



Fiona Dunning
Development Management
East Hertfordshire District Council
Wallfields
Pegs Lane
Hertford SG13 8EQ

Our Ref:

Your Ref:

27th April 2022 (by email)

Dear Fiona Dunning,

Application no. 3/21/2601/FUL

**Land at Wickham Hall Estate, Hadham Road, Bishops Stortford, CM21 1JG
Erection of a solar photovoltaic farm with an output capacity not to exceed 49.9MW of
energy, with supporting infrastructure and battery storage, inverters and transformers,
fencing and landscaping works**

I write with reference to the above application, with apologies for the late response, to register CPRE Hertfordshire's strong objection to the installation of this large solar farm, notwithstanding our firm support for sustainable forms of electricity generation, and specifically solar generation related to buildings and previously developed land. Certain renewable energy sources, if not properly controlled, can have serious consequences for our natural environment.

We note that the proposed development of 114 hectares straddles both East Herts and Uttlesford District Council areas, 78 hectares of which lies within East Herts. At present, in Hertfordshire, there is a proliferation of similar applications for solar energy installations across the Green Belt and similarly protected areas. The cumulative effects of these proposals will have a significant and damaging impact on wide areas of highly valued open countryside and agricultural land.

National Planning Practice Guidance (Renewable and Low Carbon Energy) is clear that the promotion of renewable energy: "does not mean that that the need for renewable energy automatically overrides environmental protections and the planning concerns of local communities." CPRE Hertfordshire thus objects strongly to this application for the following reasons.

1. A proportion of the land identified for this proposed development within East Herts District Council area is located within the London Metropolitan Green Belt as identified in the adopted East Herts District Plan (23.5% of the area within East Herts). The remainder



- is designated as Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt (RABGB) within the District Plan which confers similar protection for rural character and countryside.
2. Both Green Belt and Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt (RABGB) are policy and land use designations of large areas of highly valued open countryside and landscape. The land proposed for this development performs vital functions as open countryside, both for agriculture and recreation, and for the conservation and enhancement of the natural environment.
 3. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) as revised in July 2021 requires land designated as Green Belt to be kept “permanently open” (para. 137) and “inappropriate development... should not be approved except in very special circumstances” (para. 147). Policy GBR2 in Part 1 of the East Herts District Plan identifies RABGB as “a valued countryside resource” and states that only exceptional development will be permitted.
 4. With regard to Policy GBR2, the Planning Statement prepared by DLP Planning for the Applicant states in para. 8.4 that the lack of specification of ‘solar farms’ as exceptional developments in RABGB means that the Council should “defer to the specific policy, Policy CC3 and the tests it contains.” This is wilful misinterpretation of Local Plan policies in this area and it is clear that protection of the rural character in RABGB is paramount.
 5. The proposed development fails three of the five tests listed in Policy CC3, that is: “impacts upon ...a) environmental and historic assets; b) visual amenity and landscape character; d) the amenity of neighbouring residents and sensitive uses“. It is entirely misleading to suggest that these tests are satisfied by over 100 hectares of ground-mounted solar energy installation.
 6. The industrial nature of the photo-voltaic panels and associated infrastructure will change the nature of the countryside in this area for a generation. The presence of large areas of glass and metal are entirely inappropriate for designated protected areas whose purpose is expressly to maintain their openness permanently (NPPF para. 138).
 7. As noted above, national Planning Policy Guidance (PPG) provides specific guidance on solar farms (Renewable and Low Carbon Energy) and notes that factors to consider include “the effect on a protected area such as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty or other designated areas.” PPG also states that “the deployment of large-scale solar farms can have a negative impact on the rural environment, particularly in undulating landscapes.”
 8. Ministerial statements of April 2013 and March 2015 are also quoted in PPG, noting that the need for renewable energy should not automatically override environmental



- protection. The large extent of this proposal, 114 hectares, will make a very considerable impact on the area, by virtue of both the solar panels themselves, and the associated infrastructure.
9. The Applicant acknowledges that “very special circumstances“ need to be demonstrated sufficient to outweigh harm to the Green Belt and these are stated to be related primarily to the benefits of the provision of renewable energy during the 40 year life of the proposed development and its temporary and reversible nature with regard to impact on the countryside.
 10. We also believe that it is disingenuous to suggest, as the Planning Statement does, that only a relatively small area of Green Belt is affected and this reduces its significance. A crucial element of the impact on the Green Belt is the total extent of the proposed development and this should be taken into full account.
 11. Ground-mounted solar installations are not locationally constrained as they require only direct sunlight. It is neither appropriate nor necessary to locate such installations on valued open countryside which has been designated to be protected through the Local Plan process.
 12. As the very significant public and institutional response to this application notes, the proposed development will be highly visually prominent in the landscape. It is situated close to Bishops Stortford to the north-west of the town and will be easily seen from all directions.
 13. The area is very extensively used by the public and a number of public rights of way cross the land affected, the most prominent of which is The Hertfordshire Way, which runs alongside the western boundary of the site. This will further increase visibility and impact to an unacceptable extent.
 14. The principle of openness is a key test for the maintenance of Green Belt, as emphasised in several court cases (including *Lea Valley Regional Park vs Epping Forest DC*; *Samuel Smith vs North Yorks County Council*). This will be severely jeopardised by the fencing, transformers and other bulky and unsightly equipment associated with this proposal.
 15. The proposed development comprises 32 AC boxes/inverters, transformers and switchgear units, a DNO sub-station, communications unit, storage building, and 10 battery storage units. These are in addition to the 1500 full and half table arrays of panels, 2.5 metre high fencing, together with 3 metre high pole mounted security



cameras, gates and additional roads which constitute considerable and unacceptable industrialisation of the landscape.

16. Safety concerns are being increasingly raised with regard to the safety aspects of the battery storage facilities connected with solar energy installations, including the fire risks connected with lithium-ion batteries. These are not susceptible to traditional fire-fighting techniques and we understand that the Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue Service is not equipped to deal with such risks.
17. The present use of the land for agriculture should be maintained. The Applicant states the land is categorised as Grade 2 and 3a which are defined as Best and Most Versatile (BMV) land by DEFRA. BMV land should clearly be used for food production to maintain and enhance domestic UK food security and this requirement will only increase in the future.
18. The importance of open countryside has been constantly emphasised throughout the recent pandemic, and the beneficial aspects of maintaining such areas are likely to be increasingly recognised. Recent legislation such as the Environment Act emphasises the importance of maintaining and enhancing biodiversity.
19. Contrary to the Applicant's assertions, the 40 year timeframe proposed is not "temporary" for wildlife and habitats which would be irreparably harmed. Birds become injured or killed by mistaking the glass panels for water, small mammals get trapped in the fencing, and pollinators and other insects have their habitats compromised by extensive areas of solar panels.
20. CPRE Hertfordshire is also concerned by the negative screening decision with regard to the requirement for Environmental Impact Assessment and would ask the Council to reconsider its position on similar matters in the future due to the undeniable environmental impacts of proposals of this magnitude.
21. CPRE Hertfordshire has prepared a [Policy Statement](#) which is attached, providing further information to assist in the determination of applications for ground-mounted solar installations. These concerns are particularly relevant with regard to designated protected areas.
22. CPRE Hertfordshire reiterates its support for renewable energy and notes that Solar Energy UK estimates there are over 617,000 acres of suitable, south-facing commercial rooftops available for solar panels. We believe that rooftops and previously developed



land should be utilised for solar energy and we urge the Council to refuse permission for this damaging proposal.

Yours sincerely,

Chris Berry
Planning Manager