

DELEGATED OFFICER REPORT



WOKINGHAM
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Application Number:	243168
Site Address:	Land At Sheepbridge Court Farm, Basingstoke Road, Swallowfield
Expiry Date:	18 March 2025
Site Visit Date:	11 March 2025
Proposal: Application to vary condition 14 of planning consent 142914 for the proposed solar farm comprising the erection of solar arrays of photovoltaic panels, inverter/transformer sheds, fencing, site storage cabin, combined DNO and EPC switchgear housing, internal gravel access road, and associated equipment (EIA Development). Condition 14 refers to the use of the site as a solar farm and the variation is to allow an increased period of solar farm operation.	

PLANNING CONSTRAINTS/STATUS

Overhead cables 15m buffer
Contaminated Land Consultation Zone
Local Authorities
Green Routes and Riverside Paths
Ancient Monuments
Archaeological Sites
Affordable Housing Thresholds
Bat Roost Habitat Suitability
Borough Parishes
Scale and Location of Development Proposals
Great Crested Newt Consultation Zone
Local Wildlife Site
Nuclear Consultation Zone
Borough Wards
Landfill Gas Consultation Zone
Landscape Character Assessment Area
Complete PRoW
SSSI Impact Risk Zones
Thames Basin Heaths SPA Mitigation Zones
PRoW Within WB Consultation Zone
Green Routes and Riverside Paths Consultation Zone
Main Rivers DRN Consultation Zone
Ordinary Watercourses Consultation Zone
Historic Flooding Points Consultation Zone
Local Wildlife Sites Consultation Zone
Archaeological Sites Consultation Zone
SAM Consultation Zone
Ordinary Watercourse
Main Rivers DRN
PRoW Improvement Plan

PLANNING POLICY	
National Policy	National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) National Planning Policy Guidance (NPPG)
Core Strategy (CS)	CP1 – Sustainable Development CP3 – General Principles for Development CP4 – Infrastructure Requirements CP6 – Managing Travel Demand CP7 – Biodiversity CP8 – Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area CP9 – Scale and Location of Development Proposals CP11 – Proposals Outside Development Limits
MDD Local Plan (MDD)	CC01 – Presumption in Favour of Sustainable Development CC02 – Development Limits CC03 – Green Infrastructure, Trees and Landscaping CC04 – Sustainable Design and Construction CC05 – Renewable Energy and Decentralised Energy Networks CC06 – Noise CC09 – Development and Flood Risk CC10 – Sustainable Drainage TB04 – Development in vicinity of Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE), Burghfield TB12 – Employment Skills Plan TB20 – Service Arrangements and Deliveries for Employment and Retail Use TB21 – Landscape Character TB23 – Biodiversity and Development TB24 – Designated Heritage Assets TB25 – Archaeology
Other	Borough Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document Sustainable Design and Construction Supplementary Planning Document

PLANNING HISTORY		
Application No.	Description	Decision & Date
142914	Proposed solar Farm comprising the erection of solar arrays of photovoltaic panels, inverter/transformer sheds, fencing, site storage cabin, combined DNO and EPC switchgear housing, internal gravel access road, and associated equipment (EIA Development)	Approved: December 2014
140541	Application for advertisement consent for the proposed installation of 1 no. internally illuminated totem sign, 1 no. non-illuminated totem sign and 1 no. externally applied vinyl.	Replied: March 2015
151379	Application for a non-material amendment to planning consent F/2014/1495 to allow for 6	Approved:

	additional cameras, removal of 22 infrared sensors, reduction by 1 inverter to a total of 3 inverter stations, relocation of storage shed and MET post, reduction of internal tracks by 472m, reduction in site area by 3.5 acres and grass rows to be widened by 4.7m.	April 2015
170146	Application to vary condition 14 of planning consent F/2014/1495 to extend the time limit by 11 years from approved 25 years to 36 years, expiring 4/12/2051 and include additional safeguarding measures for removal.	Withdrawn: April 2017

CONSULTATION RESPONSES

Internal

WBC Drainage – No objection
WBC Landscape and Trees – No objection
WBC Built Heritage Officer – No objection
WBC Ecology – No comments

External

None

REPRESENTATIONS

Shinfield Parish Council	No objection but request that better screening and boundary finishes are done to hide the site from view.
Ward Member(s)	No comments received
Neighbours	No comments received

APPRAISAL

Context: The application site is a moderately sized parcel of land within the wider setting of Sheepbridge Court Farm, Swallowfield, which is within the designated Countryside.

Planning permission for the creation of a solar farm on the site was granted in December 2014, under reference 142914. This was the subject of various conditions, including a limitation on the lifespan of the development. The relevant condition states:

14. Land Returned to its Former Use

The use of the site as a solar farm shall be discontinued on or before 25 years from the date of connection (the point at which the solar panels are connected to the National Grid). All materials shall be removed and the land restored to its former condition (apart from in terms of the proposed landscaping) within six months of the date of disconnection (the points at which the solar panels stop supplying to the National Grid).

This application proposes a variation of the condition listed above, to extend the operational lifespan of the solar farm from 25 years to 40 years. In providing justification

for the amended condition, the Cover Letter accompanying this submission states the following:

“As a result of market changes and technological advancement, which allow solar farms to be maintained for longer periods, the applicant is seeking to increase the period that the Solar Farm is permitted to operate for.”

Principle of Development:

The National Planning Policy Framework has an underlying presumption in favour of sustainable development which is carried through to the local Development Plan. The Managing Development Delivery Local Plan Policy CC01 states that planning applications that accord with the policies in the Development Plan for Wokingham Borough will be approved without delay, unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

The site is located in the countryside and therefore must be assessed against policy CP11. This policy states that proposals outside of development limits will not normally be permitted except where:

- 1) It contributes to diverse and sustainable rural enterprises within the borough, or in the case of other countryside-based enterprises and activities, it contributes and/or promotes recreation in, and enjoyment of, the countryside; and
- 2) It does not lead to excessive encroachment or expansion of development away from the original buildings; and
- 3) It is contained within suitably located buildings which are appropriate for conversion, or in the case of replacement buildings would bring about environmental improvement; or
- 4) In the case of residential extensions, does not result in inappropriate increases in the scale, form or footprint of the original building;
- 5) In the case of replacement dwellings the proposal must:
 - i) Bring about environmental improvements; or
 - ii) Not result in inappropriate increases in the scale, form or footprint of the original building.
- 6) Essential community facilities cannot be accommodated within development limits or through the re-use/replacement of an existing building;
- 7) Affordable housing on rural exception sites in line with CP9.

There has been little change in local planning policy since the original application was made for the solar farm at Sheepbridge Court Farm. Within the assessment of the initial scheme, the principle of development was accepted on the basis that the provision of renewable energy would outweigh any potential negative implications of creating additional built form in the countryside. Nothing contained within the current application is deemed to affect this conclusion.

Notwithstanding the above, extending the operational lifespan of the solar farm from 25 years to 40 years does require further consideration, especially in relation to the loss of agricultural land. In this respect, paragraph 17 of the previous Officer Report states that:

“... Additionally, whilst the solar farm would result in grade 3a and 3b land not being available, it would not prohibit the land ever being used in this way. Indeed the solar farm would not be a permanent use of the land and this could be controlled by a condition”

It is clear that in eventuating the acceptability of the solar farm, the temporary nature of the development was given considerable weight. Whilst the variation proposed would increase the lifespan of the development, this would not fundamentally be in conflict with the condition, as the amended condition would still ensure the proper decommissioning of the solar farm at the end of its operational life, thus restoring the agricultural use of the land.

In addition to all the above, further strides in national planning policy have been made in the transition to net zero by 2050, provide additional support for this application. Specific to this development, paragraph 168 of the NPPF states the following:

“168. When determining planning applications for all forms of renewable and low carbon energy developments and their associated infrastructure, local planning authorities should:

a) not require applicants to demonstrate the overall need for renewable or low carbon energy, and give significant weight to the benefits associated with renewable and low carbon energy generation and the proposal’s contribution to a net zero future;

b) recognise that small-scale and community-led projects provide a valuable contribution to cutting greenhouse gas emissions;

c) in the case of applications for the repowering and life-extension of existing renewable sites, give significant weight to the benefits of utilising an established site.”

In summary, there is an ever-increasing emphasis on development projects which contribute to climate resilience, both locally and nationally. By extending the operational lifespan of the solar farm, it will continue to make a positive contribution to meeting renewable energy targets, reducing greenhouse gas emissions associated with fossil fuelled electricity generation, and contribute to security of supply. Overall, the proposed variation is compliant with the aims of the NPPF and local policy, despite a small confliction with CP11 of the Core Strategy. As such, there is no overriding reason to oppose the development in principle.

Character of the Area:

Policy CP3 of the Core Strategy states that development must be appropriate in terms of its scale, mass, layout, built form, height and character of the area and must be of high-quality design. R1 and RD1 of the Council’s Borough Design Guide (BDG)

requires developments to contribute positively towards and be compatible with the historic or underlying character and quality of the local area. R11 requires coherent street character, including terms of scale, rhythm, proportion, and height. Policy CP1 of the Core Strategy requires developments to maintain or enhance the high quality of the environment.

The application proposes no physical changes to the solar farm, such that any additional concerns of the existing development on the character of the area are not applicable. The solar farm is now part of the established landscape, with the Trees & Landscape Officer raising no objection to the extended lifespan of the development.

Shinfield Parish Council have requested that better screening and boundary finishes are installed to hide the site from wider view. This is not considered necessary given the relatively limited prominence of the solar farm within the wider landscape. In any event, such a request would not be prudent to pursue through the current application.

Heritage, Highway, Flooding, Ecology, Environmental Health:

The nature of the variation is one that does not warrant any additional concerns on any of these material grounds.

The Drainage Officer has requested a review of the long-term sustainability of the sites surface water management strategy, given the proposed extended lifespan of the solar farm. Whilst the LPA is sympathetic to the Drainage Officers request, it is noted that neither the Flood Risk Assessment pertaining to condition 12, nor the Drainage Strategy pertaining to condition 6, were limited to a 25-year assessment. It remains the case that the development must be retained in accordance with these documents, which include comprehensive reviews and mitigation measures relating to flood & drainage risk. On this basis, it is not considered that there is any need to obtain additional information on these matters.

All other conditions previously recommended still apply, unless previously discharged, in which case these have been amended.

Conclusion:

For the reasons set out above, the proposed variation of condition 14 of planning permission F/2014/1495, to extend the operational lifespan of the solar farm from 25 years to 40 years, is acceptable, and the application is recommended for approval.

The Public Sector Equality Duty (Equality Act 2010):

In determining this application the Council is required to have due regard to its obligations under the Equality Act 2010. The key equalities protected characteristics include age, disability, gender, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief. There is no indication or evidence (including from consultation on the application) that persons with protected characteristics as identified by the Act have or will have different needs, experiences, issues and priorities in relation to this particular planning application and there would be no significant adverse impacts as a result of the development.

RECOMMENDATION	
Conditions agreed:	Not required
Recommendation:	Approve
Date:	12 March 2025
Earliest date for decision:	10 January 2025

Recommendation agreed by: (Authorised Officer)	<i>BJC</i>
Date:	14.03.25