

Sunnica Informal Meeting (Remote) With Local Parish Councils – 15th July 2020

The focus of the questions from the Chippenham representatives were on the following matters:

- The sheer scale and consequential effect on the 'feel' of the countryside
- The possibility of long-term damage to the land
- To ensure the land is not made available for development at the end of the scheme
- The ease of restoring the land back to agricultural use
- Who ends up owning the land and what control we will have over it as a community?
- Will the power supply/feed-in cables remain below ground rather be placed on pylons for cheapness?

The Sunnica team were: Paul Kelly (Chair), Luke Murray (Presentation & Design), Matt Hazel & Nigel Chalmers (Construction?).

The official consultation is now due to start late September to early October as it has been delayed by around four months due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The project is near its final design stage but certain details are not set in stone. Environmental surveys are almost complete. There was some consternation expressed by Isleham PC as they did not have time to respond unlike other parishes due to the extension towards Isleham being announced later.

With regards to utilising certain grades of agricultural land, the project team said they were following strict government guidelines on the type that could be included in the scheme. It was suggested other solar projects may have used grade A agricultural land but they could not do this. Also, Natural England's own assessment of land quality was not to be depended upon and they had had to implement their own survey with independent assessors to get a more accurate picture. The size of the current scheme appears to be a little confused with some literature stating 'hectares' whereas 'acres' have also been used and the two figures do not tally (1100 Hectares / 2600 Acres). The Sunnica team said they would get the detail corrected and it was not suspicious or meant to mislead. About 31% of the land used in the scheme is hoped not be developed on but will instead form screening, protect existing historical features and also areas to encourage nature. It should be noted the Sunnica team did use the word 'hope' when explaining this element of the project!

The land is to be utilised for 30 to 40 years and the point was made this could be viewed as the land being protected from other types of development during this time. At the end of the solar schemes use of the land, it is to return to its original owner and agricultural classification so it will not become available for industrial or housing development. A pot of money will be set aside throughout the project to pay for the removal of all the equipment at the end. Any 'green' areas used for screening and such like may have become so established over the decades it may not even be possible to return them to how they are now. This could be because of protected species living within them etc...

Clearly the planting of screening vegetation and bolstering hedgerows will take some time to establish. It was suggested the planting of more mature trees at the start can end up with a high level of failure whereas saplings are proven to have a much better success rate of achieving maturity due to a more gradual climatisation. We were assured the introduced vegetation was not just to be planted and ignored. There are official assessments at one year and fifteen years to check on progress and make up any shortfalls. The vegetation is managed throughout the life of the scheme. It was suggested this work would most likely be carried out by the landowners or, possibly, local contractors as they understood the area best. It could be considered that there was too much emphasis on how good the screening would be without any real acknowledgment the screening itself could detrimentally affect local views. The area may lose the feeling of wide-open spaces/big skies in some places.

They were asked how the scheme will make money. The Sunnica team concentrated their reply on the obvious solar generation being sold to the electrical grid and how the onsite battery storage will be used during peak demand periods. However, and not necessarily a bad thing, I suspect some of the battery charge

will be gained overnight by effectively drawing off the grid at a cheaper rate. I think it best to consider the panels and the battery storage as two very distinct parts to the overall scheme.

It was felt that the Sunnica team might be trying to down play the local opposition to the scheme by using the word 'some' rather than the more accurate phrase; 'vast majority'. They agreed to be more realistic regarding the concerns of residents and not to use the word 'some' again. Whilst there was very high opposition to the schemes size in Chippenham's questionnaire it would not be fair to say the majority were against having any solar generation in the area. However, this scheme is required to be of a significant size to justify the cable routing all the way from Burwell.

The issue of noise, particularly from the operation of the units containing the battery storage, was raised. These units will have air conditioning equipment on the roof and even the power distribution elements can create an annoying background noise if positioned too close residential areas. Apparently, noise assessments have been carried out and it looks like the battery storage units will be positioned well away from residential areas. The proposed planting of trees and bolstering of hedgerows is also designed to mitigate noise transmission but, again, this will take some time to properly establish.

Sunnica were asked directly if the power supply/feed-in cables would remain below ground beyond the design stage rather than placed on pylons for some or all of the route from Burwell for reasons of cost effectiveness. They were unequivocal in saying that running the cables above ground was not an option. They were also asked how the solar panels would be mounted and what ground works would be required as this directly affects how easy everything will be to dismantle at the end of the scheme. Apparently, this is one of the requirements of the project so the majority of the panel supports will be simply pushed into the ground so they can be pulled out at the end. There was some concern that galvanised rods might not so easy to remove after forty years but the team did not think this would be an issue. They did concede that some foundations might have to be of the concrete pad foot variety due to difficult ground conditions but its fair to assume this would not be their preference based on installation costs alone.

The scheme has reduced the solar panel installation height from over 3.5m to 2.5m and the containers used for distribution and battery equipment will only be single storey. It should be noted they suggested that sheep may/will be used to mow the grass below the panels. The lowest edge of the solar panels will be around 600 to 800mm from the ground to allow the livestock to roam freely.

Finally, there will be fencing around most, if not all, of the installations although this will apparently be 'soft'. They called it 'deer fencing' that will comprise a wide mesh mounted on wooden posts with a height of around six to seven feet. There will also be provision for 'passing bays' to allow larger wildlife to go about their business as they will not be able to pass through the mesh.