

Mallard Pass Solar Farm – Community Benefits

1 CONTEXT

In considering the planning application for the Mallard Pass Solar Farm the Planning Inspectorate need to balance the need and benefits of the scheme against harms caused by the development and come to a balanced conclusion as to whether the benefits outweigh the harm.

There is no doubt that there is a clear and urgent need for significant additional renewable energy generation, both globally and in the UK, and this need, coupled with significant policy support will weigh heavily in the balance.

Protections for the local community are through the Rutland Local Plan which was adopted in 2011. For context the UK solar industry was in its infancy in 2011 with a handful of 5MW schemes obtaining planning consent and being built in 2010. It would be 2013 before any significantly larger schemes were consented, but even the largest of those (33 MW at Wymeswold in Leicestershire) are a fraction of the size of the scheme currently being assessed at Mallard Pass. The Rutland local plan could not have envisaged a solar scheme of this magnitude when it was adopted.

This scheme is being assessed by the Planning Inspectorate because it is deemed to be a 'Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project', and if consented its benefits will be felt at a national scale, its harms however fall at a very local level. The harms may not be of national significance but will be of immense local significance.

In recognition of similar pressures from onshore wind developments the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy published a [Community Engagement and Benefits from onshore wind Good Practice Guide](#) in 2021. The guide goes on to state:

“COMMUNITY BENEFIT PACKAGES

It is common for renewable energy projects to incorporate financial packages that make payments directly, or in kind, to local communities. These schemes are a well-established part of onshore wind energy development. The onshore wind industry maintains a community benefits protocol which commits to ensuring that these benefits schemes are realised within local host communities. These packages are separate and additional to any other wider benefits of windfarms.

WIDER BENEFITS

These often derive from the way in which the construction and development is carried out, for example in employment of local people or upgrades to infrastructure (such as faster

broadband). Preference can be given to local contractors in tendering processes, community cohesion and agency can be built through effective engagement processes (as outlined in Part 1), and investment opportunities can be provided for local people.

COMMUNITY BENEFITS AND PLANNING

Community benefit packages are not material considerations in determining whether planning permission should be given. That said, a planning authority may require a development to undertake or make contributions towards a compensatory set of actions in order for planning permission to be granted. This might include widening a road to enable turbines to get to site, or initiatives or investments to counteract the direct losses of amenity or habitat. These actions must be deemed necessary to make the development acceptable in planning terms; **direct and related to the site development; and fairly and reasonably related in scale and kind to the development**

The onshore wind industry committed to a [Community Benefit Protocol](#) over a decade ago, which provides £ 5,000 per MW installed per annum (index linked) for the duration of the scheme.

Solar developments have historically argued that they should not be subject to s106 or other developer contributions because on balance they contribute positively to sustainability. This was maybe a tenable argument for 5 MW solar farms occupying a single field, but becomes rather less so when the scale is equivalent to 80% of the size of the county town of Oakham.

The text of the guidance is clear that the authors considered “It is common for renewable energy projects to incorporate financial packages that make payments directly, or in kind, to local communities” and were therefore not exclusively referring to onshore wind projects. Equally the guidance is clear that whilst community benefit is not a material planning consideration it is within the remit of the determining authority to require contributions to be made to a compensatory set of actions that are fairly and reasonably related in scale and kind to the development.

1.1 RUTLAND CONTEXT

Rutland is a small, historically successful rural county which offers most of our 42,000 residents a high quality of life. Our beautiful environment, rolling green fields, rich biodiversity and characterful towns are hallmarks of life here. Our 2,000 businesses tend to be small but resilient, and our visitor economy is in the top three of our most important sectors.

However, our economy shrunk by 8.2% between 2010 and 2019, making Rutland one of the UK's worst performing economies over that period. Covid-19 caused additional stresses for local employers, residents, high streets and towns; with our visitor economy being hit particularly hard. We are working to reverse these trends and have recently been successful with £ 23 million investment from the government's Levelling Up Fund to address some of those inequalities, supporting the visitor economy and scientific and high-tech sectors.

Council tax is higher in Rutland than anywhere else in England (17% higher than the national average) – reflecting the relatively low levels of central government funding to the area. In 2022 the Council received £ 444 per household from the central government funding settlement, compared with an average of £ 773 per household for all unitary councils. In essence this means that the local population in Rutland pay more for their local services than the UK average and receive significantly less from central government than other areas.

As set out in the Rutland Levelling Up fund bid the relative affluence of the area masks a number of significant inequalities including a rapidly ageing population, declining healthy life expectancy rates for women, and poor social mobility. 12.9% of homes in the area are in fuel poverty, close to the national average of 13.1%.

The developers have already set out at the hearings that the scheme will bring local benefits in the form of business rates for the local authorities in the area. Business rates from part of the revenue base of any local authority and will be applied to local authority priorities such as care provision, which may provide no significant mitigation to the harms from this development on the local area. Whilst this funding will be welcomed it cannot be guaranteed as it is subject to changes from Westminster at short notice and will, at least in part be needed to fund ongoing commitments as a consequence of the development such as 30 year monitoring, enforcement and reporting on biodiversity net gain, additional road repairs due to an increase in lorries and other traffic etc.

2 STRATEGIC CASE

The developer's strategic case for the development hinges around the national and international need to decarbonise power systems to avoid catastrophic climate breakdown.

Developers are however not altruistic in their ambitions and will make significant profits from their developments over an extended period.

As set out above a scheme of this size would have national significance, but the harms will all be felt at the local level, whether or not the overall benefit outweighs the overall harm is for the Examining Authority to determine, however the harms to the local communities are significant and will outweigh any benefit felt locally. Furthermore, schemes of this scale in the UK are in their infancy and it is not possible to predict with absolute certainty all of the potential impacts they will have on the local environment and community over time.

As it stands the economic benefits from the scheme are unlikely to benefit the local communities to any material extent. Whilst there may be modest opportunities for some relatively local contractors during construction the high value work such as engineering design will not be locally procured, and the equipment will be manufactured overseas. Significant profits will be made by the developers and ultimate owners of the scheme. The developers are based more than 200 miles from the site (in the case of Windel Energy) and Canadian Solar's parent company is based in British Columbia, so it is considered very unlikely that any of this value will be captured in the local area. The developers have not proposed any form of community ownership.

There may be a compelling case for large scale renewable energy generation, but there is also a compelling case to ensure that the relatively local harms of the scheme are not felt disproportionately by a relatively small community.

3 SCALE AND NATURE OF THE DEVELOPMENT

3.1 SCALE OF MALLARD PASS SOLAR FARM

It should be born in mind that the development at 350 MW is equivalent to around 2.5% of the total PV installed in the UK at the date of application, and 0.5% of the total 70 GW UK Government target for solar PV.

The first developments of this scale in the UK are only just starting to be built and whilst considerable effort has gone into assessing the potential impacts (by the developers and the local authorities) no one can be certain over time of the full extent of the impacts of a scheme of this size and scale.

3.2 NATURE OF THE DEVELOPMENT

The development is a utility scale power generation plant. Whilst most of the associated infrastructure is relatively low rise at around 3m high there are elements at the new substation which exceed 12m in height.

The overall land requirement for the scheme is significant and covers an area approximately 80% of the size of the county town of Oakham in Rutland. The land is currently used for arable farming and the energy generation infrastructure will represent a significant change for residents of this largely rural area.

The developer has yet to determine whether the solar arrays will be fixed or will rotate around a single axis.

4 LOCAL IMPACTS

Rutland Council has set out the local impacts in it's Local Impact Report and written submission dated 15 June 2023. These documents catalogue the ways in which the development will impact the local community in terms of the mechanics of day to day life. What is not catalogued is the ongoing and serious impacts on health and well being for local residents. These impacts started over a year ago when they first learned of the proposals and will continue throughout the life of the scheme and fundamentally change the environment in which people live and work.

During 2021/22 Rutland undertook an extensive community consultation listening to over 2,000 residents as part of the development of the [Future Rutland Vision](#).

Rutland is seen by residents as a truly special place. Based on the things that local people have said are most important: Rutland's character, its homeliness and community spirit, peace and well-being, nature, wildlife, rurality and the freedom to enjoy life.

The Vision is split into four sections that cover all aspects of life in Rutland:

- **A special place:** Sustaining a vibrant rural county that harnesses the enterprise of its businesses, the ambition and creativity of its residents, and the passion of its local communities.
- **Sustainable lives:** Living sustainably and combatting the climate crisis through the power of choice, the removal of barriers, and real collective action.
- **Healthy and well:** Promoting health, happiness and well-being for people of all ages and backgrounds.
- **A county for everyone:** Celebrating diversity and ensuring everyone has the opportunity to live well, be heard and overcome any challenges they may face.

The vision concludes with the following statement:

“Rutland: A modern rural county with an unrivalled quality and pace of life. Somewhere different and special, where you can escape from the norm. A place to be active and connect with nature. A friendly and welcoming county with incredible food, drink and heritage. A genuine surprise where countryside and traditional market towns are complemented by technological advancement and innovation. A county for everyone and a place to live your best life.”

The scale of the Mallard Pass solar farm is such that it will impact into each of the Vision themes, fundamentally altering the way of life, and the things which bring residents to Rutland.

5 THE NEED FOR A FUND

The harms and impacts of the scheme are not limited to the period of construction but will continue for the lifetime of the infrastructure.

The developers have expressed a potential desire to fund identifiable projects, but this approach is likely to significantly fetter the ability of local residents to respond to events and changes over time. For example, the unforeseen impacts of the lockdowns associated with the COVID-19 pandemic made communities far more reliant on local walking for recreation than would have been envisaged only a few months before. Furthermore, schemes of this magnitude are relatively new in the UK and it is not possible to predict with certainty what all the impacts will be over time.

Seeking to identify specific projects from the outset is unlikely to represent the best public value in ensuring that there are not additional burdens on the public purse over time as a consequence of the development. The Council's preferred approach is to have an ongoing annual revenue stream for the life of the infrastructure, as is common practice with large scale onshore wind developments.

Whilst it is not a 'silver bullet' [research](#) shows that a suitable community benefit fund can increase levels of community acceptance of renewable energy projects.

5.1 INTERVENTION THEMES

The key themes in the Future Rutland Vision align well with neighbouring South Kesteven District Council's [Corporate Plan](#). We are therefore seeking interventions on the following themes:

1. **A Special Place.** Covering the topics of housing, economy, growth, community, and rurality.
2. **Sustainable lives.** Covering nature and biodiversity, carbon neutrality, energy efficiency, digital inclusion, healthy transport and circular economy
3. **Healthy and well.** Focusing on leisure and exercise, supporting an ageing population with suitable health services and mental health and well-being.
4. **A location for everyone.** Providing a safe, community focussed environment in which everyone feels welcome and able to participate. This theme also focusses on young people reaching their full potential.

Aside from the production of sustainable electricity the development at Mallard Pass has the potential to detrimentally impact on these themes and any community benefit fund should seek to mitigate a wide range of impacts resulting from development on this scale. The table below sets out some examples of projects which are related to the development in nature and scale, but which would fit with the identified and consulted on themes.



Theme	Examples of impacts	Example interventions
A special place	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Housing demand for long term workers during maintenance phase.• Detrimental impact on tourist economy – potentially through competing for accommodation, noise and disruption during construction, loss of rurality and direct impacts on businesses such as the Mallard Point Vineyard and Distillery.• Potential impact on local agricultural land prices impacting the ability of local farm businesses to grow and develop.• Moving home from villages in the middle of the scheme may become difficult during development and construction. This will lead directly to an ageing community and may have impacts on local services, schools etc.• Homes locally may lose value due to the loss of amenity caused by the scheme.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provision of 5+ affordable for rent houses in local villages• Additional marketing support for local tourist businesses during the construction period.• Support for agricultural diversification projects• Mapping exercise of the potential impacts of a change in community and therefore demand and provision for services• Projects which could help to support local home values such as programmes of energy efficiency and rooftop solar PV



Theme	Examples of Impact	Example interventions
Sustainable Lives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whilst the scheme generates significant amounts of renewable energy this is not directly available to local residents. The energy efficiency hierarchy requires energy reduction and migration of other fuel sources to electricity as well as the generation of renewable electricity. • The biodiversity work on site improves connectivity and provides some additional habitat. This work would be further enhanced by linkages to other projects and development of other programmes along the river valley and across tree belts. • Whilst high levels of digital connectivity are a requirement for the scheme, this does not necessarily translate to local digital inclusion and may make matters worse by taking up available mobile and digital capacity. • The additional quantities of waste will potentially put a strain on local facilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential for local tariffs as well as domestic energy efficiency programme. • Support the transition to more sustainable transport thorough improved bus routes and electric vehicle charging infrastructure and potentially a safe walking and cycling route between Essendine and Ryhall • Support to local energy efficiency programme including rooftop solar PV. • Potential funding for additional off site biodiversity projects to further enhance the onsite provision. • Digital enhancement and inclusion projects. This may be particularly important in light of the ageing population and the Levelling Up work around elderly digital inclusion. • Projects to enhance reuse of waste materials from site to reduce quantities heading for landfill or recycling. • Projects to support enhancement of local recycling facilities.



Theme	Examples of impacts	Example interventions
Healthy and well	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A reduction in amenity and an increase in stress for local residents through construction and beyond. This could be for extended periods and is likely to reduce overall mental and physical health and wellbeing in the area. • Residents will be less likely to walk, cycle, run or ride in proximity to the solar farm, both during and after construction. • Residents concerns over a loss in value of their homes and difficulties experienced in selling and moving are likely to cause acute stress and depression for some and general anxiety for the wider local population. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Projects to improve connectivity to other areas so residents can exercise and connect elsewhere. • Improvements to digital to reduce feelings of isolation. • Free parking for residents local to the solar farm at other local attractions such as Rutland Water. • Enhancements and improvements to greenspace and leisure facilities. • Support to local health provision and charities.
A location for everyone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Mallard Pass solar farm is not well connected with the local community and has caused feelings of anxiety and resentment locally due to its scale and wider impacts. There are some local residents with specific concerns of the impacts on pre-existing medical conditions. • Whilst the site is unlikely to generate significant long-term employment, that employment should be local. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult learning and apprenticeship opportunities to enable local people to train in green skills. • Support to develop climate change and renewables understanding in young people, schools, education and care facilities in the area • Support to local cultural and heritage events and charities. • Subsidised access to local events for local residents living in fuel poverty.

6 AFFORDABILITY

Commercial solar PV schemes typically produce an internal rate of return after finance costs of around 8-10%.

350MW of solar PV will cost in the order of £ 175m+ to construct. Annual revenues after finance and operating costs are likely to be in the region of £ 10 - £ 15m pa. In addition to this Windel Energy will also expect a development premium of several million pounds once the site is ready for construction.

If a benefits package were to be agreed commensurate with the rates paid by onshore wind the benefits fund would amount to around £ 1.5m to be spent on local community investment and mitigation per annum. This would represent 10-15% of pre tax revenues for the scheme and would not adversely impact viability.

There is therefore significant scope for community benefits to be provided without impacting the overall scheme viability.

7 MANAGEMENT OF THE FUND

As the sums involved are likely to be relatively significant the fund will need to have robust management and governance in place. It is likely that this will comprise an arms length body with representation from the local councils, parish councils and potentially the scheme owners.

Further work will take place on the constitution of this following a period of public consultation and engagement.