

POSTLING PARISH COUNCIL

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Minutes of meeting held in Postling Village Hall on Tuesday 30 May 2023 at 6.30pm

to discuss responses to planning application:

23/0580/FH Pent Farm, Pilgrims Way CT21 4EY

Photovoltaic solar array, ancillary infrastructure, and landscaping

1. Attending Cllr Frank Hobbs in the Chair, Cllrs Christine Hobbs, Helen Calderbank, Dan Shaddick, John Patrick, parish clerk Clare Hamilton, District Cllrs Jenny Hollingsbee and Elaine Martin, and 16 members of the public. Apologies: Cllr Charlie Wilkins.
2. Cllr Helen Calderbank proposed and Cllr Dan Shaddick seconded to open the meeting to the public to hear their views on planning application:
23/0580/FH Pent Farm, Pilgrims Way CT21 4EY
Photovoltaic solar array, ancillary infrastructure, and landscaping.
(comments to FHDC by 9 June)

The Chairman requested opposing points of view be respected and that speakers limit themselves to three minutes each. All speakers voiced objections to this application, and many pertinent points were raised against the application, including that every new built Otterpool house should have solar panels fitted or a solar farm on the development site, and not use AONB land to reduce the drain on the grid. Renewable energy should be a priority for the local planning and building authority when planning a new development.

3. The public meeting was then closed and the parish council meeting began. After discussion, all Councillors were unanimously against the planning application.

The following parish council comment will be submitted to FHDC:

Postling Parish Council strongly objects to this application.

AONB

The application site lies wholly within the Kent Downs AONB and the nature of the development would have a significant adverse impact on the landscape and scenic beauty of the AONB. AONBs are nationally protected landscapes afforded the same level of protection as National Parks, therefore this is not an appropriate location for a solar farm.

Policy CSD4 of the Shepway Core Strategy Review requires planning decisions to have close regard to the need for conservation and enhancement of natural beauty in the AONB, which will be given the highest status of protection in relation to these issues.

This is also reflected in policy NE3 of the Places and Policies Local Plan which requires the natural beauty and locally distinctive features of the AONB and its setting to be conserved and enhanced.

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Policy CC6 of the Places and Policies Local Plan states that solar farms will only be acceptable where ‘...the proposal does not have an adverse impact on the landscape character or have any adverse visual impact on the scenic beauty of the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, other sensitive local landscapes or heritage assets’.

Alternative location

The council supports renewable energy in the appropriate location, and concurs with the Green Party’s statement in their Renewable Energy Policy that ‘...renewable energy is crucial in the fight against climate change, but it has to be in the right place, not in a fragile, protected, rural environment’.

Alternative locations on non-agricultural land outside of the AONB are supported, which leads to the question – why isn’t solar being included within the plans for the Otterpool Park development? Councillors support the statement in the Green Party’s Renewable Energy Policy of ‘...making full use of domestic, commercial and industrial roof space and limited deployment of solar farms’ and therefore consider the development at Otterpool to be a suitable alternative location for solar energy generation.

Conclusion

This application fails to meet the primary purpose of AONB designation, i.e. the conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty of the area. The proposal would introduce a large, industrial feature into a currently unspoilt landscape that would fail to conserve or enhance the Kent Downs AONB.

It would also be in conflict with policy CC6 of the Local Plan which requires proposals to ‘...not have an adverse impact on the landscape character or have any adverse visual impact on the scenic beauty of the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty’.

This application comprises major development on a site within the Kent Downs AONB which is a nationally protected landscape. It is the parish council’s view that the requirements of local planning policy and NPPF para 177 that major development should not be permitted within AONBs except in exceptional circumstances and where public interest can be demonstrated, have not been met.

This application does not demonstrate that development could be provided on less sensitive sites, including outside the AONB. The parish council considers the development does not represent exceptional circumstances nor be in the public interest, given the harm it would inflict on a protected landscape.

The proposed Environmental Plan would, after some time to allow for growth, provide some screening to the structure, but due to the scale of the solar array would not disguise the impacts of the development on the local landscape.

It is likely that solar panels will be manufactured in China using poorly-paid labour then shipped to the UK. The processes to mine minerals and to source the materials needed for associated infrastructure such as cabling, batteries, fencing, etc., all add to solar’s carbon footprint. The life cycle of a solar panel farm is relatively short. Recent news reports have suggested that there are serious concerns about the disposal of the panels etc., and it is understood that currently only 1% of panels are recycled.

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Postling Parish Council therefore strongly objects to this application.

If the proposal was to be approved, conditions should be attached to ensure the site is restored to agricultural use at the end of its term of consent, and all panels and associated infrastructure be removed from the site and recycled/reused as much as possible. Any future proposals for the site should be based on its current agricultural nature rather than as a brownfield site following solar arrays.

Signed.....Cllr Frank Hobbs, Chairman, 25 July 2023