

Reference: 22/02102/MFUL
Proposal: Construction of on-farm anaerobic digestion plant with associated equipment and works
Location: Land at NGR 300535 112291 (Bycott Farm) Lower Town Halberton Devon
Parish: Halberton

Willand Parish Council has now had the opportunity to be in possession of much more information in relation to the application with all the additional documents now available.

Willand Parish has a large commercial AD Plant on the edge of the village which requires considerable tonnages of 'feedstock' being brought to the site. From the original permissions further variations have been approved greatly increasing vehicle road movements and tonnages of feedstock being delivered to the site which comes from a considerable area around Devon and Somerset. Many of the deliveries are by oversized tractor and trailer movements although Transport Plans refer to large lorries. There are occasional odours from the site where there are feedstocks being dumped and stored in the open contrary to conditions and Environment Agency permits. There are a considerable number of transport movements leaving the plant with digestate.

The experiences within the village have led to interest being taken in operations elsewhere in the area. There are a number and the demand for feedstocks is utilising considerable land mass for the growth of silage grass and maize feed crop. The problems experienced within Willand are not as bad as seen in other nearby areas and although each application has to be treated on its own merit there is a pattern of operations which appear to be common and regularly in breach of meaningless and unenforceable conditions. In some cases planning breaches have been evident for over five years and the current planning enforcement activity, if any, seems to be to allow retrospective applications or variations to 'legalise' the continued breaches.

With this knowledge and experience gained, Willand Parish Council support the objections being made in relation to the current application. Ongoing 'tweaks' and amendments to the application detail and information results in a lack of clarity and leads to objectors and consultees not knowing what the current position is. This is even clear from the reports of professional Officers. The Public Health Officer has had to respond at least three times without having clarification of points raised.

DCC Highways appear to have little or no issues with what is being proposed and seem to accept applicant led Transport Assessments without proper analysis or question. This is a common experience for objectors who are frustrated as they live on the roads and use them on a daily basis. Even those members of the public who do not live in close proximity to the site can see the unsuitability of the road infrastructure for large lorries and/or tractors and trailers. Schoolchildren faced without even the simplest of footpaths on their way to and from school is a potential for grief. What is evident from the Transport Assessment is the further increase in HGV movements which is forecast to have an annualised increase of 80% on roads which were not designed or built to take this volume or type of traffic.

Even after all of this time and with objectors raising issues in relation to the effect on the Conservation Area, at the time of writing there is still no report from a professional Conservation Officer independent from the applicant. It is clear to many that the proximity of this development to both conservation areas, Halberton and the Grand Western Canal, lead to material negative impacts and are at odds with the protection afforded from the appropriate planning policies.

The number of local objectors must be given weight and consideration as it will be they that will be most greatly affected if the experiences from this proposed plant are anything like experienced elsewhere. In addition to the volume of public objections it is noticeable the parishes of Halberton, Sampford Peverell, Uffculme and ourselves have objected along with Tiverton Town Council which reflects the scale of concern with this development and the undoubted impact across all these areas

It is stated that this is a new design and therefore there are a number of unknowns. That is not a reason to negate the concerns of objectors or professional officers in relation to experiences elsewhere. This 'new design' of plant may turn out to have more harmful issues than have been experienced elsewhere. Some of the assertions by the applicant and employed experts lack evidence to support their assertions and opinions.

Whilst supporting the need and objectives around green energy and climate change those objectives and their benefits have to be balanced against the potential harms that have been identified relevant to this proposed site.

There are major potential concerns raised in relation to odour and the potential for health issues. There are breaches and/or noncompliance with Local Plan policies and guidance given in relation to health and safety. The road infrastructure and potential usage raises concerns as to danger for pedestrians, particularly school children. There are potential problems, from the number of large vehicle movements needed, to cause damage to unsuitable roads and then there are heritage assets which could be adversely affected. Feedstocks will have to be brought from other sites than that which can be supplied on the farm. There will be conflict with supply as this will be in addition to the demands of other similar plants in the area. There are too many such plants in the area making demands on feedstock. This coupled with all the solar farms, actual or planned, in the area means that land available for food production for humans and animals is being greatly reduced adding to food miles and thereby adding to any carbon footprint.

Refusal is strongly recommended in that the potential cumulative harmful issues raised far outweighs any potential benefits.