

**ERECTION OF 34,320 GROUND MOUNTED SOLAR PHOTOVOLTAIC PANELS
GENERATING UP TO 8.24MW OF ENERGY AT HALSE FARM, HALSE**

Grid Reference: 315581.128441

Full Planning Permission

RECOMMENDATION AND REASON(S)

Recommended Decision: Conditional Approval

The proposed development will generate electricity from renewable sources contributing to tackling climate change and meeting renewable energy targets. There will be some significant short term harm to the visual amenities of the area, but the long term harm is considered to be limited. The benefits are, therefore, considered to outweigh the limited harm and the proposal is acceptable in accordance with Policy C12 (Renewable Energy) of the Taunton Deane Local Plan, Policies CP1 (Climate Change) and CP8 (Environment) of the Taunton Deane Core Strategy. The development will not cause harm to wildlife interests, the amenities of neighbouring property or the highway safety, nor will it lead to an increase in off-site flooding. It is, therefore, considered to be acceptable in accordance with Policies S1 (General Requirements), EN3 (Local Wildlife and Geological Interests) and EN12 (Landscape Character Areas) of the Taunton Deane Local Plan, Policy DM1 (General Requirements) and guidance contained in the National Planning Policy Framework.

RECOMMENDED CONDITION(S) (if applicable)

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

Reason: In accordance with the provisions of Section 91 Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended by Section 51(1) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004).

2. The development hereby permitted shall be carried out in accordance with the following approved plans:

(A1) DrNo HAL1-LP02-120503-01 Location Plan

(A1) DrNo HAL1-MP02-120813-r08 Modules Layout Plan

(A1) DrNo HAL1-ECO01-120813-r00 Landscape and Ecological Management Plan

(A1) DrNo OWL-TD01SIEMENS-120601-r01 Table Design

(A4) DrNo OWL2-INVERTER-120601-r02 Inverter Station 1000 kW

(A3) DrNo SH01-12022615-r00 Substation Building

(A3) Fence Drawing

Reason: For the avoidance of doubt and in the interests of proper planning.

3. Within 25 years and six months following the development hereby permitted being brought into use, or within six months of the cessation of electricity generation by the solar PV facility hereby permitted, whichever is the sooner, the solar PV panels, frames, ground screws, inverter housings, and all associated structures, foundations and fencing approved shall be dismantled and removed from the site. The site shall subsequently be restored in accordance with a scheme and method statement (that shall include deconstruction traffic management) that shall have been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority no later than three months following the cessation of power production.

Reason: To ensure that the site is adequately restored following the decommissioning of the site in the interests of the visual amenities of the area, in accordance with Policy DM1 of the Taunton Deane Core Strategy.

4. The site operator shall inform the Local Planning Authority within 5 days of being brought into use that the site is operational and producing electricity.

Reason: To allow the Local Planning Authority to keep a firm record of the date of operation, to allow effective future monitoring of the development.

5. Prior to the commencement of the development, details of a strategy to protect wildlife shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The strategy shall be based on the advice of Nicolas Pearson Associates' Extended phase 1 habitats survey dated May 2012 and aee's Draft Landscape and Ecological Management plan dated June 2012 and include:

- Details of protective measures to include method statements to avoid impacts on protected species during all stages of development;
- Details of the timing of works to avoid periods of work when the species could be harmed by disturbance;
- Measures for the retention and replacement and enhancement of places of rest for the species.

Once approved the works shall be implemented in accordance with the approved details and timing of the works unless otherwise approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority and thereafter the resting places and agreed accesses for wildlife shall be permanently maintained.

Reason: To protect wildlife and their habitats from damage in accordance with Policies DM1 and CP8 of the Taunton Deane Core Strategy and guidance contained in the National Planning Policy Statement.

6. (i) Before any part of the development hereby permitted is commenced, a

landscaping scheme, which shall include details of the species, siting and numbers to be planted, shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority.

- (ii) The scheme shall be completely carried out within the first available planting season from the date of commencement of the development, or as otherwise extended with the agreement in writing of the Local Planning Authority.
- (iii) For a period of five years after the completion of each landscaping scheme, the trees and shrubs shall be protected and maintained in a healthy weed free condition and any trees or shrubs that cease to grow shall be replaced by trees or shrubs of similar size and species, or the appropriate trees or shrubs as may be approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority.

Reason: To ensure that the proposed development makes a satisfactory contribution to the preservation and enhancement of the local character and distinctiveness of the area in accordance with Taunton Deane Local Plan Policy S2.

7. Prior to the commencement of development an Environmental, Landscape and Ecological Management Plan and a Construction Method Statement shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The Environmental Management Plan shall include details of how risks of water pollution shall be minimised during the construction phase of the development, the proposed method of decommissioning of the development and how the site will be maintained during the course of the development, including any temporary protection of ecological interests on the access routes. The Environmental Management Plan and Construction Method Statement shall be implemented as approved for the duration of the approved development including the decommissioning phase.

Reason: To ensure that the site is managed in an acceptable way to protect visual amenity and ecological interests on the site, in accordance with Policies DM1 and CP8 of the Taunton Deane Core Strategy.

8. Prior to the commencement of the development hereby permitted, a condition survey of the existing public highway including the road surface and boundary hedgebanks shall be carried out in accordance with details that shall previously have been agreed with the Local Planning Authority in consultation with the Local Highway Authority. Any damage caused to the highway and boundary hedgebanks shall be remedied by the developer within 6 months of the completion of the construction phase unless otherwise agreed in writing by the Local Planning Authority.

Reason: To ensure that the access roads are returned to their former condition in the interests of highway safety and the visual amenities of the area in accordance with Policy DM1 of the Taunton Deane Core Strategy.

9. The perimeter fencing hereby permitted shall be erected prior to the commencement of any other works on site unless otherwise agreed in writing by the Local Planning Authority.

Reason: To protect boundary trees, hedges and wildlife interests during the construction phase, in accordance with Policies DM1 and CP8 of the Taunton Deane Core Strategy.

10. The development hereby permitted by this planning application shall only be undertaken in accordance with the approved Flood Risk Assessment (Ref: J-3999.2-FM dated May 2012 and prepared by H20K) specifically including the following measures detailed within the FRA:

- All access routes shall be permeable surfaces constructed of either mown grass or unbound stones; and
- The drainage strategy is implemented in full prior to any new buildings or arrays being installed at the site.

Reason: To ensure that flood risk is not increased, and where possible reduced, in accordance with NPPF paragraph 102.

11. Construction Traffic shall be routed and managed as described in Sections 2.3, 2.4, and 2.7 to 2.10 of the Construction Traffic Management Plan and additional signage as suggested in Section 2.6 that shall have been previously agreed in writing by the Local Planning Authority prior to the commencement of the development hereby permitted shall be erected in the agreed locations prior to the commencement of the development and maintained for the duration of the construction phase.

Reason: To ensure that construction traffic is adequately managed in order to minimise the impact on the local highway network in accordance with Policy DM1 of the Taunton Deane Core Strategy.

12. The developer shall ensure that all vehicles leaving the site are in such condition as not to emit dust or deposit mud, slurry or other debris on the highway. In particular (but without prejudice to the foregoing), efficient means shall be installed, maintained and employed for cleaning the wheels of all lorries leaving the site, details of which shall have been agreed in writing by the Local Planning Authority beforehand and fully implemented prior to start of construction, and thereafter maintained until the completion of the construction phase.

Reason: In the interests of highway safety in accordance with Policy DM1 of the Taunton Deane Core Strategy.

13. The compound area at the site access shall be removed and the ground restored to its former condition within 1 month of the completion of the construction phase unless otherwise agreed in writing by the Local Planning

Authority.

Reason: In the interests of preserving the visual amenities of the area in accordance with Policy DM1 of the Taunton Deane Core Strategy.
This is a unique Reason

14. Notwithstanding the provisions of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order, 1995 (or any Order amending, replacing or re-enacting that Order), no fixed plant or machinery, buildings, structures and erections, or private ways shall be erected, extended, installed rearranged, replaced, repaired or altered at the site, other than those hereby permitted, without the further grant of planning permission.

Reason: To protect wildlife interests and the visual amenities of the area in accordance with Policies DM1 and CP8 of the Taunton Deane Core Strategy.

15. No external artificial lighting shall be installed on the site.

Reason: To protect wildlife interests and the visual amenities of the area in accordance with Policies DM1 and CP8 of the Taunton Deane Core Strategy.

Notes for compliance

1. The Local Highway Authority advise that:
 - Where works are to be undertaken on or adjoining the publicly maintained highway, a licence under Section 171 of the Highway Act 1980 must be obtained from the Highway Authority. Application forms can be obtained by writing to Mrs Maureen Atwell, Transport Development Group, Environment Dept, County Hall Taunton TA1 4DY, or by telephoning him on (01823 355645). Applications should be submitted at least four weeks before works are proposed to commence in order for statutory undertakers to be consulted concerning their services.
 - The applicant should be advised that at least seven days before access works commence the Highway Service Manager Taunton Deane Area Highways Office, Burton Place, Taunton must be consulted.
 - Under Section 59 of the Highways Act 1980 allows the Highway Authority to recover certain expenses incurred in maintaining highways, where the average cost of maintenance has increased by excessive use. The condition survey will be used as evidence should damage to the highway network occur during the construction phase of the development.
2. Wessex Water advise that there is 150mm PVC water distribution main crossing the site. The main must be protected which must include consideration of the following:

- The location of the main needs to be confirmed exactly on site and marked accurately on all drawings.
- No panels or other structures will be permitted within the existing easement area (statutory minimum 3m either side of centred over the main).
- Construction traffic over the route of the main will also need to be confined to no more than normal agricultural type vehicles.
- Failure of the main due to damage or other reasons could effect considerably damage and stop operation of the planned solar farm for some time.
- Any resultant repair works to the main will be rechargeable and likely at considerable cost.
- Immediate unfettered access is required around the clock to this main for essential maintenance or repair (to meet this requirement, subject to agreement, the access point could be modified with the use of a joint multi-pad lockable vehicular gate system).

The applicant should contact the development engineer Peter George (01823 225225) to agree arrangements.

PROPOSAL

This application seeks full planning permission for the erection of an 8.24MW solar installation. The application indicates that 34,320 solar PV panels would be positioned on the 18.6ha site, across the 3 fields described below.

The arrays are proposed to be laid out on tables 4 landscape panels high, with an overall height of around 2.78m from the ground level (slight variations may occur due to undulating ground level), with the front of the panels around 0.8m from the ground level. The frames would be fixed to the ground using stakes or ground screws.

The submitted landscape masterplan indicates that the hedgerow along the northern site boundary would be thickened with native species on its southern boundary and the eastern hedgerow would be allowed to grow up to screen views from the northeast. Gaps in the hedgerow along the green lane that passes through the site would be filled in with native species and a new hedgerow would be planted along the northern edge of the public footpath to the south. A 1.9m security fence would be provided around the perimeter of each of the 3 fields.

The application originally proposed that construction traffic would access the site via Tithill Lane, with construction traffic exiting via the Halse to Heathfield road. Following concerns raised by local residents, a new construction traffic management plan has been submitted. This revises these arrangements to route all construction traffic via the Halse to Heathfield road and then via existing farm tracks to join Tithill Lane at the end of the green lane.

SITE DESCRIPTION AND HISTORY

The site comprises three agricultural fields immediately to the south of Ash Priors Common, a designated County Wildlife Site. From the south of the Common,

running to the east of the northern part of the site and through the centre of the southern part is a sunken green lane which connects with the northern end of Tithill Lane and then on to Dene Road between Bishops Lydeard and Cotford St Luke.

The green lane is bound on both sides by mature hedge planting which screen views into the site along the majority of its length, although there are small gaps in places. As the lane rises to the south of the site, views are available of part of the site, framed by the hedges either side of the lane.

At the southern end of the green lane and the northern limit of the metalled part of Tithill Lane, a public footpath runs east towards Hopkins Farm. This path is elevated above the site and offers the most expansive public view across the application site.

The northern edge of the site at its boundary with Ash Priors Common comprises a mature hedgebank and mature trees at the edge of the wooded Common. The western and south western boundaries have mature hedgerows, whilst the east and south eastern hedge boundaries have more gaps and individual trees.

CONSULTATION AND REPRESENTATION RESPONSES

Consultees

BISHOPS LYDEARD & COTHELSTONE PARISH COUNCIL – The Council objects to the proposal on the following grounds:

- Tithill Lane is unsuitable for construction traffic as it is narrow, the surface is in poor condition and part of the road is a restricted byeway. Increased traffic along the road would pose a danger to pedestrians using the route.
- The development would spoil views both within the immediate area and from the Quantock Hills.

Should the application be approved, the Council would like to propose that a bond be put in place by the developers before construction work commences. This would cover any damage caused to Tithill Lane and associated Public Rights of Way. In addition it is requested that the connection with the National Grid network be constructed underground.

SCC - TRANSPORT DEVELOPMENT GROUP – Somerset County Council is generally supportive of alternative energy development and as such there is no objection in principle to the proposal.

The proposed development is situated on agricultural land in proximity to Ash Priors Common for the development of a 34,320 solar photovoltaic panel park. Having made a site visit and studied the documentation supporting the application it is clear that the proposal is in an adequate location for this type of development.

Notes that Tithill Lane would not be suitable for access to the site and that a revised Construction Management Plan proposes access via Oxlear Barton Lane (the Heathfield to Halse Road).

Oxlear Barton Lane is a designated unclassified highway to which the National Speed Limit applies. It was observed from my most recent site (13th August 2012) visit that vehicle speeds travelling along Oxlear Barton Lane are significantly reduced due its narrow and sinuous nature.

The proposal will make use of this existing access and carry out improvements to benefit the type of vehicles that will be associated with the site. In terms of visibility, drawing No. 12375/T03 shows that the access can provide 2.4metres x 25metres, with no obstruction over 900millimetres in either direction. I am satisfied that suitable visibility can be achieved.

It is shown on Drawing No. 12375/T03 that the first 15metres of the access is hard surfaced, which is to prevent any loose debris from being carried onto the public highway. Also, the applicant will need to provide a wheel wash facility to ensure that all vehicles leaving the site are in such condition as not to emit dust or deposit mud, slurry or other debris on the highway.

It is noted that the Construction Traffic Management Plan seeks to minimise the likelihood of HGV/large vehicles meeting along Oxlear Barton Lane by using a staggered ('call on') in/out, one way arrangement, where vehicle operators will need to clarify, through radio, with the Site Manager there intention to use the proposed route, to avoid large vehicles meeting along Oxlear Barton Lane. By making use of the existing public lay-by adjacent to Oakfield Farm along the B3227, vehicles will be able to safely notify the Site Manager. The public lay-by is approximately 3km from the site access.

Also the Traffic Consultant has highlighted that as part of the development appropriate signage in proximity to the site (see 2.6 Signage - Construction Traffic Management Plan) during the construction phase will be erected to notify all highway users of the potential hazard that will be associated with the development.

The Transport Consultant has provided satisfactory swept path analysis diagrams, detailing that the vehicles associated with the construction of the development are able to navigate Oxlear Barton Lane, causing minimal disruption to the highway network.

I would wish to see a highway condition survey imposed, this should be carried out to ensure that any damage that occurs to the public highway and rights of way, can be directly attributed to construction vehicles associated with the construction of the photovoltaic park. In the event of any damage to the public highway, repair costs would need to be met by the applicant.

The Local Highway Authority, therefore, raise no objection and recommend conditions that a condition survey of the local highway network be carried out and wheel washing facilities are placed on the site.

LANDSCAPE LEAD – The Landscape & Visual Impact Assessment is thorough and I generally agree with the findings and the proposed mitigation measures. Subject to details of the proposed mitigation I consider that it should be possible to significantly reduce any landscape impacts after a short period of time.

BIODIVERSITY – Nicholas Pearson Associates carried out an extended phase 1 habitat survey of the site in May 2012. In addition a draft Landscape and Ecological Management Plan dated June 2012 was submitted in support of the application. Findings of the report were as follows:

- No evidence of bats and badgers on site. However, badgers are mobile animals, so I support the recommendation of a pre-construction check of the site one month prior to the commencement of works
- Ponds in adjacent woodland considered sub-optimal for Great Crested Newts, but presence can't be ruled out
- Hedgerow network and adjacent woodland offer foraging habitat for breeding birds, dormice and reptiles.

The three breaks in the hedgerow proposed to install the earth copper ring could impact on birds, dormice, Great Crested Newts and reptiles. I support the mitigation proposed to minimise impacts.

Additional mitigation for the scheme consists of new planting, sensitive management of existing hedges, sowing of herb rich grassland seed mix, the management of ponds and the erection of bird and bat boxes.

A condition is recommended for the protection and accommodation of wildlife.

STRATEGY AND COMMUNICATIONS – No comments received.

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH - NOISE & POLLUTION – No comments received.

SCC - DEVELOPMENT CONTROL ARCHAEOLOGIST – No comments received.

ENVIRONMENT AGENCY – The EA has no objection to the application subject to a couple of conditions with regard to access road surface, drainage and potential water pollution being imposed upon any permission granted.

HALSE PARISH COUNCIL – No response received.

ASH PRIORS PARISH COUNCIL – No response received.

COTFORD ST LUKE – The Council objects to the proposal on following grounds of:

- Tithill Lane being too narrow for the construction traffic and surface of road being in a poor condition already
- Part of the one-way-system being along to public footpaths for which no public footpath diversion is in place
- No measures being in place to protect walkers and horse riders from the increased traffic
- Difficulties caused by construction traffic for residents to access / egress their properties. This comment also applies to emergency services, refuse and

- recycle collections etc
- Concerns about structural integrity of Tithill Lane bridge. Also, no indication that the contractor will make good any damage potentially caused to the bridge.
- Visual impact on aeroplanes from reflective glare of panels – site is on the flight path for Bristol, Exeter and other airports located in the South West, and for military aircraft at Norton Manor Camp.
- There will be a visual impact from the reflective glare and power lines for Cotford St Luke and surrounding country side
- The panels will be audible when in use. No audiology impact assessment undertaken yet.
- Adverse impact on wildlife and their habitat caused by the construction and maintenance of the panels

Should consent be granted, Parish Council requests a sufficient bond to be deposited with SCC Highways to make good any damage to Tithill Lane and Tithill Lane bridge.

QUANTOCK HILLS AONB SERVICE – Although beyond the boundary of the Quantock Hill AONB Authority is concerned that the proposal may be visible from the Quantock Hills. They ask for due consideration is given to any potential adverse visual impacts on the protected landscape, in particular with regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB in line with Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

WESSEX WATER – a water distribution main that crosses the site must be protected.

Representations

County Councillor John Wilkins – “I object to this application on the following grounds. This is a large scale development of hard landscaping within open countryside and close to a conservation village and the Quantock Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. There will be an adverse affect on both adjacent and distant views. The development is immediately adjacent to Ash Priors Common. All of these factors will detract from the general enjoyment of this attractive rural location”.

29 Letters of OBJECTION have been received, making the following comments:

Principle of development:

- No planning gain arises out of the proposal. 41 acres of good agricultural land will be lost and any local employment will be minimal and for the construction period only.
- Forty-acres of good farmland will produce far more energy (food) than that which could be produced by the solar farm. Proposal might help with increasing energy security, but also increases dependency on food imports by loosing 40 acres of arable land for 25 years. Food imports will also increase carbon emissions.

- With the likelihood of a new reactor (Hinkley C) being built at Hinkley Point, this huge solar panel installation will soon be superfluous.

Scale of development and landscape impact:

- Potential glare and reflection of sunlight from 34,200 panels not acceptable.
- Development out of scale with the surrounding area and access point.
- Scale of development considerable and will have an adverse impact on those who currently enjoy the countryside from the footpaths.
- Statement in the proposal that the site is surrounded by thick woodland is incorrect: Only the northern boundary is.
- Proposal would detract from views of Bishops Lydeard and in particular the heritage railway station when viewed from public right of way T4/19 at Hopkins Farm.
- Proposed solar farm would also stand out significantly when viewed from the Quantock Hills AONB.
- Proposal is a large scale development of hard landscaping within open country side and close to a conservation village and the Quantock Hills AONB. There will be an adverse affect on both adjacent and distant views.
- The development is immediately adjacent to Ash Priors Common and will detract from the general enjoyment of this attractive rural location.
- Development more acceptable if moved one field further west using access from Ash Common to Halse Road that would be of better standard and size

Neighbouring property

- Site can be viewed from Templars. Occupants want to be assured that anti-glare will be applied to panels and will be properly maintained
- Local farmer objects potential upgrade of powerlines (bigger pylons) on his land.
- Residents feel that property value could be reduced because of the scheme.

Traffic/access

- Numerous concerns were raised about the use of Tithill Lane to acces the site by construction traffic. This was in terms of the width and alignment of the lane, the potential erosion to banks, the disruption to the free flow of traffic on the lane and the conflict with agricultural activities. Concerns were also raised over the suitability of Dene Bridge, over the West Somerset Railway. [Given the now amended access proposals, these concerns are considered to have been overcome].
- The amended access route is much better, although a better route would be via the Ash Common - Halse Road.
- Hedgebanks as well as the road surface must be repaired.
- The unsurfaced bridleway beyond Stallenge Farm will be totally incapable to withstand weights of heavy traffic and will become unusable for walkers and riders

Other Matters

- Proposed deer fencing will prevent deer from crossing the site and force them to go round. Harm could be caused to pedestrians or riders using the bridleways when meeting deer during rutting time.
- Detrimental impact from lorry traffic to animals living in hedgerows and grass banks along Tithill Lane.
- Public bridleway that runs through site is regularly used by horses and riders to access the woods at Ash Common. Glare from panels could scare horses

thus putting riders at risk.

- Glare from panels could also cause issues to civil aviation. Query whether Civil Aviation Authority has been consulted about this.
- Scant information regarding the increase or upgrade of overhead power lines needed to support the electricity generated and the decommissioning of the solar farm at the end of its useful lifespan.
- Potential upgrade of the local overhead powerlines to cope with 8.4MW of power would create additional traffic along Tithill Lane
- Query whether new power lines will go from the development and whether they would be placed underground to preserve the rural nature of the locality
- Lack of notification (site notices) in area
- Method of notification to some people directly affected by this proposal has been somewhat erratic and ineffective
- Query whether a bond has been considered / declared to make good anything affected by the works
- The suggestion that sheep could graze under the these ground mounted photovoltaic cells has already been shown in other installations to be impractical as the sheep rub against the cells causing damage and are then removed
- Is there a plan and finance to restore the site to its former state in case that investors go bankrupt (as happened at Sandhill Park solar farm)?

PLANNING POLICIES

EN12 - TDBCLP - Landscape Character Areas,
EN28 - TDBCLP - Development and Flood Risk,
DM1 - TD CORE STRATEGY - GENERAL REQUIREMENTS,
CP8 - TD CORE STRATEGY- ENVIRONMENT,
S1 - TDBCLP - General Requirements,
EN3 - TDBCLP - Local Wildlife and Geological Interests,

DETERMINING ISSUES AND CONSIDERATIONS

The main issues in the consideration of this application are the principle of the development, the landscape impact and the impact on the highway network. Ecology and flood risk must also be considered.

Principle

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states that the purpose of planning is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development. This should be with a social, economic and environmental role. In terms of its environmental role, planning should contribute “to protecting and enhancing our natural, built and historic environment; and, as part of this, helping to improve biodiversity, use natural resources prudently, minimise waste and pollution, and mitigate and adapt to climate change including moving to a low carbon economy”. As part of the 12 principles of planning, the NPPF states that in moving to a low carbon economy, Local Planning Authorities should encourage the use of renewable resources (for example, by the development of renewable energy).

Paragraph 79 specifically states: “To help increase the use and supply of renewable and low carbon energy, local planning authorities should recognise the responsibility on all communities to contribute to energy generation from renewable or low carbon sources”, going on to add that local policies “should maximise renewable and low carbon energy development while ensuring that adverse impacts are addressed satisfactorily, including cumulative landscape and visual impacts”. As in previous planning policy, the NPPF indicates that the ‘need’ for the development should not be considered by the Local Planning Authority.

In terms of local plan policy, the proposal is located on land designated as open countryside. In general terms, development in these areas is restricted, unless they are for agricultural purpose or accord with other specific development plan policies. Policy C12 relates to renewable energy development and also states that such proposal will be permitted where relevant policies are met. In this context, those policies are considered to be the ones relating to the other considerations detailed in the remainder of the report.

The emerging Taunton Deane Core Strategy states at Strategic Objective 1 (Climate Change) that “Taunton Deane will be a leader in addressing the causes and impacts of climate change and adapting to its effects”. Policy CP1 (Climate Change) states that ‘proposals for the development of renewable and low carbon sources of energy, including large-scale freestanding installations will be favourably considered provided that...[they] can be satisfactorily assimilated into the landscape ... and would not harm the appearance of these areas; [and that their] impact on the local community, economy, nature conservation or historical interests does not outweigh the economic and wider environmental benefits of the proposal”.

Some concern has been raised about the loss of high quality agricultural land and that the reduction in carbon emissions would be off-set by an increase from food importation. Neither local nor national planning policy makes any meaningful reference to the quality of agricultural land and whilst its loss is regrettable, the permission is sought for a 25 year period after which the land could be returned to agriculture. As such, it is not considered that this matter carries sufficient weight to warrant refusal of the application.

With regard to the foregoing, it is considered that the proposal is acceptable in principle, provided that it has an acceptable impact on the landscape, ecology, highway network and other surrounding land uses.

Landscape impact

In general terms the site is not widely visible in the surrounding landscape. Whilst it adjoins the publically accessible area of Ash Priors Common to the north, the mature hedgerows, mainly on top a bank and trees along this boundary general prevent views into the site, unless one stands on top of the banks at the site boundary. In addition, where there are gaps, it is proposed to enhance the boundary with further planting.

Views are also available from the railway station platform at Bishops Lydeard Station, although this is at some distance. The landscape is generally level between this point and the site and, as such there is not a wide open view of the site. The applicant proposes to allow the eastern boundary hedge to grow up in order to

screen views from this direction and this is likely to fully mitigate the impact from this location in a relatively short period of time.

The most significant view of the site is from the public footpath between Hopkins Farm and Tithill lane to the southwest of the site. This footpath is elevated above the site and views would be available at close range down on top of the installation. Being from the south, the full effect of the main faces of the panels would be visible and the full form of the installation would be discernable.

Enhanced planting along the south western site boundaries cannot mitigate this view due to the elevation of the path above the site. The applicant, therefore, proposes to mitigate the view through the planting of a hedge along the northern side of the footpath. Such would have the effect of screening the panels from view, but the downside would be the simultaneous loss of outlook in this direction towards the Quantock Hills. Given the height and close proximity of the hills, it is unlikely that they would be totally obliterated from view, but they would not longer be seen in the context of the flat and gently rising vale in the foreground. However, this loss of outlook from this relatively short length of footpath is not considered to be significantly harmful given the ongoing connections to the wider footpath network.

The second most significant viewpoint is from the northern end of Tithill Lane walking north onto the green lane to Ash Priors common. From here, the green lane descends steeply towards the site offering views of the site between its hedgerows. Since the path is heading straight towards the site at this point it is impossible to screen the installation from view. There would, therefore, be some significant harm to this viewpoint for the duration of the development, albeit that it would only affect approximately 100m of path. Such harm will need to be weighed against any benefits that the proposal may bring.

In addition to the initial descent towards the site, the green lane then continues through the middle of the installation. It is bound on both sides by high hedges that would totally screen views to the site by walkers. Representations received claim that this is a popular horse riding route and it is not clear whether horse riders will be able to see the installation over the top of the hedges. If they can, then there would be further harm to this substantial length of path.

In terms of wider views from the Quantock Hills, it is considered that the site will not have a significant impact on the natural beauty of the area. It is some 5km distant from Cothelstone Hill, the closest major viewpoint on the hills, and given the surrounding woodland landform features in the area, it seems unlikely that the development would be overly prominent from within the AONB.

Highways and site access

Following substantial local concern about the use of Tithill Lane for construction access, the proposals have been amended to provide access from the Heathfield to Halse Road, referred to by the Local Highway Authority as Oxlear Barton Lane.

Oxlear Barton Lane is a narrow single lane highway and part of the network that links Halse to the wider strategic road network. It is, however, lightly trafficked and does have some passing places. The applicant's Highway Consultant has tracked the lane for the type of vehicles that would be used to transport construction materials to

the site and, with some slight modifications to the access, this shows that the lane can be used by the traffic that would need to be attracted to the site.

However, with some 180 HGV movements proposed over the 10 week construction period, there is potential for conflict on the lane should one HGV entering the site meet another exiting. There are very limited opportunities for two such vehicles to pass on this stretch of highway. The applicant's consultant therefore proposes to implement a construction traffic management plan whereby a vehicle about to enter the site would pull over in a layby on the B3227 and call ahead to check that the lane was clear. The site manager would, then, be responsible for ensuring that he did not release another vehicle from the site. The Local Highway Authority considers that, with appropriate signage also in place, this system would be an acceptable mechanism for avoiding disruption to the local highway network during the construction phase.

Once operational the site would be visited approximately once per month by a maintenance van. It is not considered that this traffic generation is significant and, therefore, there is no need to control how such access would occur.

From the public highway, traffic accessing the site would make use of an existing farm track, also a public right of way, to the northern section of Tithill Lane then onwards to the green lane and the site beyond. Again, there is potential for a conflict with pedestrians using these rights of way, but it would be for a short period of time. The use of the right of way for vehicular access will require special agreement with the County Council under separate legislation.

With regard to the above, the impact on the local highway network is considered to be acceptable.

Ecology

The submitted ecological survey identifies limited ecological potential for the main parts of the site, although notes that the hedgerows and surrounding trees do have wildlife potential, including providing habitat for some protected species.

It is proposed that the development is set off the hedgerows by at least 10m and the prior erection of the perimeter fencing will ensure that construction activities do not affect the habitat. Where the hedgerows have to be breached for construction and installation purposes, this will be for a limited length and the Biodiversity Officer is satisfied that the impact on potential habitat can be adequately controlled by condition.

Flood Risk

The Environment Agency considers that the increase in impermeable area is small. They do not consider that the panels themselves should be considered as impermeable area since they drain immediately onto the ground between the panels as in the existing situation. However, as the water would fall entirely into one area as it runs off the panels, there is potential for surface water run-off to be slightly faster. In order to mitigate this, scrapes and swales are proposed across the site to intercept flows and slow it to Greenfield rates prior to them leaving the site. The EA

considers the proposed designs to be acceptable and, therefore, do not believe that the site would give rise to any increase in off-site flooding.

One objector to the proposal has commented that construction activities will compact the soils and will, therefore, alter the ground's ability to absorb water. Such, he argues, will lead to increased run-off rates that should be attenuated by larger swales on the site. The EA have been asked to specifically consider this matter and they have responded, saying "whilst the occurrence of compaction is a theoretical possibility, it is unlikely to have a significant impact in this area because of the loamy clay soil type (which has limited infiltration) and the fairly gentle gradient of the site".

They also consider that it would be very difficult for the applicant to rigorously model such an impact and provide an accurate assessment. As such, they consider that such impacts need not be considered as part of this application.

Other matters

There is a scattering of isolated dwellings in the vicinity of the site. However, it is not considered that they would be adversely affected by glint or glare from the panels. Residents of Templars, who have made specific reference to this point are located to the east-northeast of the site and are, therefore, unlikely to suffer from glare as the faces of the panels would face away from them. Whilst no comments have been received from Environmental Health, it has been accepted in terms of other installations that it is unlikely that a significant amount of noise would result from the development.

It has been suggested that the civil aviation authority may have an interest in the application due to potential glare from the panels. However, they are not a statutory consultee on the application and, therefore, do not need to be consulted in this instance.

The applicant has confirmed that connection to the grid will be made to at the north east corner of the site, to an existing 33kV overland line. 3 additional poles will be required to make the connection.

Conclusions

It has been shown above that, with the exception of landscape impact the other impacts detailed above can be adequately mitigated and controlled by condition. It is accepted that there will be some permanent (for the life of the permission at least) harm to some views along a short stretch of the green lane and it is possible that horse riders will have a full view of the panels along the duration of the lane. However, this must be balanced against the wider carbon reduction that would occur nationally from the increased uptake of renewable energy. A development of this scale would produce a substantial amount of electricity and, as such, it is considered that the benefits are significant and, in this case, outweigh the identified, limited, harm. With regard to these matters, it is recommended that planning permission is granted.

In preparing this report the Planning Officer has considered fully the

implications and requirements of the Human Rights Act 1998.

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