

Presentation to Public Forum on 25th February 2025

Good evening.

My name is Paddy Herlihy and I am speaking on behalf of The Village Alliance, which is a local organisation in Mersham which is challenging plans for Ashford and the surrounding area.

I am also the Local Footpath Officer for the Ramblers for Mersham Parish, but I am speaking on behalf of the Village Alliance today.

The Village Alliance is fundamentally opposed to the proposal by the applicant to place a solar power station in the East Stour Valley between Mersham and Aldington.

Firstly, let us be clear here about terminology. This is not a 'solar farm'. A solar farm suggests solar powered sheep and solar powered cows and solar powered wheat ripening in the sun. In contrast, this is a major industrial installation. It will include solar panels mounted on steel structures across the whole valley. In places these structures will be of significant height, as much of the proposed power station is located on the north-facing slope of the valley, and so the panels will have to be a significant height to catch the sun's rays.

The size of the proposed power station is such that it will generate more power than can be utilised by the Sellindge Converter Station. This will therefore require the storing of the excess energy created by this over-sized power station.

It will therefore have to include 27 compounds containing 116 battery units – each of which is the size of a shipping container. These battery units will generate sufficient noise that the applicant is proposing to surround each one with an acoustic fence. However, this is a valley and in many locations it will be possible to look down over the acoustic fencing to the battery units, meaning that the full noise will be audible.

There are serious safety concerns around these battery units. We will leave it to the experts to lead on the discussion of this in detail tomorrow, but the addition of 116 fire and pollution risks to a peaceful Kentish valley is not something that the Village Alliance can allow to pass unchallenged.

The facility will require regular maintenance, leading to the necessity for permanent haul roads and vehicles regularly despoiling what remains of the peace in this currently beautiful valley and secluded valley.

So, this is a solar power station and not a solar farm.

The solar power station will be visible from the Grade One Plus listed building of St John the Baptist Church at Mersham. The applicant does not appear to have considered the impact on the quality of this view. At present the view from the Church is across rolling Kent countryside, but this will be interrupted with a view of solar panels and, worse still, the rear sides of solar panels, which are essentially permanent scaffolding structures in the valley. It will also be visible from the Grade One listed Stonegreen Hall Farm.

As the applicant confirmed in the presentation to Issue Specific Hearing 3 on Public Right of Way this morning, it will not be possible to screen the solar power station from the churchyard and the associated borders of Mersham as it is located on the opposite side of a valley, meaning that it will be possible to see over any screening elements placed in the space between the viewer and the power station. This is particularly important to the people of Mersham because

this view 30 (from the track between the school and the railway track) is the first view facing residents of upper Mersham when they leave the village for a walk in the countryside.

The proposals will completely destroy the rural solitude of the East Stour Valley. This area is criss-crossed with public footpaths and the proposals will reduce walking in this area to zig-zagging between fences and looking at either the fence or industrial installations as far as the eye can see. This area is particularly important to local walkers, now that the Inland Border Facility has similarly 'urbanised' walks to the west of the village.

The applicant suggests that new hedges and planting belts will reduce the visual impact of the solar power station, but a) this will not reduce the negative visual impact to acceptable levels and b) planting trees and hedges would change the landscape character of this area of open river valley in unacceptable, irrevocable and permanent ways.

It should be remembered that this network of public footpaths is used regularly and repeatedly by residents of both villages for their regular walks. If a long-distance walker should happen to walk through a site like this then they would be disadvantaged and dissatisfied with the visual appeal of that section of their walk, but the impact would be temporary. However, the impact on local walkers is far more profound. This proposal would condemn 40 years' worth of local residents to either taking all of their exercise in the middle of the urban landscape of a solar factory, or to having to give up on this beautiful valley and having to walk elsewhere – where options are reducing all the time due to the Inland Border Facility and the proposed Otterpool development.

The applicant claims that there will be no major effects on visual impacts in the area. However, this definition is based entirely on the work of consultants employed by the applicant. The Village Alliance completely disagrees with this assessment and it is our contention that there will be substantial negative impact on the views and landscape character of the East Stour Valley.

The Village Alliance is also extremely worried about the proposals for accessing the site. The proposal for the haul road to cross Station Road/Calleywell Lane between the Mill and the Calleywell Lane/Goldwell Lane junction is a dangerous proposal. The narrow lane twists around several blind corners and this is therefore an unsafe location for a new crossroad design.

The amount of construction traffic during the construction process will have a substantial impact on traffic on this increasingly busy road. With disruption and delays on this road, it is likely that traffic will divert to drive through Mersham. Mersham's roads are already busy at certain times and I was not able to find any assessment of traffic that will divert through Mersham within the submission.

The surface and sub-strate of Station Road from Evegate Mill is already breaking up and subsiding. Driving construction traffic on this road will lead to further, potentially terminal subsidence.

In summary, this is a flawed application for an inappropriately sized solar power station in the wrong place. The Village Alliance urges the Inspector to recommend refusal of this application.

Thank you.

Padraig Herlihy

For The Village Alliance

