

Craig y Perthi Solar Farm

Meeting with Bishton Community Council

In attendance:

Robin Jackson, JBM Solar
Sara Jones, JBM Solar
Cllr. John Davies, Chair
Cllr. Cherie Hall
Cllr. Rachael Stephens
Cllr. Richard Stokes

Note of Meeting – questions raised

Q – Is it possible to cultivate the land between the panels, is there enough space for machinery to operate?

A – Yes, typically there is a 4-5m wide gap between the panels, allowing for farm machinery to mow grass/undertake maintenance where required.

Q – You’ve noted that this is Grade 4 agricultural land – however, we would disagree with this in several locations across the site. Does your Grade 4 assessment cover the entire site, or is there different soil analysis for different areas. We know that the land has previously been harvested for crops (typically wheat or barley).

A - None of the land within the scope of the site is deemed as ‘good’ quality agricultural land per the official ‘agricultural land classification (ALC)’ metric. The majority of the site is Grade 4, with some Grade 3b present in areas. It is much more difficult to yield a good crop from this land, with Grade 4 land subject to ‘severe limitations which significantly restrict the range of crops or level of yields’ per the government’s metric/advice. In practice, in the long term this means it will not be financially viable to grow crops (which will already be of a limited nature) on this land. A full report detailing the agricultural land grading will accompany the planning application.

Q – In terms of the community fund, how will the fund be paid, to whom and when?

A – The fund would be paid directly to Bishton Community Council, and this would be paid upon commencement of construction. Other, neighbouring Community Councils will have access to alternative funds to support local projects, which will be proportionate to the level of the scheme in that area.

Q – Will the local community be able to directly benefit from cheaper electricity bills?

A – Due to the complexities of building a local grid network (which would require extensive new infrastructure and currently is not in place), it is unfortunately not possible to supply energy directly to local residents. However, given how cheap solar energy is compared to traditional generation (such as gas generation which makes up ~70% of Wales’ generation), the project will contribute to a lowering of energy bills in the long term due to the benefits of renewable energy investment Wales wide. Likewise, the targeted community benefit fund is designed to directly benefit local residents through supporting rooftop solar and energy saving initiatives locally.

Q – How big are the panels and how will they be stacked? How high is the fencing, and will there be any CCTV?

A – The panels will start at ~0.8m with a maximum height of ~3m. The exterior fencing is typically ~2m high and consists of wooden stock post deer fencing.

In terms of CCTV, this will be inward facing only, with no views onto private property, and with no external lighting.

Q – Are there any plans for wind turbines?

A – No

Q – Will you be planting wildflower? This will need a lot of work in terms of maintenance.

A – Yes, we will be planting over 38 acres of new wildflower across the site, with full details of the management schedule outlined in our Landscape and Environmental Management Plan (LEMP) which will accompany the application.

Q – There are a number of footpaths inaccessible to the community at present, that link to the application site. For example, we are missing bridges in Wilcrick on the footpath. What will be the impact on footpaths/will these be improved/restored?

A – There will be no closures or diversions, and the project will greatly improve accessibility on these pathways for all with the installation of accessible gates, the re-instatement of all footpath bridges across ditches/reens, and the creation of an enhanced footpath. Likewise, the introduction of new permissive pathways will allow further use of an otherwise private site, linking the pathways to new, large wildflower meadows situated in several areas across the site.

Q – Will there be litter facilities and who would empty and maintain these? There is an issue currently in the community with collection of bin waste?

A – This will be detailed in the final plan but will be the responsibility of us as the developer (with the assistance of the site contractor).

Q – Could the local schools be involved, in terms of tree planting for example?

A – This is something we would definitely encourage.

Q – Why not put solar panels on brownfield land / rooftops?

A – We agree that rooftop solar is a fantastic technology, and should be encouraged where possible. However, even if we deployed this technology on all viable rooftops, it would not meet anywhere near our overall energy demand (especially as this increases due to the electrification of cars, trains, heating etc). Likewise, many houses/industrial units do not have suitable rooftops to hold the load of panels, and often rooftop solar simply isn't affordable for those who may wish to explore it as an option.

In terms of brownfield land, prior to selection of our site, we undertook a full brownfield land search, and unfortunately there were simply not any sites suitable (either of a sufficient size, or

available to use). Much of brownfield land that is available is already earmarked for permanent development, such as housing or industrial use, given that this is a far more lucrative option.

Q – Will there be excess traffic? And what will they be delivering? Will you be accessing the site by Bishton Church.

A – There is expected to be just 12 deliveries a day, at this level the impact would be minimal. We would install internal farm access tracks and deer fencing, which would enter the site to the north of Bishton where existing access exists to the farm, north of the village. Access will be gained from the Junction 24 or 23a of the M4.

The delivery consist of panels and the relevant materials to physically construct the site (including relevant landscaping items).

There will be no access to the site via Bishton Church.

Q – Will the site generate excess noise?

A – The site will remain within background noise levels, adding no additional noise to the area. This is demonstrated through the background noise assessment that will accompany the application.

Q – Would a successful application mean that the land is more likely to be designated as brownfield land post project delivery?

A – No, it will be preserved and protected as greenfield, before, during and after the development.

Q – How many people attended the public consultation event?

A – The initial informal public consultation event saw letters posted to all residents within 2km of the site, and advertised in media outlets such as South Wales Argus and Wales Online. We want to engage with as wide an audience as possible and would welcome further comments, both now and during the next consultation period. 65 people attended the first event in total.

Q – A concern for some is that this site is too close to homes (c.5 or 6 directly affected by the proximity to their boundary), can this be modified ensuring there is a decent distance between panels and houses?

A – We are listening to residents, and have noted this feedback from the consultation event. We are looking at how we can modify our proposals to take account of these concerns. We will refer to this in our response.

Q – Can we use the pylons through Llanwern (to the west of the site) for the grid connection?

A – Unfortunately, there is no grid capacity on this line which is why we have to connect through the Uskmouth Power Station.

Q – Who will be monitoring and managing the works, if consented? Who will be our main point of contact when works start?

A – We will likely be the owner / operator and will be managing the works and operation and maintenance of the site. RJ will be the main point of contact for Councillors to field any queries.

Q – How will the landowners benefit?

A – Typically, on schemes such as this, we rent the land through a lease. As part of this, landowners would receive a proportion of the site generation.

Q – When do you envisage the project build starting, should consent be granted?

A – We are aiming to submit an application early summer 2023. There will be a formal consultation ahead of the application submission. We would hope to have a decision by summer 2024. However, it is unlikely work will start till 2025 as it needs, ideally, to be timed from springtime to take advantage of the weather conditions.