

<b>APPLICATION NO.</b>	<a href="#">P14/S3192/FUL</a>
<b>APPLICATION TYPE</b>	FULL APPLICATION
<b>REGISTERED</b>	11.11.2014
<b>PARISH</b>	CLIFTON HAMPDEN
<b>WARD MEMBER(S)</b>	Sue Lawson
<b>APPLICANT</b>	Culham Renewables Ltd
<b>SITE</b>	Fullamoor Farm House Clifton Hampden, OX14 3DD
<b>PROPOSAL</b>	Development of a Solar Array farm.
<b>AMENDMENTS</b>	As clarified by reptile survey received on 3 December 2014. As further clarified by noise assessment accompanying agent's email dated 7 January 2015, Green Belt Statement received on 4 August 2015 and as amended by revisions to layout to accommodate relief road shown on drawing Culham Site plan 1 and justification letter accompanying agent's email dated 8 July 2015.
<b>GRID REFERENCE</b>	454171/195696
<b>OFFICER</b>	Sharon Crawford

**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 The application has been referred to the Committee because the recommendation conflicts with the views of Clifton Hampden Parish Council.
- 1.2 The total area of the site extends to some 9.5 ha. The site is an open field some 300 m to the north west of Clifton Hampden village and 100m to the south east of Culham Science Centre; the site lies within the parish of Clifton Hampden. The site is enclosed by mature native hedgerows on the field boundaries. It is separated from the nearest public road (A415) by a field laid to arable crop and is some 100m from the road at its closest point. A public footpath follows the northern boundary (CliFP10) of the field. A sewage treatment plant lies to the west of the site. For agricultural purposes the land is graded as predominantly in urban use due to the proximity to the Culham Science Centre and the previous use of the site as part of a larger airfield. The site lies within the Oxford Green Belt.
- 1.3 The site is identified on the Ordnance Survey Extract **attached** at Appendix 1.

**2.0 PROPOSAL**

- 2.1 The application seeks full planning permission to establish a solar farm (approx. 5 megawatt) with associated infrastructure for a temporary period of 30 years.
- The solar array would cover approximately 9.5 ha.
  - The solar panels will be mounted on metal frames on posts which will be piled into the ground causing minimal impact on the ground surface and they will be fully removable once the operational life of the solar park ends.
  - The panels will be set out in rows with 7m spacing between rows and orientated south in order to capture maximum solar energy.
  - There will be 5 inverter stations distributed amongst the panels and switchgear and transformer housing for the Distribution Network Operator (DNO) located on the southern boundary of the field near the CSC. An access track will be constructed along the northern boundary and through the centre of the array.
  - The panels and frames will be a maximum height of 2.3 m, typically comprising

two panels stacked in portrait format set at an angle of approximately 30 degrees. Additional equipment will include housing units for inverters/transformers and one small grid connection unit.

- The solar farm will be protected with a 1.8 - 2 m high security fence. Infra-red CCTV will be installed but this would be discrete. The application site will not be artificially lit. The external security fence will be off-set internally from the perimeter hedgerows by a minimum of 5 m but at a greater distance where shading is an issue

2.2 The application is accompanied by the following reports;

- Planning, Design and Access Statement
- Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment
- Biodiversity report
- Statement of community involvement
- Phase 1 Habitat Survey

Additional information and amended plans have been provided in respect of;

- Full reptile survey
- Noise assessment
- Revised layout to accommodate relief road route
- Green Belt Statement (special circumstances)

This application covers the first phase of a two phase scheme for a 7MW scheme in total. A subsequent application for a 4 hectare field to the west of sewage works is likely to follow.

2.3 A screening opinion submitted in 2013 (ref P13/S1239/SCR) determined that an environmental impact assessment was not needed because the site is well contained, has no nature conservation issues and any environmental issues will be of a local nature which can be dealt with through the normal planning application process.

2.4 The application has been advertised as major development.

2.5 Reduced copies of the plans accompanying the application are **attached** at Appendix 2. Full copies of the plans and consultation responses are available for inspection on the Council's website at [www.southoxon.gov.uk](http://www.southoxon.gov.uk).

3.0 **SUMMARY OF CONSULTATIONS & REPRESENTATIONS**

- 3.1 Clifton Hampden Parish Council **Refuse.** An approval would be premature until the route of the relief road is confirmed. OCC have yet to consult on the route and therefore the removal of OCCs objection is premature. To limit the available route options by allowing the construction of a solar farm would be inadvisable at this time.  
As you are aware the parish is producing a neighbourhood plan. The plan has to follow the SODC Local Plan and we are awaiting the latest iteration to enable us to move forward. As Government housing targets have increased there is a possibility that this land maybe needed to for housing should the village be allocated housing within the local plan and our Neighbourhood Plan. Whilst we understand that this is unlikely, until the plan is released we cannot be sure.  
Whilst we have no objection in principle to the Solar Farm, we believe it would be irresponsible of us not to object at this time whilst these two issues remain outstanding. We are not asking for a delay until our Neighbourhood Plan is finalised but only until the SODC Local Plan becomes an ‘emerging plan’ with housing needs allocated.
- 3.2 Culham Parish Council Culham Parish Council believe that this proposal is inappropriate within the green belt and a poor use of good agricultural land. The roofs of the nearby science centre would provide a much more suitable location for solar panels.
- 3.3 Countryside Officer The application is accompanied by a phase 1 habitats survey and a reptile survey report. The habitats present are common and widespread and much of the existing grassland will remain once the solar array has been installed. The reptile surveys found no evidence to indicate that the site is used by reptiles. I therefore have no objections to the proposed development on ecological grounds.
- 3.4 OCC (Highways) **Original scheme.** The land subject to this application is likely to be required to deliver a new strategic road linking the north of Didcot and eastern arc of Oxford with Culham science Centre and each other. This has been identified in a number of documents as required to support and enable planned economic and residential growth across the area. I urge the district council to seriously consider the negative impact on the emerging strategic transport scheme which would hinder its delivery and reduce the economic growth potential of Culham, and if minded to approve to do so for a limited period of time only.  
**Comments on revised layout.** No objection subject to conditions. The development proposal is on land that may be required to deliver a Science Vale strategic scheme to construct a new road from Didcot to Culham Science Centre linking to the B4015. During normal operation the site will generate no significant increase in traffic at the development site. Construction traffic will be significant, and a construction traffic management plan will be required

- 3.5 Conservation Officer This application site does not directly impact any designated heritage assets but is situated to the west of the designated Conservation Area of Clifton Hampden. The potential harm to the setting of the Conservation Area is largely mitigated by the existing hedge and tree lined boundary of the site. In addition, there are enhancements to this landscaping proposed within the LVIA. As such, the proposal is not judged to constitute such harm as to be contrary to National and Local Policy. However, the site is within the Green Belt and the rural openness of the area makes an important contribution to the wider setting of Clifton Hampden and the designated Conservation Area.
- 3.6 CPRE Objection. This particular site is in the Green Belt where an industrial development on this scale is totally inappropriate. It is also a valuable “green gap” between the Science Park and neighbouring housing. It is not brownfield land, as claimed, as the airfield buildings that are said to have been there have long since disappeared, and the land has subsequently been used for minerals extraction and restored. For both these reasons it is excluded from “previously developed” by the NPPF glossary.
- 3.7 London Oxford Airport No objection provided that there is no increase in bird activity or glare to aircraft as a result of the development.
- 3.8 SODC Environmental Protection Team No objections. Based on the information provided, I am satisfied that the proposed plant and equipment will not generate unacceptable levels of noise at the nearest noise sensitive properties. I would therefore have no concerns about disturbance from noise arising from the development, should planning permission be granted.
- 3.9 Oxford Green Belt Network Objection. This will close the gap between the science centre and Clifton Hampden. It is an important purpose of the Green Belt to protect open spaces of this kind which have role in relation to the setting of settlements, rural as well as urban. Although this site has been worked for minerals in the past it has been restored to pasture and should not be regarded as brownfield land. This should not be regarded as temporary, it will impact on openness and will have an urbanising effect.
- 3.10 Neighbour Objectors (2 ) I object to the access to the proposed solar farm being on the shared farm drive to the farmyard. This will mean additional traffic on an already heavily used farm access road. We have to pay a percentage of the cost of repair and maintenance to this road. Additional wear and tear would therefore cause us personally financial loss. Furthermore, we reverse out of our drive onto this farm road. Visibility is limited and there have been quite a few 'near misses'. Any additional traffic - above and beyond the current lorries, tractors, farm machinery and cars would be detrimental to our enjoyment of our property.

It would be an unsightly blot on the landscape. Clifton Hampden is a beautiful and historic village which should be protected from money-making schemes like this.

The only grid connection point is within Culham Science Centre and no arrangements have been secured with the owner to arrange connection across this land.

The siting may be prejudicial to the provision of the Clifton Hampden relief road.

**4.0 RELEVANT PLANNING HISTORY**

4.1 P13/S1525/PEM - Response  
Installation of a solar array scheme.

4.2 P13/S1239/SCR – EIA NOT required.  
Installation of a solar array scheme.

4.3 An appeal against the refusal of planning permission for a solar array with the district have recently been allowed;

Ref. P14/S2242/FUL : Appeal Ref: APP/Q3115/W/15/3032498  
Land to the east of Windmill Road, Towersey, Oxfordshire, OX9 3QH.

**5.0 POLICY & GUIDANCE**

5.1 South Oxfordshire Core Strategy policies  
CSS1 – The overall strategy  
CSB1 - Biodiversity  
CSEN1 - Landscape  
CSEN2 - Green Belt protection  
CSQ1 - Renewable energy

5.2 South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2011 policies;

A3 - Agricultural diversification  
C4 – Landscape setting of settlements (Oxford)  
C6 - Maintain & enhance biodiversity  
C7 - Adverse affect on protected site  
C8 - Adverse affect on protected species  
C9 - Loss of landscape features  
D1 - Principles of good design  
EP2 - Adverse affect by noise or vibration  
EP3 - Adverse affect by external lighting  
G2 - Protect district from adverse development  
G4 - Protection of Countryside  
GB4 - Openness of Green Belt maintained  
R8 - Protection of existing public right of way  
T1 - Safe, convenient and adequate highway network for all users

South Oxfordshire Design Guide 2008  
South Oxfordshire Landscape Assessment - adopted as supplementary planning guidance (SPG) in 2003

5.3 National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

National Planning Policy Framework Planning Practice Guidance (PPG)  
Oxfordshire County Council Position Statement (OCCPS) CME9 – Major Development

Proposals for Ground Mounted Solar PV arrays. The statement has been subject to consultation with relevant organisations and was approved by Oxfordshire County Council's Cabinet Member for the Environment on 13 November 2014.

BRE - Planning guidance for the development of large scale ground mounted solar PV systems

The letter of 16 October 2013 by the Minister of State at the Department of Energy and Climate Change (The Rt Hon Gregory Barker MP)

Written Ministerial Statement – Solar Energy: protecting the local and global environment - 25 March 2015.

6.0 **PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS**

6.1 The main issues in this case are:

- The principle
- Green Belt
- Special circumstances
- Landscape and visual impact
- Loss of agricultural land
- Ecology
- Impact on footpath
- Neighbour impact
- Highway issues
- Cumulative impact
- Other issues

6.2i **Principle in relation to sustainable development.** The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets out the Government's commitment to the provision of renewable energy – supporting the delivery of renewable energy is central to the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development (paragraphs 93-98). The Framework and the Planning Practice Guidance replaced PPS22: Renewable Energy (RE) and its Companion Guide (PPS22CG).

6.2ii Paragraph 94 advises that Local Planning authorities should adopt proactive strategies to mitigate and adapt to climate change, in line with the objectives and provisions of the Climate Change Act 2008. (The Climate Change Act 2008 commits the UK to an 80% reduction in greenhouse gases by 2050 and a 34% reduction by 2020, based on 1990 levels).

6.2iii Paragraph 97 of the NPPF states that 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. They should: -

- Have a positive strategy to promote energy from renewable and low carbon sources.
- Design their policies to maximise renewable and low carbon energy development while ensuring that adverse impacts are addressed satisfactorily, including cumulative landscape and visual impacts.
- Consider identifying suitable areas for renewable and low carbon energy sources, and supporting infrastructure, where this would help secure the development of such sources.
- Support community-led initiatives for renewable and low carbon energy,

including developments outside such areas being taken forward through neighbourhood planning; and

- Identify opportunities where development can draw its energy supply from decentralised, renewable or low carbon energy supply systems and for co-locating potential heat customer and suppliers.

6.2iv The NPPF adds that in determining applications applicants should not be required to demonstrate the overall need for RE and recognises that even small-scale projects provide a valuable contribution to cutting greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Applications should be approved if the impacts are (or can be made) acceptable. The *Framework* provides that the planning system should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by, amongst other things, protecting and enhancing valued landscapes.

6.2v Policy CSQ1 of the adopted South Oxfordshire Core Strategy supports the NPPF as follows;

**Policy CSQ1 Renewable Energy**

Proposals for development for the generation of energy from renewable resources will be permitted provided any adverse impact on the landscape, heritage and biodiversity of an area, traffic generation or the amenities of local communities is outweighed by wider environmental, social, economic or other benefits.

6.2vi Renewable and decentralised energy generation schemes provide a valuable source of green energy for both existing and new development that contributes towards reducing CO2 emissions. The availability of such schemes will become increasingly important with the Government's target for zero carbon new housing by 2016.

6.2vii Government policy is that proposals for large scale ground-mounted solar PV arrays should be focussed on previously developed land or brownfield sites, contaminated land or industrial land, provided it is not of high environmental quality. One of the core planning principles of the Framework is that the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside should be recognised. The PPG sets out that the deployment of large-scale solar farms can have a negative impact on the rural environment, particularly in very undulating landscapes. However, it continues that, the visual impact of a well planned and well-screened solar farm can be properly addressed within the landscape if planned sensitively. This guidance also stresses that local topography is an important factor in assessing whether a large scale solar farms could have a damaging impact on the landscape. The OCCPS acknowledges that 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.

6.3i **Principle in relation to the Oxford Green Belt.** The NPPF attaches great importance to Green Belts. The intention of Green Belt policy around the built-up area of Oxford, is to keep land permanently open and severely restrict development.

The purposes of the Green Belt are to:

- preserve the special character and landscape setting of Oxford
- check the growth of Oxford and prevent ribbon development and urban sprawl
- prevent the coalescence of settlements
- assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment
- assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

- 6.3ii The fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open – the most important attribute of Green Belts is their openness. It is important to note that whilst the Green Belt contains areas of attractive landscape, the quality of the landscape is not relevant to the inclusion of land in the Green Belt or its continued protection. It is the openness of land that is important.
- 6.3iii To protect openness there is a general presumption against inappropriate development. Inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt. The NPPF states that development, other than new buildings, may not be inappropriate in the Green Belt provided they preserve the openness of the Green Belt and do not conflict with the purposes of including land in Green Belt.
- 6.3iv The NPPF specifically refers to proposals for renewable energy within the Green Belt at Paragraph 91. “Elements of many renewable energy projects will comprise inappropriate development. In such cases developers will need to demonstrate very special circumstances if projects are to proceed. Such very special circumstances may include the wider environmental benefits associated with increased production of energy from renewable sources”.
- 6.3v Paragraph 79 of the Framework tells us that openness is an essential characteristic of the Green Belt. Openness is generally defined as the absence of built form. This does not depend on visibility; even if a site is well screened the impact on openness is the same. As a man-made imposition on the landscape, the solar array, fencing and infrastructure would obviously reduce openness and this would add to the harm to the Green Belt by reason of inappropriateness.
- 6.3vi However, notwithstanding the decision of the Secretary of State on a recent appeal concerning a large solar farm in Suffolk (APP/T3535/A/13/2193543), and the letter of 16 October 2013 by the Minister of State at the Department of Energy and Climate Change (The Rt Hon Gregory Barker MP), a recent appeal has concluded that “renewable energy projects are not prohibited outright in the Green Belt. It is, as ever, a matter of balancing any benefits they would bring forward, against any harm they would cause”. But LPAs should ensure that substantial weight is given to any harm to the Green Belt (APP/CS105/A/13/2207532).
- 6.4 **Applicant’s case for special circumstances.** Where development is inappropriate it is necessary to demonstrate that the harm by reason of inappropriateness is outweighed by other factors. Special circumstances may include the wider environmental benefits associated with increased production of energy from renewable sources. The special circumstances in this case are:
- The proposal is for a 5MW solar farm, capable of generating enough clean electricity to power 1,515 typical households.
  - The solar farm would avoid 2,150 tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions associated with electricity generation each year, thus reducing the carbon footprint of South Oxfordshire District.
  - The proposed development will not have any significant adverse impacts, will not impact on flood risk or drainage, will not impact on any heritage assets, will have very limited visual impacts and will provide ecological benefits by increasing biodiversity on and around the site.
  - The site is well contained by the existing vegetation on and around the site, and as such no properties have views of the site area. The additional planting proposed, including new hedgerow and trees as shown on the Planting Plan



will mitigate the limited visual impact of the development from the footpath running along the boundary and will be over 100m from the nearest public road. This mitigation will also provide habitat enhancements and benefit the biodiversity of the area.

- The site currently has low ecological value. The proposed development will safeguard and enhance the habitats on and around the site, and will result in the creation of new habitats, benefitting ecological resources in the local area and providing an overall net gain for biodiversity.
- The proposed development is not within an area of Flood Risk and will not increase run off of water from the site.
- There will be no impact on any designated or non-designated heritage assets, and the potential for there to be any significant unrecorded archaeology on the site is low.
- Whilst the site is not classified as Agricultural Land,
- The proposal has an agreed point of connection to the electricity network. Analysis provided in Appendix 1 confirms that there are only three small areas outside the Green Belt and Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty where a connection to the 33kV electricity network would be technically feasible. However, there is no guarantee that there would be capacity for a 5MW solar farm to connect in these other areas,
- At the end of the solar farm's life, the site will be decommissioned, with all infrastructure removed from the site, and the site restored to its original condition for potential future agricultural use.

- 6.4i In my view there are special circumstances that would justify this development and the landscape impacts of the development can be made acceptable by appropriate landscaping.
- 6.5i **Landscape impact.** The South Oxfordshire Landscape Assessment (SOLA) identifies the landscape characteristics of the district and gives guidelines for landscape enhancement, planning and development. The site falls within the Nuneham Courtney Ridge character area; an area of rolling plateau between the higher Oxford Heights to the north and the lower river valley to the south. This site is included as part of the institutional land of the science centre which is characterised as a dispersed complex of buildings, signs and land uses which have an urbanising influence on the rural context of the area. It is an area of low scenic quality of medium visual sensitivity and low sensitivity to change. It is a landscape identified to restore in order to strengthen the landscape structure which has been lost as a result of intensive arable farming (the loss of hedges etc).
- 6.5ii The SOLA states that Large scale development of any kind will be inappropriate within the rural and unspoilt landscape outside of the institutional land. Land management on the fringes of built areas (including the institutions) should be carefully managed to mitigate adverse impacts on the surrounding countryside.
- 6.5iii A landscape visual assessment (LVA) has been submitted with the application. It has been prepared using standard methodology. The LVA identifies the character of the site as “that of previously developed land associated with the Culham Science Centre which was a former naval airfield. The Site as a landscape resource is considered to be of low value.” (para 1.3).
- 6.5iv The LVA identifies a number of key viewpoints and includes viewpoint photographs and considers the effect of the development. This assessment concludes that, once built, the proposed solar array will have no significant visual impact except to users of the public right of way (PRoW) which passes to the east of the Site. Even to these

receptors the visual impact will be minor adverse and can easily be mitigated so that there will be no visual effect.

- 6.5v The LVA concludes “Once the proposed mitigation has become effective the proposed development is considered acceptable in terms of the landscape and visual effects since the Site is already visually discreet and can be adequately screened from its surroundings. In this respect it complies entirely with the aspirations of NPPF guidance on large scale solar farms.”
- 6.5vi Whilst this is large scale development, it is in a location that is not visually prominent due to the flat nature of the site and surrounding land. The site is a field distance away from the boundary to the nearest public road (over 100m distance) and the boundaries between fields are already planted with a traditional and mature field hedge. With the mitigation measures proposed in proposed landscaping (which can be controlled by condition), the solar farm will be effectively screened in short and long term views. The biodiversity of the site will be improved with the additional planting and the planting would restore some landscape structure in an area of very large fields. Conditions are recommended to ensure that the site will be restored in line with agreed scheme after the 30 year period.
- 6.6i **Loss of agricultural land.** The CPRE has objected to the proposal on the grounds that it involves the loss of agricultural land that should be used for the production of food. In the first instance it is necessary to consider whether the site is classified as agricultural land.
- 6.6ii The following policy guidance is also of relevance:
- Government policy is that proposals for large scale ground-mounted solar PV arrays should be focussed on previously developed land or brownfield sites, contaminated land or industrial land, provided it is not of high environmental quality.
  - The NPPF paragraph 112 requires the presence of best and most versatile agricultural land (defined as land in grades 1, 2 and 3a of the Agricultural Land Classification) to be taken into account alongside other sustainability considerations. The NPPF expresses a preference for development to be directed to land outside of this classification (i.e. on 3b, 4 and 5 land), but paragraph 28 also recognises the need to support diversification of agricultural land that helps to sustain an agricultural enterprise; and
- 6.6iii The council’s records contain old Ordnance Survey maps for the 1970s. The records show large areas of hardstanding and 6 large hangar type buildings associated with the former use of the site as an airfield. The buildings were demolished and the hardstanding area broken up, once the buildings were demolished gravel was extracted and the land has been backfilled with inert material (as a tip) and then covered with a layer of soil. The land is now essentially flat and is poor quality grassland from which only a crop of hay is taken yearly. The DEFRA maps show the land classified as being “non-agricultural”.
- 6.6iv Whilst the site may not fall within the definition of previously developed land – because the evidence of development above ground has been removed - it could be regarded as contaminated land and is not of high environmental quality. In accordance with Government Guidance sites such as this should be used in preference above higher grades of agricultural land.

- 6.6v It should also be noted that the solar array equipment would have a life span of 30 years and any planning permission would be for a temporary period to cover that time period. Once the operational period has expired conditions would require the re-instatement of the land.
- 6.6 vi In addition the design and layout specifically provides for an ongoing agricultural use of the site through sheep grazing. Sheep grazing has been found to be beneficial in the operation and maintenance of our solar farms, as it largely avoids the need for mowing between and beneath the rows of panels. Sheep grazing can be sustained on the site despite the poor quality of the land.
- 6.6vii In this case the proposal does not involve the loss of agricultural land and a refusal grounds of loss of agricultural land can be sustained
- 6.7i **Site selection process.** As part of the demonstrating special circumstances it is necessary to detail the lack of alternative sites outside the Green Belt for the development proposed.
- 6.7ii The Applicant adopted the following criteria to identify and to determine the most appropriate site
- Good irradiation (sunlight) levels;
  - Grid connection and grid capacity;
  - Brownfield land or poorer grades of agricultural land;
  - Land in single ownership and landowner willing to lease land for 30 years;
  - Accessible to delivery and construction vehicles. Other characteristics are also sought out when looking for suitable sites:
  - Ability to screen the development;
  - Scope for biodiversity enhancements;
  - No material harm to designated heritage assets and their settings, i.e. World Heritage Sites, Scheduled Monuments, Grade I and II\* Listed Buildings and Grade I and II\* Registered Parks and Gardens;
  - Not in an area at risk of flooding
- 6.7iii Outside Green Belt and AONB in the district, there are 3 principal areas that might be able to connect to a 33kV line for some sort of renewable generation but the applicant's analysis illustrates that it would be extremely difficult to do so. Smaller schemes can connect to the 11kV network but the scale of deployment is modest (the scheme at Howbery Park is an example.
- 6.7iv Even though there are areas outside Green Belt and AONB with 33kV lines relatively close by there is no guarantee that there would be any spare capacity. In this proposal not only is there a line with grid capacity but it is on land that is of poor quality and not classified as agricultural; the solar farm is also adjacent to one of the most important employment growth areas in SODC. There is sufficient spare capacity in the system in this location with a good and close source of connection.
- 6.8i **Ecology.** An ecological assessment of the site has taken place that revealed little potential. One area where some potential was flagged was the identification of possible reptile habitat in some areas of the grassland. A reptile survey has been completed and nothing of interest has been found. The habitats present are common and widespread and much of the existing grassland will remain once the solar array has been installed. Long term the use of the land as a solar array is highly beneficial to ecological diversity including reptiles. Biodiversity can be enhanced with a management regime and reseeded of the sward between the rows of panels,

bringing the land back to grazing levels and use of seeding regimes that encourage wildlife. As such, there are no objections to the scheme on ecology grounds.

- 6.9 **Impact on footpaths.** Clifton Hampden footpath no 10 joins the north eastern boundary of the site and then connects to the A415. The solar farm will be visible from this footpath where it passes adjacent to the field for some 500m in length but will be screened to some degree by the field hedge that lines the field boundary. Additional planting to fill in any gaps in the hedge is proposed. The effect on the visual amenity of users of the PRow within 5 years will be Negligible in summer and adverse of Minor significance when the deciduous vegetation is out of leaf.
- 6.10 **Neighbour impact.** The nearest residential properties are in Clifton Hampden in Watery Lane Farm some 200 metres to the east and have some protection, in terms of views from trees/shrubs/hedge, lie of land etc. I do not think that the solar array scheme would give rise to an unneighbourly impact.
- 6.10i Once operational, the sub-stations which accompany the scheme may generate very low background noise levels, however any noise is largely contained to the inverter housing and there are no nearby receptors that would be affected. The modules/arrays will be fixed and as such will not generate any noise. It is considered that due to the remote location of the site, any noise generated above background levels will not be audible.
- 6.11 **Highway issues.** The adjacent land and part of the site is likely to be required to deliver a new strategic road linking the north of Didcot and eastern arc of Oxford with Culham science Centre and each other (see Appendix 3). This has been identified in a number of documents as required to support and enable planned economic and residential growth across the area. Oxfordshire County Council objected to the original scheme because it was not clear the new road could be accommodated. A revised plan has been submitted that identifies that the solar array can be accommodated without affecting the alignment of the planned road.
- 6.11ii Access to the site will be taken easily from the existing road network. The application includes a plan of access, which demonstrates appropriate visibility. The access proposal is acceptable in principle but a condition is recommended to ensure appropriate construction and drainage.
- 6.11iii When operational the proposed solar farm would have a negligible impact upon the local highway network, attracting very few trips. However, during the construction phase a significant number of HGV trips will be required. Therefore, pre-commencement conditions are recommended in this respect.
- 6.12 **Grid connection** A viable grid connection lies within Culham Science Centre. Whilst no arrangements have been secured with the owner to arrange connection across this land to date this may be achieved once planning permission is granted.
- 6.13 **Glint and glare.** Glint and glare is not considered to be a problem with modern solar panels. Panels absorb 94% of the sun's rays and are less reflective than water. As the panels are south-facing, the mid-day sunshine is reflected back up at the sky. When the Sun is close to the horizon, it will be in the South East or the South West, so again the reflection will be up towards the sky. Given the relative proximity of the site to RAF Abingdon and Benson, the MoD were consulted on this proposal and raised no objection to it. London Oxford Airport also have no objection to the application.

6.14 **Cumulative impact.** There are no other solar parks or developments of a similar nature in the immediate area. There are a solar arrays on the Wallingford by pass, a small array at Howbery Park, Crowmarsh and two larger arrays near to Chalgrove. However, given the distances involved to these other arrays within the district the proposed development will be visually discrete and no cumulative impact is predicted.

6.15 **Other issues.**

The CPRE has objected to the proposal as a matter of principle. They consider that solar farms in Oxfordshire are not appropriate because the geography and latitude preclude an output of energy adequate to offset the harm to landscape, amenity and productivity of agricultural land. They consider solar farms as inappropriate industrial development in the countryside. As demonstrated above, this view is out of kilter with government advice. Whilst the need to protect the countryside from adverse development is acknowledged other factors weigh in the balance in this case.

6.16 A Neighbour has objected to the access to the proposed solar farm being on the shared farm drive to the farmyard. This will mean additional traffic on an already heavily used farm access road. It is acknowledged that during the construction phase a significant number of HGV trips will be required but these movements can be managed by use of a construction management plan which will be required by condition. When operational the proposed solar farm would have a negligible impact upon the local highway network, attracting very few trips.

6.17 **Summary**

This site is classified as part of the institutional land of the science centre which is characterised as a dispersed complex of buildings, signs and land uses which have an urbanising influence on the rural context of the area. It is an area of low scenic quality of medium visual sensitivity and low sensitivity to change. It is a landscape identified to restore in order to strengthen the landscape structure.

The site could be regarded as contaminated land, given the previous land uses and is not of high environmental quality. Sites such as this should be used in preference above higher grades of agricultural land.

7.0 **CONCLUSION**

7.1 Planning permission is granted because, whilst the proposed development is inappropriate development in the Green Belt and would result in some localised harm to the landscape, the harm by reason of inappropriateness would be outweighed by the renewable energy benefits of the proposal which constitute very special circumstances. The localised harm to the landscape can be made acceptable by landscaping. The proposal represents sustainable development for a limited period of 30 years after which the site will be restored and does not involve the loss of agricultural land. There are also some benefits in terms of improvements to biodiversity and landscape structure with the provision for new planting and landscaping required by condition. As such the development accords with the Development Plan Policies.

8.0 **RECOMMENDATION**

8.1 **To grant planning permission, subject to the following conditions:**

1. **Commencement three years - full planning permission.**
2. **Approved plans.**
3. **Temporary Permission – 30 years.**
4. **Site restoration scheme required.**
5. **Panels shall not exceed 3 metres in height.**

6. Landscaping Scheme (trees and shrubs only).
7. Provide parking and maintenance tracks in accordance with layout plan.
8. Construction management plan required.

**Author:** Sharon Crawford  
**E-mail :** [sharon.crawford@southandvale.gov.uk](mailto:sharon.crawford@southandvale.gov.uk)  
**Contact No:** 01235 540546