

**Minutes of Withersfield Parish Council meeting held at
7:30pm on Tuesday, 12th October 2023 at the village hall, Withersfield.**

Present: Cllrs Terry Rich (Chairman), Frank Eve (Vice-chair), Sheila Horton, Gill Jarvis,
Julia Korona, Philip Stiles, Indunil Wijenayaka; Clerk: Laura Crump;
District Councillor: Indunil Wijenayaka; County Councillor: Bobby Bennett;
Sarah Stevens and at least 50 parishioners.

1. Apologies for absence

None.

2. Declaration of members' interests

None.

3. Consideration of Planning Application SCC/0045/23SE

*Proposal: Construction and operation of an anaerobic digestion facility, associated infrastructure and new access road, connecting pipeline and covered digestate lagoons.
Location: Land to the north of Spring Grove Farm, Withersfield, Suffolk, CB9 7SW*

The Chair gave an introduction to the meeting and planning application. He explained how that up until this point, the PC had not taken a view on the proposal but had asked questions to learn more and be able to give an informed view when the consultation period began. Acorn, the applicant, had been invited to attend but declined – this caused much disappointment among the attendees at the meeting. Thurlow Estate had been invited, but they advised the PC to communicate through Acorn. Matt Hancock, MP, had been invited, whom also declined. Sarah Stevens, a villager with experience as a planning consultant, agreed to assist the PC and was in attendance. Therefore, the purpose of the meeting was for the Parish Councillor to hear the views of residents towards the planning application.

The Chair and the Councillors gave a brief description of the planning application being: The implementation of an anaerobic digestion plant which will process agricultural feedstocks to produce biomethane, sited at Spring Grove Farm in Withersfield on grade 2 farm land. Roughly amounting to 11 hectares, the site will be the largest AD plant in the country. It will consist of 5 fermentation tanks, approximately the size of 4 double decker buses high, and digestate lagoons, approximately the size of 8 Olympic sized swimming pools.

It was explained that the consultation period ends on 26th October 2023. The PC have secured an extension for comment until the 15th November 2023. Acorn is holding a public exhibition on 1st November 2023.

Cllr Bennett confirmed that **the public would be able to submit their comments after the consultation period ends and right up until the committee meeting** – the date has not yet been set but will possibly be in February 2024. She will find out the date from Planning. Cllr Bennett also confirmed that the public is able to write an addendum, to give additional information, after they have submitted comments.

Parishioners were welcomed to articulate their thoughts. The following points were raised by parishioners:

- One parishioner had recently passed a similar plant, although much smaller in size, which caused a substantial odour which could be smelled very strongly a mile away from the plant, and 2 miles away the smell was still very much in the air. During this drive-by, they noticed a lot of traffic had been caused by the vehicles driving to and from the plant. These vehicles were also dragging some sort of brown residue over the roads for quite some distance.
- The site location - worse choice being on the edge of a village. Thurlow Estate own a lot of land and there are more suitable places for this plant within their land.
- A parishioner asked whether the track record and competence of the company would be taken into account by the planning officers. She explained that at Acorn's very first meeting, she had spoken to many different people there all whom gave her different answers to her questions, causing great concern in the company's ability and authenticity. She also said that the documents submitted by Acorn contain a large number of errors and a lot of information has been 'copied and pasted' from other applications they have made.
- A parishioner said they had recently been passed the plant in Bedfordshire, which they were able to smell for over a mile away. They also stated that in the documentation Acorn have said that the use of the plant could change in the future – meaning that the smell of the plant could become much worse.
- The road where the HGVs would be using for the AD plant is already dangerous.
- The plant would be noisy.
- The pub nearby the proposed site holds events, weddings, parties etc, and this would be badly affected due to smelly vehicles driving past.
- Dog walkers would be affected by the plant.
- Acorn had previously lied by saying they had carried out a newt survey, which was not the case.
- A parishioner with many years experience in the chemicals industry, talked about methane. He mentioned a plant that had been hit by lightning causing an explosion. He also spoke about an explosion at an AD plant in the USA which had killed thousands of cattle. In this proposal, it is much closer to residents' homes, a nursery, and work place at the Epicentre.
- Health and safety concerns. There have been multiple accidents with AD plants, including explosions. There is the concern that the proximity of the plant to a large population if an explosion were to occur. This would also cause the A1307 to close

and cause damage to cars. This is a huge safety concern to neighbouring homes and the nearby nursery.

- The location being next to the flood park and the concern of the chemicals getting into the water system as the village floods.
- In one of Acorn's documents, it states there is a risk of flooding.
- Walkers would be impacted.
- The application says the site will be well screened with deciduous trees – meaning in winter, it would not be 'screened'.
- The government are discouraging using gas over other renewable energy meaning the plant isn't sustainable. It is burning gas.
- Evidence of particulates causes harm to health. Duty of care – plant of this scale in proximity to residents and a nursery.
- Oversight of the site.

Questions raised by parishioners:

- On what grounds the application would or would not be granted?
- Could the PC work with a specialist to provide a template to parishioners who wish to object but find the process overwhelming?
- Would Taylor Wimpey aid us in an objection?
- Public benefit versus harm?
- Should agricultural land be being used for this plant?
- Would Cambridge CC and neighbouring Cambridgeshire parishes be objecting?
- The underground digestate pipeline – what if it were to burst?

The Councillors discussed the points raised and also spoke about:

- The impact of wildlife including 24-hour lighting.
- Businesses threatening to leave the Epicentre if the proposal goes through – job loss.
- Euston site – all monitoring of the pressure of the site is carried out in Slovakia. Remote safety management – could it be hacked?
- If application is denied – the right to appeal period process. There is no right to appeal if permission is granted – only through judicial review if the decision is not made correctly and this is expensive.
- Access – unclear in documentation.
- When you stand on the proposed site – you can see the houses on the Arboretum.
- Decommissioning – 20 years – expensive operation.
- Plant producing more emissions than ever offset. Powering the HGVs on bio methane.

- Use of chicken manure - bird flu pandemic which might migrate to humans.
- Material planning considerations – suitability of the site, health and safety, traffic impact, community voice.
- National planning policy framework – use this to be able to quote the relevant policies in reasoning. Proposal will be rejected if there is an unacceptable impact on the community and has a severe impact the roads.
- Need to consider if proposal is approved, what conditions to set/request.

After listening to parishioners' views and discussions among the Councillors, the PC were all in agreement to object on the following grounds:

- Location
- Traffic impact
- Visual impact
- Smell
- Noise
- Impact on Gateway to Haverhill
- Health and safety concerns – recent incidents at other plants
- Oversight - management of plant
- False green credentials
- Jobs loss – negative business impact
- Environmental:
 - Ecology wildlife
 - Flood risks
 - 24-hour lighting
 - Use of agricultural land
 - Particulates – air quality

It was agreed for the PC to submit an initial objection with a more detailed objection to follow.

Public objections: as many as possible are needed – there is no age limit to objectors and it is not limited to one per household.

Acorn would be invited to the next PC meeting on Tuesday 14th November.

The 'Muck off' campaign are holding a meeting on 20th October at the village hall and a drop-in session on 21st October at the Epicentre. The campaign is working on a template for those who have requested this to aid them with their objections. All are welcome to attend these meetings.

Thanks to all for attending the meeting.

The meeting closed at 21:19.