

Further comments after the open floor hearings 15th & 16th October 2024

After attending all of the open floor hearings, I have to say that none of my concerns were alleviated, in fact, quite the opposite, RWE stated that the scheme has an "overplanting" of 1.6 panels, which means they are using 60% more panels and land than they need. This shows that solar energy is inefficient and RWE is trying to maximise its profits and output with no regard for the residents who are going to be affected by this for the next 40 years.

This must be why there are so many banks of battery storage units. When this was probed further Micheal Baker (RWE) suggested that even if technology improved by the time they have a connection to the grid in 2031 (7 years away) the panels would probably not be any smaller or any more efficient. That is utter rubbish, technology will have moved on, and there is no way it won't have. If the additional 60% of land and panels were removed from the project the local community would not be so against it.

The Jinko panels that are being suggested are not eco-friendly at all travelling from China and being linked to modern-day slavery for their production. RWE was also unable or unwilling to say how many panels were to be used across the project, again this seems like it is to simply maximise profits at whatever cost to the local communities using cheaper products where possible.

It was also mentioned by Mary Fisher that no changes could now be made to the design as it was too late, how is it too late, the project has not been passed yet, so why are they not willing to look at changes suggested by people with better knowledge of the area. Mary Fisher working on another project in the area many years ago does not give you the same knowledge as a local however much she argued that it does.

There was more discussion about the grid connection not being fully secured and it sounded like RWE's solicitor was just hoping for the best for it to be brought forward to 2029. So why would they want to start construction in 2025, according to their website it will be fully operational in 2025. Or are they hoping to build it and for it to sit unused for up to 6 years with 1.6 times more panels than are required and are obviously 1.6 times less efficient than they should be? By the time they have a guaranteed connection to the grid, the panels would more than likely have been superseded several times by technology advancements. It doesn't make sense for this project to be approved to me.

On the afternoon of Tuesday's meeting, RWE discussed how on top of around 36 wagons a day making 2-way journeys being added to the highway, they would also be adding around 15 minibusses twice daily to transport the workers to and from the site. They stated that they would create a traffic management plan for the workers to get to and from work. This is floored, but also laughable, as they then discussed using the TeesFlex bus service which loses its funding in March 2025. Even if this was used it could not carry that many workers anyway, it is one small bus that seats around 15-16 people.

RWE has quoted 100 workers per panel area at a time. There is no way on this earth that these workers will all travel on a bus to and from the site each day and RWE confirmed that there is no provision for overspill car parks for any workers.

This "transport plan" has simply been created to try and get around any highway issues. Workers would rather go straight to work and straight home, they won't want to hang around for a bus both ways, to then maybe travel back on themselves to get home, this will add time onto their working day, and in practice can not be policed and RWE won't care less about this if approval is granted. The traffic plan needs to be stated as it will be, not flowered up with a 7.5 people per vehicle ratio.

As with many other things the traffic plan has been created simply to tick boxes and to get the project passed. This is like builders using a 1.4-person occupancy on a 5-bedroom house to get around nitrate neutrality. It isn't realistic. Neither is the suggestion of passing places, the road is not wide enough to allow this anywhere.

There were even suggestions of workers cycling to the site too, this is also ludicrous. In this instance what would happen in the event of an emergency?

As someone who has had issues with Highways, it was very surprising to see the Highways Officer happily agree to this ridiculous traffic plan as being acceptable, I think something is amiss. The scheme may be temporary but it won't feel like it for the people who live here and you wouldn't be temporarily killed by a wagon or minibus, by people who RWE confirms will not be local.

What guarantees can RWE give that the construction time won't increase significantly like has happened with Whinfield Solar which is ten times smaller but has been under construction for around 17 months so far and still not complete?

At the end of July for 10 weeks, the bridge above Junction 59 of the A1 towards Newton Aycliffe was closed, this meant there was no access to Newton Aycliffe from the North of Darlington. Over this period, we got a feel for how this was going to be as there were lots of extra wagons per day travelling towards Aycliffe Quarry via Elstob Lane and then going up onto Lime Lane. Elstob Lane is not wide enough for two wagons, Lime Lane

certainly isn't and you can see that by the state of the verges along the way. There were lots of back and forth between RWE's solicitor and the LPA about the roads, currently, the roads are dreadful, they are full of potholes, I have had 4 different vehicles in 2 weeks having to change a tyre on my front after ripping them on potholes, so for RWE to agree to repair the roads, when so far they have caused no damage shows they will do anything to pass this project.

The week before the open floor hearings and the site visits, the road marking was repainted at the junction for Lime Lane, therefore it will have looked to be much less dangerous than it has been for the past 17 months, but you will still have seen how horrific it is as soon as you progress further with the first entrance to Whinfield Solar on a dangerous bend. The roads were not designed for wagons, they are frequently over the white line, which is dangerous for any oncoming traffic and creates even more potholes.

Along Lime Lane to the Whinfield Solar site, at one point I counted 45 freestanding signs on the roadside, these are now mostly hidden by overgrowth, making them even more of a hazard. Byers Gill is ten times the size of Whinfield, and Lime Lane will need to be used again to connect panel area A to all the other panel areas. So does that also mean there will be around 450 freestanding signs on the roadside throughout the construction period across all of the panel areas?

On the initial local impact report by DBC, it states there are 57 field enclosures, I did ask the question "How many actual entrances to the sites there would be as Whinfield has one for each field" RWE said they thought at least 1 or 2 per panel area, and were asked to confirm that for the inspectorate. How does RWE plan to get all of these entrances to comply with correct visibility guidance?

The area that has been set aside for the substation is one of the wettest fields in the area, since the site visits by the Planning Inspectors last week I have found out that they were not allowed to visit this site. This is very odd, it is a vital part

of the project and surely one of the main places that should have been visited and seen. It also questions why RWE would put the substation in an area that floods, where you would need to build a road around a historic wood that contains several ponds and waterways when there are much better positions for it to be in. Even moving it further behind the wood, it would not be seen so much from the road and would not trap all of the wildlife behind the fencing. I genuinely don't see how Natural England and all the ecologists etc are not saying no rather than agreeing to all of this. As a community, everyone is concerned that this whole process is just to pacify objections to the project and it is going to simply get the green light.

The substation site is nearby to an SSSI but also to an LWS which will be affected by the proposed development near it. If RWE is allowed to go ahead with the current design and position for the substation the fencing will trap all of the deer and any larger wildlife within the wood, they will not know there has been a tiny entrance added to one corner, it is a recipe for disaster, if they do find their way out, the chances are that they will end up on the highway. Simply having a better design using local knowledge rather than just desktop studies could alleviate this.

Everything to do with the substation throughout the process has been very vague. RWE's lack of concern for drain positions is worrying, Micheal Baker stated at the meeting with BVAG that they "would sort or alter any drains" I know RWE wants this project through at any cost, but it needs to be so, us the people who live here and pay to live here, aren't feeling the effects of bad decisions or cost-cutting for years to come.

This project also needs to be looked at better with further in-depth ecology and flooding reports being carried out before any approval is granted, not afterward as RWE says will happen. Repeatedly we kept hearing "That will be done in the design process" That is too late, especially after Mary Fisher was adamant that nothing would be changed in her design as they had paid for ecology reports. In normal planning all of your reports have to be done before a decision is made, so why not on these schemes?

Regarding all of the areas of concern around flooding RWE's stated that some grass would be planted for "buffering" but the type quoted would be the least effective type of grass for this purpose. It also sounded more like protecting "the panels" from flooding rather than not worsening flooding in and around the areas of concern. RWE's solicitor said it would be up to the contractors to sort this, but this sounds like simply passing the book to someone else if there were issues after approval.

Byers Gill should also be considered as a bigger picture, along with the other huge local proposals for Skerningham Garden Village and the Relief Road which are also in the pipeline. The combination of all of these projects in the same area would be catastrophic to wildlife and the waterways, which will again spill onto the Highway.

Three huge projects under construction like this in such proximity would be a daily nightmare for everyone, for years to come. There was severe flooding across all of the panel areas last week and also on the land for the other proposed projects, it needs to be considered in more detail, even the flooding experts didn't have a clue about how much flooding there had been which is alarming to say the least.

No consideration has been given to the impact of this on people's health and well-being, I won't be able to drive in any direction without seeing some of these panels. If I want to walk my dogs in my field I will be able to see them in most directions too, these will be faced away from me, so I will see the blackness of these right up towards Great Stainton and each way I look. My property was not covered on the site visit, had it been you would have gotten a further understanding of how undulating the land is and how much these are going to be seen for miles, they will ruin the characteristics of the full area and cut us off completely.

BVAG met with RWE before the open floor hearings and we suggested to them, moving the substation position so as not to trap wildlife within Square Wood but were told by Mary their designer that "the layout is better than on some of their other projects" This hasn't alleviated any concerns, in fact, again the opposite, it would be madness for the office workers at the substation to drive all around the wood, these solar farms are supposed to be helping the environment, not destroying it and it seems boxes are just getting ticked to guarantee approval regardless of normal practices.

As a community we also have huge concerns about the routing of cables going across Elstob Lane, the impact of putting them under the Highway would be huge, are RWE looking to use pylons instead, and if so where does it show this within the documentation? As with some other sites, pylons have been added very late in the day.

It has also recently been discovered that the landowner at The Mount is to get screening from the panels up his drive, if he who instigated the full project wants to be screened from it what does that tell you? For the project to be passed much more mitigation needs to be done, if he is to be screened from it then so should everybody. There needs to be much better visuals produced, that aren't done from a low height to hide how horrendous these will be. Darlington Council also stated that any visuals should be shown as worst-case scenario and in Winter conditions, these need to be done and fully assessed before any approval is given. RWE confirmed that the use of the PROW was based on assumptions rather than facts. PROW should not be altered from a lovely landscape to walking along 6-foot security fence. As Mary Fisher stated "She can't create a nice view" - well then there is a very simple answer to that "Don't mess with the ones we have!"