



Historic England

Ms Bron Curtis

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Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils
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Our ref: P01570041

31 January 2024

Dear Ms Curtis

**T&CP (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015
& Planning (Listed Buildings & Conservation Areas) Regulations 1990**

**LAND AT GROVE FARM AND LAND EAST OF THE RAILWAY LINE, BENTLEY,
SUFFOLK
Application No. DC/23/05656**

Thank you for your letter of 7 December 2023 regarding the above application for planning permission. We initially contacted the Council asking for further information and have since received some from the applicant's agent and other sources and have had the opportunity to visit the site. On the basis of the information available to date, we offer the following advice to assist your authority in determining the application.

Historic England Advice

This application proposes the development of a solar energy generation facility on an open field to the south of the grade II* listed parish church of St Mary, a building with origins in the 12th century as shown by the construction of the nave with considerable work of later centuries including the 14th century west tower. Just to the north is the group of buildings including the 15th century Bentley Hall (grade II*) and late 16th century barn (grade I) which was formerly one of its associated farm buildings. Together with the church this forms an important group set away from the centre of the present village of Bentley suggesting that settlement has moved and leaving the church, Hall and barn in a largely rural landscape setting. This setting contributes to their significance by both illustrating this historical development and showing that the listed buildings were built in agricultural land and as a result of the



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wealth and role they played in an agricultural community. The application site may very well have been in the ownership of Bentley Hall in the past, used as farmland for much of the time but latterly as parkland. This possible historical association which could add to its significance. We would note that there are other grade II listed buildings and undesignated heritage assets in the vicinity which are not in the remit of Historic England to advise the Council.

Although the documents submitted with the application do not mention this, the tower of St Mary's church is visible from the application site and from Potash Lane to its south. While there are trees on the churchyard boundary from the paddock to the south of the churchyard the fact that the field beyond is an open greenspace can also be appreciated. As described above, the fact that the application site is an undeveloped field makes it contribute to the historic significance of the church. Developing it as proposed would fundamentally change that character and so reduce that contribution. Due to distance, vegetation and post-medieval development it appears there would not be direct intervisibility between the application site and Bentley Hall and barn. Having said this, the potential historical link between the site and Hall is of interest and something the Council might explore further and give due weight to in terms of the proposed change of land use.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states that the purpose of the planning system is to achieve sustainable development and that protection and enhancement of the historic environment is an overarching objective in this (paragraphs 7 and 8). The significance of listed buildings can be harmed or lost by alteration to them or development in their setting. The NPPF states that clear and convincing justification should be made for any such harm and that 'great weight' should be given to the conservation of listed buildings irrespective of the level of harm caused (paragraphs 199 and 200). This weight and the justification for harm should be especially convincing where harm to buildings of a high grade of listing is concerned, as is the case here. Paragraph 206 also states that the Council should favour those proposals for development which preserve those elements of setting that make a positive contribution to the heritage asset or better reveal its significance.

We have reviewed this application in terms of this policy and consider that development of the application site could result in harm to the parish church of St Mary by developing part of its setting which contributes to its historic significance and so not preserve those elements of setting that make a positive contribution to the heritage assets and better reveal their significance in terms of the NPPF, paragraphs 199 and 206. We would consider that harm to be 'less than substantial' in terms of the NPPF. We are keenly aware of the importance of developing sustainable sources of electricity generation and the importance placed on this in government policy. Paragraph 202 requires the Council to consider any public benefit which might be delivered by the proposals and weigh this against the harmful impact. We would accept that the proposed solar farm could deliver such benefits and leave this balancing process to the Council when determining the application, but would express concern at the potential impact and consider that there may be other sites in the immediate vicinity which could be developed without this impact.



Recommendation

Historic England has concerns regarding the application on heritage grounds, in particular the potential to harm the historic significance of the parish church of St Mary, Bentley, due to development in its setting. We consider that the issues and safeguards outlined in our advice need to be addressed in order for the application to meet the requirements of paragraphs 7, 8, 199 and 200 of the NPPF. In determining this application you should bear in mind the statutory duty of section 66(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 to have special regard to the desirability of preserving listed buildings or their setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which they possess. Your authority should take these representations into account and seek amendments, safeguards or further information as set out in our advice. If there are any material changes to the proposals, or you would like further advice, please contact us.

Yours sincerely

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