

The Drovers, Open Hearing September 2026...

Good afternoon Sir.

My name is [REDACTED]. I am a resident of Castle Acre having lived there for the last 27 years, I have recently retired from a lifetime working in Agriculture most of which was spent in Norfolk.

I am Chair of Castle Acre Parish Council and Chair of the Castle Acre Solar Group. The Parish Council, being a group of volunteers, have been engaged with The Drovers NSIP proposals right from the start attending initial meetings and workshops some two years ago. Nearly three weeks ago we held a village meeting allowing residents to meet us and our local MP James Wild giving them an opportunity to air their views on the local proposals for Industrial Solar developments. I am now going to try and convey some of those views to you and this hearing.

Castle Acre and South Acre are regarded as some of the jewels of Norfolk, residents foster a very strong sense of community.

We are not against solar power and understand that future national energy security requires a mixture of generation methods. We have previously expressed our objection to the proposed Drovers Industrial Solar Site situated west of the A1065 with Swaffham to the south, and Castle Acre, South Acre to the north. This position has not changed.

We still question site selection and are not satisfied that alternatives were sufficiently appraised. The current Drovers site is clearly one of convenience to the applicant, we would call it 'low hanging fruit', with its proximity to National Grid power lines and that most of the land is being offered by a single landowner. What was overlooked, was its position within the historic landscape and the lasting impact it will place on the setting of a significant historical cluster of Norman origin dating back nearly 1,000 years. Solar Panels and other infrastructure Sub-stations, Transformers, Bess Storage Containers, Pylons and Fencing will inevitably introduce a fundamental change to agricultural land and cause major visual harm to the historic landscape and the setting of important historical assets. Any attempts to mitigate the visual harm with planting and screening will itself change the landscape forever... This surely cannot be contested. We were told the development is 'temporary', it is not and never will be.

What was also overlooked was its proximity to The Marham air base, a strategic UK/ NATO asset, we can only hope its defensive operations are never compromised by this industrial complex.

We cannot understand the applicant's claim that this specific site is 'critical' to future UK energy supply, the national grid is currently overwhelmed by offers of generation and no Gate 2 connection point has been secured by the applicant for this site. Residents are very concerned that the potential location of a National Grid sub-station could change and effectively will not be agreed as part of this review process. It just does not make sense in our minds.

"Absolute madness" is a comment I have heard many times regarding the use of BMV Agricultural land for such large and inefficient solar development. We believe national policy states that the use of BMV land for solar development should be avoided. Survey work has found large areas of this site are classified as BMV land. As we discussed yesterday, irrigation is available to much of this site allowing high value specialist crops such as potatoes, carrots, onions to be successfully grown in rotation across the area. I was most concerned by the applicants' comments yesterday suggesting that the loss of current agricultural activities are insignificant and will be replaced by the grazing of a few sheep on what will be, unproductive grass land. The suggestion that the loss of agricultural and food processing jobs that are supported by this unit will be replaced by annual panel washing opportunities shows a total lack of understanding for high-quality food production in this country. Not only does this unit support the staff that are actually farming the land it supports many other associated business activities. Supply companies of seeds, fertiliser and agrochemicals along with highly skilled associated advice, haulage companies, food processing and packing to mention but a few. Food security for the nation is hugely significant, (as well as energy), who knows what challenges we will be facing next year, let alone in 20, 30, 40 and 60 years' time. The value of this land for food production should not be dismissed and overlooked. There are alternatives, which would not use such vast areas of this precious land resource, commercial buildings, brown field sites, car parks, the list goes on. We suggested, and the applicant was asked to investigate wind generation utilising a much smaller area of the site. All examples of alternatives that should be considered.

A local resident has presented a representation in respect of Biodiversity and the protection of protected species within the boundaries of the site which I am not going to repeat. However, local communities and residents appreciate and care deeply about the environment and the surroundings that they live in every day. We respectfully ask via the Inspector for the applicant to acknowledge this and commit to further detailed surveys covering all areas we are concerned about.

Again, as discussed yesterday, we are rightly concerned about road safety on the A1065 and the implications for local residents. Many times we have mentioned deer crossing the highway and potentially being corralled by site fencing on both sides of the road, holding them on the highway. We asked the applicant at a recent local meeting to remove solar arrays and fencing from fields, 20, 21, 25, and 26. This would offer a twofold solution not only relieving road safety concerns but also hugely reducing the visual impact of the site from the A1065, another key concern. At the very least we ask for panels and fencing to be moved much further away from the road creating a greater safety margin for wildlife and road users alike.

We hope Norfolk County Council are entirely happy with arrangements made within traffic management plans for the safe entry and exit of development vehicles to and from the proposed site off and on to the A1065 a busy tourist route.

Castle Acre Parish Council have been trying to engage with the applicant to discuss 'Community Benefit'. Lack of progress and commitment to this point is disappointing however there is an acknowledged desire to meet, and representatives of CAPC and the applicant are planning to do so very soon. We ask for meaningful engagement.

As shown by a vote at the end of the recent Castle Acre residents meeting they support the views submitted to this hearing. For the reasons stated in this and other submissions we cannot support this application, the development of this site will have a lasting negative impact on local communities the historic landscape, BMV land, biodiversity and the general well-being of residents in local communities. It is just in the wrong place!

Thank you for allowing me to speak.

 Chair, Castle Acre Parish Council