Carbon Neutral Cambridge welcomes Sunnica Solar Farm decision

Although we, and many others, expressed our concerns about the Sunnica solar farm proposal during the consultation in 2022, we are pleased that the new Secretary of State has decided to approve a modified scheme.

This is important for decarbonising our economy, and the fight against catastrophic climate change

Overview

Following modifications, the public benefits of the project now appear to outweigh the adverse impacts. The size of the project has been reduced and it is now very largely on grade 3 and 4 land; the area of hedging, tree planting and new native grassland has been increased; and it has become clear that the limiting factor for agriculture in the area is not the availability of land, but the availability of water. We welcome the proposal to graze sheep around the panels, although note this does not appear to be enforceable. Meanwhile the need to decarbonise our energy supply has become ever more pressing.

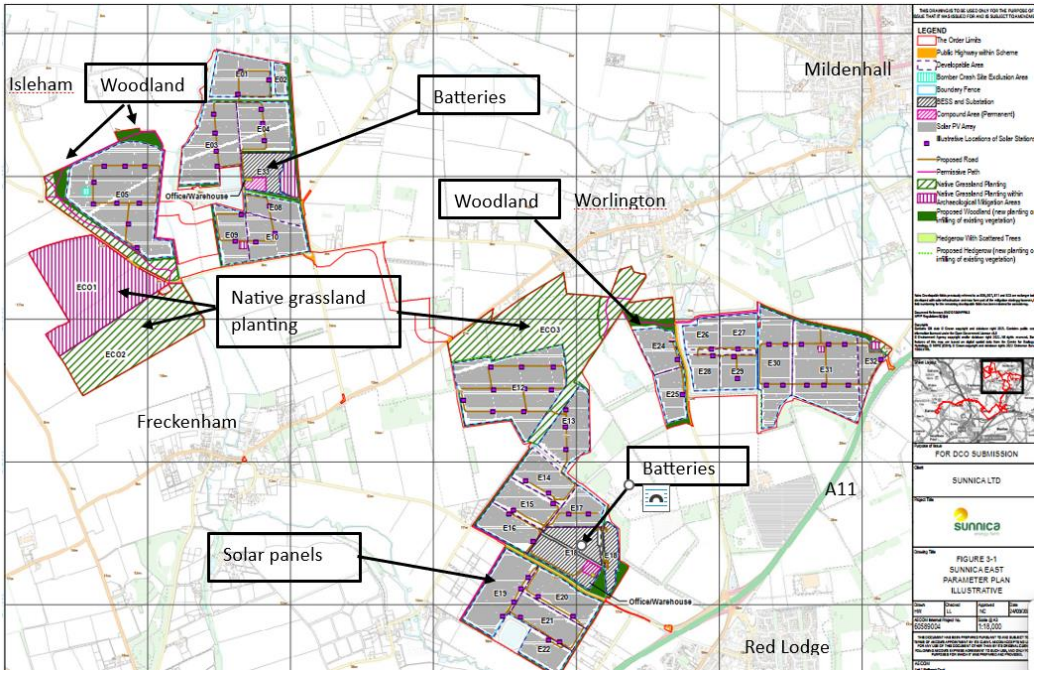
After many years of neglect, it is urgent that we accelerate decarbonisation. Although we also need solar to be installed on rooftops and smaller sites, large sites such as the Sunnica one, are important for reducing costs and accelerating progress. The Sunnica scheme is around 500MW and will power over 170,000 homes for the 40 year life of the project: As it would supply 3 times the population of Cambridge, or 2/3rds of Cambridgeshire as a whole with low cost, zero carbon electricity, the Sunnica solar farm will, as the Secretary of State says, play a "*meaningful contribution towards meeting the targets in the Climate Change Act 2008*"

Image from PS Renewables' (Sunnica's parent company) 5MW Blay Farm project

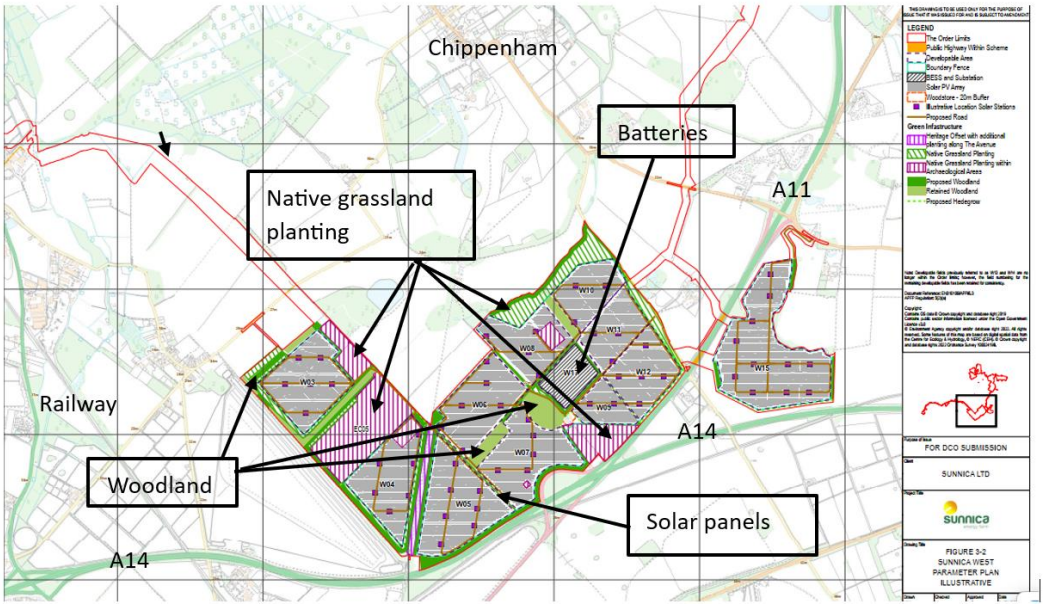
The location.

The examining authority described the chosen location (between Mildenhall and Newmarket) of the Proposed Development as "*suitable for large scale solar development due to high levels of solar irradiation compared to other parts of the UK and predominately large open flat land; maximisation of use of low-grade-non best and most versatile ("BMV") agricultural land, the land not being located in or near to Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty ("AONB"), or internationally and nationally designated biodiversity sites and its ability to avoid direct physical impact on designated heritage assets [ER 4.6.29]"*

Sunnica East, Sites A and B, as approved July 2024 (annotation by CNC)



Sunnica West Site A as approved July 2024 (annotation by CNC)



We also understand that the proximity to the important substation at Burwell is important, because this will reduce the cost of supplying low carbon electricity to the power grid. Currently most renewables are in the North of the UK, while the demand for power is in the South, so grid capacity is limiting use of renewables. It is clearly sensible to try to place power generation and storage near to where the power demand is, as it will improve efficiency, and reduce costs (as well as reducing the need for new pylons)

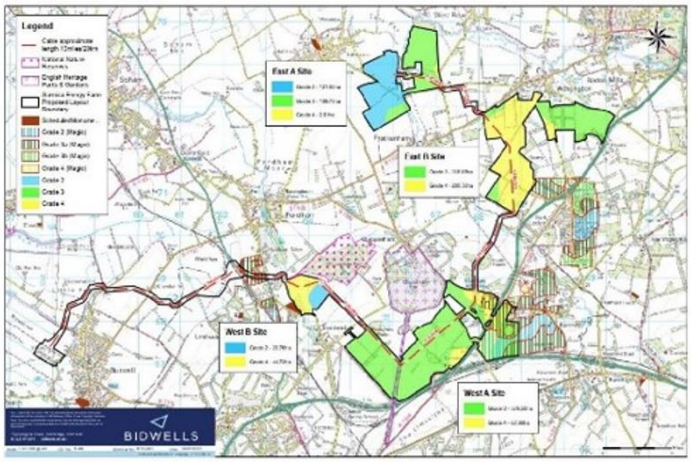
Agriculture

The proposed site is rural farmland, largely of moderate quality. Various modifications have been made to address concerns raised during the consultations and we're pleased to see that these have removed most of the grade 2 (i.e. very good quality) land from use.

Land quality in scheme as proposed during the consultation in 2022.

Grade 2 land in blue, Grade 3 in green, grade 4 in yellow. Note that by comparing this with the maps on page 2, it is clear that the scheme that was approved in July 2024 is slightly smaller and uses less high quality land. Sunnica West site B (near Burwell) has been removed from the scheme, Sunnica West site A is a little smaller than in 2022, and most of the grade 2 land near Isleham is now grassland. We have been unable to find a more recent version of this land quality map.

Appendix 2 – ALC land classification within Sunnica Scheme



The June 2023 report by the examining authority includes an extensive discussion of the quality of the agricultural land. This makes it clear that as the land is largely "droughty" and stony, good yields can currently only be achieved with irrigation.

It was also pointed out that as the volume of irrigation water available to each farm is subject to abstraction licences, the limiting factor for agriculture is not the availability of land, but the availability of water. Given the depletion of the Chalk aquifer, and the worrying state of the chalk streams in our area, optimising water use is an increasingly important factor. We note that the local authorities are requiring that rainwater is captured in lagoons, so it can be used for purposes such as firefighting or agriculture.

In approving the development, although Secretary of State is "*not convinced there will be a benefit to the soil quality due to the Proposed Development*, he agreed with the view that *"any agricultural land resource lost to the Proposed Development could return to supporting agricultural production, grazing sheep and so would not be lost or degraded*"

Although the benefits to soil quality from fallow grassland are not proven, it seems to us that with good management, soil health and carbon sequestration is likely to improve. The Sunnica solar farm gives an interesting opportunity for research to investigate the merits of different techniques for managing the grass under and around the panels. We hope Sunnica will support and enable this.

Landscape and ecology

We sympathise with those living in the immediate area, because there will undoubtedly be an impact on the landscape, and disruption during construction. However, looking closely at the rather unclear maps that Sunnica provide of the revised schemes, it appears that the new areas of woodland and planting of native grassland could in due course be an attractive addition for nearby communities.

We note that although the secretary of State has approved the project, the Development Consent Order states that "*No phase of the authorised development may commence until details have been approved in writing by the relevant planning authority".* This includes the requirement to get approval for the "landscape and ecology management plan, together with details of how to achieve 10% biodiversity net gain.

Financial benefits to the community

We feel that local communities should benefit financially when major infrastructure is built in their areas, as in Scotland. As far as we can see, the only payment that is required by the development consent order is £300,000, to be split between the 2 councils. This seems very little, given the scale of the project, so we hope that either we've missed additional payments, or that Sunnica will choose to make significant donations to local projects, as other renewables companies have done. For example, the area badly needs improved public transport and safe cycling routes between the villages and local schools and transport hubs.

References

Planning inspectorate webpage, with Secretary of State decision letter, and supporting reports. https://national-infrastructure-consenting.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/projects/EN010106

Sunnica website with maps of scheme approved in July 2024 https://sunnica.co.uk/proposals/

Development Consent Order, July 2024 https://infrastructure.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/wp-content/ipc/uploads/projects/EN010106/EN010106-006024-Sunnica%20Development%20Consent%20Order%20signed%20but%20not%20registered%2012%20July%202024.pdf

Examining authority report 28 June 2023 https://infrastructure.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/wp-content/ipc/uploads/projects/EN010106/EN010106-005902-Sunnica-ExA-Recommendation-Report-28-June-2023-FINAL-with%20Errata%20sheet.pdf

S**unnica website, with changes to application made in December 2022** https://sunnica.co.uk/

Author: Anne Miller 17 July 2024 doc ref 21777