

Application No.
P/15/0254

Date
30th July 2015

Determining Authority
MTCBC

Proposed Development

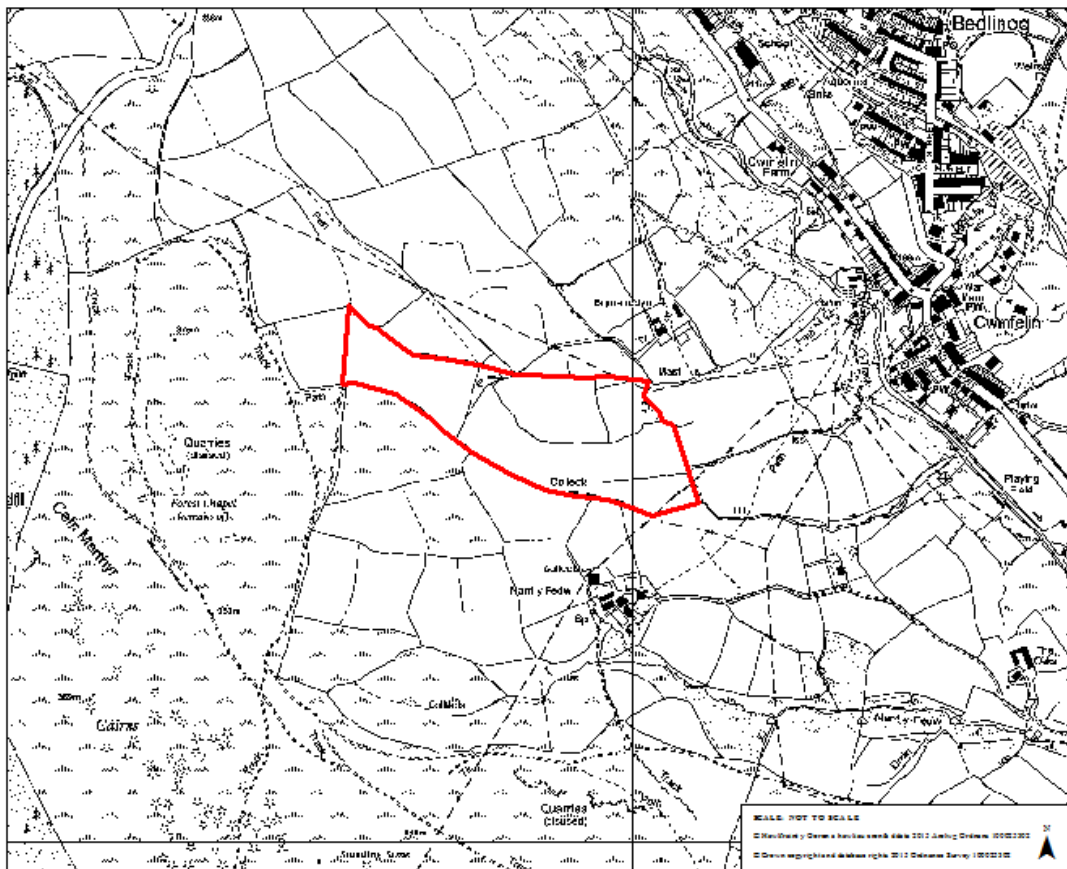
Location

Name & Address of Applicant/Agent

Construction of solar photovoltaic farm with associated infrastructure, including access tracks, inverter stations, duo cabinet sub stations, storage room, temporary compound, fencing, security cameras and landscaping

Land To The South West (0.1 Km) Of Bryn Rhedyn And To The North (0.15 Km) Of Nant Y Fedw Farm
Bedlinog

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PURPOSE OF REPORT

To further consider planning application P/15/0254

At the Planning, Regulatory and Licensing Committee meeting on the 3rd February 2016, it was resolved to defer the determination of the application to undertake a fact finding site visit. This took place on the 26th February 2016.

The main issues raised during the fact finding site visit centred on the location of the proposed development and the potential impact it would have on the character of the landscape, visual amenity and on the character of Bedlinog Conservation Area. Members

visited a number of vantage points to view the application site. These locations included Gelligaer Common to the north of Bedlinog, Pleasant View, Upper High Street, George Street and along an un-named track, which leads to Craig Fargoed Cemetery. At each location, members were advised of the location of the application site and the degree that the proposed development would be visible within the landscape.

As highlighted in the original report, the Town Planning Division's Landscape Architect has raised an objection to the proposed development. At the fact finding site visit the Town Planning Division's Landscape Architect reaffirmed this position and indicated that the proposed landscaping scheme would not adequately mitigate the impacts of the development on the surrounding landscape. Members were advised that the proposed hedgerow planting would screen views of the development from lower levels i.e. from the Bedlinog Conservation Area. However, this would be less effective when viewing the site from elevated positions within the landscape. The Town Planning Division's Landscape Architect also advised that the existing trees adjoining the site would not provide an adequate screen to the development throughout the year, particularly during the winter periods. Furthermore, the degree of planting (using evergreen species) to be introduced to mitigate any harm would over emphasise the boundaries of the site, which in turn would alter the character of the area and draw greater attention to the development. Members were also advised that the development would not be visible from the Taff Bargoed Millenium Park.

The other matters raised in the fact finding site visit (i.e. the means of access to the site, the size of the solar panels, the effects of glint and glare and potential noise and disturbance) have been assessed in the original report. The points raised at the fact finding visit do not highlight any new issues that would cause me to alter my original recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION: BE REFUSED

COMMITTEE'S DECISION IS REQUIRED.

A copy of the original report to Committee is reproduced below for Committee's convenience.

APPLICATION SITE

This application relates to an area of agricultural land within a countryside location measuring approximately 9 hectares. The site is located to the south-west (0.36km) of the main settlement of Bedlinog, with the nearest properties being Bryn-Rhedyn (0.1km) to the north-east of the site and Nant Y Fedw Farm (0.15km) to the south.

The site comprises three fields of open grassland which are used for grazing and is bound on all sides by pastoral fields. The extent of the site is largely defined by a combination of post and wire fencing, a number of trees along parts of the southern boundary and dilapidated stone walls along part of the southern, western and northern boundaries.

There is evidence of a historical field boundary crossing through the centre of the eastern half of the site (from east to west). This is formed by a row of trees located on an

embankment, which has eroded over the years. Additionally, the north-eastern part of the site includes a large group of mature trees that encloses a smaller section of the fields.

The site is situated in an area of undulating open landscape, which is characterised by expansive grassland to the west and woodland areas to the north-east and south-west, which is typically used for grazing and recreational purposes.

The site generally slopes down from north-west to south-east with the north-eastern part of the site sloping down to the east. Due to the topography of the surrounding area the majority of the views of the site would be from the north-east to the south, particularly from elevated positions.

Access into the site is via an existing unmade track that leads to the western part of the site from the south. This track links to a network of tracks which serve a number of farms in the area and links to Twynygareg, approximately 3.65km to the south of the site.

PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

Full planning permission is sought for the construction of a 5MW solar farm (for a period of 25 years) involving the erection of lines of photovoltaic panels laid in modules on a west to east axis across the site. The scheme would comprise a total of 17,440 photovoltaic panels, all of which would face south. The solar panels would be mounted on steel frames measuring approximately 3.8m deep, which would vary in length between 8-13m and would be pile driven 1.5m into the ground. The height of the solar panels would be 2.25m with each row of panels being installed between 3m and 7m apart. The solar panels would be connected to the national grid via underground cabling.

A number of service buildings/structures would be required as part of the operation of the development. These would be located on either side of the access track on hard standing areas measuring between 10m-12m wide by 10m-18m deep. The buildings/structures would be:-

- A DNO (Distributor Network Operator) cabin measuring 6m wide by 3.4m deep and 2.9m high.
- Inverter stations measuring 12.2m wide by 2.5m deep and 2.9m high.
- A customer substation measuring 3.65m wide by 2.75m deep and 2.9m high.
- A storage room measuring 6.5m wide by 2.5m deep and 2.9m high.

These buildings/structures would be pre-fabricated and of a green GRP (Glass Reinforced Polymer) construction.

Part of the existing unmade track serving the development would be improved and extended across the centre of the site, from north-west to south-east, to provide access to the inverter stations, substations and operator buildings etc. The access track would measure approximately 4m wide by 1.1km in length and would be constructed with a 0.2m deep hardcore surface.

A detailed landscaping scheme has been submitted as part of the application. The proposal involves the construction of stone walls along the western boundary of the site and the planting of hedgerows along parts of the western, northern and eastern boundaries. A

number of infill trees are also proposed to be planted along the boundaries and across the centre of the site.

It is proposed that a 2.2m high deer fence would be erected around the perimeter of the application site together with a total of 27 CCTV cameras mounted on 2.5m high posts. Additionally, a temporary compound would be provided in the western corner of the site adjacent to the access track measuring 46m wide by 34m deep.

PLANNING HISTORY

There is no relevant planning history relating to the application site.

CONSULTATION

Internal consultees

- | | | |
|--|---|--|
| Engineering and Highways Manager | - | No objection subject to conditions relating to surface water drainage and access. |
| Town Planning Division's Policy and Implementation Group Leader | - | No objection. |
| Town Planning Division's Countryside Officer | - | No objection. |
| Town Planning Division's Design, Heritage and Conservation Officer | - | <u>OBJECTION:</u> The location of the solar farm is inappropriate and would have an unacceptable impact on the historic landscape . |
| Town Planning Division's Landscape Architect | - | <u>OBJECTION:</u> The solar farm would have an unacceptable impact on the landscape character, as well as negative visual and cumulative impacts. |
| Rights of Way | - | No response. |
| Environmental Health Manager | - | No objection. |

External consultees

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| Natural Resources Wales (NRW) | - | No objection subject to a condition relating to landscaping and ecological management. |
| Glamorgan Gwent Archaeological Trust (GGAT) | - | No objection subject to a condition relating to a programme of archaeological works. |
| Cadw | - | No objection. |

Bedlinog Community Council	-	OBJECTION: The proposed development would have an adverse visual impact on views within Bedlinog Village, to the detriment of the character of the area.
Welsh Water	-	No objection.
Wales & West Utilities	-	No objection.
Western Power Distribution	-	No response

PUBLICITY

In accordance with the Town & Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (Wales) Order 2012, letters were sent to nearby properties on the 6th August 2015 and a notice was displayed in the local newspaper on the 20th August 2015. Additionally, a total of 8 site notices were displayed around Bedlinog on the 7th August 2015.

A further two publicity exercises were carried out, following the submission of additional information in relation to the landscape and visual impact assessment. Letters were sent to nearby properties on the 10th November 2015 and 7th January 2016 and site notices were displayed on the 11th November 2015 and the 7th January 2016.

As a result of these publicity exercises, 283 letters of objection and a petition with a total of 164 signatures were received. In summary, the following issues were raised:

- The solar farm would be inappropriately located and would result in a blot on the nature rich landscape and would be out of character with the rural area.
- There are cairns on the periphery of the site which are of historical interest which may be disturbed by the development.
- The large scale of the development would dwarf a small village such as Bedlinog. It would be visible from most of the village and Craig Fargoed Cemetery, resulting in an adverse impact on the unspoilt views of Bedlinog and Gelligaer Common, both of which are of historic importance.
- People visit Bedlinog for a number of reasons including using the climbing centre, cycling, walking and pony trekking. Bedlinog is an area that is used recreationally, which includes the 'Loop and Links' trails.
- Some of the viewpoints presented do little justice in illustrating the character of the area and should also consider the effects during the winter period.
- The assessment of the landscape appears to lack local knowledge of the area. The considerations of the visual amenity are misrepresented and would have adverse effects despite the presence of trees which would not conceal the site from residents.
- There are concerns that birds flying over the solar farm would be harmed by reflections from the solar panels.
- There are rare birds in the Bedlinog valley including Curlews and Red Kites which are seen flying in the area and should be protected from the development.
- Residential amenity would be adversely affected by noise and disturbance generated during the construction stage of the development.

- Due regard should be given to the infrastructure, glare/reflection, type of fencing and appearance of the development to ensure it is in keeping with the surrounding area.
- Given the topography of the site, regard should be given to the potential pollution of water courses.
- House prices in Bedlinog would be affected by the development.
- It appears that there has been no consultation with local residents with many villagers being unaware of the proposed development.

POLICY CONTEXT

National planning policy

Planning Policy Wales (PPW), 8th Edition, January 2016:

Section 4.5 - Planning for climate change.

Para 4.5.2 sets out the Welsh Government's commitment towards a low carbon economy to tackle future climate impacts through a number of key areas, which includes energy generation.

Para 4.5.7 recognises the need to proactively reduce the demand for energy and facilitate the delivery of new and more sustainable forms of energy provision at all scales as a means towards a low carbon economy.

Section 5.5 - Development management and the conservation and improvement of the natural heritage.

Para 5.5.1 highlights the importance of biodiversity and landscape considerations in the determination of planning applications and the need to take reasonable steps to safeguard or enhance the environmental quality of land.

Para 5.5.2 acknowledges that regard should be given to the environmental impacts of development proposals and the need to avoid any adverse effects. Where there are potential impacts, this should be balanced with other material considerations and the local planning authority should seek to minimise any effects and where practicable enhance features of nature conservation.

Section 6.5 - Development management and the historic environment.

Para 6.5.1 emphasises the importance of preserving an ancient monument and its setting and the presumption in favour of preserving in situ archaeological remains of national importance. In cases that involve an impact on lesser archaeological remains, regard should be given to the importance of those remains against other factors, including the need for the proposed development.

Para 6.5.9 indicates that where a development affects a listed building or its setting, special regard should be given to the desirability of preserving the building, or its setting, or any features of special architectural or historical interest which it possesses.

Para 6.5.17 notes that where a proposed development conflicts with the objectives of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of a conservation area, or its setting, there should be a strong presumption against the granting of planning permission.

Para 6.5.25 highlights the need to protect historic landscapes and to consider the implications a development may have on that landscape, which may be of more than local importance.

Section 8.7 – Development management and transport

Para 8.7.1 sets out the criteria that should be taken into account when considering development proposals that have potential transport implications.

Para 8.7.2 identifies the importance of Transport Statements as a mechanism for assessing anticipated highway impacts of a development proposal.

Section 12.10 - Development management and renewable and low carbon energy

Para 12.10.1 sets out the criteria that should be considered in the assessment of applications for renewable and low carbon energy development and associated infrastructure.

- *The contribution a proposal will play in meeting identified national, UK and European targets and potential for renewable energy, including the contribution to cutting greenhouse gas emissions;*
- *The wider environmental, social and economic benefits and opportunities from renewable and low carbon energy development;*
- *The impact on the natural heritage, the Coast and the Historic Environment;*
- *The need to minimise impacts on local communities to safeguard quality of life for existing and future generations;*
- *Ways to avoid, mitigate or compensate identified adverse impacts;*
- *The impacts of climate change on the location, design, build and operation of renewable and low carbon energy development. In doing so consider whether measures to adapt to climate change impacts give rise to additional impacts;*
- *Grid connection issues where renewable (electricity) energy developments are proposed; and*
- *The capacity of and effects on the transportation network relating to the construction and operation of the proposal.*

Technical Advice Note (TAN):

TAN 5 - Nature Conservation and Planning, September 2009

Para 4.1.1 sets out the measures that should be followed in delivering the protection and enhancement of nature conservation required by PPW.

Para 4.6.1 – 4.6.2 supports the use of appropriate conditions that may contribute to biodiversity conservation.

TAN 6 – Planning for Sustainable Rural Communities, July 2010

Para 3.7.2 supports the diversification of agricultural land to accommodate renewable energy schemes.

TAN 8 - Renewable Energy, July 2005

Para 2.1 acknowledges the role of the planning system to meet the Welsh Government's commitment to enabling the deployment of all forms of renewable energy technologies.

TAN 18 – Transport, March 2007

Para 9.19 supports the use of conditions to secure transport measures and facilities as part of a development proposal, which may include details of deliveries to the site and mitigations to offset any highway implications.

Local planning policy

Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Local Development Plan (LDP) 2006-2021:

Section 2.2.11 of the LDP identifies the need to combat climate change through the promotion of energy efficiency and renewable energy technologies to assist in the reduction of CO2 emissions. This is reinforced by the vision and primary aim of the LDP, as set out in its Strategic Objectives. The following policies are relevant to the determination of this application:

- Policy BW4 - Settlement boundaries/locational constraints
- Policy BW5 - Natural heritage
- Policy BW6 - Townscape and built heritage
- Policy BW7 - Sustainable design and place making
- Policy BW8 - Development and the water environment
- Policy BW10 - Mineral safeguarding
- Policy BW12 - Development proposals and transport
- Policy AS4 - Historic landscape
- Policy TB7 - Renewable energy
- Policy TB9 - Mineral buffer zone
- Policy TB11 - Access, parking and accessibility of local facilities

Policy TB7 of the LDP specifically relates to renewable energy schemes and states that:

Development proposals that contribute to meeting national and local renewable energy targets will be favourably considered providing:-

- *In the case of wind turbine developments, their capacity does not exceed 25MW on urban and industrial brownfield sites, and 5MW elsewhere in the County Borough.*
- *They do not have an unacceptable impact on biodiversity and landscape including the setting of the Brecon Beacons National Park*
- *They do not have an unacceptable impact on the amenity of residential areas.*

Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG)

SPG 1- Planning Obligations, March 2012

SPG 5 - Nature and Development, May 2015

PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

Land Use

The planning system has an important role in achieving the Welsh Government's commitment to enable the deployment of all forms of renewable energy technologies in Wales. Section 12.8.9 of PPW highlights the need for local authorities to facilitate the development of renewable and low carbon energy.

Whilst there is an aim to secure an appropriate mix of energy provision for Wales, Section 12.8.6 of PPW highlights that this should be balanced against the need to avoid, and where possible minimise environmental, social and economic impacts. The importance of clean energy and the efficient use of natural resources, both as an economic driver and a commitment to sustainable development is recognised at all levels of policy.

The proposed solar farm would be located outside of the settlement boundary as defined by the LDP Proposals Map and is therefore regarded to be located within the open countryside. The development of the site is generally supported by Policy BW4 of the LDP, which acknowledges that renewable energy schemes are an acceptable form of development in countryside locations, subject to its compliance with other relevant policies. Furthermore, Policy TB7 of the LDP states that development proposals that contribute to meeting the national and local renewable energy targets should be favourably considered provided it does not have an unacceptable impact on biodiversity, the landscape or the amenity of residential areas.

Therefore the proposed development is considered to be acceptable in principle and complies with policies BW4 and TB7 of the LDP.

Archaeology and cultural heritage

An Archaeological and Cultural Heritage Assessment has been submitted in support of the application. The assessment notes that the application site is situated approximately 2km west of the Gelligaer Registered Landscape of Special Historic Interest, where there is some potential inter-visibility with the proposed development. Taking into account the Zone of Theoretical Visibility (ZTV), the development would also be within 2km of four Scheduled Ancient Monuments (SAM) which includes:

- GM270 - Tir Lan Round Barrow Cemetery
- GM271 - Coed Cae Round Cairns
- GM272 - Cefn Merthyr Round Cairns
- GM320 - Platform Houses on Coity Uchaf

Additionally, the assessment has identified two listed buildings, namely the Grade II Listed Corbelled Pigsty at Penddeugae Fach and the Grade II Salam Baptist Chapel to the north-

west (576m) and east (664m) of the site respectively. The latter of these buildings is located in the Cwmfelin Conservation Area.

The assessment notes that the intervening topography and landscape features surrounding the site would largely screen the development from the identified historical assets. However, there would be some inter-visibility with the Coed Cae Round Cairns and the Gelligaer Registered Landscape of Special Historic Interest. The assessment indicates that the application site does not directly contribute to the significance of the cairns and the proposal would not measurably change their setting. Similarly, the assessment concludes that views of the development from the Registered Landscape would not significantly impact on its character, with a negligible change in the existing views. In this regard, it is acknowledged that Cadw considers the development would only have a limited impact on the designated historic assets and has therefore not raised any objection to the proposal. Similarly, NRW have not raised any concerns and are of the view that the proposal would not have a significant adverse effect on the Registered Landscape. GGAT have raised no objection to the development and have noted that there is limited potential for unrecorded archaeological remains to exist within the site. However, of particular concern is the potential impact of the access track and any field boundaries that may need to be breached during construction. As such, GGAT has requested a programme of archaeological works be secured by condition.

The Town Planning Division's Design, Heritage and Conservation Officer has acknowledged that the development would be visible from a number of historic assets referred to above. It is further argued that a more in-depth analysis of the special character of the historic landscape is required, in order to fully assess the potential impacts of the development, which must be analysed in terms of its local importance to the community and users of the historic landscape.

Policies BW6 and AS4 of the LDP seek to preserve or enhance the character, setting and quality of the built heritage and historic landscapes. Whilst it is appreciated that there are some concerns over the adequacy of the assessments provided, particularly in relation to the historic landscape, taking into consideration the comments from Cadw and NRW, it has been concluded that the development would not have an adverse impact on the key characteristics of the aforementioned historic designations. Therefore the proposal is considered to comply with policies BW6 and AS4 of the LDP.

Landscape and visual impact

A Landscape Character and Visual Impact Assessment (LCVIA) has been submitted in support of the application. This is accompanied by two addendum reports, which include a number of photomontages and an Arboricultural Impact Assessment to inform the assessment of the development. To determine the extent that the development would be visible within the landscape, a Zone of Theoretical Visibility (ZTV) plan has been produced, which illustrates that the solar farm would be mainly visible from the north, east and south of the site, particularly from elevated positions. Views of the development to the west would be limited by the land form of the area. The ZTV also indicates that the development would be potentially visible from the majority of the main settlement of Bedlinog, including the Cwmfelin Conservation Area.

Through an assessment of sensitivity and magnitude of effects on landscape character areas, judgments can be made about the scale of effects of any change in the landscape qualities, the value placed on the landscape and how it is experienced by receptors. In this respect the LCVIA considers the potential landscape effects and the visual effects from a number of viewpoints. The high value placed on the landscape is acknowledged in the LCVIA, particularly in relation to its habitat, historic and cultural qualities, with its mosaic of habitats, irregular fieldscape, dispersed settlement pattern, as well as, industrial and pre-historic remains.

The LCVIA considers the landscape quality of the site to be poor due to current site conditions, which includes demolished structures, poor and declining hedgerows and the lack of management to boundary trees. However the quality of the landscaping surrounding the site is considered in the LCVIA to be good and of medium value, based on its locality to heritage assets, Cwmfelin Conservation Area and the number of properties that face the site. The LCVIA notes that the proposed solar farm would have an overall major-moderate adverse effect on the site itself, but in the wider area this would be reduced to a moderate or minor adverse effect. Additionally, when considering the condition and quality of the landscape, the LCVIA considers the effect of the development to be negligible when balanced against the enhancement works to the landscape features within the site.

The Town Planning Division's Landscape Architect highlights that the landscape of the area where the development is proposed is characterised by its steep valleys sides with a diversity of land cover. The essential attractive features include a substantial proportion of tree and scrub cover and a mosaic of enclosed farmland and bracken. This landscape is considered by The Town Planning Division's Landscape Architect to be highly sensitive to large scale development. Given the size of the proposed solar farm, with its vast number of rows of solar panels and their rigid frameworks, the development would be particularly industrial in nature. This would be in stark contrast with its countryside setting and would thus significantly harm and interrupt the rural and tranquil characteristics of the area.

In regards to the potential visual effects of the development, the LCVIA primarily focuses on areas that fall within the ZTV where sensitive receptors are located. A total of 12 viewpoints have been selected, which include views of the development from various locations within the Bedlinog settlement. Viewpoints have also been taken from open access land to the west and south of the site as well as from trails across the valley to the south-east and north-east.

The LCVIA notes that from viewpoints 6, 8, 9, 11 and 12, which include the public rights of ways and residential areas, the proposed solar farm would largely have moderate to substantial adverse effects on those views. These effects would be reduced to minor or moderate adverse through mitigation. In this regard, a detailed landscape and character mitigation strategy has been submitted, which seeks to enhance the landscape character of the site by improving the management of existing hedgerows and trees, as well the retention, repair and construction of dry stone walls along the site boundaries. The scheme also includes the extensive planting of additional trees and 'instant' hedgerows to further screen the development. Photomontages have been submitted which illustrate how the views of the site might evolve over a period of 1 to 10 years.

The Town Planning Division's Landscape Architect has expressed concerns that the photomontage viewpoints and their resulting assessments are misleading, as the

development is often presented as a small component of a larger panoramic view, which does not reveal an accurate reflection of how the site might be viewed or appreciated by receptors.

It has clearly been identified in the LCVIA that the development would have adverse visual effects on the surrounding landscape, particularly from the viewpoints noted above. It is considered that there is heavy reliance on the landscape mitigation strategy to address the negative effects of the development. Whilst the proposed management of existing trees and repairs to boundary stone walls would to some extent improve the quality of the site, the Town Planning Division's Landscape Architect has raised concerns about the effectiveness of both the existing and proposed vegetation to provide significant improvements to the visual experience. During winter/autumn period, which is effectively 6 months of the year where there is little or no leaf cover, the development would be more prominent in the landscape than suggested in the submitted assessment. This would result in a greater impact on the visual amenity experienced by residents within Bedlinog. Additionally, the reliance on slow growing evergreen species would unlikely reach a suitable height required to form an effective screen.

Whilst it is appreciated that the additional landscaping is to mitigate the visual impacts of the development, this degree of planting, together with 2.2m high fencing and CCTV columns, would over emphasise the boundaries of the site, which would be detrimental to the character and appearance of the area and would draw greater attention to the development within the landscape. Furthermore, the development would appear visually dominant when viewed from the south, as is evident in Viewpoint 9 (to the south of Nant Y Fedw Farm). Even with enhanced landscaping a large proportion of the development would remain visible.

The Town Planning Division's Landscape Architect has noted that there is a network of public footpaths (including the 'Loop and Links' trails) used for recreational purposes (Viewpoint 6) that lead walkers around the Craig Fargoed side of the Bargoed valley (to the south-east of the site). Along these footpaths there are various vantage points where wider landscape views can be appreciated by recreational receptors. Even with mitigation, it would be difficult to successfully screen the development from these locations. Additionally, the Town Planning Division's Landscape Architect has noted that views of the development from elevated positions, such as those from Gelligaer Common (Viewpoint 1), where there are long range panoramic views to the south-west, would have potential for cumulative impacts with two wind turbines located to the south of the site.

It is acknowledged that similar concerns to those noted above have also been raised by the Town Planning Division's Design, Heritage and Conservation Officer in respect of the potential visual impacts on the historic landscape. She considers that the development would be much more visible from the surrounding area than that illustrated in the LCVIA and that the potential impacts on the various viewpoints are likely to be greater than that concluded in the LCVIA. Additionally, the Town Planning Division's Design, Heritage and Conservation Officer has indicated that the development would also be strongly visible by both pedestrians and drivers from a number of other locations in elevated areas of Bedlinog i.e. Upper High Street, Moriah Street, High Street and George Street.

It is considered that the proposed development would have significant visual impacts on the landscape character which is deemed to be of a high value. It would also have an adverse

visual effect on the views experienced by recreational users of the countryside. The LCVIA fails to demonstrate that the effects on the landscape can be adequately and successfully mitigated. In this regard the Town Planning Division's Landscape Architect and Design, Heritage and Conservation Officer have raised an objection to the development. Therefore, the development is not considered to comply with policies BW5 and TB7 of the LDP.

Residential Amenity

The nearest residential properties to the proposed development would be Bryn-Rhedyn (0.1km) to the north-east of the site and Nant Y Fedw Farm (0.15km) to the south. The Glint and Glare Analysis shows that these properties would not be affected by reflections off the photovoltaic panels. Furthermore, the presence of intervening vegetation would help to minimise any limited times at which glint and glare might occur towards the main settlement of Bedlinog (0.36km to the west of the site).

There would likely be some noise and disturbance to these residents during the construction phase of the development. However, this would be temporary in nature and not experienced when the solar farm is operational. As such the proposal would not have an adverse impact on the amenities of neighboring residents.

Natural environment

The application site lies within the vicinity of three Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC). Cwm Bargoed (SINC No. 25) lies immediately to the north of the site, with Cwm Fedw (SINC No. 31) and Mynydd-y-Capel Common (SINC No. 32) located approximately 200m to the south and west of the site respectively. As such, a Preliminary Ecological Appraisal has been submitted in support of the application.

The ecological appraisal identifies a number of features within the site that have potential ecological value i.e. stone walls, trees and hedgerows which may be used by roosting bats, nesting birds and reptiles. The ecological appraisal identifies that there is some potential for these habitats to be disturbed, particularly during the construction phase of the development. However, given that all of the existing stone walls, trees, and hedgerows are to be retained, the ecological appraisal does not identify any adverse impacts on protected species or habitats. Additionally, the ecological appraisal sets out a number of recommendations relating to the timing of works, enhancements to the landscape and the provision of log piles and bird/bat boxes.

The Town Planning Division's Countryside Officer has raised no objection to the development, and has indicated that whilst there would be some negative ecological impacts, predominantly in the short term (i.e. disturbance to vegetation and stone walls during construction), there are some positive benefits arising from the proposal, including the retention, management and restoration of hedgerows. In this regard it is also noted that Natural Resources Wales have not raised any objection to the proposal. Therefore the proposal complies with policy BW5 of the LDP.

Ground conditions

The majority of the site lies within a sandstone safeguarding area and as such is protected from permanent development by Policy BW10 of the LDP. It is considered that the solar

farm is temporary in nature, albeit for a period of 25 years, and would not sterilise the site from future mineral extraction. Therefore the proposal complies with policy BW10 of the LDP.

Flooding consequences

The development could increase the concentration of surface water run-off from the photovoltaic panels, which can give rise to flooding concerns. As such, a Flood Consequence Assessment (FCA) has been submitted in support of the application.

The FCA report indicates that the site is not at any risk from direct flooding and is therefore focused on reducing the risks associated with surface water run-off. The report concludes that the development would have a negligible impact on the surface water discharge rates from the site. Chisel-ploughing between the rows of solar panels would help increase infiltration rates and the planting of trees and hedgerows would further improve the attenuation of water and minimise any risks of erosion to the land.

It is considered that the proposed development would have a minimal impact on the water environment. In this respect, the Engineering and Highways Manager has not raised any objection. Therefore the proposal complies with policy BW8 of the LDP.

Highway impacts

Part of the existing unmade track serving the application site would be upgraded with a hardcore surface. Additional tracks would also be created within the site to enable a suitable means of access into the site during the construction and operational phases of the development. Improvements may also be required along the access tracks leading to the site, in the form of temporary matting to allow for necessary ground clearance for vehicles.

The greatest impact on the highway infrastructure would be during the construction phase. A Construction Traffic Management Plan has been submitted in support of the application. The report indicates that the construction period of the development would take up to 16 weeks with a total of 86 HGV vehicles visiting the site. Once the development is operational, there would be approximately three visits a year by van or 4x4 vehicles to maintain the equipment on site.

The components of the solar park would be transported by road using a combination of strategic and local road networks. It is anticipated that the construction traffic would travel north along the A470 trunk road and exit onto the A472, which leads to Cardiff Road (A4054) through Treharris. The construction traffic would then continue along Commercial Terrace towards Tywnygarreg, where it then travels north along a lane and access tracks to the application site. It is noted that part of the lane was previously used to transport wind turbine components.

The Construction Traffic Management Plan indicates that the proposed access route to the application site can adequately accommodate the vehicles transporting the components of the solar farm and that the traffic generated would result in no material impact on the highway network. In this respect, it is noted that the Engineering and Highways Manager has not raised any highway safety concerns, subject to a condition relating to a 'walk over'

survey to review the condition of the lane from Twynygarreg to the application site. Therefore, the proposal complies with policies BW12 and TB11 of the LDP.

Representations

The main issues raised as a result of the publicity exercise have been considered in detail in the relevant sections of this report.

As members will be aware, the potential impact the proposed development may have on house prices in Bedlinog is not a material planning consideration and should be given no weight in the determination of this application.

In respect of the objection raised about the lack of consultation, a number of publicity exercises were appropriately carried out to notify residents of this application. This is evident in the number of representations subsequently received. In addition, prior to the submission of this application, the applicant contends that they attempted to engage with the local community, ward councillors and the Bedlinog Community Council.

CONCLUSIONS

The principle of the development is considered to be acceptable and would contribute to meeting local and national renewable energy targets. The impact on historic designations, ecology, as well as the highway implications and flooding risks, are deemed to be acceptable. However, the overall significant adverse impacts on the character and visual appearance of the landscape, which cannot be overcome by mitigation, do not outweigh the benefits of the development. For the reasons set out in this report, the proposed development would run contrary to policies BW5 and TB7 of the LDP. Accordingly, the following recommendation is made:

RECOMMENDATION: BE REFUSED for the following REASONS:

1. The proposed solar farm, by virtue of its size and siting would result in an inappropriate development in a sensitive rural setting. As such it would have a significant impact which is detrimental to the character of the landscape and contrary to policies BW5 and TB7 of the Merthyr Tydfil Local Development Plan 2006-2021.
2. The proposed solar farm, by virtue of its prominent siting and size, would have a significant visual impact, which would be detrimental to the experience and enjoyment of the landscape by residents of and visitors to Bedlinog, users of Gelligaer Common and the public footpaths and trails on open access land to the south-east of Bedlinog. Therefore, the proposal fails to comply with policies BW5 and TB7 of the Merthyr Tydfil Local Development Plan 2006-2021.
