

HARBERTON PARISH COUNCIL

Minutes of the EGM to develop a policy on renewable energy.
8.00pm on Tuesday 1st July 2014 held at Harberton Parish Hall.

Present: Cllrs Beamish, Broom, Clayton, J Hockings, S Hockings, Hoddinott, Janes, Padfield, Trott, Williams, Wynne.

Apologies: C. Cllr Robert Vint.

Public: 83

Clerk: Ms C Radford

Public Session

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and opened the public session.

16 members of the public addressed the Parish Council, of whom 14 were residents of the Parish.

Comments are summarised below:

- A member of the public commented that 'renewables' cover many technologies. Much discussion is focused on wind and solar as there are grant schemes in place to subsidise them, however there are greater opportunities in biomass and waste technologies. The Parish of Harberton is comprised of small settlements, small fields and narrow roads and as such any large scale development is out of place; developers of such ruin the landscape. Solar developments should be placed on schools and industrial buildings rather than on green field sites.

The Parish Council should actively encourage biomass, community woodchipping schemes and pellet makers. Wind and solar developments are not the only options, they are the least effective and the most contentious, initiated not for the community but for corporate financial gain. The Community Benefit aspect of these developments leads to resentment and bitterness.

- It was commented that the practice of holding a public session prior to hearing from the Councillors doesn't enable public comment on what has been heard or the opportunity to correct inaccuracies. It is not accurate when referring to the National Planning Policy Framework that wildlife need to be in an ANOB to be protected.

The speaker continued to comment that it is wrong to use the Community Benefit Fund for community profit, but rather it should go to people whose lives have been directly affected by developed schemes.

- Parish Councillors were asked how much weight will be taken on board by Parish Council by national policy or will the letter from Sarah Wollaston MP regarding solar farms on green fields taken into consideration? Will the public now see the views of the council representing views of the parishioners and not views of individuals of the Council?
- A member of the public commented that there is not only public opinion against proposals for Belsford but proposed developments at Luscombe were also a bone of contention. 56% of people in the ward of Harberton expressed an opinion on the Luscombe Cross development and 88% of those were in objection. Neighbourhood Plan consultation saw 50 comments made about sustainable issues which entirely objected to large scale wind and solar. The Parish Council has a grave responsibility to the people.
- The speaker commented that the public should stand up and take responsibility for the energy we use and take a global stance against coal fire, CO2 and Nuclear energy, rather than adopting a parochial view.
- Councillors were asked if the amount of money paid to the Parish (as noted in the previous minutes of the Parish Council) make the difference in passing the developments?
- The speaker thanked the Parish Council for holding the meeting and commented that she trust Councillors to make the right decision and apologised that the tenor of the meeting has been so hostile.
- The speaker commented that in the Parish Council's own Code of Conduct point 1.5 states 'Do nothing as a Member that you cannot justify to the public'. The Devon Association of Local Councils (DALC) state that councillors have a responsibility to their constituents and that councillors should recognise where they offer that support. The speaker invited Councillors to recognise where they offer support.

- The comment was made that although a need for alternative sources of power is acknowledged, the production of such panels used in solar is detrimental to its own carbon footprint. How much energy is saved when taking production of the panels into account? Visitors to the equestrian stables commented that they would not come here for B&B tourism because the solar development is so visually unattractive. Quoting Prince Charles, they are a carbuncle on the English Countryside.
- It was agreed that all communities do have a responsibility to find renewable energy alternatives, but this doesn't mean that they override planning concerns of local communities or the environmental impact. There are detailed policies in the Neighbourhood Plan about protecting the area with clear factors of what should be included in developments; those factors should refer to public opinion. It is important to protect the rural environment. It should be protected regardless of ANOB status. Visual amenity of this area important is it provides relief to the stresses of everyday life. Any development should have a presumption against it if it impacts on the quality of life.
- On issues of macro and micro means of energy production the speaker commented that in rejecting large scale production there is a need to reflect that micro generation is the way forward. We all need to invest saving our planet; macro generation is a way of making profit and is not, at its heart, a way of solving renewable energy commitments.
- A member of the public living in Hazard commented that the dazzle from solar panels when working in the field does have a significant impact which makes one wonder what impact it has on the wildlife/bees. The Transition Town Totnes' 'Can Britain Feed Itself?' study suggests that unless we move away from meat consumption and eat more vegetables we won't be able to feed ourselves. If our fields are covered by solar panels the ability to grow food for ourselves will be reduced.
- The comment was made that solar arrays are an industrialisation of the countryside; they should go on brown field sites, not green field sites.
- A resident of Higher Bowden commented that he looks out across the Parish although outside of it. Decisions made have a wider implication and responsibilities of councillors are wide ranging. Residents of Higher Bowden wrote a letter of representation prior to the public meeting in April in which suggestions were made and residents are pleased to see that those suggestions have been taken up in the draft plan.
- It was commented that defining a policy for the Parish is too small an ambition, as is developing one for the South Hams. Any policy should look across the whole nation. Rather than being against particular forms of energy production the issue of subsidies to large companies and the consequences of those planning applications is a greater one facing the community. Providing that developments don't impinge on other people's property, access, traffic and everything else there would be no objection. There is no respect shown to Belsford residents in this new application being as far away as possible from the owners of Blakemore. Moving the development to other parts of Blakemore land would seem to be much more beneficial in many regards. It is proposed that the sites used will be returned in 25 years but by then we will need more, not fewer sites, so we have to be sure that those selected are the right ones. There is no obvious planning policy for the South Hams or at national level, so why are there so many developments around Totnes?
- It was commented there are grounds in the Planning Policy to refuse applications on grounds of 'Proliferation'. Although we have to support means of renewable energy, we've done our bit in the Parish of Harberton. No more, not in our Parish.
- A Parish resident thanked Parish Councillors for voting against the planning application to install a turbine 100 yards from her front door. She commented that she lives in fear of a wind turbine above her house but thank the Parish Council for voting against it.
- A farmer in the Parish commented that he is dead against solar. He observed that it is not really possible to really graze under the panels as you can't see the flock properly and see a sheep if they've taken ill and brambles take hold underneath. Put panels on buildings, not on good land.

The Chairman thanked the public for their comments and closed the public session.

Introductory Statement

The Chairman had prepared a summary of National and South Hams Policy and powers of the Parish Council to provide context to the discussion. *(Heavily paraphrased for the minutes by the Clerk)*

There is a National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and guidance notes to which the South Hams has to adhere to, with statements that have a presumption in favour of sustainable development, that it is the responsibility of all communities to be supportive and that policies designed enable adverse impacts to be addressed satisfactorily.

Policies should recognise the intrinsic character of the countryside and support rural communities to thrive, they should take account of the different roles and character of different area but should support the transition to a low carbon future, promote the development and diversification of agricultural and other land-based rural businesses and are encouraged to support community led initiatives for renewable and low carbon energy. There are specific policies in the framework in which it is indicated that development should be restricted (examples relating to wild life and landscape that should be protected). However, where there are no policies, permission should be granted unless adverse impacts of doing so would outweigh the benefits when assessed against policies in the Framework as a whole.

Local planning authorities should recognise the need for renewable energy and that even small scale projects provide a valuable contribution cutting greenhouse gasses. Local authorities should seek to use areas of poorer quality land in preference to that of higher quality and set criteria based policies on which to judge proposals that may affect protected wildlife of geodiverse landscapes. Permission should be refused to applications that will cause significant harm, if it affected irreplaceable habitats or contributed to the loss or deterioration of woodland. Adverse impacts on health and quality of life should be assessed by planning policy.

With regard to comments about Luscombe Cross, there were 119 letters of objection, it is important to point out that in to find percentages for statistical analysis they only counted the numbers of houses in the ward of Harberton, not across the whole Parish.

Councillors Comments

Councillors were given 3 minutes to speak from their perspective on the subject, without interruption.

Cllrs Clayton and Janes declined to make specific comment, preferring to engage in discussion later.

Cllr J. Hockings stated that he called this meeting as it was right that members of the public understood what the Parish Council stood for. Without it, the Parish would most likely ask for opinion every time a new application comes to the Parish Council for comment. The Harberton Neighbourhood Plan has developed good papers and although the Parish Council could adopt this as policy there may be several more drafts before it can be finally agreed.

Having lived in the Parish for 74 years he has seen it devastated by developers who consider their plans to be 'exciting developments'. He commented that the Parish Council should adopt a simple policy so that the people know where the Council stand.

Cllr Beamish perceives there to be a 'Farmers against Residents' divide. Farmers struggle to make their business profitable. Local farmers don't grow cereal as a food crop as it can't easily be grown on a hill. Straw and hay were grown to over winter animals, but it is increasingly harder for farms to operate in this traditional manner as farms are split up when relationships break down and people pass on. Developments in agriculture policy has made life very difficult for Devon farmers who will want to diversify in whatever way they can. The Parish Council need to be positive and make sure there is dialogue before heartbreak.

Cllr Padfield commented that the Parish Council is not a planning authority, and although it is asked to comment on applications comments are often paid no heed. It is Cllr Padfield's opinion that the Parish Council should make the best of the role and have a less defensive attitude and a more positive one in which the Council allows itself to negotiate with proposals and secure a community benefit, in kind and not just in cash, that would provide better access for people and wildlife, negotiate screening and other positive improvements in accord with local wishes. It is the role of the Parish Council not to make pious objections but take the positive view and encourage proposals but enter negotiations to optimise an application so everyone benefits.

Cllr Williams comments that he agrees with the members of the public who said that the Council should represent parishioners' wishes. He reported that during the meeting with Sarah Wollaston MP there was one young person who was in favour of solar farms remarking that he would be around in 25 years when the issue of energy would be even more pressing. Everyone else at the meeting said that they were against

further proliferation in this Parish. It is Cllr Williams' opinion that the issue is only going to get worse. The Parish Council have no effect on national policy, nor on South Hams District Council. Cllr Williams encouraged the public to attend planning meetings at SHDC to show strength of feeling and write to the District Councillor as those are the actions that will have best effect.

Cllr Williams commented that he would like to see more planning applications with solar cells on roofs, on houses and for installation on farm buildings and community buildings such as the Parish Hall. He called for more people to insulate their houses properly and engage in the micro. On the macro, he argued that the Parish had done their bit.

Cllr Hoddinott commented that the summary of government policy as prepared by the Chairman can be interpreted in many ways, taking whatever angle and coming up with whatever answer you want. He stated that the Parish Council doesn't have to follow government policy, it can do whatever it wants; have a policy that we believe in.

Cllr S. Hockings commented that the public could be more charitable to Councillors. There is an implication that Councillors have been 'bought off' which is not the case. He made a comment about glare, the Parish Council were told before applications went in that there would be no glare, when clearly there is. Cllr S. Hockings agreed that the Parish had enough large scale solar farms providing power to the grid, but that applications for wind and solar generation of a certain size could be considered where there is need.

Cllr Wynne disagreed with the notion that the Parish Council had limited power, but rather believed that Parish opinion does matter at district level and that a view should be put in writing and shared with the MP as government will look to Parish Councils as being a voice of the public. He commented that the figure of approximately 80% objection to proposals and development has been consistent if looking at data collected for Luscombe Cross, Diptford and through the Neighbourhood Plan consultation. Sarah Wollaston MP is taking the issue to parliament as local people have expressed they do not want it. Cllr Wynne agrees that the global issue has to be considered, but the Harberton Parish has to find its own solutions. He comments that tourism, agriculture and visual amenity is important to the community and the Council should have a policy that reflects public opinion.

Cllrs have concerns that statistics quoted are not an accurate representation due to the households within the Parish excluded.

Cllr Trott comments that he recognises an overwhelming objection amongst the public at the meeting to large scale green energy installations. He remarks that it is a shame that the 18 – 30 year age group who he believes to be largely in favour of renewable energy development do not speak out.

Cllr Camp comments that the Parish Council needs to look at the issue not only for the short term but also into the future. He comments that we each reside in the Parish for a limited number of years and need to hand it on to the next generation in a way in which it is sustainable and should therefore look at all options. He requests that when attempting to draft policy Councillors bear in mind that Harberton is a large Parish and needs to have a broad policy that is as relevant to the fields near the Parish hall as they are to the fields near Follaton.

Cllr Broom responded to Cllr Wynne's optimistic view that the Parish Council has a significant power, by sharing a more cynical view himself. He commented that Parish Council policy has to have the maximum chance of impact. The Coombeshead application at Diptford has been called in for scrutiny and Cllr Broom hopes that more information will be provided following this process that will aid policy planning. Cllr Broom also commented that renewable energy technology might be very different in 25 years-time, that it is a moving picture and policy needs to address this.

Topic Discussion

Councillors were in broad agreement that the Parish Council should reflect public opinion in objection to large solar development, but debated:

- whether or not a Parish Council policy is needed as it could be argued that current government guidelines enables the Parish Council to object to applications on the grounds of proliferation.
- whether the Parish Council should/can adopt a policy that presumes objection as this could be interpreted as pre-determination.
- whether the Parish Council is in a position to negotiate with developers or not.
- whether any policy drafted should be negative or positive in tone.
- whether future solar applications could address issues of concern, as to technologies develops and design improves.
- global community responsibility in contributing to energy needs.

It was acknowledged that it would be impossible within the confines of the meeting to go through the sustainable energy policies as developed for the Neighbourhood Plan and come to agreement. The Councillors debated adopting a shorter statement in the interim.

Cllr Hockings proposed a motion, seconded by Cllr Williams amended by Cllr Camp and seconded by Cllr Padfield that: 'The Parish Council will support roof mounted solar arrays and ground mounted installations of up to a quarter of an acre of good design that do not contribute to the further proliferation in the Parish'. The motion was passed by all Councillors voting in favour.

Councillors discussed a statement in support of wind power but were unable to resolve a specific wording around issues of ownership and the agreeable height of turbines in the landscape. As it was clear that a policy would not be resolved within the EGM Cllr Wynne requested that the sustainable energy policies as written for the Neighbourhood Plan could appear on the next meeting of the Parish Council, and for those policies to be looked at in detail with a view to potential adoption.

The Chairman thanked members of the public and Councillors for attending the meeting, and closed the meeting at 10.25pm