

APPENDIX A - Conservation Consultation Response - Landscape

TO: Alex Skidmore
FROM: Robert Archer
DATE: 07 February 2014

APPLICATION: 14/00215 – Land S of Southfield farm, Yeovilton

Alex, I have reviewed the above re-application and its associated documentation submitted in support of the above proposal, which seeks to construct a PV solar array on a land of 22.74ha that lays to the south of the local Yeovilton – Queen Camel road, and circa 1.0km south of West Camel and 1.5km east of RNAS Yeovilton. I am familiar with the wider landscape context of the proposal, and recollect the earlier submission – as this is effectively the same proposal, my earlier comments follow with little amendment.

To assist both PV developers and our own assessment of such proposals, SSDC has set out a number of landscape criteria within its guidance note on PV installations that proposals should aim to satisfy, to ensure potential impacts are not significantly adverse. These criteria include:

- (1) Site selection - array proposals should ideally be guided toward previously developed land. 'Greenfield' site proposals should express a relationship with existing development presence.
- (2) Landscape character - the proposal should complement the character of the local landscape, particularly its scale and pattern, and be located within land areas that equate to typical field/plot sizes, and are suited to the uniformity of a PV array;
- (3) Visual impact - the array should be sited to limit its visual profile, with minimal overlooking from sensitive public vantage points;
- (4) Cumulative impact - there should be no overly cumulative effect of PV sites arising from consents given in any one area, and;
- (5) Site detail - site layout and design should be landscape-sympathetic.

This application includes an assessment (L&VIA) of potential landscape and visual impacts that may arise from the installation of an array at this site. It assesses the landscape features that define and contain the site - primarily hedgelines and small copses - to be robust and typical of the locality. It identifies the general character to be typically rural, but notes the intrusion of activity associated with the local air base. It considers there to be few sensitive visual receptors, and judges the local landscape to be capable of absorbing an array, due to the strong tree and hedgerow structure, both surrounding the site, and providing a wider context for site assimilation.

In relation to the above criteria, and the findings of the L&VIA, my detailed comments follow:

- (1) SSDC's PV guidance note advises that array proposals on 'greenfield' sites should be located to express a relationship with existing development presence. In this instance, the relationship with established built form is tenuous. Whilst a local lane runs to the southwest of the site, and a singular farm holding abuts the northern boundary, there is otherwise no built form or other development presence into which this proposal can be anchored. Hence

in relation to the lack of a development context, I am not persuaded that the application site is suitably located.

(2) With regard to potential landscape character impact, the array is proposed to lay within three fields that are typical of the scale of the local fields that characterise this part of the lowland vale. These fields are primarily defined by managed hedgerows that broadly correspond to a rectilinear 'enclosure' pattern. The bounding hedgerows offer a fair degree of enclosure and containment, which goes some way toward enabling the site's assimilation into the wider landscape pattern. Also to advantage is the relatively flat topography of the vale floor, which enables the array to nestle in the base of the vale. Hence in this respect, I would concur with the L&VIA, that the character of this local landscape appears capable of absorbing an array.

That is not to say that landscape character impacts are fully satisfied however. The concept of landscape character also considers the appropriateness of the context for development, as touched upon in (1) above: In this instance, an array circa 22.74 ha. is clearly a substantial area, and whilst this is minimal compared to the scale of RNAS Yeovilton to the west, it is in the main larger than the surrounding fields. Its expression of panel forms within security fencing can be viewed as being 'industrial' in character. Such character is in most part at variance with this landscape setting, which has a predominant sense of rural character as expressed by the pattern and strength of the hedgerow network; extensive farmland; and the low level of development presence. This incongruity reinforces the concerns raised in site selection (1) above, to an extent that the proposed development within such a rural context is difficult to support.

(3) The relatively flat topography of the site potentially enables the proposed array to nestle into the broad base of the vale, which will assist in reducing the number of low-level views into the site. The L&VIA notes that there are few sensitive receptors, and the closer views of the site are partial and low-trajectory, and disrupted by intervening hedges to thus limit public prospect. Higher level views are at a greater distance from the site, and again prospect is limited. I note however, that the regional footpath – the Leland Trail – is not assessed, and I consider this to be a sensitive receptor. From my own assessment of the site, I note views from the Trail to be low trajectory, and intercepted by intervening hedgerows. I also note that the L&VIA proposes mitigation in the form of a new native-species woodland belt to the most sensitive boundary, along with supplementation of hedge boundaries to break-up the mass of the array, and a raising of the hedge height, to thus reduce any potential visibility. I agree these proposals to be appropriate, and necessary to reduce the potential visual impact upon local visual receptors. Overall, I agree the findings of the L&VIA that the site – despite its scale – will not create a significantly adverse visual impact.

(4) This proposed array lays to the north of a recently constructed PV installation at Chilton Cantello, with little more than a 1km distance between them. This gives the potential for a cumulative impact to arise. The context of both sites is the wide lowland vale, that lays between the low hills to the south of the River Yeo, and the ridge formed by Camel and West Camel Hills to the north. This is a broad area, within which the substantial scale of RNAS Yeovilton is the dominant element, and field sizes vary to include large areas of single crops. Within this context, both PV installations will only have a significance in their immediate vicinity, and it is noted that whilst the L&VIA indicates the two sites in a number of its photos, there will be few locations that will perceive the two in the same sightline, and in those

instances, perception will be minimal. Consequently, the cumulative impact is not deemed sufficiently adverse to tell against this application.

5) Turning to site detail, I note that the height of the array is stated as being 2.43m whilst a weldmesh fence surround of circa 2.0 m height is cited. It would appear that no site-levelling works are intended, and PV mounting is limited to a fixed racking system with its toes driven into the ground without need for concrete, and I view this as a positive approach. I have not seen an indication of how grid connection will be achieved, which should not involve any overhead cabling, nor is it clear (i) what the height of CCTV camera mounts will be, (ii) the tone finish of the mounting, nor (iii) where they will be located. Clarity is needed on these items.

Looking at the application overall, it is clear that whilst the location selected is not well related to built form, and I have some apprehension of the proposal's incongruity within an agricultural landscape, I would acknowledge that the scale of the proposal can be accommodated within the context of the wider vale without undue impact, and the site's visual profile is low. Hence whilst there are potentially grounds on which to base a landscape objection, mindful that national government guidance is heavily weighted in favour of renewables, and that LPAs are urged to approve renewable energy schemes providing impacts can be made acceptable, then I do not consider the extent of landscape impact to be sufficiently adverse to generate an over-riding landscape objection.

Should you be minded to approve this application, I would advise that we first seek confirmation of;

- (a) Detail of grid connection, and;
- (b) Details of CCTV installations;
and condition;
- (c) The planting works to conform with the landscape masterplan (drawing 2556.200A) and the planting detail (drawing 2466.201) and;
- (d) A detailed site management proposal to be submitted covering the long term management of the site's vegetation and landscape features.

Do get back to me if you require clarification on any of the above points, or if there are any other issues related to this application that I may have overlooked at this stage.

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