

Registration identification 20047831 or 20047832

My name is Richard Cowen and I am Secretary of Durham Bird Club. I make this statement on behalf of the Club in respect of the proposed solar array at Byers Gill.

Under the terms of the Club's Constitution, one of our objectives is to promote the conservation of birds and their habitats.

The Club takes a neutral stance in respect of this application, but wishes to draw the following points to attention

- 1) While there are no notable wildlife sites within the area of the proposed solar array, it is important for farmland birds and has also attracted in various parts wildfowl (particularly geese, including in winter Pink-footed geese) to graze on the fields. However, the Club has access to an important water feature at Castle Lake, Bishop Middleham some 9 kilometers north of the boundary to this site. This site attracts large numbers of waterfowl and waders, some of which are likely to fly over the proposed array.
- 2) In addition, although we have not been part of the Brightwater Project, we have been very interested in it (in fact, Castle Lake falls within the boundary of the project). As we understand it, the Project is likely to produce more wetland around the River Skerne in this area which is likely to attract more water birds and waders (at least, we understand that that is the objective). This may attract more birds over the proposed site and we comment on this further below. A copy of their webpage is attached for information which shows the area of the project extending towards Great Stainton from the west.
- 3) It is an important area for birds such as Skylark, Grey Partridge, Yellowhammer, Lapwing and Curlew, as well as, in summer, some populations of Yellow Wagtail.
- 4) We note the comments of Durham County Council in respect of ecological matters and broadly support them. We also represent that such considerations are consistent with Section 3 of the Environment Act 2021 (Environmental targets – species abundance)
- 5) Of particular concern to the Club is that species currently found on the site are not displaced without suitable mitigation or compensation being provided. Hedgerows may provide a higher Biodiversity Metric score than grasslands but hedgerows do not support ground nesting birds such as Skylark. We note grasslands have been proposed but support the Council's comments about these. In particular, we believe that they must be in areas likely to attract such birds and be free from disturbance, particularly by humans.
- 6) While we have concerns as mentioned above, we understand that, because

of the micro climate solar panels can create, more insects may be attracted to it thus attracting hirundines and swifts. We can find no reference to these in the documentation but believe that it would be beneficial to consider their interests. These species, particularly swifts, have suffered dramatic declines in recent years and nesting opportunities for them in suitable locations may help to reduce this decline.

- 7) With regard to birds flying over the site, we ask the Panel to consider the potential impact of them mistaking the panels for water features with, if they decide to land, catastrophic results. As far as we can see, there is no determinative research on this subject. We have asked the British Trust for Ornithology if they have done any research on this topic but at present have not had a reply. We note however that Natural England has published a review about this (Evidence Review of the impact of solar farms on birds, bats and general ecology (NEER012) published in March 2017). A copy is attached and the Executive Summary outlines the position as at 2017. As far as the industry is concerned, the Freedom Solar Panel website (freedomssolarpower.com/blog/everything-you-need-to-know-about-solar-panels-and-birds) contains the following comment

“Solar panels do not kill birds outright.

However, birds are attracted to the shininess of solar panels, which often look like moving water when flying above. Some birds mistake panels for bodies of water and try to dive into the “water,” which hurts or kills them.

Many researchers have noted [birds that try to dive into solar panels are aquatic species](#).

Folks with solar systems in residential areas that aren't too close to large water bodies won't experience this issue, but it's still a possibility.

Researchers are using AI to [track and monitor which bird species dive into solar panels](#) to prevent the problem”

- 8) We note from paragraph 3.2.6 of the Biodiversity Net Gain Report that it is stated that there are no watercourses on the site. We are surprised by this. While the River Skerne may lie to the west of the site, we do note that this site is called “Byers Gill”, which as we understand it is a watercourse. Other small watercourses are shown in the general area on OS Explorer Map 304 (Darlington and Richmond).

Conclusion

If the Development Consent Order is granted, we represent that consideration should be given to the following conditions in conjunction with those currently suggested for this aspect of the proposed development

- a) Suitable and appropriately placed mitigation or compensation measures, including where appropriate habitat creation and improvement, are agreed with the appropriate authority to ensure that ground nesting birds are not displaced as a result of the proposed development
(Reason – to ensure that species such as skylark or Grey Partridge retain suitable nesting and foraging sites after the completion of this development and so protect species abundance)

- b) Nesting opportunities be provided in suitable locations for hirundines and swifts
Reason – these species may well be attracted to the site in view of food opportunities and nesting places will help to address their decline

- c) The site be monitored, particularly in winter and following poor visibility conditions, to check whether there have been any bird accidents and the results be recorded and sent to the appropriate authority
Reason – to improve evidence on whether there is in fact a problem with aquatic species of birds being attracted to solar arrays

We also represent that the comment in the Biodiversity Net Gain report that there are no watercourses in the area be checked and the situation be clarified bearing in mind that there appear to be some small watercourses shown on the relevant OS map.