

RAYNHAM - PF/19/0893 - Variation of Condition 4 of application ref: PF/13/1166 (Installation of 49.9MW solar farm with plant housing and perimeter fence) to extend the operational lifetime of the development from a maximum of 30 years to 40 years.; Solar Farm, Blenheim Way, West Raynham, FAKENHAM, NR21 7PL for West Raynham Solar Limited

Major Development

- Target Date: 28 August 2019

Case Officer: Mr G Lyon

Full Planning Permission

CONSTRAINTS

Countryside

Landscape Character Type: ROF1 (Rolling Open Farmland) Holkham to Raynham

Listed Building (Grade II) adjacent

Section 106 Planning Obligations

Contaminated Land

SFRA - Risk of Flooding from Surface Water + CC

EA Risk of Flooding from Surface Water 1 in 100

EA Risk of Flooding from Surface Water 1 in 1000

RELEVANT PLANNING HISTORY for Solar Farm, Blenheim Way, West Raynham, FAKENHAM, NR21 7PL

PF/13/1166 PF

Former Airfield, West Raynham

Installation of 49.9MW solar farm with plant housing and perimeter fence

Approved 16/01/2014

NMA1/13/1166 NMA

Former Airfield, West Raynham

Non material amendment request to permit the erection one cabin to house switch gear connection and one cabin to house communication/CCTV equipment.

Approved 17/07/2014

NMA2/13/1166 NMA

Former Airfield, West Raynham

Non material amendment request to permit alterations to road layout, arrangement of panels, increase in size of customer switchgear cabinet, fencing details and additional gated accesses

Approved 18/03/2015

PF/14/1572 PF

Former Airfield, West Raynham

Installation of pole mounted CCTV equipment

Approved 12/02/2015

PF/15/0324 PF

West Raynham Airfield, NR21 7AJ

Variation of condition 2 of planning application ref : 13/1166, to alter site boundaries and for new access route

Approved 01/06/2015

PF/16/1305 PF

West Raynham Airfield, West Raynham Solar Park, Fakenham NR21 7JP

Erection of two ancillary storage containers (part retrospective) and gravel access track

Approved 14/11/2016

THE APPLICATION

Seeks permission to extend the permitted life of the solar farm from 30 years from first export date of electricity (permitted till 30 March 2045) to 40 years from first export date of electricity (till 30 March 2055).

No other physical works are proposed.

The Applicant has included a Planning Supporting Statement.

REASONS FOR REFERRAL TO COMMITTEE

The Council's Constitution currently requires applications for ground mounted solar panels to be determined by the Development Committee.

PARISH/TOWN COUNCIL

Helhoughton Parish Council - Supports the application

Raynham Parish Council - Do not object to the planning application but recommend the planting of wildflowers to help encourage more natural wildlife to the area that would be beneficial to the environment.

REPRESENTATIONS

One representation has been received in support of the proposal. This representation states that the extension presents opportunities to improve biodiversity and heritage across the site.

CONSULTATIONS

Environmental Health - Supports the proposal as there are no concerns or objections to the proposed variation on environmental health grounds.

Conservation and Design Officer - No objection subject to securing heritage funding through S106 Obligation to mitigate impacts.

Former RAF West Raynham was developed between 1937 and 1939 and is a rare example of a complete Second World War air base. As part of C&D's original assessment (see 2013 comments), it was concluded that the development would result in less than substantial harm to the setting of those designated and non-designated heritage assets within the base confines and minimal harm to the setting of those heritage assets further afield.

On the basis of a 10 year extension to the existing solar farm, this balanced assessment remains unchanged. That said, during the intervening period the site has been subject to a development brief process which took a holistic approach to the identification of those non-designated assets on the site in more detail.

In summary, the heritage assets affected now include:

- **The control tower** (grade II listed) – approx. 50m
- **Remains of the Bloodhound MK II missile launching pads** (non-designated heritage asset)
- **Rapier missile training dome** (non-designated heritage asset) – 166m
- **Officers Mess** (non-designated heritage asset) – 765m
- **Station Headquarters** (non-designated heritage asset) – 600m
- **Chapel** (non-designated heritage asset) – 570m

- **Hangers 1-4** (non-designated heritage asset) – 175m
- **Water Tower** (non-designated heritage asset) – 500m
- **Painswhin House** (grade II listed) – approx. 500m
- **Helhoughton Conservation Area** – approx. 1km North-East
- **Church of All Saints** (grade II* listed) – approx. 1km North-East
- **Former Buck Public House** (grade II listed) – approx. 1km North-East
- **61 Buck Yard** (grade II listed) - approx 1km North-East
- **Raynham Park** (grade II registered park and garden) - approx. 1.2km East
- **Raynham Hall** (grade I listed) - approx. 1.2km East
- **Church of All Saints** (grade II*listed) - approx. 1.2km East
- **West Raynham Conservation Area** - approx 1.3km East
- **Weasenham St Peter Conservation Area** - approx 1.6km South
- **Listed Church of St Peter** (grade II* listed) - approx 1.7km South

Of the above list, the assets which are considered to be harmed by the development include:

- The Very Heavy Bomber Control Tower; this grade II listed building dates back to 1945 and is the landmark focal point of the former airfield. It's historic use and association with the land in question is of intrinsic significance to the interpretation of the asset and its setting.
- The Bloodhound MKII missile pads; the remains of these structures carry a close interrelationship to the airfield and its defence. Their position and relationship to the airfield is again intrinsically linked to their interpretation and former function.
- The Rapier missile training dome; this structure lies within close proximity to the solar farm with key views of the structure are punctuated by the backdrop of the solar panels.
- Hangers 1-4; these have a direct relationship to the airfield and enclose the former runway and run off. These structure overlook the solar farm.
- The Water Tower; this structure is one of the landmark features of the site as one of the tallest buildings. Direct views of the tower can be gained into and out of the solar farm.

As part of the 2013 Section 106 agreement, a 'heritage obligation' was set aside to secure the long term conservation of the then derelict control tower. Permission was subsequently secured in 2016 for the towers conversion and refurbishment. The external envelope has now been fully restored and work continues on the interior spaces. To this end, the original S106 funds have produced a tangible heritage legacy for the site and helped to secure the viability of a nationally significant structure.

In the event of the variation being agreed, a renewed heritage obligation should be secured to offset the continued harm caused to the heritage assets as outlined above. It is therefore recommended that another 13k should be contributed to the proper conservation and interpretation of the site through one or a combination of the following means:

- Contribution to the inception of a visitor hub/heritage interpretation centre;
- Feasibility study and assessment for the conversion and reuse of the remaining derelict heritage assets;
- Contribution to the preservation of the remaining derelict heritage assets;
- The creation of a heritage trail.

Overall, whilst the development will continue to result in less than substantial harm to the setting of those designated and non-designated heritage assets as identified above, the public benefit of the 49.9MW of electricity production to the national grid alongside any future heritage contribution would likely outweigh this harm. To this end, C&D raise no overriding objection to

the application subject to S106 heritage obligation agreement.

Landscape Officer - No objection subject to ensuring biodiversity enhancements secured as part of the extended Landscape and Ecology Management Plan (LEMP) are meeting their intended purpose otherwise an updated LEMP and extended monitoring period will be required so that biodiversity enhancements are delivered.

King's Lynn and West Norfolk Borough Council - No comments received
Breckland District Council - No comments received

HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS

It is considered that the proposed development may raise issues relevant to

Article 8: The Right to respect for private and family life.

Article 1 of the First Protocol: The right to peaceful enjoyment of possessions.

Having considered the likely impact on an individual's Human Rights, and the general interest of the public, approval of this application as recommended is considered to be justified, proportionate and in accordance with planning law.

CRIME AND DISORDER ACT 1998 - SECTION 17

The application raises no significant crime and disorder issues.

POLICIES

North Norfolk Core Strategy (Adopted September 2008):

Policy SS2: Development in the Countryside (*prevents general development in the countryside with specific exceptions*).

Policy SS 4: Environment (*strategic approach to environmental issues*).

Policy EN 2: Protection and enhancement of landscape and settlement character (*specifies criteria that proposals should have regard to, including the Landscape Character Assessment*).

Policy EN 4: Design (*specifies criteria that proposals should have regard to, including the North Norfolk Design Guide and sustainable construction*).

Policy EN 7: Renewable energy (*specifies criteria for renewable energy proposals*).

Policy EN 8: Protecting and enhancing the historic environment (*prevents insensitive development and specifies requirements relating to designated assets and other valuable buildings*).

Policy EN 9: Biodiversity and geology (*requires no adverse impact on designated nature conservation sites*).

Policy EN 10: Flood risk (*prevents inappropriate development in flood risk areas*).

National Planning Policy Framework (2019):

Section 2 – Achieving sustainable development

Section 4 – Decision-making

Section 14 - Meeting the challenge of climate change, flooding and coastal change

Section 15 - Conserving and enhancing the natural environment

Section 16 - Conserving and enhancing the historic environment

MAIN ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

- Principle of Development
- Effect on Landscape Character
- Effect on Heritage Assets

- Effect on Residential Amenity
- Effect on Ecology and Biodiversity
- Effect on Highway Safety
- Renewable Energy and Community Benefits
- Planning Obligations

APPRAISAL

Principle of Development

The site is situated in the countryside policy area where Core Strategy Policy SS 2 permits renewable energy projects which accord with other relevant Core Strategy policies including Policy EN 7 (Renewable Energy).

Permission has already been granted for a 49.9 MW solar farm at the former RAF West Raynham site which has been implemented and first exported electricity in March 2015. The solar farm was granted with a 30year permission and therefore the principle of such development on this site has been established. A time limited permission was required to ensure that, at the end of its operational life, the solar panels and associated equipment are removed from the site by the landowner/applicant. This is a similar approach used from many renewable energy projects across the country.

The key issue to consider with this application is whether the proposal to increase the operational life of the solar farm by a further 10 years raises any additional planning matters including, amongst other things, those relating to landscape, heritage, residential amenity and ecology and biodiversity. Subject to these issues being favourably assessed, the principle of development would be considered acceptable. The grant of any permission would create an entirely new planning permission and so would be required to include all relevant planning conditions in addition to any amendments proposed to condition 4.

Effect on Landscape Character

The site is located within the Landscape Character Type known as ROF1 (Rolling Open Farmland) Holkham to Raynham within the most up to date Landscape Character Assessment. This landscape type is characterised by high level open, gently rolling arable farmland with relatively large, geometric fields enclosed by hedgerows. Many of the former airfield sites within this character type contain flatter plateau areas with the former RAF West Raynham site occupying an elevated position on top of the domed plateau. Both the elevated position and domed plateau help to reduce the visual impact of the solar farm and limit wider views. Very little of the solar panels are generally visible. Where panels are visible, the domed plateau means that all of the site is not visible at any one time. This helps to reduce the wider impact of the proposal and was part of the reason why a 49.9MW solar farm was considered acceptable in this location when supported by the mitigating impacts of the proposed landscaping scheme. The retention of the solar farm for an additional ten years is unlikely to result in significant landscape harm. The proposal would be considered acceptable subject to continual management and maintenance of landscaping for the additional period.

Effect on Heritage Assets

When considering the impact on historic assets, the Committee is advised to take account of advice within Core Strategy Policy EN 7 (Renewable Energy) and Policy EN 8 (Protecting and Enhancing the Historic Environment) together with the advice contained in the National Planning Policy Framework Section 16 - Conserving and enhancing the historic environment, in particular paragraphs 193, 194, 196 and 197.

In making its decision the Committee is advised to have regard to its duties under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 including Section 66 (listed buildings - special regard to the desirability of preserving the building or its setting or any features of

special architectural or historic interest which it possesses) and Section 72 (Conservation Areas - special attention shall be paid to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of that area).

There are a number of heritage assets in the area identified by the Conservation & Design Officer including:

- The Very Heavy Bomber Control Tower; this grade II listed building dates back to 1945 and is the landmark focal point of the former airfield. It's historic use and association with the land in question is of intrinsic significance to the interpretation of the asset and its setting.
- The Bloodhound MKII missile pads; the remains of these structures carry a close interrelationship to the airfield and its defence. Their position and relationship to the airfield is again intrinsically linked to their interpretation and former function.
- The Rapier missile training dome; this structure lies within close proximity to the solar farm with key views of the structure are punctuated by the backdrop of the solar panels.
- Hangers 1-4; these have a direct relationship to the airfield and enclose the former runway and run off. These structure overlook the solar farm.
- The Water Tower; this structure is one of the landmark features of the site as one of the tallest buildings. Direct views of the tower can be gained into and out of the solar farm.

In considering the solar farm under planning ref: PF/13/1166, it was concluded that some adverse impacts would arise, particularly in relation to the setting of the grade II listed Very Heavy Bomber Control Tower. A financial contribution of £25,000 was secured from the applicant via a S106 obligation which was used to help make the control tower watertight with new windows and doors. These works have now been completed and the long term future of the control tower has been secured; thanks in part to the financial assistance of the original solar development. This, together with the public benefits of the solar farm in terms of significant generation of renewable energy where considered to outweigh the harm to the setting of the heritage asset over the then 30-year lifetime of the proposed development.

The application before Committee today seeks to extend the life of the development by a further 10 years and so the harm to the setting of the Very Heavy Bomber Control Tower will continue representing a 1/3 increase in lifespan of the development. In discussion with the applicant, agreement has been reached to provide additional heritage benefit funding so as to enable proper conservation and interpretation of the site through one or a combination of the following means:

- Contribution to the inception of a visitor hub/heritage interpretation centre;
- Feasibility study and assessment for the conversion and reuse of the remaining derelict heritage assets;
- Contribution to the preservation of the remaining derelict heritage assets; and
- The creation of a heritage trail.

A final sum of money is yet to be agreed but the figure recommended by the Council is **£13,000** based on a proportionate approach to the increase in length of time of the solar farm will remain on site with an uplift to take account of inflation since the original agreement S106 Obligation was made.

Whilst the retention of the solar farm for a further 10 year period for up to 40 years would continue to affect the setting of the Very Heavy Bomber Control Tower, subject to receipt of an appropriate sum of monies via a S106 Obligation to be used for heritage purposes within the former RAF West Raynham site, it is considered that the public benefits of the scheme in

terms of heritage contribution together with the renewable energy benefits would outweigh the identified harm to the setting of heritage assets.

Effect on Residential Amenity

In respect of impact on residential amenity, the nearest residential properties are located approximately 75-100m away to the west of the site within a residential estate known as 'The Kiptons' (part of the former airbase). Between 'The Kiptons' housing estate and the airfield is a belt of trees approximately 13m wide and 158m long together with a recently planted orchard. Whilst it is likely that the solar panels and related development may be partly visible by residents within 'The Kiptons', it is considered that the solar farm would not result in any overbearing impacts or loss of daylight and sunlight and would not therefore have a significantly adverse effect on the amenity of the closest residents.

To the north west of the site is Paxfield Farm, approximately 200m away from the proposed solar farm. On the eastern boundary of Paxtons Farm is a maturing belt of trees/hedges which help screen the airfield from the farm. It is considered that the solar farm would not have a significantly adverse impact on the amenity of the residents of Paxfield Farm.

Other dwellings in the area include a group of 44 former 'Officer' dwellings located some 600m west of the proposed solar farm at 'The Orchard', Kipton Ash Farm, approximately 600m south together with a number of interspersed dwellings to the south west of the site.

A further 94 dwellings are proposed across 'The Kiptons' and 'The Orchard' site with the former RAF West Raynham site under planning ref: PF/17/0729. A resolution to approve this housing was made in April 2018 and is expected to be issued in due course once an associated S106 Obligation is completed.

Helhoughton village and West Raynham village are both approximately 1,100m east and north-east of the site.

There are approximately 7 residential properties along Low Street which forms the proposed access between the application site and the A1065 between Fakenham and Swaffham. These properties lie within the Parish of Weasenham St Peter (part of Breckland Council). The village of Weasenham St Peter lies approximately 1,600m south of the site.

Whilst the proposed solar farm may be visible from a small number of properties (including from new dwellings yet to be built), given the distance between residential properties; the application site and having regard to the height of the panels, it is not considered that the proposal solar farm would in any overbearing impacts or loss of daylight or sunlight. The panels are designed to absorb sunlight and therefore glare is not likely to occur from the panels themselves.

The retention of panels on site for a further 10-year period for up to 40 years would not result in unacceptable impacts on residential amenity and would comply with adopted Development Plan policy.

Effect on Ecology and Biodiversity

Application ref: PF/13/1166 which established the original solar permission included a number of planning conditions relating to ecology and biodiversity. Condition 5 required the submission of a Landscape Ecological Management Plan and Condition 6 required a mitigation planting scheme. The applicant submitted a Landscape and Ecological Management Plan (LEMP) dated November 2014 prepared by MWA Ecological Consultants which satisfied the requirements of conditions 5 and 6. In addition to protection of habitats and wildlife during construction the approved LEMP included:

- Sowing of diverse grassland within the northern area of the solar farm;
- Sowing of seed at the Eastern Perimeter of the site;
- Planting of new hedgerows and trees;
- Structure Planting of Shrubs and Trees
- Infilling of Existing Hedgerows;
- Installation of Bat and Bird Boxes.

In terms of operation phase the LEMP set out:

- Grassland Management within the Array;
- Management of Injurious Weeds;
- Monitoring (including monitoring in years 1, 2, 3, 5 and 10)

The LEMP set out that monitoring reports will be supplied to the Local Planning Authority. To date these have not been supplied so it will be necessary to establish whether the intended aims of the LEMP have/are being met and, if the aims are not being met, that further biodiversity improvements are secured on site through an updated LEMP with an additional monitoring period.

Subject to demonstration by the applicant that the approved LEMP is meeting its stated aims or through the imposition of a planning condition to secure further biodiversity improvements on site through an updated LEMP with an additional monitoring period, the proposal would accord with Development Plan policy.

Effect on Highway Safety

Whilst the solar farm generates some traffic movements during its operational life associated with management and maintenance, the primary highway impacts occurred when the solar farm was constructed with materials brought to site and associated construction traffic. Highway impacts will also occur at the end of its life at the decommissioning phase. The extension of the life of the permission by a further 10 years will increase the period of management and maintenance traffic but these incremental additions will not give rise to significant highway objections. As such the proposal would accord with Development Plan policy.

Renewable Energy and Community Benefits

In considering application PF/13/1166, the applicants indicated that the proposed solar farm would generate approximately 48.153GWh (48,153,000KWh) of electricity per annum based on a stated capacity of the solar farm of approximately 49.9MW. This was predicted to generate enough electricity to power approximately 10,212 homes annually. It was considered that the solar farm would make significant contribution towards meeting national renewable energy targets, to which significant weight was attached.

Whilst it is understood that solar panel performance can reduce over time (most panels have a 25 year warranty to deliver at least 80% of their rated output over the life of the warranty), extending the life of the solar farm by a further 10 years will still enable the generation of a significant amount of renewable energy. The applicant has indicated a carbon saving of over 16,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide per annum as a result of the extended life. Continued use also negates the need to dispose of the panels before the end of the useful working life and this offers another benefit of delaying the generation of waste from decommission. In most cases solar panels can be recycled at the end of their life and are currently classed as e-waste in the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) Directive which requires solar cell manufacturers to fulfil specific legal requirements and recycling standards in order to make sure that solar panels do not become a burden to the environment.

In summary, extending the life of the solar farm would continue to make a significant contribution towards meeting national renewable energy targets, to which significant weight can be attached.

In terms of community benefits, it is the understanding of officers that an annual Community Fund of £25,000 is paid by the developer and that individual Community Fund Agreements are in place between the applicant and Helhoughton, West Raynham and Weasenham Parish Councils which provide up to £8,333.25 to each Parish annually. This is to be used for funding and promotion of any charitable or community projects and purposes within the Parish and for grants which offer opportunities to grass roots community groups and volunteers for the promotion and installation of energy efficient measures, small-scale renewable energy projects, or, other projects involving renewable energy, climate change and nature conservation within the Parish. The applicant has indicated that they will continue these payments for the additional lifetime of the development.

Whilst these community benefit contributions are commendable and are undoubtedly welcomed by the local community, consideration has to be given as to whether the suggested Community fund complies with Government advice at paragraph 56 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the NPPF) and CIL Regulation 122 tests in respect that section 106 planning obligations “should only be sought where they meet all of the following tests:

- Necessary to make the development acceptable in planning terms;
- Directly related to the development; and
- Fairly and reasonably related in scale and kind to the development”

The applicant for application PF/13/1166 previously indicated within their submitted application that they agreed that the Community fund cannot legally be considered as a material consideration in the determination of the application and this continues to be the case. Therefore, the Committee should not give any weight to the Community Fund when determining the application.

Summary

Extending the life of the solar farm by an additional ten years is considered acceptable in principle and would continue to make a significant contribution towards meeting national renewable energy targets. The proposal will not result in any significant adverse incremental impacts to residential amenity, highway safety or unacceptable impacts to wider landscape character. Whilst harm to the setting of the Very Heavy Bomber Control Tower will continue for a longer period of time, the applicant has indicated a willingness to provide additional financial contributions to be used towards heritage assets at the former RAF West Raynham site which provide additional public benefits that weigh in favour of the proposal. Subject to demonstration by the applicant that the approved Landscape and Ecological Management Plan (LEMP) for the site is meeting its stated aims or through the imposition of a planning condition to secure further biodiversity improvements on site through an updated LEMP with an additional monitoring period, the proposal would accord with Development Plan policy.

RECOMMENDATION:

Delegated Authority to the Head of Planning to approve the proposal subject to:

- **the completion of a S106 Obligation or Unilateral Undertaking to secure an additional £13,000 heritage contribution to be used for the purposes set out above,**
- **subject to demonstration by the applicant that the approved Landscape and Ecological Management Plan (LEMP) for the site is meeting its stated aims or, in the**

event this is not possible within a reasonable timeframe, to include the imposition of a planning condition to secure further biodiversity improvements on site through an updated LEMP with an additional monitoring period and

- **subject to imposition of the following condition topics:**
 1. **40 year permission till 30 March 2055**
 1. **In accordance with approved plans**
 2. **Replacement planting if failed within 10 years of planting;**
 3. **No external lighting;**
 4. **No transformer installed on site to be audible above background noise levels beyond the boundaries of the site**

and any other conditions considered necessary by the Head of Planning.