



EAST  
CAMBRIDGESHIRE  
DISTRICT COUNCIL

### **AGENDA ITEM NO 3**

Minutes of a meeting of the Planning Committee held at 10:30am on Thursday 3rd November 2022 at Mandeville Hall, Tan House Lane, Burwell, CB25 0AR.

#### **PRESENT**

Cllr Christine Ambrose Smith  
Cllr David Ambrose Smith (Substitute for Cllr Brown)  
Cllr Sue Austen  
Cllr Lavinia Edwards  
Cllr Lis Every  
Cllr Bill Hunt (Chairman)  
Cllr Alec Jones  
Cllr Gareth Wilson

#### **OFFICERS**

Maggie Camp – Director Legal Services & Monitoring Officer  
Holly Chapman – Senior Planning Officer  
Simon Ellis – Planning Manager  
Caroline Evans – Senior Democratic Services Officer  
Andrew Phillips – Planning Team Leader

#### **IN ATTENDANCE**

Garry Chapman (Objector)  
Lea Dodds (Supporter)  
Edmund Fordham (Objector)  
Rt Hon Lucy Frazer KC MP (MP for South East Cambridgeshire)  
John James (Objector)  
Paul Kelly (Applicant)  
Parish Cllr Fiona Maxwell (Chippenham Parish Council)  
Luke Murray (Applicant)  
Chris Wall (Objector)  
Nick Wright (Objector)

13 other members of the public and press.

Cllr Julia Huffer (Ward Member for Fordham & Isleham)

Sally Bonnett – Director Community  
Annalise Lister – Communications Manager  
Angela Tyrrell – Senior Legal Assistant  
Adeel Younis – Legal Assistant

#### **40. APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTIONS**

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs David Brown, Matthew Downey, Lisa Stubbs and John Trapp.

Cllr David Ambrose Smith was attending as a substitute for Cllr Brown.

#### **41. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No declarations of interest were made.

#### **42. MINUTES**

The Committee received the Minutes of the meeting held on 5<sup>th</sup> October 2022.

It was resolved:

That the Minutes of the Planning Committee meeting held on 5<sup>th</sup> October 2022 be confirmed as a correct record and be signed by the Chairman.

#### **43. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Chairman made the following announcements:

- The meeting was being held in a village affected by the application because the Council wanted to ensure that members of the public had been given the maximum possible opportunity to express their opinions on the application under consideration. The public-speaking time had also been extended from the usual 5 minutes per category to 15 minutes per category.
- The Council was a consultee for the application and not the decision-maker. The Council's opinion, as decided at this meeting, would be submitted as a Written Representation and the Secretary of State would make the final decision in 2023.
- The new Planning Manager, Simon Ellis, was welcomed to his first Planning Committee meeting at ECDC.

#### **44. SUNNICA ENERGY FARM**

Andrew Phillips, Planning Team Leader, presented a report (X97, previously circulated) recommending approval of the consultation response setting out the Council's objection to elements of the proposal for an energy farm across 981 hectares (excluding the cable route) made up of solar panels and batteries, together with associated infrastructure for connection to the national grid, including an extension to the Burwell National Grid Substation. The proposal was a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) because it exceeded 50 MW of solar energy. The applicants, Sunnica Ltd, were seeking approval from the Secretary of State for a Development Consent Order (DCO) that would grant the developer legislation to build, operate and decommission Sunnica. In addition to permission for development, the DCO could also remove substantial amounts of existing legislation to effectively provide a unique set of rules for Sunnica to comply with. Sunnica Ltd had confirmed on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2022 that the scheme would have 500 MW solar connection and a 500 MW per battery connection to the National Grid.

Members were shown maps of the overall site location as well as more detailed plans of Sunnica East, Sunnica West, and the grid connection between Sunnica West and the Burwell Substation. The total site would stretch from Isleham to Worlington, Red Lodge, Chippenham and Snailwell and then pass Fordham to connect to the substation at Burwell. Part of Sunnica East near Isleham, and all of

Sunnica West, was within East Cambs; overall there was roughly half of the total site area within West Suffolk and half within East Cambs.

Images and dimensions were provided for the proposed solar panels (maximum height 2.5m), Sunnica West Site Substation (maximum height 10m), and the Sunnica West Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) Compound (each container to be a maximum height of 6m, with an overall area of 83,000 sqm). At the BESS, if the battery technology necessitated water storage tanks then their maximum capacity would be 242.5 cubic metres. Option 1 at the Burwell substation had been removed from the application but Option 2 remained in case the developer was not allowed to provide 400kV cables directly into the network. Batteries would be needed in some form in order to store surplus energy since peak generation times generally did not coincide with peak demand times. Batteries could also be used to take surplus energy from the grid and then feed it back in when there was high demand.

East Cambridgeshire District Council's main considerations for the application were deemed to be as detailed below. Other elements such as highways and drainage fell within the remit of other consultees such as Cambridgeshire County Council.

- **Principle / climate change** – national legislation, National Policy Statements, the NPPF, policy ENV6 of the Local Plan, and the Renewable Energy SPD were all in favour of promoting renewable energy *via* solar farms and the Council had declared a Climate Emergency on 21<sup>st</sup> October 2019. In 2019, sufficient electricity had been generated from solar and from straw burning to power approximately 100-145k homes. The Sunnica proposal was anticipated to power approximately 200k homes. The benefits of renewable energy were considered to carry very substantial positive weight and the proposal was therefore considered to be acceptable in principle.
- **Cultural heritage** – maps and images were provided to illustrate the proximity of the proposed development to the historic grade II-listed Chippenham Park and Garden. The proposed development was considered to cause substantial harm to the setting, and the benefits of the scheme were not considered to outweigh the harm since there were other sites that could provide renewable energy.
- **Ecology** – Officers had worked with the Wildlife Trust and with ecology experts at the County Council. Several concerns had been raised, including issues with the methodology, accuracy, completion or absence of stone curlew surveys, invertebrate surveys, hedgerow surveys and badger territory mapping. In addition, the Phase 1 habitat mapping was inaccurate in places. The Councils did not agree that there would be no significant residual effects to ecological receptors during the construction and operation of the proposals. Appendix 3 of the report included detail about a long-term plan for a biodiversity area around Snailwell; although the developer had proposed an area of biodiversity protection that would enable some biodiversity connection it was smaller than had been recommended.
- **Landscape / visual amenity** – maps and images were provided to demonstrate the impact on the landscape and visual amenity by comparing various viewpoints with their projected appearance in year 1 and year 15 of the scheme. The cumulative landscape harm was considered to be significant. In addition, Members' attention was drawn to a Tree

Preservation Order in place along Chippenham Road in Snailwell to protect a maturing avenue of trees that represented an important landscape feature. The applicant's submitted tree constraints report contained significant omissions which represented poor information for a development of this scale. However, the applicant had confirmed on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2022 that a new arboricultural assessment would be submitted on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2022.

- **Noise, vibration, dust, light / glare** – the build stage was anticipated to take 3-5 years and therefore the requirements within the DCO would need to ensure the protection of long-term residential amenity. Construction hours and piling operational hours would be limited.
- **Socio-economics** – there were many concerns both within and outside the Council regarding the socio-economic impact of the development. Key areas of concern were: the methodology of the applicant's assessment, including their assumptions and conclusions; potential significant harm to the horse-racing industry centred around Newmarket; the potential for a substantial detrimental impact to major businesses along the A142 between Snailwell and Lancaster Way, Ely, during the construction phase; and the large loss of agricultural land for at least 40 years.
- **Air quality** – there were no significant concerns with regard to vehicle air pollution during construction, operation, or decommissioning.
- **Battery safety** – BESS technology was constantly evolving and greater detail was required to ensure an appropriate Fire Safety Management Plan to protect the public, firefighters and the environment. A new plan was due to be submitted on 11<sup>th</sup> November but it was important to note that different batteries would require different safety measures.

In summary, Members were recommended to object to the development as detailed in the draft response to the Examining Authority at Appendix 1. Delegated authority was also requested to enable Officers to determine the requirements of the DCO in consultation with the Chairman of the Planning Committee if the proposal was approved by the Secretary of State.

The Chairman commended the cooperation between the various Councils affected by the application and then invited the Rt Hon Lucy Frazer KC MP to address the Committee. She stated that at least six of the villages in her South East Cambridgeshire constituency would be impacted by the proposed solar farm and highlighted that although there was widespread support within her constituency for solar energy and renewable energy sources, the overwhelming majority of residents opposed the Sunnica project. Her concerns, and those of her constituents, related to the size of the development, the use of the land, the batteries, and the consultation process. She stated that the proposed solar farm would be the largest in Europe, several times larger than any existing or planned UK solar farms, and its poor design meant that the infrastructure would effectively enclose neighbourhoods within her constituency. During the construction and/or operation period the residents would therefore suffer from a depletion of the countryside, loss of visual amenity, and significant disruption on local highways. The area was well-documented as a seedbed for quality crops and she had been informed by some local farmers and agricultural specialists that much of the soil within the proposed site was of "best and most versatile" quality which the Government's Energy Security Strategy suggested avoiding in the interests of food security. The discrepancy between the applicant's assessment of the land quality

and her constituents' assessments had been raised by her as a concern but no access to the land for further checks had been forthcoming. Regarding the extensive use of lithium-ion battery energy storage systems covering an area of 78 acres across three site compounds, she raised concerns about the potential for a major accident close to residential properties. Finally, she expressed her disappointment, and that of Matt Hancock (MP for the neighbouring constituency of West Suffolk which also included land within the Sunnica proposal), for the lack of regard shown by the applicant to their constituents. For a project of such magnitude that would affect many villages and significantly impact residents, she stressed the importance of reliable information and consultation and stated that neither had been forthcoming. As an example, she referenced the applicant's recent request for the Examination to start in July even though their proposed changes to the scheme were not due to be clarified until 30<sup>th</sup> August, and stated that many constituents had reported a consistently poor standard of communication from the applicant throughout the process. In particular, access to information and the quality of the webinar had both been poor and the applicant's changeable agenda had resulted in short notice for consultation deadlines.

In response to questions from Cllr Hunt and Cllr Every, the MP confirmed that the applicants had not attended a public meeting to which they had been invited, the Sunnica action group believed the land to be of higher quality than was claimed but had been unable to gain access to assess the land, and constituents had not found the web-based consultation during the pandemic to be constructive nor had Sunnica taken the opportunity for face-to-face consultation once restrictions had been lifted. She reiterated that, together with Matt Hancock MP, she had held a public meeting about the application, to which Sunnica had been invited. Although the notice period had been short approximately 200 members of the public had attended but Sunnica had not.

Cllr Jones referenced the stated concern about the size and scale of the application, and asked what level would have been considered to be appropriate. The MP stated that she could only comment on the application as submitted, and reiterated that its scale was not appropriate for the area and the design was poor considering the number of villages it would affect.

The Chairman then invited a group of objectors to present their views. Garry Chapman spoke of his concern about having a high voltage cable through his paddock near Burwell. He explained that there was already one solar farm nearby and another under construction but hedging that had been promised was still not planted 5 years after construction. His experience with Sunnica was that their responses were not clear and he was being pressurised to sign agreements about his land due to threats of compulsory purchase. He had found their manner to be uncaring and aggressive in their dealings with residents.

Dr Edmund Fordham detailed his background as a physicist and engineer, and explained that he had worked with the Say No to Sunnica action group. In his opinion, the size of the battery storage for the proposal suggested that overall the solar farm would in fact be a large energy trading plant. He criticised the lack of detail regarding the batteries since they would be the main industrial hazard of the development and questioned whether it would be possible to safely operate lithium ion batteries of the proposed size in proximity to residential properties. He

emphasised that no similar project had been completed anywhere in the world and he urged caution due to the lack of information about the batteries.

Chris Wall spoke about protecting the integrity and heritage of The Gallops in order to maintain it as a world-class facility. He stated that he spoke for all 75 racehorse trainers in Newmarket and Exning to express their concern about the threat to the unique setting of the Limekilns that was renowned throughout the horse-racing world. In addition, he highlighted the importance of the Tattersalls and all of the training facilities and the consequent damage to Newmarket if their national and international success was compromised by the loss of agricultural land, damage to nature and to the villages, and the introduction of an industrial backdrop in a unique and rural setting.

John James provided the perspective of a stud farmer and expressed his disappointment regarding the lack of consultation about the effects that the proposal would have on the stud farms. His stud was proposed to have solar panels within 125 yards of his house and positioned up to his boundary together with a footpath along the boundary fence of a paddock that contained mares and foals. He emphasised that, as flight animals, this presented a danger to highly expensive animals. Additionally, a battery site was proposed across the road from his property which he had not been consulted on and caused concern regarding the potential for explosion. He stressed that the proposal would be detrimental to the stud, his business, his home and his family.

Nick Wright explained that he was a chartered surveyor and a farmer of land less than 0.25 miles from Sunnica Site B. He supported solar farms in appropriate locations but considered this application to be poor due to its huge cumulative industrial impact on the area. The size would be equivalent to 2200 football pitches and would be the largest solar farm in the UK. The land would be lost for at least a generation and he disagreed with the applicant's assertion that more than 96% of the agricultural land was grade 3b or 4. He stated that three independent soil experts had reviewed Sunnica's report and disagreed with it but had three times been denied access for soil testing. He referenced the fragility of world food sources, detailed the many crops that were grown in the region, and stated that a farm the size of the Sunnica site could yield approximately 33k tonnes of produce per year and should therefore not be removed from agricultural use. He suggested that south-facing industrial roof space would be more suited to solar panels and stated his full support for the Officer's report.

In response to a question from Cllr Hunt, Mr James confirmed that he had not been personally consulted about the proposed solar panels or battery storage near his property although he had received circular letters. Most recently he had received a letter requesting purchase of land to widen the road.

Cllr Every asked Dr Fordham for more information about the "trading plant" that he had mentioned, and also whether he considered the specification of the batteries to be essential for the decision-making. Dr Fordham explained that the battery storage would enable the operator to buy electricity during cheap periods and then sell it back when there was higher demand and therefore higher prices. He considered that this was the most likely business model for the proposal and highlighted that a drawback of renewable energy was that the peak periods of

generation often did not coincide with peak periods of demand. Regarding the lack of specification, he referenced difficulties in obtaining meaningful figures from the applicant for the energy storage capacity of the batteries. However, earlier in the week Sunnica had provided a figure of 2400MWh, which had been in line with his estimates. Major explosions had taken place in considerably smaller facilities and he was therefore extremely concerned about the safety of such large energy storage facilities. In response to a query from Cllr Jones, he explained that there were other alternatives for energy storage but lithium ion batteries were the commercially available battery option and the only large-scale non-battery option was pump storage which required a hilly or mountainous landscape. He confirmed to Cllr C Ambrose Smith that the relevant technology was developing so fast that any specifications agreed at this point would likely to be superseded within a few years.

Cllr Edwards asked Mr Chapman for further details about the threat of compulsory purchase and questioned how close the proposed high voltage cable would be to his home. Mr Chapman explained that having researched the effects of such cables he was very concerned but had been unable to get helpful information from Sunnica. He had been threatened that a compulsory purchase of his land would be made if he did not sign an agreement for its use, and his neighbour had signed an agreement due to the pressure applied.

Cllr Hunt asked Mr Wright to confirm that use of the land for the solar farm would result in an annual loss of 33k tonnes of produce. Mr Wright explained that the quoted figure was simply a result of calculations using the total site area and the known local yields on a standard 8 year rotation.

The Chairman then invited Luke Murray (Director of Sunnica Ltd) and Paul Kelly to address the Committee on behalf of the applicants. Mr Murray outlined the need for renewable energy projects and referenced policy ENV6 of the Local Plan that would support the principle of the solar farm. In order to reach net-zero by 2050 significant change would be needed and a large scheme such as the Sunnica proposal would provide a nationally significant contribution to meeting the need for secure renewable energy. He emphasised that although the final decision regarding the application would be made by the Secretary of State, the DCO process guaranteed the Council and other host authorities an important role in agreeing the details of the design and management. He thanked the host authorities for their engagement throughout the process which had resulted in an improved scheme, and highlighted the environmental impact assessment and two rounds of public consultation as well as planting proposals to provide biodiversity enhancements and mitigate the impacts of the development. After 40 years the solar farm would be decommissioned and the land restored. He provided the following counterarguments to many conclusions that were included in the Council's draft Written Representation:

- The removal of some areas of the proposal would eliminate a significant amount of the scheme's energy generation potential and could therefore not be supported.
- Careful design and siting together with minimising heights, managing stand offs, and providing landscaping and screening together with minimal tree removal ensured compliance with EN-1 and draft EN-3.

- Biodiversity impacts had been extensively assessed and once operational the site would offer a significant net gain.
- There would be no long-term harm to the siting of Chippenham Park and the minor adverse effect would be reversed upon the decommissioning of the site.
- Decommissioning after 25 years would be premature and would limit the volume of renewable energy generated by the scheme, hence the requested 40 year limit.
- Safety was taken very seriously and the BESS elements would be constructed in accordance with a battery fire safety management plan that would be prepared in consultation with the local Fire Authorities and would form part of the detailed plan required by the DCO.
- No further land quality analysis was required since an assessment of the quality of the farmland had been prepared and submitted by an appropriately qualified and experienced independent expert and had concluded that 94% of the land was not of best and most versatile quality.
- The scheme would provide high employment during the construction phase and would be undertaken in accordance with a plan agreed by the host authorities in order to maximise the economic benefits.

He stated that, on balance, the local and national benefits of the scheme would outweigh its impacts and he emphasised that Sunnica had used careful design and mitigation strategies in their proposed scheme that would generate a large amount of electricity to help the national drive for a resilient and sufficient supply. If approved, Sunnica would continue to work with the Council throughout the scheme's lifetime.

Paul Kelly added that a statutory consultation had taken place during the period of Covid restrictions and had received 756 responses of which 705 were from local people. He thanked Officers for their assistance in trying to design a consultation that would be effective within the restrictions and he emphasised that the process had been sent to be fit for purpose at the time it was held.

In response to a question from Cllr D Ambrose Smith, Mr Kelly stated that a consultation booklet had been sent to more than 10k households in the area.

Cllr D Ambrose Smith asked about the budget for compulsory purchases and how many households would be affected. Cllr Wilson asked how much of the required land was already owned by Sunnica or under agreement to purchase, and questioned why it was scattered rather than grouped together with battery storage in the centre away from people and vegetation. Cllr Jones asked why more rural areas had not been considered in order to avoid the sense that some villages would be encompassed. Mr Murray explained that the entire scheme within the red line could be affected by compulsory purchase powers and Sunnica had been attempting to engage with all those who would be affected. They would seek to include such powers within the DCO in order to ensure deliverability in the event that an agreement could not be reached. There was no intention to purchase any land, rather it would be leased; a significant number of agreements were already in place and many others were at an advanced stage. In terms of the site's spread, locations had been determined from alternative site assessments for suitable land within 15km of the Burwell connection point and there was no single block of land of sufficient size. The BESS areas were located close to on-site sub-stations to



keep costs to a minimum. The purpose of the project was to deliver emissions reductions due to the need to reach net-zero within 30 years. In order to achieve this the scheme needed to be as large as possible so removal of areas of land would compromise delivery of the central purpose. He stated that a key advantage of such a scheme when compared to other electricity generation methods was that it could be built and operational in a short time frame and at the end of its lifespan could be demolished and recycled and the land returned to agriculture after a 40 year rest period.

Cllr C Ambrose Smith asked whether the Burwell substation was the driving force for the scheme's location or whether a similar scheme could be constructed elsewhere. Mr Murray replied that he and his colleagues were working on other projects of similar or bigger scale and all were constrained by the need to connect the new infrastructure to the grid and Burwell substation provided that facility.

Cllr Edwards asked whether other schemes used agricultural land, and questioned where crops should be produced instead. Mr Murray provided figures from the trade association representing the solar industry to illustrate that the land required to generate 70GW was equivalent to the land used for golf courses within the UK. He emphasised that lower grades of agricultural land were used wherever possible and that although food security was important, climate change and the cost of living and energy security were all pressing emergencies. In response to a question from Cllr Wilson about the crops currently produced on the land, Mr Murray detailed the crops and animals in the affected fields and stated that Sunnica were in regular contact with the farmers so that by consideration of their cropping schedules the developer would aim to be minimally invasive. Landowners would be eligible to hold a sheep-grazing licence with the scheme contractor.

When asked by Cllr D Ambrose Smith about the potential for using riverbanks, Mr Murray outlined his understanding that they were ecologically sensitive areas unsuitable for such uses.

Cllr Jones questioned the safety of the batteries and in particular whether there was sufficient capacity for water in the event of a fire. Mr Murray provided anecdotal information about the handling of a battery fire in Liverpool and explained that Sunnica had engaged with appropriate experts to design a scheme based on safety factors. He stated that the majority of fires to date had been in air-cooled systems rather than liquid-cooled systems and the equipment would be chosen to reduce potential accidents. Large areas had been allocated for the BESS so that significant separation distances between the containers would help to limit the spread of any incidents. The required water levels would be dictated by the separation distances and would be based on information provided by the fire services. There would also be a banded set up. Cllr Every further questioned the fire safety aspects and Mr Murray explained that an outline battery fire safety management plan had been developed with and approved by the Cambridgeshire and Suffolk Fire Authorities. A revised version would be submitted on 11<sup>th</sup> November.

Referencing the overall size and impact of the scheme, Cllr Jones asked whether it would be viable without the solar panels to be purely battery-based. Mr Murray stressed that the battery storage was classed as associated development to the

scheme and that the panels represented the majority of the land use and would generate the electricity. The battery storage would enable the electricity to be stored until it was needed and a scheme for battery storage alone would not be located far from the substation as was the case in this proposal.

Cllr C Ambrose Smith questioned whether battery storage facilities would be susceptible to targeted malicious damage but Mr Murray did not consider that to be the case and Mr Kelly emphasised the importance of schemes such as this that would provide national energy security.

The Chairman then invited Lea Dodds to address the Committee. Mr Dodds explained that although he was a member of Burwell Parish Council his statement had not been seen or approved by them and therefore he was speaking as an individual and not on behalf of the Parish Council. He referenced the climate emergency statements made by both East Cambs District Council and Burwell Parish Council, and also the comments from those who would be directly affected by the proposed solar farm, and on balance stated his support for the proposal due the necessity for swift action to reach a low-carbon economy. He considered the concerns about food security to be legitimate but exaggerated since the amount of farmland that would be lost to the scheme would be a very small fraction of the arable land in the East of England. He understood the anger and frustration of those who would be most impacted by the large infrastructure development and stated that the concerns should be addressed and accommodations found. He therefore suggested that the Council's response should support the proposal since immediate action was required to address the climate emergency, but request that the plans be improved to address local concerns.

There were no questions for Mr Dodds.

Parish Cllr Fiona Maxwell explained that she was speaking as the Chair of Chippenham Parish Council, and she was also the Chair of the Parish and Town Councils Alliance that represented approximately 12 Parish and Town Councils within the Sunnica site. She stressed that all of the Parish and Town Councils affected by Sunnica opposed the scheme. In order for the development to be large enough to qualify for a DCO, the applicant had identified multiple sites with the overall result that villages would be surrounded and would suffer from the cumulative impact; the scheme had not evolved sympathetically to the affected residential areas. Local surveys had shown that there was widespread support for renewable energy, but not for this proposal. She referenced the quality of the farmland that would be used for the solar farm and that local people disagreed with the applicant's assessment of it but had not been permitted to access it for corroboration. The scheme would result in a long-term loss of land, rather than a temporary one, due to the 40-year life span together with the construction and decommissioning timeframes. The roads that would be necessarily required for construction traffic were narrow, winding, and often within settlements, so were unsuitable for such usage. The proposal would also result in a lack of connection between villages and a transformation of the rural and agricultural landscape into an industrial landscape which would damage both the villages and the racing industry. She emphasised that the overwhelming view of residents was that the proposal should be refused.

Parish Cllr Fiona Maxwell also read aloud a statement from Anne Noble who had been unable to attend. The statement detailed calculations regarding the proposed site area and energy production values, and suggested that it would not be possible to produce the amount of electricity that had been claimed by the applicants.

In response to a question from Cllr Jones about her reference to connectivity, Parish Cllr Maxwell explained that many of the affected settlements were centuries old and there were routes between them that would be interrupted by the development, although she was unsure whether there would be any official loss of public rights of way.

Cllr Every asked for further information about the surveys that had taken place. Parish Cllr Maxwell explained that a local survey had fed into the Parishes' Interested Party Representations. She also reiterated that a public meeting had been held in Isleham and had been attended by many people from all over the affected area but Sunnica representatives had not attended.

The Chairman informed Members that Cllr Brown, Ward Member for Burwell, had requested that his support for the Officer's recommendation be placed on record. He then invited Cllr Huffer, Ward Member for Fordham & Isleham, to address the Committee.

Cllr Huffer gave an impassioned and detailed statement explaining that although she and the communities she represented were in favour of solar power, they considered that the Sunnica scheme would devastate the local area. She referenced the importance of the productive farmland and the racehorse industry, and stated that new hedging would not be able to hide the urbanisation and industrialisation that the huge area of solar panels would bring to the unique landscape. The battery storage units would also be out of keeping with the area since farm buildings were more organic and smaller in scale than the industrial nature of the storage units. The nature of the landscape was such that they would be visible from miles away. She considered that the impact of the development on buildings such as The Ark in Isleham and on areas of outstanding natural beauty such as Chippenham Park and the Limekilns would be devastating. She criticised the applicant's suggestion that biodiversity would be improved by providing biodiversity corridors, arguing that many species of mammals and birds currently roamed freely throughout the proposed Sunnica site that would be industrialised. She also questioned the applicant's claim that the land would return to farmland after 40 years, since a further application to continue the site use could be made towards the end of the solar panels' lifetime. She detailed the range of crops that were currently produced across the site and stated that the farmland was all high-quality productive land with irrigation; the land quality report from the applicants was poorly prepared and technically lacking and multiple requests for access to collect soil samples had been denied. She referenced fires in battery storage facilities elsewhere in the world and expressed concern for the devastating effects that a similar event would have on many households and on local wildlife. She considered that the predicted battery storage capacity would be far greater than would be needed for the electricity generated by the solar panels and suggested that the future operator would use the batteries to be able to buy electricity from the National Grid during low demand and sell it back at a higher price during periods of high demand. Finally, she drew attention to the significant increase in vehicle

movements on the quiet B-roads in the area during the construction phase that was estimated to take at least two years, and highlighted the dangers of the resulting exhaust fumes and increased congestion. She strongly urged the Committee to support the Officer's recommendation and object to the proposal. She also commented that although the applicant may have received many local responses to their consultation, it could not be assumed that all were in favour.

*12:45 – 1:25pm The meeting was adjourned for lunch.*

The Chairman invited Cllr Huffer to read aloud a statement from her fellow Ward Member for Fordham & Isleham, Cllr Joshua Schumann, who had been unable to attend the meeting. He stated his objection to the application and his full support for Cllr Huffer's previous statement; he would address different issues to those covered by Cllr Huffer to avoid duplication. He also emphasised that his objection to the scheme was neither an objection to solar energy nor a lack of recognition of the challenges faced to deliver net zero, and highlighted that East Cambs generated more renewable energy than any other district in Cambridgeshire. The Council had adopted Planning policies to protect residents from inappropriate development and he considered that the application had failed to adhere to many of them. In addition to the visual intrusion into open countryside that would be contrary to policies ENV1 and ENV2 of the local plan, he considered that the addition of vast areas of concrete and glass to 1600 acres of agricultural land would inevitably lead to an increased flood risk contrary to policy ENV8. He referenced policy ENV9 that addressed the avoidance and management of increased pollution, and stated that the vehicular movements during the construction of the scheme would result in unprecedented amounts of fuel particulates in rural village that currently benefitted from clean air. Finally, the applicant had failed to recognise the importance of local views and the wishes of the community: the role of the Council and its elected Members was to be the voice of local residents and he urged the Committee to ensure that their response to the consultation made clear the intolerable impact that the scheme would have on local residents.

Responding to points raised during the public speaking, the Planning Team Leader provided the following further information:

- The Local Impact Report had included consideration of all submitted information at the point of its preparation.
- There would be a temporary loss of some public rights of way during the construction phase and ongoing access across public rights of way would also be permitted for maintenance purposes.
- The development would not be carbon-neutral and the developer had not claimed otherwise. Relevant details were included in paragraph 6.14 of the report which demonstrated that the development would have a lower greenhouse gas impact than more traditional energy suppliers such as gas power stations.
- The Draft National Policy Statement EN3 stated that consent for solar farm proposals would typically be granted for 25 years based on the typical lifespan of the solar panels.
- Environmental Health had considered that there would be no significant concerns regarding traffic pollution during the construction phase.

Cllr Every asked whether Officers considered there to be missing information that would hinder the ability for Members to make an informed decision, and questioned whether the working relationship with the applicant had been positive. The Planning Team Leader explained that the decision-making process was ongoing and therefore additional information would regularly be submitted until March 2023. However, the Trees Officer had been unable to provide a professional opinion since blank documents had been supplied, as previously shown, although he understood that a revised arboricultural assessment would be submitted by the applicant on 22<sup>nd</sup> November. The biodiversity information was also insufficient and should have included more details about the benefits and harm of the proposal. Many questions remained about the batteries, which was somewhat inevitable since the technology progressed rapidly, and it would be a requirement of the DCO that the Council agreed all fire prevention aspects if approval was granted. Regarding the working relationship with the applicants, there had been ongoing conversations since March 2022 including requests from Officers for further information where details were lacking or concerns were raised. The developer was providing the required information but in general it was being received later in the process than Officers would ideally prefer.

Cllr Jones asked about the potential for removal of trees that were subject to Tree Protection Orders and questioned whether the overall loss of habitat would be less than had been originally envisaged. Cllr Wilson commented that very few trees had been seen during the site visits. The Planning Team Leader explained that the developer was seeking to remove the relevant regulation and therefore any protected tree could potentially be felled. Not all sites had been shown during the site visit since some were on private land and had therefore been inaccessible. There were, for example, tree belts on sites around Chippenham but on other sites there were currently no trees and the developer was seeking to plant more. Cllr Every referred to the proposed landscaping having been described as poor quality, and asked for further details. The Planning Team Leader explained that the proposed landscape scheme was generic and did not account for the difference in landscape between, for example, the fens around Isleham compared to the land around Chippenham. Good landscaping schemes were expected to use planting that responded to the existing landscape whereas the vista around Isleham would be harmed by the proposal due to it being substantially altered by the introduction of large numbers of trees. In response to Cllr C Ambrose Smith questioning why the introduction of trees to shield the solar panels would not be welcomed since the addition of trees in other planning applications was often encouraged, the Planning Team Leader explained that the landscaping should not simply be used to obscure the development but should instead blend it in to the existing surroundings.

In response to questions from Cllr Hunt, the Planning Team Leader stated that the site areas rather than the size or number of the solar panels were known at this stage and the total area excluding the cable route would be 2424 acres with the BESS compound site comprising 947224 square feet.

Cllr Wilson referred to the usual expectation of a 25 year lifespan, and the application being for a 40 year period, and questioned whether the panels would be likely to be replaced at the end of that period rather than the site being decommissioned. The Planning Team Leader stated that, if granted, the DCO

would be for a 40 year period and would require decommissioning. As with all equipment, solar panels had a limited lifespan that was currently suggested to be around 30 years. A developer could potentially submit a future application but Members were reminded to only consider the application before them. Cllr C Ambrose Smith questioned whether the applicant's lease of the land, as opposed to owning it, would necessarily limit the lifespan of the scheme: the Planning Team Leader reiterated that the DCO would be for 40 years regardless of whether the land had been leased or purchased.

Cllr Jones referred to transport elements mentioned in the Local Impact Report and, recognising the County Council's role in assessing transport issues, asked about mitigation. The Planning Team Leader stated that both County Councils were working with the developer regarding the necessary contributions and mitigations. The District Council had been assessing the impact on businesses and residents.

Cllr Wilson asked for more information about the economic impact of the proposal. In particular, he suggested that if the land was rented rather than purchased then an income would be provided for the farmers, and he asked about employment prospects. The Planning Team Leader explained that farmers were able to make money from their land however they wished, within certain constraints, and that the consideration for the Committee was simply to examine the merits of the proposed scheme and determine whether they outweighed the harm it would cause. Regarding employment, there would be many jobs available during the construction phase but a low number once the solar farm was operational. These issues were raised in the economic questions that were being asked of the developer.

The Chairman then opened the debate. Cllr D Ambrose Smith was critical of Sunnica's approach to community consultation and stated that he could not support the application because the views of the community had not been heard.

Cllr Hunt proposed that the Officer's recommendation of objection be approved since the application would have a detrimental impact on the world-renowned Newmarket horse-racing industry and on the historic Chippenham Park and Gardens. Additionally, there would be cumulative damage to the rural environment of Isleham and Chippenham and the biodiversity at Snailwell would be harmed. He also considered that there had been a lack of timely information supplied to Officers and that the public consultation by the applicant had been poor. Cllr Every seconded the proposal.

Cllr Wilson expressed his support for generating electricity *via* solar means and commented that it was common to receive objections from those who were geographically closest to proposed developments. He therefore questioned why the applicant had not made greater efforts to inform and involve the local communities. Other solar farms that had been supported in the District were better organised and the affected residents had been better informed. He considered that the application site was too large and that the proposal was not sufficiently well planned. Cllr C Ambrose Smith largely agreed. Cllr Jones commented that the impacts on the racing scene and on the rural areas would be detrimental, and that overall he agreed with the Officer's conclusions.

The Chairman reiterated that the Committee were being asked to consider the Council's consultation response rather than to make a decision on the application. In response to a query from Cllr D Ambrose Smith, the Monitoring Officer stated that the reference in the Officer's recommendation to "consultation with the Chairman" automatically included the Vice-Chairman should the Chairman be unavailable.

It was resolved unanimously:

- i) That the consultation response setting out the Council's OBJECTION to elements of the proposal, as set out in Appendix 1 of the Officer's report, be approved.
- ii) That in the event of the proposal being approved by the Examining Authority, authority be delegated to the Case Officer, in consultation with the Chairman of Planning Committee, to determine the requirements under the Development Consent Order.

*The meeting concluded at 2pm.*

