

Minutes of the Public Meeting held on Thursday 11 January 2024 at Bentley Village Hall at 7.30 pm.

To discuss Planning Application DC/23/05656 – Land at Grove Farm & Land East of the Railway Line – Construction of photovoltaic Solar Array, Ancillary Infrastructure, DNO Substation, Customer Substation, Grid Connection & Landscaping.

Present: Chairman & Clerk of the Parish Council – Bron Curtis Principal Planning Officer, Strategic Projects & Delivery – Development Management – Sustainable Communities – Babergh District Council – Via Zoom and 80 residents -including District Councillors D Busby & H Davies.

1. **Introduction by Parish Council Chairman-** The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting which had been called to give residents the opportunity to look at the proposals and comment. Notes will be taken forward to the next Parish Council meeting so that Councillors can make recommendations on this application. Bron Curtis Principal Planning Officer for Babergh District Council has joined the meeting remotely and will be taking questions before, at the meeting and after the meeting by e-mail. The Chairman told Residents deadline to comment on the application is 31 January - you can either register on the Babergh Planning Portal to make a comment online – e-mail – including the application reference DC/23/05656 or write to the Planning Officer including the application reference and your name and address – to Planning Department at Endeavour House. She told the meeting she would give a short presentation with a few slides so everyone was clear what the application involved – attached **Appendix 1** – a note will be made of any questions asked – if you want to speak during the meeting please raise your hand to ask a question or comment – please be brief and bear in mind there are other people in the room who want to comment – address comments to us – please respect the fact that there might be different opinions and please be polite.

The Chairman proceeded to show slides of the application from information provided in the documents by the applicant – she pointed out the intended roads to bring the infrastructure in via Capel Road (not Station Road as stated) to Grove Farm via the farm track and from the A137 and the single track Church Road via Maltings House for the DNO sub station. The site is 115 Acres – 46.8 hectares and will produce 40 megawatts of electricity using 11 transformers and two substations – with security fencing and cctv cameras. The land is listed as Grade 2, 3A, 3B by the applicant – Natural England lists the land as Grade 2. Construction will take 32 weeks – 6 days a week – 9 – 5 piling to put in the posts – Swept path analysis for 18 metre long low loader via Church Road from A137. Crossing between proposed fields will be via a permanent crossing in Church Road. DNO substation – a new access track to be created with impact on trees and hedges – some will be removed. According to the Ecology report there will be some gains – floral – Hazel Dormice – but no mention of hares and badgers. Photographs of the hedges Year 1 and Year 10 were shown – there was also no mention of the glint and glare from the panels for PROW users. There are policies to be considered in the Bentley Neighbourhood Plan. There are 11 other sites around the region – there is no mention about Battery Storage in the application – Bron Curtis was asked about this – she confirmed there is no mention of storage.

2. **Public Session – Resident:** i) Had concerns about DNO Sub Station – absent from the consultation so has been quite hard to figure out what is happening. At the top of the old Hadleigh railway line – within about 30 metres of the sub station – no ideas of what the noise issues will be. ii) Was concerned re photographs re side of Uplands – they appear to have no resemblance - almost all the photographs are taken from inside the site. He feels that it is

incorrectly assessed and wanted to know if a site visit is planned as they have had no contact at all from the landowner. iii) Walking up and down Church Road to the centre of the village with the agricultural landscape the elms which fared badly and the hedge is very thin to the middle of the Solar Farm. Hedging is not going to be sufficient to hide views.

Resident: - Church Farm will be very badly affected by this application –been through the planning documents and found a lot of errors and misrepresentations. A real big error claims there are no long views over the site – which will have an enclosure round it. He wanted to know if Babergh will be making a site visit to see how the households and public rights of way will be affected

Resident:– Full notes attached. (Appendix 2) Has lived in Bentley for nearly 30 years and farms several hundred acres at the north end of Bentley and a nearby parish. He is also fortunate to be the temporary custodian of one of Bentley’s remarkable collections of surviving ancient woodland - Mungon’s Grove. He fully understands the need to move to more renewable energy and has installed some of the earliest solar panels as well as air source heat pumps but has said “no” to an industrial scale proposal on his land. He told the meeting he practised at the Bar in the field of planning and environmental law and is very familiar with National Planning Policy – particularly in relation to renewable energy and the difference between policy which applies to NSIPs and that which applies to application for local determination – he was surprised that the application material dwells so heavily on quotations from the Draft Energy NPC which has no statutory force for applications for local determination. He told residents he is a long time student of History as well as Law and has spent much of the last 10 years studying the history of Bentley over the past 800 years with 4 Manors extant at the time of the Norman Conquest all still clearly recognisable today. We live in a remarkable parish where the historic mosaic of farmland, woodland, houses, farms and other buildings is very largely intact – there are Grade I and II* listed buildings in abundance – 15 separately identified and named ancient woodlands (more than any other parish in Suffolk) an at the heart of all this, centrally within the parish, lies Engry Wood and Falstaff Manor – one of those Norman manors held by the Tollemaches from the reign of Henry VIII. This is not the place to site 100,000 solar panels inside 4km of security fencing with innumerable CCTV cameras on 3m masts, innumerable inverters, 11 substantial transformers and two substations including 7m tall elements – The application site stretches end to end 2 km across our village and cannot be absorbed without very serious adverse impacts which will change the character of Bentley and its historic core forever. Remember the applications says “the site will be decommissioned after 40 years unless planning permission is secured for its continued operation.” We do need to increase the availability of renewable energy but not at any cost. Government policy does not demand this neither does Local Development Plan Policy -The Babergh Local Plan (adopted less than two months ago) requires where harm to the setting of a heritage asset is found to exist – as the applicants accept here – that an applicant must demonstrate that there are no alternative sites. The applicants have submitted what they call an “Alternative Site Assessment” which concludes - not only are there no alternative sites but that this is “The Best Possible” site – presumably in Babergh. It is clear this report has been produced in something of a hurry in response to the recently adopted policy and does not stand up to scrutiny either as a matter of law or on its merits and actually screens out the application site, which is Grade 2 BMV land on the MAF database. He recommended going to see an industrial scale solar array on 50-100 acres at Parham Airfield of Stratton Hall, Levington – There are sensible sites for solar on the roofs on industrial and commercial buildings and previously developed land like old aerodromes etc but not at the very heart of the ancient

parish of Bentley ringed by its ancient woodland and heritage assets. The site is also ringed by about 30 houses and has meant there are multiple offsets in an attempt to provide some sort of limited separation leading to numerous small field parcels around the edge which will be too small for arable farming on this BMV land. So the sterilization of BMV is further magnified by the poor siting of this proposal.

Resident: – Objecting to this proposal based on the impact to our property – a Grade II listed heritage asset – and to residents’ properties closer to the solar farm – Has lived at Maltings House with wife for some 45 years and enjoyed the wonderful outlook – its one of a group of three houses to the east of the site – the Design & Access Statement says 250 metres away from the sub station to the east of the site – He fears his property will be significantly impacted by this. He posed a series of questions to the applicant’s noise statement – well before Christmas but has received no response – nevertheless he will be formally objecting to the proposal on noise – As a noise expert - Founder Member and Fellow of the Institute of Acoustics with 50 years experience consulting on acoustics - he can show that the applicants noise assessment is fundamentally flawed due to errors and omissions – there is likely to be an unacceptable noise impact from the proposal – In his opinion the noise levels in the Noise Report are considerably understated as to the noise impact.

Resident: - Was worried about Bentley Badgers – there is a long established badger set in the area – they use the field behind the Church for foraging – there is no way an adult badger can get through the hole provided – so they will have to cross Church Road (a Quiet Lane) with construction activities 6 days a week.

Resident -- Will be directly impacted from it – directly overlooking the Solar Farm which has a direct view from the churchyard – the house is not listed but it is a heritage building. We object.

Resident: - Past the Church - had no idea how large it would be – this is news to us – we have lived here for 10 years – this would be like living in the middle of an industrial site.

Resident – Wanted to know what will happen to the footpaths we use all the time whilst the construction is going ahead – certain people are walking re the Six Walks Booklet. The Neighbourhood Plan questionnaire asked residents a question on amenities and second after the village shop was footpaths – walking keeps people fit and healthy. The Footpath Society is still active. What is going to happen to the Public Rights of Way. Will we be able to use them whilst construction is going ahead? Glint and Glare also needs to be addressed.

Resident – (Footpath enquiry into the closure of the footpath across the railway line. The Island footpath -Network Rail visited him on Monday –as he had complained about horns on top of the trains.

Resident – - If this takes place it would be for the benefit of the whole county – would residents get any benefit?

Chairman - A community benefit for Bentley is something we should ask for as a Parish Council

Resident - Struggling to see any benefits with this application at all.

Resident – A member of Greenpeace & Friends of the Earth - opposed this application - DEFRA Official statistics Food Summary Report 2021 was updated on 5 October 2023 – UK is largely self sufficient in the production of grains – due to the extreme weather in 2022 wheat yields were down 40% - Landowner was asked if we might get hungry in our lifetimes.

Resident – Agricultural land is being taken over with all the building that is going on – there is plenty of roof space to put solar panels on without putting them on this amount of landscape.

3. **Any Questions:** Is there a better space for this?

Bron Curtis: - Thanks for inviting her – she told the meeting that it was the job of the Local Planning Authority to consider the application that is put to us - not alternatives. Although she had listened to all the objections, she cannot take this into account when considering the application and therefore, urged residents to write in with their concerns.

Resident – Thanked Bron for taking the time to attend the meeting remotely and pointed out that the BDC Joint Local Plan Policy LP 25 expressly states that the applicant must be able to demonstrate that there are no alternative sites available within the District. This is not the case.

The Chairman’s presentation will be put on the Parish Council website- there will be hyperlinks to Babergh Planning Portal- fill in your name and address - If not able to do that e-mail or write. The Parish Council will consider the application on behalf of Bentley residents.

The Chairman thanked everyone for coming and the meeting ended at 8.45 pm