STROUD DISTRICT COUNCIL
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Member Questions

Question from Cllr. John Jones
Question 1
Earlier this year, planning permission was given at Development Control Committee to develop 286 acres of land in Moreton Valence and Whitminster Parishes for a Solar Farm. This follows permission previously given to develop a Solar Farm of 118 acres in Longney Parish a couple of years earlier. There is already built and in operation a Solar Farm in the village of Cambridge, a short distance away. In addition, plans have been submitted for another Solar Farm of 153 acres in Arlingham Parish, and yet another application for an Environmental Impact Assessment Screening Opinion for a Solar Farm of 185 acres in Frampton on Severn Parish, recently confirmed as needed. All of these sites are within a 10-kilometre radius of each other in the Severn Vale, not including some other, smaller sites operating in close proximity in the District. If all of these proposals come to fruition in the near future, it will mean that around 850 acres of good productive agricultural will be lost for a long time for badly needed food production, which I understand to be a key driver in this Council's ongoing strategy. This is not brash, stony limestone land that is found in the Cotswolds, it is fertile, lowland land that has maintained farming families for generations over many centuries for all types of farming. **What Policies does this Administration propose to put in place to prevent the complete saturation of the Severn Vale in the District, between the A38 road and the River Severn, by Solar Farm development, when other options could be available?**
Reply
It is both national policy and local policy to support the generation of energy increasingly from renewable sources. Our Local Plan (adopted by Council in November 2015) states that: "the Council will support proposals that maximise the generation of energy from renewable or low carbon sources, provided that the installation would not have significant adverse impact (either alone **or cumulatively**) and includes an impact statement that demonstrates the following factors: 1. The impact of the scheme, **together with any cumulative impact** (including associated transmission lines, buildings and access roads), on landscape character, visual amenity, water quality and flood risk, historic features and biodiversity." (Local Plan, Delivery Policy ES2, officer emphasis **in bold**). Individual decisions on planning applications are thereby made by the local planning authority having regard to the cumulative impact of proposals on the local area and detailed assessment of impacts are carried out through the planning process to meet EIA regulations and national and local planning policy. National planning practice guidance encourages the effective use of land by focussing large scale solar farms on previously developed and non-agricultural land, provided that it is not

of high environmental value. Whilst national policy does not prevent the use of agricultural land for large scale solar farms, the guidance states that the proposed use of agricultural land needs to be shown to be necessary and that poorer quality land has been used in preference to higher quality land.

The Council's emerging Local Plan now includes a policy to avoid the unacceptable loss of healthy soils to development, particularly the best and most versatile agricultural land, where practicable, and this will be a material consideration in future planning decisions when the Plan is adopted.

Both national and local policy promote the diversification of farming businesses to support the local economy, provided that the new use supports farming activities on the rest of the farm. Farming families retain the ability to choose whether or not to investigate the potential for solar on their farms.

Supplementary Question 1

In the applications for these Solar Farms, the developers all state that the land involved is of poor quality, being rated Grade 3b or below, apart from a few small exceptions. In a recent Parliamentary session, the Environment Minister stated that Grade 3b land is included as Best and Most Versatile, along with 3a and above, and has been since 2016. Are there any measures in place whereby this Council can make its own assessment of land quality, perhaps carrying out its own assessment and not simply rely on figures produced by applicants?

Reply

Provisional agricultural land classification maps were published by the former Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food (MAFF), now the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), in the 1980s at a 1:250,000 scale (quarter inch to the mile) and Defra has made them available digitally on their MAGIC website within the landscape section of its interactive maps. Where the presence of best and most versatile land may be a material planning consideration but no soil survey reports are available, appropriately qualified soil consultants should carry out site surveys to confirm soil quality. These can be employed either by the local planning authority or by site promoters. Guidance on how to undertake the surveys is available from Government websites and Natural England will check on the methodology used by consultants through their statutory consultee role, to ensure a robust approach is taken.

Question 2

In recent years, many square metres of industrial land in this District have been developed for warehousing and distribution purposes, for office space and light industrial units. On a recent tour of the District, I could not find many, in fact hardly any roofs of these new buildings with Solar Panels on them, all of the new buildings close to Junction 12 of the M5 being a particular point of note. Using these roofs, and those of similar places, would surely be a better option than covering green fields with Solar arrays, and go a considerable way to achieving this Council's objective of becoming carbon neutral by 2030

What measures do this Council propose to put in place to use these hundreds of square metres of roof space, together with brownfield sites that become available, along with all new industrial buildings proposed to be built in the District, to utilize Solar Power production, so that even more productive agricultural land is not lost to acres of Solar Panel arrays?

Reply
The new emerging Local Plan includes policies to require the design of new development to reduce carbon to net zero. For industrial buildings, the use of solar panels will be an important opportunity to meet these requirements. Some existing permissions do provide for solar panels to be fitted to industrial buildings. For example, at Quedgeley East, adjacent to M5J12, the industrial buildings have been designed with a roof structure and associated steelwork to accommodate solar PVs to ensure maximum flexibility for future provision if required. The units are targeting an EPC 'A' Rating and BREEAM Excellent. However, large scale solar panels on prominent industrial buildings may have a more significant landscape impact than at other locations and so it is important that proposals are considered on a case-by-case basis and with regard to cumulative impact, in the same way as solar farms. The adopted Local Plan promotes the use of appropriately located brownfield to achieve its strategic objective relating to climate change and environmental limits. There may be opportunities for solar farms on brownfield sites, particularly in rural areas. However, the priority for brownfield sites in urban areas is to meet the housing and employment needs of local people, reducing the need to convert greenfield sites into permanent built development. Solar farms are normally temporary structures and planning conditions can be used to ensure that the installations are removed when no longer in use and the land is restored to its previous use.
Supplementary Question 2
In some recent planning applications, developers have been encouraged or even told to install electric vehicle charging points in each new property they build. What reassurances can be given that developers of large industrial buildings will have the same opportunities given to use roofs of those buildings for Solar Panel installation, thereby reducing the need to cover vast areas of green fields, which could also desecrate the landscape, the ecology and biodiversity within it?
Reply
The roll out of electric charging points is being led through building regulations and the emerging Draft Local Plan includes additional requirements. Progress towards net zero carbon reduction from built developments and the use of renewable energy technologies is somewhat different, as it is both national and local policy not to insist upon the use of certain technologies, but to allow applicants to utilise the most appropriate technologies available, provided that the overall impact meets building regulations and the emerging Draft Local Plan net zero requirements. Whilst the Council can encourage solar panel installation at pre-application stages, it is not possible to insist upon it, over and above other technologies.