

## **SOLAR FARM PROPOSALS IN THE DISTRICT**

### **Local Planning and Environment Advisory Committee - 27 January 2015**

Report of Chief Planning Officer

Status: For Consideration

Key Decision: No

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**Portfolio Holder** Cllr. Piper

**Contact Officer(s)** Alan Dyer Ext. 7196

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**Recommendation to Local Planning and Environment Advisory Committee:** That the report be noted.

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#### **Introduction**

- 1 This report, prepared for Members information, describes proposals that have come forward for development of solar farms in the District and outlines relevant local and national policy.

#### **Proposals for Solar Farms in the District**

- 2 There have been three planning applications for solar farms on two sites in the District. These are:  
  
A site of 39.3 ha generating 20MW of power on land adjoining the M20 between Fawkham Road and Crowhurst Lane, West Kingsdown (13/02487). Application withdrawn.  
  
A site of 10.9 ha generating 6MW of power on land at Skinners Farm, Skinners Lane, Edenbridge (14/01270). Application withdrawn  
  
Skinners Farm, Skinners Lane, Edenbridge (14/03361). Current application on the agenda for Development Control Committee on 8 January recommended for refusal on Green Belt and visual impact grounds. (Resubmission of 14/01270 with the same site area and generating capacity).
- 3 In addition there has been a pre application enquiry regarding land at St Clere's Estate, Watery Lane, Kemsing, which the prospective applicants have made public. This covers a site of 45 ha generating 23MW on land adjoining the M26 and extending into Tonbridge and Malling.
- 4 There have been two pre application enquiries on other sites that have not been publicised and have not led to planning applications.

- 5 Solar farms have the potential to supply energy direct to local communities and/or to supply energy to the national grid. The applications we have received to date are all based solely on supplying to the national grid.
- 6 The Skinners Farm development would generate enough energy to serve approximately 1,500 homes. The West Kingsdown and Kemsing proposals would both generate enough energy to serve about 5,000 homes.

### **Policy Considerations: National**

- 7 Solar farms are a form of renewable energy on which national policy is set out in the NPPF. In this District solar farms are most likely to come forward on Green Belt land because of their space requirements. Para 91 of the NPPF states:

*“When located in the Green Belt, 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”.*

- 8 To increase use of renewable and low carbon energy para 97 suggests that planning authorities 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 customers and suppliers.

It add that applicants should not be required to make the case generally for renewable energy and that permission should be granted if impacts are (or can be made) acceptable.

- 9 Prior to the NPPF national policy did not support the identification of locations for renewable energy development in development plans.
- 10 The NPPF gives additional protection to AONBs and states that great weight should be given to their protection. In considering major developments one of the factors to consider is the scope for accommodating development outside the AONB. This suggests a preference for non-AONB over AONB sites in locating large solar farms.

- 11 The National Planning Practice Guidance supplements the NPPF and contains a section on renewables which includes specific guidance on consideration of solar farms. This is reproduced as Appendix A.

**Policy Considerations: Local**

- 12 At a local level Core Strategy Policy SP2 covers sustainable development and low carbon energy generation. It supports decentralised energy sources (which would include solar farms supplying the local community) and small scale and community based renewable energy developments where such development does not adversely affect the openness of the Green Belt and is consistent with AONB policy.
- 13 An update will be provided for the meeting on the Skinners Farm decision and any other new developments coming forward.

Richard Morris  
Chief Planning Officer

**Extract from National Planning Practice Guidance**

**What are the particular planning considerations that relate to large scale ground-mounted solar photovoltaic Farms?**

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.

Particular factors a local planning authority will need to consider 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. See also a [speech by the Minister for Energy and Climate Change, the Rt Hon Gregory Barker MP, to the solar PV industry on 25 April 2013](#).
- 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 (see [guidance on landscape assessment](#)) 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.

The approach to assessing cumulative landscape and visual impact of large scale solar farms is likely to be the same as assessing the [impact of wind turbines](#). However, in the case of ground-mounted solar panels it should be noted that with effective screening and appropriate land topography the area of a zone of visual influence could be zero.