

My Name is Susan Nobbs and I was hoping to deliver the following to the Open Floor hearing on Wednesday 16th October 2024. Due to time constraints there was very little time for residents to speak. My submission below is therefore a script I prepared for the event.

I have been a resident of Great Stainton for [REDACTED] and wish to speak about the destruction of our local rural landscape.

Let me start by acknowledging the need to combat climate change and reduce our carbon footprint. Can I also put on record my support for renewable energy and indeed the benefits of solar energy when sited in appropriate locations.

The Secretary of State has gone on record as part of his Clean Energy Superpower Mission [Volume 752 debated on Thursday 18 July 2024] as saying “we must plan for how we use land in this country to ensure a proper balance between food security, nature preservation and clean energy”

and in the same speech stated “I also assure the House that communities will continue to have a say on any proposals in their area”.

My question then is why this Byers Gill development, with such devastating consequences on local communities, who object to the development and the long lasting destruction of an historic landscape, is being considered when many more appropriate solutions such as wind are already available and others, roof top solar, are coming on stream?

To illustrate these impacts, not only will Great Stainton be surrounded by an area of panels which dwarf the village itself, RWE are also proposing to reroute our footpaths without any consideration of how unusable to footpaths will be. By way of an example, [2.3-Street-Works-Rights-of-Way-and-Access-Plans.pdf] (byersgillsolarfarm.co.uk) if public right no.40 is rerouted as proposed it will be against the road, this is an unsafe location, the hedges here are not evergreen therefore there will be minimal barrier with the road during the winter season. Dogs owners like myself who currently use the footpaths on a daily basis will be unable to walk dogs sandwiched between a fence surrounding the panels and a hedge bordering a road. Additionally the south/east extent of the field where the rerouted footpath is proposed, is in flood zone 3 therefore it is likely that this footpath will be impassable due to its condition for large parts of the winter, indeed this field was under water only last week after severe rain.

100% of village residents in Great Stainton said that they did not support the solar development.

Great Stainton:

The Darlington Landscape Character Assessment describes Great Stainton as:

“Traditional in form, and would be of high sensitivity to even small built developments”.

Great Stainton’s key sensitivities are described as:

‘Strongly rural character without modern development and few roads;

‘Prominent hilltop site;

‘Long views from open elevated locations, including from roads around Great Stainton;

‘And many field boundary trees which contribute to landscape character.

Now let me highlight that The Applicant in ES Chapter 7 Landscape and Visual [APP-030] acknowledge

“there would be residual significant effects relating to views at Great Stainton

These effects would be residual following the application of mitigation measures,

furthermore, there would be some significant landscape and visual effects relating to Great Stainton, which cannot be mitigated.

Why therefore is the Byers Gill Development being considered in a landscape of this nature?

I would now like share my concerns around the cumulative impacts & suitability of this development in this area.

I personally am convinced the location and design of Byers Gill is based on the willingness of landowners to lease their land and the proximity of the substation in Norton.

At the first RWE consultation we were told a 10km boundary was drawn around the substation and sites for the panels were looked for within that.

Does this approach suggest good design principles have been adhered to?

What other justification do RWE have for clustering solar panels around small rural settlements, clustering solar panels along the country roads connecting local villages and the fragmented design of the development which means the panels cover such a wide geographic area?

The Local Impact Report - Landscape and Visual Amenity commissioned by Darlington Borough Council [published in July 2024] states:

“The undulating topography of the Study Area presents a challenging landscape in which to locate solar farm development due to high visibility from elevated land, visibility on local ridges and the large variation in reflective light caused by undulating solar panels”.

This same report makes reference to:

“this area is already impacted by a number of renewable energy schemes”. And states “The Byers Gill development would compound the impact, due to the broad geographic spread of the scheme design, running across the rural landscape in a swathe from Darlington through to the point of connection in Norton”

A further sobering statement which cannot be ignored in the same consultant’s report identifies “The gap between the edges of the major urban areas is approximately 12km.

This gap contains an additional seven solar farms which have consent and/or are under construction.

The Solar Panel Areas extend across 8km of this gap.

The Panel Areas cover approximately 20% of all land.”

However, RWE as part of ES Chapter 13 Cumulative Effects [APP-036] conclude that there would be no significant effects as a result of those combined or cumulative impacts.

In reality, the landscape cannot accommodate another solar farm of this size.

Again my question is why the Byers Gill Development is being considered when it is clearly being shoehorned into an unsuitable landscape?

As a layperson I believe our local landscape will be overwhelmed & transformed into an industrial area. Having recently driven through Holland, Germany and Austria, industrial areas and motorway corridors are exactly where panels are sited.

Not on rolling countryside next to traditional villages.

Unlike these developments, Byers Gill will clearly have a major and lasting impact on landscape character, and the amenity of local residents. The sheer scale of Panel Area D dwarfs the footprint of Great Stainton.

The effects on the landscape & visual impacts acknowledged by RWE as transformative and the effects on local amenity and consequences for our local communities will be multi-generational.

There is a visit planned to our property, School House, on 17th October, during which time I believe some of what I have had to say can be put into context.

The transition to renewable energy is crucial for a sustainable future. We must not overlook the landscape destruction this excessive development will bring. It is my belief we can achieve an approach that respects both our need for renewable energy and the preservation of our environment. It's crucial we find a balance between our energy goals and the preservation of our natural environments, rather than rush into this scheme which, as we have heard, won't even generate any power until 2031.