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Report

Subject: Consultation by North Dorset District Council on two planning applications on land between West Bourton and Whistley Farm, B3081, Gillingham for:
(1) 6 x 120m high wind turbine generators, construction pads, substation, temporary construction pound, information board and modified vehicular access (their reference number 2/2008/0661).
(2) 1 x 50m high meteorological monitoring mast for temporary period of 18 months (their reference 2/2008/0671).

Report to: Western Area Committee
Date: 7th August 2008
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Reason for Report

North Dorset District Council (NDDC) has consulted Salisbury District Council (SDC) on two planning applications submitted to them on land relatively close to the District and County boundary.

The land in question is between West Bourton and Whistley Farm, off the B3081, which at its closest point is around 1.6 miles from the boundary. The site is located to the south of Zeals and south west of Mere.

The applications propose: (1) 6 x 120m high wind turbine generators, construction pads, substation, temporary construction pound, information board and modified vehicular access, and (2) 1 x 50m high meteorological monitoring mast for temporary period of 18 months. A copy of the 'non-technical summary' is attached to this report as an appendix.

This report focuses primarily on the turbines consultation because of their greater impact and permanency, although a separate response should be given to both applications.

Background

Prior to submitting these planning applications, North Dorset District Council consulted SDC on the scope (ie which topics had to be covered) of the Environmental Impact Assessment that has to be submitted with applications of this scale. Members considered the scope of the EIA at Western Area Committee on 6th March.

The aspects included within the EIA are:

- Planning Policy
- Landscape and visual impact (including on the nearby AONB)
- Ecology
- Ornithology
- Hydrology and hydrogeology
- Cultural Heritage (including archaeology, listed buildings, Conservation Areas) etc
- Noise
- Transport and Access
- Aviation (including military aviation)
- Miscellaneous considerations (including public safety, air quality, socio-economic impacts, shadow flicker and electromagnetic interference including TV, radio and mobile phone interference)

This is effectively a list of the relevant material considerations in relation to the planning applications, at least in relation to the turbines application. However, members should remember that we are only considering the aspects of the proposal that would impact on land within the District – we are not trying to determine the proposal as if it were in our own District.

In considering the proposals, members should bear in mind, amongst other things, national planning policies and in particular the renewable energy guidance contained within PPS22.

PPS22 stresses that increased development of renewable energy resources is vital in facilitating the delivery of the Government's commitments on both climate change and renewable energy. The Policy sets out eight key principles that local planning authorities should adhere to in their approach to planning for renewable energy, one of which is that *"the wider environment and economic benefits of all proposals for renewable energy projects, whatever their scale, are material considerations that should be given significant weight in determining whether proposals should be granted planning permission"*.

Perhaps the most relevant issue in relation to Salisbury District Council is likely to be the visual impact from within the District, particularly those parts within the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

On the subject of landscape and visual effects, PPS22 acknowledges that of all renewable technologies, wind turbines are likely to have the greatest visual and landscape effects (PPS22 Para 20).

It also makes clear that local authorities should recognise that the impact of turbines on the landscape will vary according to the size and number of turbines and the type of landscape involved, and that these impacts may be temporary if conditions are attached to planning permissions which require the future decommissioning of turbines.

Planning Considerations – visual impact of the turbines

(a) Visual impact from the AONB

The applicants have undertaken a landscape and visual impact assessment (LVIA) to assess the visual impact that the turbines would have. The proposed wind turbines would be within 3km (or 1.8 miles) of the AONB.

Their assessment considers the impact on the AONB (in table 6.13 and paragraph 6.249) and says that:

"The Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB is considered the most important landscape designation within the study area with very highly valued scenic quality and it also covers a significant part of that study area. The [study] illustrates that the wind park would tend to be visible from the west and south facing hill sides, primarily on the periphery of the designated area.

Much of the AONB has a tranquil character remote from the agricultural and built development of the lowlands to the west and south. The lowland landscape of the Stour valley is clearly visible from the fringes of the AONB but is clearly differentiated by the clear difference in landform, height and land cover.

The level of detail visible within the lowland varies depending on visibility but the larger settlements such as Gillingham are clearly visible, contributing to the difference between the two landscapes. It is considered that, although clearly visible, the wind park would not significantly encroach on the experience remoteness or tranquility of the AONB because of the clear distinction between the designated and non designated landscapes. Where seen in conjunction with other developed punctuations such as Gillingham or the A303 the effect of the wind park would be neutral. Elsewhere the prominent development would have a visual effect."

Never-the-less the applicant's landscape visual impact assessment argues that that:

"The magnitude of change to the experience of users of the AONB would be low and the effect would be slight during construction and slight/moderate during operation and not significant."

(b) impact on settlements

Meanwhile, in table 6.11, the applicant's assessment looks at the impact on various settlements within SDC's boundaries, as well as the A303 in general.

In relation to the Zeals / Bourton area, it says that:

"...there are some fairly long views to the south towards the development site from properties on the south side of building groups. The embankments and tree planting associated with the A303, mature trees located south of the villages and intervening buildings tend to limit views towards the proposals but there would be some clear views from some properties and short sections of the main road to the turbines beyond scattered trees. This view is illustrated by Viewpoint 4. Where visible, the impact of the wind farm would tend to be moderate and adverse with the introduction of new elements so unlike the existing within the rural view."

In relation to Mere, it says that:

*"It is likely that the wind park would be viewed as a compact group of turbines from the upper slopes and some parts of the south west boundary but would be screened from much of the settlement. The magnitude of change would be **low** and the level of impact during construction and operation would be **slight** and **not significant**"*

In relation to Stourton, Kilmington and Kilmington Common, the assessment says that the upper sections of the turbines would be visible from some parts of Stourton, although mature trees and undulations in terrain would be likely to screen views from most parts of the village. These in turn would screen most views from the villages to the north except perhaps the eastern most parts of Kilmington Common where views would be similar to those at Stourton.

The assessment also comments on the views available from the A303 by saying that the road crosses a series of valleys and is often either in cutting or there are road side embankments or tree belts and therefore the view tends to fluctuate between open and enclosed. The closest and clearest views are represented by Viewpoint 4 [just beyond SDC's boundary, into Dorset] from the central section traveling west.

"Where visible, the turbines would be viewed within a rural, agricultural setting and would be seen as a compact group. Where visible, the turbines would stand out and there would be very clear views from Charnage Down 10km to the north east of the wind park. It is likely that there would be views from approximately 15% of the route..."

(c) cultural heritage

The study also looks at the impact on other designations (in table 6.13). In SDC's area the assessment considers Stourhead registered park/garden, Zeals Conservation Area and the listed buildings at Zeals House (grade I), St Martin's Church Zeals (grade II*), and Woodlands Manor, Mere (grade I).

In commenting on the impact on Stourhead registered park/garden, the assessment says that although parts of the grounds are located at over 250m AOD and therefore higher than large parts of the study area, the most intensively used and designed parts are located within a natural depression.

They consider that, in combination with the extensive and mature tree cover of the grounds and intervening areas, views out of the designated area are very limited. There could be some views to the south to parts of the turbines seen through mature trees in winter from the north east boundary of the grounds where they could be seen in the context of the main house. This is not a commonly accessed location however and foliage would significantly screen any views to turbines. Viewpoints 8 (south side of the village) and 10 (upper part of Alfred's Tower) illustrates that the turbines would be clearly visible within the broader view from this point.

In relation to Zeals House, it says that it is likely that views from the house to the wind park would be largely screened by mature trees on the south west boundary, particularly when in leaf. The blades of the turbines may be visible from upper windows.

In assessing the impact St Martin's Church, it says that Zeals village generally has some elevated views towards the wind park site. It is possible that there may be some views to the blades of some of the turbines

beyond the intervening trees and buildings from the front entrance of the church although at a distance of 3km away.

In considering Woodlands Manor, Mere the study says that garden vegetation would screen lower floor views to the proposals and at distance of 4km away, they do not consider that the proposals would significantly affect the setting of the house.

(d) Conclusion in relation to visual impact

PPS22 says that the question of visual impact should be assessed using objective analysis where possible but that the final decision will to some extent be a question of professional judgment, though one that should be balanced against the sustainable energy generation benefits that the proposal would provide.

The applicant's landscape assessment accepts that the turbines will be visible from a number of locations, including within the AONB and Castle Hill in Mere, and this is borne out by officer's own visits. Although the applicant's assessment argues that the overall impact is low (though medium/moderate in some instances), this is very much a question of judgment.

The visual impact of wind turbines is one that generates a wide range of strong opinion often resulting in heated debate. However, it is clearly the case that the application proposes six tall structures that are alien to and intrusive in the landscape, including both the AONB and when viewed from Castle Hill. Their animation only draws the viewer's attention to them, making their impact that much greater.

In officer's view, on balance, an objection to the turbines based on visual impact on landscape grounds would be defensible at appeal, should North Dorset District Council choose to refuse permission and call on Salisbury District Council to present evidence to support such a refusal.

The impact of the meteorological mast however, at only 50m, would clearly be less visible, would not be animated, and would remain for only 18 months rather than 25 years. It is considered that an objection on visual impact grounds could probably not be defended at appeal.

Impact on highway network (particularly the A303)

Transport to and from the site is relevant to SDC as there is the potential requirement for vehicles to travel through parts of the District to reach the site (on the A303), especially during construction.

In total the applicants estimate that 1092 vehicle movements will enter and leave the site, during the 18 week construction phase, and it seems likely that most (if not all) of these would use the A303. However, the applicants argue that because this is less than a 5% increase in HGV/heavy vehicle flows using the A303, that this is insignificant.

The A303 is a Trunk Road and the Highway Agency will have been consulted on the application by North Dorset District Council. They will formally consider the impact on the A303 including its sections within Salisbury District.

Other factors

The remaining issues are ecology, ornithology, hydrology and hydrogeology, archaeology, noise, access, aviation (including military aviation) and other miscellaneous considerations (public safety, air quality, socio-economic impacts, shadow flicker and electromagnetic interference including TV, radio and mobile phone interference).

These are unlikely to have a direct effect on land within SDC's area, though clearly North Dorset will have to give significant weight to technical evidence provided by their consultees.

Options for consideration:

Members are invited to comment on the proposed development, and its impact on land within the District.

The views of the committee will be forwarded to North Dorset District Council for their consideration as part of determining the applications.