

THE SHERBORNE AND DISTRICT SOCIETY

Richard Temple, Senior Planning Officer
Dorset County Council,
South Walks House,
South Walks Road,
Dorchester,
DORSET DT1 1UZ

16 February 2020

Dear Mr Temple,

Objection to planning application WD/D/19/003181 Proposed Solar Farm, Higher Stockbridge Farm, Sherborne, Dorset, DT9 6EP

The Sherborne and District Society (CPRE) strongly **objects** to this planning application on the grounds that it poses unacceptable harm to the landscape, the setting of heritage assets and the amenity value of this important part of the Blackmore Vale.

CPRE Sherborne endorses the Government's pledge to address climate change through all sensible means, including the expansion of renewable energy.

Equally, we support Dorset Council's policy of seeking practical ways to combat climate change. However, as the Government has itself stressed, any measures must be proportionate, and must be balanced against potential harm to the countryside, especially where the geography of a potential solar site suggests it would blemish the surrounding landscape. We refer to the Dorset CPRE report 'Renewable Energy Generation Projects' written by Dr David Peacock in support: this is now posted on the website. Our objections are set out below:-

1 The application is contrary to policy COM11 of the Local Plan.

COM11, Renewable Energy Development Proposals for generating heat or electricity from renewable energy sources (other than wind energy) will be allowed wherever possible providing that the benefits of the development, such as the contribution towards renewable energy targets, significantly outweigh any harm. In addition, permission will only be granted provided any adverse impacts on the local landscape, townscape or areas of historical interest can be satisfactorily assimilated.

Landscape

At 187 acres the site is very large and sits in the middle of the attractive countryside typical of the Blackmore Vale. It is surrounded on three sides by higher ground, as can be seen on the map on the first page of the document volume 2 part 5 submitted by the applicant. Consequently the solar panels would be clearly visible from many locations from miles around, including from the Batcombe Ridge AONB due south and the grade 1 listed church in Lillington.

The solar panel arrays will also be visible from a number of other listed buildings, roads, and numerous footpaths in the surrounding countryside and the lie of the land makes mitigation by screening impossible.

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2 The proposal fails to meet policies ENV1 and ENV10 in the Local Plan.

ENV1. LANDSCAPE, SEASCAPE AND SITES OF GEOLOGICAL INTEREST

ii) Development should be located and designed so that it does not detract from and, where reasonable, enhances the local landscape character.

ENV10. THE LANDSCAPE AND TOWNSCAPE SETTING

i) All development proposals should contribute positively to the maintenance and enhancement of local identity and distinctiveness. Development should be informed by the character of the site and its surroundings.

Amenity Value

The area is attractive Dorset countryside with many footpaths and bridleways, making it of great amenity value to local residents and visitors. The proposed site can be seen from footpaths N20/11, N20/14, N20/17, N20/19, N20/20, N20/22, and N20/25 and the MacMillan Way, and the enjoyment of the area by people using these will be greatly diminished by the sight of what would in effect be an industrial landscape. The applicant states that “*Access to the solar park will be restricted for security reasons to prevent theft and vandalism. The application proposal will not impact or divert any existing or proposed right of way*”. This is incorrect as the bridleway N20/24 and Drove Road D20257, recorded by the Dorset Council Highways department as an ancient drove road with public rights to walk and drive on it, will both be impacted as they would need to have a 2 metre fence on each side where they pass through the site. This will seriously reduce the amenity value of these rights of way and may considerably reduce their use.

The two properties closest to the proposed arrays, Holmbushes Farm and Higher Bailey Ridge Farm will be affected to such an extent, reducing their right to quiet enjoyment of their properties, that this alone should make the proposal unacceptable. See ENV16:

ENV16. AMENITY

i) Proposals for development should be designed to minimize their impact on the amenity and quiet enjoyment of both existing residents and future residents within the development and close to it.

3 The application clearly fails to meet the policy ENV4 in the Local Plan:

Heritage Assets

The applicant states that ‘*the proposals would result in no harm to the significance of any heritage assets within the Site environs*’. This is simply incorrect. As the solar panels would be seen from a number of listed assets, including grade 1 listed Lillington church, there would unavoidably be some impact. The aforementioned map on the first page of the document volume 2 part 5 submitted by the applicant shows just how many heritage assets there are in the vicinity.

Historic England provided advice to the applicants that they would need to conduct an impact assessment, ***but they have not done so***. Historic England in a letter dated 10th February 2020 to Dorset Council stated “*Given the issues outlined above, Historic England has concerns regarding the application on heritage grounds. We consider that the issues and safeguards outlined in our advice need to be addressed in order for the application to meet the requirements of paragraphs 189, 193 and 196 of the NPPF*”.

ENV4. HERITAGE ASSETS

The impact of development on a designated or non-designated heritage asset and its setting must be thoroughly assessed against the significance of the asset.

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4 The Applications fails to meet the criteria in The Revised NPPF 2019 - Planning for Climate Change

Paragraph 151 says. To help increase the use and supply of renewable and low carbon energy and heat, plans should:

- a) *provide a positive strategy for energy from these sources, that maximises the potential for suitable development, **while ensuring that adverse impacts are addressed satisfactorily (including cumulative landscape and visual impacts)***

We contend that this condition cannot be met on this site and refer to the Clark Landscape Design Report and Historic England's comments as evidence in support of this position.

- b) *consider **identifying suitable areas for renewable and low carbon energy sources, and supporting infrastructure, where this would help secure their development.***

To date the Council hasn't in its development plans identified suitable sites. Given the unsuitability of this site it would create a dangerous precedent, for the identification of suitable sites in the new Dorset Local Plan, if it was granted planning permission.

Paragraph 154.b) says approve the application if its impacts are (or can be made) acceptable.

In other words Councils do not have to approve applications whose impacts are unacceptable and as we have indicated earlier we do not consider the impacts are or can be made acceptable.

5. Duration

With a proposed operational lifetime of 35 years the development cannot be considered temporary. It seems unlikely that the site would ever return to agricultural use. It seems more likely be a refurbished solar farm or become derelict industrial wasteland. Voltaia's attitude, detected in their application, does not give one a feeling they will have any enthusiasm to restore the site to countryside. Indeed 35 years is so long the company may no longer exist.

6. Disclaimer

Whilst we have taken every effort to present accurate information for your consideration, as we are not a decision maker or statutory consultee, we cannot accept any responsibility for unintentional errors or omissions and you should satisfy yourselves on any facts before reaching your decision.

7. CONCLUSION

Accordingly, whilst supporting any reasonable measures to address climate change, on this occasion CPRE Sherborne strongly objects to this proposal for the reasons outlined above. The development will be over-large and will have a very considerable effect on the surrounding countryside. It will cause unacceptable harm to the landscape, the setting of heritage assets and the amenity value of this part of Blackmore Vale.

We therefore believe that **the application should be refused.**

Yours sincerely

John A Newman

Chairman Sherborne Society CPRE
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