

Representation by Kent Countryside Access Forum (KCAF)

Date submitted

10 December 2024

Submitted by

Members of the public/businesses

The KCAF is a statutory, independent, advisory body made up of volunteers from the local community. Members include those who represent landowners and land managers (both public and private); countryside access users (such as walkers, cyclists, horse riders, carriage drivers, motorized vehicle users); and others with countryside access interests (such as health and well-being, access with disabilities, tourism and the rural economy, conservation and biodiversity, cultural heritage, rural sports, rural policing, and parish councils).

The purpose of the KCAF is to advise KCC (in particular, the Public Rights of Way and Access Service) and other relevant public and private organisations, (for example Natural England, Borough and Parish councils and organisations such as Sport England) on the management, protection, enhancement, and promotion of Kent's Public Rights of Way (PROW) and green spaces for the benefit of the people of Kent and visitors to the County.

The Forum functions in accordance with the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 and the Local Access Forums (England) regulations 2007. **As a Statutory Body advice from the KCAF must be given due regard**

We object to the proposal as it stands particularly in relation to the public rights of way and their alignment. We are also concerned about the project harming the enjoyment of the countryside and landscape that is gained from the use of the public rights of way, particularly so close to the town of Ashford and future developments to the east of the site. Given the size of the project we would expect greater enhancement of the public rights of way within the site and externally as to encourage all users including cyclists and horse riders to enjoy the wider countryside and landscape in the area.

Specifically, The KCAF object on the following points.

1. Significant negative visual impact both locally and from afar (North Downs National Heritage Landscape)
2. Local negative visual impact on Aldington village by scale and size of the panels and area covered by them, and negative impact on tranquility of the area during construction phase and ongoing from maintenance machinery access
3. Re-routing proposals of direct paths by the developer has been the default option with insufficient regard to various user needs/wishes or the historic nature of some of the routes
4. Linear and circular routes are both important for different types of users (specific destination/long distance user, daily circular route users) and have not been addressed
5. Upgrades have not been sufficiently considered, and achievability not adequately investigated (most important when suggested enhancements extend into other land ownership – who appear to have had no input).
6. There is currently no requirement for decommissioning of the site to occur before end of development project life (40 years). Realistic working life of solar panels is often significantly less than that, not uncommon to be half (20 years) or less (in some cases as little as 10 to 12 years). Current rapid advances in solar technology indicate that solar panels of this type and scale will soon be obsolete (or at least not the economic norm). We should ensure that if, for whatever reason, the project should become uneconomic/unviable then the panels and associated structures should be removed, and the landscape character and public access restored at that time. Not left abandoned and deteriorating in place until the 40 year end of development project life is reached.
7. We ask that some form of planning condition (legally binding with safeguards to guarantee that there are funds for decommissioning and restoration whatever the financial fortunes of the business – such as ring-fencing, funds in escrow or suitable insurance arrangements) is placed on the developer and/or land owner(s) and/or their successors that the land is restored back to agricultural use along with all historic public access rights immediately post decommissioning, ensuring any improvement in the landscape and access rights during the life of the solar farm are retained after the restoration of the land.