

Thank you for inviting me to attend this Open Hearing today about Springwell Solar Farm. And to represent my constituents as the Member of Parliament for Sleaford and North Hykeham. I'm very grateful for the opportunity to appear online given the parliamentary business today. I'd also like to declare that my husband is a farmer locally and an agricultural contractor. Springwell Solar Farm is actually one of several current energy applications within my constituency, but it's the largest, covering 4.94mi<sup>2</sup> or 3163 acres, or the equivalent of 2108 football pitches of farmland.

Our transition to sustainable energy is, of course, important but large-scale solar farms on good farmland are not the right solution.

We should not approve every proposal that comes before us, particularly ones such as this, that would come at such a disproportionate cost to our land use strategy and to the local community.

The proposed Springwell solar farm will be over twice the size of the nearby town of Sleaford, which is 2.3mi<sup>2</sup> and that has a population of nearly 19,800 per the 2021 census. The impact this size of application will have on a productive agricultural land is stark. It will be an industrial energy development on good quality farmland.

According to the January 2025 planning statement, the vast majority of the order limit site is shown as Grade 2 and/or Grade 3 on an ALC survey conducted in 2023.

The report states that percentages of best and most versatile (BMV) land across the site calculated to date show that 87.9% of the site is Grade 1, 2 or 3.

Grades 1,2 and 3a land are Best and Most Versatile land and Grade 3b land, we should also remember, is good, productive farmland.

We cannot ignore the sheer amount of viable farmland that will be lost under this proposal, particularly at a time when our national security and land use strategy is so pertinent in a global context.

In a Written Statement in May 2024, the previous government offered further guidance on the use of BMV land for solar farms instead of food production. It explained how these competing priorities should be balanced, clarifying the policies set out in the NPS. Firstly, the starting position for developers should be to minimise the impact on best and most versatile land and use land in areas of poorer quality.

The decision makers should give due weight to the proposed use of BMV land when considering whether consent should be granted, and the government added that decision makers should not only consider the impacts of individual proposals, but also the cumulative impacts where several proposals come forward in the same locality.

In this case, when the examining authority is considering this proposal, the sheer amount of Best and Most Versatile land in this site must be given due weight, along with the cumulative impact.

We cannot view this application in isolation. There are many more local applications, either approved or pending, that combined, pose an even greater threat to our region. For example, the Secretary of State has already approved Heckington Fen, covering an area of 1300 acres, and the NSIP reservoir proposal, in addition to all solar applications, covers a further 1000 acres. The cumulative impact of so many NSIP projects in one District is more than unreasonable for local people to bear.

Springwell is one of the largest applications in the region. There is no current grid connection and the obligation for a grid connection to be provided, if this application is proved to be passed, opens the door and has opened the door to many local applications for large solar farms.

A recent report conducted by Solar Q showed that 7% of the land in the Sleaford and North Hykeham constituency is open to solar farm applications. In the neighbouring constituencies of Newark and Gainsborough, this is 8.84% and 5.07% respectively.

The lack of strategic coordination and the density of these massive applications in that area is posing a real threat to our rural communities and to food security.

There are several heritage assets within 5km of the site, including 11 Grade 1 listed buildings, 218 Grade 2 or 2\* listed buildings, and 17 scheduled monuments, including Brauncewell Medieval Village (located approximately 500m to the south of Springwell West).

Metheringham Airfield sits in the vicinity of this application. This site preserves the memory of all the men and women who flew with or supported 106 Squadron RAF Bomber Command at RAF Metheringham in WW2. Something we particularly think of this week.

At least 18 public footpaths, byways and bridleways lie within the boundaries of the site. These include four promoted walks which form part of the 'Stepping Out' series developed by North Kesteven District Council. They are the Shires and Steeples Trail, the Scopwick Loop, the Kirkby Green Loop and the Blankney Circuit.

Springwell's own consultation on the height of the solar panels says "In some limited areas, solar panels could be up to 4m high, though most would be 3.5m high at their highest point" (p14). 4m is more than twice the height of even a very tall person walking through them.

Meanwhile, Springwell West is adjacent to the Bloxham Wood Nature Reserve, in the southeast corner of the site.

The impact of these applications on the community health and well-being must be considered, with a loss of nature and biodiversity, impact on house prices, and the mental and physical health of the industrialization in this area of usual tranquil rurality.

History has shown us that as technology develops, devices often get smaller. Think of IBM computers from 1984 to the iMacs we have today. Solar technology is already developing more efficient, smaller panels. There are alternative spaces such as roofs and poor-quality land available. It is nonsensical to use our best farmland.

There are three local RAF bases within the vicinity of this application. RAF Digby, RAF Cranwell and RAF Waddington. The application is causing great concerns regarding the glint and glare arising from such a large application. In particular, RAF Waddington is home to the Red Arrows - a key national treasure. The Red Arrows fly fast in all directions, including upside down, where glint and glare from panels could dazzle the brave pilots. Due weight must be given to the significance of this particular location and proposal, in light of this. Moreover, RAF Digby is the HQ of the Joint Cyber and Electromagnetic Activities Group.

I will finish with this: I conducted a survey in my constituency in the areas most affected by the large-scale NSIP applications in our area, including Springwell Solar Farm. Letters were sent directly to thousands of households in Sleaford and North Hykeham, and I received over 2,000 handwritten responses. These were not simple online forms; they were thought-out responses, many of which contained pages of heartfelt comments.

Of the respondents, 90% were concerned about the enormous scale of the proposals, 68% were extremely concerned about the use of productive farmland, and 55% were extremely concerned about the visual impact.

Lincolnshire is the nation's breadbasket and produces 30% of the UK's vegetables. My constituents understand the importance of our farming heritage and production. They understand the quality of the land Springwell will engulf.

Many local people fear that NSIP applications such as this one take away a level of local decision making; however, I have summarised many of their views in my comments today. The responses to my survey speak volumes about this application and I urge you very strongly to reject this inappropriate application.