

Committee Report

Application Number:	WD/D/19/003181
Site address:	LAND AT, HIGHER STOCKBRIDGE FARM, HIGHER STOCKBRIDGE FARM, STOCKBRIDGE
Proposal:	Installation of a renewable energy scheme comprising ground mounted photovoltaic solar arrays together with substation; transformer stations; access; internal access track; landscaping; biodiversity measures; security fencing; security measures; access gate; access improvement and ancillary infrastructure
Applicant name:	Ms Clutterbuck
Case Officer:	Emma Telford
Ward Member(s):	Cllr Penfold

1.0 This application is referred to planning committee, on the basis of the significant scale of the application and the clear level of public interest in the decision.

2.0 Summary of recommendation:

2.1 That the Committee would be minded to delegate to the Head of Planning to refuse the application for the reason as follows:

1) The proposed development by reason of its location, appearance and scale would harm the character of the valued landscape, part of its importance is its setting to the heritage assets and therefore the cumulative harmful effect on the landscape and its importance to the setting of the assets would be contrary to Policies ENV 1, ENV 4, ENV 10 of the West Dorset, Weymouth & Portland Local Plan (2015) and paragraphs 174 & 199-203 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2021) thus the principle of development of the scheme is also contrary to Local Plan policy COM 11.

And recommends that the Head of Planning determines the application accordingly.

3.0 Reason for the recommendation:

- The public benefits of the development are not considered to outweigh the cumulative harm caused to the character of the valued landscape and its importance to the setting of heritage assets and their relationship with the rural landscape.
- The proposed development cannot be successfully assimilated into the receiving valued landscape. It will be visually intrusive because of its industrial character and scale and will be harmful to the setting of heritage assets and to the character of the wider landscape.

- Given the above the proposed development does not comply with local plan policy COM 11.

4.0 Key planning issues

Issue	Conclusion
Principle of Development	The proposal will need to be considered against Local Plan policy COM 11. Benefits of renewable energy are accepted.
Residential Amenity	Acceptable impact on residential amenity in compliance with local plan policy ENV 16
Heritage Assets	Less than substantial harm is identified to the significance of heritage assets.
Visual Amenity and Landscape	The proposed development cannot be successfully assimilated into the receiving valued landscape. It will be visually intrusive because of its industrial character and scale and will be harmful to the setting of heritage assets and to the character of the wider landscape.
Highway Safety	Highways raised no objections.
Biodiversity	Natural Environment Team considered that the measures proposed would ensure the development would avoid detrimental impacts and result in an overall net gain for biodiversity.
Flooding & Drainage	Flood Risk Management Team raised no objections.
Rights of Way	Rights of Way Team raised no objections in response to the amendments made.

5.0 Description of Site

- 5.1 The site is comprised of a collection of agricultural fields at Higher Stockbridge Farm, Longburton, Sherborne. The site is set within the open countryside located approximately 3 miles to the south of Sherborne and approximately 5 miles to the south east of Yeovil. The site is bounded to the north and west by agricultural land. The southern edge of the site runs parallel with Bailey Ridge Lane, beyond which are further agricultural fields. The eastern edge of the site is predominantly bounded by The Holme Bushes (woodland). Higher Stockbridge Farm is located near the northeast corner of the site.
- 5.2 The site comprises of a number of irregular shape fields of mainly improved grassland bounded by mature hedgerows and ditches. Large mature trees are present within both the hedgerows and fields themselves.
- 5.3 The nearest principal road to the development site is the A352 about 1.85km to the east as its closest point. One public right of way transverses the lower third of the site

extending west and northwest from the neighbouring property Holmbushes Farm toward the southern edge of Middle Wood.

5.4 The application site is located outside of a defined development boundary (DDB).

6.0 Description of Development

6.1 The main element of the proposal is the installation of a ground mounted solar park with a maximum export capacity of 35MW laid across various fields enclosures. This application seeks permission for the construction, operation, maintenance and decommissioning of the ground mounted solar park.

6.2 The photovoltaic panels would be laid out in straight arrays and would be static. The distance between the arrays would typically be between 3.35m to 6m. The arrays would be set within a 2m high security fence. A single main substation compound would serve the development and would be required for the duration of the development. Transformer centres that would include inverters and transformers will be located throughout the site. The transformer element would be surrounded by individual deer proof fencing and the inverters would sit inside metal cabinets that would be finished in green. The cables linking all the arrays to the inverter/transformers and then the substation would be concealed in trenches.

6.3 This application proposes that the development would export renewable energy to the grid for a minimum of 35 years.

7.0 Relevant Planning History

Application No.	Application Description	Decision	Date of decision
WD/D/17/001204	Request for EIA Screening Opinion in relation to proposed installation of ground mounted Photovoltaic (PV) arrays laid out in rows running from east to west, and associated infrastructure in the form of transformer and inverter stations, DNO sub-station and control centre.	The Local Planning Authority concluded that the proposed development is likely to result in significant environmental effects and adopted a screening opinion that the proposed development is EIA development.	16/06/2017
WD/D/18/000896	Pre-application Consultation -	Summary: The proposal should deliver wider environmental benefits by providing a considerable amount of	05/07/2018

	Ground Mounted Solar Park	<p>clean, renewable and sustainable electricity, which would contribute to national and local targets for renewable energy. In addition, it is likely that the proposal would make a valuable contribution to cutting greenhouse gas emission and help combat climate change. However, this will need to be considered in the planning balance given the size of the site and nature of development.</p> <p>Detailed landscape and conservation advice was not sought.</p>	
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8.0 List of Constraints

Outside of defined development boundary
 Contaminated Sites Buffer
 Veteran Trees 500m buffer
 Ancient Woodland 500m buffer
 Right of Way
 Setting of Listed Buildings

9.0 Consultations

All consultee responses can be viewed in full on the website.

Consultees

Original Scheme

9.1 Health and Safety Executive – *The proposed development site which you have identified does not currently lie within the consultation distance of a major hazard site or major accident hazard pipeline, therefore at present HSE does not need to be consulted on any developments on this site.*

9.2 Environmental Health – *The noise report submitted is sufficient. No further submission is required.*

9.3 Dorset Waste Partnership – *In reference to this application the DWP has no issues.*

9.4 National Air Traffic Services Safeguarding – *The proposed development has been examined from a technical safeguarding aspect and does not conflict with out safeguarding criteria. Accordingly, NATS (En Route) Public Limited Company (“NERL”) has no safeguarding objection to the proposal.*

9.5 CADENT and National Grid – *No objection to these proposed activities.*

9.6 MOD Safeguarding – *I can confirm the MOD has no safeguarding objections to this proposal.*

9.7 Highways - *The Highway Authority has NO OBJECTION, subject to a condition for the implementation of the submitted Construction Traffic Management Plan.*

9.8 Flood Risk Management Team – *We are satisfied that the supporting FRA/DS document offers an adequate assessment of the site, the proposals and a scheme of surface water management, in so far that it assesses the hydrological and hydrogeological context of both the site and proposed development. There are no grounds to object to the proposed on the basis of surface water management subject to adherence and implementation of the FRA/DS supplied to be secured by condition.*

9.9 Mineral Planning Authority – *There is safeguarded mineral land in the vicinity of the proposed development site, the site does not itself fall within the Mineral Safeguarding Area. The Mineral Planning Authority can confirm that in this case, on the site identified for this proposal, there is no mineral safeguarding objection.*

9.10 Planning Obligations Manager – *I have no comments from a planning obligations perspective.*

9.11 Countryside Access Team – *The works directly affect the line of the Bridleway 23, Lillington. The line could be changed under the planning laws or the bridleway could be allowed for in the current scheme. It will need to be 4m wide.*

9.12 Historic England – *The character, land use and experience of being within the landscape also plays an important role in how heritage assets are appreciated and therefore in their communal, aesthetic and historic value. In this case, the application sites forms the agrarian, tranquil and rural setting to the buildings which lie within and around it. Whilst the landscape is not designed, it provides the agricultural backdrop to the listed buildings at Lower Stockbridge Farm. Its use is inextricably linked with those buildings, contributing to an appreciation and understanding of the inherent qualities of the listed farmstead and its historic landscape setting. This application would transform the farmland which provides this wider environment – land which is currently undulating fields with hedgerows and individual trees would be almost entirely filled with regular, dark and highly linear array of incongruous solar cells, fenced and interspersed with other associated structures e.g. CCTV and inverters. The significance which these heritage assets derive from the unspoilt, open character of their gently agricultural setting would therefore be eroded.*

Whilst we accept that there is minimal direct intervisibility between it and the development site, the unspoilt open character of the surrounding rural landscape makes an important and positive contribution to the setting of the Grade II, late 16th century barn, and therefore to its special architectural and historic qualities. Consequently, and despite the conclusions of the heritage statement that the proposals would not result in any harm to the significance of the heritage assets, Historic England are concerned that the implementation of this development would be harmful to the setting of the building through considerable erosion of its timeless historic and agricultural setting.*

Having assessed this documentation submitted, we believe that this proposal would result in harm to the special historic qualities of the barn at Lower Stockbridge Farm. Given its II listed status this is a consideration that needs to be afforded considerable statutory weight in the determination of any planning application.*

The NPPF states that heritage assets should be conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance, so that they can be enjoyed for their contribution to the quality of life of this and future generations. When considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset's conservation. No other planning concern is given a greater sense of importance in the NPPF. Significance can be harmed or lost through alterations or destruction of the heritage asset or development within its setting.

Historic England has concerns regarding the application on heritage grounds. These concerns relate particularly to the harmful impact of the development on the significance which the grade II barn at Lower Stockbridge Farm derives from the open, unspoilt character of its agricultural setting.*

9.13 Natural England - *The application triggers a number of environmental risk thresholds for provision of a Biodiversity Mitigation and Enhancement Plan (BMEP). It is advised that the applicant provide an approved BMEP in accordance with the Dorset Biodiversity Protocol. Whilst the application has been rigorously assessed under the framework of an Environmental Statement, it is unclear what measures **will be** done within a summary document in a format which is enforceable and can be secured as a planning condition to the permission. The Dorset Biodiversity Protocol has been established to give your authority assurance that an application will not harm the environment and seek opportunities for net biodiversity gains in a format which achieves this. The BMEP should cover the construction and operation phase in addition to the details of any infrastructure, management and monitoring for the life of the development.*

Natural England would recommend that your authority take any necessary steps to ensure that mature and veteran trees that may shade the proposal site are protected from future felling.

9.14 Natural Environment Team - *We recommend the application is reviewed under the Dorset Biodiversity Appraisal Protocol with documents submitted in accordance with published guidelines. The surveys can be reviewed on line from the ES however, we would expect a Biodiversity Mitigation Plan to be submitted for review.*

9.15 Technical Services - *With regards to this application i have no objection. The FRM team in their role as LLFA have provided comments with regards the management of surface water given the proposals qualify as major development, and i suggest you refer to their comments in this instance.*

9.16 Queen Thorne Parish Council - *Queen Thorne Parish Council voted unanimously at its meeting on 2nd March 2020 to object strongly to this application on the planning grounds of the unacceptable harm that it poses to this important part of the Blackmore Vale, its landscape, the setting of its heritage assets, particularly the church at Lillington and its amenity value.*

The Government has pledged to address climate change through all sensible means, including the expansion of renewable energy; Queen Thorne Parish Council endorses this pledge. Furthermore, Queen Thorne Parish Council has initiated its own efforts to support Dorset Council's policy of seeking practical ways to combat climate change.

However, as the Government has itself stressed, any measures must be proportionate and must be balanced against potential or actual harm to the countryside. In the case of this application, the geography of this particular site is such that it would threaten to disfigure the surrounding landscape. When the proposed solar farm, if approved and constructed, came to the end of its useful life, its site would be ripe for industrial or other unsympathetic development.

The proposed site for this application is some 4 miles (in a straight line) from the nearest part of Queen Thorne Parish Council's area, and is not visible from it. It must be stressed that our objection is based on the principle that sites of such obvious attractiveness and merit in several different respects should not be despoiled.

9.17 Dorset Wildlife Trust - *DWT support the comments of the Natural Environment Team (NET) at Dorset Council and Natural England in their responses dated 17th and 14th February 2020 respectively and also recommend the application is reviewed under the Dorset Biodiversity Appraisal Protocol. This requires the submission of a Biodiversity Mitigation and Enhancement Plan (BMEP) to summarise the impacts of the development upon biodiversity, and the appropriate measures to avoid, mitigate or compensate for such impacts. It is vital that independent scrutiny of the BMEP is undertaken, to ensure adequate mitigation, compensation and net gains for biodiversity are secured in accordance with the National Planning Policy Framework 2019.*

DWT recommend that the BMEP should consider all phases of the development, including construction, operation and decommissioning, as well as monitoring and management during these phases. Whilst it is accepted that decommissioning impacts are currently difficult to predict, further ecological survey to establish the status of wildlife prior to decommissioning should be included to inform the safeguarding measures required (as stated in paragraph 7.4.3, Volume 1 of the ES). DWT also recommend that permission is not granted until a Certificate of Approval is provided for any submitted BMEP, and its implementation secured through a planning condition.

9.18 Cam Vale Parish Council - *We support Dorset Council's policy of seeking practical ways to combat climate change and broadly support the government's policy of expanding the use of renewable energy per se. However, any measures must be proportionate, and must be balanced against potential harm to the countryside. We believe that the application should be refused on the following grounds:*

1. The proposed site of the solar farm is on a north facing slope in a landscape of small fields, ancient hedgerows, copses, farms and small villages. There is nothing in the area approaching this huge scale such that the solar farm would completely dominate the surrounding countryside. By comparison, the site of the Chapel Lane solar farm, some 70% larger, is next to Bournemouth Airport and Aviation Business Park within a flat landscape and is thus largely invisible from both near and far.

2. The proposed site is overlooked by The MacMillan Way, bridle ways, footpaths, parts of Bailey Ridge Hill, Batcombe and Lillington, where owners of listed buildings are themselves constrained by planning regulations. While it would barely impact upon the

Applicant's visual amenity, the solar farm would have a serious impact on specific properties including Holmbushes Farm, Lower Bailey Ridge Farm and holiday cottages, and the Grade 1 listed Lillington Church.

3. Our Parishioners expressed concern about excessive construction and maintenance traffic along local minor roads and an increased flood risk.

4. With a proposed operational lifetime of 35 years the development cannot be considered temporary. We think it unlikely that the site would ever return to agricultural use – more likely be refurbished as a solar farm or become a derelict brown field site.

9.19 Senior Conservation Officer – *We are unable to support this application.*

The application site forms part of a historic landscape which has sufficient historic and aesthetic interest to be considered a non-designated heritage asset. Furthermore, the site sits within the settings of a number of designated heritage assets.

The scale of the proposed development, combined with its incongruent materials, does not complement or respect the local landscape character and does not demonstrate that the adverse impacts on the local landscape and areas of historical interest can be satisfactorily assimilated.

Taking into account the application documentation and our own assessment below, the current proposals result in the following levels of harm:

- **substantial harm** to the significance of the historic landscape as a non-designated heritage asset, as it has serious adverse impacts on the key historical and aesthetic elements which make up that significance;
- **less than substantial harm** to the contribution made by the setting to the special architectural and historic interest of the following designated heritage assets:
 - St Antony's Convent (Leweston School) (Grade II*)
 - Lower Stockbridge Barn (Grade II*) and Farmhouse (II)
 - Italian Garden to SW of Leweston School (cumulative elements at Grade II)
 - Old Water Tower to W of Leweston School (Grade II)

With regard to non-designated heritage assets, the NPPF requires a 'balanced judgement...having regard to the scale of any harm or loss and the significance of the heritage asset', whilst less than substantial harm to a designated heritage asset' requires the harm to be weighed 'against the public benefits, including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use'.

The public benefits of renewable energy are not in doubt and, insofar as it meets this global need, the application would undoubtedly deliver public benefits. However, it does not follow that the public benefits grow ever larger with an ever larger size of development, but rather that the means of providing public benefits are to be provided within the weighed-up constraints of the particular site at an optimum level. Therefore, in this case, the public benefit of 'providing renewable energy' could be met by a significantly smaller development, the harm of which would either be lessened or could be more effectively mitigated within the landscape.

9.20 Senior Landscape Architect – *Unable to support.*

The visual impact of the proposed development will be an issue from locations along nearby rights of way. The proposed mitigation measures are intended to address this, but will only be partially successful. It is however the negative impact of the proposals on the character of a valued landscape and on the setting of heritage assets is that is of greater concern.

The comments of the Conservation Officer should be sought with regard to impact on the setting of heritage assets, however I include the following Historic England advice for reference, especially as it explains that impact on the setting of heritage assets is not just visual:

'The extent and importance of setting is often expressed by reference to visual considerations. Although views of or from an asset will play an important part, the way in which we experience an asset in its setting is also influenced by other environmental factors such as noise, dust and vibration from other land uses in the vicinity, and by our understanding of the historic relationship between places. For example, buildings that are in close proximity but are not visible from each other may have a historic or aesthetic connection that amplifies the experience of the significance of each. The contribution that setting makes to the significance of the heritage asset does not depend on there being public rights or an ability to access or experience that setting. This will vary over time and according to circumstance.'

(Extract from 'The Setting of Heritage Assets - Historic Environment Practice Advice in Planning Note 3' - second edition published by Historic England 2017)

The consistency of texture, form, line and colour, and the rigidity of the pattern created by the development will strongly contrast with natural textures and form, and have a significant impact on the existing landscape pattern. The perceptual aspects of character such as rural tranquillity typically reflect the degree of value attributed to the landscape, and this will be affected by the introduction of the industrial appearance and form of the solar farm, its ancillary buildings and structures, and the large number of CCTV cameras along the length of the perimeter fencing.

The use of recessive colours for the buildings and equipment and the proposed mitigation planting will not reduce the resulting impact on landscape character to an acceptable level, and the contribution of the planting to the overall condition of the landscape is limited given the scale of impact of the development. The development is also described as being temporary and reversible, but I do not consider this sufficient justification to allow development that will cause an unreasonable degree of harm to a valued landscape throughout its 35 or more years operational life. Further reduction of the size of the solar farm would reduce landscape impact to a degree, but I am not in a position to be able to advise whether this measure could reduce the impact on heritage assets to an acceptable level.

I consider that the proposed development cannot be successfully assimilated into the receiving valued landscape. It will be visually intrusive because of its industrial character and scale and will be harmful to the setting of heritage assets and to the character of the wider landscape.

9.20 Flood Risk Management Team - *As previously stated (ref: PLN20-007) we (DC/FRM) have no grounds to object to the proposed development on the basis of surface water management, subject to adherence and implementation of the FRA/DS*

document supplied. Therefore, we recommend that an appropriate planning condition and related informative be attached to any permission granted;

The approved development shall be conducted in strict compliance with the relevant site-specific Flood Risk Assessment (FRA) & Drainage Strategy (DS) document (ref: Clive Onions CCE – P17- 2603 V3, dated 18/12/2019) supplied, specifically with regard to the suggested maintenance regime and mitigation measures (i.e. minimal ground compaction during construction, grass reseeding & land management, and reuse of existing watercourse crossings).

REASON: To prevent the increased risk of flooding and to protect water quality.

Revised Scheme

9.21 In response to the comments received the scheme was reduced in size by approximately 20%. A Landscape and Ecology Management Plan (LEMP) was submitted and the Construction Environmental Management Plan (CEMP) was revised. The application was re-consulted on and the following further comments were made in response.

9.22 **Leigh Parish Council** - *This major development is just outside Leigh parish boundary. Leigh Parish Council considers that the positive contribution that it will deliver to the regions renewable energy generation is significant.*

Despite the c.20% footprint reduction of the arrays, the proposed development will inevitably still have a negative visual impact. However, given that: it is to be sighted in a generally well screened, low lying valley that is only overlooked by relatively few houses and rights of way; it will cover only Grade 3 and 4 land; the very southern group of arrays (that were to be located immediately alongside Bailey Ridge Lane) have been erased, then Leigh PC has, by a majority vote, no objection provided that, in order to reduce the visual impact when using Bailey Ridge Lane: the east-west hedge on the north side of Bailey Ridge Lane is allowed to grow and is thereafter preserved at a height of at least 6 feet, and the trees presently embedded therein to remain unmolested.

9.23 **Senior Landscape Architect** - *Revised Voltalia plan DV_LV_101_04_01 indicates that the area of the installation has reduced by 20.89ha which very roughly equates to a reduction in size by one quarter. In addition to the reduction in the area covered by the proposed solar farm there have been changes to the proposed equipment, meaning that there is little change in potential capacity of power generated by the installation. Full details of the new equipment have not been provided, so it is difficult for me to ascertain whether there will consequently be changes to the bulk and height of individual elements making up the revised scheme. Nevertheless, the revised proposals still represent very substantial development located in a sensitive setting.*

Despite the reduction in area covered by the proposed solar farm the consistency of texture, form, line and colour, and the rigidity of the pattern created by the development will still strongly contrast with natural textures and form, and have a significant impact on the existing landscape pattern. The perceptual aspects of character such as rural tranquillity typically reflect the degree of value attributed to the landscape, and this will be affected by the introduction of the industrial appearance and form of the solar farm,

its ancillary buildings and structures, and the large number of CCTV cameras along the length of the perimeter fencing.

The use of recessive colours for the buildings and equipment and the proposed mitigation planting will not significantly reduce the wide ranging impact of the development on landscape character, and the contribution of the planting to the overall condition of the landscape is limited given the scale of impact. Although described as being temporary and reversible, I do not consider this sufficient justification to allow development that will cause an unreasonable degree of harm to a valued landscape throughout its 35 or more years operational life.

My comments of 14 April 2020 therefore remain essentially unchanged, and overall, I consider that despite the proposed reduction in size:

The proposed development cannot be successfully assimilated into the receiving valued landscape. It will be visually intrusive because of its industrial character and scale and will be harmful to the setting of heritage assets and to the character of the wider landscape.

9.24 Historic England - *Our most recent letter concluded that Historic England had concerns regarding the application on heritage grounds. These concerns related particularly to the harmful impact of the development on the significance which the Grade II* barn at Lower Stockbridge Farm derives from the open, unspoilt character of its agricultural setting.*

Whilst considerable additional information has been supplied in support of this application, the heritage addendum has not been updated since we were last consulted. The extent of the array has also been slightly reduced in the southern part of the site, however we do not consider that this minor amendment allays Historic England's concerns about the resulting erosion of the tranquil and rural character of the setting of the listed buildings at Lower Stockbridge Farm, and the consequent impact on the significance which is derived from this setting.

9.25 Senior Conservation Officer - *We welcome the 20% reduction in the footprint of the overall array relating to the areas described above, although we note that the general extent of the array across the landscape remains broadly the same. Since providing our initial comments during the COVID-19 lockdown period, we have had the opportunity of making an extensive visit to the site and surroundings.*

The main concerns raised in our previous comments were related to the selection of viewpoints (though these were to inform the LVIA, they are also relevant to the setting of heritage assets insofar as visual experience is a contributory element to significance), and non-visual impacts on the setting of designated heritage assets.

In terms of Lower Stockbridge Farm, our site visit confirmed that it and its historic landscape are most widely perceived in views from the W, particularly from areas along Higher Street between Lillington and Higher Knighton Farm; Viewpoint 12 in the revised LVIA approximates to these locations. From various locations from this direction one is able to view a wide expanse of landscape comprising Leweston Hill, a vale of irregular fields with hedgerows and patches of mature trees, and a distant ring of downland across the horizon. The application site forms the foreground of this composition and is in turn framed to one side by Lower and Higher Stockbridge Farm and to the other by

Holmbushes Farm. Within this composition, Lower Stockbridge Farm sits as a unit which reflects, illustrates and is fundamentally tied to this agricultural setting which has changed little since the enclosure of the fields in the post-medieval period. The visual experience of this aspect of the setting was, to be sure, not 'intended' in the position and design of the farm, but has arisen fortuitously owing to contemporary perceptions and enjoyment of historic landscapes. By 'seeing' this composition, we can understand the farm, its position, its use, and its connection to the land around it without detraction or distraction from incongruent elements within this setting. Not only is it possible visually to experience and understand this aspect of the designated heritage asset's setting, it also exists whether or not it is visually perceptible – 'the contribution of setting to significance does not depend on public rights or ability to access it' (Historic England). There is an intimate relationship between historic farm and historic farmed landscape which patently does not exist simply because someone can 'see' it and which continues to the present day. Attributes of development which have the potential to affect this non-visual aspect of setting include change to general character of the surroundings, changes to land use and land cover. On this basis, and noting that the revised DBA does not amend its comments relating to these relationships (cited in our previous comments) we see no reason to deviate from our previous conclusion that, although minor, less than substantial harm will accrue to the setting of Lower Stockbridge Farm.

As for St Anthony's Chapel, we had previously made comments to the effect that its park, an identified non-designated heritage asset, was specifically designed to take advantage of views to the S – i.e. over the application site – by 'the straight allées, which were subsequently employed and enhanced with the Italian Garden and the Old Water Tower'; more detailed discussion on these interconnected elements were provided in our previous comments. The Heritage DBA Addendum does not expressly address these findings, but seeks a twofold approach: i) limiting the significance of the building to its interior, which is specifically mentioned in the list description as influencing the II grading; and ii) limiting the significance of the park to its own confines. However, on these points some relevant observations might be made:*

i. Though the Art Deco interior clearly resulted in the elevated grading of the building, the list description does not specifically omit the remainder of the building and therefore, whilst its internal architectural interest clearly forms a large part of its significance, it does not affect the related significance of a late 18th century country house on a historic site with a concomitant park and, like all designated heritage assets, a setting;

ii. The DBA Addendum does highlight that 'the surrounding non-designated park' forms one of the 'principal elements of the assets' setting(s)' (p. 16). Significantly, though the Addendum does note that other 'key aspects of the assets' setting' include land to the E, W (including Lillington) and 'the expanse of undulating farmland to the north' (p. 17), it is careful to ensure that the land to the S – the application site – is not included in this list despite the obvious fact that, unlike the wider landscape to the E and N, it benefits from clearly intentional landscaped views across it as evidenced in the formal park arrangements recorded on historic maps and remaining legible in Leweston Wood.

The DBA does not provide any information to suggest that the formal landscape of the park was not constructed in the way evidenced on historic maps; nor that the conclusion of an intentional connection between the park and the landscape to which the allées point should be discounted; nor that we should disregard the cumulative significance and connection between St Anthony's Chapel, the designated elements that comprise its historic park, and the non-designated park itself. On this score, we therefore remain of the opinion that the development would result in less than substantial harm to the significance of these elements, although again, this might be minor in extent.

In our previous comments, we also set out a number of reasons why the site should be considered a non-designated heritage asset. The Cultural Heritage – First Addendum takes issue with this point: 'There would be no justification or precedent for considering this area of landscape to be of such significance that it would comprise a heritage asset in and of itself' (8.4.35), though falls short of arguing successfully against the points we raised or how this conclusion did not meet the definition of 'heritage asset' in the NPPF, which contains no implicit or explicit limits to non-designated heritage assets. However, on reviewing the evidence, and for clarity, we will modify this conclusion to identify the remains of the medieval field system as a non-designated heritage asset. This then reflects the specific comments relating to these features in the Heritage DBA (see our previous comments), whilst also assuaging the fears of the applicant as to considerations of historic landscape as heritage assets. Taking this revision into account, we do not consider that the proposals will materially affect the significance of the remnant field system owing to the relatively low physical impact of the solar array.

9.26 Cam Vale Parish Council - *We welcome the recent revised planning application to reduce the scale of the site by up to 20% due to the use of higher performance solar panels, however the fact cannot be ignored that this site is still HUGE by any standards and will dominate this beautiful vale. The unanimous view of Parish Councillors is to support local opposition and to reiterate our strong objection to the scheme. Our previous comments remain extant.*

9.27 Natural Environment Team - *We are satisfied that our comments have been incorporated into the revised LEMP and CEMP documents and that the measures contained within the documents will ensure that the development will avoid detrimental impacts and result in an overall net gain for biodiversity. Implementation in full of both the LEMP and CEMP should be secured by planning conditions to ensure the biodiversity mitigation measures and net gains are delivered.*

Representations received

9.28 392 comments were received in response to the application with 369 objecting and 23 in support although multiple comments were submitted by individuals. The objections are summarised below:

- Negative visual impact
- Damaging to the landscape character of the area
- Impact on rights of way

- Benefits are considerably less than the harm to neighbourhood amenities and the landscape setting
- No local financial gain
- Inappropriate use of greenfield land
- Increases pressures on existing road network
- Increases traffic on road network
- Negative impact on wildlife and loss of wildlife
- Increased risk of flooding and negative impact on watercourses
- Inappropriate location
- Excessive in scale
- Obtrusive security measures
- Glare to neighbouring properties
- Loss of tourism
- Increases risk of water contamination
- No restoration or decommissioning plans
- Detrimental to heritage assets
- Detrimental to ancient farmland
- Irreversible harm to the landscape and local distinctiveness
- Loss of local amenity
- Loss of agricultural sector jobs
- Inadequate road network for construction phase
- No public consultation
- Negative impact on viewpoints
- No urgent need for additional solar farms in Dorset
- Detrimental to woodland
- Detrimental to food production
- Appearance and scale would significantly harm the character of the valued landscape
- Negative impact on historic value of the landscape
- Endangers biodiversity/ loss of ecological value
- Unreversible loss of local amenity
- Negative long-term impact on environment
- Poor design
- Loss of bird wildlife
- Negative impacts on water drainage
- Negatively impact on ancient woodland
- May set a negative precedent for further applications
- Detrimental to wellbeing
- Detrimental to natural ecosystems

- Inappropriate solution to defeat climate change
- Renewable target already met
- Unsustainable construction materials
- Too many existing solar developments in the area
- Loss of protected species
- Insufficient demand
- Adverse impact on the setting of listed buildings
- Already solar farms in vicinity
- Intrusive security measures and construction process
- Reduced use of the area by ground nesting birds
- Fails to protect and preserve the countryside
- Negative noise impacts during both construction and operation
- Emission of hazardous chemicals
- Comprises access routes during construction and maintenance phases
- Lack sufficient assessments
- Less efficient solar panels
- Creation of toxic waste
- Biased/inaccurate impact assessments
- Inadequate tree and hedge protection

9.29 Comments were also received regarding the proposal resulting in a negative impact on houses prices however this is not a material planning consideration and will not be considered as part of this application.

9.30 The comments of support are summarised below:

- Will meet future energy demands
- Will help in the climate crisis
- Provide diversity in the landscape
- A sustainable energy source
- Will enable us to reach net zero
- Increased biodiversity
- Benefit local economy
- Obscure location
- Appropriate use of poor quality agricultural land
- All forms of green energy should be supported
- Helps to provide clean energy for future generations
- Solar farm would generate enough energy to power up to 10,605 homes a year

10.0 Relevant Policies

West Dorset, Weymouth & Portland Local Plan

ENV 1 – Landscape, Seascape and Sites of Geological Interest
ENV 2 – Wildlife and Habitats
ENV 4 – Heritage Assets
ENV 5 – Flood Risk
ENV 9 – Pollution and Contaminated Land
ENV 10 – The Landscape and Townscape Setting
ENV 12 – The Design and Positioning of Buildings
ENV 15 – Efficient and Appropriate Use of Land
ENV 16 – Amenity
SUS 2 – Distribution of Development
COM 7 – Creating a Safe and Efficient Transport Network
COM 9 – Parking Standards in New Development
COM 11 – Renewable Energy Development

National Planning Policy Framework

2. Achieving sustainable development
4. Decision-making
11. Making effective use of land
12. Achieving well-designed places
14. Meeting the challenge of climate change, flooding and coastal change
15. Conserving and enhancing the natural environment
16. Conserving and enhancing the historic environment

Other material considerations

Design and Sustainable Development Planning Guidelines (2009)
West Dorset Landscape Character Assessment 2009

11.0 Human rights

Article 6 - Right to a fair trial.

Article 8 - Right to respect for private and family life and home.

The first protocol of Article 1 Protection of property.

This recommendation is based on adopted Development Plan policies, the application of which does not prejudice the Human Rights of the applicant or any third party.

12.0 Public Sector Equalities Duty

As set out in the Equalities Act 2010, all public bodies, in discharging their functions must have “due regard” to this duty. There are 3 main aims:-

- Removing or minimising disadvantages suffered by people due to their protected characteristics

- Taking steps to meet the needs of people with certain protected characteristics where these are different from the needs of other people
- Encouraging people with certain protected characteristics to participate in public life or in other activities where participation is disproportionately low.

Whilst there is no absolute requirement to fully remove any disadvantage the Duty is to have “regard to” and remove or minimise disadvantage and in considering the merits of this planning application the planning authority has taken into consideration the requirements of the Public Sector Equalities Duty.

The proposal is for a renewable energy scheme comprising ground mounted photovoltaic solar arrays and it is considered that the proposal would have no impact on people with protected characteristics.

13.0 Financial benefits

- Jobs created from construction

14.0 Climate Implications

14.1 NPPF paragraph 158 sets out that when determining planning application for renewable and low carbon development, local planning authorities should not require applicants to demonstrate the overall need for renewable energy and recognise that even small-scale projects provide a valuable contribution to cutting greenhouse gas emissions. It also sets out that applications should be approved if the impacts are (or can be made) acceptable.

14.2 Dorset Council accepts that energy needs to be produced from renewable sources and the Council must aim to provide this within its administrative area. The Council recognised this by declaring a climate emergency at a meeting on May 16th, 2019 with the aim of taking a lead as an authority in tackling climate change. In November 2019, this was updated to a Climate and Ecological Emergency.

14.3 The proposed development involves the installation of a renewable energy scheme comprising of ground mounted photovoltaic solar arrays. The scheme will have a maximum export capacity of 35MW which equates to the generation of clean renewable energy for approximately 10,605 homes a year and anticipated CO2 displacement is circa 11,610 tonnes per annum.

15.0 Planning Assessment

Principle of Development

15.1 The proposed development is for the installation of a renewable energy scheme comprising ground mounted photovoltaic solar arrays together with substation; transformer stations; access; internal access track; security fencing; security measures and ancillary infrastructure. West Dorset, Weymouth & Portland Local Plan policy COM 11 covers matters relating to renewable energy development. It states that proposals for generating heat or electricity from renewable energy sources (other than wind energy) will be allowed wherever

possible providing the benefits of the development, such as the contribution towards renewable energy targets, significantly outweigh any harm. It also states that permission will only be granted provided any adverse impacts on local landscape, townscape or areas of historic interest can be satisfactorily assimilated; the proposal minimises harm to residential amenity by virtue of noise, vibration, overshadowing, flicker or other detrimental emissions, during construction, its operation and decommissioning; adverse impacts upon designated wildlife sites, nature conservation interests, and biodiversity are satisfactorily mitigated.

15.2 Dorset Council accepts that energy needs to be produced from renewable sources and the Council must aim to provide this within its administrative area. The Council recognised this by declaring a climate emergency at a meeting on May 16th, 2019 (updated to a climate and ecological emergency in November 2019) with the aim of taking a lead as an authority in tackling climate change. Local Plan policy COM 11 (as above) explains how the Council will assess renewable energy applications. Section 14 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states, amongst other requirements, that Councils do not expect applicants to justify the need for renewable energy development. They are recognised as providing a valuable contribution to gutting greenhouse gas emissions. But it also states approval should only be granted for renewable and low carbon development if its other impacts are acceptable.

15.3 The maximum export capacity of the solar arrays would be 35MW laid out across various field enclosures. This would allow the solar park to generate clean renewable energy for the equivalent of approximately 10,605 homes a year and the anticipated CO₂ displacement is circa 11,610 tonnes per annum. As such, the development would lead to a source of renewable energy and cut in greenhouse gas emissions.

15.4 The proposal for the generation of renewable energy is acceptable in principle by virtue of the broad support for renewable energy development under policy COM 11 of the adopted Local Plan. However this is caveated that planning permission will only be granted provided that any adverse impacts can be mitigated and the benefits that the scheme will deliver outweigh the adverse impacts that remain which will be considered in the following sections of this report.

15.5 In response to initial concerns raised the overall footprint of the site was reduced in size by 20% whilst still maintaining the same output. Modules have been removed from the rectangular shaped field bounding Bailey Ridge Lane and the irregular shaped field along the western periphery of the site. Modules have also been drawn back from higher ground along the south easterly periphery of the development site. Hedgerow planting with trees has been introduced to north and south of Stockbridge Drove and an extended area of new native woodland mix within the field north of Holmbushes Farm. This report will consider the amended reduced scheme.

Residential Amenity

15.6 Local plan policy ENV 16 refers to protecting the amenity and enjoyment of residents. The nearest properties to the site are those situated to the south-east at Bailey Ridge Farm Cottages and a cluster of properties on Bailey Ridge Lane, the farmhouse at Holmbushes Farm and the properties at Stockbridge Farm. A critical issue to address in considering the impact on residential amenity is not whether there will be a change in the outlook from nearby

dwellings, but whether the extent of that change and any activity associated with the proposed development is such that it is overtly harmful to neighbours' living conditions such that it would warrant refusal of an application. It is recognised that from residential properties near to the site, it may be possible to view parts of the solar farm. However, that would not automatically make it unacceptable. The proposal is not considered to have a significant impact in terms of visual intrusion, overshadowing or loss of daylight. Third party concerns have also been raised regarding glint and glare from the proposed solar panels. However, owing to the separation from the proposed solar arrays and the residential properties and intervening vegetation it is not considered that glint and glare from the arrays would cause any issues and detrimentally affect neighbouring amenity. Noise and disturbance during construction would be mitigated by the measures outlined in the Construction Management Plan. A noise report was submitted in response to initial comments from Environmental Health which concluded that the operational noise during the likely operation hours would comply with the operational noise target which ensures there would be no exceedance of WHO sleep disturbance limits for early morning periods at all noise sensitive receptors. Environmental Health were reconsulted on the noise report and considered it to be sufficient. With these points in mind, it is considered that the impact upon neighbouring amenity would not be significantly harmful and warrant a reason for refusal. The proposal would therefore comply with local plan policy ENV 16.

Heritage Assets

15.7 The application site forms part of a historic landscape which has both historic and aesthetic interest. The site sits within the setting of a number of designated heritage assets and would impact on the following heritage assets:

- On the contribution made by the setting to the special architectural and historic interest of the following designated heritage assets:
 - St Antony's Convent (Leweston School) Grade II*
 - Lower Stockbridge Barn Grade II* and Farmhouse Grade II
 - Features of the Italian Garden to SW of Leweston School (cumulative elements at Grade II)
 - Old Water Tower to W of Leweston School Grade II

15.8 In terms of Lower Stockbridge Farm its historic landscape is most widely received in views from the west, particularly from areas along Higher Street between Lillington and Higher Knighton Farm. From various locations from this direction one is able to view a wide expanse of landscape comprising Leweston Hill, a vale of irregular fields with hedgerows and patches of mature trees. The application site forms the foreground of this composition and is in turn framed to one side by Lower and Higher Stockbridge Farm and to the other by Holmbushes Farm. Within this composition, Lower Stockbridge Farm sits as a unit which reflects, illustrates and is fundamentally tied to this agricultural setting which has changed little since the enclosure of the fields in the post-medieval period. The visual experience of this aspect of the setting was, to be sure, not 'intended' in the position and design of the farm, but has arisen fortuitously owing to contemporary perceptions and enjoyment of historic landscapes. By 'seeing' this composition, we can understand the farm, its position, its use, and its connection to the land around it without detraction or distraction from incongruent elements within this setting. Not only is it possible visually to experience and understand this

aspect of the designated heritage asset's setting, it also exists *whether or not* it is visually perceptible – 'the contribution of setting to significance does not depend on public rights or ability to access it' (Historic England). There is an intimate relationship between historic farm and historic farmed landscape which patently does not exist simply because someone can 'see' it and which continues to the present day. Attributes of development which have the potential to affect this non-visual aspect of setting include change to general character of the surroundings, changes to land use and land cover. Therefore, although minor, less than substantial harm will accrue to the setting of Lower Stockbridge Farm.

15.9 In relation to St Anthony's Chapel, its park, an identified non-designated heritage asset, was specifically designed to take advantage of views to the south over the application site by 'the straight *allées*, which were subsequently employed and enhanced with the Italian Garden and the Old Water Tower'. NPPF paragraph 203 sets out that the effect of an application on the significance of a non-designated heritage asset should be taken into account. In weighing applications that directly or indirectly affect non-designated heritage assets, a balanced judgement will be required having regard to the scale of any harm and the significance of the heritage asset. It is considered that the development will result in less than substantial harm to the significance of this element although again minor in extent.

15.10 Travelling from the south along Bailey Ridge, the prominence of Leweston Wood above the agricultural vale is an appreciable element of the experience of the historic landscape. The prominence of this outcrop was likely fundamental to its location for a Saxon farmstead and later a manor house. With regard to the manor house it would have made use of views across the vale to the south and southwest demonstrated by the straight *allées*, which were subsequently employed and enhanced with the Italian Garden and the Old Water Tower. The latter has a viewing platform which affords views to the west and south over Leweston Wood and the lower ground of the vale. These designated heritage assets are inextricably linked to their experience of and from the landscape and the proposal would result in harm to these elements of their setting.

15.11 The Senior Conservation Officer in response to the submitted Heritage Assessment – First Addendum set out that the remains of the medieval field system are a non-designated heritage asset but concludes that the proposals will not materially affect the significance of the remnant field system owing to the relatively low physical impact of the solar array.

15.12 NPPF para 202 sets out that where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset like concluded above with the different heritage assets, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal. The public benefits of the development in this case include a source of renewable energy with a maximum export of 35MW which would generate renewable energy for the equivalent of approximately 10,605 homes and a CO₂ displacement is circa 11,610 tonnes per annum, and therefore the application would undoubtedly deliver significant public benefits. In weighing up the public benefits against the great weight given to the conservation of heritage assets, in this case the less than substantial harm, when considered in isolation is not considered to outweigh the public benefit of the scheme. However, it is the combination with the landscape impacts and the importance of the rural landscape to the setting of the assets, the cumulative impact is considered to outweigh the public benefits which will be considered further in the following section.

Visual Amenity and Landscape

15.13 The proposal is for the installation of solar arrays on agricultural land in contiguous fields with a minimum output life of 35 years. The dark blue solar modules will be mounted on grey frames and would include a number of transformer/inverter centres across the site. It would also involve a number of CCTV cameras, fencing and access tracks. The reduction in footprint by 20% for the overall array is welcomed however the general extent of the array across the landscape remains broadly the same. The scale of the proposed development, combined with its incongruent materials, does not complement or respect the local landscape character.

15.14 The site lies in an area of low-lying farmland within the Blackmore Vale, which is bordered to the north by higher ground where the small village of Longburton and the hamlets of Lillington and Knighton are located. To the south the land rises more gradually, and the nearest settlement is Leigh along with the hamlets of Totnell and Higher Totnell. There are 4 significant areas of ancient woodland and 3 important veteran trees within a 1km radius of the site. The overall character of the nearest settlements is rural. The site is not within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) however it is picturesque and evokes the image of quintessentially English countryside. The site is within the Blackmore Vale and Vale of Wardour National Character Area, the NCA profile describes the area as being steeped in a long history of pastoral agriculture, characterised by hedged fields with an abundance of hedgerow trees, many of them veteran and productive pastureland.

15.15 The Senior Landscape Architect set out that the proposed solar arrays would be visible from 9 public rights of way (high sensitivity visual receptors) within 1km of the site. It was considered that the photographs submitted in the Landscape Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) were not wholly representative of the overall views available along the selected routes. The Senior Landscape Architect also considered that the LVIA did not fully recognise the significance of the visual impact of the proposed development by indicating that the effects are temporary and reversible however in this case temporary will mean 35 or potentially more years which is a significant length of time. It was considered that the proposed solar farm would be a significant detracting element in views from a number of well used local rights of way and that whilst the proposed mitigation planting will provide effective screening in some views in others it will not. The overall appearance of the solar arrays and associated paraphernalia would be industrial in character, and whilst the whole of the development will not be visible from any one location the scale and appearance of the development mean that it would be visually intrusive in this rural setting.

15.16 Paragraph 174 of the NPPF sets out that *Planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by:*

- a) protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, sites of biodiversity or geological value and soils (in a manner commensurate with their statutory status or identified quality in the development plan)*

The text in brackets indicates that land within statutory landscape designations should be regarded as of the greatest value, but the value of non-designated landscapes still needs to

be considered. Case law (Stroud DC v SSCLG) (2014) identified that there was no agreed definition of valued landscape and that in the absence of any formal guidance it was considered that 'valued' would require the site to show some demonstrable physical attribute rather than just popularity. The Guidelines for Landscape Visual Impact Assessment provides a series of criteria assessing these demonstrable attributes of landscape value and include the following:

Landscape Quality

15.17 The Senior Landscape Architect considered that there are few detracting elements in the landscape setting of the proposals, and the presence of the majority of the original field boundaries indicates that the landscape is fairly intact and condition therefore good. There are no major transport routes traversing the landscape. The local byways consist of tree and hedge-lined country lanes which are often single track, and ancient drove roads which are now bridleways or tracks. The local villages and hamlets have retained much of their historic form and character when viewed from this part of the clay valley. The HV powerline and pylons that pass through the site and extends along the valley to the east and west are detracting elements. In summary, it was considered that the landscape of this area to be in good condition and to be of moderate/good quality.

Scenic Quality

15.18 The application site and wider valley area is a picturesque and undeveloped setting with open views across a pastoral landscape, which is enhanced by the meandering river. Wider views are available and prominent features include Leweston Wood to the north, Bulbarrow Hill to the south east, and Knighton Hill to the north west. The area has a high level of tranquillity that is only slightly disturbed by traffic along the A 352. Powerlines and incongruous, modern, large-scale farm buildings are detrimental elements within views. The Senior Landscape Architect considered the landscape of this area to have moderate scenic quality.

Rarity

15.19 The landscape of the application site is not rare within Dorset or nationally therefore the landscape of the application site to have low landscape rarity.

Representativeness

15.20 The application site and the wider valley area are typical of the Limestone Hills and Clay Valley landscape character types. The fields within this area contain a diverse mix of farmland with a predominant pastoral character. Dense hedgerows and old water meadows systems are apparent, as are groups of riverside trees. The valley provides an historic and cultural setting to the surrounding hamlets, villages and provides the 'borrowed landscape' setting of the parkland of Leweston School/Manor. The Senior Landscape Architect considered the landscape of this area to be highly representative of the defined landscape character types.

Conservation Interest

15.21 The setting of heritage assets has been set out in the previous section and the rich pastureland of the value is intrinsic to the historic development of many historic farms and of the area. Therefore, the landscape of this area is considered to have high conservation interest.

Recreational Value

15.22 The Blackmore Vale is a popular destination for walkers and cyclists with the main reason for visiting being to enjoy the pleasant surroundings of the countryside. The Macmillan Way is a nationally promoted route which passes through Lillington and heads southward skirting Knighton Hill which overlooks the site. Bailey Ridge Lane is part of the Dorset Cycle Network. Leweston Leisure, based at the school also has a particular reputation for sport, hosting many regional and national sporting events. It is also one of Team GB's pentathlon training centres. Though it is the facilities that are provided on the site that are the main draw, the surrounding countryside is also used for riding and cross-country training. Based on the above, the Senior Landscape Architect considers that the recreational value of the landscape that the site sits within to have moderate/high recreational value.

Perceptual Aspects

15.23 The application site and wider valley area provide a number of perceptual values that are uplifting or promote relaxation. The understanding of the past through the historic character of the landscape and surrounding settlements, the tranquillity of area and physical and emotional links to the natural environment are not uncommon within the local and wider Blackmore Vale area. It is considered the landscape of this area to have moderate perceptual quality.

Associations

15.24 There are a number of loose cultural associations with this area and the wider Blackmore Vale. Blackmore Vale, also known as the 'land of milk and honey', has also been referred to as the 'face' of Dorset. The vale, in particular the village of Marnhull ("Marlott"), is the opening backdrop for Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. There are also associations with Sir Walter Raleigh and with witchcraft. It is considered the landscape of this area to have low/moderate cultural associations.

15.25 The Senior Landscape Architect concluded that it is not necessary to score highly in all of the factors for a landscape to be considered to be of high value – a high score in any one of the criteria gives an indication that the landscape is valued. However, conservation and recreational value are generally considered to be of greater weight when placing value on the landscape. Overall, it is considered the application site and the surrounding landscape to be a valued landscape on the grounds of its high representativeness of the defined landscape character, its high conservation value and its recreational value.

15.26 Both the Senior Landscape Architect and the applicant were asked to consider a further reduction in the size of the scheme on top of the offered 20% reduction. The applicant

set out that with any solar development project, one of the key commercial considerations is the cost of connecting the project onto the grid. Given the amount of reinforcements that need to be completed to facilitate the connection of the project and the associated costs, any further reduction in the size of the scheme would have made it financially unviable. The Senior Landscape Architect set out that the application site is located within the Blackmore Vale Landscape Character Area the key characteristics and qualities of the landscape are highly vulnerable to change. The site also sits within what is considered a valued landscape, which raises sensitivity further. In this context, even a significantly reduced in size scheme would be difficult to support. Given the above the scheme as detailed with the 20% reduction needs to be considered.

15.27 The consistency of texture, form, line and colour, and the rigidity of the pattern created by the development will strongly contrast with natural textures and form, and have a significant impact on the existing landscape pattern. The perceptual aspects of character such as rural tranquillity typically reflect the degree of value attributed to the landscape, and this will be affected by the introduction of the industrial appearance and form of the solar farm, its ancillary buildings and structures, and the large number of CCTV cameras along the length of the perimeter fencing. The use of recessive colours for the buildings and equipment and the proposed mitigation planting will not reduce the resulting impact on landscape character to an acceptable level, and the contribution of the planting to the overall condition of the landscape is limited given the scale of impact of the development. The landscape also plays an important role in the setting of the heritage assets as set out in the previous heritage section of this report. The development is also described as being temporary and reversible, but the development that will cause an unreasonable degree of harm to a valued landscape throughout its 35 or more years operational life. It is considered that the proposed development cannot be successfully assimilated into the receiving valued landscape. It will be visually intrusive because of its industrial character and scale and will be harmful to the character of the wider landscape and therefore would not comply with local plan policies ENV 1 and ENV 10.

Highway Safety

15.28 It is proposed that all construction vehicles would access the site via the existing Higher Stockbridge farm access with the Bailey Ridge/Dyke Head. The proposal would involve some widening of the access radii to provide turning for delivery and construction vehicles. From the site access it is proposed to route all vehicles northwards along Dyke Head to the A352 junction. The solar farm layout would include permanent 4m wide access tracks throughout the site. A Construction Environmental Management Plan (CEMP) and Traffic Management Plan were submitted as part of the application. Highways were consulted on the application and raised no objection subject to a condition for the measures of the CEMP to be implemented prior to the commencement of the development and to be adhered to fully for the full length of the construction period, such a condition would be placed on any approval granted.

Biodiversity

15.29 An Environmental Statement (ES) was submitted and considered as part of this application, in line with the formal Scoping Opinion given by the Local Planning Authority. No

concerns were raised in response to the ES and Natural England considered that the application has been rigorously assessed under the framework of an ES. Natural England did however consider that the submission of a Biodiversity Plan will ensure that the proposed development would not harm the environment and seek opportunities for net biodiversity gains in a format which achieves this. Natural England also recommended that necessary steps to ensure that mature and veteran trees that may shade the proposal site are protected from future felling. In response to the comments received a LEMP was submitted and considered by the Natural Environment Team (NET). The LEMP included three main areas veteran trees in field and in hedgerows, margin widths and foraging/commuting routes for bats. In response to the comments received both the CEMP and LEMP were amended and NET were satisfied their comments had been incorporated into the revised documents and that the measures would ensure that the development would avoid detrimental impacts and result in an overall net gain for biodiversity. NET recommended that implementation in full of both the LEMP and CEMP should be secured by planning conditions to ensure the biodiversity mitigation measures and net gains are delivered such conditions would be placed on any approval granted.

Flooding & Drainage

15.30 The application site falls entirely within Flood Zone 1 (low risk of fluvial flooding) but is shown to be at some theoretical risk of surface water flooding via the formation of overland flow routes aligned with a number of ordinary watercourses which cross the site. Third party concerns have been raised regarding prevailing risk to land and property within the relevant catchment area, downstream and west of the site. The Flood Risk Management Team were consulted on the proposed development and set out that the management of surface water runoff must demonstrate that the proposed development will not be placed at risk and that any prevailing risk to adjacent or downstream areas is not exacerbated. A Flood Risk Assessment/Drainage Strategy was submitted as part of the scheme which sets out the proposed drainage strategy with associated betterment via the improvement of ground conditions and land use in terms of runoff characteristics, together with mitigation measures namely the introduction of swale features. The Flood Risk Management Team considered there was no grounds which to object to the proposed development on the basis of surface water management subject to a condition for the development to be conducted in compliance with the Flood Risk Assessment/Drainage Strategy such a condition would be placed on any approval granted.

Rights of Way

15.31 One public right of way (bridleway) traverses the lower third of the development site, extending west and northwest from the neighbouring property of Holmbushes Farm toward the southern edge of Middle Wood, where it connects to another bridleway south of Whitfield Farm/north of Bailey Ridge Lane. Several other rights of way criss-cross the landscape to the west in close proximity to the development site. The Rights of Way Team were consulted on the application and considered that the application would impact on the bridleway that crosses the site and that the line could be changed under the planning laws or the bridleway could be allowed for in the current scheme. In response to the comments received the layout plan was amended to respect the line of the public right of way. The Rights of Way Team was re-consulted and raised no objections as the bridleway was clear and 4m wide.

Planning Balance

15.32 Section 14 of the NPPF does not require applicants to justify the need for renewable energy development. This proposal for the installation of a ground mounted solar arrays with a maximum export capacity of 35MW and would allow for the generation of renewable energy for the equivalent of approximately 10,605 homes a year. The proposal for the generation of renewable energy is acceptable in principle by virtue of the broad support for renewable energy development under policy COM 11 of the adopted Local Plan.

15.33 However this is caveated that planning permission will only be granted provided that any adverse impacts can be mitigated and the benefits that the scheme will deliver outweigh the adverse impacts that remain.

15.34 In relation to the heritage assets it was considered that the proposals will lead to less than substantial harm to both designated and non-designated heritage assets. NPPF para 202 sets out that where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal. In weighing up the public benefits, it was considered that the less than substantial harm to the heritage assets in isolation would not outweigh the public benefits.

15.35 Large solar farms will almost always have a visual impact of some sort. The use of recessive colours for the buildings and equipment and the proposed mitigation planting will not reduce the resulting impact on landscape character to an acceptable level, and the contribution of the planting to the overall condition of the landscape is limited given the scale of impact of the development. In this case it is considered that the proposed development cannot be successfully assimilated into the receiving valued landscape part of which is the setting of the heritage assets. It will be visually intrusive because of its industrial character and scale and will be harmful to character of the wider landscape.

15.36 The site sits within the Blackmore Value Landscape Character Area which is considered highly vulnerable to change and the landscape the site sits within is considered a valued landscape which increases the sensitivity. It is considered that whilst a further reduction in the scheme would reduce the impact on the setting of the heritage assets the landscape impacts concerns would remain. The applicant has also set out that any further reductions in the size of the scheme would make it financially unviable.

15.37 The proposed development is considered acceptable in relation to biodiversity, highway safety, flooding and drainage and the neighbouring amenity subject to planning conditions.

16.0 Conclusion

16.1 The development would offer some economic (at the time of construction) and environmental benefits, over the lifetime of the solar farm for the purposes of sustainable development. It would provide a maximum export capacity of 35MW which equates to the generation of clean renewable energy for approximately 10,605 homes a year and anticipated CO2 displacement is circa 11,610 tonnes per annum which provide a significant environmental benefit. However, the large expanse of the site means the detrimental impacts

on the designated and non-designated heritage assets, their settings, the valued rural landscape of the area (over the lifetime of the solar farm) and associated public enjoyment of these would on balance be sufficiently significant to outweigh the noted benefits of the proposal, and the 20% reduction in its scale is not deemed sufficient to overcome the adverse effects to an acceptable level.

16.2 As such the development would conflict with relevant policies of the West Dorset, Weymouth & Portland Local Plan and the National Planning Policy Framework.

17.0 Recommendation

17.1 That the Committee would be minded to delegate to the Head of Planning to refuse the application for the reason as follows:

1) The proposed development by reason of its location, appearance and scale would harm the character of the valued landscape, part of its importance is its setting to the heritage assets and therefore the cumulative harmful effect on the landscape and its importance to the setting of the assets would be contrary to Policies ENV 1, ENV 4, ENV 10 of the West Dorset, Weymouth & Portland Local Plan (2015) and paragraphs 174 & 199-203 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2021) thus the principle of development of the scheme is also contrary to Local Plan policy COM 11.

And recommends that the Head of Planning determines the application accordingly.

● Approximate Site Location

Application reference: WD/D/19/003181

Site Address: Land at, Higher Stockbridge Farm, Higher Stockbridge Farm, Stockbridge

Proposal: Installation of a renewable energy scheme comprising ground mounted photovoltaic solar arrays together with substation; transformer stations; access; internal access track; landscaping; biodiversity measures; security fencing; security measures; access gate; access improvement and ancillary infrastructure

