Public Consultation

Potential funding for independent professional advice on the ILOS solar farm proposal at Old House Farm

Consultation closes: Thursday 31 December 2026

1. Purpose of this consultation

Hartlip Parish Council is consulting residents on whether it should allocate public funds to obtain independent professional assessments of the proposed ILOS solar farm development at Old House Farm. The consultation is about potential expenditure on advice, not a vote for or against the solar farm. No decision to commit this funding has been made.

The proposals concern agricultural land within an area identified as an Area of High Landscape Value (AHLV) under the adopted Swale Local Plan. Matters potentially relevant to planning include landscape character, heritage, agricultural land, biodiversity and environmental effects. Specialist evidence could help the Council assess such matters and respond to any planning application.

2. What advice is being considered, and how much might it cost?

The Council is considering a single potential expenditure provision, estimated at £10,000–£15,000. This is a range for consultation purposes, not an approved allocation or authority to incur expenditure. The eventual scope and cost would depend on quotations and subsequent Council decisions.

Depending on available funds and the questions requiring examination, the Council might seek reports on:

- Landscape and visual effects: effects on the AHLV, countryside character and important views.
- Heritage: effects on heritage assets, their settings and the historic character of the area.
- Agricultural and environmental matters: land classification, implications for continued agricultural use and relevant environmental effects.

The amount indicated might fund fewer than three reports. It should not be taken to cover every planning matter. Further reports, specialist representation or legal proceedings, if considered, would entail separate decisions and potentially substantial additional costs.

3. What might the reports achieve — and what are their limitations?

Independent assessments could help the Council evaluate technical material supplied by the developer, identify matters requiring clarification and make evidence-based representations. Findings might identify adverse impacts, possible mitigation, or grounds for seeking amendments or planning conditions.

Objective specialists might equally find that anticipated impacts are limited, can be mitigated or do not substantiate particular concerns. Any of these findings could inform the Council’s position, but useful information does not necessarily mean the expenditure is proportionate to its cost. The Council would remain liable for properly commissioned fees regardless of the findings.

Even evidence identifying significant concerns would not guarantee refusal of planning permission or amendments to the scheme. Planning decisions rest with the relevant planning authority, applying the applicable policies and evidence.

4. A local illustration: Pitstock solar farm, Rodmersham

The Pitstock solar farm proposal at Rodmersham attracted objections and public concern. Swale Borough Council granted planning permission in October 2025. Rodmersham Parish Council challenged that permission by judicial review; the High Court dismissed the challenge on 16 September 2026. The Parish Council subsequently decided to seek permission to appeal. The position on any subsequent proceedings had not been confirmed when this consultation was prepared.

The circumstances at Rodmersham are distinct from those at Hartlip. The example does not establish whether advice would be worthwhile here; it illustrates that substantial scrutiny, objections and legal action cannot guarantee a particular planning outcome. The potential value, cost and uncertainty of commissioning reports must therefore be weighed carefully.

5. Financial implications for Hartlip

For context, the Council's 2026/27 financial figures are:

- Current total annual parish precept: £23,080.
- Current annual Band D parish precept: £60.53.
- Council Tax Base: 381 Band D-equivalent properties; electorate: 624.

If the full expenditure were funded through an increase in the parish precept, £10,000 would represent an additional amount equivalent to approximately 43% of the current annual precept, while £15,000 would represent approximately 65%. These figures describe the possible additional precept, not a proportion of the eventual total.

Assuming the Council Tax Base remains unchanged, raising the entire amount through the precept would represent an additional £26.25–£39.37 per year for a Band D property (approximately £2.19–£3.28 per month). Those figures are illustrative, not predictions of the actual 2027/28 Council Tax increase.

The financial effect would depend on the final budget, available resources, the level and timing of any approved expenditure and the Council's other operating and maintenance commitments. Funding specialist advice could reduce money available for other priorities or require additional precept. If work is needed before 1 April 2027, the Council may need to consider whether to meet initial costs from existing funds, with any later budgetary provision considered separately.

6. How residents' views will be used

All valid responses submitted through the online questionnaire on Hartlip Parish Council's Public Consultation webpage by Thursday 31 December 2026 will be reported to councillors and considered before they decide whether any allocation is justified. Comments sent separately to the Council or individual members will not be counted in the formal questionnaire totals.

In making its decision, the Council will consider the responses and reasons given, the stage of the planning proposals, likely value and availability of professional advice, competing priorities and its financial responsibilities. Consultation responses inform the decision; they do not predetermine it. Any subsequent allocation and expenditure would require formal Council consideration and approval.

7. Have your say

Residents are invited to say whether they support the Council potentially allocating public funds for independent professional advice within the single estimated expenditure range of £10,000–£15,000, recognising the uncertain findings and planning outcome. This is not a referendum on the solar farm itself.

Please complete the online questionnaire on the Council's Public Consultation webpage by 31 December 2026.