

TITLE	Barkham Solar Farm Update
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Climate Emergency Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 11 December 2023
WARD	Barkham
LEAD OFFICER	Deputy Chief Executive - Graham Ebers

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

The delivery of the Barkham Solar Farm is identified as a key priority of the Council's Climate Emergency Action Plan.

The project will also generate a considerable net income for the Council over 25 years which will be introduced into the Council's annual budget using an equalisation reserve.

RECOMMENDATION

To note the update on progress on the delivery of the Barkham Solar Farm.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

In March of this year, SSEN advised that the connection date for the Barkham Solar Farm had been pushed out from 2026 to 2037.

Following ongoing negotiations, WBC are now in receipt of a written revised connection offer from SSEN for August 2026 connection. At the time of writing the Council's Project and Legal teams are in the process of considering the offer and seeking further clarifications. More detail will be reported on the evening of the O&S Committee. This new connection offer represents a significant and positive step in the delivery of the project.

Bouygues E&S (the Council's contractor) have remobilised and over the next couple of months will complete their survey work and progress the design ready for discharging the planning conditions.

Following the above, the business case for the solar farm will be updated and reported back into the Climate Emergency Overview and Scrutiny Committee in February 2024.

Background

In March of this year, SSEN advised that the connection date for the Barkham Solar Farm had been pushed out from 2026 to 2037.

This current update follows on from the update provided at the previous Climate Emergency Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 25th September 2023. At that time it was advised that following positive engagement with SSEN and National Grid, WBC were awaiting a formal revised connection date/offer from SSEN more closely aligned with the original connection offer of 2026. O&S Committee were also advised that in light of the positive nature of the tripartite meetings between WBC, SSEN and National Grid, Bouygues E&S (the Council's contractor) were being remobilised to complete the surveying, design and contract pricing under their Pre-Construction Services Agreement.

Grid Connection Update

Since that last update further meetings and correspondence has occurred between WBC, SSEN and National Grid; culminating in WBC receiving a written revised connection offer letter from SSEN for August 2026 connection.

At the time of writing, the Council's Project and Legal teams are in the process of considering the offer and seeking further clarifications. More detail will be reported on the evening of the O&S Committee. This new connection offer represents a significant and positive step in the delivery of the project.

Bouygues' Remobilisation

Following remobilisation, Bouygues E&S commenced their survey work on 28th November 2023. Over the next couple of months they will complete their survey work and progress the design sufficiently to enable submission of details to the Local Planning Authority for approval under the various pre-commencement conditions imposed against the planning permission. These submissions to the Local Planning Authority are anticipated in February/March 2024.

Future Reporting

The financial business case for the Barkham Solar Farm was previously presented to, and supported by, the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on 5th October 2022.

The business case will be updated cognisant of the new SSEN Grid Connection Offer together with Bouygues' design progression and known changes to the market in terms of costs and values. Both the design progression and updated business case will be presented into Climate Emergency Overview and Scrutiny Committee in February 2024 (currently diarised for 29th February); followed by update reporting into Executive in March 2024.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces unprecedented financial pressures as a result of; the longer term impact of the COVID-19 crisis, Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the general economic climate of rising prices and the increasing cost of debt. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are optimised and are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	£26.8m	Yes	Capital
Next Financial Year (Year 2)			
Following Financial Year (Year 3)			

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision
Following receipt of the revised connection offer from SSEN and Bouygues' design progression, the business case will be updated, the delivery programme can be formalised and future spend will be profiled.

Cross-Council Implications (how does this decision impact on other Council services, including properties and priorities?)
The net income from the Solar Farm will be introduced into the Council's annual budget using an equalisation reserve.

Public Sector Equality Duty
An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken. The Initial Impact Assessment did not identify any potentially negative impacts upon persons with protected characteristics.

Climate Emergency – This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030
Generation of renewable energy through investment in solar farms is identified as a key priority under the Climate Emergency Action Plan (CEAP). The delivery of the Barkham Solar Farm is a specific target identified therein.

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2
N/A

List of Background Papers
None

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