

APPLICATION NO.	P20/S3245/FUL
APPLICATION TYPE	FULL APPLICATION
REGISTERED	16.9.2020
PARISH	TETSWORTH
WARD MEMBER	Caroline Newton
APPLICANT	Harlesford Solar Farm Limited (owned by Low Carbon)
SITE	Harlesford Farm near Tetsworth, Oxfordshire, OX9 7BX
PROPOSAL	The construction and operation of a solar photovoltaic farm and associated infrastructure, including inverters, substation compound, security cameras, fencing, access tracks and landscaping
AMENDMENTS	As clarified by information received 26 October 2020, 11 November 2020, 1 February 2021 and 18 November 2021 and amended by drawings received 21 December 2020 and 9 February 2021.
OFFICER	Emma Bowerman

1.0 INTRODUCTION AND PROPOSAL

- 1.1 Officers recommend that planning permission is granted. This report explains how officers have reached this conclusion.
- 1.2 The application is referred to the Planning Committee at the discretion of the Development Manager so that the Committee can consider the cumulative impacts of solar farm proposals in the District. The whole of the site is located within the Parish of Tetsworth, and Tetsworth Parish Council have no objection to the application.
- 1.3 The 78-hectare application site (which is shown on the OS extract **attached** as Appendix A) is located to the southwest of Tetsworth (on the opposite side of the M40). The site consists of several agricultural fields used for grazing.
- 1.4 The site does not fall within any areas of special designation. There is a separation of around 4.5km to the edge of the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Harlesford Farmhouse, which is outside of the application site, is a Grade II Listed Building.
- 1.5 There are hedgerows within the site, breaking up the different fields, and around the site boundaries. In terms of its agricultural land classification, most of the site is Grade 3b land (moderate quality) with a small section of Grade 3a land (good quality).
- 1.6 The Haseley Brook runs along the southern boundary of the site and the land slopes in a southern direction towards the Brook. Most of the site falls within Flood Zone 1 (lowest probability of flooding). There is an area of Flood Zone 2 and 3 around Haseley Brook along the southern boundary of the site.
- 1.7 The site is crossed by several Public Rights of Way including the Oxfordshire Way, which crosses the eastern edge of the Site. A 132-kilovolt overhead electricity line crosses the site and there are pylons within the site. The proposal would connect into this existing infrastructure.

- 1.8 The application proposes the construction and operation of a solar photovoltaic farm and associated infrastructure. The panels would generate up to 49.99 megawatts (MW), enough to power approximately 15,000 homes. Based on the scale and nature of the proposal, it is Environmental Impact Appraisal (EIA) development, and the application is therefore accompanied by an Environmental Statement (ES).
- 1.9 Planning permission is sought to operate the plant for 40 years, at which point it would be decommissioned and the land returned to its previous state. The development includes the following equipment:
- Ground mounted rows of solar PV panels running from east to west across the site with approximately 3-4m between each row of arrays.
 - At the lowest edge the arrays would be approximately 0.9m above ground and up to approximately 2.7m at the highest edge.
 - Approximately 30 inverters within units similar to shipping containers (12m x 2.5m and 3m high).
 - A substation compound of up to 50m x 50m consisting of overhead electrical busbars and other electrical equipment along with a control building and a switch room. These structures would be up to approximately 12.5m x 5.5m x 6m high.
 - Stock-proof perimeter fencing (mesh with wooden posts or similar) to a height of approximately 2m along the outer edges of the site.
 - A system of CCTV / infra-red cameras on poles up to approximately 3m high, spaces at approximately 50m intervals along the security fence.
 - Internal access tracks
- 1.10 The application plans are **attached** as Appendix B. The application is supported by several technical documents including the ES and an Alternative Site Assessment. The application is also accompanied by a Statement of Community Involvement which provides details of the pre-application public consultation undertaken with local communities. These documents can be reviewed on the council's website at the following link:
<https://data.southoxon.gov.uk/ccm/support/Main.jsp?MODULE=ApplicationDetails&REF=P20/S3245/FUL>
- 1.11 The applicant has not been able to fix all of the details of the development at this stage because the final technology selection and layout would be determined by an appointed contractor. The applicant has therefore sought to incorporate sufficient design flexibility into the application in relation to the dimensions and layout of the structures.
- 1.12 The assessments that form part of the application and EIA have therefore been undertaken adopting the principles of the "Rochdale Envelope." This approach involves assessing the maximum parameters for the elements where flexibility is required and provides a worst-case scenario. For example, the solar panels have been assessed for the purposes of landscape and visual impact as being a maximum of 2.7m high, when they may be lower at around 2.5m.
- 1.13 The Rochdale Envelope assessment approach is an acknowledged way of assessing a proposed development comprising EIA development where uncertainty exists, and

necessary flexibility is sought. To provide clearly defined parameters, the applicant has split the site into 14 Development Zones (**attached** as Appendix C). The zones define where certain infrastructure would be located within the site, but there is flexibility in terms of the layout within each zone.

1.14 The application has been updated on several occasions with additional information submitted in relation to heritage, ecology, drainage and archaeology. This included an update to the ES to include a geophysical survey. The plans have also been amended during the application process to address some issues raised by consultees. This included removing a Development Zone and all solar panels to the northeast of the site.

1.15 Low Carbon is also funding the development process for another solar farm project in the local area to the northwest of Stoke Talmage (P20/S3244/FUL). Councillors considered this scheme at the committee meeting on 13 October 2021 and resolved to approve the application. This site is approximately 400m to the west of the application site.

2.0 **SUMMARY OF CONSULTATIONS & REPRESENTATIONS**

2.1 A summary of the latest responses received to the proposal is below. A full copy of all the comments made including those in respect of previous iterations of the proposals can be seen online at:

<https://data.southoxon.gov.uk/ccm/support/Main.jsp?MODULE=ApplicationDetails&REF=P20/S3245/FUL>

2.2 Parish Councils, local bodies and residents:

Tetsworth Parish Council	<p>No objection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The positive changes in the plans as part of the consultation feedback are welcome. • Does not impact on neighbourhood plan.
Wheatfield Parish Council	<p>No comment</p>
Adwell Parish Meeting	<p>Object</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Land is beautiful and unspoilt, and development will ruin the beautiful biodiverse countryside. • Used by walkers and cyclists. • An industrial blot on the landscape.
Great Haseley Parish Council	<p>Object</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concern about cumulative effect on landscape. • The effects of the Harlesford site are more harmful and the cumulative effects of both sites would be highly detrimental. • Harmful effect on landscape and historic setting of Tetsworth. • Sloping ground would make panels widely visible. • Loss of amenity due to impact on footpaths. • The open nature of the footpaths and the views from them would be lost to a corridor of enclosed hedges.

Pyrton Parish Council	<p>No objection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developer should be required to restore the site
South Oxfordshire District of CPRE	<p>Object</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unacceptable and massive industrialisation of the countryside. • Inappropriate use of land which would be better employed for its proper purpose of efficient production of food rather than the production of solar energy. • Unnecessary and unacceptable landscape harm especially on open grassland sites. • Significant loss of countryside. • Change of views from high points. • Intrusion into open views of attractive countryside from M40. • Adverse effect on historic environment. • Adverse impact on residential amenity.
South Oxfordshire District of CPRE (Rights of Way)	<p>Object</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affects 6 public rights of way including the Oxfordshire Way. • Proposal would completely smother rights of way network • Deprive residents of Tetsworth of satisfying walking opportunities
Neighbour Representations	<p>Four received in objection or with concerns:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact on property values. • Substation would be an eyesore and incongruous. • Suitable high landscaping should be provided. • Development Zone 14 should not contain any panels. • Watercourses should not be harmed • Proposal will ruin unspoilt countryside • Cumulative effects will have a disastrous effect on countryside. • Landscape should not be sacrificed to achieve climate goals <p><i>Officer note: One of these objections was based on a Development Zone to the east of the site, which has subsequently been removed through the submission of amended plans.</i></p>

Technical consultees:

Environment Agency	<p>No objection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject to conditions requiring the development to be carried out in accordance with the Flood Risk Assessment and the provision of buffer zones to watercourses.
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Highways England	<p>No objection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject to a condition to ensure that access is only taken from Stoke Talmage Road. • Support the new hedgerows and planting which should reduce the risk of any solar reflection occurring.
Oxfordshire County Council Single Response	<p><i>Transport Development Control</i></p> <p>No objection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject to conditions requiring wheel washing facilities and a Construction Traffic Management Plan. <p><i>Lead Local Flood Authority</i></p> <p>No objection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject to conditions set out by South and Vale drainage team <p><i>Archaeology</i></p> <p>No objection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject to conditions to record and report matters of archaeological importance.
Climate Action Lead Officer	<p>Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solar farms will play an important role in the future local renewable energy mix. • To meet our Climate Emergency target of net zero by 2030 we need to reach South Oxfordshire’s full potential for renewable energy infrastructure. • Strong case for locating energy generation as close as possible to demand. • Local generation reduces transmission losses.
Landscape Officer	<p>No objection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amended plans an improvement over the original submission and acceptable in mitigating the anticipated landscape and visual effects of the development. • The ‘moderate’ cumulative effect and ‘major/moderate’ effect on landscape character will need to be taken into the planning balance. • Other amendments to incorporate hedgerow and tree planting are positive.
Countryside Officer	<p>No objection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject to conditions requiring the development to take place in accordance with the council’s great crested newt licencing scheme, that the agreed great crested newt mitigation measures are followed, and that a Landscape and Ecology Management Plan, Construction Environmental Management Plan for Biodiversity and a Biodiversity Enhancement Plan are submitted for approval.

Forestry Officer	<p>No objection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject to a condition requiring tree protection.
Conservation Officer	<p>Proposal would result in less than substantial harm</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact on the setting of the Grade II listed Harlesford Farmhouse. • Panels would erode the appreciation of the buildings agricultural setting and reduce the extent to which the listed building is understood as part of the historic open countryside. • The amendments removing the extent of the panels to the north-east of the site reduces the impact on the appreciation of the setting of the farmstead and represents an improvement. • This harm should be balanced against the public benefits of the scheme.
Drainage Officer	<p>No objection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject to a condition requiring the submission of a sustainable drainage scheme.
Contaminated Land Officer	<p>No objection</p>
Environmental Protection Officer	<p>No objection</p>

3.0 RELEVANT PLANNING HISTORY

3.1 [P20/S2334/SCO](#) - Withdrawn (04/08/2020)

Request for a Screening Opinion for a solar photovoltaic farm and associated infrastructure.

[P20/S1356/SCR](#) – Environmental Impact Assessment required (21/05/20)
Solar Photovoltaic Farm and associated infrastructure.

[P20/S0848/PEJ](#) – Pre-application response issued (12/06/2020)
Solar Photovoltaic Farm and associated infrastructure.

4.0 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

4.1 Officers have considered the size and nature of the proposed development, the characteristics of the site and cumulative impacts. Based on the likely environmental impacts of the development, the development is considered to be Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) development for the purposes of the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017.

4.2 A positive Screening Opinion was issued on 15 May 2020, which confirmed that the proposals are EIA development. An Environmental Statement (ES) has therefore been submitted with this planning application. The specific environmental topics scoped into the ES include landscape and visual impact, and cultural heritage. Officers have taken the ES into account, including the further information submitted on 26 October 2021, and representations made on it in determining the application.

5.0 **POLICY & GUIDANCE**

5.1 **Development Plan**

In the case of South Oxfordshire, the Development Plan is the South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035, which was adopted in December 2020 and any “made” Neighbourhood Plans within the relevant geographical area. Tetsworth has a made Neighbourhood Development Plan.

South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035 (SOLP) Policies:

STRAT1 - The Overall Strategy
EMP10 - Development in Rural Areas
ENV1 - Landscape and Countryside
ENV2 - Biodiversity - Designated sites, Priority Habitats and Species
ENV3 - Biodiversity
ENV4 - Watercourses
ENV5 - Green Infrastructure in New Developments
ENV6 - Historic Environment
ENV7 - Listed Buildings
ENV9 - Archaeology and Scheduled Monuments
ENV11 – Pollution – Impact from Existing / Previous Land Uses
DES1 - Delivering High Quality Development
DES2 - Enhancing Local Character
DES6 - Residential Amenity
DES7 - Efficient Use of Resources
DES9 - Renewable Energy
EP4 - Flood Risk
TRANS4 - Transport Assessments, Transport Statements and Travel Plans
TRANS5 - Consideration of Development Proposals

Tetsworth Neighbourhood Development Plan (TNDP) 2035 Policies:

TET1 – Dev within the Tetsworth Village Settlement and Surrounding Countryside
TET2 – Settlement Character Areas and Design Criteria
TET3 – Countryside Character Sectors
TET4 – Key Views
TET5 – Local Heritage Assets
TET8 – Biodiversity and the Natural Environment

5.2 **National Planning Policy Framework and Planning Practice Guidance**

5.3 **Other Planning Guidance/Documents**

- National Policy Statement for Overarching Energy (EN-1)
- National Policy Statement for Renewable Energy Infrastructure (EN-3)
- National Policy Statement for Electricity Networks (EN-5)
- UK Solar PV Strategy Part 1: Roadmap to a Brighter Future
- UK Solar PV Strategy Part 2: Delivering a Brighter Future
- Oxfordshire Energy Strategy
- National Infrastructure Commission - Net Zero - Opportunities for the Power Sector
- Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) Position Statement for Major Development Proposals for Ground-mounted Solar PV Arrays
- BRE’s Planning Guidance for Large Scale Ground Mounted Solar PV Systems
- The Solar Trade Association’s Solar Farm 10 Commitments

5.4 **Other Relevant Legislation**

Human Rights Act 1998

The provisions of the Human Rights Act 1998 have been taken into account in the processing of the application and the preparation of this report.

Equality Act 2010

In determining this planning application the Council has regard to its equalities obligations including its obligations under Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010.

6.0 **PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS**

6.1 **The relevant planning considerations are:**

- **Principle of the development**
- **Loss of agricultural land**
- **Landscape and visual impact**
- **Cumulative impact**
- **Ecology and trees**
- **Archaeology and historic environment**
- **Residential amenity**
- **Access and parking**
- **Environmental matters (flooding, drainage and contamination)**

Principle of the development

6.2 National planning policy on renewable energy development is set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and Planning Practice Guidance: Renewable and Low Carbon Energy (PPG).

6.3 At para.152, the NPPF sets out its support for renewable energy development. It states that *“The planning system should support the transition to a low carbon future in a changing climate, ... It should help to:....support renewable and low carbon energy and associated infrastructure.”*

6.4 The NPPF continues at para. 158, *“When determining applications for renewable and low carbon development, local planning authorities should:*
a) *not require applicants to demonstrate the overall need for renewable or low carbon energy, and recognise that even small-scale projects provide a valuable contribution to cutting greenhouse gas emissions; and*
b) *approve the application if the impacts are (or can be made) acceptable. Once suitable areas for renewable or low carbon energy have been identified in plans, local planning authorities should expect subsequent applications for commercial scale projects outside of these areas to demonstrate that the proposed location meets the criteria used in identifying suitable areas.”*

6.5 The PPG further explains that: *“The National Planning Policy Framework explains that all communities have a responsibility to help increase the use and supply of green energy, but this does not mean that the need for renewable energy automatically overrides environmental protections and the planning concerns of local communities. As with other types of development, it is important that the planning concerns of local communities are properly heard in matters that directly affect them.”*

6.6 The PPG adds that *“renewable energy developments should be acceptable for their location.”* and 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.

- 6.7 The PPG also provides a list of particular factors that a Local Planning Authority will need to consider in determining applications for large scale solar farms. These include:
- *“encouraging the effective use of land by focussing large scale solar farms on previously developed and non agricultural land, provided that it is not of high environmental value;*
 - *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.*
 - *that solar farms are normally temporary structures and planning conditions can be used to ensure that the installations are removed when no longer in use and the land is restored to its previous use;*
 - *the proposal’s visual impact, the effect on landscape of glint and glare and on neighbouring uses and aircraft safety;*
 - *the extent to which there may be additional impacts if solar arrays follow the daily movement of the sun;*
 - *the need for, and impact of, security measures such as lights and fencing;*
 - *great care should be taken to ensure heritage assets are conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance, including the impact of proposals on views important to their setting. As the significance of a heritage asset derives not only from its physical presence, but also from its setting, careful consideration should be given to the impact of large scale solar farms on such assets. Depending on their scale, design and prominence, a large scale solar farm within the setting of a heritage asset may cause substantial harm to the significance of the asset;*
 - *the potential to mitigate landscape and visual impacts through, for example, screening with native hedges;*
 - *the energy generating potential, which can vary for a number of reasons including, latitude and aspect.”*
- 6.8 In terms of local policy, the South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035 (SOLP 2035) does not identify suitable areas or specific sites for renewable or low carbon energy projects. Tetsworth Neighbourhood Development Plan (TNDP) also does not allocate any sites for this type of development.
- 6.9 Policy DES9 of the SOLP 2035 is concerned with renewable and low carbon energy and states: *“The council encourages schemes for renewable and low carbon energy generation and associated infrastructure at all scales including domestic schemes. It also encourages the incorporation of renewable and low carbon energy applications within all development. Planning applications for renewable and low carbon energy generation will be supported, provided that they do not cause a significant adverse effect to:*
- i) landscape, both designated AONB and locally valued, biodiversity, including protected habitats and species and Conservation Target Areas;*
 - ii) the historic environment, both designated and non-designated assets, including development within their setting;*
 - iii) openness of the Green Belt;*

- iv) *the safe movement of traffic or pedestrians; or*
- v) *residential amenity.*

- 6.10 And in relation to the TNDP, policy TET1 advises that proposals outside of the village settlement will only be supported if they are appropriate to a countryside location and are consistent with other SOLP and neighbourhood plan policies.
- 6.11 Overall, I do not consider that there are any policies in the Development Plan or at a national level that would restrict this type of development in this location. Subject to several environmental and amenity considerations, both national and local policies are supportive of proposals for renewable energy generation and in my opinion the principle of the development is acceptable. The environmental and amenity impacts are assessed in the relevant parts of the report below.

Loss of agricultural land

- 6.12 As indicated by the PPG, Government policy is that large scale solar farms should be focused on previously developed and non-agricultural land. However, as acknowledged by the OCC Position Statement for Major Development Proposals for Ground-mounted Solar PV Arrays *“Oxfordshire is the most rural county in the South East; and applications may come forward on green field sites; these will need to be determined on a case by case basis.”*
- 6.13 The OCC Position Statement continues: *“Where large scale solar PV farms are proposed on greenfield land, the developer should show that the use of agricultural land is necessary. Poorer quality land should be used in preference to higher quality land, and the Best and Most Versatile (BMV) agricultural land (grades 1, 2 and 3a) should be avoided. Where possible and viable, agricultural activity and other environmental/land management services should continue on the site.”*
- 6.14 Policy DES7 of the SOLP 2035 requires new development to make provision for the effective use and protection of natural resources through several means including, *“avoiding the development of the best and most versatile agricultural land, unless it has been demonstrated to be the most sustainable choice from reasonable alternatives, by first using areas or poorer quality land in preference to that of a higher quality”*
- 6.15 The Agricultural Land Classification system classifies land into five grades numbered 1 to 5, with grade 3 divided into two subgrades (3a and 3b). The majority of this 78 hectare site is Grade 3b land (moderate quality), with a small section of Grade 3a land (good quality). The good quality land covers 1 hectare (1.3%) of the site and it therefore follows that the land is farmed as a unit of Grade 3b land. It is noted that the majority of the Grade 3a land is not within any of the Development Zones so will not have any development on it.
- 6.16 The proposal will not therefore result in the loss of BMV agricultural land. The application documents also indicate that the agricultural land use of the site would be retained as the land can be grazed once the proposed development is in operation.
- 6.17 It is noted that the applicant has submitted an Alternative Sites Assessment in support of their application. This considers whether there are any suitable alternative sites located on previously developed land that could be utilised and whether there are any potential alternative sites located on lower grade agricultural land that are in a location with good access to the grid. This assessment adds further weight to the need to locate the development on Grade 3b agricultural land.

- 6.18 Furthermore, the agricultural land will not be lost permanently as the applicant has sought planning permission for a period of 40 years to cover the lifespan of the equipment. A condition is recommended to require the removal of the panels and associated equipment at the end of this period, and this will include a requirement to reinstate the land to its previous condition. Subject to the imposition of this condition, I consider that in this case, it is acceptable to locate the proposed solar farm on this site, which is predominantly Grade 3b agricultural land.

Landscape and visual impact

- 6.19 The application site does not fall within any areas of special landscape designation. The Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) lies approximately 4.5km to the southeast of the site. The council's landscape officer is satisfied that the proposal would not impact either directly or indirectly on the AONB and there would be no adverse effect on its setting as a result of the development.
- 6.20 Policy ENV1 of the SOLP 2035 is concerned with protecting South Oxfordshire's landscape, countryside and rural areas against harmful developments. It states that *"Development will only be permitted where it protects and, where possible enhances, features that contribute to the nature and quality of South Oxfordshire's landscapes"*. Policy TET3 of the TNDP has similar aims and requires development proposals to preserve or enhance the character and appearance of the character sector in which the development is located.
- 6.21 The application site is sizable and consists of several different fields of various shapes and sizes. These fields are crossed by a relatively extensive Public Right of Way (PRoW) network that extends into the surrounding host landscape. Although the site itself is mainly undeveloped, the adjacent M40 is an intrusive feature from parts of the site and impacts on its tranquillity. The electricity pylons that extend across the site are also a visually intrusive feature.
- 6.22 The proposal would introduce further man-made features into this generally undeveloped rural area. The development would result in a long-term temporary change from open fields to a more industrial land use within the existing pattern of hedgerows.
- 6.23 On reviewing the initial submission, the council's landscape officer raised concern that the proposals would have an unacceptable adverse effect on the application site's character and visual amenity and that this would adversely affect the wider landscape. Following these comments, the applicant amended the plans to reduce the landscape impact of the proposals.
- 6.24 The amended plans removed a standalone section of panels to the east of the site and rationalised the access arrangements in this area. The amendments also included the addition of a new hedgerow and tree planting around the proposed substation and hedgerow planting along the access track leading to Stoke Talmage Road. The council's landscape officer confirmed that he is *"happy that the latest iteration of the proposed solar farm is an improvement over the original submission and is acceptable in attempting to mitigate the anticipated landscape and visual effects of the proposed development"*.
- 6.25 The package of landscape mitigation measures includes the creation of approximately 4km of new native hedgerow planting, some of which create green corridors along the routes of PRoWs. The enclosure of these sections of PRoWs will provide a different quality of landscape experience in those sections but would not significantly detract from the users' overall enjoyment of the countryside. Existing hedge lines will be

retained and allowed to grow to at least 3m in height, so the height of most of the development would be in keeping with the vertical scale of existing features. Gaps within hedge lines will be infilled, historic field boundaries will be reinstated and around 55 new trees will be planted.

- 6.26 Although the mitigation planting will be successful in reducing the impacts of the proposals, given the scale of the development, the extensive network of footpaths and the topography of the land, the proposals will still result in some adverse impacts on the character of the site and the surrounding landscape. The Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment submitted with the application identifies that the proposal will result in a major-moderate effect on the immediate landscape character and a slight to negligible adverse effect on wider landscape character.
- 6.27 Overall, the proposal would result in some harm to the landscape and this needs to be weighed against the benefits of the proposal. On balance, I am of the opinion that the proposal would not cause “a significant adverse effect to landscape”, in accordance with Policy DES9 of the SOLP 2035.

Cumulative impact

- 6.28 The ES submitted with the application includes an assessment of the cumulative effects of the proposed solar farm and other developments. The cumulative impact assessment examines the potential cumulative effects of the proposal and a series of other proposed developments in the study area, on the existing landscape and visual baseline. These developments include the recently permitted solar farm at land northwest of Stoke Talmage (P20/S3245/FUL), together with the proposed new settlement at Harrington (for which an EIA Scoping Opinion has been submitted but the site is not allocated), the allocated mixed-use development at Chalgrove Airfield (SOLP STRAT7), residential development of 39 units in Tetsworth (which is now built), and a proposed equestrian fitness and rehabilitation centre (formerly an application, refused May 2021).
- 6.29 The council’s landscape officer has commented that “*the cumulative impact assessment is felt to be superficial and it is not clear as to how the scale of effects on the landscape and visual baseline is drawn? In particular, the cumulative visual assessment is weak and the evidence for the conclusions is limited. No new viewpoints/photomontages are provided, and no systematic cumulative assessment is made of the existing representative viewpoints. Overall, the cumulative assessment is felt not to assist the findings of the main LVIA.*”
- 6.30 Although lacking in some respects, the submitted assessment does review the cumulative impact of the proposed solar farm and the solar farm that is permitted on land to the northwest of Stoke Talmage (P20/S3244/FUL), which at its closest point is around 400m to the west of the application site. This accepts that “*The introduction of two solar farms into a rural area of Oxfordshire will change the rural pastoral/arable mixed character of the local area to a partial industrial scale power generation.*” But it also acknowledges that, once established, the planting mitigation for both sites would re-enforce landscape structure and reduce visibility to partial areas of the solar farms rather than the full extent of the proposals.
- 6.31 In terms of landscape character, the assessment considers that the cumulative effect would not be significant adverse in the long term. In terms of visual receptors, it adds that there are very few viewpoints where both solar farms would be visible because of the undulations in the landscape, the strong vegetation structure, and the proposed mitigation planting.

- 6.32 Although not considered under the submitted assessment, I am satisfied that given the distance to the existing solar farm at Easington Farm, Chalgrove (3.8km) and the scale of this development, that there would be no cumulative impacts between this existing solar farm and the current proposal.

Ecology and trees

- 6.33 The relevant policies in relation to ecology are ENV2, ENV3 and ENV4 of the SOLP 2035 and policy TET8 of the TNDP. Amongst other things, these policies seek to protect legally protected species through measures that avoid, mitigate or compensate for the adverse effects resulting from a development. They also seek to ensure that existing green and blue infrastructure is preserved and enhanced, including providing net gains in biodiversity.
- 6.34 The habitats on the application site are primarily improved grassland, but there are features of increased ecological value, such as ponds, tree lines, hedgerows, ditches, woodland and scrub. Most of the linear habitat features on the site will be retained as part of the proposals and extensive hedge planting will also be provided. The amended plans have secured a 20m buffer zone along the Haseley Brook.
- 6.35 Within the local area there is a known meta-population of great crested newts (GCN), which are a protected species. The site contains habitats that are suitable to support GCN and the proposal is likely to adversely impact on GCN. Following the advice of the council's countryside officer, the development has been entered into the GCN district licencing scheme to fund the creation and management of GCN habitat across the district. Subject to conditions to ensure that the development is carried out in accordance with the council's GCN licencing scheme, and that specific mitigation measures are followed, the development would provide suitable compensation / mitigation for the impact on GCN.
- 6.36 The council's countryside officer is satisfied that the impacts on other protected species, such as breeding birds, bats and badgers can be adequately mitigated through the use of sensitive working practices. And subject to appropriate habitat creation and management, the proposal will also achieve a net gain in biodiversity. These matters can be secured through conditions requiring the approval of a Landscape and Ecological Management Plan, a Construction Environmental Management Plan for Biodiversity and a Biodiversity Enhancement Plan.
- 6.37 In relation to trees, policy ENV2 of the SOLP 2035 also seeks to protect ancient woodland and veteran trees. And policy ENV1 requires development to protect, and where possible enhance features that contribute to the nature and quality of South Oxfordshire's landscapes, including trees, hedgerows and field boundaries. The council's forestry officer raised concerns with the initial submission as the proposals would be within the buffer zone of a protected tree. The amended plans have addressed this issue and, subject to a tree protection condition, the proposals would have an acceptable impact on trees.

Archaeology and historic environment

- 6.38 Policy ENV9 of the SOLP 2035 advises that applicants will be expected to undertake an assessment of appropriate detail to determine whether the development site is known to, or is likely to, contain archaeological remains. To comply with these requirements, the applicant has recently submitted the results of an on-going trial trench evaluation being conducted on the application site.

- 6.39 The results of the trenched evaluation to date have identified the presence of below ground archaeological remains within the application site dating from the Iron Age to post-medieval periods, these primarily focused across, but not confined to, Development Zones six to nine, representing evidence of occupation and associated land use including burial remains.
- 6.40 The County Council Archaeologist has confirmed that whilst these recorded archaeological remains are not considered to be of a significance that would preclude / constrain the proposed development, the development would result in impacts upon the recorded archaeological features and as such they will require further investigation and record in advance of development. Subject to suitable conditions to secure these investigations, I consider that the proposal is in accordance with the above policy.
- 6.41 In relation to above ground heritage assets, the application site surrounds the Grade II Listed Harlesford Farmhouse on three sides. The TNDP recognises Harlesford House as a local heritage asset and the application site also wraps around this property.
- 6.42 The council's conservation officer has confirmed that there will be no direct impact on the historic fabric of Harlesford Farmhouse. In relation to the setting of Harlesford Farmhouse the conservation officer commented that the extent of the solar development around the building will considerably erode the appreciation of the wider setting of the listed building being one of open fields. The amended plans have reduced the impact by removing the area of panels to the northeast of the listed buildings.
- 6.43 Although the amended plans have improved the impact on the setting of Harlesford Farmhouse, the proposal would still reduce the extent to which the listed building is understood as part of the historic open countryside and its former relationship to the agricultural character of the area. It is recognised that there will be some remaining open space surrounding the farm grouping and as such the impact is considered to result in less than substantial harm to the significance of the listed building.
- 6.44 SOLP policy ENV7 requires development proposals that affect the setting of a listed building to respect any features of special interest, which includes its historic curtilage or context. Where development results in less than substantial harm to the significance of a listed building, amongst other matters, proposals will be expected to:
- i) minimise harm and avoid adverse impacts, and provide justification for any adverse impacts, harm or loss of significance;
 - ii) identify any demonstrable public benefits or exceptional circumstances in relation to the development proposed;
- 6.45 As outlined in paragraph 199 of the NPPF, irrespective of whether the harm amounts to less than substantial harm, great weight should be given to an asset's conservation and less than substantial harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal. The delivery of a renewable energy project will have clear public benefits and in weighing these against the low level of harm to the setting of Harlesford Farmhouse, I am of the opinion that planning permission should be granted. The removal of a section of the panels, and the provision of additional planting also has minimised the level of harm, in accordance with policy ENV7 of the SOLP.
- 6.46 The NPPF, also requires the effect on the significance of non-designated heritage assets to be taken into account. In terms of the impact on the non-designated Harlesford House, panels will be located on the parcel of land immediately to the west of this property, with equipment on other sides positioned some distance away. There is a substantial landscape buffer between this property and the panels to the west, and

additional planting is proposed. Given these features, I am satisfied that the proposed development would not result in any harm to this local heritage asset, in accordance with policy TET5 of the TNDP.

Residential amenity

- 6.47 Policy DES6 of the SOLP requires that development proposals demonstrate that they will not result in any adverse impacts on the amenity of neighbouring uses. Most of the land surrounding the site is in agricultural use and the proposal would not result in any conflict with this use.
- 6.48 There are five residential properties adjoining, or near the site. Given the relationship between these neighbouring dwellings and the built development, the separation involved and the intervening boundary treatment, I do not consider that the proposals would result in any adverse impacts on amenity, in accordance with policy DES6.
- 6.49 It is noted that the application is also accompanied by a glint and glare assessment. This concludes that the effects of glint and glare and their impacts on local receptors have been analysed in detail and the impacts are predicted to be “*none*” and as such, there would be “*no significant effects.*”

Access and parking

- 6.50 Policy TRANS5 of the SOLP 2035 is the most relevant transport policy and, amongst other matters, this requires developments to provide a safe and convenient access. The site would be accessed via the Stoke Talmage Road. Two accesses were initially proposed from this road, but the amended plans have reduced this to a single access. The County Council highways officer has reviewed the proposal and is satisfied that this access arrangement is suitable for the construction and operational phases of the development.
- 6.51 Most vehicle trips associated with this development will take place during the construction phase, expected to take place over 16 weeks. The County Council highways officer has considered the impact of these trips and has concluded that they would not result in development HGV traffic causing a severe impact to the local highway network. The effective management of these trips during the limited construction phase can be achieved through a Construction Traffic Management Plan (CTMP), which is a recommended condition.
- 6.52 During the operation of the development, the application documents identify that during normal circumstances, no more than four cars / vans would visit the site each week and only one HGV trip would occur per annum if a new or replacement item of equipment is bought to the site. This number of trips generated when the development is operational will therefore be minimal and will have a negligible impact on the highway network.
- 6.53 The County Council highways officer has not raised any concerns with the layout of the site. The existing PRowWs that cross the site will need to be protected during construction, with measures put in place to protect users of the footpaths. This can be included in the CTMP, along with details of wheel washing facilities. Subject to this condition, I am satisfied that the proposal complies with policy TRANS5 of the SOLP 2035.

Environmental matters (flooding, drainage and contamination)

- 6.54 Policy EP4 of the SOLP 2035 considers flood risk and sets out drainage requirements for new developments. Most of the site is within Flood Zone 1 which has the least probability of flooding. There are areas at the south of the site around Haseley Brook

that are within Flood Zones 2 and 3 and no development will be located within these areas. The council's drainage officer and the County Council as Lead Local Flood Authority have no objection to the proposal subject to a condition requiring details of a sustainable drainage scheme.

- 6.55 Policy ENV11 of the SOLP 2035 is concerned with contamination. The council's contaminated land officer has reviewed the scheme and has not raised any concerns. Based on the recommendations of the council's specialist officers' I consider that the proposal is acceptable in terms of flood risk, drainage, and contamination.

Other material planning considerations

- 6.56 The UK Government has committed to meeting a legally binding target of net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. The council has also declared a climate emergency with a target to be a carbon neutral district by 2030. The proposed solar farm will help to meet national and local objectives for reducing carbon emissions and reducing reliance on fossil fuels.

7.0 CONCLUSION

- 7.1 The development is EIA development for the purposes of the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017. The council has taken into account the Environmental Statement submitted with the application and representations made on it in determining the application.
- 7.2 The environmental and technical reports that form part of the planning application submission demonstrate that there would be no unacceptable environmental impacts, and there are no technical objections to the proposal.
- 7.3 There are a number of factors to balance in determining this application. In terms of negative aspects, the proposed solar farm would result in the loss of agricultural land and there would be some adverse impacts on local landscape character and the visual amenity of the area. There would also be cumulative impacts with the recently permitted solar farm to the west of the site (P20/S3244/FUL). In addition, the proposal would result in less than substantial harm to the setting of a listed building and great weight should be attributed to this harm. In terms of the benefits of the development, the proposal would generate renewable energy, contribute towards reducing carbon emissions, restore landscape structure, create habitat, and increase biodiversity.
- 7.4 Having weighed up these factors, I am of the opinion the renewable energy benefits of the proposed development are substantial and in combination with the other benefits, outweigh the harm. And when considered against the Development Plan as a whole, the proposal represents a sustainable form of development and there are no valid reasons to withhold planning permission.

8.0 RECOMMENDATION

That planning permission for **P20/S3245/FUL** is **granted** subject to the following conditions:

Time limits and approved plans

- 1. Commencement within three years**
- 2. Development in accordance with approved plans**
- 3. Temporary permission for a period of 40 years**

Pre-commencement conditions

4. Submission of final details of layout, design, and scale of equipment to be submitted for approval
5. Details of hard and soft landscaping to be submitted for approval
6. Landscape and Ecological Management Plan to be submitted for approval
7. Tree protection to be submitted for approval
8. Construction Environmental Management Plan for Biodiversity to be submitted for approval
9. Biodiversity Enhancement Plan to be submitted for approval
10. Scheme for provision and management of buffer zone to watercourse to be submitted for approval
11. Full archaeological field evaluation to be submitted for approval
12. Archaeological Written Scheme of Investigation to be submitted for approval
13. Programme of archaeological mitigation to be submitted for approval
14. Construction Traffic Management Plan to be submitted for approval (including wheel washing facilities)
15. Sustainable drainage scheme to be submitted for approval

Compliance conditions

16. Development to be carried out in accordance with the council's great crested newt licencing scheme
17. Great crested newt mitigation to be provided
18. Development to be carried out in accordance with Flood Risk Assessment
19. No lighting to be installed
20. Removal of panels if not used continuously for the production of energy for a period of six months

End of development condition

21. Decommissioning Method Statement to be submitted for approval and decommissioning to be carried out within 6 months of the expiry of the 40-year planning permission and land returned to agricultural use

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