

## **WAT/1611/16 - Mr Adam Twine**

**Change of use from agricultural land to mixed use for agriculture and energy production, installation of plant equipment & machinery for energy production (photovoltaic arrays, cable trenches, inverters and transformer)**

**Westmill Farm (adjacent existing Wind Turbines), Highworth Road, Watchfield**

### **The Proposal**

1. The application seeks permission for the installation of linear arrays of light weight solar photovoltaic panels across a 12ha field to the north of the A420. The panels are static, angled at 30° from horizontal and make no noise. They would be arranged in lines across the field from east to west and firmly supported on an aluminium structure with poles set 1.5m into the ground. This leaves the ground cover open between and under the panel arrays. Each line of panels would be 2.2m high and distanced from the rows either side by 7.5m. There would be underground service lines to link the panels together, four inverters (converting DC to AC electrical current) and a small transformer unit.
2. In support of the application are a design and access statement, a statement of community consultation, a flood risk assessment, a landscape and visual impact assessment, and a solar reflections study.
3. Extracts from the application plans are at **Appendix 1**.
4. The application comes to committee as the parish council opposes the proposal.

### **Relevant Planning History**

5. WAT/1611/7– Erection of five wind turbines each 50m in height to the hub. Approved in November 1999. Located on adjacent land within the same ownership.
6. WAT/1611/ – Erection of five wind turbines(revised scheme). Approved in January 2001. Positioned on adjoining land within the same ownership.
7. 10/02220/SOP – Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) screening opinion submission for photovoltaic array considered to not warrant EIA.

### **Planning Policies**

8. Policy DC1 of the adopted local plan requires new development to be of a high design quality in terms of layout, scale, mass, height, detailing, materials to be used, and its relationship with adjoining buildings.

9. Policy DC9 seeks to ensure development will not unacceptably harm the amenities of neighbouring properties and the wider environment.
10. Policies DC13 and DC14 relate to flood risk and surface water run off.
11. Policy CF10 supports commercially based renewable energy subject to no harm to rural character or nature conservation and no harm to the amenity of local residents.
12. Planning Policy Statement 1: Delivering Sustainable Development; Planning Policy Statement 4: Planning for Sustainable Economic Growth; Planning Policy Guidance 9: Biodiversity and Geological Conservation; Planning Policy Statement 22: Renewable Energy.

### **Consultations**

13. Watchfield Parish Council – “has two main concerns, the one being that existing footpaths are preserved and kept clear during and after any installation. We would wish to see assurances on this in writing. In addition the Parish Council considers that the proposed development area is too extensive and would have a major and adverse impact on the surrounding countryside, both close to the village and from a distance, spoiling the views and the enjoyment of local residents. It is for this latter reason that the Parish Council wishes to object to the application.”
14. Longcot Parish Council (adjacent parish) –“objects to the application for the following reasons: The development would have a major adverse impact on the surrounding countryside spoiling the visual enjoyment from White Horse Hill. We are concerned that this development would severely impact on our local flood plan and request Peter Della be involved. We are also concerned about glare from the panels, even though there is a report regarding this, it is not exhaustive.”
15. Letter of support from one local resident who notes the impact of climate change and that the proposal would assist in meeting the government’s CO2 reduction target; the scheme is dual use of energy production and agriculture; would be a community ownership funded scheme; and would be hidden from view with minimal impact on local residents.
16. Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) – do not object to the proposal after considering the submission documents. Would suggest conditions to coat panels in non-reflective material and return to agriculture should the panels be removed.
17. North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty – do not object subject to conditions for a landscaping scheme and management plan for the edges of the site; that permission is temporary for the life span of the equipment and if removed the land is returned to agriculture. This site should be considered to be within the setting of the AONB though the level of change

is not so great to have a serious negative impact on the AONB.

18. Environment Agency – no objections as satisfied with the submitted flood risk assessment for this application.
19. County Archaeologist – the site lies close to a Scheduled Monument Anglo Saxon cemetery which may extend towards the development area. An archaeological field evaluation as required by PPS5 should be carried out prior to determination to assess the scope of any findings and how to minimise and avoid damage to any archaeology found.
20. Landscape Architect – no objection but would condition the proposed mitigation planting required including proposed species, plant sizes, numbers or densities, planting methods and protection.

### **Officer Comments**

21. The main considerations for this proposal are the impact on the visual amenity of the area, the impact on flood risk, and whether adequate safeguards against reflection and glare are embodied in the proposal.
22. The proposed panels are shown to occupy an area of 7,096sq.m. within a large rectangular arable field of generally level land between the A420 and the nearest of the five wind turbines close to the site. The site lies about 6km away from the North Wessex Downs AONB to the south. No footpaths cross the site or run adjacent to it.
23. The location of the solar farm between the North Wessex Downs ANOB to the south and the North Vale Corallian Ridge to the north means that it does not interrupt views of the more visually prominent slopes or break the skyline. Views across the open farmland from external vantage points are not interrupted. The site would be visible from some short and distant viewpoints but is not considered to be prominent or expansive enough to have a serious detracting impact on the landscape. Both the North Wessex Downs AONB and the Councils Landscape Architect share this consensus view.
24. The areas under and around the panels will remain open and maintained as grassland for the grazing of sheep. The installation of the panels allows the land to be mainly undisturbed and left in an open and natural form, capable of taking normal rainfall drainage and therefore not impeding the dispersal of water through long established land drains or forming any flood risk. This is confirmed by the Environment Agency's assessment. The site lies within a flood zone 1 area where all uses are considered to be appropriate.
25. The panels are designed to efficiently absorb the maximum amount of light available with less than 10% being reflected. The manufacture of the polycrystalline solar glass used is also designed to minimise glare through the creation of diffuse reflection. Together with the angle of the panels this allows good light tracking and absorption and minimal observable glare.

26. The panels are set at a 30° angle from horizontal. The angle of reflection in this arrangement would infer that potential near to ground level reflection is limited to narrow zones (east-south-east and west-south-west) at two periods of the day (in the morning in a westerly direction with the sun in the east, and in the afternoon in an easterly direction with the sun in the west) and then not at all during the period October to mid March. This limited frequency would be further tempered by weather conditions, with all but bright sunlight reducing the prospect of reflection being a visual concern.
27. Even at the time of the sun's zenith during the summer solstice (approx 12 noon on 21 June) most reflection would occur above near ground height, with any impact being above the height of the Ridgeway to the south, itself over 7km away from the site.
28. The principle of increasing sustainable energy sources, such as through photovoltaic panels, and the reduction of dangerous gas emissions, such as CO<sub>2</sub>, are government objectives. The provision of this type of energy generation has become financially viable with the government's 'Feed in Tariff' and has generally been supported by the public, especially with the principle of community ownership for such projects.

***Recommendation***

***that planning permission be granted subject to the following conditions:***

- 1 TL1 Time Limit – Full Application***
- 2 MC3 Development in accordance with approved plans***
- 3 Removal of installation if no longer in use***
- 4 LS1 Landscape details to be submitted for approval***
- 5 LS2 Landscape details approved to be implemented***
- 6 Highway crossover to be restored / repaired***
- 7 CN11 Scheme of Archaeological Field Investigation***