GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE STATEMENT

RETROSPECTIVE INSTALLATION OF SOLAR PANELS

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Welsh Government recently made changes to Planning Policy Wales Edition 11 to address the nature emergency by publishing a revised Chapter 6 'Distinctive and Natural Placemaking and Well-Being'.

The policy changes came into immediate affect and impacts on all planning applications.

There is a great deal to consider in the revised Chapter 6, however the main policy changes relate to:

- Green Infrastructure
- Net Benefit for Biodiversity and the Step Wise Approach
- Protection for Sites of Special Scientific Interest
- Trees and Woodlands

One key change is the requirement for all planning applications to be submitted with a 'Green Infrastructure Statement' (para 6.2.5). A 'Green Infrastructure Statement' is now required with all new applications and should describe how green infrastructure has been incorporated into the proposal.

The statement should be proportionate to the scale and nature of the proposed development, for example on householder and minor developments this would normally be a short description.

The Green Infrastructure statement will be an effective way of demonstrating positive multi-functional outcomes which are appropriate to the site in question and must be used for demonstrating how the 'Step-wise Approach' (Paragraph 6.4.21) has been applied.

This statement relates to an application for the retrospective installation of ground mounted solar panels on agricultural land. It is acknowledged that Planning Authorities must seek to maintain and enhance biodiversity in the exercise of their functions. This means that development should not cause any significant loss of habitats or populations of species (not including non-native invasive species), locally or nationally and it must provide a net benefit for biodiversity and improve, or enable the improvement of the resilience of ecosystems.

In this instance there are no statutory and non-statutory designated sites and habitats within the vicinity of the site. Similarly, there are no trees or woodlands effected by the proposed development.

The field subject of the application consists of semi-improved grassland, which was of low ecological value and not a habitat of any ecological significance. It has been extensively grazed over the years under the previous agricultural use. The legislation acknowledges that the green infrastructure is heavily influenced by the opportunities it presents. In this case the ground mounted solar panels can benefit biodiversity by creating new habitats, increasing plant and insect diversity through diverse microclimates, and improving soil health under panels. The panels will provide improved opportunities for nesting birds and refuge for small mammals, support pollinators by extending flowering seasons, and reduce the need for fertilizers and pesticides now the land has been taken out of agriculture. It will effectively act as a habitat island within a field which was heavily grazed for many years and has degraded in ecological terms. The introduction of lower maintenance and wildflower planting beneath and between the panels will increase the diversity of flowering plants, which in turn will support a greater variety of invertebrates. It will also encourage extended foraging creating a mix of flowering times, created by different planting and shading conditions, providing food sources for pollinators like bees over a longer period into the autumn. Taking this part of the field out of agricultural use also allows the soil to recover from compaction and nutrient depletion.

The proposal will also provide for the planting of a new native hedge around the site and allows us to take a more sympathetic approach to the improvement and future maintenance of the field boundary hedgerows which should improve wildlife corridors and bio-diversity in the area. Any existing gaps within hedgerows will be filled and planted with indigenous species e.g. hawthorn/blackthorn.

Under the previous use the field had a much lower ecological value as a result of the intensity of grazing by livestock on land close to the farmstead. The low key nature of the proposed use together with improvements highlighted above will provide a net benefit for biodiversity. This should leave biodiversity and the resilience of ecosystems in a significantly better state than before.

The introduction of native species rich planting will provide a good source of direct and indirect forage for a variety of invertebrate, birds and small mammal species; improved habitat connectivity for the same, (particularly bats), and nesting opportunities for birds. A more sympathetic approach to the treatment and future management of the area will encourage improved habitat and opportunities for more native plants, animals and micro-organisms to populate this area.

No external lighting is proposed and consequently there should be no impact upon bats and tree planting should encourage improved connectivity with adjoining woodland areas.

In terms of the Step-Wise Approach, because of the existing and previous condition of the site there are no harmful environmental effects which need to be mitigated. The measures

put forward therefore are not, strictly speaking compensatory, but represent an overall benefit. For example, we are not compensating for any detrimental impact or loss of habitat.

Given the nature of the proposed use and the environmental changes involved, the proposed improvements represent a proportionate intervention as required by the legislation.