amenities.

Relevant policy: Core Strategy policies CP3 and CP6.

28) Restoration and remediation

No later than 12 months from the first generation of electricity, the following shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority:

- a) 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
- b) A scheme detailing the restoration and aftercare of the land
- c) A timetable for completion of the removal and restoration works

- d) Details for the end destination of materials and equipment removed from the site
- e) Details ensuring that the Biodiversity Net Gain is maintained beyond the decommissioning stage

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 long-term landscape and visual amenity of the countryside and to allow for agricultural use in the future.

Relevant policy: NPPF Section 15, Core Strategy policies CP1, CP3 and CP11 and Managing Development Delivery Local Plan Policies CC03 and TB21.

29) Retention of trees and shrubs

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: To secure the protection throughout the time that development is being carried out, of trees, shrubs and hedges growing within the site which are of amenity value to the area.

Relevant policy: Core Strategy policy CP3 and Managing Development Delivery Local Plan policies CC03 and TB21

Informatives

1) Section 106 agreement

This permission should be read in conjunction with the legal agreement under section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act dated <tdc>, the obligations in which relate to this development.

2) Water pipes to Church Cottages

It is advised that domestic water pipes serving 1 and 2 Church Cottages lie in the paddock to the south of the site but there are no details confirming their exact location. In order to protect assets, further discussions are recommended with the owners of 1 and 2 Church Cottages to ensure the continued provision of water supplies through the course of the construction works. The applicant is advised to contact Thames Water Developer Services on 0845 850 2777.

3) Pre commencement conditions

Where this permission requires further details to be submitted for approval, the information must formally be submitted to the Council for consideration with the

relevant fee. Once 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.

4) Changes to the approved plans

The applicant is reminded that should there be any change from the approved drawings during the build of the development this may require a fresh planning application if the changes differ materially from the approved details. Non-material changes may be formalised by way of an application under s.96A Town and Country Planning Act 1990.

5) Construction of access

The Head of Highways at the Council Offices, Shute End, Wokingham [0118 9746000] should be contacted for the approval of the access construction details before any work is carried out within the highway (including verges and footways). This planning permission does NOT authorise the construction of such an access or works.

Any works/ events carried out by or on behalf of the developer affecting either a public highway or a prospectively maintainable highway (as defined under s.87 New Roads and Street Works Act 1991 (NRSWA)), shall be co-ordinated and licensed as required under NRSWA and the Traffic Management Act 2004 in order to minimise disruption to both pedestrian and vehicular users of the highway.

Any such works or events, and particularly those involving the connection of any utility to the site must be co-ordinated by the developer in liaison with the Borough's Street Works team (0118 974 6302). This must take place AT LEAST three months in advance of the intended works to ensure effective co-ordination with other works so as to minimise disruption.

6) Discussion

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.

This planning application has been the subject of positive and proactive discussions with the applicant in terms of a full pre-application, extending the determination period of the application, amended plans being submitted and discussions around planning issues. The decision to grant planning permission in accordance with the presumption in favour of sustainable development as set out in the NPPF is considered to be a positive outcome of these discussions.

PLANNING HISTORY

Note: History includes farm buildings at High Barn Farm that fall outside of red line area.

App No.	Description	Decision/Date
206/1973	Reorganising of smallholdings	Approved 28 February 1973
18229	Farmhouse and buildings	Approved 26 January 1983
43865	Granny annexe	Approved 10 March 1995

F/2000/2234	Covered yard building for livestock	Approved 18 October 2000
CLE/2004/2000	CoU for the storage of caravans	Approved 26 April 1995
F/2014/1181	Continued storage of caravans	Approved 22 July 2014
210460	Scoping opinion for solar farm	Replied 17 March 2021

SUMMARY INFORMATION

	Existing	Proposed
Site Area	52 ha (solar farm) Total of 2 ha across 2km length (grid connection to Barkham Road)	
Use	Agricultural farm and public highway leading to existing substation (grid connection)	Solar farm and Greenway (≈47 ha) Retained farm (5.5 ha) Carbon sequestration (2.9 ha)
Density	360 head of cattle with crop rotation (currently maize)	67,340 panels at 29.63 MWp Five transformers One substation 10,947 trees
Employment	Farmer	No figure given but almost entirely confined to construction phase only
Structures	Nil (farm buildings fall outside of application site)	Excluding panels, one substation and storage shed on Barkham Ride and five transformer buildings across the site with perimeter fencing

CONSULTATION RESPONSES

Internal	Comments
WBC Public Rights of Way	<p>No objection is raised, subject to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Finalisation of the proposed Greenway crossing point on Barkham Ride b) Reintroduction of the linking bridleway parallel to the northern side of Barkham Ride c) Surfacing of the adjacent public footpaths leading from the proposed Greenway d) Clarification on fencing along the Greenway <p><u>Officer comment:</u> Because of site constraints, the Greenway crossing on Barkham Ride remains subject to further design consideration. Final design solutions are required in Condition 10.</p> <p>Surfacing details of the Greenway are also required as part of a pre commencement requirement. This will extend to surfacing of the spurs branching from the Greenway. See Condition 10. Likewise, fencing details are subject to a final design decision in Conditions 4 and 10 which intends to resolve specific pinch points in the design.</p>
WBC Drainage	The north of the site is within Flood Zone 2. No objection is raised, subject to Condition 20 requiring finalised drainage details as a pre commencement requirement.
WBC Ecology	There are no in-principle objections in relation to the provision of grasslands and hedgerow planting. The Biodiversity Net Gain

	Assessment acknowledges that the habitat created and/or enhanced needs to be maintained for a minimum period of 30 years for it to be considered a viable net gain (which extends beyond the life of the temporary permission). Conditions 14-16 require the submission of ecological details in a Landscape Environmental Management Plan, Construction Environmental Management Plan, lighting details and ecological permeability measures.
WBC Env. Health	No objection is raised on neighbour amenity or any other grounds.
WBC Highways	No objection, subject to conditions. There is no perceived long term highways issue with the proposed development and the only issues, which are manageable, arise during the construction phase. See Conditions 13 and 14 which require a Construction Traffic Management Plan and Construction Environmental Management Plan as well as construction and stopping up of the temporary access in Conditions 12 and 25.
WBC Trees and Landscaping	<p>No objection in general, subject to conditions relating to further details relating to tree protection, landscaping, site management, boundary treatments and site levels. These are outlined in Conditions 4-7. Some reservations are raised in relation to the impact upon landscape views towards the north and west in the proximity of the boundary with Rooks Nest Wood.</p> <p><u>Officer comment:</u> A further review of this area of the scheme is outlined in paragraph 57. It is concluded that the harm is not sufficient to warrant amendment of the scheme and the benefits of the solar panels outweigh the minor additional harm.</p>
WBC Growth and Delivery	<p>No objection. The principle of renewable energy generating development is supported by national and local policy providing there is no unacceptable harm to the character of the area.</p> <p><u>Officer comment:</u> Refer to further comments in paragraphs 10-17 and the planning balance in paragraph 164-174.</p>
WBC Conservation and Heritage	An objection is raised in relation to the harm posed by the solar panels upon the setting of and views to and from the Scheduled Monument and listed buildings in the north of the site.
WBC Employment Skills	No objection. Based on the estimated cost of works of £19,300,000, an Employment Skills Plan for 11 community skills support positions, 7 apprenticeships and 7 jobs in total is required. This forms part of a s106 legal agreement.
WBC Sports Development	No comments received.
WBC Green Infrastructure	No comments received.
WBC Property Services	No comments received. Note: It is a Council application on Council owned land.
WBC Waste Services	No comments received.
External	Comments

Berkshire Archaeology	<p>Objections raised. There is potential for harm from the panel foundations and tree planting on below-ground archaeology associated with the adjacent Scheduled Ancient Monument. The geophysical report submitted with the application is inadequate to assess this harm given the scope of the application.</p> <p>Notwithstanding, in the event of an approval, Condition 9 requires additional geophysical investigations prior to the commencement of any works. Whilst not overcoming the initial objection in relation to lack of satisfactory information, it is an acceptable outcome.</p>
Historic England	<p>Objections raised. The design and layout of the solar panels will result in unsympathetic development within the setting of a medieval site which retains a rural and agricultural character. The impact is a moderate and less than substantial harm. Only limited mitigation options have been proposed which are considered insufficient. If approval is recommended, interpretive information boards should be included as part of the Greenway development. This forms Condition 8.</p>
Environment Agency	<p>No objection, subject to consideration of measures to mitigate the impact of more extreme future flood events such as raising the ground level of the substation building or incorporating flood proofing measures. Consideration of the sequential test is also required.</p> <p><u>Officer comment:</u> See comments in relation to flood proofing and the sequential test in paragraph 156.</p>
Natural England	No objection.
Ramblers Association	<p>The PROW and Greenway layout is broadly supported but the details remain unclear. Further consultation is required and any future design should include linkages between BR11 and FP8.</p> <p><u>Officer comment:</u> The Greenway route, as proposed under the revised scheme, provides a more direct and clearer route. This includes connectivity between Footpath 8 and Bridleway 11. Refer to comments of the Council's Public Rights of Way Officer in paragraphs 122-129 for further comment and Condition 10 for further clarity.</p>
Forestry Commission	No comments received.
Gigaclear	<p>Assets dissect the site but there is no in-principle objection. Condition 21 requires a summary report of any identified infrastructure and any associated impacts.</p>
Exolum Pipeline System	
Scottish and Southern Electricity	
Southern Gas Networks	
SEE Telecoms	No objection.
National Grid	No comments received
Woodlands Trust	
Open Spaces Society	
Binfield Badger Group	

South East Water	
Thames Water	
Wildlife Trust	

REPRESENTATIONS

Barkham Parish Council	<p>Conditional support is given, with the following comments (some of which are resolved) provided in the original and revised applications:</p> <p>Principle of development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contribution to climate change more important than reduced returns <p><u>Officer comment:</u> This requires a consideration of the planning balance, as has been undertaken at paragraph 164-174.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No guarantee that the land will be returned to agricultural use after 25 years <p><u>Officer comment:</u> Whilst long term planning for the use of the land is difficult, the decommissioning of the site forms part of the application and the site remediation and returning land to its original state forms part of Condition 28. Any change to this would be subject to further review. This is made clear in the Planning Practice Guidance which states that planning conditions are entirely appropriate in this instance.</p> <p>Landscape and visual</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater gaps and lower trees/hedges would achieve better screening • Lighter density planting would be appropriate in some areas <p><u>Officer comment:</u> The proposal does not rely upon screening to eliminate any views of the panels from the public domain. Rather, there is an expectation that they will be apparent in various vantage points, as assessed in the Landscape Visual Impact Assessment. The harm to the wider visual context is considered acceptable, as noted in paragraphs 47-57.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of slow growing trees is good for carbon sequestration but bad for screening in the short to medium term <p><u>Officer comment:</u> The application includes a variety of trees for different purposes, with a carbon sink to the south of the site not intended for screening purposes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Substations are not screened effectively • Details of materials should be neutral countryside colours
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Officer comment: The location of the substation in the revised layout is at the eastern end of the site alongside Barkham Ride. It will be visible through an enlarged opening for access but will be complemented with additional hedgerow planting, to be agreed in Condition 5. The extent of screening is considered acceptable.

Heritage and archaeology

- Planting along the heritage assets will remove the setting of the rural countryside
- Change within the wider setting will harm the significance of the heritage assets
- Meadow and hedge screening of the fence would enhance the setting
- Increased buffer to 25m would improve setting

Officer comment: The revised scheme has removed the bulk of the tree/screen planting alongside the heritage assets although some dispersed planting is required via Condition 5. There is a 25m setback from the boundary to the panels and 21m to the fence edge. This is unacceptable in the perspective of the Council's Conservation Officer and Historic England (see paragraphs 72-87) and this requires a planning balance consideration in paragraph 164-174.

- Root damage possible to scheduled monument
- Geophysical study is not available
- The remaining fields will be completed once the crops have been harvested

Officer comment: The geophysical report was submitted and reviewed by Berkshire Archaeology. The extent of available information is insufficient but not unacceptable, with it being resolved via further works in Condition 9.

- Should it be necessary to preserve archaeology in the ground, this will be achieved by mounting the PV cells on concrete pads as opposed to the usual piled foundations.

Officer comment: Condition 9 requires further details on this aspect of the development.

Traffic and highways

- Traffic congestion will be aggravated during construction
- Barkham Street has a prohibitive width for HGV access
- One way system along Barkham Ride might be an option
- Large deliveries should occur outside of hours
- Delivery vehicles should not park on public roads, conflict with buses or approach from different directions. Strict control on delivery times, holding areas, direction of travel, vehicle size is of significant importance

Officer comment: Traffic impact is limited to the 10-month construction phase only. Final access arrangements are subject to further consideration. Routing of HGV traffic would be set out in the CEMP and CTMP to avoid this part of the highway network. One way access will form part of the consideration of these documents in Conditions 13 and 14. Managed deliveries will be included as part of the CEMP and the Construction Traffic Management Plan with the Highways Officer restricting delivery hours for HGVs.

- Traffic concerns at The Bull roundabout, including turning circles

Officer comment: Managed HGV deliveries outside peak hours would assist with traffic management as well as ensuring that heavy vehicles access the site for the south. Refer to paragraph 109.

- Emergency fire access needs to be ensured

Officer comment: The width of the entrance and internal access roads is such that emergency access is ensured through the site.

- Barkham Road will be affected during construction
- Details of mitigation and resurfacing for the roadworks to accommodate the grid connection are unclear

Officer comment: Some traffic impact is expected and is unavoidable. Final details of traffic management will form part of the CTMP in Condition 13. Final surfacing works are subject to separate Highways authorisation outside of the planning process.

Footpath access

- Will the Greenway and planting be retained post decommissioning and will the substation and plant be removed

Officer comment: The Greenway and tree planting are permanent features, as made explicit in Condition 3.

- Alternative routes for the Greenway and crossing at Barkham Ride should be explored prior to determination
- Linking footpath needed along Barkham Ride
- Safe crossing on Barkham Ride required

Officer comment: The revised scheme includes a Greenway route through the site, which is supported by the Council's Public Rights of Way Officer in terms of connectivity and being the most direct route. The crossing across Barkham Road and linking to other existing footpaths is addressed with more detail in Condition 11.

- Will Greenways be immediately available and will existing footpaths remain open

Officer comment: The phasing of the Greenway is not specified in the Construction Method Statement or Transport Statement and so these details form part of Condition 10. Forward delivery of the project would be beneficial but it is subject to other construction works. Further, the extent of interruption to existing footpaths has been reduced with the realignment of the Greenway through the site. Nonetheless, details of how access to the PROW network will be managed during the construction phase will be contained within the full CTMP and CEMP in Conditions 13 and 14.

- Footpath 10A is to be upgraded

Officer comment: Surfacing works and upgrade of other footpaths is required in Condition 10.

Other

- There is no provision for graveyard space at St James Church

Officer comment: This is unrelated to the subject application.

- External colours for the substation should consider the area

Officer comment: Condition 18 requires further details prior to the commencement of works.

- EV charging points should be included at nearby points

Officer comment: The application is for the generation of electricity for the grid and it is not feasible or possible to offer charging points at points around the site.

- Is lighting for maintenance or construction purposes?

Officer comment: Lighting is limited to the buildings only during the operational phase and Condition 19 requires that these lights are sensor operated. There is no indication that lighting is required for construction purposes and this is reinforced in Condition 19.

- Meadow grass will need to be maintained

Officer comment: Maintenance details are required in Condition 6.

- Perimeter fence is not wildlife friendly

Officer comment: Ecological permeability for badgers and bats (as a protected species) or hare, hedgehogs, reptiles and amphibians (as species of principal importance) is achievable through the fencing and hedgerow. Larger herbivorous species (such as deer) are not protected (other than closed shooting seasons) so there is no obligation for access or passage across the site. That said, deer are

	<p>not species of principal importance but muntjac deer will likely get in and out through the badger gates and red deer could jump the fence.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Battery storage is unclear <p><u>Officer comment:</u> Battery storage is not included as part of the application as it is connected to the grid.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a lack of clarity around the expansion into Rooks Nest Wood <p><u>Officer comment:</u> Whilst panels will extend to within 10m of the boundary with Rooks Nest Wood, which is acceptable, there is no expansion into Rooks Nest Wood.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of the local support is because it removes the possibility of housing and increased traffic <p><u>Officer comment:</u> Noted.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trees may present permanent problems rather than solving them <p><u>Officer comment:</u> The siting of tree planting in the revised scheme is acceptable.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every effort should be made to support the farmer <p><u>Officer comment:</u> The farmer has retained the opportunity to lease 5.5 ha of farmland and the management of this lease and what he undertakes on the farm is outside the scope of this application.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drainage survey is required in relation to protecting the seasonal fill of the moat • The depth of the water table in the area to the east of St James Church is required <p><u>Officer comment:</u> Refer to Condition 20.</p>
<p>Finchampstead Parish Council (adjoining)</p>	<p>Whilst the Greenway is a positive aspect, there is broad objection to the proposal, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The wildlife report is redacted <p><u>Officer comment:</u> Redaction of the wildlife/ecology report is in relation to badger setts which is standard practice.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Should not extend so close to California Country Park and this would retain the woodland setting <p><u>Officer comment:</u> There is a 57m setback from the southern boundary with California Country Park, with the buffer planted with woodland. This is sufficient to protect and enhance the woodland setting.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pedestrian and cycling route should be added along Barkham Ride <p><u>Officer comment:</u> A sufficient buffer is maintained along the northern boundary of Barkham Ride to allow future implementation of a connecting footpath, as specified in further details in Condition 10.</p>
Wokingham Town Council (adjoining)	<p>Removal of trees will affect the visual amenity of the area.</p> <p><u>Officer comment:</u> The application involves the removal of approximately five trees, 2 groups of trees and part removal of seven hedges, which the Council's Trees Officer has reviewed and considered acceptable. Refer to paragraphs 117-121 for further comments.</p>
Ward Member	<p>Councillor Sarah Kerr (Ewendons Ward (the grid connection falls within this ward)) raised the following issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A decentralised approach is more appropriate <p><u>Officer comment:</u> The application forms part of the Climate Emergency Action Plan, which has a more immediate timeline. A more decentralised approach will occur via the Local Plan update, which is still subject to consultation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are more suitable sites with the Council's intent to provide three more solar farms in the borough • It is not clear whether other sites have been considered <p><u>Officer comment:</u> Consideration of sites were undertaken as part of the development of the Climate Emergency Action Plan. Further comment is provided in paragraphs 35-40.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of BMV land is inappropriate • Food production should not be affected at the expense of solar panels, contrary to the climate emergency action plan <p><u>Officer comment:</u> The proposal is contrary to policies protecting agricultural land but as part of the consideration of the overall balance, it is acceptable. See paragraphs 23-34 and 164-174.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is potential for a change of use of the land once returned to its previous use, albeit of poorer quality <p><u>Officer comment:</u> Whilst long term planning for the use of the land in 25 years' time is difficult, the decommissioning of the site forms part of the application and the site remediation and returning land to its original state forms part of Condition 28. Any change to this would be subject to further review. This is made clear in the Planning Practice Guidance which states that planning conditions are entirely appropriate in this instance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The proposal is for offsetting the Council's emissions only

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power will enter the grid and will not benefit the local community <p><u>Officer comment:</u> The application achieves the same intent of reducing carbon emissions regardless of its ultimate destination within the grid and is supported on those grounds.</p>
Residents	<p>The application was first consulted to approximately 3,300 nearby properties from 7 April to 7 May 2021. An advertisement and site notices were placed on site for the minimum period of 15 April to 7 May 2021. Revisions to the scheme were consulted to those that commented on the original scheme from 4-18 August 2021. A summary of all submissions received is outlined below.</p> <p>56 submissions against the proposal were received from:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) High Barn Farm, Commonfield Lane, Barkham RG40 4PR 2) 1 Church Cottages, Church Lane, Barkham RG40 4PL (x2) 3) 2 Church Cottages, Church Lane, Barkham RG40 4PL (x2) 4) Willow Cottage, Commonfield Lane, Finchampstead RG40 4PP 5) MQM Planning, on behalf of Willow Cottage, Commonfield Lane, Finchampstead RG40 4PP 6) Model Farm, Barkham Ride, Barkham RG40 4EX 7) Barkham Ride, Finchampstead RG40 (specific address not supplied) 8) 30 Barkham Ride, Finchampstead RG40 4EU 9) 71 Barkham Ride, Finchampstead RG40 4HA 10) 73 Barkham Ride, Finchampstead RG40 4HA 11) 69 Bearwood Road, Barkham RG41 4SX 12) 4 Cherry Tree Grove, Barkham RG41 4UZ 13) School Road, Barkham RG41 4TR (no number supplied) 14) Hayes Lane, Barkham RG41 4TA (no number supplied) (x3) 15) Barkham Road, Barkham RG41 4DE (no number supplied) 16) Primrose Cottage, School Road, Barkham RG41 4TR 17) 20 Silver Birches, Barkham RG41 4YZ 18) 18 Hornbeam Close, Barkham RG41 4UR 19) 350 Nine Mile Ride, Finchampstead RG40 3NJ 20) 1 Copse Way, Finchampstead RG40 4EJ 21) 29 Carolina Place, Finchampstead RG40 4PQ 22) 10 Heather Close, Finchampstead RG40 4PX 23) 31 Fir Cottage Road, Finchampstead RG40 4RY 24) 5 Springdale, Finchampstead RG40 4RZ 25) 14 Springdale, Finchampstead RG40 4RZ 26) Springdale, Finchampstead RG40 4RZ (no number supplied) 27) Southfield, Southfield Park Lane, Finchampstead RG40 4PY 28) 7 Hazelbank, Finchampstead RG40 4XD 29) 12 Hazelbank, Finchampstead RG40 4XD 30) 11 Church Hams Finchampstead RG40 4XF 31) 50 Pine Drive, Finchampstead RG40 3LE 32) 15 Ditchfield Lane, Finchampstead RG40 4HP 33) 42 Nash Grove Lane, Finchampstead RG40 4HD 34) 73 Nash Grove Lane, Finchampstead RG40 4HE 35) 2 Vermont Woods, Finchampstead RG40 4PF (x2) 36) Heath Ride, Finchampstead RG40 3QJ (no number supplied)

- 37) 4 Oak Drive, Arborfield RG2 9GJ
- 38) 51 Hill Road, Arborfield RG2 9LP
- 39) 26 Buttenshaw Close, Arborfield RG2 9LX
- 40) 16 Bramshill Close, Arborfield RG2 9PT
- 41) 1 Lime Grove, Arborfield RG2 9GP
- 42) 15 Mill Close, Wokingham RG41 1EP
- 43) 5 Park Avenue, Wokingham RG40 2AJ
- 44) 2 Roberts Grove, Wokingham RG41 4WR
- 45) Greenlands, Doles Lane, Wokingham RG41 4EB
- 46) Ockley, 306 Barkham Road, Wokingham RG41 4DA
- 47) 83 Evendons Lane, Wokingham RG41 4AD
- 48) Redlands Cottage, Evendons Lane, Wokingham RG41 4DX
(x2)
- 49) Evendons Lane, Wokingham RG41 4AE (no number supplied)
- 50) The Street, Eversley RG27 0PJ (no number supplied)
- 51) 70 Fleetham Gardens, Lower Earley RG6 4BY
- 52) 14 Russell Way, Winnersh RG41 5SN
- 53) 33 Loddon Bridge Road, Woodley RG5 4AP
- 54) 80 Oak Avenue, Sandhurst GU47 0SJ
- 55) No address supplied (x2)
- 56) No address supplied

The submissions raised the following issues:

Principle of development

- Contrary to Policy CP11 and the Neighbourhood Plan
- Conflicts with NPPF policy in relation to the loss of agricultural land
- Development is contrary to Finchampstead Neighbourhood Development Plan, which included local consultation
- Contrary to Arborfield and Barkham Neighbourhood Plan, including resident submissions that helped shape it
- Local Plan policies attract little weight as the Local Plan has not been examined or even consulted

Officer comment: The policies in the NPPF, the Council's Development Plan and the Barkham and Arborfield Neighbourhood Plan pull in different directions with the proposal contrary to several policies. This requires a planning balance consideration of the proposal. This is found at paragraphs 164-174.

Whilst there is reference to solar panels not being preferred in Arborfield Parish in the Neighbourhood Plan, there is no explicit policy against them.

Draft policies in the Local Plan have been referenced and explained where relevant but they have not formed the justification for the proposal.

- Encroachment of development
- Reduction in gap between Arborfield and Finchampstead

Officer comment: The proposal is viewed of encroachment of development in the countryside, with some erosion of the settlement gap. However, it is not unreasonable, as noted in paragraph 67.

- 25 years is hardly temporary and has permanence

Officer comment: It is acknowledged that 25 years is a significant period of time and is more than 10 years (which is the threshold used for considering development immune from enforcement action) but it would be impractical (and possibly unviable) for the project to operate for shorter than 25 years.

- No clarification of whether the temporary status applies to the Greenway and tree planting

Officer comment: Condition 4 confirms that the Greenway and tree planting are permanent.

- Change of use is out of character and scale

Officer comment: Consideration of the use and its impact upon the countryside is outlined in paragraphs 48-67.

- Meeting energy goals should not be used to justify the wrong development in the wrong location

Officer comment: This weighs heavily in the planning balance, as noted in paragraph 164-174.

- Loss of public amenity space near Rooks Nest and St James Church
- Contrary to the recreational improvements on nearby sites

Officer comment: The proposal does not include the removal of any publicly accessible land. The application includes the introduction of a new Greenway through the site, which is supportive of existing walking routes in the area, including at Rooks Nest Wood.

- Will be converted for brownfield land
- Additional 200 homes and a crematorium will add to the urbanisation
- Land will be made brownfield and made good for houses as it won't be able to be remediated
- Infrastructure cannot cope with subsequent housing which will be built on the site
- The extent of the works is such that it is not reversible/able to be returned to agricultural land

Officer comment: The development is temporary insofar that the solar farm will be decommissioned at the end of its lifetime. Whilst long term planning for the use of the land is difficult, the

decommissioning of the site forms part of the application and the site remediation and returning land to its original state forms part of Condition 28. Any change to this would be subject to further review.

- Creates a precedent for other developers

Officer comment: Each application is assessed on its own merits, with consideration of the local impacts weighed against the benefits of the development.

Loss of agricultural land

- BRE guidance states that Ground Mounted Solar PV projects, over 50kWp, should ideally utilise previously developed land, brownfield land, contaminated land, industrial land or agricultural land preferably of classification 3b, 4, and 5 (avoiding the use of “Best and Most Versatile” cropland where possible) with the proposal not being any of the above
- There is insufficient justification for locating the panels on Grade 2 and 3a land, including what other sites there are, the impact upon the existing farm, the impact upon supply of agricultural land and cumulative impact, as required by the BR
- Agricultural land reduced by 1.5% from 2019 to 2020 and imports of food are at 48% and this will contribute to these figures
- BRE guidance has been used as policy (which it is not) and then used selectively and ignored in other parts
- Loss of agricultural land for food production

Officer comment: The proposal is contrary to policies protecting agricultural land but as part of the consideration of the overall balance, it is acceptable. See paragraphs 23-34 and 164-174.

- The agricultural land retained for the farmer is not sustainable or viable

Officer comment: Whilst a significant reduction in scale, the 5.5 ha farm remains in use for the farmer and whether it is sustainable is subjective based on the intended use of the land. Further, the installation of the solar panels does not explicitly prohibit any future farming use of the land if negotiated.

- No objection from Natural England in relation to the loss of agricultural land is irrelevant

Officer comment: Whilst not determinative, the fact that Natural England, as the relevant statutory consultee, has not objected on these grounds is a material to the application.

- Higher solar panels were not considered to allow farming to continue

Officer comment: Any increase in the solar panels would have a measurable impact upon the character of the area given that it would need to be raised significantly to accommodate cattle.

Landscape and visual

- Industrialisation of the countryside
- Will add bulk and scale to the countryside
- Overall scale of the site is excessive
- Unsightly impact upon the landscape
- Loss of green fields and rural land
- Views from public rights of way will be affected
- There will be Moderate to Major adverse effects on a significant number of receptors whilst the proposed planting is established. This will take many years before it provides an effective screen

Officer comment: The landscape visual impact is assessed as being acceptable in 'Character of the Area'.

- Significant screening will be required
- Tree planting is minimal
- Perimeter landscaping will not suffice for screening

Officer comment: The proposal does not rely upon screening to eliminate any views of the panels from the public domain. Rather, there is an expectation that they will be apparent in various vantage points, as assessed in the Landscape Visual Impact Assessment. The harm to the wider visual context is considered acceptable, as noted in paragraphs 44-67.

- The attractiveness of the SANG will be affected

Officer comment: The Council's Trees Officer has raised some concern with the relationship along the boundary with Rooks Nest Wood SANG but it is considered that it has a satisfactory relationship and would not be detrimental to users.

- Some receptors have not been provided in the landscape consideration

Officer comment: The LVIA has been updated to include an additional receptor along Barkham Ride and this is to the satisfaction of the Council's Trees and Landscape Officer.

- Often screening will only become effective in the second half of the project lifespan
- Landscape screening will take years to establish and screen the site
- Planting should be implemented in some areas at the beginning of the construction period (as per the fencing)

Officer comment: The balanced consideration of the application takes account of proposed screening but does not rely upon it for justification for the scheme, In places, the solar panels will remain readily apparent for most of the lifespan of the development, if not all of it and this is not unacceptable.

- Perimeter fencing should be landscaped to break up the alien form

Officer comment: In most cases, the site fencing benefits from existing and proposed landscaping to allow a degree of screening. However, it has a relatively open form that is not entirely inappropriate in the countryside.

- Fencing is not justified when weighing the impact

Officer comment: Fencing is required for security purposes, particularly with the proximity of existing footpaths and the proposed Greenway.

- External lighting is unnecessary

Officer comment: External lighting is proposed for the five transformer buildings and the substation. Condition 19 requires that it is sensor activated and further details of lighting. The remainder of the site is unlit.

Ecology

- Impact upon flora and fauna
- Loss of wildlife habitat and corridors, including birds which will not be attracted to the area

Officer comment: The Council's Ecology Officer has reviewed the impact upon biodiversity net gain, ecological permeability and protection of wildlife and raises no in-principle objection, subject to Conditions 14-16. Refer to paragraphs 130-150 for further detail.

- Fence will reduce movement of wildlife across the site
- Fencing will prevent movement of wildlife across the site, including deer, foxes and badgers

Officer comment: Ecological permeability for badgers and bats (as a protected species) or hare, hedgehogs, reptiles and amphibians (as species of principal importance) is achievable through the fencing and hedgerow. Larger herbivorous species (such as deer) are not protected (other than closed shooting seasons) so there is no obligation for access or passage across the site. That said, deer are not species of principal importance but muntjac deer will likely get in and out through the badger gates and red deer could jump the fence.

- Ecology information has been redacted and should be made public

Officer comment: Redaction of the wildlife/ecology report is in relation to badger setts which is standard practice.

- There were no ecological surveys for wintering birds, brown hare, invertebrates, reptiles, or any botanical surveys
- It is unclear whether ecological and archaeological surveys have been done
- The impact upon Great Crested Newts and reptiles has not been fully explored. Surveys of GCNs were not in accordance with Natural England Technical Guidance and further surveys of all ponds (not all ponds were surveyed) are required
- There is no reference to the environmental impact on the adjacent, statutorily designated, Coombes Ancient and Semi Natural Woodland

Officer comment: The Council's Ecology Officer has reviewed the scope of the relevant information in the Environmental Statement and raises no in-principle objection with the level of detail.

- Grasscover should improve the biodiversity of the area

Officer comment: The suitability of grasscover is discussed in paragraph 148.

Heritage and archaeology

- Solar panels will remove the context of the listed items
- Impact upon the setting of the listed building
- The buffer to the listed buildings and scheduled monument is inadequate
- The landscaping and solar panels reduce openness and the interpretation of the moated site's original agricultural use and ability to understand, appreciate and experience their cultural value
- Views of the listed St James Church (including the spire) will be affected

Officer comment: The Council's Conservation Officer and Historic England have both objected to the proposal on the grounds that the solar panels will disrupt the setting of the listed buildings at Church Cottage and St James Church and the interpretation and setting of the moat, which is a scheduled monument. It will also disrupt wider views from the south and south east. This requires a planning balance consideration, as provided in paragraphs 164-174.

- The fence is inside the 25m buffer zone to the scheduled monument
- Height of fence is dominating to Church Cottages

Officer comment: The height of the fence is at 2.4m and it is setback 21m from the boundary with Church Cottages. A cumulative consideration of the panels and fencing from the Council's Conservation Officer and Historic England is that the overall development poses unacceptable harm. This is discussed further in paragraphs 164-174 as part of the overall planning balance.

- Planting around Church Cottages is dense and overbearing
- The mitigation in the form of landscape screening alongside the scheduled monument does more harm than good by creating a stark barrier rather than screening and an enlarged/extended buffer is more effective

Officer comment: Planting around Church Cottages has been removed in the recent revised plans though Condition 5 requires some additional planting

- Greenway will require surfacing, change in levels and erosion from walking putting archaeological significance at harm
- Greenway route could impact moat
- Rerouting of the Greenway alongside the scheduled monument is inappropriate
- No heritage impact of the Greenway on Church Cottages has been undertaken

Officer comment: The revised plans include the removal of the Greenway from the vicinity of the scheduled monument.

- Planting will cause root damage to the moat
- Cable trenches and piling have the potential to impact archaeological significance in an area that is largely undisturbed
- Desktop study is not sufficient and a geophysical survey is required
- Increased humus will hasten the clogging up of the moat which would require Scheduled Monument Consent to removed and shading will alter the ecological status

Officer comment: The geophysical report was submitted and reviewed by Berkshire Archaeology. The extent of available information is insufficient but not unacceptable, with it being resolved via further works in Condition 9.

- Heritage impact from glare upon Barkham Street and the church

Officer comment: The glint and glare assessment has concluded that there will not be an unacceptable outcome for surrounding heritage assets. With the level of existing vegetation screening around Church Cottages and St James Church, there is no reason to dispute this conclusion.

- Use of Barkham Street by HGVs would affect the Area of Special Character

Officer comment: The Council's Highways Officer raised some initial reservations with the routing of larger HGV traffic. Clarification would be set out in the CEMP and CTMP with the intention to avoid this part of the network because of width limitations. Refer to paragraph 109 for further details.

Traffic and highways

- Traffic movement along Barkham Road will be affected by digging up of the road for the grid connection

Officer comment: Some temporary traffic impact is expected and is unavoidable but acceptable to the Council's Highways Officer. Final details of traffic management will form part of the CEMP in Condition 14. Final surfacing works are subject to separate Highways authorisation outside of the planning process.

- Congestion from road traffic during the construction period

Officer comment: The Council's Highways Officer has noted that the anticipated level of construction traffic (slightly more than 100 daily movements) is not expected to have a major impact on Barkham Road. Management of this traffic would be through the CEMP and the CTMP as required by Conditions 13 and 14 respectively.

- Transport Statement does not reference width of Barkham Street, which is narrow and not able to accommodate HGVs
- Traffic should arrive from the south

Officer comment: The routing of the construction traffic will be set out in the CEMP and CTMP such that HGVs will need to arrive from the south. See Conditions 13 and 14 respectively.

- Glint and glare report is preliminary and the findings are questionable

Officer comment: The glint and glare assessment has concluded that there will not be an unacceptable outcome for surrounding heritage assets. With the level of existing vegetation screening around Church Cottages and St James Church, there is no reason to dispute this conclusion. Impacts upon footpath users require further clarification, as required in Condition 22.

Residential amenity

- Planting around Church Cottages is dense and overbearing with root damage to the moat
- Screening should be sufficient to reduce glare

Officer comment: The planting has been removed in the revised scheme.

- Potential noise and lack of acoustic detail for substations

Officer comment: The substation is well removed from the nearest residential property (Model Farm) but it remains prudent to ensure that there is no adverse background noise issue such as overnight humming that may pose some harm. See Condition 24.

- Orchard should be provided in the vicinity of Willow Cottage to minimise the scale of tree planting and to protect views
- Landscaping would enclose the open vista

Officer comment: Tree planting in the south west of the site near Willow Cottage has been removed in the revised plans as part of the retention of agricultural land for the existing farmer.

- Potential health impacts from substation and panels
- Will affect quality of life

Officer comment: There is no planning basis to oppose the development on potential health issues from the solar panels or substation. Noise details are, however, required for the substation. See Condition 24

Footpath access

- Greenway is a positive development but should be more direct

Officer comment: The revisions include a new more direct route which forms part of the assessment.

- Buffer could become informal footpath
- Robust fencing and gate are required at the end of the buffer to prevent unauthorised access

Officer comment: Whilst highly unlikely, this situation is unchanged from the present arrangement with footpath users otherwise able to walk south of the scheduled monument.

- Footpath FP10A through the northern part of the site is not retained
- There is no throughway to replace the existing right of way FP10A

Officer comment: Footpath 10A is maintained and upgraded as per details as required in Condition 10.

Maintenance and decommissioning

- Decommissioning (and recycling) is unclear
- Remediation and mitigation to revert the land to its original use at the end of 25 years should be provided now

Officer comment: Refer to Condition 28 which requires details within 12 months of the first generation of electricity. There would be an expectation that the solar panels would be recycled at the end of their shelf life.

- Buffer will need continued maintenance
- Must not result in land use mismanagement (such as weeds)
- Who will be responsible for management?

Officer comment: Maintenance details are required in Condition 28.

Cumulative

- Cumulative effects on agricultural land of all five solar farms must be considered

Officer comment: The application is only the first Council commissioned solar farm and there is currently no guarantee that the other projects will be delivered. If they are proposed, these applications would need to consider further cumulative effects.

- Approval would render nearby farms less viable leading to non-agricultural uses
- Will contribute to further rural decline with the loss of the farmer

Officer comment: The farm buildings are outside of the red line boundary and will be retained for the farmer to occupy. It will be complemented with the retention of 5.5 ha of farmland in the south western corner of the site. In doing so, viability of the agricultural operations in the immediate area are not unduly affected.

- The Council has not invested in the existing farms, allowing the solar farm to appear more attractive

Officer comment: There is no apparent connection between the standard of farm buildings and infrastructure and the merits of the solar farm. The primary benefits of the subject site over other sites are outlined in paragraph 38.

- Barkham has had too much development

Officer comment: Noted.

- Construction in the borough has not occurred in a cohesive manner to accommodate such things as solar panels

Officer comment: The additional electricity generation addresses identified need as it will power up to 8,200 homes, which is the equivalent of more than 10 years of the Council's projected housing delivery.

Planning balance

- The benefits are outweighed by the harm
- Benefits do not weigh in favour given the visual harm
- Not enough energy return to justify loss of agricultural land

Officer comment: The planning balance finds in favour of the development, as noted in paragraphs 164-174.

- Planning balance of reduced carbon must consider the transportation of the solar panels, the loss of local food production and the carbon sink of the existing farm
- Loss of local agricultural land will result in additional food miles, outweighing the benefit and contrary to the climate emergency action plan
- Agricultural land should be protected for food production, thus reducing the carbon footprint from imports

Officer comment: These observations are valid considerations and form part of the assessment of the planning balance.

- The tilted balance is not engaged

Officer comment: This is correct.

- Greenway can be delivered anyway and should not weigh in favour of the scheme
- The Greenway is happening anyway and should not be used as an additional justification

Officer comment: The Greenway forms part of the application but has not weighed in any significant way in the assessment of the benefits of the solar farm.

Effectiveness of solar

- The amount of existing carbon sequestration will not be offset by the proposed tree planting

Officer comment: It is estimated that the proposed solar panels would represent a carbon reduction of approximately 92,242 tonnes of carbon from the solar farm and an additional 592 tonnes from the carbon sink tree planting. Measurements against the existing carbon sequestration of the existing site has not been provided but it appears unlikely that the existing use would provide more benefit particularly when 360 head of cattle are kept on the farm, which are high methane emitters.

- Solar panels will end up in landfill at the end of life

Officer comment: Recycling of solar panels is possible now and may well be easier in 25 years' time. Condition 28 seeks further information on this aspect.

- There is no battery storage to allow for use during peak times
- Lack of battery power is not efficient use of the land

Officer comment: Battery storage does not form part of the application and there is no planning policy objection to this.

- Will not benefit the local area as power generation is from across the UK

Officer comment: The application achieves the same intent of reducing carbon emissions regardless of its ultimate destination within the grid and is supported on those grounds. Revenue will be retained within the borough.

- Up to 20% of the site appears to be unusable because of powerline interference

Officer comment: The Greenway is located underneath the powerlines, which is a positive outcome in terms of establishing a dual use of the land.

- Panels of increased efficiency could be used, thereby requiring less land and less impact

Officer comment: This is a commercial decision and does not affect the assessment of the subject application.

Alternatives explored

- Site has been selected as it is Council owned
- Details as to why this area was selected over others has not been considered
- Alternative sites have not been adequately considered
- There are better sites such as Grazeley, which is no longer suitable for housing or adjacent to motorways
- There is no evidence that the Council has consulted other Council's for a consolidated approach
- Consideration of alternative sites is limited to those owned by Council and a wider approach should have been undertaken in the Climate Emergency Action Plan
- Solar panels should be mandatory to all new roof tops and brownfield sites
- Council owned buildings should have solar first

- There are better alternatives – such as hydro from the River Loddon, thermal or subsidised residential roof top solar
- Solar could be installed on other smaller Council owned farms or buildings
- Reduction in domestic emissions, mandated low carbon technologies and increased housing efficiency would be more effective
- Smaller solar schemes would be better assimilated
- Local plan update should mandate more localised and short-term solutions

Officer comment: There are pros and cons to different renewable energy sources depending upon various factors such as climate and location and the assessment of the planning application does not need to consider why solar was preferred over other sources.

The Local Plan update includes various draft measures to improve energy efficiency within buildings. These policies remain in draft form only but the Climate Emergency Action Plan includes intent to increase solar generation on building rooftops.

Whilst not material to the decision, the ownership has made it easier for the scheme to be brought forward because it allows for immediate delivery. Most of Gravely is not in Council ownership and is not currently available to come forward for this purpose.

The consolidation of the project into one 52 ha site allows for consolidation of infrastructure, which makes for a more efficient development.

Refer to other comments in paragraphs 35-40.

- Has a tiny carbon impact compared to better projects (eg turbines)

Officer comment: This is a commercial and site/locality specific consideration and does not affect the assessment of the subject application.

- Energy generation should be a national led process and established in a more consolidated, less piecemeal approach at local level

Officer comment: This project is a locally and policy driven based on the Council's declaration of a climate emergency. A consolidated approach requires national government policy. A piecemeal approach is the most appropriate approach in the current circumstances.

Conflict of interest

- Public forum should be allowed

Officer comment: The application is to be considered in a public forum at the Planning Committee.

- Conflict of interest for a Council application on Council land with Council investment return being decided by the same Councillors that advocated for the scheme originally
- Council has already agreed to five solar farms and as decision maker, it implies the decision is already made
- Should be referred to the Secretary of State

Officer comment: Local planning authorities are responsible for renewable and low carbon energy development of 50 MW or less installed capacity (under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990). Renewable and low carbon development over 50 MW capacity are currently considered by the Secretary of State for Energy under the Planning Act 2008. The scheme is less than 50 MW but is still being reviewed by the Secretary of State.

- Ulterior motives to allow for housing

Officer comment: There is no proposal for housing on the site.

- Commercial interests have outweighed a local green farming enterprise
- Removal of panels in the south west corner has been done for expediency rather than overall impact

Officer comment: This is a subjective opinion.

Business case

- The business case should be put forward
- The financial return is questionable and open to scrutiny
- Burden of funding is on the ratepayers
- No direct benefit for taxpayers
- Where is the investment coming from?
- Needs to be a balance of local food production vs energy production and this is skewed in this case because of the Council's business interests

Officer comment: The business case is not material to the consideration of the application. Nonetheless, as background, the case was tabled to The Executive on 29 July 2021. It refers to an initial £20.3 million cost, made up of borrowed money. There is anticipated to be a net profit of approximately £500,000 per year. The financial returns on the scheme would be reinvested in the future, which is a benefit for ratepayers.

- The required construction of the connection along Barkham Road will contribute to the cost which has not been accounted for
- Decommissioning costs have not been considered in the viability case
- Output is minimal when considering construction and decommissioning
- The business case is reduced given the removal of panels in the revised scheme

Officer comment: The business case is not material to the consideration of the application. Nonetheless, the business case is publicly available. Decommissioning costs are not anticipated until 2046 and do not weigh heavily against the proposal. It has been assumed but not confirmed that grid connection forms part of the anticipated cost of works.

Other

- Eviction of farmer is unreasonable
- Tenant farmer should not be evicted until alternative land is found

Officer comment: As part of this application, the farmer will remain a resident within High Barn Farm, albeit within a smaller holding.

- Vast majority of residents do not want the scheme
- Much of the support is not local

Officer comment: Over 3300 residents were consulted by letter and 56 objections received in response (1.6% response rate).

- Shortwave radio interference from panels – a pre commencement before and after assessment of impact is required

Officer comment: There are no planning policies or guidance relating to radio interference from solar panels (there is guidance in relation to interference from wind turbines) in the NPPF or the Development Plan.

- The depth of the cable on Barkham Road is inadequate given the loading it will be carrying

Officer comment: This is not a relevant planning consideration and would be a standard ‘dial before you dig’ obligation of any future contractor excavating along Barkham Road.

- Route of the domestic water supply to Church Cottages needs to be confirmed

Officer comment: Post determination requirements require a review of all underground assets. This is noted in Informative 21.

- Land liable to flooding should be better used for solar panels

Officer comment: The land to the north of the site is in Flood Zone 2 and aside from a 10m buffer on ecological grounds, the land is being used for the installation of solar panels. See further comment in paragraph 153.

- The entrance to California Country Park will be dull and foreboding

Officer comment: The main entrance to California Country Park is not affected by this proposal.

- Perimeter buffers will ultimately be used for construction

Officer comment: The buffer around the panels will be used for the construction/installation of the solar panels but this is temporary, short lived and unavoidable.

- Perimeter fencing should be setback from the road to allow for future widening of the road

Officer comment: The location of the fence would not prohibit any future widening of the road if it were deemed necessary.

Ten submissions in **support** of the proposal were received from:

- 57) Pickwick, School Road, Barkham RG41 4TN
- 58) 25 The Vines, Barkham RG41 4YY
- 59) 22 Sandy Lane, Barkham RG41 4DB
- 60) Blandford Drive, Barkham RG40 4EU (no number supplied)
- 61) 12 Bearwood Road, Barkham RG41 4TD
- 62) 7 Wimbrushes, Finchampstead RG40 4XG (x2)
- 63) Easthampstead Road, Wokingham RG40 2EG (no number supplied)
- 64) 9 Oak Drive, Arborfield RG2 9GJ
- 65) 6 Lupin Ride, Crowthorne RG456UR
- 66) 107 Moordale Avenue, Bracknell RG42 1TQ
- 67) 51 Bearwood Road, Barkham RG41 4SX

The submissions raised the following points:

- Is preferable to more housing and should be conditional on less housing in the area
- Will remove the possibility of housing for at least 25 years
- Is close to existing housing
- Will increase uptake of renewable energy, reduce carbon emissions and help meet the climate emergency targets
- improvements to air quality

- Will operate effectively in conjunction with other sources
- Removal of cattle is better for the ecosystem
- Meat and dairy have a bigger footprint and the reduction of this farm has a positive benefit
- Includes landscape enhancement with tree and hedgerow planting
- Groundcover is unaffected
- Income should be redistributed to the local borough for green reinvestment
- Will be reverted back to its existing use
- Enhancements to footpaths and Greenway are positive, particularly where there are missing links filled in
- The annual profits of £480k is value for money
- The amount of service tracks has been reduced

Officer comment: The above comments are noted.

- Farmer will/shall be compensated

Officer comment: The farmer will remain on site.

- Sign of progress

Officer comment: This is an observation.

One **neutral** comment was received from:

68) The Bailiff's Cottage, Barkham Road, Barkham RG41 4TG

The submission raised the following points:

- Footpath 10 and 10A should remain open during construction and any other closures should be given advance warning in a media outlet

Officer comment: The Construction Environmental Management Plan as required in Condition 14 will aim to minimise disturbance throughout the duration of the works.

APPLICANTS POINTS

(Note: Taken from Conclusion of Planning Statement and based on original proposal prior to amendments)

The proposed solar farm and carbon sink woodland planting will generate significant environmental benefits so as to make a substantial contribution to WBC's Climate Emergency Action Plan. The solar farm will provide enough electricity to power up to 8,200 homes providing over 92,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide savings over the 25-year lifespan of the technology. The adjoining carbon sequestration area will create a new 3.4ha woodland comprising approximately 15,000 new trees that will contribute towards the council's target of planting 250,000 new trees in the next five years.

Whilst the benefits of renewable energy proposals such as this carry with them significant positive weight, local policies and the national planning practice guidance requires solar farms to be assessed in terms of their impacts upon a whole range of other considerations, including agricultural land availability, landscape, heritage, biodiversity and local amenities.

Accordingly, as part of the site selection and progression of the scheme through to planning in the first instance WBC has undertaken a site selection and site feasibility exercise to identify Barkham Farms as an appropriate location to deliver its first solar farm that will deliver its Climate Emergency Action Plan commitments. Whilst the site is good quality agricultural land, no alternative sites that are comparable, or available have been identified. Furthermore, any historical and landscape concerns regarding the development will be partially mitigated through an extensive landscaping scheme. Whilst some limited harm to the surrounding rural landscape and heritage assets has been identified, this harm is temporary, reversible and significantly and demonstrably outweighed by the public benefits of the proposed development.

The principle of developing a solar farm within the countryside accords with the adopted development plan, including the neighbourhood plan, and is explicitly supported as an appropriate type of development within the countryside within the new draft Local Plan. The nature of the solar farm is appropriate for this rural location and will preserve the character of the surrounding area, in particular the setting of the settlements to the north and south of the site.

Furthermore, the development will enhance the accessibility of the countryside through the provision of a new Greenway PROW through the site that will connect the existing fragmented network of footpaths and bridleways within vicinity of the site.

The development site and the proposals also provide an opportunity to deliver significant biodiversity enhancements through the creation of new habitats within the site.

All other key material considerations have been assessed within this application, including the supporting Environmental Statement, demonstrating the proposals compliance with relevant development plan policies when read as a whole. In addition, the significant benefits of the development are key material considerations weighing strongly in favour of the proposed application.

This application should, therefore, be supported by the local planning authority as providing substantial benefits that respond to the strategic priorities of the council's Climate Emergency Action Plan.

PLANNING POLICY

National Planning Policy Framework 2021 (NPPF)	Section 2	Achieving Sustainable Development
	Section 6	Building a Strong, Competitive Economy
	Section 8	Promoting Healthy and Safe Communities
	Section 11	Making Effective Use of Land
	Section 12	Achieving Well-Designed Places
	Section 14	Meeting the Challenge of Climate Change, Flooding And Coastal Change

	Section 15	Conserving and Enhancing the Natural Environment
	Section 16	Conserving and Enhancing the Historic Environment
Core Strategy 2010	CP1	Sustainable Development
	CP2	Inclusive Communities
	CP3	General Principles for Development
	CP6	Managing Travel Demand
	CP7	Biodiversity
	CP8	Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area
	CP9	Scale and Location of Development Proposals
	CP11	Proposals Outside Development Limits
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
	CC09	Development and Flood Risk
	CC10	Sustainable Drainage
	TB12	Employment Skills Plan
	TB21	Landscape Character
	TB23	Biodiversity and Development
	TB24	Designated Heritage Assets
	TB26	Buildings of Traditional Local Character and Areas of Special Character
Arborfield and Newland Village Design Statement		Full document
Arborfield and Barkham Neighbourhood Plan	IRS1	Preservation of Separation of Settlements
	IRS2	Protection and Enhancement of the Natural Environment and Green Spaces
	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
Borough Design Guide SPD	Section 6	Parking
	Section 7	Non-Residential
	Section 8	Rural and Settlement Edge
Sustainable Design and Construction SPD		Full document

PLANNING ASSESSMENT

Description of Development

1. The application involves the following development across a 52-ha site (plus cumulative 2-ha area linking to Barkham Road) at High Barn Farm and part of Brook Farm and Rooks Nest Farm:
 - a) Erection of 67,340 solar panels across 43.56 ha, each at a height of 0.68-2.14m facing south and angled at 20-degrees
 - b) Provision of 257 inverters across the site
 - c) Conversion of the energy from DC to AC via five transformer cabinets across the site, each measuring 6.1m x 2.4m x 2.9m
 - d) Underground cabling throughout the site to connect with a substation measuring 10m x 6m x 3m and storage shed on the northern side of Barkham Ride (with new kerbed access from Barkham Ride and parking and turning)
 - e) Total output of 29.63 MWp with connection into the grid via underground cabling at a depth of approximately 0.8m, routed northwards through Council owned paddocks for 540m, along Edney's Lane for 75m and Barkham Road for 640m
 - f) 2.4m high security fencing around the perimeter of the site and along the proposed Greenway with post and rail fencing in some other areas
 - g) New access entrance on the southern side of Barkham Ride with entrance gates
 - h) A total of 470m of access tracks through the site including access between High Barn Farm and Rooks Nest Farm
 - i) Associated lighting of buildings and CCTV around the site perimeter
 - j) Provision of a new Greenway through the site (underneath the existing powerlines) connecting Bridleway 14 in the south with Footpath 10A in the north, with associated connections
 - k) Planting of 10,947 trees across 2.89 ha in a woodland setting along the southern boundary of the site as part of a borough wider carbon sequestration project
 - l) Other supplementary planting across the site including meadow grassland, hedgerow in areas (including the Greenway) and trees
 - m) Removal of five trees and two tree groups and part removal of seven hedges
 - n) Retention of 5.52 ha of farmland in the south western corner around the existing High Barn Farm buildings for use by the existing tenant farmer

2. The construction phase is estimated to take 10 months and it is proposed that it will comprise the following:
 - a. Site access via two kerbed entrances (the same accesses will be permanently retained for operational purposes) at the eastern end of Barkham Ride
 - b. Two site compounds on either side of Barkham Ride adjacent to the site entrances and comprising temporary hardstanding, fencing, gates, portacabins, storage containers and wheel washing facilities with parking and turning for 40 vehicles and two HGVs
 - c. Delivery routing via Barkham Street to the north
 - d. Associated directional signage

3. The lifespan of the development is 25 years with decommissioning and remediation of the site to return the site to its existing use.

4. The application forms part of the Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan following the declaration of a Climate Emergency in July 2019. It is an Environmental Impact Assessment application, which requires an assessment of the likely significant environmental effects of the project. The proposal falls under Part 3 of Schedule 2 of the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017, specifically being "industrial installations for the production of electricity, steam and hot water" of more than 0.5 hectare. An EIA Scoping Report was submitted to the Council on 18 January 2021 together with a formal request for an EIA Scoping Opinion, in accordance with Regulation 15(1) of the EIA Regulations 2017. A formal Scoping Opinion was issued on 17 March 2021.
5. The application, as originally proposed, was amended once in July 2021 in the following manner:
 - a) Removal of solar panels and woodland planting adjacent to the main farm buildings of High Barn Farm in the south western corner of the site and retention of 5.52 ha of farmland for use by the tenant farmer and with the provision of an access track to Rooks Nest Farm for operational purposes
 - b) Realignment of the proposed Greenway and footpath connections between BR14, BR11 and FP10A through the centre of the site underneath the existing powerlines
 - c) Increase in the buffer around the south eastern side of the listed buildings and scheduled monument from 20m to 25m and removal of associated planting and its replacement with meadow planting
 - d) Increase in the buffer around Barkham Brook to 10m
 - e) Reduction in the length of access tracks across the site
 - f) Relocation of the substation on the northern side of Barkham Ride further to the east
 - g) Overall reduction in solar panels from 71,812 to 67,340 and occupied area from 48.5 ha to 43.56 ha
 - h) Reduction in output from 32.38MWp to 29.63 MWp with inverters reduced from 282 to 257 and transformers from 6 to 5
 - i) Reduction in area and density of woodland planting from 3.4 ha or 15,093 trees to 2.89 ha or 10,947 trees

Description of Site

6. The 52-ha application site consists of three agricultural farms in Council ownership - High Barn Farm (excluding the farmhouse and associated buildings and hardstanding) and part of Brook Farm and Rooks Nest Farm between the locations of Barkham in the north and Finchampstead to the south east. It is bounded by Barkham Brook in the north, Barkham Street and Commonfield Lane in the east, an existing Greenway to the south and the village of Finchampstead and Rooks Nest Wood to the east. Barkham Ride intersects west to east across the site.
7. The site is predominantly rural or agricultural in nature with several public footpaths through the north of the site. Mature vegetation, some of which has veteran status lines the perimeter of the site and hedgerows form a characteristic of paths and bridleways around the north of the site. It is largely flat to the north, with an upward slope of about 6m in the area to the north of Barkham Ride. The southern end of the site has a more obvious slope, rising a further 7m to a ridgeline before sloping more steeply downwards to the southern boundary.

8. Surrounding development consists of:
 - a) Countryside to the north
 - b) The historic buildings of Church Cottages and St James Church near the intersection of Barkham Street and Commonfield Lane
 - c) Recent residential development in close proximity to the south west corner with other sporadic residential development nearby
 - d) Longmoor Bog and California Country Park to the south
 - e) Rooks Nest Wood and Model Farm to the east, with the village of Finchampstead further east

Principle of Development

9. The National Planning Policy Framework 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.

Proposed use

10. The principle of renewable energy infrastructure is strongly supported in the Core Strategy, MDD Local Plan and the NPPF and this generates significant weight in favour of the development. Notwithstanding, there are planning policies and considerations that pull in different directions.
11. At paragraph 8, the NPPF lists adapting and mitigating to climate change as a core principle of sustainable development. At paragraph 152, it supports the transition to a low carbon future and specifically recognises that the planning system should support renewable and low carbon energy and associated infrastructure. More specifically, it articulates that local planning authorities should:
 - a) Provide a positive strategy for energy from renewable and low carbon sources, that maximises the potential for suitable development, while ensuring that adverse impacts are addressed satisfactorily (including cumulative landscape and visual impacts) (paragraph 155)
 - b) Not require applicants to demonstrate the overall need for renewable or low carbon energy (paragraph 158)
 - c) Approve the application if its impacts are (or can be made) acceptable (paragraph 158)
12. Policy CP1 of the Core Strategy encourages appropriate on-site renewable energy features and development that minimises consumption of resources, but also requires that development proposals maintain or enhance the high quality of the environment.
13. Paragraph 4.6 of the Core Strategy notes that delivering on sustainable energy can bring significant social, environmental and economic benefits to Wokingham Borough. Paragraph 4.9 reiterates the Council's aim to achieve zero carbon development as soon as possible and states that development for the generation of

energy from renewable resources will be permitted unless there are unacceptable locational or other impacts that could not be outweighed by wider environmental, social and economic or other benefits.

14. Policy CC05 of the MDD Local Plan encourages renewable energy and decentralised energy networks where
 - 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...*
15. The Council has also 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. It is recognised that the subject application is one cog of this process.
16. Draft policies associated with the climate emergency form part of the Draft Local Plan Update. It was subject to consultation during February-April 2020 but will be reconsulted in the coming months. Whilst the weight applied to these policies is minimal, they reflect the intent of the NPPF and indicate the council's direction and commitment to playing the fullest role possible in mitigating and adapting to climate change. Draft Policy DH10 (Low carbon and renewable energy generation) states that:

“Development proposals for new standalone low carbon and renewable energy generation schemes and associated infrastructure, or extensions to existing schemes, will be supported provided they are of an appropriate scale and do not give rise to unacceptable impacts on landscape, biodiversity, heritage assets, character of the area, and amenity.”
17. Referring to the above, the principle of renewable energy development is clearly supported in principle by local and national policy and by the Draft Local Plan Update, provided that there are no unacceptable impacts. This report deals in detail with these impacts and there is therefore significant and broad policy support at local and national level for this type of development. It is also 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.

Development in the countryside

18. The site is located outside the settlement boundary and in the countryside. Policy CP11 of the Core Strategy does not normally permit development outside of development limits unless it protects the separate identity of settlements, maintains the quality of the environment, and meets one of several exception criteria.
19. Policy CP11 is silent on the allowance of renewable energy developments within the countryside and so none of the criteria are entirely relevant to this type of development. Indeed, there are no allocated sites for renewable and low carbon energy. However, one of the exceptions is where it involves a sustainable rural or

recreational enterprise, does not lead to excessive expansion away from the original building and is contained within a building suitable for conversion.

20. Paragraph 157 of the NPPF also states that development should comply with any development plan policies on local requirements for decentralised energy supply unless it can be demonstrated by the applicant, having regard to the type of development involved and its design, that this is not feasible or viable. Paragraph 158 recommends approval where impacts are (or can be made) acceptable.
21. The solar farm is a sustainable enterprise that would only ever be achievable within a countryside location. It would bring about noticeable impacts, including but not limited to landscape and visual harm, moderate but less than substantial harm to the setting of heritage assets, loss of agricultural land and ecological impacts necessitating mitigation. Visually, it is viewed as encroachment of development that would result in a reduction in the separation between Arborfield Garrison in the west and Finchampstead in the east, albeit with a retained gap at its eastern end to Finchampstead and to the north to Barkham.
22. Whilst there is identifiable harm to the quality of the environment, there is a more holistic and wider benefit for the environment in terms of the provision of renewable and low carbon energy. On this basis, the proposal could be viewed as being broadly in line with the intent of Policy CP11 or if it is not, the benefits are such that it is acceptable despite any departure.

Loss of agricultural land

23. Policy CP1(7) of the Core Strategy, Policy TC3 of the Barkham and Arborfield Neighbourhood Plan and Paragraph 174(b) of the NPPF all state that that best and most versatile (BMV) agricultural land should be protected. The primary reasoning is to protect food production in the UK.
24. Agricultural land is graded between 1 and 5. The principal physical factors influencing grading are climate, site and soil which, together with interactions between them, Gradings of 1, 2 and 3a are the BMV agricultural land that should be retained. Grade 1 land is excellent quality agricultural land with very minor or no limitations to agricultural use. Grade 5 is very poor-quality land, with severe limitations which restrict use to permanent pasture or rough grazing.
25. An Agricultural Land Classification and Soil Resources Report (Reading Agricultural Consultants, March 2021) was prepared for the application. It concluded that the site comprised a mix of Grade 2 (27 ha) and Grade 3a (24 ha) land, which falls within the category of BMV land.
26. Grade 2 is very good quality agricultural land, with minor limitations which affect crop yield, cultivations or harvesting. Subgrade 3a land is capable of consistently producing moderate to high yields of a narrow range of arable crops or moderate yields of a wide range of crops.
27. Paragraph 013 of the Planning Practice Guidance requires consideration 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.”

28. The Planning Statement submitted with the subject application then references the BRE guidance for commercial ground mounted solar panel developments. It notes that development should ideally utilise previously developed land, brownfield land, contaminated land, industrial land, or agricultural land preferably of classification 3b, 4, and 5, avoiding the use of “Best and Most Versatile” cropland where possible.
29. The entire site comprises three farms, all owned by the Council and leased to a tenant farmer with 360 head of cattle. The proposal involves the use of approximately 47 ha for the solar farm and tree planting. 5.52 ha or 20% of the existing Grade 2 farmland within the farm will be retained for the farmer’s use in the south western corner. The Council has advised the farmer that the lease for the remainder of the farm holding will not be renewed and it is understood that this is not the farmer’s preference.
30. The farm is currently occupied by 360 head of cattle and a maize crop. The use of BMV land for a solar farm is contrary to policy and the loss of 80% of the Grade 2 and all of Grade 3a agricultural land would not normally be supported. This forms the basis of a large number of submissions, including that a 25-year period might be temporary but is also a generation length of time where the use of the land for farming is not possible, leading to increased transportation emissions associated with the importation of food.
31. The justification used in the Planning Statement to support the scheme is that (a) it is temporary, (b) there are measurable biodiversity improvements elsewhere within the site (c) that other Council own holdings are more sensitively located and (d) there are no other suitable locations in the borough.
32. At a minimum height of 0.7m, it is not possible to retain cattle on the land and the raising of the solar panels so that they can be retained would have measurable impacts upon the wider landscape. However, cows are very high carbon emitters, mostly through the release of methane and so the conversion of the land to a solar farm weighs in favour of the application albeit on better quality agricultural land. It is feasible that smaller livestock (eg sheep) could be accommodated without impacting upon the solar panels and this would generate less emissions. However, there is no confirmation of any dual use of the site at this time.
33. Weighing significantly in favour of the application is the fact that Natural England have raised no objection to the proposal. Land to the east of the site at Rooks Nest Farm and to the north of the site at Brook Farm will also be retained, broadly about 62 ha. It is also important to recognise that it is a temporary loss of agricultural land with long term use of the land for agriculture protected in Condition 3. Any departure from this would require further assessment.
34. There are positives and negatives associated with the use of the BMV land and the departure from the national and local policy aiming to protecting this agricultural land requires a consideration in the planning balance.

Alternative sites

35. Whilst it is well established that each planning application should be considered on its individual merits, Paragraph 013 of the Planning Practice Guidance 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'. Local residents have also raised objections stating that alternative sites should be considered for this type of development.
36. The documentation submitted with the application included consideration of alternative sites. The key factors were that it was to be in Council ownership (and so available for development), capable of accommodating 25 MWp-plus and allowing for easy access to the grid, all of which limits the number of available sites.
37. The site was first identified as part of the Climate Emergency Action Plan and the urgency associated with the climate emergency required a development of significant scale. Target 12 of the Climate Emergency Action Plan Progress report specifically identifies the generation of renewable energy through investment in solar farms to power 25,000 homes by 2030. Four other solar farms are proposed on Council owned land as well as on top of existing buildings as part of the delivery of the Climate Emergency Action Plan.
38. The farms of High Barn, Brook and Rooks Nest together form the first of these solar farms on the largest Council owned farm holdings (114 ha). The use of 52 ha represents less than half of this land with much of the rest constrained for such development. The site offers a consolidated parcel of land in the south of the borough where the north of the borough contains large areas of Green Belt. It also allows for easy connection to the grid that is capable of accommodating the power generation without significant costs associated with retrofitting. The connection is also via Council owned land, either within farmland or on Barkham Road. Brownfield sites at this scale and within Council ownership have not been identified.
39. The emerging Local Plan aims to add to availability of land for renewable energy through previously developed land, brownfield land, contaminated land, industrial land or agricultural land.
40. On the basis of the above assessment, it is concluded that the site represents the most suitable location for the scheme.

Character of the Area

Landscape and visual impact

41. Policy CC03 of the MDD Local Plan aims to protect green infrastructure networks, retain existing trees and establish appropriate landscaping and Policy TB21 requires consideration of the landscape character. Paragraph 174 of the NPPF also states that development should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by:

- a) *Protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, sites of biodiversity or geological value and soils (in a manner commensurate with their statutory status or identified quality in the development plan);*
- b) *Recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, and the wider benefits from natural capital and ecosystem services – including the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land, and of trees and woodland.*

42. Policy CP3 of the Core Strategy states that development must be appropriate in terms of its scale, layout, built form and character of the area and must be of high-quality design. This is reinforced in other policies in the Borough Design Guide SPD, including:

- RD1 requires that development contribute positively towards and be compatible with the historic or underlying character and quality of the local area
- RD3 notes that development must respond to and not harm the setting of the village
- RD4 requires that buildings retain views into or out of the village
- NR1 states development should respond to key characteristics and features of the site and NR2 states that proposals should improve the area
- NR12 requires consideration of boundary treatments

43. Paragraph 013 of the Planning Practice Guidance offers specific guidance on the planning considerations relating to large scale ground mounted solar PV farms. A definition of 'large scale' is not provided, but it is considered this applies to the current application. The PPG states that:

'The deployment of large-scale solar farms can have a negative impact on the rural environment, particularly in undulating landscapes. However, the visual impact of a well-planned and well-screened solar farm can be properly addressed within the landscape if planned sensitively.'

44. The landscape is not considered as a 'Valued Landscape' as identified in the Values Landscape Topic Paper – January 2020. However, the site is adjacent to the edge of the Forest and Rides Valued Landscape to the east, and close to the southern part of Barkham and Bearwood Valued Landscape.

45. Of relevance within the landscape are the Grade II listed Church Cottages which sit within the scheduled monument of the moated site and enclosure at Church Farm, directly abutting part of the north western boundary of the site. Slightly beyond the Church Cottages to the north is the Grade II listed Church of St James which has a tower with a small wooden spire. The church and churchyard are mainly enclosed by trees with the spire visible above the vegetation from some locations. The Church Cottages have some vegetation on the boundary of the site, but this is variable.

46. The landscape in which the site is located is as identified within the Wokingham Borough Landscape Character Assessment (November 2019) as Arborfield Cross and Barkham Settled and Farmed Clay (J2). The southern boundary abuts Finchampstead Forested and Settled Sands (M1). The relevant extracts for character area J2 are.

Valuable Landscape Attributes

- *Barkham Brook and associated wetland which provide important ecological habitats including wet meadow and BAP priority habitat wet woodland.*
- *Pattern of arable and pastoral fields, which provides a rural character away from settlement, and creates an important separation between settlements.*
- *Mature hedgerow trees and in-field trees which provide a wooded character and visual interest within the landscape.*
- *Historic Second World War pillboxes and other defence works, which are now a scenic part of the landscape.*
- *Rural settlement pattern of farms, hamlets and small nucleated villages outside the urban area which provides a rural character and a link to the past.*
- *Recreational value of the network of rights of way between settlements.*
- *Views across the landscape to surrounding character areas, particularly across the river valleys to the west and to the wooded hills to the north and south provides a loose sense of enclosure.*

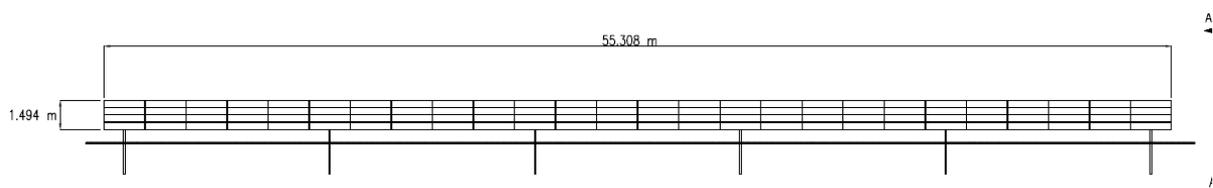
Landscape Condition

*The landscape is in overall **moderate condition**, due to the pattern of arable and pastoral fields, and remnant wetland influences associated with Barkham Brook. However, the hedgerow network is fragmented and the introduction of further development through the Arborfield Garrison SDL and associated infrastructure will further fragment the rural settlement pattern altering the character of the area.*

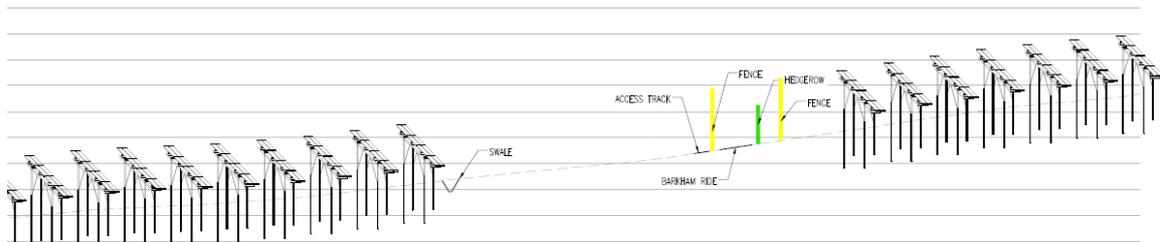
Landscape Strategy

To maintain the landscape character of the Arborfield Cross and Barkham Settled and Farmed Clay the following strategy is required: to conserve and enhance the remaining rural character of the landscape. The key aspects to be conserved and enhanced are the field pattern with mature hedgerow trees, wetland and woodland habitats, rural lanes and historic features. In terms of development, the aim is to integrate new development into its landscape setting and retain the open and rural character of the landscape between settlements.

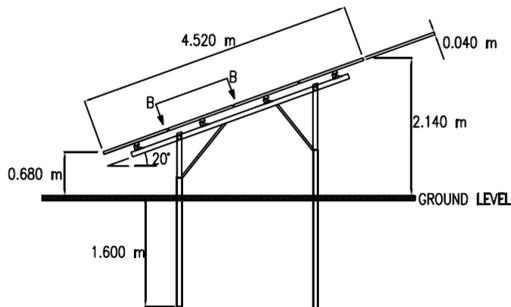
47. Despite the partly undulating and relatively level topography of the site, it is conclusive that there would be a clear change to the character and appearance of the landscape and because of the significant size of the site, it will be across a large expanse and from multiple vantage points, not limited to Barkham Ride that intersects east-west through the middle of the site.
48. The elevations depicted below give an indication of the solar panels, projecting up to 2.14m above ground along rows of more than 55m.



Front elevation



Cross section through site including fencing



Typical section

49. Primary public viewpoints will be from Commonfield Lane in the west, through the middle of the site on Barkham Ride (looking north and south) and from Rooks Nest Wood in the east. There will be other immediately apparent viewpoints from the footpaths which run mostly along field edges. There would also be filtered views from other points such as California Country Park to the south and in wider views from land higher up to the north of the site. The following photographs taken by the Council planning officer provide a section of these views. It is immediately apparent is that there is an open rural form with hedgerows framing the edges and the proposal would significantly alter these views.



View from within Rooks Nest Wood looking north west (August 2021)



View from Footpath 10A adjacent to Rooks Nest Wood looking north (August 2021)



View looking north from Footpath 10 underneath powerlines (August 2021)



View looking north from near Barkham Ride towards Church Cottages and St James' Church (June 2021)



Winter screening along Commonfield Lane (November 2020)



Looking north from Barkham Ride (November 2020)



Looking south east from Barkham Ride (November 2020)



**Looking north east from intersection of Commonfield Lane and Barkham Ride/Street
(November 2020)**



**Looking south east from intersection of Commonfield Lane and Barkham Ride/Street
(November 2020)**

50. The Environmental Statement dated March 2021 includes a chapter on Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA). An Environmental Masterplan is provided indicating proposed landscape mitigation and public right of way enhancements across the site. The LVIA was updated in July 2021 to include an additional receptor and was accompanied by a revised Environmental Masterplan.
51. The LVIA assesses the anticipated landscape and visual effects of the proposed solar farm on identified receptors including a detailed assessment of its impact on the nearest dwellings. The Environmental Masterplan provides details of the proposed planting within the site to mitigate the effects of the PV panels and associated works from receptor views and to mitigate the effects on the landscape character and this is assessed as part of the LVIA. The key findings are that:
 - There is likely to be a direct and indirect, short-term, temporary moderate adverse residual effect on five visual receptors (significant) during the construction phase

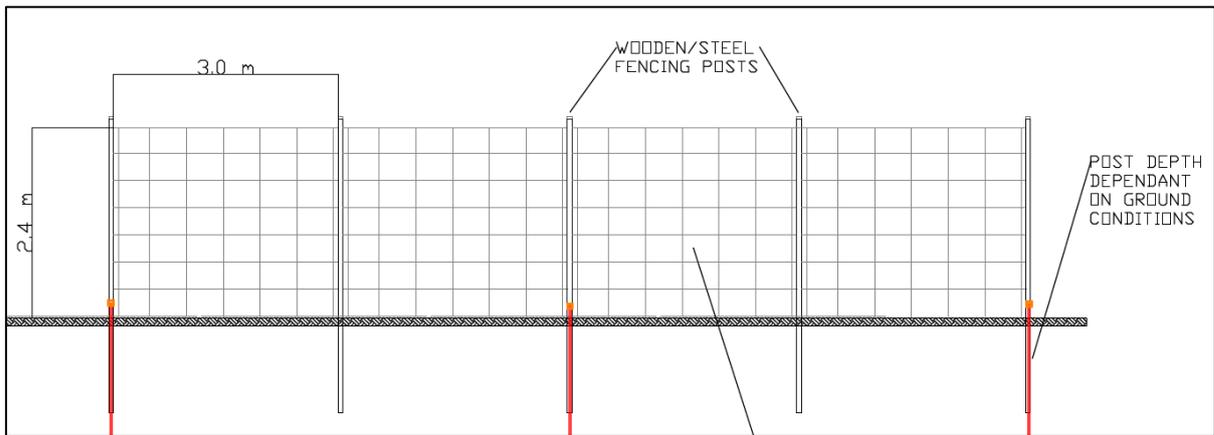
- There is likely to be direct, short-term, temporary neutral to minor adverse residual effects on the remaining nine visual receptors (not significant) during the construction phase
 - There is likely to be direct and indirect, medium-term moderate or major adverse residual effects from half of the visual receptors (significant) during operation phase (Year 1); direct, permanent Moderate adverse residual effects on visual receptor R9 (significant) during operation phase (Year 15), and direct and indirect, permanent Neutral to Minor adverse residual effects (not significant) on the remainder of these receptors at Year 15
 - There is likely to be direct and indirect, medium-term neutral to minor adverse residual effects on half of the visual receptors (not significant) during the operational phase (Year 1) and direct and indirect, permanent Neutral to Minor adverse residual effects on these receptors at Year 15.
52. As part of the assessment of the original documentation, the Council's Trees and Landscape Officer was in general agreement with the majority of findings in relation to assessed impact. The exception was the site's relationship with the heritage assets or in particular, how views to the heritage assets or their setting are retained and the justification for different design solutions to minimise the effects. This is distinct from the impact of development within the setting which is a heritage consideration already addressed above.
53. This has been adequately addressed in the revised Environmental Masterplan and there are no in-principle objections raised by the Council's Trees Officer subject to mitigation in the form of additional hedgerow planting in the following locations:
- To the south of Barkham Ride as this boundary is relatively open
 - To the south-east of the Greenway separating the open area through which the Greenway will pass from the PV panels to the south-east
 - Replacement hedgerow behind visibility splays for new accesses off Barkham Ride
54. These requirements form part of Condition 5. Other revisions to the landscape scheme are needed, including revisions to the woodland edge mix, planting of Elm in the woodland and the exclusion of Ash, A landscape specification would need to be included with the detailed landscape plans and should also include a matrix for the woodland planting showing typical spacing and distribution of species.
55. There is undoubtedly heavy reliance upon landscaping as a screening tool. This is used effectively in areas such as alongside both sides of Barkham Ride where views are most prominent. The landscaping does not dominant or enclose the setting where it should not (such as along footpaths) and there remains a sufficient degree of openness across the site. There is generally 35-45m separation between groups of panels alongside the Greenway through the site and this allows sufficient space for planting and retaining a sense of openness and views across the site.
56. There is also the recognition that the landscaping will take many years to be effective in screening the development. This is reflected in the landscape visual assessments. However, there has not been an attempt to hide the solar panels. They will be visible elements on the landscape and the assessment of the application recognises this fact in reaching the conclusion that it has a measurable but acceptable impact upon the wider landscape and visual impression of this rural location.

57. Notwithstanding, the Council's Trees and Landscape Officer raises additional issue with the need to conserve the open and rural qualities of the farmed landscape, particularly in views from the edge of the SANG woodland towards the Church of St James' spire and in the view from footpath 10A towards the wooded skyline to the north. Further consideration of this viewpoint (shown in the first two photographs above) is such that there is no additional need to increase the buffer along the woodland edge of the SANG and the footpath. Setbacks vary between 10m and 40m at the corner of the site, which allows sufficient angle of site over the solar panels with the retention of views beyond. The views are only properly appreciated once leaving the woodland to the east because of the density of coverage within Rooks Nest Wood and thus the impact is limited.

Ancillary works

58. Substation: The substation is positioned 15-25m from Barkham Ride in the eastern corner of the site. It has a footprint of 60m² and a volume of 180m³. It will be appreciated in views from Barkham Ride, mostly across the splayed access entrance where visibility will limit the extent of hedgerow. However, it has a relatively modest height of 3m, which is only 800mm above the solar panels. It is also located at the eastern edge of the site where it is more contained. Moreover, it will not appear entirely foreign in the landscape given the existing powerlines passing through the site above. Subject to suitable landscape planting in Condition 5, no objection is raised.
59. A separate storage shed is located alongside the substation building. It is smaller in size and because of its siting closer to the corner of the site, is better screened in views from Barkham Ride. The associated parking and turning area consist of compacted gravel and does not contribute to any additional harm beyond that already identified. On the basis of the above observations, there are no objections.
60. Transformers: Five transformer buildings are proposed, each with a height of 3m and volume of 42m³. They will be positioned 70m north of St James Church, south of Footpath 10 near Rooks Nest Wood, 15m south of Barkham Ride, along the eastern boundary 90m to the south of Barkham Ride and in the south eastern corner of the site, some 300m to the north of Longmoor Bog. In general, they are located in isolated locations within the solar farm where impacts are very limited with the exception of the transformer building alongside Barkham Ride. However, in that location it will be sited behind hedgerow. Given their height is only 700mm above the solar panels and there are only five in total, they will not contribute to any noticeable additional impression on the landscape and are acceptable.
61. Fencing: Deer type fencing will surround the solar farm and both sides of the Greenway. Because much of the fencing is at the edge of the solar farm and there is a height of 2.4m (on security grounds), the fencing will be apparent in the landscape and it contrasts with more traditional wire or post and rail fencing in the area. However, it will also be well screened either by existing vegetation (eg along Commonfield Lane) or proposed hedgerow (eg along Barkham Ride). Moreover, where it is visible, it is very open in nature, allowing for sightlines through the fence, only interrupted by the fence posts. Along the Greenway, there is broadly at least 25m separation between the fences on either side such that there is no imposition or dominance imposed on users of the footpath or bridleway. Some post and rail

fencing is also proposed along the Greenway where it does not adjoin the solar panels and this is an entirely reasonable and expected feature in the landscape.



Fencing elevation

62. Access and internal roads: There are 470m of access roads around the site and a new farm access west to east across the southern part of the site. These roads are unpaved, being made of compacted gravel and Condition 25 reinforces this. Most of the access is grass only and will be used rarely such that they will fit within the countryside setting amongst the solar panels. As they are not paved, they are easily reversible over time. Condition 4 requires ground level details in the event that raising of ground levels is required in order to ensure a more detailed assessment prior to the commencement of works.
63. Lighting: Paragraph 180 of the NPPF aims to limit the impact of light pollution from artificial light on local amenity, intrinsically dark landscapes, and nature conservation. The wider solar farm will not be lit and is for security/maintenance purposes only. Lighting will be provided around the key infrastructure (substation and transformers). Whilst largely acceptable, Condition 19 requires further details on ecological grounds and this limits any impact upon the night sky to negligible levels. Condition 19 also ensures that the lighting is building mounted and sensor activated only.
64. CCTV: Closed circuit TV is included around the site but there is an absence of detail about locations, type, or heights of any associated poles. The use of CCTV is not opposed in principle and can be managed in a suitable manner (such as on the proposed fencing) but further details are required by Condition 17.
65. Greenway: The proposed Greenway is a positive outcome for the character of the area, allowing for increased recreation in the area. It will be surfaced to ensure continued use but this does not weigh against the proposal. Interpretative boards are required in Condition 8 (see paragraph 81) and these are modest elements that provide visual and historic interest rather than detracting from the setting. It has an open form, being about 25m wide in most parts.
66. Roadworks to Barkham Ride: The works associated with the laying of the grid connection extend for 2km north to the existing substation on Barkham Road. They are mostly confined to the adopted highway but any effect on the road surface is temporary only and will include making good in the resurfacing of the road. There are no in-principle objections.

Conclusion

67. The cumulative effect of the above development is such that there is encroachment of development within the countryside. However, it is not unacceptable on account of the existing and proposed screening, the circumstances of the proposal being a renewable energy project that cannot be provided anywhere other than the countryside and because there remains ample separation between settlements to the north, west and east in Barkham, Arborfield and Finchampstead.

Heritage, Conservation and Archaeology

68. Section 66 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 states that development must ensure the preservation of any nearby listed building, including its setting, Policy TB24 of the MDD Local Plan requires the conservation and enhancement of Listed Buildings and Scheduled Monuments, including their views and setting.
69. Policy TB26 of the MDD Local Plan allows development to or adjacent to Areas of Special Character where it will retain and enhance the traditional, historical, local, and special character of the building or area and its setting.
70. Section 16 of the NPPF requires consideration of the harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset. At paragraph 189 of the NPPF, heritage assets 'should be conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance, so that they can be enjoyed for their contribution to the quality of life of existing and future generations'. Paragraph 199 states that 'great weight should be given to the asset's conservation' and that more important the asset, the greater the weight given should be. Paragraph 201 then notes that where there is less than substantial harm, it should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use.
71. The north western corner of the site comprises several Grade II Listed Buildings, an Ancient Monument, Area of Special Character and Building of Traditional Local Character.

Adjacent to and/or within 30m

- Moated site and associated enclosure at Church Farm – Scheduled Monument status since 1977
- Church Cottage - Grade II Listed Building status since 1986
- Church of St. James - Grade II Listed Building status since 1967

Within 500m

- Barkham Square - Grade II Listed Building status since 1967
- Barkham Manor - Grade II status Listed Building.
- Southern boundary wall to Barkham Manor – Grade II status Listed Building.
- The Bull Public House and Smithy - Grade II status Listed Building
- Sparks Farmhouse - Grade II status Listed Building.

Non-Designated Heritage Assets within 500m

- Brook Farm House – identified as a Building of Traditional Local Character
- Associated former building of Brook Farm, including old stables, and a granary and nearby barn to east side of Barkham Road)
- Manor Cottage, Barkham Road
- Brook Cottage
- The White Cottage
- The Bothy and The Stable House, historically associated with the listed building, Barkham Square

Other

- Barkham Church and Manor – Area of Special Character (local authority classification) that encompasses all the above noted heritage assets both designated and non-designated
- Barkham Manor grounds – Local Historic Parks and Gardens, a local authority classification

Moated site

72. Church Cottages is surrounded by a moat, which is listed as a Scheduled Monument. The moat is water-filled and in good condition. It is of irregular shape with a causeway on the north-west side. Observations in 1982 suggested at least one recut of the moat and deliberate backfilling after the middle ages. Adjacent to the moat on the north-east side is a field surrounded on all sides by a ditch and stands 0.5m higher than surrounding land. It is considered to represent the farmyard area of the original manor.
73. Moated sites are representative of the upper class of medieval society. Their purpose is to display wealth and influence. Many are found throughout the country but a concentration is found in the midlands, south, and east of England. Whilst considered as a single class of monument there are wide variations in the design and form of each site.
74. Beyond the moat further structures and features such as fish ponds, field systems and stock enclosures are also found, often only remaining as buried archaeological features. Therefore the moated site and any associated buildings and structures should be viewed as part of a manorial and agricultural landscape. They should not be viewed in isolation or as defensive features.
75. The moated site continues to sit as part of a rural agricultural parish. The immediate surrounding environment illustrates its original setting. This ongoing connection of the site to its agricultural hinterland allows the site to be understood as a part of that landscape rather than a disconnected and isolated feature within it. Therefore the scheduled monument draws some significance from its setting. The site retains an important connection to its rural agricultural hinterland which allows the site to be experienced as part of that landscape.
76. Historic England were consulted and have raised objection to the original and revised schemes. Their view is that the design and layout of the solar array will result in unsympathetic development within the setting of a medieval site which retains a rural and agricultural character in their view.

77. Expanding on this, the application will result in the loss of the agricultural hinterland and introduce a new built form to the rural landscape. The proposals will also disconnect the site and the agricultural landscape which will harm how the site is appreciated and viewed. This is less than substantial harm, at a moderate level. There is no formal scale of less than substantial harm but the harm, in the eyes of Historic England, it is moderate.
78. The panels have an 'industrial' element and built form to the current agricultural and rural landscape. Vegetation bounds the moat on all sides and allows glimpsed views both to and from the monument which are more open in winter than in summer. These views are limited but a sense of an agricultural hinterland can be appreciated, illustrating the medieval situation. The development will result in a material change to this surrounding landscape during its lifetime.
79. Approaches to the site on existing public rights of way allow open views of the agricultural landscape beyond the existing vegetation, which is denser in some areas than others. This allows the moated site to be viewed and appreciated within its original environment (a rural agricultural parish).
80. The *Historic England Good Practice Advice Note 3: The setting of heritage assets* states that where adverse impacts are identified these should be minimised where possible. In the view of Historic England, an increase in the buffer from 20m to 25m in the revised scheme (albeit with the fence to 21m) does not demonstrate a minimisation of identified harm and the view is that alternative solutions still exist and that these should be explored in order to minimise the identified harm and bring about the support of Historic England.
81. Whilst not changing the overall assessment of harm, the following would slightly improve the proposals as submitted:
- The re-introduction of some form of vegetation between the solar array and the moated site of Church Farm on its south eastern facing side in the form of dappled/sporadic planting rather than a 'green screen' which will serve to break up appearance of the solar farm during its operation life but will not result in a loss of views when the field reverts to agricultural use.
 - The installation of some form of interpretation of the scheduled monument and its immediate landscape, allowing an introduction to the public to the scheduled monument and its landscape that do not solely rely on an interpretation board.
82. These form Condition 5 and 8 respectively.

Listed buildings

83. The topography is a significant influence on the original siting of St James Church and the former Moated site occupied by Church Cottages as they sit on a northern east edge promontory above the valley. The land slopes away from the Church to the north east. This location therefore has a focal point and status in the landscape. The Church of St James steeple is a key feature in the immediate area and is visible in views from local highways including to the north east and to the south.
84. Church Cottages with the Church Tower behind are a visible feature in views across the relatively flat topography of the field north of the Barkham Ride and at the existing

field entrance located about 135m from the west and 60m from the east edge on Barkham Lane.

85. What is being considered is the 'setting' of the designated Heritage Assets and Historic England Guidance on Setting of Listed Buildings GPA3, Setting, is defined in the Annex 2 Glossary to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

'The surroundings in which a heritage asset is experienced. Its extent is not fixed and may change as the asset and its surroundings evolve. Elements of a setting may make a positive or negative contribution to the significance of an asset, may affect the ability to appreciate that significance or may be neutral.'

86. The view of the Council's Conservation Officer is that the encroachment of the solar farm around this significant group of designated Heritage Assets as proposed in the revised scheme remains harmful. The suggestion of a 25m buffer is less so in reality, with the fence line at 21m and an access road positioned between the fence and the solar panels. This would result in a somewhat abrupt and harsh line to the meadow buffer transition zone. Whilst the removal of the footpaths in this area improves the broader setting of these assets, the buffer zone is still insufficient to wholly overcome issues of harm to their setting and their disassociation from the agricultural fields that provide context. As such, it is considered the development would still be harmful with respect to the setting and context of the designated heritage assets and that the harm is less than substantial in nature.
87. Paragraph 200 of the NPPF needs to be borne in mind which states that it is expected that 'any harm to, or loss of, the significance of a designated heritage asset (from its alteration or destruction, or from development within its setting), should require clear and convincing justification'. This, in the view of the Council's Conservation Officer, has not been provided.

Archaeology

88. Policy TB25 of the MDD Local Plan requires the retention of archaeological sites in situ. The Environment Statement submitted with the application acknowledges that the majority of the Site has never been built on and so archaeological survival potential is therefore likely to be high. Any archaeological remains would be expected to be beneath the topsoil and cut into the underlying geology, at a likely depth of 0.5–1.0m below ground level. Mechanised ploughing is likely to have reworked the upper 0.3 metres of the ground. Archaeological remains may have been truncated, but not removed.
89. Sensitive buried heritage receptors include moderate potential for pre historic remains, Roman remains, early and late medieval remains and High potential for post-medieval remains of isolated finds of agricultural features, mostly associated with the moated Scheduled Monument.
90. A geophysical report was submitted as part of the application. Berkshire Archaeology were consulted as part of the application and have reviewed the report. It only covers a small fraction of the site due to the crops being too high when the survey was commenced. There is an intention for the investigations to recommence once harvesting occurs in later September.
91. The small amount of geophysics that has been carried out has shown that archaeology does survive, and this can be expected to extend into other areas of the

site, with none being eliminated at this point. The main concern is with any fixed elements, such as access, ancillary infrastructure and specific screening required

92. The limited information submitted with the application to date is undesirable but not unacceptable. For a policy-compliant approach, Condition 9 requires the provision of further details prior to the commencement of works. It may be necessary to employ methods such as “floating foundations/substructures) to avoid any harm to archaeological deposits if these conflict with the scheme and this would be borne out in this pre commencement approach.

Conclusion

93. The views of Historic England and the Council’s Conservation Officer are that there is identified harm. Berkshire Archaeology also hold reservations, mostly brought about by the lack of information submitted with the application. These variances require consideration of the application in the wider planning balance, as detailed in paragraphs 164-174. Part of that consideration is that the harm identified above is temporary in nature for a maximum of 25 years.

Neighbour Amenity

94. Policy CP3 of the Core Strategy aims to protect neighbouring amenity and Policy CC06 and Appendix 1 of the MDD Local Plan requires that development protect noise sensitive receptors from noise impact.
95. There are residential receptors around the site, including:
- At Barkham Square, about 120m to the west of the north western corner
 - The limited development location of Barkham and continuing along Edneys Hill 430m to the north
 - The modest development location of Finchampstead, the western edge of which is 500-550m to the east
 - Properties lining the northern side of Nine Mile Ride generally about 550m to south
 - Properties adjacent to and within 20m of the south western corner at Arborfield Garrison
 - More localised development on Barkham Street, Barkham Ride and Church Lane which lies adjacent to or in very close proximity to the sit
96. Given the limited height of the solar panels (2.1m) and their setback of at least 10m from the boundary around the perimeter of the site, there are no perceived neighbour amenity concerns, including dominance and loss of light. The substation is at least 17m from the boundary with Model Farm and similarly poses no unreasonable dominance. The transformer buildings and Greenway are set within the site, well away from neighbouring dwellings such that no issue is raised.
97. It is also envisaged that noise disturbance from vehicle movements is unlikely to pose an unacceptable impact to neighbouring residents. Noise transmission (or humming) from the substation is unlikely to pose an issue but because of its siting alongside Model Farm, Condition 24 seeks confirmation on this aspect.

Glint and Glare

98. A glint and glare report was submitted as part of the application. It identifies reflections through a number of times over the year. As the solar panels are fixed at 20 degrees, facing south. By virtue of the angle of the sun and the angle of the solar panels, most of the solar radiation throughout the year is reflected skywards with no impact on the surroundings.

Residential

99. The results take account of properties within 1km. They indicate that glint and glare is only likely when the sun is lower in the sky at dawn for some days in June and September. Dwellings in and around Church Cottages, Barkham Ride, Barkham Street and upper Commonfield Lane will be partially affected but suitably and adequately ameliorated by existing (and proposed) vegetation. It is also understood that any incidents of glint and glare would be limited to specific time periods representing 0.02% of the year, not accounting for vegetation. This is an acceptable outcome and no objection is raised.

Road traffic

100. The only roads running adjacent to the site are Barkham Road running through the centre of the site and Commonfield Lane along the western edge of the lower half of the site. As the panels will face south, only the northern side of Barkham Ride is likely to be affected. The same conclusions reached above with respect to residential impacts are concluded in terms of any impacts upon the road network. Existing and proposed landscaping will limit the potential impacts and no objection is raised.

Aircraft

101. The effect of glint during a flight is weather dependent and would be almost instantaneous when the flight path coincides with the reflected beam band. The nearest airports are Blackbushe (7.3km) and Farnborough (14.2km). Heathrow is 31km to the east. The glint and flare assessment indicates that there is no affection on flight paths, including approaches to these airports. No objection is raised.

Footpath users

102. Footpath users will be subject to a higher degree of glare by virtue of the greater proximity to the solar panels and the absence of significant landscaping such as along the eastern side of the proposed Greenway or the northern side of Footpath 10A. However, like all of the other identified impacts, it is dependent upon the time of day and weather conditions. The glint and glare assessment does not refer to this impact. Whilst not fatal to the application, it may be that additional measures are required and this is to be established as part of Condition 22.

Highway Access and Parking Provision

Parking

103. Policy CC07 and Appendix 2 of the MDD Local Plan stipulates minimum off street parking standards. Minimal parking facilities are required for the lifespan of the

development as it will operate without any permeant on site staff. A small informal car park is provided alongside the substation on Barkham Ride and this is adequate for likely parking demand and the Council's Highways Officer raised no objection. Cycle parking is considered unnecessary given the limited number of visitors and the negligible likelihood that they will be cycling.

Traffic generation

104. Policy CP6 of the Core Strategy requires, amongst other things, enhancement of road safety and development that does not cause highway problems or lead to traffic related environmental problems.
105. Paragraph 110 of the NPPF requires safe and suitable access to the site can be achieved for all users and that any significant impacts from the development on the transport network (in terms of capacity and congestion), or on highway safety, can be cost effectively mitigated to an acceptable degree.
106. Paragraph 111 of the NPPF states that development should only be prevented or refused on highways grounds if there would be an unacceptable impact on highway safe, or the residual cumulative impacts on the road network would be severe.
107. It is unlikely that traffic during the operational phase would have an adverse impact on the highway network. Any impact will be from construction traffic and decommissioning traffic with the applicant's estimates concluding that 1300 solar panels will be delivered per HGV. A transport statement has been submitted including a framework Construction Traffic Management Plan (CTMP) and a framework CEMP. There are also 470m of internal access roads.
108. It is indicated that the maximum number of vehicle trips would be 106 daily movements spread out over the operating day. With controlled deliveries this would not have an adverse impact on the highway network. HGV deliveries will be managed to be outside the peak hours and no deliveries will be able to arrive before the site opens.
109. The Transport Statement refers to a proposed route for construction vehicles to and from the M4, with signage will be used to direct traffic. This is acceptable for non-HGV traffic only due to the width restriction on Barkham Street. Heavy vehicles would need to approach/egress from/to the south. This will need to be included in the final Construction Traffic Management Plan in Condition 13.

Construction management

110. There are two compounds on either side of Barkham Ride, with entrances opposite each other. A construction programme has also been included with an estimated construction period of 10 months, which does not appear to be elongated. Wheel washing and street sweeping are proposed to be included which is supported.
111. There are some identified issues with the proposal including cycle parking for workers, fencing, gates, PROW protection and green measures. Decommissioning of the compounds is also imperative. It is recognised that this document will need to be reviewed by the appointed contractor. Highways is therefore content to secure the Construction Environmental Management Plan by Condition 14.

Access

112. Figure 4.1 of the Transport Statement sets out the proposed construction accesses into the site and swept paths for the largest vehicle have been submitted which allow for satisfactory access. It is also proposed that these accesses would be controlled using temporary traffic signals. This is also acceptable, subject to further details in the Construction Traffic Management Plan in Condition 13.
113. The gates are setback from Barkham Ride to ensure that no vehicle waits on the highway whilst the gate opens or closes. The first 15m would need to be bonded to the carriageway edge, as proposed and outlined in Condition 12.
114. Once construction is over, the access would need to be amended for maintenance use. This is outlined in Condition 27.
115. Visibility splays, using the actual speed limit, have been provided and are acceptable. At least 120m distance is achieved which is more than sufficient. Regardless, banksmen would control access which further improves the arrangement.
116. As part of the Greenway, a crossing is required across Barkham Ride. Securing the design and implementation details of such a crossing is to the satisfaction of the Council's Highways Officer in consultation with the Public Rights of Way Officer. See Condition 10.

Trees

117. Policy CC03 of the MDD Local Plan aims to protect green infrastructure networks, retain existing trees, and establish appropriate landscaping and Policy TB21 requires consideration of the landscape character.
118. An Arboricultural Impact Assessment (WSP, March 2021) provides details of the existing trees, tree groups and hedgerows within and adjacent to the site. There are 231 individual trees (38 Category A trees, mostly Oaks concentrated in the area around St James' Church), 17 tree groups and 15 hedges of varying length. It is noted that the majority of the existing vegetation will be retained and enhanced as part of the scheme proposals. Two veteran trees (English Oaks) have been identified to the north of Barkham Ride (T35 and T111)
119. The AIA indicates that the access tracks (which are unpaved) or PV panels are to be located outside the root protection areas of the veteran trees to avoid further harm to these locally important trees. Another 36 trees are Category A, mostly Oak trees
120. As part of the original proposal, 14 arboricultural features were proposed for removal to facilitate site access on Barkham Ride and for internal access tracks. One Category B tree (Oak) will be removed in the south eastern corner of the site. Several other low quality, category C trees will also need to be removed on either side of the site entrances off Barkham Ride to allow for the appropriate visibility splays from these entrances. The removal of 166m of low-quality hedge is almost entirely for visibility and access purposes in and around the site compounds and substation on Barkham Ride, The Arboricultural Impact Assessment will need to be updated to

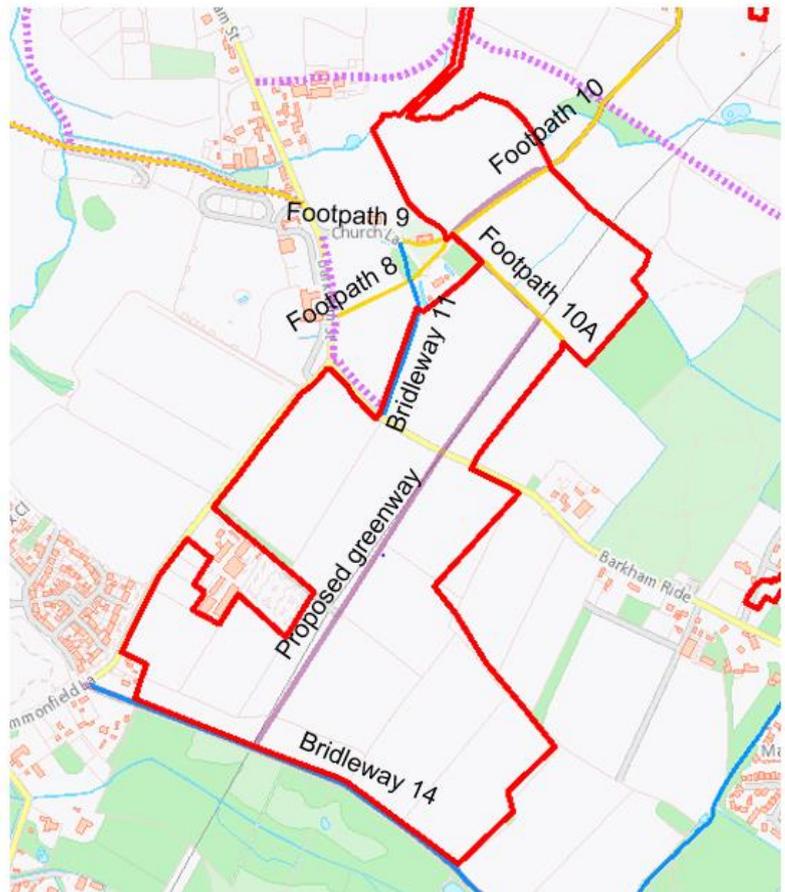
address the revised layouts and should be accompanied by an Arboricultural Method Statement in accordance with BS 5837:2012. See Condition 7.

121. The Council's Trees Officer has reviewed the AIA and the justification for the removal of trees and hedgerow and does not oppose the removal of these trees. Losses will be mitigated through an extensive programme of woodland and hedge planting, including around the compound/substation. Accordingly, no objection is raised, subject to replacement hedgerow planting with specimen trees along the site boundary with Barkham Ride. This is to be included in a revised landscape scheme in Condition 5.

Public Rights of Way

122. Paragraph 100 of the NPPF seeks to protect and enhance public rights of way and access, including taking opportunities to provide better facilities for users, for example by adding links to existing rights of way networks including National Trails.
123. Policy CC03 of the MDD Local Plan aims to promote accessibility, linkages, and permeability between and within existing green corridors including public rights of way such as footpaths, cycleways, and bridleways. There are a number of existing public rights of way running over the site and these footpaths will be altered or affected. These include Barkham Bridleways 11 and 14 and Footpaths 10 and 10A. It will also indirectly affect Barkham Footpaths 8 and 9.
124. The Council's Rights of Way Officer recognises that the change of use of the land from arable farmland to a solar farm will be a significant change to the landscape and will have a material effect on the path network. Currently the paths are used as quiet routes around the countryside and to link into Rooks Nest Wood SANG. Footpath 10 and 10A are field edge paths with an open aspect on one side and a hedgerow on the other. Changing the character of the land will have a corresponding detrimental effect on the rights of way network.

125. Bridleway 11 is a popular route for walking and riding, however the termination of the bridleway at Barkham Ride does limit the options for users at this point due to the busy nature of the road. It is framed by tree lines boundary between two fields and but glimpses, particularly during winter, will be evident. Bridleway 14 is outside the southern boundary of the site, forming part of the California Way Greenway, which is a very popular local route. Increased woodland next to this path is broadly acceptable with some additional shadowing of the surface an unavoidable consequence.



126. Screening of the footpath is not the ideal solution because this alters the amenity afforded to footpath users by reducing the outlook, increasing shading, and affecting the surface of the footpath (eg increased mud). This would need to be balanced with potential glare issues, as identified above in paragraph 22. Notwithstanding, there are opportunities within this scheme to provide an enhanced and improved network in compensation to this change which will ameliorate the effects and this weighs heavily in favour of the development.

127. The Council has a strategic aim to create the Greenway Route D from Commonfield Lane through to Edney's Hill and on to Wokingham. The proposed Greenway, as amended, runs through the site via the existing corridor created by the overhead powerlines. Running the Greenway along this area would mean that a wider channel of land is assigned for the public, avoiding the need to place fences too close to the Greenway which would detract from the overall enjoyment of the route. This 20-25m width also allows for additional planting, used for screening and to contribute to biodiversity as well as the provision of the heritage interpretative boards (see Condition 8). Finally, it allows for a softer ground route for equestrians.

128. On this basis, the Council's Public Rights of Way Officer is supportive of the scheme. However, this is subject to the following:

- The crossing point of the existing route at Barkham Ride is close to the junction and corner of Barkham Road, posing a significant safety risk. The crossing point for the alternative route at the pylons offers a better position for a crossing which would provide a safe crossing for pedestrians, cyclists, and equestrians. An uncontrolled crossing is proposed. However, this has not been agreed by the Council's Highways Officer and final details relating to this crossing to make

it safe and convenient for walkers and horse riders is required as part of Condition 11

- The Greenway would have additional width and formal surfacing, as a distinct contrast to the narrow and unmade paths at Footpath 8 and 10A. It is also likely that there would be additional use of these existing footpaths necessitating the expediting of improvements. Without some kind of surfacing on these paths it is likely to track a lot of mud and detritus onto and within the Greenway surface. Upgrades to the existing paths along Footpaths 8 and 10A as well as Footpath 10 are therefore specified as part of the wider Greenway works in Condition 10, taking the form of an aggregate path (type 1 granite and dust) for a 15m stretch from the Greenway for both paths, to provide a transition between the Greenway and the paths
- A bridleway link running parallel to the Barkham Road to link Bridleway 11 to the new Greenway would allow for much improved access for horse riders. At present, the bridleway is less used because of the issues linking into Barkham Ride and Barkham Road.
Officer comment: There is sufficient width for this link however the applicant is unwilling to undertake the works to provide this and as it falls outside the scope of the application, it is not feasible to condition it. Regular cultivation of the land means that the surface would need to be managed and this can occur as part of future works.
- The security fencing is very close to the new Greenway at the southern part of the development, presenting a 'pinch point' and to address this issue, the applicant is content to negotiate further details as part of the pre commencement arrangements in Conditions 5 and 10

129. Construction of the main Greenway (minus any wearing course) will take place in months 1-2 when the access tracks will also be constructed. The final wearing course of the Greenway will be laid in month 10 when landscaping works around the Greenway are undertaken. The Greenway will not open until completion of the construction works as the Greenway will likely be used as a construction haul route.

Ecology

130. Policy CP7 of the Core Strategy states that sites designated as of importance for nature conservation are to be conserved and enhanced and inappropriate development will be resisted.

131. Policy TB23 of the MDD Local Plan requires the incorporation of new biodiversity features, buffers between habitats and species of importance and integration with the wider green infrastructure network.

132. The site is adjacent to Longmoor Bog Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) to its south. To the immediate east of the site is Rooks Nest Wood, which is a SANG site providing a recreational site to nearby residents as an alternative to visiting the Thames Basin Heaths SPA. Rooks Nest Wood includes a Local Wildlife Site (LWS) and a Local Geological Site (LGS).

Bats

133. The bat surveys so far have highlighted the importance of Barkham Ride as a commuting and foraging route for bats. The post-development habitat changes will

also provide a number of additional ecological receptors that will be sensitive to artificial lighting. The detail of the type and extent of lighting has not been provided. The addendum to the Environmental Statement proposes that external lighting will be designed in accordance with a lighting strategy that is informed by best practice guidance. The Council's Ecology Officer raises no objection, subject to details of external lighting in Condition 19. If avoidance and mitigation measures are applied as per the Institute of Lighting Professionals guidance, adverse effects on nocturnal protected species will be negligible.

134. The access point from Barkham Ride into the southern compound will require the removal of T132 (in the Arboricultural Impact Assessment and mislabelled as T103 in the plan). This tree was not identified as having bat roost potential in the ground level tree assessment undertaken. However, the Arboricultural Impact Assessment includes in the notes that it has a declining crown and major deadwood in crown, raising the potential for this tree to be in the process of developing bat roost features. Accordingly, the Construction Environmental Management Plan in Condition 14 is to include the requirement for protected species mitigation measures for bats to be included and that this should be based on an up-to-date review of the bat roost potential of all trees requiring removal or other work to enable access.

Badgers

135. The confidential Badger Monitoring Survey Report has been reviewed and indicates that there are active badger setts in the vicinity and that badgers are likely foraging across the site. Security fencing around the solar panels has the potential to reduce the availability of foraging habitat to the local badger clans.
136. Whilst a number of habitat enhancements will occur outside of the fenced areas, the Council's Ecology Officer is not convinced that this is sufficient to provide compensation for loss of foraging area. It is acknowledged in the Environmental Statement addendum that there is potential for badger gates to be provided at strategic locations in the fence lines in order to maintain access to foraging habitat for these species.
137. As fencing and animal access points are not given in the plans, ecological permeability details across the site for protected species and species of principal importance is required. Provided this mitigation measure is implemented as part of Condition 16, the proposed development is unlikely to lead to adverse effects on the local badger population (or other species of principal importance locally such as Brown Hare and Hedgehogs).

Reptiles

138. The site is adjacent to one of the best (known about) sites for widespread reptile species in Wokingham Borough. It is likely that parts of the site support these reptiles, including through providing hibernation locations. The Council's Ecology Officer is of the opinion that the risk to reptiles during construction can be adequately mitigated through the application of reasonable avoidance measures (RAMs), including supervised vegetation clearance of high-risk locations. An outline of such RAMs to be implemented during construction is provided in the Environmental Statement addendum (table 4.2). However, these will need to be worked up and

integrated with other environmental measures necessary during construction within a CEMP in Condition 14.

139. The habitat changes that are proposed to achieve a habitat biodiversity net gain are also likely to lead to an increased carrying capacity for the widespread reptile species on the application site, leading to beneficial effects for these species.

Great Crested Newts

140. It has not been possible through surveys to rule out the presence of great crested newts in nearby waterbodies. It is likely that the species of principal importance, Common Toad, is present on site also. The Environmental Assessment recommends precautionary RAMs for amphibian species (along the lines of those also proposed for reptiles). If these are included in the detailed CEMP, then the development is unlikely to adversely affect local amphibian populations.

Barn Owls

141. Outside but near to the site are two Barn Owl boxes which are part of a national monitoring scheme for the species. Barn Owls are known to breed in these boxes and are very likely to use the fields of the application site to forage for food. The Barn Owl Trust considers solar farms to be compatible with ongoing foraging by this species and has issued a statement to this effect. However, it is important to recognise that this will depend on ongoing grassland management regime between and around the panels. The Council's Ecology Officer expects that the LEMP in Condition 15 will include as an objective the ongoing provision of good foraging habitat for Barn Owls (particularly in the winter months). The extent of conversion from grassland to woodland/tree'd habitat proposed by this application is unlikely to be detrimental to the local Barn Owl population provided that the other grassland enhancements are secured through detailed design and LEMP implementation.

Invertebrates

142. A number of trees including Tree 132 (number from the Arboricultural Impact Assessment) are proposed to be removed to improve the sight lines of the access points to the site. The deadwood features of these trees are likely to support a number of saproxylic species that are considered notable or rare. The root plates of the trees could well be supporting Stag Beetle which is a species of principal importance. Whilst loss of saproxylic habitat supporting rare invertebrates is not an offence (the presence of Violet Click Beetle is unlikely), it is important to acknowledge that this habitat is rare and can take a long time to replace.
143. The retention of as much woody material on site in a form that can continue to support these rare invertebrates and species of principal importance is imperative. Moving and retaining the felled tree trunks and root plates in the area proposed for woodland creation would be much better use of the material than sending it to waste or chipping and taking off-site. Accordingly, the Council's Ecology Officer recommends that the detailed design of the soft landscaping should include creation of log piles and stumparies from felled and cut trees on site. The LEMP should also include as an objective the ongoing provision of deadwood material within suitable habitats, particularly as this provides additional foraging material for the local badger clans.

Biodiversity Net Gain

144. Within Natural England's National Habitat Networks map, the entire site is within a 'Restorable Habitat Zone' except for the southern area within approximately 250m of the SSSI which is considered 'Fragmentation Action Zone'.
145. a revised Biodiversity Net Gain Assessment (ref: 70069260 Appendix 6-7, August 2021) has been submitted to consider the habitat changes proposed as part of the development.
146. A short section of the Barkham Brook is included within the site. The assessment justifies not needing to include a Modular River Corridor survey to consider the river corridor condition because the development will keep a 10m minimum stand-off to the river bank top and the only modification in this buffer zone is soft landscaping to enhance the habitat units provision. The Council's Ecology Officer agrees that this is a reasonable approach provided that the buffer is respected when it comes to detailed design.
147. The headline figures for the remaining categories of habitat units and hedgerow units generated by the development are a healthy gain. There are only a few minor errors in the options selected for the many habitat/hedgerow lines. These would not be sufficient to consider there to be a risk to achieving a 10% biodiversity net gain.
148. Whilst it is possible to create the proposed habitats and hedgerows within the scheme to match the BNG calculation, a cross check the soft landscaping proposals to confirm that they align and are capable of providing the habitat types proposed indicates several discrepancies or areas of concern:
 - The species *Genista lydia* is included in the native hedgerow mix, scrub mix and shrub layer mix, which is a non-native species
 - The woodland edge mix includes *Fraxinus excelsior* which it is inappropriate to plant due to the high risk of failure from Ash dieback.
 - The woodland edge mix is a limited selection of species as a transition from woodland to grassland and requires more scrub and fruit species.
 - The broadleaved woodland mix is a limited selection of species at an unjustified large size for the planting density. The species *Tilia cordata* is not suited to the soil type for the proposed woodland location. The species *Sorbus torminalis* is proposed at an oddly high percentage
 - The canopy layer wet woodland mix is an odd selection with the species *Betula pubescens*, *Quercus robur*, and *Salix cinerea* to form a lesser component with a more diverse mix including *Populus tremula* and *Populus nigra* subsp. *betulifolia*
 - The understorey layer wet woodland mix should include *Frangula alnus*, *Salix pupurea*, and *Prunus spinosa* in lieu of *Ilex aquifolium*, *Prunus padus*, *Quercus petraea*, or *Sorbus aucuparia*
 - The species *Viburnum opulus* is not appropriate to plant in the southern half of the site where the ground is more acidic.
 - The Greenway needs to be set back from the hedgerow at the northern end of the site in order to allow a structural gradient and room for the hedgerows to grow without needing frequent cutting along their length

- The wildflower EM4F sections are needlessly complex in shape and set out in an arrangement that is going to make ongoing management harder and requires review
- There is no species rich native hedgerow with trees that is expected according to the BNG assessment
- The grassland EM2 seed mix is not suitable to make shade tolerant grassland to a standard of 'other neutral grassland' at moderate condition. There would need to be greater diversity of species sown in the areas currently marked for EM2, factoring in some more shade tolerant hedgerow and woodland species, in order to account for the variety of conditions that the solar panel array will produce.

149. Notwithstanding these concerns, the Council's Ecology Officer is satisfied that these changes can be accommodated at detailed design stage, mostly via soft landscaping and greenway design details in Condition 5 and 10. The former is to show compliance with the submitted Biodiversity Net Gain Assessment – Update, WSP, ref: 70069260 Appendix 6-7, August 2021.

150. The Biodiversity Net Gain Assessment acknowledges that the habitat created and/or enhanced needs to be maintained for a minimum period of 30 years for it to be considered a viable net gain. The assessment proposes that this is best secured through provision of a Landscape Environmental Management Plan (LEMP) and this would allow for its implementation beyond the lifetime of the solar farm.

Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area

151. Policy CP8 of the Core Strategy states that where development is likely to have an effect on the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area (TBH SPA), it is required to demonstrate that adequate measures to avoid and mitigate any potential adverse effects are delivered. The site is within 5km of the TBH SPA but the scope of the works does not result in a net gain in the number of dwellings whereby there is no requirement for mitigation.

Flooding and Drainage

152. Policy CC09 of the MDD Local Plan requires consideration of flood risk from historic flooding. The majority of the site and access thereto is located within Flood Zone 1 and the proposal represents no clear flood risk or vulnerability. The northern extremity (2.5 hectares) lining Barkham Brook is within Flood Zone 2 (Land with a 1 in 1000 (0.1%) chance of flooding each year) and is subject to surface water flooding.

153. The proposal includes a 10m buffer to Barkham Brook for ecological purposes but some solar panels would be within Flood Zone 2. Annexure 3 was added to NPPF 2021 and it now lists solar farms as essential infrastructure which is allowed within Flood Zone 2. There is a further 680mm to the underside of the panel, which further reduces any flood risk. Therefore, there is no in principle objection to the installation of panels within Flood Zone 2. Further, the fence is a deer type fence which will not interrupt water flow.

154. Policy CC10 of the MDD Local Plan requires sustainable drainage methods and the minimisation of surface water flow. The footings for the solar panels will cumulatively contribute to some additional permeability across the site but the area underneath

the panels will remain unchanged. As the panels are tilted at 20 degrees, there are no concerns with affecting existing levels of onsite permeability. The parking area around the substation and the access roads are gravel which ensures there is no further affectation to the rural permeability.

155. Paragraph 2.8 of Flood Risk Assessment notes that water conveyance features along Barkham Brook were generally poorly maintained, with dense vegetation along their base and debris partially blocking culverts. The vegetation strip running alongside ditches and watercourses was found to protect these features from any debris capable of increasing the risk of blockage, which will also be beneficial during construction and on a post-development stage. Subject to reconfirmation of final details in Condition 20, the Council's Drainage Officer raises no objection.
156. The Environment Agency were also consulted and they raised no objection, subject to consideration of measures to mitigate the impact of more extreme future flood events such as raising the ground level of the substation building or incorporating flood proofing measures. Given all buildings are within flood zone 1, this is considered unnecessary. Consideration of the sequential test was also required. This was undertaken in Section 5 of the Flood Risk Assessment and it concludes that because essential infrastructure is permitted and that the solar panels will be elevated above the flood level, the sequential test is satisfied. There is no objection to this approach.

Employment Skills

157. Policy TB12 of the MDD Local Plan requires an employment skills plan (ESP) with a supporting method statement for major development such as the subject application. It is intended to provide opportunities for training, apprenticeship, or other vocational initiatives to develop local employability skills required by developers, contractors, or end users of the proposal.
158. Based on a cost of works of £19.3m, the employment skills plan would generate a need for 11 community skills support positions (eg work experience or CSCS training courses), seven apprenticeships and seven jobs. This is incorporated into a s106 legal agreement.

Contamination

159. The area is not listed as potentially contaminated on Council's inventory.

Atomic Weapons Location

160. Policy TB04 of the MDD allows development in the vicinity of the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Burghfield but only where the increase in density can be safely accommodated. The site is within the 12km zone and the proposed use for a renewable energy project is a suitable use.

Accessibility (incorporating The Public Sector Equality Duty (Equality Act 2010))

161. 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.

162. Buildings will be built at ground level and the Greenway will allow for improved pedestrian connectivity for all users. Therefore, there is no indication or evidence that persons with protected characteristics as identified by the Act have or will have different needs, experiences, issues and priorities and there would be no significant adverse impacts as a result of the development.

Community Infrastructure Levy

163. The proposed use is not CIL liable.

PLANNING BALANCE AND CONCLUSION

164. The application should be determined against the development plan as whole. For large scale and EIA 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.

165. Moreover, paragraph 8 of the NPPF seeks to achieve sustainable development, with reference to economic, social and environmental objectives. The Planning Practice Guidance also notes that:

Local planning authorities should not rule out otherwise acceptable renewable energy developments through inflexible rules on buffer zones or separation distances. Other than when dealing with setback distances for safety, distance of itself does not necessarily determine whether the impact of a proposal is unacceptable. Distance plays a part, but so does the local context include factors such as topography, the local environment and near-by land uses. This is why it is important to think about in what circumstances proposals are likely to be acceptable and plan on this basis.

166. The proposed development would result in some harm to the landscape setting. The landscape has no formal designation but valued features of the site would be impacted. There would be some encroachment of development into the countryside and between settlements but not sufficient to raise concern and particularly when a development of this type would be anticipated in a countryside setting. The harm would be partially mitigated by additional landscaping and to some extent the temporary 25-year period of the application. There is a large expectation that the solar panels and associated infrastructure would be expected elements in the countryside. It attracts moderate weight.
167. There remain objections to the scheme from the relevant consultees in relation to the likely harm to the scheduled monument, listed buildings and archaeological significance in and around Church Cottages. However, it is partially offset by the proposed 25m buffer as well as existing and proposed landscaping. More significantly, though, the harm is limited to 25 years plus remediation and this is weighed against the age of the assets. Archaeological significance can be retained with further details and measures. This attracts moderate weight.

168. There is also loss of best and most versatile agricultural land but it is offset somewhat by the retention of Grade 2 farmland for the farmer, the fact that it is not a permanent loss of agricultural land that might be expected with housing development and it is feasible that livestock could still utilise the land in the future. The departure from national and local policy attracts minor weight.
169. The proposal will involve the removal of some trees, mostly of lesser quality and this and the above aspects contribute to some wider environmental harm. However, there is a net increase in tree planting and grassland management, even when discounting the carbon sink at the south of the site. Additionally, the Council's Ecology Officer has concluded that ecological harm can be mitigated and that there will be a net biodiversity gain of at least 10% over the next 30 years. This environmental benefit attracts minor weight in favour of the scheme, countering some of the other environmental effects associated with loss of agricultural land, landscape and visual harm and potential impacts upon heritage assets.
170. The Council's Highways Officer has indicated broad support for the scheme with manageable impacts associated with traffic movements being adequately managed through the course of the construction period. This should be considered in the context of the economic benefits associated with the employment generation (including an Employment Skills Plan) whereby some localised impact will always be anticipated but otherwise managed to an acceptable level. Further economic benefit is evident with the solar farm allowing the Council to reinvest profits into the future.
171. The Council's Rights of Way Officer has also indicated broad support with improved footpath connections through the site for walkers and horse riders. This attracts minor weight in favour of the scheme.
172. 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. In this case, it is expected to power 8200 homes, removing approximately 92,242 tonnes of carbon emissions with an additional 592 tonnes from the carbon sink tree planting. The planting of nearly 11,000 trees forms part of the Council's goal of planting 250,000 trees in the next five years.
173. All of the above measures should be read in the context of the immediate urgency of the Climate Emergency Action Plan implemented by the Council and the immediate deadline of becoming carbon neutral by 2030 as well as the UN IPCC 2021 Climate Change report released in early August 2021.
174. This benefit holds significant weight in favour in the planning balance and it is concluded that on this basis, conditional approval for a temporary period of 25 year is recommended.