
APPLICATION NO.	<u>P20/S3244/FUL</u>
APPLICATION TYPE	FULL APPLICATION
REGISTERED	16.9.2020
PARISH	PYRTON
WARD MEMBERS	Caroline Newton Anna Badcock
APPLICANT	Cornwell Solar Farm Ltd (Owned by Low Carbon)
SITE	Land to the North West of Stoke Talmage, OX9 7HB
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, 22 January 2021, 1 and 9 February 2021, 10 and 13 September 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 as the officer recommendation conflicts with the views of two Parish Councils in which the application site is located. The application site extends over three Parishes; Wheatfield, Stoke Talmage and Pyrton. It also adjoins the Parishes of Great Haseley and Tetsworth.
- 1.3 The 67-hectare application site (which is shown on the OS extract attached as Appendix A) is located to the northwest of the small settlement of Stoke Talmage. The site is predominantly one large arable field, with part of a smaller arable field forming the most westerly extent of the site. The site is categorised as Grade 3b (moderate quality) agricultural land and most of the land surrounding the site is in agricultural use.
- 1.4 Haseley Brook is to the north of the site and the land slopes in a northward direction towards the Brook. There is an area of woodland, Cornwell Copse, to the south. Residential properties adjoin the southernmost part of the site and a Public Right of Way (Pyrton Footpath 14) crosses the site.
- 1.5 The site itself does not fall within any areas of special designation. Spartum Fen Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is around 700m to the northwest of the site. There is a separation of around 5km to the edge of the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).
- 1.6 The listed structures closest to the site are Latchford House, which is around 500m to the northeast of the site, and The Old Rectory in Stoke Talmage around 1km to the south. Both of these are Grade II Listed Buildings.
- 1.7 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 northern boundary of the site.

- 1.8 The application proposes the construction and operation of a solar photovoltaic farm and associated infrastructure. There is an overhead electricity line and pylons approximately 80m to the north of the site, into which the proposed development would connect. 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, spaced at approximately 50m intervals along the security fence.
 - Internal access tracks
- 1.10 The application plans are attached as Appendix B. The application is also accompanied 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 supporting 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/S3244/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 five 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 application plans were also updated during the application process to increase the buffer to a veteran tree.
- 1.15 Low Carbon is also funding the development process for another solar farm project in the local area at Harlesford Farm, and this is being considered under application P20/S3245/FUL. This site is approximately 400m to the east 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/S3244/FUL>

2.2 Parish Councils, local bodies and residents:

Pyrton Parish Council	Object <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solar farms should be focused on previously developed land. • Cumulative impact on the availability of agricultural land and on natural environment / landscape. • Countryside would be overloaded with large scale renewable energy projects. • Loss of agricultural land. • Restrict and endanger wildlife movements • Impact on areas natural environment, landscape and biodiversity. • Unspoilt countryside not appropriate for a solar farm. • Commented that there should be a requirement for the developers to restore the site.
Stoke Talmage Parish Council	Object <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of farmland. • Visual impact on countryside would be impossible to mitigate. • Roads inaccessible for construction vehicles. • Traffic increase. • Obtrusive feature in countryside as not amongst other non-agricultural development.
Wheatfield Parish Council	No comment
Great Haseley Parish Council	Support

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commented that a gap of at least 100m should be provided to Stoke Grange and that mature landscaping should be secured for screening.
Tetsworth Parish Council	<p>No objection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commented that the positive changes in the plans as part of the consultation feedback are welcome.
South Oxfordshire District of Campaign to Protect Rural England (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.
South Oxfordshire District of CPRE (Rights of Way)	<p>Object</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adverse impact on a footpath that is remote and provides solitude in a natural setting. Introducing alien man-made structures would ruin ambience of path. Concern that screening would be ineffective. Impact on wider views across lowland Oxfordshire.
Neighbour Representations	<p>Two received in objection (from one property) raising the following concerns:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loss of perfectly good agricultural land. Cumulative impacts are not acceptable. Adverse impact on footpath. Effective screening will take 15 years to establish. Formation of a developed block within open countryside will spoil and detract from beauty of site and surrounding area. No planning reason why the scheme has to be this size – driven by commercial considerations. Tranquil areas should remain undisturbed by noise and are prized for their recreation and amenity value. Countryside should be protected whether it is visible or not. Fencing will stop free movement of animals. The applicants should consider developed land, brownfield sites or non-agricultural land. The area between Oxford Green Belt and AONBs is vulnerable to development of this kind. Growing food is an effective use. Application has not balanced need for renewable energy against the need for food production. SODC do not have to meet a quota for renewables. Off-shore renewable energy generation is preferable. Application should be an outline application.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consideration should be given to financing and enforcing removal of panels after 40 years. • Biodiversity could be increased without the development. • There should be a specific measurement shown to Stoke Grange and separation distance to the panels should be increased. • Trees and vegetation shown incorrectly on plans and proposed planting not adequate. • Will affect consideration of potential neighbouring development. • There are better ways to be carbon neutral. • Consideration should be given to carbon footprint of production, installation and disposal of solar panels. • Harlesford solar farm is preferable.
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2.3 Technical consultees:

Natural England	<p>No objection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The proposed development will not have significant adverse impacts on protected landscapes.
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 a buffer zone to be retained to the watercourse.
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	No objection <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Subject to a condition detailing hard and soft landscape treatments together with a supporting Landscape and Ecological Management Plan.
Countryside Officer	No objection <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Subject to conditions requiring a Construction Environmental Management Plan for Biodiversity and a Biodiversity Enhancement Plan.
Forestry Officer	No objection <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Subject to conditions requiring the planting to be implemented and existing trees to be protected.
Conservation Officer	No objection <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The significance of nearby designated heritage assets would not be harmed by the proposal.
Drainage Officer	No objection <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Subject to a condition requiring the submission of a sustainable drainage scheme.
Contaminated Land Officer	No objection
Environmental Protection Officer	No objection

3.0 RELEVANT PLANNING HISTORY

[P20/S2333/SCO](#) - Withdrawn (04/08/2020)

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

[P20/S1483/SCR](#) – Environmental Impact Assessment required (15/05/20)
Solar Photovoltaic Farm and associated infrastructure.

[P20/S0847/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. Pyrton has a made Neighbourhood Development Plan.

5.2 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

5.3 Neighbourhood Plan Policies

Pyrton Neighbourhood Plan 2019 – 2034 (PNP)

BNE1 – Historic Environment
BNE2 – Landscape character
BNE5 – Flood risk and drainage
BNE6 – Footpaths and bridleways

5.4 National Planning Policy Framework and Planning Practice Guidance

5.5 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

5.6 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

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. Pyrton Neighbourhood Plan 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 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 overall principle of the development is acceptable. This is subject to there being no unacceptable impacts, which are considered in the relevant parts of the report below.

Loss of agricultural land

- 6.11 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.*”
- 6.12 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.*”
- 6.13 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*”
- 6.14 The proposed solar farm is located on land that is classified as Grade 3b (moderate quality) agricultural land. The Agricultural Land Classification system classifies land into five grades numbered 1 to 5, with grade 3 divided into two subgrades (3a and 3b). Land classified as 3b is capable of producing moderate yields of a narrow range of crops (mainly cereals and grass) or lower yields of a wider range of crops, or higher yields of grass (for grazing / harvesting).
- 6.15 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.
- 6.16 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. This assessment adds further weight to the need to locate the development on Grade 3b agricultural land.
- 6.17 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 Grade 3b agricultural land.

Landscape and visual impact

- 6.18 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*”.

- 6.19 Policy BNE2 of the PNP has similar aims in terms of landscape protection and this policy states “*every effort should be made to ensure that new development is in keeping with the local landscape character.*” And policy BNE6 requires developments to “*respect and conserve the parish’s footpaths and bridleways, ensuring they do not harm their ambience significantly, unless an appropriate alternative can be delivered.*”
- 6.20 The application site is not subject to any landscape designations. The Chilterns AONB is around 5km to the southeast and the proposal would not affect the setting of the AONB or views out from the AONB.
- 6.21 The site is relatively flat and comprises arable fields that are typical of the landscape character area and types in which the application site is located. The site has a rural character and sense of isolation. Existing perimeter vegetation provides a strong visual structure in the landscape with mature linear copses, hedgerows and hedgerow trees.
- 6.22 The application is supported by a Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA). The council’s landscape officer has confirmed that the methodology in this assessment is in line with technical guidance.
- 6.23 The LVIA outlines the landscape mitigation that would be provided as part of the proposals including the restoration and reinstatement of historic hedgerows to reduce the existing large-scale arable field into smaller components. There are no proposals to remove any trees or hedgerows as part of the proposed development.
- 6.24 The LVIA acknowledges that there would be some intervisibility between the proposed development and the surrounding landscape. However, owing to the generally level topography of the site and the area immediately surrounding the site, intervisibility between the proposals and the wider landscape would generally be restricted to vantage points on more elevated ground at some distance from the site boundary and that the level of effect would not be significant.
- 6.25 Owing to the scale of the fields in which the proposed solar farm is to be located, there would be only a limited perceived change to the pattern of the landscape. The site’s landscape and boundary features would be retained substantially unaltered. It is considered that except for the extension into the western field, the proposed development utilises the existing features of the landscape to sit comfortably into its setting.
- 6.26 The proposal would have an adverse effect on the public right of way (PROW) passing through the site, but this would be largely limited to a short section of the overall route. The ‘corridor’ through which the PROW would pass, with the implementation of the two new hedgerows, is reasonably generous. In the long term this definition of the linear corridor across the site would provide a different quality of landscape experience for walkers in that section but would not detract from the users’ overall enjoyment of the countryside.
- 6.27 The proposed hedgerows also have the benefit of connecting existing, retained, vegetation blocks together. And the creation of a wildlife orientated buffer zone along the Haseley Brook is an enhancement in landscape terms. This accords with Policy ENV4 of the SOLP 2035, which requires development adjacent to a watercourse to “*protect and where possible, enhance the function of the watercourse and its biodiversity.*”

- 6.28 The council's landscape officer considers that the perceived change to the character of the wider landscape beyond the site boundary would, as the LVIA concludes, be limited and not significant. Conditions are recommended to ensure that the landscaping is implemented, and properly managed. Subject to these conditions, the application complies with the above landscape policies.

Cumulative impact

- 6.29 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 proposed solar farm at Harlesford Farm (current application), 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).
- 6.30 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.*"
- 6.31 Although lacking in some respects, the submitted assessment does review the cumulative impact of the proposed solar farm and the solar farm that is currently proposed at Harlesford Farm (P20/S3245/FUL), which at its closest point is around 400m to the east 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 reinforce landscape structure and reduce visibility to partial areas of the solar farms rather than the full extent of the proposals.
- 6.32 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.
- 6.33 Although not considered under the submitted assessment, I am satisfied that given the distance to the existing solar farm at Easington Farm, Chalgrove (2.8km) 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

- 6.34 The relevant SOLP 2035 policies in relation to ecology are ENV2 and ENV3. Policy BEN2 of the PNP also refers to the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity. 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 conserve, restore and enhance biodiversity and to provide new biodiversity features.

- 6.35 The predominant habitats on site are arable fields and field margins. The majority of habitats of increased ecological value, such as linear habitats, will be retained as part of the proposals. A significant buffer will also be retained between the development and Haseley Brook. The ecological appraisal submitted with the application concludes that impacts on protected species are unlikely, using mitigation, and that the proposal will likely result in a net gain for biodiversity.
- 6.36 Following the submission of some additional information on Great Crested Newts, the council's countryside officer agrees with the conclusions of the ecological appraisal. As such, subject to conditions to secure a Construction Environmental Management Plan for Biodiversity and a Biodiversity Enhancement Plan, I am satisfied that the proposal complies with the above policies.
- 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.
- 6.38 There are no trees on site that are subject to a Tree Preservation Order. A fully mature oak tree within one of the hedgerows on site is likely to be of a veteran status and the woodland located adjacent to the south boundary (Cornwell Copse) is recorded as ancient woodland.
- 6.39 The amended layout plan has increased the buffer to the veteran tree and an appropriate buffer will also be provided between the proposed development and Cornwell Copse. The council's forestry officer has no objection to the development. As such, subject to a condition to secure appropriate tree protection during construction, I am satisfied that the proposal accords with the relevant policies.

Archaeology and historic environment

- 6.40 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.
- 6.41 The results of the trenched evaluation to date have identified the presence of below ground archaeological remains within the application site dating to the Iron Age and Romano-British periods. These remains represent a continuation of settlement and occupation activity previously recorded on the site during works for the Aylesbury to Chalgrove gas pipeline.
- 6.42 The County Council archaeologist has confirmed that these recorded archaeological remains are not considered to be of a significance that would preclude/constrain the proposed development. However, the development will 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.
- 6.43 The council's conservation officer has considered the impact on above ground heritage assets including the setting of listed buildings that are within the locality. She does not consider that the significance of nearby designated heritage assets would be harmed by this proposal. As such, the proposal accords with the relevant policies that seek to

conserve and enhance heritage assets including policies ENV6 and ENV7 of the SOLP 2035, and policy BNE1 of the PNP.

Residential amenity

- 6.44 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. There are some residential buildings to the very south of the site and an objection has been received from Stoke Grange.
- 6.45 This neighbour's rear garden adjoins the application site boundary and there is a separation of some 80m between the actual dwelling at Stoke Grange and the application site boundary. There is existing vegetation screening along this boundary. The application plans show the proposed solar arrays positioned some 50m from the site boundary. Based on the Rochdale Envelope principles (referred to in the introduction) this is the closest that the solar panels would be to this neighbour, with the final details potentially positioning them further away.
- 6.46 The landscaping proposals include additional planting to address specific areas of visual intrusion at Stoke Grange. In my opinion, this mitigation and the level of separation between the proposed panels and Stoke Grange would ensure that the proposal would not result in any unacceptable impacts on the amenity of this neighbouring property. As such, the proposal complies with the above policy.
- 6.47 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

- 6.48 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 an existing farm access track to the south and no works are proposed to this existing 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.
- 6.49 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.
- 6.50 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.
- 6.51 The County Council highways officer has not raised any concerns with the layout of the site. The existing Public Right of Way that crosses the site will need to be protected during construction, with measures put in place to protect users of the footpath. 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)

- 6.52 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 north 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.
- 6.53 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

- 6.54 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 would have an impact on local landscape character and the visual amenity of the area. In terms of positive impacts, it 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 benefits of the proposed development 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

- 8.1 That planning permission for P20/S3244/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 Flood Risk Assessment
17. No lighting to be installed
18. Removal of panels if not used continuously for the production of energy for a period of six months

End of development condition

19. 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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