

**MINUTES of a Special Planning Committee Meeting of Melksham Without Parish Council held on Monday 2nd December at 7.00 p.m. at Crown Chambers, Melksham to consider a Solar Farm application for Sandridge**

**Present:** Cllr. Richard Wood (Chair); Cllrs. Alan Baines; Rolf Brindle; Gregory Coombes, John Glover, Mike Sankey and Steve Petty  
*Cllrs. Terry Chivers, Paul Carter, Pat Nicol and Mike Mills and Wiltshire Cllr. Roy While also attended this Meeting.*

There were also 17 members of the public in attendance

**Apologies:** Cllr. Adam Nardell

344/13 **Declarations of Interest:** Cllr. Gregory Coombes declared an interest in PA W13 06140 Solar Farm at Sandridge, as he knew the landowner as a fellow member of the Rotary Club. Cllr. Glover declared an interest in the same application as an acquaintance of the landowner.

345/13 **Introductory Comments from the Chair:** The Chair, Cllr. Wood explained that normally the Council only permitted residents of their own parish to speak at Council and Committee Meetings. However he was aware that several people from Seend and Chippenham were attending this meeting and he would allow them to address the Council, providing they kept in mind that this was a Planning Committee Meeting and only kept to comments relating to planning issues. He was not prepared to accept comments about the principle of solar farms; global warming, sustainable energy, or economic efficiency.

*The Council resolved to suspend Standing Orders for a period of public participation*

346/13 **Public Participation - W13 06140 Solar Farm at Sandridge**  
Town Resident Mr Don Millard explained he was attending to represent the views of the people of Sandridge. Praters Lane, the main access to the proposed Solar Farm was very well used by horse-riders and walkers and was unsuitable for use by lorries. Farmers sometimes used the Lane to move cattle from one field to another. If gates were left open, cattle could escape on to the dangerous Manor farm bend on A3102. He felt a “change of use” application should be made for the Solar Farm as it really was commercial development and this would required a proper entrance to where the solar panels were being placed.

He was concerned about drainage. When it rained there would be runoff from the panels. Had adequate provision been made? How many cubic metres of glass was there and how much water would this produce? Developers needed to consider this aspect very carefully.

Forest and Sandridge School would be at its existing location for at least two more years. Parents regularly parked across the proposed entrance to the Solar Farm. It would be safer to use the other gateway.

He also understood there was glare from solar panels. Was this correct?

Town resident Mr Rod Eaton reported he used to serve on the West Wilts. Planning Committee He emphasised that the Solar Farm was a poor and inefficient use of agricultural land because it only gave low-density energy. The proposed farm took

away acres (80.5 Ha - 200 acres) or rural land and while it was being promoted as a 40 megawatt solar farm, in fact over a year it would only give 5 megawatts and provide power for 12,000 homes. A combined cylinder gas turbine placed on a 50 acres land in an industrial park would provide for 1.5 million homes; 125 times as much output for half the cost and a quarter the amount of land. It was going to produce more CO2 than if it was not there.

Chippenham resident Caroline Stevens expressed concern that so much farmland was being lost. It was not the best grade land but it could produce hay. Solar energy in this country was an expensive and inefficient form of energy requiring fossil fuel back-up to work. By 2016 it was estimated that 43% families would suffer fuel poverty. The farm could be abandoned leaving panels with toxins in them.

Seend resident Jack Church emphasised his main concern was the change in the character of the land use from predominantly rural land to being the largest Solar Farm in the UK. Such a change from sheep and cattle farming to glass panels was industrialisation and would be seen from as far away as Roundway Hill and Seend. The proposal was to cover the whole area with 170,000 solar panels.

Town resident Chris Holden reported his main concern when he heard about the farm had been possible loss of visual amenity. Having examined the plans there would be very few places from which it could be seen and measures were being taken to increase the amount of trees and hedgerows. It was poor agricultural land but sheep would be able to graze under the panels. If it was left fallow for 25 years, it would become much higher quality land. The proposal included active measures to improve ecology so he could not see much to object to.

Seend resident Terry Lawrence objected to solar farms being put on green land to spoil the beauty of the countryside when they could instead be put along major roads or on industrial estates. Wiltshire had only to locate 2,000 acres for solar farming to meet its target and this could be found without spoiling the natural beauty of the county. Now very quietly and surreptitiously acres and acres of fields were being covered full of panels. The problem was the Government had not yet formulated a proper policy and until this happened, England would go on being ruined with solar panels.

Seend Parish Councillor and resident Kevin Reed was concerned about the accumulative effect of so many local solar farms. The area was too large and would be seen from Seend

The Chair Richard Wood asked the developer to reply to some of the points made

*Drainage:* The Technical Consultant for the developers, St. John Hughes replied that he appreciated the points made but the surface area being put under concrete was minimal as was the area for the station. The run-off from the panels would drain towards the next row of panels. Most of the land had drainage and these drains would be used.

*Bond* A bond was in place to cover the eventuality of the need to decommission the site. Developers paid into the bond..

(Caroline Stevens interjected three times to ask who the insurer was)

*Public Use of bridleway:* St.John Hughes continued that developers were committed to the safety of horses and walker. The plan was to use the existing track. To the right of the track (Praters Lane) was a strip of green land and during construction a temporary fence would be erected so use of the bridleway could continue. Building activities would take place away from the track. There was an alternative access as well to the east as well as the other gateway.

*Potential Fire-risk:* The fire risks were much less than for roof -mounted solar panels.

*Visual Amenity:* This site had been selected because it would have a low visual impact. it was surrounded by trees, woodland and hedgerow. An aerial view would show more but most people would not see very much. He had prepared views from 12 viewpoints including Seend, to present the site before and after development.

The Chair asked about the presentation to Seend Parish Council. He understood Seend had voted in favour of the application.

Residents confirmed this was incorrect. They had voted for a Solar Farm at Poulshot but not this one, which would be considered this week.

*Track Reinforcement* Mr Don Millard emphasised Praters Lane would need a lot of extra hardcore on it. There was a Health and Safety Issue with people regularly using it for walking.

St.John Hughes replied that the track was being reinforced with additional stone. The track would be separated from the rest of the site. He was aware of the safety issues. A Traffic Management Plan would be agreed with the Parish Council.

Don Millard emphasised horses would be put at risk. A change of use application should be required.

St John Hughes replied that change of use was not required. It was proposed to use the bridleway but in any case there was alternative track east of the bridleway as well. It would take about four months to install.

Seend Cleeve resident Lucy Garton emphasised that she was a horse rider and rode at Sandridge and Craysmarsh. Solar Farms did not look agricultural. This was industrial desecration of the countryside. These were old hayfields used by drovers in the past. The farm would not increase the number of birds or butterflies. The "sweeteners" being offered by developers came from everyone's pockets i.e. energy bills. The area was not sheep country because heavy damp clay produced foot-rot. They needed sunny meadows not fields shaded by panels. This was a "fig-leaf" benefit.

St.John Hughes replied that a change of use was not proposed. Currently the land was low-producing Grade 4 intensive arable and was used for sheep. The owner fully intended to continue to use it for sheep.

*The Planning Committee re-convened.*

347/13 **W13 06140 Development of 80.5 Ha solar photovoltaic farm with attendance equipment and infrastructure at Sandridge: Resolved:** *Cllr. Glover proposed, seconded by Cllr. Sankey that the Parish Council welcome this planning application subject to the proposed additional landscaping and adequate controls including a condition to ensure the access was restricted to ensure pupil safety during school opening and closing times. The A3102 road surface must be maintained in a clean condition at all times This was unanimously agreed*

*Members of the public and Cllr. While then left the Meeting.*

348/13 **Other planning applications:** The Planning Committee considered the following planning applications:

**1. W13 06053 Variation to W11 00858/FUL 112 Beanacre, retrospective application for garden walls and fences.**

There was concern that the height given for the constructed wall and fence related to the internal ground level that had been built up during works within the property. Externally on the right-hand side along Footpath 109, the wall had been built on top of a bank and at the spring it was about 3 metres high. It was an ugly visual intrusion. The Committee noted that the ground/ property on the left-hand side was on lower ground too, resulting in this neighbour having a very high wall towering over their bungalow. It was agreed to send a photo to the Planning Department to show the boundary wall from outside the property

**Resolved:** *The Council object to the height of the wall*

**Comments:** *The Council OBJECTS that the height of the wall as stated on this application is incorrect because the property land has been built up. The height of the wall should be taken from the external level of land outside the property and the wall as it is at present is far too high - see attached photos.*

**2, W13 05436 Johnson 3 Gibson Close, Bowerhill. Single storey front porch extension Resolved: No objections**

349/13 **Planning Correspondence**

**a) W12 01256 Replacement of hedgerow at Hornchurch Road:** The Clerk reported that she had received an email to confirm that new planting would take place and she had hoped Cllr. While would be able to give a further report. The Clerk had asked for details of the planting. Drawing JBA 08/191 TSO3 indicated the amount of trees to be removed. Cllr. Mills reported that buildings now went right up to the path edge, leaving no room for new planting. It was noted that Drawing 0457 -102 indicated that there was a gap between the site boundary and the footpath.

**Resolved:** *The Council take up this matter again with the Planning Department send a copy of the Drawing 0457-102 showing the correct site boundary.*

**b) W13 00797 Change to roofline at Beanacre:** The Assistant Clerk reported that she had asked the Planning Officer why the roofline had been changed without the Council being notified. He appeared not to know and referred her to the Planning

Administration Manager. She had sent an email to the Manager but had not received any response. Cllr. Chivers offered to take up this matter with the Planning Department. The Chair agreed to ask the neighbour who had complained to write a letter to the Planning Dept. as well.

**c) W13 05142/FUL Alteration of existing dwelling and new dwelling at 63 Shaw Hill:** Copy letter of objection from Dr and Mrs Brennan. This item was noted

**d) W13 06140/FUL Proposed Solar Farm at Sandridge:** Letter of objection from Sells Green resident. This item was noted

*Meeting closed at 7.56 p.m.*

Chairman, 2nd December 2013