

BARKESTONE, PLUNGAR & REDMILE PARISH COUNCIL

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14th December 2020

FOR THE ATTENTION OF MR ANDREW CUNNINGHAM

Dear Mr Cunningham

Installation of a solar farm comprising ground mounted solar PV panels with a net installed generating capacity (AC) of up to 49.9MW, including mounting system, battery storage units, inverters, underground cabling, stock proof fence, CCTV, internal tracks and associated infrastructure, landscaping and environmental enhancements for a temporary period of 40 years and a permanent grid connection hub. 

Land East Of Jericho Covert Jericho Lane Barkestone Le Vale

Ref. No: 20/01182/FUL

The Parish Council strongly objects to this application.

Consultation process

Notwithstanding the difficulties of the current pandemic, we have consulted with residents and found an overwhelming majority against the proposal. We consider that there are strong planning reasons to reject this application, and that there are substantial weaknesses in the applicant's evidence and consequent assertions.

It is wholly unreasonable to claim a lack of public interest, as the applicant suggests, based as it is on the inadequate public consultation exercise. Moreover, those individuals who did send in their comments received scant responses from the agents. Most people who object to the proposal have very sensibly delayed their response until the formal application was available. Since then, an online petition raised only in December has already had gathered over 260 signatures, and the numerous individual objections continue to rise steadily.

Submitted evidence

Several residents have raised significant concerns over the submitted documentation. For example, the level of construction traffic has been severely under-estimated, and the Ecological Impact Assessment Report is based on the flimsy and incomplete evidence (e.g. desk based research only, few visits, no winter bird assessment). The Parish Council is especially disappointed at the Council's 'screening opinion' that an EIA is not required for this proposal; the assertion that the solar farm will

not have a significant effect on landscape character is astounding, and, in our opinion, the applicant's supporting documentation is not an adequate substitute for a formal EIA.

As a result, the PC intends to commission our own assessments in key areas, and therefore this initial response represents is a **holding objection** pending the results of further investigation.

We are aware from consultee responses that there is a number of outstanding matters for the applicant to address, so given the likely deferment to of any decision, the parish council seeks formal **extension of time** in which to submit its fully informed response of this complex proposal (including any intervening amendments).

PLANNING REASONS FOR OBJECTION

Scale and location of the proposal:

Notwithstanding support for solar energy in principle, at appropriate scale and location, the massive size of this development is of fundamental concern.

The solar park would completely change a piece of quintessential English countryside, turning an agricultural landscape into a quasi-industrial one. The PC is aware of a trailing proposal for another huge solar park some two miles away, and the combined size of the two solar parks, if passed would be over 400 acres. We are very concerned that the rural landscape which is so highly treasured by our parish residents, and which fosters an array of indigenous wildlife, is in grave danger.

This proposal is for a massive solar park on agricultural land in the heart of the Vale of Belvoir. The site is remote from a suitable grid connection, does not have easy access, and is not in a high solar output area of the UK. For these reasons, it needs to be exceptionally large to make it cost effective. The size has been pitched at 49.9MW, which is just 0.1 MW below the level at which the proposal would have to be decided at a national level. Even so, if it were in existence today, this would be within the top 5 largest solar parks in the UK.

Landscape and visual impact

This part of the Vale of Belvoir is identified as *'an expansive gentle vale landscape with a strong pattern of medium scale rectangular shaped pastoral and arable fields with managed hedgerows and the Grantham canal, punctuated by nucleated villages with prominent church spires'* (Melton Local Plan: Landscape Character Assessment). The solar park would radically change the landscape, described in Melton Local Plan as *'sensitive to change'*, and amongst one of the more sensitive areas in the County (moderately to *highly* sensitive in the County Study).

Barkestone Church (Grade II*) has one of the prominent spires mentioned above, and the views Southwards towards that church would be significantly impacted by this solar park. The footpath in this area is being retained but it is doubtful whether anyone would choose to walk it any more. In addition, the presence of the solar park would blight other walking paths in the locality, including that along the Grantham Canal, which is an SSSI, and the disused railway line, which the Parish Council has just acquired under license to create a footpath and bridleway.

There is a campaign underway, led by Alicia Kearns MP, to secure AONB status for the Vale of Belvoir, bringing with it an enhancement of the tourism offers and sustainable rural economy which are already emerging in this area. That campaign would surely be blighted by this huge industrial development in the heart of the Vale (on an Ordnance survey map, the very spot where "Vale of Belvoir" is written).

Environment and ecology

The land has been assessed by the applicants as not best and most versatile agricultural land, but it is still good agricultural land, typical of that in the Vale of Belvoir, an area which has helped to make Melton the “food capital of England”. The farm was successfully farmed for many years by a tenant farmer until recently, and could quite easily be so farmed for years to come.

The applicants claim that flat land suitable for solar parks is hard to find in England, but that statement is hard to substantiate.

The applicant has proposed a land management plan which is described as ‘environmental enhancement’; in fact, it amounts to poor mitigation for the environmental harm caused by this solar park. The development will not improve the landscape from a visual point of view or ecologically, quite the opposite.

Natural England and the RSPB among others recommend that solar parks should not be sited near protected areas. The Grantham Canal SSSI is less than 50m away from this site, and the disused railway line, which provides habitat for an abundance of wildlife, is even closer.

The area has significant populations of birds which are on the RSBP’s Red and Amber lists, as well as other important species including raptors such as the Red kite, Sparrowhawk and several species of owl. The existence of this bird life also suggests that the landscape is a successful ecosystem which would be seriously impacted by an industrial type managed development. Certainly a more detailed study of the impact of this proposal on the wildlife of the area should be conducted.

Policy considerations

In paragraph 151 the NPPF endorses the use and supply of renewable and low carbon energy, *but* only if ensuring that adverse impacts, including cumulative landscape and visual impacts, are addressed satisfactorily. In our view the adverse impacts of this development on the landscape, visual amenity, recognised landscape character, biodiversity and ecology far outweigh the benefits of any solar energy gain, especially given the inherent inappropriateness of the site in terms of its access to the grid and its inaccessibility.

The NPPF (paragraphs 170-172) says that planning decisions should ‘conserve and enhance the natural local environment by, among other things, protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, and *recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside*’. Contrary to the applicant’s submissions, it is difficult to see how the development could fulfil such objectives.

Paragraph 174 of the NPPF also states that “to protect and enhance biodiversity and geodiversity, plans should identify, map and safeguard components of local wildlife-rich habitats, and if significant harm to biodiversity resulting from a development cannot be avoided then planning permission should be refused.” There are further points made in paragraphs 174-177 of the NPPF which have so far not been given adequate attention in this application.

Similarly, the Melton LP Policy EN1 is aimed at ensuring that the character of Melton Borough’s landscape and countryside will be conserved and, where possible, enhanced.

The Melton LP recognises that solar parks can have significant impacts on the character and appearance of the landscape (7.20.5). It refers to the balance between protecting the rural character and the need to reduce greenhouse gases/support low carbon energy (7.20.6). The Parish Council is convinced that, in this case, that balance weighs infinitely in favour of protecting the inherent character of the Vale from this unacceptably intrusive development.

The Melton Local Plan policy on renewable energy is **policy EN10**. Out of 14 factors which need to be considered in relation to proposals, at least seven are impacted by the proposal. It is the strongly held view of the PC that the proposal is likely to have net adverse impacts on the surrounding landscape and heritage assets, residential and visual amenity, biodiversity and ecology, best use of agricultural land and access for construction. These adverse impacts outweigh the advantages of this site in terms of its suitability for solar energy generation, for which there are many alternative *acceptable* locations.

Despite the consultant's assertions, there would seem to be very few social or economic benefits to the local economy from this proposal. On the contrary there would be adverse impacts on the tourism and diversification of the rural economy in the wider locality.

Yours sincerely

M E Jones

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