DC/2015/00247

CONSTRUCTION OF A GROUND-MOUNTED SOLAR PHOTOVOLTAIC (PV) GENERATION PROJECT AND ASSOCIATED WORKS

OAK GROVE FARM, A48 CRICK ROAD, CAERWENT

RECOMMENDATION: APPROVE

Case Officer: Kate Bingham
Date Registered: 30/03/2015

1.0 APPLICATION DETAILS

1.1 Planning permission is sought by Monmouthshire County Council for the creation of a 5.67MW photovoltaic solar park consisting of 22,660 PV panels over five fields of agricultural land used for pasture situated to the south-east of the village of Crick and 2.5 km east of Caerwent. It is estimated that the amount of energy generated will be sufficient to power 4536 homes. The application site extends over an area of 15.73 hectares (39 acres) and is generally open and lies on an area of relatively flat land, albeit with a slightly sloping gradient to the west, with its highest point located towards the eastern part of the site at 47m AOD. The site also has a south facing aspect which is a necessity for this type of energy generation.

1.2 The land is currently used for sheep pasture with a belt of woodland immediately to the north and west known as Ballan Wood which serves to screen the site from much of the surrounding area in this direction. The remaining site boundaries are a combination of linear corridors of hedgerows and agricultural fencing. The PV panels will be far enough above ground level to allow the site to continue to be grazed by sheep, thus retaining agricultural productivity while keeping the grass down. The development will be temporary, lasting approximately 25 years before being decommissioned.

1.3 The proposal involves the erection of arrays of photovoltaic panels (max 1.0m in height when aligned at 34 degrees) in 44 rows aligned east-west to face south. The PV panels will be ground mounted using steel piles set into the ground and therefore no foundations are required. Deployment of the electricity generated by the PV panels would then require five inverter stations, a power transformer cabin and a small substation where the voltage will be changed from Direct Current (DC) to Alternating Current (AC). The final details of the substation will be dealt with at a later date via condition as the details will only be discussed by the network developer following the grant of planning consent. However, should any additional overhead cables or plant be required to enable connection to the grid then this would be the subject of a further planning application, as it would be a material change to the current application.

1.4 Site security is a legal requirement for the grid electricity equipment and the applicant is aware that the visual impact of security measures can sometimes be a concern. The detailed specification of any additional enclosures that may be required cannot be confirmed until a later date and therefore this would have to be conditioned. However,

the substation and the inverter housing will be located within the site and will therefore benefit from existing natural screening which can be reinforced if necessary.

1.5 Perimeter security fencing would comprise 2.0m high deer type stock proof fencing with wooden poles at 3m intervals. This is detailed on drawing no. PWS/GA/002 together with details of 22 CCTV cameras. The cameras are directed into the site so that recordings are made only within the 'footprint' of the scheme. There would be no external lighting. In order to facilitate existing hedgerow and fence maintenance, an internal clearance of 5m from the solar arrays to the boundary hedge will be established. This space will then act as a corridor for both humans and wildlife to move around the installation which will be an ecological gain given that all of the land is currently grazed.

1.6 A temporary construction compound will be sited on or adjacent to the proposed access road to the site from the B4245 to store some components required to construct the arrays which will be restored to its current agricultural use following completion of the construction stage which should last no longer than 8 weeks. The proposals require deliveries by 16.5m articulated vehicles, 10m ridged vehicles as well as a mobile crane. It is anticipated that approximately 69 two way trips will be generated by the proposals during the most intensive two weeks of construction. Longer term, access for maintenance will be via the existing access to Oak Grove Farm to the north as this would serve small vehicles only. One new permanent access track 4m wide is also proposed to allow the tenant farmer access through the site.

1.7 The application is accompanied by a detailed Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment, Access and Ecological Report which suggest appropriate mitigation including retention of all existing trees and hedgerows as well as the aforementioned buffer between the hedges and any plant. Where necessary, hedgerows would be reinforced with further planting of appropriate species, to be agreed with the Local Planning Authority. Following advice from Glamorgan Gwent Archaeological Trust an Archaeological Evaluation of the site has also been undertaken.

1.8 In line with best practice advice, a public consultation exercise has been held prior to the submission of this application. The event was advertised in the local press together with site notices and was attended by approximately 25 local residents. Furthermore, as part of the proposed development, Monmouthshire County Council are proposing to establish a community fund which will commit to contribute £1000 per MW on installed capacity per year (approximately £5000 in this case). The exact details are yet to be agreed, however, it is envisaged that the fund may be controlled by local people and used to support community initiatives. This fund is offered outside the planning process and is not a material planning consideration.

1.9 Having assessed the selection criteria in Schedule 3 of the Regulations and the criteria and /or thresholds set out in Annex A to Welsh Office Circular 10/99 "Environmental Impact Assessment", the Local Planning Authority does not consider that the proposed development would be likely to have significant environmental effects by virtue of its size, nature or scale. Thus, an Environmental Impact Assessment has not been required for this proposed development.

1.0 RELEVANT PLANNING HISTORY

There are no applications directly relating to this site. There have been six other applications for solar farms determined elsewhere in the County:

DC/2011/0196 - Installation of up to 22,000 photovoltaic panels, erection of inverter and converter buildings, erection of site boundary fencing and CCTV cameras and the underground connection of 11kv cable to existing sub-station at Prioress Mill. Approved 20/5/11

DC/2012/00666 - Installation of Photovoltaic Panels (Circa 32,400 panels), installation of Inverter & Converter Stations, erection of site boundary fencing & CCTV cameras and connection to the existing electricity grid – Lower Church Farm, Kemeys Commander; Approved 10/12/12

DC/2013/00006 - Construction of a solar park to include the installation of solar panels to generate up to 10MW of electricity with transformer housings; security fencing and cameras; landscaping with other associated works – Manor Farm, Llanvapley Refused 13/09/13. *Appeal allowed 2014.*

DC/2013/00925 - Installation of photovoltaic panels (circa 32,430 panels), gravel access track, erection of site boundary fencing & CCTV cameras, installation of inverter stations, and connection to the existing electricity grid; formation of temporary construction compound – Buckwell Farm, Wentwood; Approved 02/09/2014.

DC/2014/00939 - Provision of photovoltaic solar park and ancillary infrastructure – Rhewl Farm, Shirenewton. Refused 5/12/2014; *Appeal allowed 25/06/2015.*

There is also the following current application:

DC/2015/00573 - Installation of ground mounted photovoltaic solar arrays to provide circa 5 MW generation capacity together with power inverter systems; transformer stations; internal access track; landscaping; cable trench, security measures, fencing, access gates and associated infrastructure – land north-west of Magor Services, M4; under consideration.

3.0 NATIONAL PLANNING POLICY

3.1 Planning Policy Wales Ed. 7 (July 2014)

Section 4 (Planning for Sustainability) of Planning Policy Wales (2014) encourages renewable and low carbon energy sources at all scales (par. 4.4.3). Section 12 (Infrastructure & Services) sets out that one of Welsh Government's key objectives is "to promote the generation and use of energy from renewable and low carbon energy sources at all scales and promote energy efficiency, especially as a means to secure zero or low carbon developments and to tackle the causes of climate change''. Paragraph 12.8.1 provides that 'The UK is subject to the requirements of the EU Renewable Energy Directive. These include a UK target of 15% of energy from renewables by 2020. The UK Renewable Energy Roadmap sets the path for the

delivery of these targets, promoting renewable energy to reduce global warming and to secure future energy supplies. The Welsh Government is committed to playing its part by delivering an energy programme which contributes to reducing carbon emissions as part of the approach to tackling climate change whilst enhancing the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the people and communities of Wales in order to achieve a better quality of life for the nation's own and future generations. This is outlined in the Welsh Government's Energy Policy Statement Energy Wales: A Low Carbon Transition (2012).

PPW section 12.8.9 provides that "Local planning authorities should facilitate the development of all forms of renewable and low carbon energy to move towards a low carbon economy to help to tackle the causes of climate change. Specifically, they should make positive provision by (inter alia):

- considering the contribution that their area can make towards developing and facilitating renewable and low carbon energy, and ensuring that development plan policies enable this contribution to be delivered;
– ensuring that development management decisions are consistent with national and international climate change obligations, including contributions to renewable energy targets and aspirations…"

Section 12.8.10 comments that, "At the same time, local planning authorities should:
– ensure that international and national statutory obligations to protect designated areas, species and habitats and the historic environment are observed;
– ensure that mitigation measures are required for potential detrimental effects on local communities whilst ensuring that the potential impact on economic viability is given full consideration; and
– encourage the optimisation of renewable and low carbon energy in new development to facilitate the move towards zero carbon buildings."

This proposed scheme would be considered as local authority-wide in the hierarchy of renewable energy scales for planning purposes as set out in PPW Figure 12.2.

PPW section 12.10.1 sets out that, "In determining applications for renewable and low carbon energy development and associated infrastructure local planning authorities should take into account:
– 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 (see 5.5), the Coast (see 5.6) and the Historic Environment (see 6.5);
– 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 (see 4.5);

– 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."

Section 12.10.3 provides "Developers for renewable and low carbon energy developments should seek to avoid or where possible minimise adverse impacts through careful consideration of location, scale, design and other measures."

Section 12.10.5 considers, "The Welsh Government supports the principle of securing sustainable community benefits for host communities through voluntary arrangements. Such arrangements must not impact on the decision making process and should not be treated as a material consideration unless it meets the tests set out in Circular 13/97 [Planning Obligations]."

3.2 Welsh Government Energy Policy Statement (2010)

The Welsh Government is committed to playing its part by delivering an energy programme which contributes to reducing carbon emissions as part of its approach to tackling climate change. The Welsh Government's Energy Policy Statement (2010) identifies the sustainable renewable energy potential for a variety of different technologies as well as establishing the commitment to energy efficiency. It explains the aim by 2050, at the latest, to be in a position where almost all of Wales' local energy needs can be met by low carbon electricity production. The approach is to reduce energy consumption and improve energy efficiency first and maximise renewable and low carbon energy generation at every scale across Wales. This is part of a concerted effort to tackle climate change in Wales.

Additional advice on solar arrays is provided in Practice Guidance – Planning Implications of Renewable and Low Carbon Energy published in 2011 by the Welsh Government which aims to assist Local Authorities in the task of determining planning applications for renewable energy projects. At paragraphs 8.4.6 – 8.4.19 it provides advice specifically about proposals for solar arrays. It recognises that landscape sensitivity will be a key factor and suggests the use of Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment and photomontages.

3.3 Technical Advice Note 8 (Renewable Energy)

Technical Advice Note 8 (Renewable Energy) provides additional advice to Local Planning Authorities on how to determine applications for this type of development:

Par. 1.4 sets out that *'The provision of electricity from renewable sources is an important component of the UK energy policy, which has an established target of producing 10% of electricity production from renewable energy sources by 2010. The Assembly Government has a target of 4TWh of electricity per annum to be produced by renewable energy by 2010 and 7TWh by 2020. In order to meet these targets the Assembly Government has concluded that 800MW of additional installed capacity is required from onshore wind sources and a further 200MW of installed capacity is required from off shore wind and other renewable technologies.'*

Par. 2.15 provides that *'Developers, in consultation with local planning authorities, should take an active role in engaging with the local community on renewable energy proposals. This should include pre-application discussion and provision of background information on the renewable energy technology that is proposed.'* Par. 2.16 continues, *'Annex B provides further information and examples about the types of community benefit which have been provided. Local planning authorities, where reasonably practical, should facilitate and encourage such proposals.'*

Par. 3.15 provides, *'Other than in circumstances where visual impact is critically damaging to a listed building, ancient monument or a conservation area vista, proposals for appropriately designed solar thermal and PV systems should be supported.'*

Par. 4.1 *'Design and energy should be considered when development plan policy is produced, in supplementary planning guidance such as design briefs, and during the submission of planning applications. Local planning authorities should actively consider the inclusion of design guidance in their development plans or Supplementary Planning Guidance.'*

Par. 5.2 states that, *'Local Development Plans should promote high standards of energy efficiency, energy conservation and the use of renewable energy as a part of the national and international response to climate change, and this should be reflected in the strategy of development plans. Local planning authorities should consider the local availability of renewable energy resources and develop suitable policies that promote their implementation. Additionally, local planning authorities should consider the specific requirements of individual renewable energy technologies, outlined in this TAN, which are likely to come forward during the plan period.'*

Par. 5.3 *'They [planning authorities] should also develop generic development control policies which might include housing, employment, and rural development proposals and consider the implications for landscape protection, the re-use of previously developed land and waste management.'*

Annex B provides further information and examples about the types of community benefit which have been provided by renewable energy schemes (these tend to focus on wind farm proposals):

Para 1.1, *Where a development would have implications for the public provision of infrastructure a local planning authority may require the developer to make an in-kind or financial contribution towards its provision. It is possible that the development of a wind farm would have such implications and lead a local planning authority to invoke its legal powers to require, for instance:-*

- *Highway infrastructure improvements outside of the application site.*
- *Wildlife habitat management or creation in mitigation for adverse impacts of the construction.*
- *Payments to overcome adverse implications for communication networks such as TV or radar.'*

The developer may be prepared to offer community benefits either within or outside the planning process. Whether the developer enters into an agreement with the local planning authority or offers these extra benefits unilaterally (as he is permitted to do under section 106), the important point here is that, as such offers are not necessary for the development to proceed, they must not impact upon the decision-making process.

3.4 Practice Guidance – Planning for Renewable and Low Carbon Energy (2011)

This has been published by the Welsh Government to support local authority planning officers. It sets out how a Local Authority can prepare a robust evidence base to underpin a number of local development plan policies that can support and facilitate the deployment of renewable and low carbon energy systems. This *Practice Guidance* is also a tool to support Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) in dealing with applications for renewable and low carbon energy development. It aims to do this by setting out a comprehensive evidence base of the land use planning impacts and benefits of different forms of renewable and low carbon energy, and provide guidance on how local planning officers can engage in a meaningful and proactive manner with developers when dealing with planning applications for renewable and low carbon energy developments.

Paragraph 8.4.16 refers to the solar PV arrays and agriculture and states that; 'National Policy requires that the best and most versatile agricultural land (i.e. grades 1, 2 and 3a of the Defra Agricultural Land Classification System) *'should only be developed if there is an overriding need for the development, and either previously developed land or land in lower agricultural grades is unavailable, or available lower grade land has an environmental value recognised by a landscape, wildlife, historic or archaeological designation which outweighs the agricultural considerations.'*

It should be noted that this is guidance only and is intended as a tool to help interpret National policy.

3.5 Other Guidance

In April 2014 the UK Solar PV Strategy Part 2 was published by the Department for Energy and Climate Change. This document states that support for solar PV "should ensure proposals are appropriately sited, give proper weight to environmental considerations such as landscape and visual impact, heritage and local amenity, and provide opportunities for local communities to influence decisions that affect them and gain some form of community benefit".

The UK Solar PV Strategy Part 2 also references a document from the Solar Trade Association which has developed a statement of "10 Commitments" best practice guidance for solar farm developers. These commitments are:

1. We will focus on non-agricultural land or land which is of lower agricultural quality.
2. We will be sensitive to nationally and locally protected landscapes and nature conservation areas, and we welcome opportunities to enhance the ecological value of the land.

3. We will minimise visual impact where possible and maintain appropriate screening throughout the lifetime of the project managed through a Land Management and/or Ecology plan.
4. We will engage with the community in advance of submitting a planning application.
5. We will encourage land diversification by proposing continued agricultural use or incorporating biodiversity measures within our projects.
6. We will do as much buying and employing locally as possible.
7. We will act considerately during construction, and demonstrate 'solar stewardship' of the land for the lifetime of the project.
8. We will seek the support of the local community and listen to their views and suggestions.
9. We commit to using the solar farm as an educational opportunity, where appropriate.
10. At the end of the project life we will return the land to its former use.

4.0 LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN POLICIES

4.1 Strategic Policies

Policy S7 – Infrastructure Provision

Policy S12 – Efficient Resource Use and Flood Risk

Policy S13 – Landscape, Green Infrastructure and the Natural Environment

Policy S17 – Place Making and Design

Development Management Policies

Policy SD1 – Renewable Energy

Policy LC1 – New Built Development in the Open Countryside

Policy LC4 – Wye Valley AONB

Policy LC5 – Protection and Enhancement of Landscape Character

Policy G11 – Green Infrastructure

Policy NE1 – Nature Conservation and Development

Policy EP1 – Amenity and Environmental Protection

Policy MV1 – Proposed Developments and Highway Considerations

Policy MV3 Public Rights of Way

Policy DES1 – General Design Considerations

Policy M2 – Minerals Safeguarding Areas

5.0 REPRESENTATIONS

5.1 Consultations Replies

Portskewett Community Council – recommends refusal. Concerns with regard to the location of the site access as this is a locally well-known accident blackspot. Concerns were raised in relation to the construction traffic which would be required to install the project and the fact that the access shown on the plans is on a corner in the road.

Caerwent Community Council (adjacent) - recommends approval; requests that screening also be provided along the drive to the farm.

Mathern Community Council (adjacent) – recommends refusal. Councillors feel that the site is open unspoilt countryside and will be spoilt with industrial solar farm. They strongly feel that development of the open countryside should be resisted. The solar panel farm is an intrusion into open, unspoiled countryside and therefore contrary to Policy EP1 of the LDP.

Natural Resources Wales (NRW) - We have no objection to the above application, providing an appropriately worded condition requiring the implementation of suitable mitigation measures in respect of European Protected Species is attached to any planning permission your authority is minded to grant. Further details are provided below.

European Protected Species
We welcome the submission of the document titled 'Oak Grove Farm, Crick, Monmouthshire - Ecological assessment' by David Clements Ecology, dated December 2014. We note that dormouse records exist in a woodland immediately adjacent to the site, and the hedgerows surrounding the site were considered likely to support dormice. Five trees within the site were found to have moderate (Category 2A) bat roosting potential. In this instance, we do not consider it likely that the proposed development will result in a detriment to the maintenance of Favourable Conservation Status of European Protected Species (EPS), provided that the following condition is included on any permission your authority may be minded to grant:

The development permitted by this planning permission shall only be carried out in accordance with the approved "Oak Grove Farm, Crick, Monmouthshire - Ecological assessment' by David Clements Ecology, dated December 2014 and specifically the recommendations in Section 6.
(Reason; to safeguard European Protected Species)

We note from the ecological survey report that no direct impacts to hedgerows, woodland, or individual trees with bat potential are anticipated as a result of the proposal. However, if any works require the removal or pruning of any of the above habitat features, further survey will be required prior to any operations commencing.

Local Biodiversity
Please note that we have not considered possible effects on all species and habitats listed in section 42 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006, or on the Local Biodiversity Action Plan or other local natural heritage interests.

To comply with your authority's duty under section 40 of the NERC Act, to have regard to conserving biodiversity, your decision should take account of possible adverse effects on such interests. We recommend that you seek further advice from your authority's internal ecological adviser and/or nature conservation organisations such as the local Wildlife Trust, RSPB, etc. The Wales Biodiversity Partnership's web site has guidance for assessing proposals that have implications for section 42 habitats and species (www.biodiversitywales.org.uk).

Additional Comments
Research has shown that solar sites can offer significant opportunities for biodiversity and we urge your Authority to seek biodiversity enhancements wherever possible. For information and as an aid to the drafting of the proposed LEMP we suggest that the following document be considered, (BRE (2014) Biodiversity Guidance for Solar Developments. Eds. G. E. Parker and L. Greene.) The guidance provides useful information regarding the enhancement of Biodiversity as part of large scale Solar developments. The document can be found at the following link. http://www.bre.co.uk/filelibrary/pdf/Brochures/NSC-Biodiversity-Guidance.pdf

Please note that the site is located within Zone 1 of the Great Spring Source Protection Zone (SPZ) and on a principal aquifer. Source Protection Zones are designated by Natural Resources Wales to identify the catchment areas of sources of potable water (that is high quality water supplies usable for human consumption) and show where they may be at particular risk from polluting activities on or below the land surface. Source Protection Zone 1 (SPZ1) areas are designated closest to the source of potable water supplies and indicate the area of highest risk for abstracted water quality.

Due to the shallow, unobtrusive (in terms of groundwater) nature of the proposed development and agricultural historical land use at the site (greenfield), we would consider the risk posed to groundwater by this development as low. However, the applicant should ensure that appropriate pollution prevention measures are followed during construction to protect the water environment.

The discharge of clean roof water to ground is acceptable both within and outside SPZ1 provided that all roof water down-pipes are sealed against pollutants entering the system from surface run-off, effluent disposal or other forms of discharge. The method of discharge must not create new pathways for pollutants to groundwater or mobilise contaminants already in the ground.

We refer you and the applicant to the attached ‘Planning Advice Note (100) Natural Resources Wales/ Cyfoeth Naturiol Cymru’ for further guidance on environmental planning and regulatory issues, in particular to the section pollution prevention guidance.

Glamorgan Gwent Archaeological Trust (GGAT) – no objections subject to condition requiring implementation of a programme of archaeological work in accordance with a written scheme of investigation.

We have received an amended copy of the report on the archaeological evaluation. The results of this show that further archaeological mitigation is necessary which can be achieved with the attachment of a condition.

The evaluation was undertaken by Foundations Archaeology, and the report (reference CGCM-01, August2015), noted that twenty nine evaluation trenches were opened within the proposed development area.

The report notes that the evaluation identified the presence of a series of pits of possible prehistoric date, a demolished building of probable post medieval date (possibly a decoy structure dating from WW2) along with a small finds assemblage which included post-medieval pottery and more significantly a single backed flint blade of Mesolithic date. This flint is a significant discovery; flint is not naturally occurring in this area and as such any discovery is important, more so when this flint is worked as is the case at Oak Grove. This flint is indicative of Mesolithic activity in the area, and it may be that further evidence survives from this period.

Clearly the proposed development will impact upon the archaeological resource and is likely to encounter remains of Mesolithic and later post medieval date. The provision of the report on the evaluation means that there is sufficient information to provide your Members with advice in regard to the importance of the archaeological resource in the application area and the impact of the proposed development on it.

Consequently, we have no objection to the positive determination of the current the works are identified, fully investigated and recorded. The detail of this will need to be worked out in relation to areas of greater disturbance required by the proposed development, for example cable trenches and access routes. This will then provide the detail needed to mitigate the impact of the proposal; and will ensure that groundworks are undertaken under archaeological supervision, together with suitable contingency arrangements to ensure the provision of sufficient time and resources to ensure that archaeological features and finds located are excavated and recorded, and that any post-excavation work is undertaken and a report on the work produced and submitted.

We recommend that the condition should be worded in a manner similar to the model given in Welsh Office Circular 60/96, Section 23:

No development shall take place until the applicant, or their agents or successors in title, has secured the implementation of a programme of archaeological work in accordance with a written scheme of investigation which has been submitted by the applicant and approved in writing by the local planning authority.

Reason: *To identify and record any features of archaeological interest discovered during the works, in order to mitigate the impact of the works on the archaeological resource*.

MCC Biodiversity – No objections subject to conditions and informatives regarding

European Protected Species. Based on the current objective survey and assessment available, we have enough ecological information to make a lawful planning decision.

MCC Landscape Officer – (initial comments). The proposal is located in a landscape identified through LANDMAP as being of High value for its historical and cultural aspects and of moderate value for its visual and sensory, biodiversity and geological aspects.

It is clearly a landscape driven by its historical connections. This is reflected by the rich mixture of historical and archaeological remains as well as the wealth of historical parks and gardens together with the unique farmed context with the long linear settlements such as Leechpool. This together with the historic horticultural and agricultural traditions associated with this area help define the landscape.

I have considered the LVIA submitted by AJA and am broadly happy with the approach taken. I do however feel that the sensitivity rating is low and in considering that this landscape is driven more by its historical and cultural values, then a sensitivity of medium /high would be accurate. I am therefore of the view that the impacts upon the landscape character would be higher and more significant than have been expressed. This I feel should be reflected in the mitigation.

In considering the visual impacts I feel the ZVI limitation to 3km whilst reasonable may be a little limited in views from the east – I would like to see these explored further up to a distance of 5km and further views and vistas from the wider road and footpath network. I would like to see any key historical or recreational assets identified and potential impacts considered.

Applicant's Landscape Consultants' Response to MCC Landscape Comments –

The MCC Landscape Officer states:

I have considered the LVIA submitted by AJA and am broadly happy with the approach taken. I do however feel that the sensitivity rating is low and in considering that this landscape is driven more by its historical and cultural values, then a sensitivity of medium /high would be accurate, I am therefore of the view that the impacts upon the landscape character would be higher and more significant than have been expressed. This I feel should be reflected in the mitigation.

Response:
We stand by our evaluation of the landscape sensitivity as medium/low. The definitions of medium and low from our methodology are below and they do, we feel, equate with the situation on the ground.

Medium	An area with a well-defined sense of place and/or character in moderate condition; or an area valued by designation at a local or regional level; or a partly damaged feature of high intrinsic value; or an intact feature of moderate intrinsic value [such as prominent trees or tree groups which contribute to the character of the site, screening of views, landscape or historic landscape pattern]; a landscape or feature which is partially tolerant of change of the

	type identified.
Low	An area with a poorly defined sense of place, and/or landscape character in poor condition, often not valued for its scenic quality; or a feature of low intrinsic value [such as trees and species poor hedges of no special quality or function]; or landscape or feature that is tolerant of change of the type identified.

The evaluation of the LANDMAP Visual and Sensory data for the Aspect Area which contains the site 'Leechpool' MNMTHVS043 is:

Moderate (A semi-rural landscape with pleasing undulating hills acting as an important setting to Caldicot Castle and as a backcloth to the Levels. The area is in moderate condition with fairly consistent character although there are instances of locally intrusive development. Its sense of place is defined by Caldicot Castle, the dispersed linear settlement of Leechpool, and views of the estuary. Gently undulating arable and mixed farmland is relatively common in Monmouthshire.)

The proposed site development would not significantly intrude on the characteristics mentioned in this evaluation such as the views of the undulating hills, the setting of Caldicot Castle and the views to the estuary. It would remain a pleasant backcloth to the Levels.

The Landscape Officer regards the High and Outstanding evaluations for the Historic and Cultural Aspect Areas respectively should raise the sensitivity level. However, the visual setting of historic features particularly noted in the descriptions – the Roman Road from Caerwent to Chepstow, the medieval/post medieval settlement of Crick and the Leechpool linear field system – are not affected by development on the site.

The site is in a peripheral area of the Cultural Landscape Aspect Area Gwent Levels MNMTHCL001. This Aspect Area and might more accurately be described as being part of the wider setting around the characteristic Levels landscape. The proposed development, tucked away in a largely invisible portion of land on gently rolling topography, will not significantly impinge on this Cultural Aspect Area. Furthermore, these installations are essentially temporary structures and yet, as a sustainable energy source, contribute to the agricultural sustainability and continuity of land use of the area. Grazing of the land under the arrays will be part of that continuity. For these reasons, the overall balance of landscape effects on this geographically extensive Aspect Area is assessed as being *negligible adverse.*

Notwithstanding all of the above points the landscape mitigation for the scheme has been reinforced: perimeter hedgerows have been increased in depth from 2 to 3 staggered rows field boundary hedgerows within the scheme have been re-instated.

The MCC Landscape Officer states:

In considering the visual impacts I feel the ZVI limitation to 3km whilst reasonable may be a little limited in views from the east – I would like to see these explored further up to a distance of 5km and further views and vistas from the wider road and

footpath network. I would like to see any key historical or recreational assets identified and potential impacts considered.

Response:

We consider that 5kms is an unnecessarily wide radius for a development of this scale, particularly given the sheltering effect of the prolific areas of woodland to the north and east, preventing any significant views from elevated ground to the north.

As part of preparing this response we made a further site visit to investigate views from the east and north east, including the edge of Chepstow and St Pierre. We checked out relevant lengths of public footpath and the road network. We did not find any views from any of these further locations.

MCC Tree Officer – No objections. The woodlands to the north and west of the main site are protected by a Tree Preservation Order. There is also a large, mature Oak tree along the line of the access off the B4245.which makes a major contribution to the visual amenity of the area. However, it is noted that the road has purposely been located 14m away from the trunk of the tree, which is way in excess of the Root Protection Area. It is considered, therefore, that an Arboricultural Method Statement would not be necessary, seeing as there will be no impact on the tree.

MCC Rights of Way – No objections. Public Footpath no 24 runs adjacent to and potentially over the access to the farm. This must be kept open and free for use by the public at all times. (Note to applicant).

MCC Highways - The application is for the construction of a ground mounted solar photovoltaic generation project within 15.75 hectares of existing agricultural land belonging to Oak Grove Farm, Crick.

Oak Grove Farm has an existing vehicular access onto the A48 north of the site. From the access an agricultural lane leads south to the application site and Oak Grove Farm.

The applicant has identified that the existing access described above is unsuitable for use by heavy construction traffic during the course of site construction. It is therefore proposed that a temporary access be constructed south of the application site onto the B4245 to ensure safer access/egress for heavy construction traffic. Following completion of the development the temporary access will be removed and once the site is operational maintenance vehicles will serve the site through the existing access off the A48 north of the site.

Having considered the proposals from a County Highway perspective we are satisfied that the existing access off the A48 is suitable for the day to day maintenance and operational management of the site. Maintenance vehicles requiring access would be infrequent and of a size that can be readily accommodated through the access and on the highway network.

With regard to the proposed temporary construction access onto the B4245 we are satisfied that the B4245 is suitable to accommodate the level of construction traffic to and from the site therefore there are no objections in principle. However, it is noted

that no engineering and construction details have been submitted in respect of the temporary access demonstrating that it satisfies the design criteria as set out in Technical Advice Note 18 (TAN18).

In light of the aforementioned comments there are no highway grounds to sustain an objection to the application. However, in absence of the engineering details for the temporary construction access we would wish to impose the following conditions to be applied to any grant of planning approval:-

1. Prior to commencement of the development full engineering and construction details for the temporary construction access in accordance with the design criteria set out in Technical Advice Note 18 (TAN 18) shall be submitted to the Planning Authority for approval.
2. Prior to commencement of the development a Construction Traffic Management Plan and Method Statement shall be submitted to the Planning Authority for approval. The CTMP and Method Statement shall set out details of their timetabling, and measures to secure:
    a) Cleaning of site entrance, facilities for wheel washing and vehicle parking and turning facilities;
    b) The erection of any entrance gates, barriers, bollards, chains or other such obstructions;
    c) any works to the public highway including temporary widening temporary signage and/or replacement of street furniture.

Reason: To ensure the temporary access is designed and implemented in the interest of road safety.

SEWBREC Search Results –Various species of bats recorded foraging/commuting within the vicinity of the site. Also dormice.

5.2 Neighbour Representations

No comments received.

5.3 Local Member Representations

Cllr Fox (Portskewett) – No comments received.

Cllr Murphy (Caerwent) (adjacent Ward) – No comments received.

Cllr Down (Mathern) (adjacent Ward) – No comments received.

6.0 EVALUATION

6.1 Principle of Development

It is considered that the proposal does not conflict with the advice set out in Planning Policy Wales (PPW) or Technical Advice Note (TAN) 8 which support renewable energy proposals, subject to assessment of such proposals against development plan policy and other material considerations, including landscape impact. These are

comprehensively considered in the body of the report. Para.3.15 of TAN8 is noted as a significant consideration.

It has recently emerged that there may have been sufficient renewable capacity consented and either operational or awaiting construction nationwide. Although the Government has indicated that it will be cutting back or ending subsidies for large scale solar developments in the future, the formal legislation and guidance remains unchanged since the application was submitted and it should therefore be determined on this basis.

With regards to Local Development Plan Policies, Strategic Policy S12 helps to meet LDP objectives by requiring all new development to be consistent with those principles of sustainable development relating to efficient resource use. All new development must demonstrate sustainable and efficient resource use and this will include energy efficiency/increasing the supply of renewable energy.

The sustainability issues identified in this policy are covered in greater detail by the more specific detailed development management Policy SD1 in the LDP. This seeks to implement the strategic policies (S7 and S12) by providing the detailed policy framework for sustainable development in order to ensure that development is consistent with the principles outlined in Policy S12 and assists in addressing climate change. Policy SD1 states that renewable energy schemes will be permitted where:

(1) There are no unacceptable adverse impacts upon the landscape, townscape and historic features and there is compliance with Policy LC5, with regard to protection and enhancement of landscape character;
(2) There are no unacceptable adverse impacts on biodiversity;
(3) There are no unacceptable adverse impacts on the amenities of nearby residents by way of noise, dust, odour or increases in traffic;
(4) The wider environmental, economic, social and community benefits directly related to the scheme outweigh any potentially adverse impacts; and
(5) The distinct identity of Monmouthshire will not be compromised.

Strategic Policy S13 of the adopted LDP is also relevant to this application as it aims to help assist with the LDP objective of protecting, enhancing and managing Monmouthshire's natural heritage, including designated landscape areas, other high quality and distinctive landscapes, protected sites, protected species and other biodiversity interests and the connectivity between them, for their own sake and to maximise benefits for the economy, tourism and social well-being. This policy states that development proposals must:

1. Maintain the character and quality of the landscape.
2. Maintain, protect and enhance the integrity and connectivity of Monmouthshire's green infrastructure network.
3. Protect, positively manage and enhance biodiversity and geological interests, including designated and non-designated sites, and habitats and species of importance and the ecological connectivity between them.
4. Seek to integrate landscape elements, green infrastructure, biodiversity features and ecological connectivity features, to create multifunctional, interconnected

spaces that offer opportunities for recreation and healthy activities such as walking and cycling.

The development management policies for landscape and nature conservation seek to implement Strategic Policy S13 by providing the policy framework to protect and enhance the special quality and distinctiveness of Monmouthshire's natural heritage/ assets. In this regard, Policy LC5 states that development proposals that would impact upon landscape character, as defined by LANDMAP Landscape Character Assessment, must demonstrate through a landscape assessment how landscape character has influenced their design, scale, nature and site selection. This application is therefore accompanied by a Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment.

The Policy goes on to provide that development will be permitted provided it would not have an unacceptable adverse effect on the special character or quality of Monmouthshire's landscape in terms of visual, historic, geological, ecological or cultural aspects by;

a) Causing significant visual intrusion;
b) Causing significant adverse change in the character of the built/natural landscape;
c) Being insensitively and unsympathetically sited within the landscape;
d) Introducing or intensifying a use which is incompatible with its location;
e) Failing to harmonise with, or enhance the landform and landscape; and/or
f) Losing or failing to incorporate important traditional features, patterns, structures and layout of settlements and landscapes of both the built and natural environment.

Particular emphasis will be given to those landscapes identified through the LANDMAP Landscape Character Assessment as being of high and outstanding quality because of a certain landscape quality or combination of qualities.

Consideration of the application in relation to these criteria is included in this report in section 6.4 below.

Strategic Policy S12 also informs Policy GI1 of the LDP relating to green infrastructure. Green infrastructure comprises natural and managed green spaces and other environmental features within urban and rural settings which provide benefits for the economy, local people and biodiversity. This policy seeks to ensure that development proposals maintain, protect and create new green infrastructure, where appropriate. Green infrastructure should be planned in a way to integrate with existing Rights of Way, pedestrian and cycle routes. Where necessary, planning obligations will be sought to facilitate enhanced and/ or new green infrastructure assets in accordance with Policy S7 relating to infrastructure provision.

Also under the umbrella of Strategic Policy S13, Policy NE1 seeks to ensure that development proposals have regard to their impact on nature conservation interests and that provision for wildlife is incorporated into the design of development. National planning policy guidance deals with international and nationally designated sites.

Finally, Policy EP1 seeks to prevent development proposals that would result in unacceptable risk or harm due to air, light, noise or water pollution, contamination or

land instability. Development proposals that would cause or result in an unacceptable risk/harm to local amenity, health, the character /quality of the countryside or interests of nature conservation, landscape or built heritage importance due to the following (air pollution; light pollution; noise pollution; water pollution; contamination; land instability; or any identified risk to public health or safety) will not be permitted under this Policy**.**

6.2 Agricultural Land Classification

An agricultural land classification report has been provided by Kernon Associated as part of the application. The report examined the soil's physical properties at 13 locations to a maximum depth of approximately 1.2 metres. Samples of soil were also sent for particle size analysis to determine their definitive texture class. The results determined that the soils over the site are predominantly subgrade 3b (14.2 ha, almost 95% of the site) due to increased soil wetness. Grade 3b is defined as moderate quality agricultural land, which is capable of producing moderate yields of a narrow range of crops, principally grass or lower yields of a wider range of crops or high yields of grass which can be grazed or harvested over most of the year. The site does not therefore fall into the category of Best and Most Versatile (BMV) agricultural land (grades 1, 2 and 3a). Notwithstanding the relatively poor agricultural land value of this site, given that there will be little depletion in the agricultural land as a result of the development and that crucially, the development is reversible such that once the operational phase has ceased, the land will return to its current form with no impact on the soil or quality of the land then this issue would seem to hold little weight. This was demonstrated in the recent appeal decision for a solar park at Llanvaply (APP/E6840/A/14/2212987) where the Inspector concluded that the development of a solar park on Grade 2 (BMV) land would only temporarily change the use of the land rather than its quality and would not affect its long term potential for resumed agricultural use, thus providing a precedent for similar developments.

6.5 Visual Amenity and Landscape Impact

The Countryside Council for Wales (now part of NRW) have undertaken an extensive landscape character assessment of Wales using the LANDMAP information system. LANDMAP is a Geographical Information System-based landscape resource where landscape characteristics, qualities and influences on the landscape are recorded and evaluated into a nationally consistent set of data. In LANDMAP the landscape is defined under five separate categories; geological, habitat, visual & sensory, historic and cultural. LDP Policy LC5 refers to LANDMAP. In determining the landscape impact of this application, each of these five elements of the landscape must be explored in relation to the site and surroundings.

The Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) submitted in support of the planning application has analysed the landscape character of the proposed development site and its surroundings using current LANDMAP data. This confirms that the proposal would be visible from very few locations, woodland and hedgerows would be unaffected, field patterns would be retained and proposal would be temporary and reversible with the grassland beneath the solar arrays retained so as to accommodate grazing by sheep. As such it is considered that there would only be a

minor impact on landscape character which would remain largely unchanged as a result of the proposal.

The main visual effects of the proposed development would be confined to the site itself and from the existing access lane into Oak Grove Farm where field gates would allow localised views. Residential receptors within the vicinity of the site are considered amongst the most sensitive to visual impact. In this case Oak Grove Farm and the property located to the eastern end of the farmstead known as Hill Barn Farm are the only properties that would have direct views of the development. The visual impact on these receptors subsequent to the implementation of appropriate mitigation measures have been classified in the accompanying LVIA as being not significant. Likewise, the visual impact on the road network and rights are way are also considered to be negligible adverse once the site is operational.

The site is included within the Leechpool Visual and Sensory Aspect Area which is classed at Level 3 (Lowland/Rolling Lowland/Mosaic Rolling Lowland) described as 'gently undulating mixed farmland'. This is regarded as of medium to low landscape sensitivity.

Views to the Severn Estuary are an important component of the sense of place in this area but the site does not play any significant role in this relationship of the Aspect Area to the sea and there are no views from the site of the estuary. Locally intrusive development is noted in the Aspect Area description and this includes power lines, transport corridors and unattractive urban settlement edges. The relatively hidden nature of the application site would mean that the proposed solar development would not cause any further significant intrusion on this landscape.

The LANDMAP entry for this area notes that a 'lack of management…has resulted in hedges either being removed or becoming neglected, overgrown and gappy in places' and this is evident around the application site. The development of the solar park and associated landscape management and mitigation would conserve and enhance the existing mosaic of landscape features. Existing hedgebanks will be gapped up where necessary and there will be longer term maintenance of trees and hedges that are important landscape features. Furthermore, a substantial length of new hedge will be planted along the line of the land leading to Oak Grove Farm as well as a new section on another part of the eastern boundary of the site to the south of the farm buildings.

While there will be solar arrays over existing agricultural land, the arrays will be contained within retained or new field boundary hedges or belts of woodland. The existing grain and distinctive pattern of the landscape will be respected. For these reasons, the overall magnitude of change is considered to be minor and it is therefore concluded that the landscape impact would be of low significance. The development is therefore considered to be acceptable having regard to Policies SD1, LC5, GI1 and S13 of the LDP.

In response to comments from the Council's Landscape Officer, landscape mitigation for the scheme has been reinforced: perimeter hedgerows have been increased in depth from 2 to 3 staggered rows and field boundary hedgerows within the scheme have been re-instated where removed in the past. This is welcomed.

6.6 Biodiversity Considerations

Policy NE1 requires that development proposals shall accord with nature conservation interests and will be expected to:

i) Retain, and where appropriate enhance, existing semi-natural habitats, linear habitat features, other features of nature conservation interest and geological features and safeguard them during construction work;
ii) Incorporate appropriate native vegetation in any landscaping or planting scheme, except where special requirements in terms of purpose or location may dictate otherwise;
iii) Ensure the protection and enhancement of wildlife and landscape resources by appropriate building design, site layouts, landscaping techniques and choice of plant species and,
iv) Where appropriate, make provision for on-going maintenance of retained or created nature conservation interests.

An Ecological Assessment has been undertaken on behalf of the applicant by David Clements Ecology Ltd dated December 2014. The majority of the site comprises fields which are largely semi improved neutral grassland grazed by livestock including both sheep and cattle. The fields are largely bound by post and wire fences. The fields are generally quite species rich and are considered to be of high local value and are likely to support a range of fauna including amphibians, small mammals, invertebrates and possibly reptiles. There are no pre-existing records of reptiles within 1km of the site but the habitats within the site are superficially suitable for species such as slow worm and common lizard. No evidence of amphibians was observed during the survey. It is considered unlikely that great crested newts would occur on the site. No invertebrates were recording during the survey and no records exist for the site.

The hedgerows within and bounding the site form the most noteworthy habitat. Although not particularly species rich, they form important linear features within the site and are likely to support more than one protected species including dormice which are known to be present within 1km of the site. No evidence of dormice was found although there are a number of Dormouse records within 1km of the site. The hedgerows at the site are dense and largely continuous and well connected to the adjacent woodland where dormice are known to be present. As such further survey work would be required to confirm the presence of Dormouse if any of the hedgerows were to be affected by the proposal. It should be noted that there are no plans to remove any hedgerow as part of this application.

There are also mature trees within the site, some of which may have roosting potential for bats and for nesting birds. Five of the trees inspected were assessed as having at least moderate potential for bat roosts. The remaining trees inspected were considered to have no or more than low potential for bats.

Potential impacts to protected species could occur during site clearance and construction if works are undertaken during the nesting period and potentially reptiles may be sheltering in grassland and other vegetation. There impacts however are considered to be amenable to mitigation. It is considered unlikely that the solar arrays

would have a significant long term impact on protected species. In fact, it is considered likely that bats and birds especially would benefit where post development landscaping involves the creation of species diverse grassland as well as margins of coarse grassland which provide foraging habitat and nesting opportunities.

It is concluded that the development of the site in the manner proposed would be unlikely to entail any significant loss of wildlife features, or adverse impacts to habitats or species of ecological value in the vicinity, provided adequate and appropriate mitigation measures are implemented to avoid or minimise impacts to protected species on the site and to valuable habitats both within the site and in the wider vicinity. It is therefore considered on current evidence that the proposed development of this site is not unacceptably constrained by biodiversity issues.

6.7 Access/Traffic

Oak Grove Farm has an existing vehicular access onto the A48 north of the site. From the access an agricultural lane leads south to the application site and Oak Grove Farm.

The construction of the proposed solar farm would result in temporary generation of construction and staff related vehicle trips over an 8 week construction period. The applicant has identified that the existing access described above is unsuitable for use by heavy construction traffic during the course of site construction. It is therefore proposed that a temporary access be constructed south of the application site onto the B4245 to ensure safer access/egress for heavy construction traffic. Following completion of the development the temporary access will be removed and once the site is operational maintenance vehicles will serve the site through the existing access off the A48 north of the site.

Highways have indicated that they are satisfied that the existing access off the A48 is suitable for the day to day maintenance and operational management of the site. Maintenance vehicles requiring access would be infrequent and of a size that can be readily accommodated through the access and on the highway network.

With regard to the proposed temporary construction access onto the B4245 Highways are also satisfied that the B4245 is suitable to accommodate the level of construction traffic to and from the site; therefore there are no objections in principle. The routing of traffic would not pass through heavily populated areas within the vicinity of the site and would therefore cause limited disturbance to surrounding communities. This is considered to be the most suitable route for accessing the site and is considered suitable to accommodate HGVs associated with the relatively brief construction phase.

During the 25 year period of operation, only routine maintenance traffic would need to access the site from the existing access to the farm the north. This is anticipated to be light vehicles only (such as 4x4 vehicles), around three times per year.

6.8 Residential Amenity

Solar PV panels do not create any discernible noise, nor do they produce traffic nor any further noise or disturbance once operational. The impact of this type of scheme

of local residents is therefore limited to visual impact. Residential properties within the vicinity of the site are considered amongst the most sensitive to visual impact. In this case Oak Grove Farm and the property located to the eastern end of the farmstead known as Hill Barn Farm are the only properties that would have direct views of the development. The visual impact on these receptors subsequent to the implementation of appropriate mitigation measures have been classified in the accompanying LVIA as being not significant and therefore it would be unreasonable to refuse the application for this reason.

6.9 Glint and Glare

Solar reflections are commonplace occurrences for most people either from wet roads, expanses of water, or windows and mirrors of cars and buildings. Solar Panels are designed to absorb light to generate electricity, not reflect it, and are therefore less reflective than other sources of solar reflection. Although 'glint and glare' are commonly referred to together, glint is the direct reflection of sunlight, whereas glare is diffuse reflection (or reflection of the bright sky around the sun).

A Glint and Glare Assessment submitted in support of this application concludes that the effects from solar reflections at this site on various receptors of any nature, e.g., motorways, major and minor roads, public footpaths, dwellings, and the nearby railway will be negligible at worst. Reflections will be minimised since near-horizontal reflections mainly occur when trees and hedges will be in leaf. Observed reflections will be negligible compared to the brightness of the sun (which will be much brighter and shining from the same general direction as reflecting panels). Any solar reflections will normally pass over a static, point receptor at any distance from the solar farm within approximately 5 minutes.

Therefore it is considered that the panels are unlikely to cause unacceptable harm to local residents by way of glint and glare. Furthermore Civil Aviation Authority guidance on the effects of glint and glare from solar farms on aviation is satisfied.

6.10 Impact on the Historic Environment and Archaeology

The site itself does not have any heritage designations such as Scheduled Ancient Monuments, Conservation Areas, Listed Buildings, Registered Parks and Gardens or Registered Battlefields. Caldicot Castle is not visible from the site, nor are there any identifiable views to the castle which include the site or the proposed development. As such the setting of Caldicot Castle will not be affected. However, the application area is also 2km east of Caerwent Roman City, and the Roman remains there are a Scheduled Ancient Monument. The Historic Environment Record shows that further remains including Roman villas are noted in the area around Caerwent and that cemeteries extend along the area around the Roman roads outside the town. A recent discovery of Kilcrow Hill roman marching camp close to the A48 near Crick was confirmed by aerial photography in 2014. This is within 400m of the proposed work. There is evidence of pre-historic activity in the area and Crick has important Scheduled remains of medieval date within 300m of the proposed boundary. Further spot finds are also noted in the Historic Environment Record with a range of dates from prehistory to the medieval period. In light of this context, as statutory advisors to the Local Planning Authority, Glamorgan Gwent Archaeological Trust (GGAT)

recommended deferral of the application for an Archaeological Evaluation to be undertaken as they considered it is likely that the proposed site would contain significant archaeological resource. The subsequent report submitted by the applicants meets relevant professional standards and details the archaeology as encountered during the evaluation.

The trial-trenching evaluation uncovered little archaeological evidence for past activity, with the majority of the trenches across the site consisting of topsoil overlying subsoil over the natural geological deposit. The archaeological features identified related to modern activity (the demolished building), and possible medieval / post-medieval agricultural activity (fence-lines and dumps of material). Many of the features were undated so it is possible that they are associated with earlier activity, although the nature of the fills suggests that they are more likely of later date.

Very few finds were recovered generally across the site, with only a few pieces of recent tile from the subsoil in Trenches 5 and 11, and one piece of worked Mesolithic flint from (0903). These reflect the presence of some general prehistoric activity within the area, although this is hardly surprising given the wider landscape of Neolithic and Bronze Age funerary activity. No confirmed evidence was obtained relating to the proximity of the site to the Roman road.

The report notes that the evaluation identified the presence of a series of pits of possible prehistoric date, a demolished building of probable post medieval date (possibly a decoy structure dating from WW2) along with a small finds assemblage which included post-medieval pottery and more significantly a single backed flint blade of Mesolithic date. This flint is a significant discovery; flint is not naturally occurring in this area and as such any discovery is important, more so when this flint is worked as is the case at Oak Grove. This flint is indicative of Mesolithic activity in the area, and it may be that further evidence survives from this period.

It is possible that further archaeological remains of Mesolithic date and later post medieval date will be present within the application area, therefore GGAT have recommended the attachment of a condition to any consent granted requiring the applicant to commission a Written Scheme of Investigation that details a programme of archaeological to be carried out in advance of and alongside development. They envisage that in practice this would largely consist of a watching brief, targeted in particular on areas where greater disturbance would be required by the development. This condition has been included below.

6.11 Economic Development Implications

At present the Renewables UK Cymru declaration is limited to onshore wind development, with activity now focussed on developing an economic and community benefit register, which will enable developers and communities to record how they are delivering contracts for Welsh companies and community benefit schemes for the long-term economic benefit of Wales. It is possible that this approach will be developed for other technologies, but at the moment, the focus is on developing the mechanisms with the onshore wind industry. However, it could also be applied to this application.

In the case of the present proposal, there would be temporary employment opportunities during the construction and decommissioning periods (up to 50 workers on site at any one time). Local contractors can tender for non-specialist elements of the construction works such as fencing, landscaping, ground-works, site security etc. As the on-going maintenance operations post-construction are relatively minimal and no continued on-site presence is required, there is no real scope for local long-term job creation. There would be long term benefits at a local level and further afield in terms of the energy produced. The Welsh Government's Energy Policy Statement (2010) explains that the aim by 2050 (at the latest) is to be in a position where almost all of Wales' local energy needs can be met by low carbon electricity production as part of a concerted effort to tackle climate change.

6.12 Flood Risk, Surface Water Drainage and Pollution

There are no historic records of flooding on the site and the flood zone maps indicate that watercourses in the vicinity have floodplains that do not encroach onto any part of the application site. The flood risk across the site is therefore considered to be negligible.

In terms of potential land contamination, the PV panels proposed are silicon based polycrystalline cellular modules and do not contain cadmium. This type of PV panel is widely used and generally regarded as environmentally benign and manufactured to meet European standards for quality. Should any panels be damaged or become faulty, they will be immediately replaced and removed from the site by the site maintenance engineer. The panels are formed by a series of laminates bonded together on a plastic backing sheet that prevents the module from shattering. If cracked, the panel would not leak soluble material and does not contain any toxic substances. All panels will be removed from the site if damaged or faulty and disposed of in accordance with industry standards.

6.13 Green Infrastructure

The proposal is a significant scheme and whilst the onsite planting would offer some mitigation there will inevitably be some landscape and visual impact. As such a comprehensive Green Infrastructure plan has been submitted as part of this application. This plan details a multidisciplinary approach to site management considering the multiple benefits of Green Infrastructure (e.g. landscape, ecology, trees, pollinators, public) and includes the following;

- Screen planting (hedgerows with trees) as a minimum triple staggered rows to be managed to a height of minimum of 3m
- Planting of orchard / orchard trees of appropriate species, density and type with appropriate protection
- Copse planting to deliver diversity of boundary planting and increased biodiversity benefits
- Post construction sward re-seeding to maximise benefits for biodiversity
- Reference to interpretation (to be fully covered by a separate planning condition)
- New benefits including bat and bird boxes
- Restoration of the temporary access route

The implementation of the plan can be enforced by the imposition of a condition.

6.14 Other Issues

The site falls within a minerals safeguarding area identified in Policy M2 of the Local Plan. However criterion b) states that proposals for development uses of a temporary nature within the identified mineral safeguarding areas will not be approved unless they can be completed and the site restored to a condition that does not inhibit mineral extraction within the timescale that the mineral is likely to be needed. The provision of a solar park is a temporary form of development and is normally the subject of a condition limiting the development to a period of 25 years. It is not considered that the proposal would be at odds with the requirements of Policy M2 and there is no evidence to indicate that there are any immediate plans for mineral extraction within the locality.

6.0 RECOMMENDATION: APPROVE

Conditions/Reasons

This development shall be begun within 5 years from the date of this permission.
The development shall be carried out in accordance with the list of approved plans.
Any trees, or hedgerow plants which within a period of five years from the completion of the development die, are removed, become seriously damaged or diseased, or become (in the opinion of the Local Planning Authority) otherwise defective, shall be replaced within the current planting season or the first two months of the next planting season, whichever is the sooner, unless the Local Planning Authority gives written consent to any variation.
The development permitted by this planning permission shall only be carried out in accordance with the approved "Oak Grove Farm, Crick, Monmouthshire - Ecological assessment' by David Clements Ecology, dated December 2014 and specifically the recommendations in Section 6. **(**Reason**;** To safeguard European Protected Species)
Construction delivery times shall be managed strictly in accordance with details agreed in the Access Appraisal by Asbri Transport dated December 2014.
A Green Infrastructure Management Plan shall be submitted to, and be approved in writing by, the local planning authority prior to the commencement or occupation of the development. The content of the Management Plan shall include the following; a) Description and evaluation of Green Infrastructure assets to be managed. b) Trends and constraints on site that might influence management. c) Aims and objectives of management. d) Appropriate management options for achieving aims and objectives. e) Prescriptions for management actions. f) Preparation of a work schedule (including an annual work plan capable of being rolled forward over a twenty-year period). g) Details of the body or organization responsible for implementation of the plan. h) Ongoing monitoring and remedial measures. The Management Plan shall also include details of the legal and funding mechanism(s) by which the long-term implementation of the plan will be secured by the developer with the management body(ies) responsible for its delivery. The plan

shall also set out (where the results from monitoring show that conservation aims and objectives of the Green Infrastructure Management Plan are not being met) how contingencies and/or remedial action will be identified, agreed and implemented so that the development still delivers the fully functioning Green Infrastructure objectives of the originally approved scheme. The approved plan will be implemented in accordance with the approved details.
Prior to commencement of development a Landscape & Ecology Decommissioning Plan shall be submitted to the LPA. This shall address restoration issues following the decommissioning of the proposal, including the timescales for the decommissioning of the development, hereby approved, to be agreed with the Local Planning Authority. The scheme shall be implemented as approved.
All materials, structures and foundations where erected shall be removed from site and the land returned to its former agricultural status following the decommissioning of the scheme.
Prior to commencement of the development full engineering and construction details for the temporary construction access in accordance with the design criteria set out in Technical Advice Note 18 (TAN 18) shall be submitted to and approved by the Planning Authority. The temporary construction road shall be constructed in accordance with the approved details and the land shall be reinstated within a timescale to be agreed with the Local planning Authority prior to works commencing on site.
Prior to commencement of the development a Construction Traffic Management Plan and Method Statement shall be submitted to the Planning Authority for approval. The CTMP and Method Statement shall set out details of their timetabling, and measures to secure: a) Cleaning of site entrance, facilities for wheel washing and vehicle parking and turning facilities; b) The erection of any entrance gates, barriers, bollards, chains or other such obstructions; c) any works to the public highway including temporary widening temporary signage and/or replacement of street furniture.
No development shall take place until the applicant, or their agents or successors in title, has secured the implementation of a programme of archaeological work in accordance with a written scheme of investigation which has been submitted by the applicant and approved in writing by the local planning authority.