

Cleve Hill Solar Park Project Development Consent Order Application

Response to Environmental Statement Chapter 6.1.13 Socio-Economic effects and tourism

Anne Salmon BA MCD MRTPI comments:

The site proposed for the solar power station with nearly 900000 solar panels and its associated roads, fencing, new culverts to some of the drainage ditches and battery storage in a bunded enclosure would occupy the greater part of the present open marshland between Graveney, Nagden and the sea wall between Faversham and Seasalter.

This site is located at the eastern end of the Borough of Swale, east of Faversham and adjacent and including a very small part of the marshland at the western end of the council area of the City of Canterbury at Seasalter on the road to Whitstable. It is on the north coast of East Kent. Therefore, it is not appropriate to consider the impacts of the scheme and associated works on either the whole of Kent, the whole of Swale District which also includes Sittingbourne and Sheppey or the whole of the council which covers Canterbury, Whitstable and Herne Bay and associated rural areas. If the whole districts or the county is the scale at which the impact on tourism or employment is considered, it is not surprising that the conclusion is that the impact will be defined as negligible.

The appropriate scale to address the impact of the development on visitors is to look at the towns of Faversham and Whitstable and their environs. Swale Borough Council and other organisations promoting Faversham as a place to visit have majored on the town's historic buildings and townscape, its reputation for food and drink, its festivals which are mentioned in passing in the Socio-Economic and Tourism chapter and on walks in the countryside including the marshes around the town. Whitstable is a popular visiting place for weekenders and day trippers from London and this includes restaurants such as The Sportsman at Seasalter which has a national reputation for good food.

Part of the attraction of Faversham and Whitstable is the open, unspoilt marshland close to the towns and between them which is accessible because of footpaths but quiet and remote because visitors can get away from roads and built-up areas. The footpaths around the site where the solar installation and battery storage is proposed comprise the Saxon Shore Way, expected to become the England Coast Path and other paths including ZR 485 which crosses the site from Nagden to the sea wall at Castle Coote. One of the most popular reasons to use these paths is to watch birds on the intertidal mudflats, but also to watch raptors and winter flocks of waders and Brent geese flying over the sea wall to land on the fields. Replacement of this large area by a small area at the east end would not have the same attraction for the birds or watchers of them.

The surveys carried out by the developer in support of their view that the paths are not well-used and the impact on their use would be minor were taken on two days in July and two in August, not all at weekends and one in wet weather. A better measure of how the footpaths are used would have been to follow the advice that

had been offered by Kent County Council and use a mechanical counter and use it to measure use all year. The sea wall and paths across the site are used by local people and visitors to walk through and round the site to enjoy views and to watch wildlife, particularly birds. Therefore, filling most of the arable fields on the marshes with densely-packed panels at 3-4 metres high with only narrow gaps for the ditches would create a much less attractive vista and this cannot reasonably be described as merely a subjective view. The coast path, ZR 484 is part of a long-distance path, the England Coast Path, but most users are not using it just to walk through the area on route to the next bit of the path. Because the path runs around a long section of marsh between Seasalter and Faversham and then comes right into Faversham itself before going on around more coastal marshland, the distance covered from Whitstable makes this part of the path almost a destination in itself.

For more local users, especially in winter, the route from Nagden to Castle Coote (ZR 485) is just as important as it is a significant short cut to views of the sea/estuary. As described in the Socio-Economic and Tourism chapter, footpath ZR 485 will be changed from a path across the open marshes with views of arable fields and the sea wall to one which is fenced by 2-metre high metal fences with security cameras, passing across the roadway through the site with gates on either side of the path and traversing the whole site with only views through the legs of the panels, with panels above the users heads stretching as far as the eye can see. Even this impact is only described to have a 'moderate' impact. This would be mitigated by the path being changed to grass. At present, the path is a semi-surfaced track which can be muddy in winter. A grass surface after winter rain would quickly become impassable as well as unpleasant because of its enclosure, so that this is not really a benefit. The path would be off-putting and unpleasant and deter use.

Visitors to The Sportsman or users of the beach huts on the nearby beach at Seasalter would be deterred from walking along the sea wall as their view inland would be of a large installation akin to a great expanse of factory roof and are likely to decide that there are more attractive places to spend their money. Visitors to Faversham who venture onto the footpaths around the creek, all of which will be advertised as part of the England Coast path and are already promoted as part of the Saxon Shore Way will also experience a large industrial-looking installation across a vast area of marshland and views to a tall bund with a battery compound inside.

For the first two or three years of the project, during the construction phase, users of the road between Faversham and Whitstable via Graveney will frequently follow or meet lorries delivering materials and equipment to the site or returning from it. These users include cars going to the beach and beach huts, The Sportsman, historic Graveney church and the caravan sites at Seasalter. This is also likely to deter them from using the road and not be beneficial to the local economy at Seasalter. This route is also part of the National Cycle Route, and the addition of frequent heavy vehicles would make this part of the route less desirable to visit and use. This is not discussed in the Socio-Economic and Tourism chapter which only refers to views of the solar panels from the cycle route which are described as having a negligible impact on uses of the cycle route

As the developer has not yet identified contractors who will carry out the work to transport the materials and equipment to the site and to carry out the construction, it is not clear whether this would generate any local employment or spin-off spending. However, if any of the contractors or their employees do spend money in the towns, it would have a minimal impact and is certainly no compensation for the loss of a presently quiet and undeveloped part of the north Kent coast between two attractive towns.

If the developers were to look at the impact of the scheme on socio-economic and tourism aspects at a much more local scale, it is likely that the levels of impact would be more significant than those defined in the Socio-Economic and Tourism chapter. Together with the impacts on biodiversity, cultural heritage and landscape which are all reasons why people visit the area, the impact of the development is much more than the mostly negligible or minor levels identified by the developer.

Anne Salmon BA MCD MRTPI

On behalf of Faversham and Swale East Branch Labour Party