

Meeting Michaelston Village Hall

Thursday 01 May 2014

Newport City Council Planning officers present: Stephen Williams (SW) & Emyr Davies (ED)

Chairman: Vic Davies, Chairman, Michaelston-y-Fedw Community Council

Newport City Councillors: Richard White (RW), Tom Suller (TS)

Vic Davies introduced the meeting, explaining that the role of the Community Council was to elicit the views of the community with regard to a planning application **14/0337: NSTALLATION OF A GROUND MOUNTED PHOTOVOLTAIC (SOLAR ELECTRICITY) PLANT (18MW), INCLUDING THE ERECTION OF TRANSFORMERS AND OTHER ANCILLARY EQUIPMENT, TRACKS, DRAINAGE, FENCING, CCTV, LANDSCAPING AND ALL ASSOCIATED BUILDING AND ENGINEERING OPERATIONS, FOR USE FOR A PERIOD OF UP TO 25 YEARS AFFECTING PUBLIC RIGHTS OF WAY 400/61, 400/62 AND 400/63.**

Chairman stressed that Sir Stanley Thomas who was present at the meeting was the landowner, **not** the developer.

There was no representative from the Developer at the meeting, because of Easter despite that fact that they had over two weeks' notice of the meeting.

Chairman read out two letters received opposing the proposal, one from Albert Griffiths and one from Lorraine Richards. Chairman also read a notice/briefing from the Developer. The Chairman stated that the attendance at the meeting may have been underestimated by the Developer but they had sent only 50 copies of this briefing document.

Chairman asked for comments/questions from the floor.

Resident: Do we have a friendly planner on board? What is Welsh Government policy on this?

ED: Refer to National Policy Planning Policy Wales 2014, Welsh Assembly. This is free to access online and includes Technical Advice note 8, renewable energy section.

Resident: Is the land agricultural Grade A?

ED: No but they are trying to establish the true grading.

Resident: Has a landscape assessment been submitted for approval? We need to know that it's accurate and correct from a landscape point of view. Our main objections are the glare, visual impact, viewpoints, disruption to roads. If it goes ahead, what's in it for the village?

ED: This is all on the planning sheet which is available for you to read. Any offer to the village is separate from the planning application and has no bearing on it.

Resident: We've done perfectly well with fundraising for the village by ourselves so far.

Resident: Are there any examples of other sites by this particular developer?

Chairman: There are 5 sites in England quoted on the developer's website, of which four have been completed and sold on.

Resident: Sold on? They've developed it and then sold it to hedge funds?

Resident: This is agricultural land. They should focus on non-agricultural land. It's good farming land and should continue in agricultural use.

SW: It will continue in agricultural use. Solar farms don't result in cessation of agricultural use.

Resident: It's going to provide energy for 6000 homes, are these homes in the local community? It's going to have a huge impact, a huge increase in vehicles in the lanes. Who is the developer?

Chairman: Eco Energy World.

Resident: It's important to clarify – after the development it will become a brown field site, therefore easier to achieve future development.

SW: It will remain Greenfield, that will be controlled for 25 years.

Resident: I live on Began Road, close to the nurseries, near to point 2 on the plan. In this area we'll see the majority of the development and the reflection from the panels. We are less than 70m from the development.

We chose to live in the countryside, not in a built industrial environment.

Can I also say that the photos put forward by the developers were taken in June when the hedgerows were full. They say they're going to plant native species, well natural species are deciduous, for 8 months of the year we will see nothing but 2.5m high fences and slabs.

The developers say that the visual assessment is that it is moderately adverse – 45 hectares of grey slabs is *not* moderate.

Other developments are in more rural areas, or on flatter lying land overlooked by an industrial estate, not in open countryside.

Resident: I've got three questions:

What about footpaths that cross the development?

What about the impact of weather – flooding. Began Road is already often flooded.

What about the impact on the value of local properties?

SW: The effect on the value of properties is not a planning issue. Regarding drainage, I don't think there is much hard standing planned which would impact run-off. This has been addressed in the application and I believe the Council drainage manager has raised a couple of queries. The planners will request further information.

A rights-of-way officer hasn't raised objections – the existing footpaths will not be affected.

Resident: We've already got 2 wind turbines, and we could be affected by the new motorway that's being proposed.

Resident: I live in Druidstone Road. This is just the beginning. Stan Thomas owns a lot more land than this. This could just be Phase 1. He's got land north of Druidstone Road, will we have further solar panels there?

SW: I've got no idea how much land Mr Thomas owns, that's not an issue for the planners. Every application is considered on its own merits, its determination doesn't set a precedent for other applications.

Resident: I live in Began Road near the Farm Park. I've got a letter from National Resources Wales (NRW) which talks about water pollution and run-off of chemicals from photovoltaic panels. This could affect the water supply.

The council has approved Mr Phillips farm, Mr Thomas has got a further application off Coalpit Lane. It's too much.

Chairman: There are also 2 more wind turbines.

ED: As I said, each application is considered on its merits. There could be a cut-off point where no more development is acceptable. I can't comment on spillage. NRW are being consulted on the application. I would like to see the letter.

Resident: I think you've got the letter. No, Cardiff Council has got it.

ED: Could you send us a copy.

Resident: We rely on well water.

Chairman of Old St Mellons Community Council: Could I say to everyone that you must send copies of any issues to Cardiff Council as well as Newport, **the contact at Cardiff Council is Catherine Howard.**

When will NRW report? Will they comment on the loss of agricultural land?

SW: It's a government department now, not NRW.

ED: Have we written to the wrong person? We need to clarify this. There is a 21 day consultation period which is up tomorrow. I know that there have been delays because of pressure of work so we expect a response next week.

Resident: So when is the deadline for letters? Tomorrow?

ED: No, decisions are made on the first Wednesday of the month, so we've missed this month, it will be June now. **Send comments in by 23rd of May.**

Resident: Do they know about this meeting at Cefn Mably Hospital?

Resident: Yes, we're here representing them.

Resident: This will be seen from as far as Rudry Road to the north.

ED: There is a landscape assessment, obviously you will see it more from high ground. The plan shows the visual appraisal.

Resident: You need to look at it from higher up. The greatest impact is here (*in Michaelston*) but it affects a bigger area.

Resident: It also affects Cardiff. People come out here from Cardiff – cyclists, walkers, to enjoy the countryside. This is a popular area. It's in the Planning Policy Wales.

Resident: What about the Caerphilly boundary?

ED: *You must raise your objections with Newport.*

Resident: As there are 2 authorities involved, what happens if one says yes to the proposal and one says no?

ED: Cardiff only has a small area of this site. If they approved it and Newport didn't, they could go ahead and build on that bit.

SW: The site has to be serviced and accessed. Stand-alone could be implemented, but really Cardiff relies on Newport's decision because theirs is such a small area.

Resident: Under agricultural land categorisation, this is Grade 1 with some Grade 2 on a scale in which 1 is the best and 5 is the worst. This is one of the only sites with Grade 1 and Grade 2 land. It is advisable to use it for agricultural purposes.

Development will have a devastating impact on trade and tourism. There are local businesses, a pub, a restaurant.

According to Cardiff Council planning, solar panels on a Greenfield site becomes Brownfield. There should be a grant to make up for the detriment to property prices.

Resident: Let's get right to the source of the problem. Let's ask Stan Thomas outright. He claims it's his area, his community. Where's the community in what he's doing?

Come on. *(hands microphone to Stan Thomas)*

ST: No comment.

Resident: I live in Druidstone Road. Can I ask what would sit under the panels?

ED: Grass – grazing sheep. This is typical of what happens throughout Europe.

Resident: They'd have to be short-legged sheep. *(laughter)*

Resident: They say that there'd be very little reflection. What about on the M4 travelling eastbound? There'd be bright light from an unexpected angle especially early in the morning.

SW: We'll be consulting on this. It's a valid problem.

Resident: Also looks like Death Valley.

Chairman: There's a company in Holland that has just developed a treatment to eliminate reflection on their products, but the panels for this development are coming from Czechoslovakia.

Resident: So they're not even British?

Resident: Will there be any permanent jobs created by this development?

ED: No, after the initial 16 weeks of build it will only need to be visited once a month for maintenance or cleaning. No.

Resident: There'll be less work, because tractors that work the land presently drive themselves don't they! Surely, yet again the application is incorrect in that **there will be job losses.**

Resident: They're planting trees and hedges, well in 25 years they'll just about be big enough to hide it unless they're planting fully grown trees and hedges. We'll end up looking at a fence 12 foot high. This is industrial development in the countryside.

Will grass grow under these panels? It doesn't even grow under my trees.

It's disgusting that the people who put in the application (*the developers*) didn't bother to come (*to this meeting*).

SW: The responsibility for agricultural land lies with the Welsh Assembly
They will be consulted, for them to advise us regarding the impact on agricultural land.

Resident: How can we set up a petition? When would it have to be in?

RW: It's better if you write in individual letters, that will have more impact. Individual points of view add more weight to the argument. You can send in emails, send them to both Newport and Cardiff.

The planning application number is 14/0337. All the information is there on the website. You can also fill in comments on the website.

Resident: Some schemes started out with hedgerows and ended up with 6 foot fencing.

Chairman: That's already in the application, they're putting up fencing.

Resident: Because it will be of interest to certain members of the locality.

Chairman: That's why they're proposing fencing, for security.

Resident: I went on the website today, it's full of patronising montages. It's all pure fiction. We know what we look out at, we live here.

SW: The montages are useful, to give an impression of how the scheme will look.

Resident: It doesn't mean anything. Does anyone ever go back after the event to see what's been done, to see the difference?

SW: We make annual site visits to see if there are lessons to learn.

Resident: Why don't you go to the properties that are affected by the development?

SW: We're not relying solely on visuals. We will make substantial site visits. We're also arranging for the planning committee to do a full visit and to assess it from various vantage points.

Resident: Come and have a look at it from my bedroom. You can bring the whole planning committee.

Chairman: From the list of attendees, mark those who would like a visit from the planners. Is that alright?

ED: Agreed

Resident: I live in Rudry. This is potentially the thin end of the wedge. There's already two windmills. This whole area is unique, it's gorgeous. It would be criminal to see it eroded. To lose this, you might as well concrete over the whole damn lot.

Resident: When it comes to Cefn Mably Hospital, we will have quite a view of this. Most of the chestnut trees around us are coming down because of disease, there will be nothing between us and the view of this development.

Resident: Is anyone for it? In Cardiff Council the officers investigate and make recommendations. There can be a number of reasons for rejection. Can I ask the planners why would you approve? Why would you reject?

SW: It's unfair to ask that. The application is being assessed. We will form recommendations based on our findings. It's not for planners to make judgements.

Resident: Is it right that if there are more than 50 signatures the lead person will be invited to attend planning and voice the objections publicly?

SW: Anyone can attend. Two people can speak, 1 for and 1 against the proposal. They must have made comments about the proposal (*in advance*) and whoever's first has the right to speak. The developer also has the right.

T.S.: When you speak you are allowed 4 minutes only, that's 4 minutes in total. Plus 4 minutes for those in favour

Resident: As the hedges are at the moment, you can see another vehicle coming towards you. These lanes are bendy, if you put higher hedges it will be more dangerous for vehicles and for horse riders.

Also, Newport is struggling, when Tesco want to put up a new store they provide a school or a library. Is Mr Thomas providing anything for Newport?

Chairman: The sweetener is being offered by the developer not by Sir Stan Thomas. I've been told by the Developers representative that it will be £20-30,000 depending on the scale of any development that goes ahead.

Resident: The developers are in London with overseas Venture Capitalist investors, Sir Stan Thomas lives in the Channel Isles, he doesn't have to see it' even when he is at home in his house at the end of Druidstone Road. For the villagers this will be an eyesore for 25 years. The visual impact will be of the greatest detriment to our landscape.

Resident: According to the leaflet solar panels are silent. This is untrue. Transformers hum and there will be 18 transformers and 18 inverters each the size of a shipping container. The document the developers have put out has untruths, don't believe too much of it.

Resident: Is this the first development of this kind in Wales?

Chairman: Yes, also the largest. One in West Wales is expecting planning this week, but on a Brownfield site.

Resident: This is the only green belt in the whole of Wales.

SW: Not green belt, it's just countryside.

Resident: If it was green belt would it still be considered?

SW: Different policies would apply, but it would still be considered.

Resident: Are there any proposals for this land to be green belt? Could it delay any decision if was under consideration?

SW: Newport and Cardiff are both trying to adopt Local Development Plans. In Newport this is currently going through examination. Cardiff is further behind. The LDP has no weight until the day it's adopted. Any application has to be determined on the basis of current policy.

Resident: The land south of the A48 – is that green belt?

SW: Yes. Part of the Unitary Development Plan so can take that into account.

Resident: What's the monetary value of this to the developers and the owners of the land?

Chairman: We don't know. It will be worth a lot.

Resident: Westminster is changing its funding from agricultural to industrial and Brownfield.

SW: That's not a planning issue.

Chairman: It doesn't apply to Wales. That's all decided down the Bay.

Chairman: Right, I think we should bring this to a close. I'd like to just put forward a few of the issues that have been raised with me by people who couldn't be here tonight, who are on holiday or whatever.

Noise. The developer has told me that they are trying to keep the noise away by putting the transformers in the middle of the development. They say that there will only be noise in the daytime.

Safety. Concerns about an increase in traffic accidents on the M4 particularly when the health service in Wales is already under pressure. Do we want to put more strain on our health service?

Security. There will be security fencing all around the site. Security cameras will be used but will be pointing inwards unless vandalism is experienced, in which case they will be turned towards the perimeter and will be pointing everywhere, resulting in a loss of privacy for everyone. We have to wonder why the developer isn't here tonight? Arrogance? They sent the briefing notes by courier, sent 50 and said that this would be enough. They hadn't counted on the strength of feeling shown here.

Can we have a show of hands of those in favour of the proposal.

(one person – Stan Thomas)

Those against the proposal.

(everyone else)

There were 2 abstentions. One from Richard White a Newport City Councillor from Marshfield and the other from Georgina White being a Cardiff City Councillor from St. Mellons. Both of these Councillors were unable to vote as they are both Members of the Planning Committee of their respective councils.

Resident: Something that hasn't been discussed – what about the wildlife? There are swans, bats, dormice. They're going to be put off by the humming from the transformers.

SW: There has been an ecological survey submitted with the planning application. We would consult with their ecologist.

Resident: Plus Canada geese. We have hundreds of them.

ED: Glare can affect migrating birds. We're still awaiting comments on this. Natural Resources Wales and Countryside Council have merged recently, so we need to approach the right people. The developers have suggested buffers and future enhancement of the environment.

Resident: We have dormice in Rudry, and bats. Bats are a protected species aren't they. Would it affect the development if there were bats there?

ED: If it can be demonstrated that they are there, yes. But we're still awaiting comments.

Resident: I would like to say thanks to the Chairman, the planners and the councillors.

(Agreement and applause).

Resident: I live on Began Road. We're going to have a wall, buzzing noise, security lights. It's going to affect us, our neighbours, everything.

Resident: We rely on farmland for forage production. There will be less land for everyone else once this goes. We will have no farms left.

Sir Stanley Thomas: I think I ought to say something. This project was started 18 months ago. However long we've farmed this land there's no money in it. Now though if this planning application is turned down I would be happy. They (*the developers*) showed me pictures of how it would look and it looked fine, I didn't realise that it would have such an impact on the village at the time. I can't do anything about it now because I'm signed up to it, the contract is signed.

The Chairman thanked all for attending and made special Mention of Sir Stanley Thomas, Steve Williams and Emyr Davies

Close of Meeting. 21.31hrs

Attendees:

Including Sir Stanley Thomas, Stephen Williams and Emyr Davies = 106