



The countryside charity

Kent

Application: 23/01363 - Goshall Valley East Street Ash

Proposal: Construction of a solar farm with associated access and infrastructure

We are CPRE, the countryside charity. Formed in 1926, CPRE is a registered charity and one of the longest-established and most respected environmental groups in England, with more than 40,000 members and supporters living in our cities, towns, villages and the countryside. CPRE Kent is the largest of the CPRE County branches with more than 1,300 members, including more than 160 parish councils, civic societies and other Kent organisations and companies.

It is our objective to retain and promote a beautiful and thriving countryside that is valued by everyone. It is our position that planning decisions should seek to ensure that the impact of development on the countryside, both directly and indirectly, is kept to a minimum and that development is sustainable in accordance with national planning policy.

Nationally, CPRE supports the pressing need to rapidly decarbonise the UK power sector. However, in what we see as a once-in-a-century opportunity to upgrade to a sustainable, low-carbon, smart energy system, it is extremely important that the UK's landscape, biodiversity and heritage assets should not be seen as acceptable collateral damage. Overall, it is the charity's position that we need to aim for the best net-zero solution for the countryside, not just whatever is the quickest and cheapest.

While CPRE Kent does not routinely comment upon ground-mounted solar applications that are sensibly located and minimise the impact on the countryside, we do have particular concerns with respect to this proposal. We therefore object to this application on the following grounds:

- 1) **Landscape Impact.** Adopted policy DM16 states that development that would harm the character of the landscape, as identified through the process of landscape character assessment, will only be permitted if it is in accordance with allocations made in Development Plan Documents and incorporates any necessary avoidance and mitigation measures; or it can be sited to avoid or reduce the harm and/or incorporate design measures to mitigate the impacts to an acceptable level.

The site is situated in the Ash Levels. This was noted within the 2020 Dover District Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) for its expansive, uninterrupted, long-distance views across the marshes, the absence of settlement and development, its contribution to sense of isolation and remoteness with a strong sense of place and openness and overall described as a tranquil and rural area, with an open and exposed remote character and large skies. Significantly, the open and remote landscape is noted for its role as the landscape setting in relation to the Grade I-listed Richborough Castle. Accordingly, the LCA states development proposals within this character area should conserve the open landscape and avoid the introduction of large-scale or incongruous elements or any form of development in this unsettled landscape and consider the role of this area as the landscape setting for Richborough Castle.

We are extremely concerned by the cumulative impact this proposal would have when considered alongside similar developments close by. In particular, CPRE Kent has been vocal in its opposition to National Grid's Sea Link proposal, particularly on the basis that to allow that scheme would lead

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to unprecedented industrialisation within the Wantsum Chanel and its surrounds. To allow the current proposal would similarly give a clear green light to the gradual industrialisation of the Ash Levels landscape.

In any event, the landscape impact of this development would be unacceptable when considered in isolation given its location within an area of prominent visibility. This includes the raised ridgeline north of Ash village, footpaths EE92A and EE97 and the long views from the Richborough Roman Fort. Planning Practice Guidance advises that local topography is an important factor in assessing whether large-scale solar farms could have a damaging effect on landscape - and that great care should be taken to ensure heritage assets are conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance, including the impact of proposals on views important to their setting.

The adverse impacts cannot be addressed satisfactorily on a site of this size and character, and the suggested mitigation measures are not currently considered sufficient to mitigate for the landscape and visual impact. It is therefore considered that the proposal would have a significant impact on the character of the countryside and a significant adverse impact on the landscape. Consequently, the development would significantly conflict with DM16.

- 2) **Heritage Impact.** Linked to the above, we are extremely concerned to see the applicant's assessment that the degree of harm that the proposed solar farm would cause to the heritage significance of the scheduled Roman site of Richborough, which includes the Grade I-listed Richborough Castle, is minor-adverse. For the reasons set out above, the proposed development would be harmful to the landscape setting of this nationally important Roman site through the loss of openness and remoteness. The associated fencing, access tracks and cameras would add to the entirely incongruous impact of the proposal, which overall would detract from Richborough's landscape context, causing far greater harm to its significance than that suggested.

It is noted that this view is shared by statutory consultee KCC Heritage Conservation, along with a number of noted experts in the area, including the Kent Archaeological Society, the Council for British Archaeology and the Dover Archaeological Group. From the weight of this opinion, it seems clear to CPRE Kent that the harm should be assessed as substantial in the context of NPPF Chapter 16.

NPPF paragraph 206 requires that any harm to, or loss of, the significance of a designated heritage asset (from its alteration or destruction, or from development within its setting) should require clear and convincing justification. Further, substantial harm to assets of the highest significance, notably scheduled monuments and Grade I and II*-listed buildings should be wholly exceptional. No clear and convincing justification for the proposal has been put forward beyond the routine need to provide green energy. As this could be provided at alternative locations, this is not considered exceptional for the purposes of NPPF paragraph 206. Similar conflict arises with regards to NPPF paragraphs 205 and 207.

- 3) **Loss of Best and Most Versatile (BMV) agricultural land.** The applicant claims that an agricultural land classification survey was conducted in January 2022, revealing that out of the 84.8-hectare site, 78 hectares (92% of the site) comprised Grade 3b soils (Agricultural Land Quality and Land-use Considerations, p.6).

As has now been highlighted by Ash Parish Council, Natural England's Agricultural Land Classification map for London and the Southeast (ALC007) suggests that at least a portion of the site area is classified as Grade 1 land. They further note that this assertion is supported by a local farmer familiar with the site, who informed the Parish Council that the current landowner acquired the land as Grade 1. Additionally, they report that the land underwent significant improvement in the 1970s with government-funded drainage enhancements, substantially augmenting its value and productivity. They conclude by noting that the land currently yields annual crops such as wheat, oilseed rape and potatoes, indicating that it must meet at least a 3a standard.

The NPPF defines best and most versatile land as land in Grades 1, 2, and 3a of the Agricultural Land Classification. Paragraph 180(b) of the NPPF requires that planning decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, and the wider benefits from natural capital and ecosystem services - including the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land.

Footnote 62 to paragraph 181 states that where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, areas of poorer-quality land should be preferred to those of a higher quality. In the interests of ongoing food security, this valuable agricultural land should not be lost to development.

This is a significant campaigning issue for CPRE, with our recent report '*Building on our food security*' highlighting that over the past 12 years we have lost more than 14,000 hectares of prime agricultural land to development, including 287,864 houses - equivalent to the productive loss of some 250,000 tonnes of vegetables and enough to provide almost two million people with their five-a-day for an entire year. Further, this is a worsening situation, with 2022 seeing the greatest number of hectares of BMV land planned for development - equating to a hundredfold increase on the number of hectares of BMV land built on in 2010. Best and most versatile agricultural land is needed to help feed the country's population. Recent world events indicate the need to protect such land. The loss of such an important resource would compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, contrary to the NPPF.

In view of the above, the applicant's claim as to the quality of the soil will need to be robustly scrutinised to ensure it is correctly accounted for within the planning balance.

- 4) **Ecological Impact.** The site is almost entirely within the Ash Level and South Richborough Pasture Local Wildlife Site (LWS). This LWS is designated for supporting a range of habitats, including the Priority Habitat, Coastal and Floodplain Grazing Marsh and a botanically rich ditch network, both of which are present on the application site. The Dover Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy Evidence Report dated May 2022 identifies Biodiversity Opportunity Areas (BOA) areas considered to be of key focus in the Kent Biodiversity Strategy to enable the greatest biodiversity gains. Ash Level and South Richborough Pasture LWS is identified as one of the key target areas for restoration and enhancement as part of the Great Stour floodplain. The site also falls within the Impact Risk Zone for the Sandwich Bay to Hacklinge Marshes Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

We note the concerns of others, in particular Sandwich Bay Bird Observatory (SBBOT), that the ecological survey appears to have overlooked two nationally significant bird species: breeding Turtle Doves (listed as critically endangered on the Red list) and wintering Golden Plovers, which congregate here in notable numbers of national significance. Turtle Doves are particularly crucial as they represent a critically endangered species, and East Kent stands as one of the last remaining

bastions for them. They are extremely sensitive to any disruption in their nesting habitat, primarily hedgerows and scrubby thickets. Golden Plovers, on the other hand, illustrate the interconnectedness of this site with surrounding habitats, extending all the way to the coast.

SBBOT point to counts that indicate that more than 1% of the UK's wintering population of Golden Plovers utilises this site. As it states, Golden Plovers' movement for feeding and roosting is contingent on various factors such as weather, disturbance and food availability. Notably absent from the survey are evening or nocturnal surveys to account for feeding and roosting bird activity, as well as consideration of tidal stages when birds may migrate here from the coast. Moreover, Golden Plovers are known not to feed beneath solar arrays.

Additionally, it observes that the survey fails to acknowledge the presence of other breeding species such as Grey Partridge, Yellowhammer, Corn Bunting and Cetti's Warbler (a Schedule 1 species), with Hobbies and Barn Owls also frequenting the vicinity. Many of these species utilise ditches and hedges as nesting sites but are intolerant to disturbance or loss of the surrounding habitat essential for feeding. Various other vertebrates including Water Voles, Water Shrews, Grass Snakes and Slow Worms are likely to be impacted adversely by the proposed development.

Likewise, Buglife points out that the grassland habitat in association with the wetland features of the site could support nationally rare and scarce invertebrates, including Priority Species under Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006 and that these species are a material consideration in a planning application. It therefore calls for invertebrate surveys to be conducted within the ditch network by an expert in invertebrates. This is essential for providing an accurate assessment of the site's significance and is crucial for informing the appropriate management of wetland features throughout the operational phase of the proposed development.

In view of these comments, it seems clear to CPRE Kent that further surveys, along with any proposed mitigation measures, will need to be submitted prior to the determination of the planning application. Further, it is only upon completion of these surveys that a conclusion be reached as to whether the development would achieve a biodiversity net gain.

- 5) **Construction Impact.** We note and share the concerns of local residents as to the impact of the site access in the context of the rural setting and existing rural road network. Accordingly, we have significant concerns regarding the management of traffic to and from the site and the potential impacts on the local population. In CPRE Kent's experience, this aspect is not being sufficiently or robustly considered at the application stage, leading to significant and prolonged impacts on the local community. In particular, we would point to current and significant harm that the construction of the Cleve Hill Solar Park in Swale District is having on the residents of Graveney.

Conclusions.

It is our overriding concern that neither the cumulative impacts of the proposal, nor the impact on the Heritage Asset of Richborough, have been adequately assessed or addressed within the proposal. We are also concerned that the Ecological Impact, along with the impact of construction traffic, is not being fully accounted for.

On current information, and notwithstanding the benefits this scheme would bring in terms of the need to decarbonise the UK power sector, the proposal would be contrary to both the policies of the adopted development plan as a whole and those of the NPPF. It is therefore our view that this scheme should be refused.

Yours sincerely

CPRE Kent – The countryside charity.



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