

GATE BURTON ENERGY PARK

Representation to Planning Inspectorate from:

Paul & Wendy Carter


INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

This scheme, if approved, will result in our property, Sandy Barr Cottage, being almost surrounded by the proposed solar site. Our narrow north-south strip of land, unchanged for centuries, will have long eastern and western boundaries adjoining the site. We will also have a shorter northern boundary adjoining the site. In total we will share a continuous boundary with the solar site of some 900 metres.

The extensive views over open countryside were a key feature in choosing Sandy Barr Cottage for our retirement. These views will be affected by the siting of the solar panels and we will also be more vulnerable to noise and glint/glare than most other properties in the vicinity of the site. Additionally, there are potential issues with flood risk, fire risk and security.

Nevertheless, we understand the need for a balance in land use (protecting both food security and energy security) and we are not unsupportive of the idea of a solar project, providing efforts are made to mitigate the adverse impacts on neighbouring properties such as ours. Following site visits to Sandy Barr Cottage, the developer has responded positively to many of our concerns, adapting the layout in some respects. This is welcomed, however there are some outstanding matters in need of further clarification.

VISUAL AMENITY

To minimise loss of visual amenity, set-back of the solar panels is important to us. In recognition of this, the developer has added a buffer zone, designated as a "lapwing field habitat", to the south-west of our property (in field C7). There is also a smaller, triangular wedge-shaped offset in the north-eastern part of field C7.

A similar triangular wedge offset has also been added to the east of our property, in field C10, however it is still important to protect our distant views to the north-east (towards Willingham village and church) and to the south-east (towards the prominent landmark of Stow Minster).

Screening with the planting of tree saplings was proposed but the height of the trees after several years growth would eventually obscure our views beyond the solar panels. Now that the solar panels are to be set back from our boundaries, these distant views should still exist. We would therefore object to any tree planting.

CONSTRUCTION PHASE & SITE ACCESS

We were concerned by the statement in EIA Scoping Report (para 2.3.5) that “it is proposed to use the network of minor roads around the site for some deliveries, subject to suitability of these roads to carry HGVs”. We would strongly object to any use of the Willingham to Marton minor road which is single track with few passing places (and is difficult enough already for horse riders, cyclists and pedestrians without any additional traffic). This road is clearly signed as “Unsuitable for HGVs” and is in a terrible state of repair. Also, the verges are very soft and, with vehicles needing to use them when meeting oncoming traffic, these verges get badly churned up when wet (leading to smaller vehicles becoming bogged down). The road is totally unsuitable for any additional traffic.

PEI Report para 13.6.3 mentioned an “A156 Access Option, South” which would have involved a one-way loop via Clay Lane and Willingham Road. We are pleased to see this option seems to have been discarded as it would have routed construction traffic along dangerous, single-track roads with blind bends and concealed summits (and with very few passing places). Indeed, Willingham Road is clearly signed as “Unsuitable for HGVs”.

NOISE

We would expect measures to be put in place to avoid excessive noise during construction. Noise in our immediate vicinity would be unsettling for our horses when being schooled/ridden in the manège (which is adjacent to the perimeter of the solar site). Such noise would be dangerous for the rider and may also result in additional vet’s bills.

GLARE & GLINT

We are concerned about glare and glint from the panels. This is of particular concern to us as it could unsettle our equines. The glare and glint study appears to have assessed the effects of glare and glint in the immediate vicinity of our dwelling but not in other parts of our land where our animals may be grazing or being exercised. We must therefore request a more complete assessment of how exactly we will be affected.

OUR HAY FIELDS

Most of our land is devoted to growing meadow hay for our equines. As well as sunshine and warmth, we need a good air flow for ripening and drying our annual hay crop. Although the solar arrays are now set back with the addition of wedge-shaped offsets, it is important that any planting in these set-back areas does not impede the air flow into our northernmost hay field (i.e. the air flow from fields C7 and C10 of the solar site).

WATERCOURSES

There is a watercourse running along the entire boundary between our property and field C7 of the solar site, i.e. along the full length of our western boundary. We are concerned that this watercourse is not shown in any of the application documents. We have received informal confirmation from the developers that the watercourse will be included in their maintenance plans (i.e. that they will be responsible for regular checking and dredging) but it seems remiss that this watercourse has been omitted from the formal plans submitted as part of the planning application.

ACCESS TO MAINTAIN BOUNDARY HEDGES & WATERCOURSES (FLOOD RISK)

Perimeter fencing needs to be set back from boundaries to allow access for hedge cutting, tree surgery and maintenance of watercourses. An access strip of 6 metres width will be needed for hedge and tree maintenance with a wider strip (circa 10 metres) for watercourse maintenance.

Frequent monitoring of the state of the watercourses within the solar site (and the watercourses along boundaries with neighbouring properties such as ours) will be essential and this needs to be carried out by the site operator. We need commitment from the project team to put in place a programme for regular monitoring and maintenance of the watercourses, including culverted sections, for the entire period of operation of the solar farm, i.e. from commencement of construction in 2025 until eventual decommissioning.

Watercourses are currently dredged every 2 - 3 years but this may need to be done more frequently if run off is increased – this could occur due to “rain shadow” from the solar panels preventing rainfall from reaching much of the ground currently available for soakaway (it is currently arable farmland so soakaway is excellent, with minimal run off). The permeability of the ground may also be affected by grazing and/or general compaction, again leading to increased run off.

As we understand it, we are situated on the watershed that divides the Trent Valley Internal Drainage Board’s extended area from the Upper Witham Internal Drainage Board’s extended area. Both of these drainage boards, as well as the Environment Agency, will be keen to ensure that the developer of the solar site takes responsibility for maintaining the various watercourses to avoid creating any flood risk.

FIRE RISK

We would like to see more detailed information regarding potential fire risk from the electrical components within and adjacent to the solar panels (inverters, transformers, switchgear, etc) and planned measures to mitigate the risk from these and from grass fires, whether caused by electrical components or simply by dry ground conditions. The “glare & glint” study should be extended to assess potential fire risks affecting tinder-dry grass, whether due to the reflection of sunlight from the solar panels or other factors.

SECURITY

Crime prevention needs to be considered. The fields to our east and west are currently cultivated for arable crops. The land is ploughed after harvest and gets very wet and boggy in the winter. This assists with security as it deters infiltration by unauthorised persons and vehicles. However, when the access strips at the edge of the development site are left untouched, we will be more vulnerable to break-in and theft.

It is important to have obstacles such as fences and locked gates incorporated into the perimeter design to prevent unauthorised ingress to the solar site and its access strips.

The developer has agreed to block accesses to field C7 with locked gates (designated 8/07 and 8/08 on sheet 8 of EN010131/APP/5.3). There is however still an issue with field C11 as its western edge is currently without any hedging or fencing and consequently open to ingress. This part of the site's perimeter, i.e. where the site abuts the shared accessway to our property, needs to be fenced to prevent unauthorised access to field C11 (which would allow unauthorised entry to other parts of the site, including field C10 which is adjacent to our property).

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO MEET LOCAL NEEDS

It would be unfortunate if the developer's proposed funding for local projects is concentrated in villages (where the majority of residents are relatively unaffected by the impact of this solar scheme). We have pointed out to the developer that consideration should be given to the immediate neighbours of the scheme who, after all, are the most adversely affected by the project, and how we can be offered some benefits – such as a contribution towards our energy costs, funding for domestic solar installations and/or provision of fibre broadband.

Paul & Wendy Carter, 6 April 2023