

Summary

This document sets out the Summary of Written Representation of Bishopton Villages Action Group (BVAG) regarding the proposed Byers Gill Solar Project by RWE Renewables UK Solar and Storage Limited.

Examination Authority Deadline 2 – 29th August 2024

BVAG strongly opposes the application for a Development Consent Order (DCO) in respect of the Byers Gill Solar Project. The Byers Gill Solar Energy proposal spans 490 hectares of agricultural land, woodland, hedgerows and countryside including high quality food producing land, and wildlife habitats, and intends to generate up to 180MW of electricity. This Written Representation sets out the community concerns about significant adverse impacts on people, land, flora, fauna, and the wider environment. BVAG requests that the Examining Authority (ExA) refuse the DCO.

BVAG has previously raised issues about the inadequacy of information and lack of meaningful community consultation. This has improved recently, and while we welcome the opportunity to engage with RWE in discussions about our concerns, the objections remain. While the statutory consultation was declared adequate at Acceptance stage of the application, BVAG notes a gap in meaningful dialogue between RWE and the affected communities. BVAG is engaging in ongoing discussions with RWE and plans further submissions for Deadline 3.

The project covers a large area equivalent to eight solar farms already constructed or approved nearby and could potentially expand even further. In BVAG's opinion the energy project is poorly sited, driven by grid connection availability and willing landowners, rather than environmental suitability or concern for the communities that would have to live alongside it. The proposal lacks adequate detailed plans and poor mitigation for visual, environmental, and social impacts. The lack of detailed designs is a challenge to adequately assess the mitigation proposed.

There is potential significant harm to local heritage and archaeological assets. The project could significantly impact the Bishopton Conservation Area, including views and settings of historic assets like the 12th-century Bishopton Motte and Bailey as well as archaeology around this Scheduled Monument. BVAG disagrees with RWE's conclusion that there will be no significant cultural heritage effects and calls for further assessments. Concerns are raised about potential archaeological damage due to the exclusion of critical areas from geophysical surveys and trial trenching.

The community have expressed concerns about the renewable energy credentials of RWE. BVAG would draw attention to RWE's background as a company with much wider interests than renewable energy and is in fact a major large fossil fuel producer. BVAG expresses concern over RWE's long term commitment to renewable energy, given its history of coal mining and lawsuits against government climate policies. Foreign ownership adds to these concerns since decisions affecting the communities

around Darlington and Stockton would be made overseas, in a way which is neither open and transparent, and which is unlikely to recognise local needs and sensitivities. BVAG requests clarity on RWE's operational intentions and the potential for transferring the project to unknown third parties.

BVAG notes the stated public benefits and questions over generating capacity. BVAG considers that the stated wider public benefits, such as the number of homes powered, are overstated by RWE. The claimed capacity of "over 50 MW" lacks a maximum cap, raising concerns about potential future expansions or intensification beyond 40 years. BVAG would therefore request greater clarity and requests that the ExA consider constraints on the operations in the event that consent is granted. In particular BVAG asks for clarity on the maximum generating capacity and a cap on the scale and duration of operations including questions about potential upgrades to the Norton Substation, which could facilitate further expansion. BVAG also calls for the ExA to consider if the Draft DCO should include stronger provisions to limit the operational period to 40 years, with no extensions.

BVAG has drawn attention to its support for many of the findings in Darlington Borough Council's Local Impact Report. BVAG is broadly aligned with the conclusions, but also expresses some different conclusions. These have been outlined in the Written Representation.

BVAG welcomes the Examination Authority's depth and range of questions to the applicant, and others, set out in the document ExAQ1. BVAG looks forward to responding to those in due course.

BVAG consider that the long term harm and losses, and residual adverse impacts, are not outweighed by the benefits arising from the proposal. BVAG concludes that the Examining Authority should recommend refusal of the proposal. This is due to the scale, and widespread harm that mitigation cannot remove or reduce.

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On behalf of the Bishopton Villages Action Group (BVAG)

Registered as an Interested Party (IP Reference Number 200048675)