



Maisemore Solar Farm

Pre-application Consultation Feedback

July 2021

Renewable Connections undertook a four-week period of public consultation between 16th April and 14th May 2021. Letters and information leaflets were sent to residents in Maisemore, Over and Highnam and an online information event was held on 28th April where the Renewable Connections project team provided an overview of the project and answered questions for attendees.

This note provides a summary of the key issues raised during consultation and how we propose to address these in our final application, which is proposed to be submitted in August 2021.

1. Footpath access from Maisemore

A number of concerns have been raised by local residents about the proposed access paths through the site and how these would connect to Maisemore Village to the north. Renewable Connections had considered that three possible access points would be appropriate – through Stanleigh Terrace, through Bridge Farm and through Rectory Close – as these could all allow such direct access a short distance from the village.

We have listened to concerns from residents, not just about the type of access (cyclist, equestrian and pedestrian), but also the acceptability of any access through these three routes. We recognise these concerns and do not want the recreational access itself to create additional problems for local residents.

Consequently, our current working assumption is that we will need to reduce the access provision into the site from the north. Initially, we will limit such access to pedestrians only as a permissive footpath accessible only through Bridge Farm and along the Severn riverbank. This will mean that the cycle route along the eastern bank of the Severn can remain open for cyclists but a segregated route for pedestrians only can be utilised on the western side.

We understand that the parish council are continuing to engage with the wider community to understand whether additional provisions are possible. We welcome the opportunity for further engagement on this in order that we may revert back to some or all of our original intent, with regards both the number and type of access points. However, we recognise the community needs to support such proposals.

2. Pedestrian access from Over

Several questions were raised about the access from the south from Over, how this would be achieved and whether this could be linked to Highnam. Renewable Connections is happy to confirm that we have engaged with both the Herefordshire and Gloucestershire Canal Trust, who own the land to the south of the Leadon, and the Environment Agency who had previously operate the structure which exists across the Leadon at present. Both have agreed to the pathway being facilitated and permissible. The structure across the Leadon will need to be surveyed and upgraded for safety purposes. However, this will allow a direct link from Maisemore to Over and Highnam, via the Three Choirs Way at the Over Farm Market.

3. Views from Lassington Hill at Highnam

Renewable Connections recognises Lassington Hill as one of the few viewpoints in the local area where the panels cannot be screened due to the fact this area looks down across the site. In response to this concern, we have moved the connection substation away from the area of the site that will be most visible from this view. Furthermore, we have enhanced our landscape planting to integrate the proposals into the existing landscape fabric so that, in time, such impacts will be reduced. We also believe that the provision of new permissive footpaths in this area will provide an overall benefit to footpath users in Highnam, Over and Maisemore.

4. Construction access route along Persh Lane

A number of concerns were raised by residents living along Persh Lane about using this route for construction access. We have considered this feedback in great detail in order that we can provide some assurances and we will continue to do this prior to submission of our planning application.

Our original proposal was to use the entire length of Persh Lane, with our construction compound to be located adjacent to the farmyard at the end. Since our consultation, we are now investigating an option to locate our construction compound within the field on the west of Persh Lane. This will require the creation of a new entrance off Persh Lane which in turn may require highways approval to confirm this is safe for vehicles to enter. Should this be permissible, it would result in vehicles moving along Persh Lane for approximately 200m but considerably shorter than originally proposed. Utilisation of that field for our compound would achieve this and would give us direct access through the yard to site.

In addition, we will commit to a suite of measures to ensure the impact of vehicles on Persh Lane is limited. Daily vehicle numbers will be limited in number and deliveries timed to avoid peak periods when Persh Lane is likely to be used by other road users.

Operational traffic for the solar farm will be extremely limited and restricted to light vehicles which will cause limited impacts to other users and the highway itself. There will likely be a substantial reduction in the volume and weight of vehicles that use Persh Lane at the minute.

We will continue to consider potential ways to improve this route and are grateful for the continued feedback provided by the local community on this matter.

5. Impacts on local wildlife

Questions were asked about how the solar farm would lead to the loss of habitat for wildlife at Persh Farm. Renewable Connections has undertaken a comprehensive suite of ecology surveys to understand fully the flora and fauna which use the site at present. This included wintering bird surveys of the floodplain of the Severn and Leaden. The results of these surveys showed that the main part of the site has a low ecological value as an arable farm. Where features of higher ecological value were identified (e.g. hedgerows, trees, and the floodplains), we have been careful to avoid these in our designs.

Solar energy projects offer the opportunity to provide a net biodiversity gain for farms. As well as the permanent species rich vegetation beneath the panels, the hedgerows and trees will be protected and enhanced and substantial areas outside of the solar fence will be converted to a wildflower meadow which will provide habitat for native invertebrates and vertebrates that would otherwise be unavailable.

In addition, Chamberlayne Farms is working closely with Natural England and Renewable Connections to create wetland areas within the remaining site areas that should attract large numbers of wetland species to this area and together will provide 75ac of new enhanced habitat.

6. Long term site maintenance

Several residents asked questions of the maintenance regime of the site, both in terms of traffic visiting the site and ensuring the land is maintained.

The solar farm itself will have periodic visits by specialist contractors to undertake reactive maintenance to ensure the equipment is generating efficiently. It is unlikely that these visits will result in more than 1-2 vehicles per week. Scheduled maintenance will take place once or twice a year which will see the panels cleaned and equipment fully checked.

In terms of the landscape management, Renewable Connections will work with Chamberlayne Farms to implement a management plan which ensures the long-term maintenance not just of land within the solar farm fence, but also land within the areas proposed for wildlife planting and recreational areas.

Sheep grazing beneath panels is an extremely effective way to manage the grass and it also affords the landowner an opportunity to continue using the farm for agriculture. There are no safety implications for the sheep and grazing has consistently shown to offer sheep and the ground benefits.

7. Use of agricultural land

A number of questions were received questioning the use of agricultural land. Planning policy provides that agricultural land should only be used if there are no brownfield or previously developed alternatives available. Furthermore, if agricultural land is to be used, proposals should aim to use poorer quality agricultural land in preference to higher quality land. Brownfield or previously developed land of this scale is seldom available for solar and typically any brownfield land is located within or on the edge of urban areas where the policy presumption prioritises residential or commercial developments. The proposed site for Maisemore Solar Farm comprises predominantly low-grade agricultural land. Renewable Connections has prepared an Alternative Site Assessment which will be submitted with our planning application and will demonstrate that no lower grade land is available in this area as an alternative.

8. Future development to the north

Concerns were raised by residents who own houses along the A417 that the field to the north of the proposed development would be used for housing or that the solar project would be extended in future. Renewable Connections has excluded the field to the north from proposals to ensure an appropriate offset between the solar site and residents along the A417. It is not Renewable Connections or Chamberlayne Farms intent to use this land for solar or other development in the future.

9. Noise impacts

Several people asked questions about what equipment within the site might generate noise and whether this might impact on local residents. Solar panels themselves do not generate noise. The only noise generating features are electrical cabins distributed within the panel array that require fans for cooling during the daytime. These cabins will be distributed throughout the site but will be far away from the site perimeter to avoid impacting on local residential properties. There will be no increase in noise levels beyond the site boundary.

10. Impact on property values

Some people queried that impact of this development on property prices. There is little evidence to suggest that renewable energy projects impact on local property values, and such issues are not considered to be material to the assessment of a planning application.

11. Glint and glare impacts

Some local people expressed concerns that glint or glare might be experienced from local viewpoints or properties. Panels are designed to absorb light, not reflect it, and therefore the potential for impacts from glare will be extremely limited. In any event, the solar panels at this site would be orientated to the south, away from Maisemore properties, local roads, and most publicly accessible viewpoints.

12. Increased flood risk

Due to the existing impacts from flooding in this area, there was questions received about whether a solar project in this area might result in increases in flood risk. The land beneath solar farms is permanently vegetated for the entire lifetime of the project which provides increased attenuation when compared to arable farmland which is ploughed year on year. The amount of impermeable cover on a solar farm is very small and so overall there will be a benefit to flood risk. The site has been designed to avoid areas most at risk of flooding and areas within the floodplain are being converted into wetlands for increased attenuation.

13. Safety implications

Queries were raised about how safe solar is and whether contamination could leach from the panels, polluting local watercourses. The latest panels are completely safe and contain no components that would represent a risk to human health. Furthermore, the site will be built to the highest electrical safety standards by specialist contractors.

14. Job creation

At peak times, around 100-150 people will be employed during construction. However, during operation, the number of maintenance personnel will be very few. We try to use local contractors where possible.

15. Description of the project

Several people had questions about the project more generally and these have been compiled here.

The solar farm will have a capacity of up to 40MWp and will be operational for up to 40 years. After this time all of the installation will be removed and the land restored to how it was before, but with improved soil health and biodiversity. The power generated will be exported to the grid via a substation connecting to existing powerlines which run through the site to the south. No new pylons will be necessary to facilitate that connection, although some modifications to the tower may be needed.

The solar panels will be installed in rows which run east to west through the site. These rows will be tilted towards the south to capture the maximum amount of solar irradiation possible. The total height of the panels will be no more than 2.8m above the ground with a gap of more than 0.8m above the ground at its minimum.

Small electric cabins will be located amongst the panels and these will be accessed by a network of crushed stone track which will run through the site. All of the panels will be surrounded by a deer fencing to protect the equipment from large animals entering the site. CCTV cameras will be located periodically around the site perimeter for security.

The solar area will be approximately 100-115 acres, depending on the final layout. The total farm area is around 200 acres total. We are assuming anywhere up to 80,000 panels would be required depending on the final solar farm design.

In Gloucestershire, the average production would be around 40,000MWh per year. This is the equivalent annual use of around 11,000 homes and would save 18,000 tonnes of CO2 each year.