

# 22/00319/FUL Solar farm - Land west of Wood Lane and Stocking Lane NG11 0LF Ward Member Comments - Cllr C Thomas (Leake Ward)

I OBJECT. This is a very special area in terms of its ecology, landscape, public rights of way and recreational use. Renewable energy is needed but the negative impacts of this scheme, mainly ecological and visual, are just too great to outweigh the benefits. Significant alterations to mitigate some of these impacts might make the scheme more acceptable, but I don't believe simply removing some of the fields would be the best way to achieve this – impact in other areas would still be too great. Policy 16 of LPP2 lists some issues to be assessed for renewable energy schemes and some of these are considered below.

## 1. Compliance with Green Belt policy

- 1.1. This is inappropriate development in the Green Belt - openness of the landscape is affected, and there is harm. Para 151 of NPPF allows the benefits of renewable energy to be considered as “very special circumstances”, but in this case the environmental harm is great and outweighs the wider environmental benefit from the provision of renewable energy in my view.

## 2. Landscape and visual effects

- 2.1. This is an area of high ground and the proposal would build the solar farm along the ridgeline with potential visibility against the skyline from a vast surrounding area, as well as from the footpaths and bridleways that criss-cross the area. There is reliance on significant screening being provided by existing areas of woodland but these are outside the redline of the application so their continued existence can't be assured by conditions. Indeed some of the areas are plantations – planted presumably to take a crop of timber at some time. Unless these areas of woodland can be protected to act as screens for the duration of the solar farm, additional screening should be provided along their boundaries within the redline.
- 2.2. In some areas existing hedges would provide the basis of screening and again these would need to be protected, allowed to grow higher with an agreed management plan, and thickened up as necessary. In other areas new hedges would be planted, but it should be noted that these would not provide effective screening for many years. Along the ridgeline, even with fully grown hedges, the equipment would be visible above the hedge. This could be mitigated by increasing the width of buffer strips along the ridges so that the equipment is on ground that is starting to fall away from the ridge so less visible. Breaking up the straight lines of the fenced areas of panels might help also, and providing some clearings where particular planting could provide interest on the ridgeline.
- 2.3. Long distance views from rights of way within and adjacent to the site would be harmed as follows:
  - the area by Cuckoo Bush Farm looking out towards the Trent Valley,
  - along Wood Lane through gaps in the hedge and through the hedge in winter,
  - across field 6 from BW12 (Gotham),
  - through the trees in winter from BW5 (West Leake) across fields 15 and 16.
- 2.4. Arriving at the top of Fox Hill via FP8 (East Leake) then FP6 (West Leake) onto the Midshires Way (a popular walk from East Leake) there is currently a glorious open view on all sides. The proposal would place the solar farm immediately ahead at the end of “Field 16” instead of an open view to the woodland beyond the field. This open view should be preserved by at least reducing the westward extent of this area of panels, and possibly also by softening their outline to a curve.

- 2.5. Considering views into the site from other public rights of way:  
The fields around Stone House (12, 13, and 14) would be visible from BW1 (West Leake), FP2 (West Leake), and BW3 (West Leake) to the south and southwest.  
The panels and possibly substation compound in field 5 would be visible from the highpoint on BW1 (Gotham) that runs alongside Gotham Hill Wood on the opposite ridgeline.
- 2.6. The above seven viewpoints were not included in the Landscape and Visual Assessment and I request that they are added.

### 3. Ecology and biodiversity

- 3.1. The landscape is essentially woodland containing a patchwork of fields in clearings. The woods provide nesting grounds and cover, the fields provide areas for creatures to hunt and forage and for some bird species to nest. These two things work together to support a biodiverse habitat which has viable populations of larger mammals, a diversity of birds (including owls and birds of prey) and bats. There is a SSSI (Golf Course) adjoining one long stretch of panels, which has a similar form of mixed woodland and clearings. There are five further local wildlife sites in and around the adjacent woods (Leake New Wood Track, Ash Spinney Assart, Crowend Wood - Eastern and Western Assarts, and Crowend Wood Ride), showing the richness of the habitat here. The area forms part of an important wildlife corridor, stretching from Bunny Woods, along Ash Lane and Hotchley Hill, over to the Golf Course and beyond towards the Trent, and linking with other areas of woodland around East and West Leake, Gotham and Kingston.
- 3.2. I note (Design and Access Statement p13) that the deer fence would have a 10 cm gap at the bottom along its length which would allow movement of smallest mammals, and this is welcomed. I question however whether the height of the gap is enough to allow passage of other small mammals, e.g. hedgehogs. I note that the recently approved Hotchley Hill solar farm application 21/00703/FUL has holes for passage of animals of 1.5 x 0.2m [REDACTED]. The British Hedgehog Preservation Society recommends 13cm by 13cm for "hedgehog streets". Appropriate gaps should be secured by condition should the application be approved.
- 3.3. However the deer fence would still prevent movement of larger mammals (including roe and muntjac deer, fox, [REDACTED] hare) freely around this area. More corridors across enclosed areas are required, particularly where long stretches of fences would separate areas of woodland and/or open space. For example within fields 7-11 hedges will be preserved anyway, (hopefully), so by separately fencing each field viable wildlife corridors could be left along the hedges to link the areas of woodland to the north and south. A similar method could be used to provide corridors between the golf course and Crow wood, and from the open fields to the east of Stocking Lane through field 16 into the woodland beyond. The same is true of the fenced areas of panels in fields 1-6 and 12-14.
- 3.4. The presence of solar panels on so many of the clearings would mean that birds of prey would have to travel further distances to hunt and mammals would have reduced access to feeding areas. Ongoing management techniques may not be helpful to ground-nesting bird species. More open space without panels is needed in general to provide areas where it is safe for birds of prey to hunt and for other species that need open spaces such as skylarks and lapwings. These areas could be managed as different habitats or left as smaller arable fields. Wider buffer strips of open land are needed alongside the areas of woodland, outside the deer fence, to facilitate movement and mitigate the loss of feeding ground, and these too should be managed for wildlife.

- 3.5. The noise from inverters could affect wildlife if installed on the woodland edge near [REDACTED] bat roosts, bird nesting sites etc. Of course this infrastructure needs to be situated away from any homes, and consideration for users of the PROW network is needed, but wildlife needs to be protected from the noise too, and the layout should consider this.
- 3.6. The vast majority of grass planting proposed is not species rich – could this be improved? There are few areas of wildflowers – again could this be improved?
- 3.7. Management methods proposed include using herbicides to clear the land (para 2.87 Biodiversity Management Plan) and thereafter to “treat all weeds” (Landscape and Ecological Management Plan). In March 2022 Rushcliffe Council unanimously passed a motion to limit use of pesticides in Rushcliffe. Ideally both the construction and ongoing management plans should state that operations will avoid pesticides, apart from for a limited number of exceptional situations where there is no viable alternative, e.g. spot control of invasive alien species such as the Japanese Knotweed on Wood Lane. Such species to be agreed and conditioned, rather than relying on the term “weeds”.
- 3.8. There are reports from other solar farms of chemicals used to clean the panels being allowed to run off onto the land. Again the management plan should state the cleaning methods and materials to be used, designed to minimise environmental harm. If the application is allowed the detail of the management plan is key to ensuring biodiversity benefits are absolutely maximised.

## 4. Agricultural land

- 4.1. Much of this land is currently in productive agricultural use. At a time when the country needs to step up food production it is difficult to understand how the loss of agricultural land can be justified when there are so many new buildings built without solar panels.

## 5. Open space and other recreational uses

- 5.1. The area is criss-crossed by bridleways and footpaths and provides a much valued resource and heavily used amenity for walkers, horse riders and cyclists. Stocking Lane (BW16 East Leake, BW16 Gotham, BW5 West Leake) forms part of a long distance multi-use trail – the Midshires Way. This area is close to areas of population, so that it can be accessed without a car journey, and it is much used at lunchtimes by workers walking from the Gypsum site. Elevated open views and surrounding agricultural fields and woodland create a countryside experience important for mental and physical well-being. Various circular walks and rides are available. If this application goes ahead solar panels and related infrastructure and a high security fence with obtrusive notices will be visible alongside the path for long stretches and at every turn. The experience would not simply be passing one area of these, but they would be present around the whole loop. In parts with high hedges in place to screen the panels, there would be a tunnel effect. There would be significant detriment to the enjoyment of the countryside because of this solar farm layout as currently proposed.
- 5.2. It is difficult to see how this negative impact could be completely avoided but something is needed to lessen the impact if the scheme is to go forward in some form. Omitting some of the areas of panels alongside the public rights of way might help. Placing wider strips of open land between the paths and new hedges might help to some extent, especially if these were managed to provide a variety of different habitats like ponds or wildflower meadows or even retaining some strips of

arable land. Rather than a uniform width of edging strip, the paths could open out into clearings at intervals to soften the straight lines and give more of a sense of openness.

- 5.3. The additional permissive path is welcomed. Linking two bridleways it should be a bridleway rather than a footpath to provide a loop for horse riders and cyclists. Has any consideration been given after the construction period to continuing it along the new access road and down the lane eventually to come out on Stocking Lane between fields 15 and 16?
- 5.4. In terms of other potential improvements to the public rights of way network:
  - The bridleway between fields 10 and 11 (BW10 Gotham) is boggy and drainage work and perhaps surfacing is needed here, particularly if solar panels change the runoff patterns or if construction work compromises the ditch between the two fields.
  - The gate where BW10 (Gotham) and BW11 (Gotham) intersect by the Cuckoo Bush is very muddy with a large puddle. Any significant additional use of this by workmen etc during the construction phase would render it even more difficult to navigate and improvement work could be undertaken here.
  - There is also a problem with mud where BW11 (Gotham) goes through a gate at the start of the wood – walkers trying to avoid this area have created an unofficial path through the woods, continuing on the wrong side of the hedge of field 11 to connect with BW10 (Gotham).
- 5.5. The site adjoins a golf course, and there will be some detriment to the overall experience for golfers. It should be noted that stray golf balls could damage panels.

## 6. Cumulative impact with existing and proposed development

- 6.1. The majority of residents in East Leake believe that the network of footpaths/bridleways out into the countryside is important to them<sup>1</sup>. Their use increased during lockdown and has remained at a higher level. The “cumulative map” does not reflect the fact that East Leake has seen explosive growth in the local plan period, increasing in size by more than half again. These new estates are positioned around the outside of the village in open countryside and footpaths and bridleways that were once country walks now travel distances through housing estates before reaching open countryside. See section 4.1 of the East Leake Neighbourhood Plan.  
Examples include:
  - FP5 (East Leake) which now passes through the development off Rempstone Road
  - BOAT11 East Leake (Lantern Lane), previously a country lane now a made up road
  - FP27 (East Leake) previously went diagonally across a field and will now cross a housing estate
- 6.2. The cumulative impact on countryside access around East Leake is already significant, and this application would adversely impact another important area where residents enjoy the countryside. The cumulative map does not reflect the ongoing work at the gravel pit between East Leake and Rempstone, with impact on FP1 (East Leake) and its extension into Rempstone as FP1 (Rempstone). “Temporary” to be sure but over a great many years. RB20 East Leake (also part of the Midshires way) will pass the approved solar farm on Hotchley Hill.
- 6.3. There is also already significant cumulative impact of development for Gotham. The Fairham development to the north, and potential solar farms to the North East will reduce the countryside setting of the village. This solar farm would be an additional loss of open countryside surrounding

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<sup>1</sup> Para 4.1.19 ELNP, data from survey for the East Leake Community-Led Plan 2012

the village, and accessible countryside at that. Redevelopment of the Ratcliffe on Soar Power Station site to the north of this proposed site and potential quarrying at Barton in Fabis also need to be factored in. This peaceful and biodiverse area is at the centre of all this development and provides an accessible green oasis in an increasingly developed area.

- 6.4. As well as the impact on landscape and residents' amenity, these cumulative developments adversely affect wildlife and habitats, increasingly pushed into smaller spaces in an area being consumed on all sides by development.

## 7. Vehicular access and traffic

- 7.1. The decision to avoid using Stocking Lane for access is welcomed, as this is heavily used for recreational purposes. However the creation of an access track through the woods will undoubtedly involve removal of trees and otherwise disrupt the wood – has the impact of this environmental (and perhaps heritage) damage been assessed? Is the intention to leave this track in place after the construction phase? Will it be removed when the solar farm is removed?
- 7.2. Looking at the access via Wood Lane, it is important that access is maintained at all times for properties off the lane, and that access via the PROW is maintained or a detour route provided as there is no obvious alternative route.
- 7.3. At the entrance onto Wood Lane the Construction Management plan states that there will be “realignment of 152m of hedgerow and the trimming of 11m of hedgerow”. What does “realignment” mean? Presumably that the hedge will be removed, destroyed, and replaced? This is a significant removal. Does this need to be surveyed first so that habitat can be recreated?
- 7.4. The documentation also states that Wood lane will be widened to 4.5m. Is this temporarily for the construction period or permanent? It is currently a fairly narrow road with generous verges rich with wildflowers etc and a memorial bench. The character of this part of the bridleway will be significantly altered, becoming more like a road and less like a lane. It forms part of a leisure route connecting East Leake to Thrumpton and the River Trent. Temporary widening may be preferable, with restoration to its current state for the operational period.
- 7.5. If the road is improved and widened it can be anticipated that there will be more vehicle access. This could perhaps be embraced, with provision for car parking to provide better access into the countryside, or prevented/discouraged in some way. Either way problems like fly tipping are likely to increase. 360 degree coverage by security cameras could assist with this.

## 8. Summary

I recognise the importance of capturing solar energy in the UK. However I object to the application as it stands because the harm to the landscape and ecology caused by this vast development outweighs the wider environmental benefit from production of renewable energy. It may be possible to reduce the negative impacts to an acceptable extent by reducing and altering the scheme. This is a temporary application but 40 years is a long time, half a lifetime, during which adverse impacts would be experienced by very many people who use the public rights of way to enjoy this tranquil countryside and woodland with elevated views. Wildlife would be harmed. Food production would be harmed. Decommissioning and restoration of the land is difficult to assure over such an extended time. The character of the area would be changed, probably forever.