

I live in Little Staughton, one of the villages that will be affected by the proposed East Park Energy solar development in north-east Bedfordshire and west Cambridgeshire.

My community supports the UK's ambition to achieve energy security and transition to lower-carbon energy sources. However, we do not believe that this proposal represents the correct approach or the right location for renewable energy generation. We are deeply concerned that the project would cause significant and lasting harm to our countryside, agriculture, local communities and food security, while delivering benefits that, at best are very questionable.

Food security in the UK is imperative. But the proposed development would cover approximately 1,900 acres of farmland with around 700,000 solar panels covering a corridor of nearly six miles. Combined with existing and proposed solar developments in the surrounding area, this would result in thousands of acres of productive farmland being transformed into an industrialised energy landscape. The proposal includes extensive associated infrastructure, including large-scale battery storage facilities.

We are particularly concerned by the loss of productive agricultural land and its replacement with an inherently inefficient energy source. 74% of the proposed site consists of Best and Most Versatile farmland. This productive farmland would be replaced by a solar generation plant which, at best, will only be 10% productive and significantly lower than this during the winter months when demand for energy is at its highest. At a time when the United Kingdom imports a significant proportion of its food it seems contrary to the national interest to remove high-quality farmland from food production let alone replace it with something which is inherently unproductive and inefficient. While solar power undoubtedly has a role to play in the UK's energy mix, many people question whether vast solar power plants on agricultural land should take precedence over alternative locations such as brownfield sites, warehouse roofs, commercial buildings, car parks and transport corridors.

Strategically, Food security should be considered alongside energy security. Recent global events have demonstrated the fragility of international supply chains and the risks of excessive reliance on imports. Britain should be protecting its most productive farmland and encouraging greater domestic food production not reducing its capacity.

This corner of Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire is home to a rich variety of wildlife and provides an increasingly rare landscape. The development would inevitably affect habitats, public rights of way and the enjoyment of the countryside by future generations.

The proposal's battery energy storage facilities raise additional concerns. While battery technology will be important to the future energy system, local communities require reassurance regarding safety and fire prevention. Given the proximity of villages and homes, these issues should be carefully scrutinised before consent is granted. It has recently come to light that the proposed battery storage facility attached to this proposal is near a local high pressure strategic gas pipeline. The concerns raised by this should not be underestimated.

The construction phase would bring years of disruption to. Thousands of heavy goods vehicle movements are expected, placing additional pressure on rural roads that are neither designed nor equipped to accommodate such traffic volumes. Residents are concerned about increased congestion, road safety risks, noise, air pollution and the impact on daily life. The prolonged use of pile-driving equipment across a development of this scale would create a significant noise burden for many communities.

We are also concerned about the long-term consequences of a project that is described as "temporary" but is expected to remain in place for approximately forty years. Questions remain regarding the future condition of the soil, the agricultural viability of the land once decommissioned, and the guarantees that exist to ensure proper restoration. Local communities deserve clarity on who will ultimately be responsible for funding and delivering decommissioning and environmental restoration when the project reaches the end of its operational life.

Finally, I believe that developers should be required to demonstrate complete transparency regarding their supply chains. Concerns have been raised internationally regarding labour standards in the manufacture of some solar panel components. It is essential that all equipment used in UK energy projects complies fully with the Modern Slavery Act 2015 and meets the highest ethical standards.

We in my community believe that the United Kingdom can meet its renewable energy and net-zero ambitions without sacrificing large areas of productive farmland and treasured countryside. I respectfully urge the Government to adopt a more balanced approach that prioritises brownfield land, rooftops and previously developed sites while protecting food security, rural communities and the natural environment.