

BARKESTONE, PLUNGAR & REDMILE PARISH COUNCIL

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4th January 2022

FOR THE ATTENTION OF MR ANDREW CUNNINGHAM

Melton Borough Council
Parkside
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Dear Mr Cunningham

Planning Application – 20/01182/FUL – SOLAR FARM

These comments were agreed to be submitted by Barkestone Plungar and Redmile Parish Council (BPRPC) at their meeting on 22nd December 2021, following continued updates and submissions which have been made since our last comments (dated 10th July 2021). A meeting was held with Savills on the 29th November 2021 to allow the PC to ask questions and outstanding and queried matters to be discussed. The agenda was quite extensive and a number of the points raised were either not answered or not agreed.

Community Benefit Fund

The applicant has offered a substantial Community Benefit Fund payment in the event that planning is approved. This is to be paid at the point the development starts to produce electricity. During the above meeting Savills requested that this matter is finalised before the planning application is heard. The two outstanding points were that Savills had yet to submit the form of contractual agreement and which parishes should receive funds. It was decided that the funds should be paid to BPRPC and this was communicated to Savills.

BPRPC was then asked by the applicant's agent, in connection with discussion regarding the Community Benefit, to confirm that it was satisfied that they had addressed all the technical issues relating to this application. The actual request was:

“I’m not asking them to confirm their support but we would ideally like some acknowledgement that we have resolved the technical issues to the satisfaction of statutory consultees and also that we have worked with the community to find the best possible solution to the construction access that avoids the villages – basically that we have done all we can to make the scheme as low impact as we can”.

The PC was not a little surprised to be asked for this in connection with the Community Benefit, not least because the PC understood that any Community Benefit payment should not be linked to the conduct of the planning application. It has therefore felt it necessary to put together a statement of the areas in which the PC believe technical issues have not been either adequately addressed or adequately investigated.

The Parish Council are not experts in the technical aspects of Solar Farm planning. However, we do know how our community operates and we have an inherent understanding about the local landscape, the local economy, traffic etc, and most importantly how these elements interact to form the community which the many submissions by the applicant often appear not to have grasped. Barkestone is a small unsustainable village, and the landscape around it is highly sensitive to change (one area in which we appear to disagree with the applicant, but our view is supported by various studies including Melton Borough Council’s LCA). The sensitivity of the site is highlighted by Heritage England’s comments referring to NPPF paragraphs 194 et seq., which Savills agreed that they had not addressed.

At a local level there is no benefit to the community if this project proceeds as proposed. In our view the wider public benefits of this solar farm are also severely limited, given the inappropriateness of the site in terms of ease of access, proximity to a grid connection, and its overall geographical location.

However there will be a significant adverse impact on the area, the economy and most importantly how the area is used by the wider regional population for a forty year period. Our remaining areas of concern are as follows.

CONTEXT OF THE APPLICATION

In common with a number of applications for solar farm projects, this one is for a 49.9 MW Solar Park deliberately to avoid the requirement for scrutiny as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project. The applicant has confirmed that the renewable energy and financial benefits of this project are marginal, when taking into account the expected cost of implementing the project. This is because of a number of factors, including the remoteness of the site from the grid connection and its relatively Northerly location. The consultation process has in addition identified that in order for the development not to cause significant harm to the landscape, wildlife and the community, it would be essential to impose a large number of complex planning conditions, in particular regarding Landscape and Ecological Management and Transport. The responsibility will then fall on the relevant authorities to ensure that these are monitored for a 40 year period.

The PC has grave concerns that, notwithstanding the best intentions of regulatory bodies, it will prove very difficult, if not impractical, to monitor and enforce those specific conditions, including (but not limited to) ongoing condition that relate to the life of the development.

IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Barkestone Plungar and Redmile are the “host” community for this development. A key aspect in the decision whether or not this proposal should be permitted is the assessment of the expected benefits of this Solar Farm against the likely harm caused to the landscape, environment economy and wellbeing of the host community. No attempt has been made to assess the impact of this development upon that community. Clearly there will be significant short term impacts from transport, but in addition there will be loss of jobs and enduring negative impacts upon the local economy, particularly in the area of leisure and tourism.

TRANSPORT

After several inappropriate and questionable proposals to lorry routeing and the transportation impacts of this development, the applicant now promotes a temporary solution to the problem of access to the site for construction purposes. *According to the applicant*, the estimates of expected traffic impacts in the latest revised transport plan, and the outstanding requirements of the statutory consultees (Highways England, Nottinghamshire HA and Leicestershire HA), have all been signed off as agreed; on the contrary, the PC understands that this not be the case with outstanding responses from local highway authorities yet to be received.

It is still our opinion that the transport requirements for this proposal have not been accurately assessed. Throughout this exercise, the transport figures and routeing strategies have been based on questionable, inconsistent, and (to be frank) misleading calculations, as identified in representations to the BC. The various TAs have lacked understanding of the local highway network, resulting in reactionary amendments to address inadequacies.

Given this background, we are concerned that the traffic estimates are still wildly underestimated (even based on the consultant’s own comparison sites). We believe that they require further scrutiny, and cannot be accepted with any degree of confidence.

Furthermore, we find the applicant’s claim, that there will be only very occasional road traffic to the site for the whole of the 40 years after the initial 6 month construction period, highly implausible/inconceivable. This surely is stretching credulity too far. Moreover, the proposal is that any post-construction traffic will rely on an inadequate lengthy, narrow and unmade BOAT, to which even to statutory consultees have expressed reservations. We would add that a large part of this BOAT is in a category 3 flood zone, which does flood regularly, something which appears not to have been addressed.

LANDSCAPE AND ECOLOGICAL IMPACT

A Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment was submitted in October 2020. MBC engaged an independent consultant (Red Kite Consulting based in Shropshire) to review this LVIA and the initial review assessed the LVIA as deficient in a number of respects. A subsequent LVIA was submitted, which addressed some, though not all, of the deficiencies. Red Kite’s further review found that there was no reason to object to the findings of the revised LVIA.

However, in the PC’s view the LVIA is still not a correct assessment of the impact of the solar farm upon the landscape for which it is proposed (being one of the most sensitive in the County Landscape Study).

There was only one site visit to the area, in July 2020, by the author of the LVIA. Red Kite did not make a site visit at all but conducted only a desktop review. The one site visit must have been perfunctory, since the one most important viewpoint over the SF, from Jericho Lane in Barkestone, is not considered or even mentioned in either report.

The LVIA and Red Kite's report make it clear that the assessment is heavily reliant upon subjective judgement. The direction of the LVIA author's approach was to make judgements which were likely to err in favour of the proposal. Red Kite's desktop review is clearly not able to make alternative judgements based on the same level of information.

The revised LVIA quotes Policy EN10 when looking at the Local Plan Policies but does not mention Policy EN1 (overall policy aimed at preserving Melton's landscape character) or EN2 (Biodiversity and Geodiversity).

The applicant's LVIA, and the Design and Access Statement, are selective in the views they choose to portray, and omit certain key areas of visual impact. They also fail to recognise the wider setting, as is made clear by the comments of Heritage England. It is unfortunate that the consultant for MBC, who reviewed the LVIA, only undertook a desktop review, and appears to have overlooked these failings.

The Ecology assessment also, in our view, fails to look at the impact of this proposal across the wider setting. Many local residents have noted that the site area is part of the habitat of many wild birds who feed and hunt on this specific type of landscape and there is a neighbouring SSSI, which needs to be monitored.

Natural England did not raise an objection to the solar farm on the basis of their usual policy, but they did recommend further work to investigate the possible effect on an SSSI. No such work has been done, and once again the impacts of the Solar Farm on these habitats is left as uncertain, with no mechanism to remedy harms which may arise.

The statutory consultees in relation to Ecology (LCC Ecological Officer and Natural England) were also not aware of the fact that most of the land relating to the site has been entered into a Countryside Stewardship Scheme Mid Tier Agreement whereby the owner benefits financially. Some of the Ecological enhancements promised by the LEMP would be required under this scheme also. This calls into question whether there would be a biodiversity net gain, comparing the management of the land under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme with that indicated by the LEMP. We consider that the statutory consultees should be asked to review their comments in the light of this. We also note that the land would not be eligible for the scheme if it were used for solar energy generation.

Conclusions

We are aware that the Community Benefit is a voluntary arrangement and that it forms no part of planning considerations. Payment of a Community Benefit is however best practice which should be followed by any developer who has engaged in meaningful consultation with the community. We are not prepared for it to be subject our agreement that no further work needs to be done on this application, when it is so clear, as we have outlined above, that the submissions by the applicant and the investigation of them have fallen short of the level expected for development of this magnitude.

We remain of the view that the choice of this site for a solar farm is a very poor one, and that no amount of attempted "impact mitigation" is going to change that.

Yours sincerely

M E Jones

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Clerk to Barkestone, Plungar & Redmile Parish Council