

26 September 2022

Application Summary:

Planning Application Ref: 22/501335/FULL

Proposal: Installation of renewable energy led generating station on land north of Sheephurst Lane

Case Officer: Marion Geary

Customer Details:

Mrs Sarah Springhall

Little Cheveney Farmhouse, Sheephurst Lane, TN12 9NX

Comment Details:

Commenter Type: Neighbour

Stance: Customer OBJECTS to the Planning Application

I OBJECT to planning application ref 22/501335/FULL and would like the following to be taken into consideration.

Another large Solar Farm currently in planning is Bockingfold and is only 700m from this application known as Sheepwash. It has the same MW capacity (49.9MW) as the Solar Farm proposal on Sheephurst Lane, but is situated just outside the Maidstone Borough border and falls in Tunbridge Wells Borough (application reference 22/02773/FULL).

The Statkraft Alternative Site Assessment concludes that “there are no sequentially preferable sites (namely, previously developed land, non-agricultural land or greenfield land of lower quality) within a viable distance of the available grid connection.” This is not true because as is illustrated in the table below, Bockingfold is arguably a better proposal.

Although I, (along with numerous other objectors) support and encourage the move to green energy, we strongly oppose large solar farms being placed on productive agricultural land. Large solar farms are a relatively new innovation, and should rightly be judged on their individual merits. So being able to draw comparisons between 2 proposals of equal export capacity within such close geographical proximity of each other, illustrates best practice and gives weight to why so many local residents and organisations have objected so strongly to the Sheepwash proposal.

KEY ISSUES

	Sheepwash	Bockingfold
Proximity to Grid	0m	0m
Size	74.5 hectares 49.9MW export capacity	69.23 hectares. 49.9MW export capacity
Quality of land	2 (9%), 3a (38%), 3b (53%)	3b (82.5%) 3a (17.5%)
Grade 3a Land	Best and Most Valuable 3a land taken out of arable farming	The portions of 3a land form of small pockets on otherwise 3b land, so cannot be independently farmed.
Grade 2 land	Best and Most Valuable grade 2 land taken out of arable farming	Boundary of development altered by landowner to ensure protection of grade 2 land

	Sheepwash	Bockingfold
Communication with local residents	588 leaflets distributed in 2km radius. Immediate neighbours not included in the leaflet drop. No communication between landowner or developer to reassure concerned residents.	Leaflet drop to 750 neighbours within 2.5 km radius. Landowner and developer actively engaging with all stakeholders, concerned or interested parties
Preconsultation results	Of the 23 responses in pre-consultation only 1 person supported the proposal	Just under 50% objected
Residential properties in close proximity to the site which would be adversely effected by the development	Numerous residential amenities including 9 grade 2 listed buildings are on the borders of or very close to the site. 4 residences are directly on the perimeter fenced border	Two semi-detached cottages owned by landowner border the site.
Height of security cameras	5m	3m
Height of HV compound	7.5m	3-3.5m
Proximity of HV compound to residential properties	Approx 85m from garden boundary of the closest residential property	Approx 580m
Listed Buildings within 170m of the site	X4 grade 2 listed buildings	0
Listed buildings within 230m of the site	X8 grade2 listed buildings	X2 Grade 2 listed buidlings
Highways	Access on Sheephurst Lane. 7.5tonne HGVs would pose danger for other road users, including cyclists and pedestrians on any of the suggested routes. Sheephurst Lane is country lane which narrows to single lane in parts, with over single track bridges, dangerous restricted visibility on corners and also when turning in and out of Sheephurst Lane at both ends.	Access from wide B2162 road. Transport route has been designed to ensure sensitive receptors on local highway network such as small villages, narrow roads are avoided.
Highways flooding	Sheephurst Lane floods frequently and becomes impassable (almost every year). The country lane would be degraded as result of floodwater. This would be made significantly worse with the passage of 3,400 18 m long 7.5 tonne lorries	No flooding issues on planned route
Access to site	Construction traffic use same entrance/exit on narrow Sheephurst Lane and drive directly passed the border of Sheephurst Cottages 7 and 8.	Construction traffic use different in and out access routes away from residences. The route is designed to disperse traffic and minimise disruption.

	Sheepwash	Bockingfold
Woodland/Veteran Parkland	1 ancient wood on the site, 1 veteran parkland which would be encapsulated by the development and would cause unacceptable harm to their setting.	Ancient woodland 300m north of the development and would not be impacted.
Biodiversity	Landowner taken no steps to take advantage of Gov Grants to encourage biodiversity on this land.	Landowner already taking advantage of Gov grants to encourage wildlife with rewilding and bird conservation crop in place.
Proximity to river	On the bank of the River Teise (which regularly floods)	130m from the River Teise
Footpath	Footpath redirected and in North East corner of site. This redirection pushes the footpath onto land which floods every year and would be impassable. New footpath along the riverbank which regularly floods.	No change to footpaths
Footpath Buffer	Footpath which surrounds site on 3 sides and bisects with no distance or buffer between path and security fencing. Footpath on northern side of site would become a tunnel with the railway on one side and solar farm security fencing on the other.	Footpath which bisects the site has a 10m landscaping and biodiversity buffer between the public footpath and wooden post fencing so potential enjoyment of countryside is maximised as much as possible.
Increased flooding risk	75% of site is on highest flood risk 3, with remainder in flood zone 2. Flooding on the site will happen.	Flood zone 1, 2 and 3. Flooding is possible. Panels which had been planned on on flood risk 3b (ie the floodplain) were removed from the plan to secure habitat and biodiversity enhancement that benefit the function of the flood plain and support infiltration and dispersion of floodwater.

CONCLUSIONS

NPPF para 170b states that the planning policies and decisions should contribute and enhance the natural and local environment by recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside - including the economic and other benefits of the Best and Most Versatile agricultural land, trees and woodland. Footnote 53 adds that where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, areas of poorer quality land should be preferred to those of higher quality.

Based on land quality, possible damage to heritage assets and their settings, impact on local residences, impact on flooding, impact on the highways, Bockingfold would appear to be a better/preferred proposal despite it being so close to Sheepwash.

Solar Farms deliver healthy returns on investment for developers who sell the energy gained back to the grid. Solar Farm developers advertise for landowners close to the grid across the UK, offering up to £1000 per acre pre annum to lease their land. Sheepwash solar farm was selected based on the fact that the site is next to the grid and the landowner was happy to rent his land

(183 acres), not because it is the best location for a solar farm. Motivation is return on investment. Sheepwash is not the best site when directly compared with Bockingfold. Arguments to promote the site by the developer have been shaped accordingly.

It should also be considered that if both proposals were given planning permission, Claygate and Sheephurst Lane would become a checkerboard of glass panels and would not be in keeping with the Low Weald rural landscape. The cumulative effect of both proposals going ahead would have a harmful and negative impact on the Low Weald landscape.