

Planning and Licensing Committee Pre-Committee Brief



Pent Farm Solar and Battery Storage Facility – Application: 23/0580/FH

At the forthcoming meeting of Folkestone and Hythe District Council's Planning & Licensing Committee on Tuesday 19th March 2024 members will be asked to consider an application by RNA Energy for a 18MW solar facility, covering 22ha of land, at Pent Farm in Postling, Hythe.

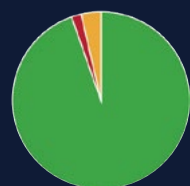
The application will supply **clean energy to over 5,500 homes**, equating to more than half of the new homes planned at the new Otterpool development, provide a **huge boost to local biodiversity**, and allocate **£60k to support the community**, its residents, and the environment.

The application has been recommended for refusal by Council officers on the basis that the harm to the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is not outweighed by the benefits of clean, secure, and cost-effective renewable energy. However, RNA Energy has developed plans to ensure the outstanding beauty is upheld and maintained, meaning the impact of the solar scheme will be limited. Indeed, 38 local residents have expressed support for the solar scheme and have called on the Council to approve the proposals.

Local Support

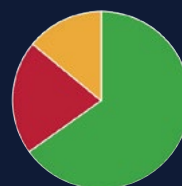
Pre-application consultation

RNA Energy consulted with the local community on the plans for Pent Farm in December 2022. In total 57 consultation responses were received which showed there is widespread support to deliver the scheme:



Do you agree with the need to generate more of our energy from renewable sources?

■ 54 – yes ■ 1 – No ■ 2 – Don't know

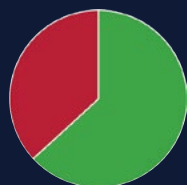


Do you agree that renewable energy should be generated locally in Postling?

■ 37 – yes ■ 12 – No ■ 8 – Don't know

Post-Submission Support

More local people have expressed support for the proposals than opposed. 38 individual letters of support have been sent to Folkestone & Hythe Council's Planning Department, with 22 letters in objection.



■ Supportive – 38

■ Opposed – 22



Why is there local support?

Boost in biodiversity to Postling

The public support stems from the need to produce renewable energy and the scheme's strong commitment to boosting biodiversity. A key benefit of solar farms is that they can easily co-exist and enhance local wildlife in the area. The Pent Farm scheme includes 4ha of habitat protection and creation on site. This includes bringing bird and bat boxes on site to encourage nesting and roosting around the farm, as well as plans to enhance ditches and hedgerows to provide habitat connectivity for small mammals, along with the creation of a new wet woodland.

The existing ponds will also be retained to support small amphibians while the wildflower grasslands will be expanded to provide a home to an abundance of local wildlife. The land is low-grade in agricultural terms, so the scheme will not be displacing significant food production. Instead, it will provide significant local biodiversity benefits while helping in the global battle to limit climate breakdown.

These gains are backed up by a recent study by Lancaster University and the University of Reading which has revealed that biodiversity thrives within solar farms in the UK.¹ Representing the first peer-reviewed field data of its kind, the study examined 15 sites and found that bumblebees were present at two-thirds of the solar parks surveyed, while the small heath butterfly, identified as a priority biodiversity species, was observed at three of the solar parks. These findings underscore the potential of solar farms to serve as habitats for diverse insect populations and contribute to local ecosystem health.

¹ <https://www.alphagalileo.org/en-gb/Item-Display/ItemId/242964?returnurl=https://www.alphagalileo.org/en-gb/Item-Display/ItemId/242964>

Achieving net zero

Folkestone & Hythe District Council declared a Climate Emergency in 2019 and has ambitions for achieving net zero across the District by as early as 2030. The Pent Farm solar facility will contribute approximately 18MW of clean renewable solar energy, making a significant contribution to renewable electricity generation capacity and helping Folkestone & Hythe achieve its objective to have net zero emissions by 2030.



Why is there local support?

Direct financial community benefits

RNA Energy has also committed to supporting the local community by establishing a £60k fund to enhance existing community and volunteer facilities at Pent Farm, benefiting residents and volunteers alike.

Presently, Pent Farm is utilised by multiple community groups that use the land for growing vegetables and education programmes that promote healthy eating and the mental health benefits of gardening. These groups include Napier Friends that support asylum seekers and Touchbase Care who support people with disabilities.

From discussions with the community groups, RNA Energy envisions that the fund could be used to build a communal kitchen for cooking vegetables grown on-site, upgrade restroom facilities for volunteers, or support educational programs on healthy eating and mental wellbeing.

Below is a comment from a spokesperson at Touchbase Care on how the scheme could benefit the community programme they run:

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The plot I have been volunteering on at Pent Farm has been a wonderful space where the members of the charity 'Touchbase Care' are able to enjoy and engage with nature and have experiences they would not normally have in society.

"It's also been a place where our other collaborating volunteer groups can come and help with large tasks, we would not be able to achieve on our own. These groups engage with the local community and are an invulnerable asset to the achievement. All members and volunteers find peace of mind and relaxation while working on the farm.

"The £60k community fund will greatly support our efforts to streamline our operations for the benefit of our local community. We ask the Council to consider approving the plans, as it would greatly enhance our ability to serve the community and provided the members with a year-round experience and share fresh, local and organic produce using regenerative agriculture methods.

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Considerations



Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Pent Farm is located just within the boundaries of Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Folkestone & Hythe's Planning Department has therefore recommended the application for refusal because they didn't feel that the landscape and visual harm was outweighed by the benefits of clean, secure, and cost-effective renewable energy generation.

However, RNA is confident that the impact to the AONB will be limited, and the character and natural beauty of the area will be upheld. RNA Energy has been through a site selection exercise along with local landowners to determine the best location for a solar development to connect into the existing Stanford Electricity Substation which adjoins the southern boundary of the chosen site. The Stanford Electricity Substation has available capacity to export renewable electricity generated by the proposed scheme, significantly without any delays, and in the current energy and cost of living crisis it is important that all parts of the National Grid that do have capacity to accept renewable energy are taken forward to deliver on our Energy Security and Net Zero aspirations.

The chosen site is strategically located adjacent to the Stanford Electricity Substation which limits the environmental impact and disruption of any grid connection through either the AONB or the local community. In addition, the site is well-located such that it will have a limited or no visual impact on properties in the nearby villages of Stanford and Postling, and is not prominent in local footpaths around either village.

The North Downs Way National Trail follows the escarpment to the north of the site and is a key footpath that people walk to experience views south across the district towards the Romney Marshes and the English Channel. The site has been chosen because in views from the North Downs Way, it benefits from a good level of screening from the existing topography and vegetation patterns, such that it is not visible from the Farthing Common viewpoint or the closest parts of the North Downs Way to the north of the site, but is seen in intermittent views from the north-east of the site as the footpath crosses high points that have a south-westerly aspect. This is evident by looking at the two photomontages below which are taken from two points along the North Downs Way.

In these views, the site can be seen in the mid-ground or background of views below a line of existing high voltage pylons, and as such is not within an unspoilt part of the view. The separation between the site and the village of Postling ensures that the countryside around Postling can still be readily appreciated from the North Downs Way, and the proposed scheme would not significantly detract from views towards the church spire in Postling.



What Local Supporters Told Us:

"I believe in this technology and the benefits it can bring to our planet and local environment. I live close by and believe we all need to do our part in accommodating such new green infrastructure."



"I live in Stanford North and regularly walk the footpaths around Pent Farm and onto Pent Downs. I support the solar project for its important green energy production that contributes to sustainability. I'm really pleased to see that the plans include measures to further increase the biodiversity in the local area - with new habitats for wildlife."



"The plans for a new solar farm in Hythe will help to create a sustainable future for generations to come and should be fully supported by the Council."



"Our world and the UK are seeing the crippling effects of climate change and the time for action to move away from fossil fuels has never been more critical."



"I support these plans as the development of clean, green energy supplies is vital to serve the ever-increasing population in this area."



"I am a local resident of 35 years standing, and a lifelong naturalist and environmentalist. I support this application. Climate change is real, and the need for renewable energy is urgent. I believe that this proposal will enhance wildlife habitats, and in any case we cannot allow a short term landscape change stand in the way of a move to green energy."



We hope you will consider the large-scale local support and approve the application when it is considered on Tuesday 19th March 2024.