

Highnam Parish Council

Solar Farms Briefing Note

Agenda Item 10

Purpose of Note: To put the recent number of planning applications and proposals affecting the village into context, and to agree appropriate courses of actions for HPC (the Council) to pursue to ensure the interests of the Highnam community are best represented and protected.

Current Position: This is summarised below:

Lassington Solar Farm Scheme- Promoted by Pace covering @ 220 acres of Grade 2, 3a and 3b open farm land, potentially producing 49.5 megawatts of power per annum. Further detailed aspects of the scheme were considered and commented on by the Council at its March meeting. Likely to go before TBC Planning committee for determination imminently. The Council have requested the right to make representations at this meeting. Pace have previously offered an initial sum by way of a community benefits programme, but this is considered unacceptable given the levels of benefits which have been secured elsewhere in the country.

Two Mile Lane – Promoted by Voltis, covering @ 150 acres of Grade 2 and 3 farm land potentially producing 36 mw’s power p.a. This application will be considered by the Council at its April meeting. Voltis have arranged an on-line meeting with the Council to open without prejudice negotiators regarding an appropriate level of community benefits. N.B. A previous scheme on this site was approved in 2019, but consent has now lapsed. Additionally, another scheme at Over Farm was approved, but consent has also since lapsed.

Linton Farm – This scheme, being promoted by Spring, will be the subject of a public presentation in the Parish Room on Thurs 30 April. This site encompasses the majority of Grade 3b farm land bordered by the South Wales Railway line and the River Severn. Access to the site would be obtained off the A38. It would produce @ 50.5 mw’s of power p.a. It is anticipated that a planning application will be made later in the year. As yet there have been no discussions regarding an appropriate programme of community benefits.

Potential Impact: Combined, these three schemes would cover @ 730 acres of farm land, equating to approximately a quarter of the farmable land in the village, producing @ 136 mw’s of power p.a. If all three schemes were to be approved this would dramatically and fundamentally compromise the essentially rural character of the village covering it with semi-industrial type development. Couple that with the scheme currently under construction in Maisemore which is clearly visible from Highnam and lies only @ 200m’s as the crow flies from the edge of the proposed Lassington scheme.

Community Benefits: There are now many examples nationally of solar farm promoters negotiating community benefits schemes with the local communities in which their schemes are situated. These can provide significant monies for a range of agreed community projects and are paid annually over the life span of the project, usually 40 years, or possibly with some of these funds paid on an agreed commuted basis. A number of County Councils have produced guidance on how to conduct these negotiations and examples of what levels of income might be secured. These will be produced at the meeting under confidential cover so as not to compromise the Council's negotiating position.

These negotiations are entirely separate from and are not linked to the planning process, do not form part of any planning related (Sec 106) obligation, and would be agreed direct between the scheme promoter and the local community, usually the town or parish council, not the planning authority. Administration of agreed projects might be undertaken by a special purpose company or passed to the local council to manage on their behalf. The best opportunity to undertake these negotiations would be before planning consent is granted, but considerable care would be required to ensure these negotiations are undertaken on an entirely separate and without prejudice basis so they do not compromise the council's legitimate planning related representations. Equally, the Council should not be seduced by the prospect of significant funds in making its proper planning related representations.

Proposed Actions: It is recommended that the Council:

- a) Makes vigorous representations in relation to each of these schemes to TBC, including attendance at planning committee meetings to present our views. Whilst accepting each scheme will be determined in its own intrinsic planning merits, the Council should press TBC to have regard to the potential totality of these schemes in considering each application.
- b) Pursues early focused without prejudice negotiations with each scheme provider to maximise the level of annual financial community benefits should scheme approvals be given.
- c) Gives in principle consideration to the sorts of projects which we would wish to be funded by these programmes.

Charlie Coats Chair: HPC