

Planning Application 19/03025/FUL Installation of solar PV panels on the rear (south east) facing roof slope of existing building (Resubmission)

Before preparing this Report Cllr Martin Walker met with local residents to discuss this application.

The Setting

The School is a non designated heritage asset and lies in the Green Belt, in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and within the Conservation Area designated in 1975. A key feature of the Conservation designation was not just the built fabric of the village but its views:

“ Freshford’s high visual quality is derived not only from the beauty of buildings and materials: glimpses of fine countryside from within the village and the view back into it from its surroundings are equally important.”

Freshford. The History of a Somerset Village by Alan Dodge.

The Freshford and Sharpstone Conservation Area Character Appraisal was published in 2007.

The open land adjacent to the school, The Tyning, is a designated Village Green and since the adoption of the Freshford and Limpley Stoke Neighbourhood Plan in 2015 is designated also as Local Green Space.

Residents have for the first time had unrestricted access to the whole of the Tyning land which was purchased in 2015 by the Parish Council for the benefit of the community. The land was formerly in private ownership. This is significant to the extent that the views enjoyed of the village and the landscape beyond are now not merely enjoyed by users from Tyning Lane but from all aspects of the Tyning land.

The School’s Application.

The Application is supported by a comprehensive Planning and Heritage Statement which addresses all the relevant issues systematically and in detail. Councillors are invited to read the Report in full.

This new application 19/03025 is a considerable improvement to the previous withdrawn application. In particular:

Firstly, the array of the PVs has more rhythm and is aesthetically more pleasing. The panels now comprise 3 banks of symmetrical 6, 10 and 8 panels. The isolated and out of place panels above the small gables have been omitted.

Secondly, the panels are now described as non reflective. In due course a sample panel should be provided.

Thirdly, the redesigned PV panels sit into the roof with the outer face of the PVs sitting flush with the outer face of the slate roof coverings.

It will not be easy to provide a more pleasing design.

The Conservation Historic Environment Officers Report. (Dated 18/07/19)

For ease of Reference a copy of the Report is attached as an Appendix to this Report.

Councillors are asked to note that the broad conclusion of the HE Officer is that the school's application will result in a small reduction in the level of harm previously identified as 'significant' but that the degree of harm is still "considerable and unacceptable."

At the same time the Officer appears to acknowledge that the harm is "less than substantial" and so Para 197 of the NPPF may be invoked:

"The case officer will need to consider whether the level of harm is now outweighed by the public benefits of the work as part of the planning balance."

Commentary

The Local Authority has a duty to seek to preserve or enhance the character or appearance of a Conservation Area.

Local Policy HE1 provides further that:

"Development that has an impact upon a heritage asset, whether designated or non-designated, will be expected to enhance or better reveal its significance and/or setting, and make a positive contribution to its character and appearance."

It is accepted by the Applicants that the roof panels will be visible from the Tynning Lane and open space affecting sight lines.

The previous application 18/0529 was discussed at our December 2018 PC meeting. The Application was subsequently withdrawn following comments from BANES Historic Environment Conservation Officer.

The current proposal must seek to strike a balance between the benefits which will accrue to the School and to the public with the wider Conservation and environmental issues.

Conclusion

The arguments both for and against the present Application are comprehensive and well documented. Councillors will recognise that there is some tension and conflict between the competing claims of the duty placed on Local Authorities both to seek to protect and enhance Conservation Areas while simultaneously weighing in the balance the need to promote schemes for sustainable energy.

The Conservation status of Freshford is a jewel in the crown and has for the last 45 years contributed significantly to the quality of both the built and natural environment. It makes Freshford a special place. At the same time the support for and promotion by the local community of, sustainable energy has been evidenced by the Galleries Shop PV scheme which had a less difficult passage through the planning process as the scheme lay outside the Conservation Area.

There is a fine balance to be struck. The improved panel design will detract from the character of the landscape in the Conservation Area and cause some harm to the non designated heritage asset of the School Building. It is difficult to see how the application enhances the Conservation Area or makes a positive contribution ‘to its character and appearance.’ Supporters of the present application say that the placement of solar roof panels on the SE elevation is not that intrusive and that in any event it is a price worth paying in the national move to a carbon neutral footprint by 2050.

It is recommended that Freshford Parish Council submit this Response to the Planning Authority and determine whether or not to conclude by recommending Comment Only or Support for the Application. The Case Officer has the fullest information on which to base his decision and to exercise his planning expertise and judgment to determine just where the balance of conflicting interests should be drawn.

Ends. - but see Appendix following.