MENHENIOT PARISH COUNCIL
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Trehawke Barton solar farm
Public Meeting

This report summarises the questions raised by residents at a public meeting that was held on 13 October 2016, and replies made by the applicant's agent.

17 October 2016

Background

This public meeting held as part of a consultation with residents to identify issues raised by a planning application (PA16/08220) made by Trehawke Solar Ltd, owners of a 9.6MW solar park at Trehawke Barton, Menheniot. The company has made application to Cornwall Council to vary Condition 11 of the original planning approval that was granted in 2013.

'When the solar farm, or part thereof, ceases to permanently operate or on 29/06/2050, all buildings, internal roadways, cables, structures, fences, gates, posts, solar panels and all associated fixings and works shall be removed from the site (or part thereof) within 6 months of the permanent cessation of use or 29/06/2050, whichever is the sooner, and the land shall revert back to use as agriculture and forestry. The removal of the solar farm, or part thereof, shall be undertaken in accordance with a decommissioning scheme (specifying the dismantling, demolition and removal procedure in accordance with the relevant laws and standards that exist at the time, timeframe, traffic management measures and land restoration scheme) that shall be submitted to the Local Planning Authority when electricity production permanently ceases and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority.

Reason: To ensure satisfactory restoration of the land to agriculture as soon as practicably possible on the cessation of electricity production.'

The change that the operating company wish to make is:

'To allow the potential for the solar farm to operate until 2050'

The questions listed below are a summary of the topics raised by residents and councillors at the public meeting. The answers have been provided by James Jenkison, Principal Planner with The Foresight Group, owners of Trehawke Solar Ltd.

Summary of Questions

PERFORMANCE

Q What is the life of these solar panels?

A Solar panels have a very long life span with warranties lasting between 25 and 30 years based on a prediction that they will perform at 80% of their original installed capacity by this time. There is some research that indicates that solar panels will maintain a higher performance % than this by year 25 and are much more durable than originally thought.

Q How does performance deteriorate over time?

A See above.

FUTURE USE

Q Will any of the panels be renewed during the current or proposed lifetime of the installation?

A Over the 25 year period it would be expected that some panels would need to be replaced due to damage and a small number of panels may need replacing at a later date in order to maintain electricity export performance. As panels are becoming increasingly more efficient and the amount of electricity that can be exported is limited to the original capacity it is likely that only a very limited of panels will need to be replaced over the lifetime of the solar farm in order to maintain performance.

Q Will steel framework ever need replacing as well?
A No. The steel framework for solar farms is laboratory tested to ensure that every batch comprises steel that will not rust or deteriorate.

Q During the installation in 2013, there was major disruption and damage on the roads approaching the farm. What disruption would be caused this time if panels (or other maintenance work) were to be replaced?
A None. Any maintenance or replacement will be small scale in nature and will not impact on the local traffic conditions. A small van for example can easily deliver 10 or more solar panels, and support frames tend to have a set of 22 solar panels each. So even if a whole set of solar panels were to be replaced at once it would only require 2 vans to make a delivery.

Q Does the level of public subsidy encourage operators to ask for extensions in the working life of the array? Or is there no longer a subsidy for extensions?
A The subsidy only lasts for the initial 25 years. After that the solar farm must operate without a subsidy.

Q Why are you asking for the extension? Is it because the panels will become less efficient as they age, and the company needs to accept a lower output over a longer time period in order to maintain their profitability?
A The extension is being requested due to commitments to renewable energy and greenhouse gas reductions. The application is also not just about a time extension but modifying the condition to ensure the flexibility to respond to future changes without the uncertainty and delays.

It is a practically plausible future scenario that the solar farm could be gradually reduced in size by using more modern and higher spec solar panels to produce the same amount of electricity- thus allowing parts of the solar farm to be removed gradually prior to the 25 year date. The current condition would prevent this situation by making it uneconomic to pursue such an option and would instead require everything to be left as it is for the whole 25 years.

Q Your slide states that the density of solar farms in the locality is low. What is high? Give examples in UK.
A Drawing a square around the solar farms identified on the presentation indicates 4 solar farms with combine area of approximately 50 hectares within a 30 square mile area, with Trehawke Barton, High Trevatha and Ford farm each about 2.5 miles distant from each other and separated by rolling hill country. There are locations where single solar farms comprising 80 hectares or greater exist. In the Horsham District 2 neighbouring farms each obtained planning permission for large solar farms separated by only one field, with a 3rd solar farm granted permission approximately 1.8 miles away. The area north of Swindon also has a high density of solar farms.

Q How does extending the life of this array bring employment benefits to local communities?
A Renewable energy, by its nature, has limited need for labour once constructed, with the main employment being the farmer who is continuing to farm the land and ensure its condition and sell farm produce to the market. Solar farms have provided additional opportunities for the electrical engineering trade and site managers. The site manager will always be as local as possible to the solar farm so as to minimise the commute. And if any specialists that not local are required they will stay at a local hotel, such as The White Hart in Menheniot.

DECOMMISSIONING

Q What will the quality of land be after decommissioning? Given that there are underground piles and ducts that will need removing.

A The land will be restored to its original condition. It is worth noting that the land remains in its original condition now, even after construction, and achieves good grass growth.

Q How will the equipment be recycled? If the panels reach the end of their useful life and cannot be relocated at another site.

A All of the components of the solar farm have re-usable value. It is worth remembering that the solar panels will still be able to be used and there may well be a good second hand market for them. If recycling is required it will be undertaken in accordance with the PV Cycle scheme.

Q What will happen to any concrete that has been used in construction?

A There is very little concrete used. It can be broken up and removed/recycled.

Q I have concerns about who has the responsibility for removing the installation. What happens if the company which currently owns it ceases trading? Is the landowner liable to make good the fields that were used?

A Because energy from the sun is free the variable cost of a solar farm are low and stable and I don't see any reason why an operational solar farm would cease trading (ie. It is not threatened by the volatility of currencies or fuel prices).

The solar farm will always have an operational company associated with it and Foresight intends to be the management company for the lifetime of the solar farm. The components of the solar farm all have a commercial value for re-use and recycling and funds will be retained from revenues for decommissioning at the end of the operational life of the solar farm.

CONSULTATION

Q The map you sent, and the details in the original design and access statement show how the installation can be viewed across the landscape. Will company be approaching residents who are affected and asking them their opinions?

A This was the purpose of attending the parish council meeting, which had a published agenda. Paragraphs 82-85 of the original Council planning report also indicated that the visual impact is not harmful to neighbours and that neighbours close to the site did not object.

PLANNING QUESTIONS

Q Can turbines and farms be considered together as being intrusive on the landscape?

A Paragraphs 80-81 (see below) of the original Council planning report indicate that the visual impact of the solar farm at Trehawke Barton is not harmful either in itself or in combination with any other development in the area.

EXTRACT FROM STRATEGIC PLANNING COMMITTEE REPORT 14 March 2012

80. The following points are considered particularly relevant in considering the landscape and visual impact:

- The site is not within an AGLV[1] or AONB[2].

[1] Area of Great Landscape Value

[2] Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

- The site occupies a tight valley-fold in the landscape bounded by woodland to the north and established hedgerows to south which significantly limits the landscape exposure as per the siting guidance within the emergent document 'An assessment of the Landscape Sensitivity to On-shore Wind Energy and Large Scale Photovoltaic Development in Cornwall'.
- Only the uppermost northern and southern limits of the site would be visible in the landscape, and although the site is at an elevated location in the landscape, it would be viewed at an oblique angle and would not be particularly legible from high value receptors such as footpaths.
- Many of the vantages of the site would be glimpsed ones from the network of lanes and at distance. In these the full extent of the installation would not be readily legible and, given the topography it would either be the uppermost northern slope or the uppermost southern slope that would be visible at any one time.
- The presence of the transformer units and feed-in station within the main site also contribute to the visual impact upon the countryside. However in the context of the wider solar farm these ancillary structures are not considered to increase the magnitude / intensity of the impact by an unacceptable amount. The palette used for the external finishes will need to be controlled via condition to ensure that the structures are visually recessive in the landscape.
- The submitted Zone of Theoretical Visibility shows the limited extent of wider exposure.
- There would be limited points in the landscape to the north of the site where both the uppermost southerly limit of the site would be visible in the same visual frame as Padderbury Top. However in such frame the installation would form a visually recessive oblique band of development, viewed at distance, and not of such prominence as to compete with the primacy or setting of the SAM.
- Any assessment of the visual / landscape impact of this proposal must be made in combination with any extant or pending proposals. In this regard the list of wind and solar developments contained in the précised representations above have been given due consideration together with other development proposals. However, it is considered that the existing and committed RE (Renewable Energy) and other development together with that proposed under this application would not cause intervisibility or be experienced sequentially in the landscape to the extent where it forms a defining or significant landscape impact that undermines the tranquillity or undeveloped natural beauty of the countryside to an unacceptable degree.
- Future applications will however need to be assessed on their own merits.

81. On this issue it is concluded that, although the site is a relatively contained one, and has limited exposure to a wider landscape that is not locally or nationally designated. Furthermore, given the ability to soften with hedgerow enhancement the already oblique vantages into the site, and the limited impact upon important recreational footpaths, it is not considered that the key landscape characteristics cited within the Landscape Character Assessment would be undermined in a significant way when weighed against the positive support for RE[3].

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[3] Renewable Energy