

Dear Examining Authority,

I write in my capacity as the elected Ward Councillor for Wyboston Ward, Bedford Borough Council, further to my previous representations and participation during the Examination of the East Park Energy application.

As the Examination draws to a close, I wish to place on record that the concerns I have previously raised have not been satisfactorily resolved. Having considered the information and changes that have emerged during the Examination, I remain particularly concerned about the cumulative and long-term impact of this development upon the rural communities I represent.

Construction, operational and replacement traffic

Traffic and highway impacts have been a consistent concern throughout this process.

The villages and rural roads within and surrounding my ward were not designed to accommodate sustained volumes of construction traffic and HGV movements. These are communities where residents already experience the consequences of inappropriate HGV movements, including vehicles using unsuitable rural roads and routes despite restrictions.

I am particularly concerned that the replacement works arrangements which have emerged during the later stages of the Examination appear capable of creating further substantial periods of traffic movements long after the initial construction phase has ended.

I note with particular concern that replacement works may result in traffic travelling through Great Staughton and Pertenhall and using Great Staughton Road. This represents a real impact upon communities which should not be dismissed simply because individual periods of activity may be described as temporary.

The scale of potential replacement activity is also significant. A replacement programme involving 20% of the panels could itself constitute a major operational exercise. The possibility of successive replacement programmes below a particular threshold raises an obvious concern that communities could experience repeated disruption during the operational lifetime of the Scheme without the level of scrutiny which activity of that scale would ordinarily warrant.

I therefore strongly support robust, enforceable controls over construction and replacement traffic, including clearly defined permitted and prohibited routes. Such controls should not depend predominantly upon voluntary driver behaviour, self-regulation or retrospective reporting after breaches have occurred.

Protection of rural communities

I remain concerned that insufficient weight has been given to the lived impact upon the small rural communities surrounding the Scheme.

The effect of additional HGVs cannot properly be considered solely by reference to their percentage increase against wider highway traffic figures. The same number of movements has a very different effect when travelling through a small village, past homes, schools and bus stops, or along narrow rural roads.

The Examination should therefore consider the actual character and capacity of the affected roads and settlements and not simply whether traffic increases appear statistically small when measured across the wider network.

Where internal haul routes or dedicated access arrangements can prevent construction or future replacement traffic from passing through villages, I believe those arrangements should be secured for the lifetime of the development wherever reasonably practicable.

Cumulative impact

I also remain deeply concerned about cumulative development in this part of Bedfordshire and the increasing concentration of large-scale solar and associated electricity infrastructure.

East Park Energy cannot reasonably be viewed in isolation from existing, consented and emerging energy developments in the surrounding area.

The latest evidence identifies an emerging concentration of solar infrastructure extending through this locality and further energy projects seeking connection around Eaton Socon. The cumulative consequences for landscape character, agricultural land, rural communities, highways and existing developments must be properly considered.

I am concerned that individual schemes can each be assessed as having an acceptable impact while the cumulative consequence for the communities hosting them becomes increasingly substantial.

Agricultural land

The scale of productive agricultural land affected also continues to concern me.

I understand that approximately three quarters of the agricultural land within the proposed Scheme is classified as Best and Most Versatile agricultural land. The loss or long-term displacement of productive farmland on this scale should carry considerable weight in the planning balance.

The issue is not whether renewable energy development should occur, but whether a development of this exceptional scale has demonstrated sufficiently that productive agricultural land has been avoided wherever reasonable alternatives exist.

Long-term replacement and restoration

One of my broader concerns throughout this process has been that the impact upon our communities will not end when the initial construction period finishes.

Solar panels, inverters, transformers, batteries and associated infrastructure will require maintenance and replacement during the lifetime of the Scheme. The late development of the replacement works regime reinforces my concern that the environmental and community consequences of those activities need to be properly controlled now rather than being left substantially to future management arrangements.

There must also be adequate and enforceable provision to ensure that eventual decommissioning and restoration can take place without leaving either local communities or public authorities exposed to the financial consequences.

Community impact and mitigation

I have separately been engaging with East Park Energy regarding the proposed Community Benefit Fund.

For completeness, I wish to make absolutely clear that my engagement regarding community benefit does not constitute support for the development and should not be interpreted as mitigating or withdrawing any of the concerns I have raised during the Examination.

If the Scheme is ultimately consented, I consider it my responsibility as the local Ward Councillor to ensure that those communities carrying the greatest burden receive meaningful and lasting benefit. That is separate from the planning

balance and from my continuing concerns regarding the Scheme itself.

Conclusion

I recognise the national importance of renewable energy generation and the need to transition towards lower-carbon sources of energy. My objection has never been to renewable energy in principle.

However, national energy objectives do not remove the requirement for an individual development to demonstrate that its environmental effects have been properly assessed, that its impacts have been minimised and that adequate and enforceable protections exist for the communities expected to host it.

As the Examination concludes, I remain concerned that important matters relating to traffic, replacement works, cumulative development, agricultural land and the long-term protection of our rural communities remain unresolved or insufficiently secured.

I respectfully ask the Examining Authority to give substantial weight to these matters when preparing its recommendation and, should consent nevertheless be recommended, to ensure that the Development Consent Order contains robust and enforceable requirements capable of protecting affected communities throughout the construction, operational, replacement and decommissioning phases of the Scheme.