As you may already be aware, there is a proposal to build a 'solar farm' on one of the fields comprising Swangley's Farm. This will involve covering much of the field with solar panels, fixed on metal frames, installing a container-sized inverter building, and connecting the latter to the grid. The field is at the junction of Swangley's Lane and Baines Lane, at the eastern boundary of the parish, where it borders Datchworth Parish. The field is approximately fifty acres. Full details are available on the website of Solstice Renewables, the developer, as well as on the Parish Council website.

Another proposal has been made for a similar-sized solar farm at Three Houses Farm, between Three Houses Lane and Node Wood. This is in the western 'finger' of the Parish, which encompasses Rusling End and Three Houses Lane. No planning application has been made for this development as yet, so it is too early to say any more about it. It is notable that a number of these developments have been proposed in nearby parishes, including in Graveley and Langley. This may be linked to the current subsidy levels, which are due to change in April 2015.

It is expected that the fully validated applications for these two solar farms will have been accepted by NHDC by September. In the case of the Swangley's Farm site, a 'screening opinion' has already been received and approved. This is a preliminary enquiry to determine what documents must be accompany in the application itself. The approval of this screening opinion application does not have any bearing on whether the development application itself will be approved.

The process for deciding on these applications is as follows. Once the application has been validated, it will be uploaded to the NHDC planning portal. The application will be examined by the Parish Council (or which I am a member) at a meeting of the Planning Committee, typically the first meeting after the application has been validated. Members of the public are welcome to attend this meeting. A period, typically fifteen minutes before the meeting formally starts, is allocated for members of the public to give their views. The discussion about the application is held in public, and, usually, the committee decides whether it has any objection to the application, and, if it has, on what ground(s) it objects. It may also decide to support an application in some cases, or merely to not object to it.

The key to the process is deciding on which ground or grounds the committee objects to the application. Planning applications must be decided in relation to the relevant planning legislation. If an application is not consistent with the Local Plan, or is outside the guidelines defined in the national and local guidelines, then the Parish Council may object, but the specific guideline that has been breached must be identified. The decision of the Parish Council is not final: it is merely a consultee, alongside possibly many others, depending on the type of the application. Neighbours are another class of consultee: all have the right to submit their comments to the Planning Authority, which is in this case is NHDC.

The key decision to be made is whether or not the renewable energy generated by these farms constitutes circumstances which are sufficiently special to override the general principle that development in the Green Belt is inappropriate. The relevant legislation is the National Planning Policy Framework, supplemented by the government's Planning Practice Guidance. Any decision about these applications, as in the case of any other planning applications, will be decided in the light of this planning legislation, not on the weight of local opinion or on the value of renewable energy generation.

References

Parish Clerk, Knebworth: clerk@knebworthpc.org.uk or 01438 813795.

NHDC Planning Portal: http://pa.north-herts.gov.uk/online-applications/

NHDC: 01462 474000 or service@north-herts.gov.uk

Planning Practice Guidance: http://planningguidance.planningportal.gov.uk/