



Priory Farm Solar Array

**Proposed development of a Photovoltaic
Solar Array on land at Priory Farm East of
Great Wymondley, Hertfordshire.**

**Planning Appeal Ref:
APP/X1925/V/23/3323321**

Opening Statement

**On behalf of The Joint Objectors Group
By Paul S Harding B.Sc. FRICS**

9th September 2023

Introduction

Thank you, Sir, for the opportunity to speak today. I am pleased to present my opening statement on behalf of the joint objectors group consisting of the Great Wymondley Village Association and the Wymondley Parish Council.

We are extremely grateful for your agreement Sir and indeed encouragement to allow us to appear and to take a full part in this inquiry as a Rule 6 party. We do appreciate the unusual circumstances as both the Applicant and the Council are on the same side. It is therefore so important that you are able to hear our point of view on the significant and unacceptable impacts that the proposal will have upon our Parish and our community.

I do also recognise that we are not professionals at the inquiry process and that with legal counsel acting for both the other parties there might be some frustration felt. Do please bear with us Mr Hardy and Ms Daly as we put our case forward that I hope will give the Inspector an important other dimension to this application as he makes his decision based on the facts before him.

We are also of course most grateful to the Secretary of State for deciding to call the application in and set out clear criteria for the Inquiry. We believe that having done so he has enabled the application to receive the level of governance that its scale and impact deserves and that we felt was lacking in the Council process.

1. Qualifications and background

So, to start with a little about me. I am Paul Harding. I have been a resident of Great Wymondley since 1982 and together with my wife, who grew up in Little Wymondley, have brought up our three children in the village benefitting from and enjoying the rural environment whilst being close to schools and facilities in the local towns.

I have been and continue to be an active member of the community having served on the Parish Council for 10 years in the 1990's as vice chair and again over the past year as chair of the planning committee. In addition, I have been Church Warden at St Marys Church for the past 20 years and as a family we fully engage in the activities of our lively community through the Village Association

In my professional life I hold a degree in Estate Management and I am a Fellow of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors. The inspiration of my chosen profession being very strongly my grandfather who was Surveyor and Engineer to the Hitchin Rural District council for over 30 years.

For the majority of my professional life, I have practiced in real estate as an equity partner of Bernard Thorpe and Partners evolving into an International Director in DTZ (now Cushman and Wakefield). I worked for major institutional and government clients on the development Property and asset management of major shopping centre and commercial portfolios across

the UK and Europe giving me a very significant insight into the intricacy of developing major landmark buildings that provide a commercial return but also meet the needs and aspirations of the communities in which they are set.

I took great pride in developing a strong emphasis on sustainability and customer service across my team of some 1500 creating major differentiators of our business.

I retired abruptly 7 years ago to be full-time carer of my wife who suffered catastrophic results of an illness.

The Matters to be addressed

The Secretary of State in ordering this Inquiry was clear that he wanted a number of key points to be carefully reviewed specifically being the extent to which the proposed development is consistent with the Government policies for Green Belt, meeting the challenge of climate change, conserving and enhancing the natural environment and consistency with the development plan for the area. We will therefore as joint Objectors Group focus our evidence on these areas raising other pertinent matters as appropriate.

Background to our Objection

We would wish to say at the outset that as a community we are firm supporters of sustainable forms of electricity generation, and in terms of solar generation related to residential commercial and agricultural building rooftops and previously developed land, closed landfill sites such as Ockendon in Essex and the innovative solutions that are emerging such as car park canopies as has been done by Newcastle City Council. It is indeed an exciting and rapidly changing industry with major steps forward in technology, which I am pleased to keep up with through my son who works in the Solar industry in Cornwall.

The reasons we strongly oppose this application is its enormous scale, 88 hectares, some 108 football pitches or 218 acres. It is Green Belt land, with open views across it, close to villages with important heritage assets and taking all important archaeological rich grade 2 and grade 3a Best and Most Versatile agricultural land.

The importance of the land as Green Belt and the communities support for it is enshrined in the Local Plan finally adopted in 2022 and the Wymondley Neighbourhood Plan adopted in 2018

In representing the concerns of the Joint Objectors Group, we will introduce one expert witness, Mr Jed Griffiths, and three further witnesses who are concerned local residents, two from the village of Great Wymondley, and one Hertfordshire resident who is assisting us with specialist knowledge of natural environment, wildlife and biodiversity issues. With your agreement, Sir, I will introduce these witnesses at the appropriate time as per your timetable.

We have carefully reviewed all the documents from the applicant and the Council and will reference them as appropriate. Our overriding observation though is that whilst very many policy clauses are referenced there is a complete lack of a sensible overview or test of

reasonableness being applied. In addition, they make scant reference to people, ignoring the community that the proposals will affect.

We simply ask Sir for a measure of reasonableness and fairness to be applied to the application. Is it reasonable to harness a Parish with 0.8% of North Herts population with the production of 31% of the Energy needs of North Herts homes.

In the overall planning balancing act please take the social impact into account as well as the physical context after all every corporate and public realm decision should now be considered in the context of ESG, environmental impacts, social impacts and correct Governance. They are interwoven in decision making not independent of each other.

In summary our objection is based on the scale of what is proposed, its location in Green Belt, the use of BMV agricultural land and the close proximity to exceptional heritage assets leading to severe impacts and harm to the local community.

Green Belt

Mr Griffiths, as our expert witness, will introduce the significance of the proposed use of 88 hectares of land designated as Green Belt in the North Herts Core Strategy serving the five purposes of the Green Belt as noted in the NPPF.

The map taken from the local Plan with the additions of the two proposed solar arrays around Wymondley and highlighting the large area already taken by the substation really emphasises the very vital role that the Green Belt plays and the severe impact this development would have on its functions.

Wymondley Parish serves a particularly vital role sitting as it does between the towns of Stevenage, Hitchin and Letchworth and the open land within the Parish forms the all-important separation of these three major towns

We believe that the context of the North Herts Local Plan is very important to realising why retaining this Green Belt land is so important.

North Herts is under significant pressure on housing allocations and so in the recently finally adopted plan it is proposed that an additional 13,000 houses are located in the district including doubling the size of little Wymondley with 312 homes on previously Green Belt land and some 5,500 on land expanding the northern edge of Stevenage, Hitchin and Letchworth as well as some 5,000 homes West of Stevenage adjoining the Parish to be brought through in due course.

If you add to this demand the two proposed solar farms (the subject of this application and Sperberry Hill /Redcoats) the green lung of the Green Belt's open agricultural land almost disappears between the towns creating effective coalescence.

It should also be recognised that these two applications are only part of a proliferation of ground mounted solar applications across Hertfordshire all potentially impacting the Green Belt, agriculture and open setting of communities. We believe that the cumulative effect of

all of these developments should be seriously considered by this Inquiry as outlined in Mr Berry's statement on behalf of the CPRE

Mr Griffiths will present evidence identifying the relevance of the appropriate legislation regarding Green Belt. He will describe how the principles of the Green Belt are seriously jeopardised by this proposal and the context for the demonstration of the very special circumstances necessary to outweigh clearly the harm caused by this inappropriate development.

Development Plans

Mr Griffiths will make reference to the Wymondley Neighbourhood Plan which the Parish Council and Neighbourhood Plan group put together with great care and effort and which was adopted in 2018

The quotes from the plan that are relevant are:

7.4 The Government attaches great importance to Green Belts – as do the Wymondley parishioners, illustrated by 92% of our survey respondents indicating that they objected to any development on Green Belt land within or surrounding the Parish. It is clearly the primary issue of concern to Wymondley parishioners, and one which significantly influenced our development proposals.

7.5 We strongly support those elements of the Government's Green Belt policy which are particularly relevant to our parish, given its close proximity to the nearby towns of Hitchin and Stevenage, i.e., designating land as Green Belt purposely to prevent the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas; prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another; and assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment.

Mr Griffiths will of course also make significant reference to the Local Plan finally adopted in 2022

It is a great regret to us that this application is having to be considered without the ability to reference a district wide net zero energy generation policy that would have had proper consultation and consideration of options. Our newly appointed District Councillor Dominic Griffiths (no relation to our expert) has raised this matter with Councillors and Officers and is seeking early action to put a policy in place rather than rely on the current reactive approach and the minimal guidance offered by Clause NE12 of the Local Plan. Indeed, it is encouraging to see that the newly released NPPF update also envisages that Councils will have Policy's in place. A scheme of this magnitude should not be being considered ahead of a Policy being in place.

Openness and visibility

The openness of the land and its role in the setting of the historic conservation area of Great Wymondley are of great importance. The open countryside views are the very essence of our village and community.

Mr Griffith's evidence will introduce these linked issues of landscape quality and character as they impact on the countryside and community.

As a rural location in the South East of England we have to accept and acknowledge an element of disturbance due to the infrastructure of the country. The A1(M) passes by us following the route of the old Great North Road, the main London to Edinburgh railway also passing through the parish, partially visible and part in a cutting and of course we house the electricity Sub-station on the edge of Little Wymondley. These are not however a reason to write off our landscape and open views and neither are they reasons to assume that it makes the Parish a natural home for even more infrastructure.

The general sense we have had is that an assumption is made that some planting will substantially obscure the scale of the solar array. This is simply not the case. Not only will planting take a long time to mature to fulfil its purpose but it will help very little in protecting views from further away. It will also have the negative impact of closing down the open views that are so enjoyed now. Ultimately people are not static you just can't hide 218 acres as you will see Sir when you visit the site it is a vast area.

This open landscape will be lost for 40 years with the industrialisation of the area not only with the 160,000 panels some 3m above ground but the 47 buildings 7.8km of fencing and the 2.1km of roadways.

The scale of the proposals will cast a shadow over the setting of our village and its residents. Contrary to the various documents on visibility the solar array will be visible from homes in the Parish. As well as substantial views from footpaths used by many people from the villages and local towns including the footpath by the railway bridge on Arch Road to little Wymondley, the footpath from Little Wymondley Priory Lane to Great Wymondley and of course the much-used Hertfordshire Way.

As woodland and hedgerows are almost all deciduous the situation that the applicant's experts have seen on their visits in June and July this year is much worse in the winter months when they lose their leaves.

The site is also viewed from the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) so diminishing the setting of the AONB as we will show. The impact will be even greater if our MP Bim Afolami's campaign to increase the AONB is successful to the Preston area and beyond

Agricultural land

Mr Griffiths will also identify the significance of the agricultural land proposed to be used for the development which is 32% Grade 2 and 68% Grade 3a.

Whilst it is appreciated that we have a climate challenge made worse by the war in Ukraine which has created an energy problem that has increased the need to move to other home created fuel sources we should not forget that it has also caused a food crisis. The collapse of the grain exporting agreement and the vivid pictures of grain stores and ships being bombed

brings home to us all that we should take great care of our best and most versatile agricultural land for creating the food we need as a country to reduce our reliance on imports.

Whilst the applicant is quick to state how many homes can be supplied with power by the Solar farm it should also be recognised that the wheat production from this land can supply over 1 million loafs of bread per year or as barley nearly 5m pints of beer! The land this year is being cultivated part wheat part Barley.

What is staggering is that in an area where grade 2 land is a real rarity, the applicants have taken this land into the scheme when Government advice is very clear that only grade 3b and below should be used for Solar arrays.

The agricultural heritage of this site is interesting through my wife's sister-in-law we have a wonderful insight in to the time that her grandfather was the head of market gardening on Haleys farm and the land right across the village was intensively gardened by up to 200 people at peaks with the Grade 2 land to the north of this site being fruit bushes and peas. At the height of the harvest some 10 lorries a day were leaving the village to go to the markets in London. This rich agricultural history of the land should not be lost now nor should the versatility of the Grade 2 land be lost in an uncertain time.

Grazing some unidentified number of sheep on the land is by no means a substitute for the current use. We also have concerns about the future use of the agricultural buildings that are close to the Priory. A subject that we will return to under the Conditions.

Development Permanent or temporary

Mr Griffiths as part of his expert witness presentation will address the issue of permanence and reference other Inspectors decisions that are pertinent to the matter.

The District Council and the applicant argue that the 40-year length of the proposed use of the land for solar array is temporary not permanent.

40 years is more than a generation and must be considered as a permanent fixture as far as the population are concerned. With 50% of the Parishes population of 1169 people over 50 they are unlikely to see the land in arable use again or at best they will be in their 90's so therefore for them this change will likely be permanent.

If we refer to the core meaning of temporary it is "not lasting very long" "short term" or going back to the Latin derivation tempus to mean "time or season" so in our case at least 160 seasons.

Under none of these definitions is it possible to rationalise that the planning system seriously considered something that would take at least 36 weeks to construct and probably longer to remove and have so much infrastructure fixed to the ground can be defined as temporary. Indeed, many permanent constructions are redeveloped in under 40 years. This proposal we suggest must be considered in planning terms in perpetuity.

Heritage including archaeology

The subject of our rich heritage and archaeology will be presented this afternoon Sir, by Mr. David Jackson a resident of the village. Great Wymondley has a exceptional heritage dating back to pre-Roman, medieval period times indeed some 5,000 years

It is our task as the custodians of our heritage to use our short space of time in the continuum of history to preserve and protect our history for the benefit of those who will follow us.

The specific unique facts about the Wymondley's will be elaborated upon by David Jackson in his witness statement

The application land sits between the historic Great North Road and the settlement of Great Wymondley meaning it is a rich area of archaeological heritage which should not be risked by 32,000 1.5 m deep posts across the site as well as the imposition of large areas of concrete

We fear for the setting of our community and its heritage by the imposition of development that by all expectations of Green Belt and the important setting of scheduled monuments and the conservation area should have assured protection.

We do not consider sufficient or even respectful weight has been given to our heritage or the land that forms the all-important setting by either the applicant or the Council. Our witness will stress the importance that should be afforded to it in the decision-making process.

Natural environment and biodiversity

Mrs Elizabeth Hamilton, who is a Hertfordshire resident, has been advising the Joint Action Group on relevant matters relating to the wildlife and the natural environment impacted by the proposed development. She will present information and concerns relating to the diversity of wildlife affected and related issues of this large tract of open land. The industrialisation of the land and the enclosing of it with fencing will dramatically change the natural order that currently exists.

We don't doubt that removing the traditional agriculture and setting grass seed and wild area's will by using the tick box world that we now live in be able to prove a biodiversity net gain.

That however completely ignores very fundamental issues including the impact that the changes will have on the current habitat such as the ground nesting skylarks. Routes for small deer, hares and other mammals as well as the wild plants and indeed the soil itself.

Solar panels have a negative effect on many species including birds and of course bats that we know use the fields as their hunting grounds from their nearby home in St Mary's Church

As a community we are well aware of biodiversity benefits and have taken great pride in creating a community garden, community orchard and wild areas in our churchyard as well as embracing no mow May in many parts of the village. We do not believe that taking Grade 2

and 3a arable land out of production with the loss of natural habits will benefit the natural order or those who enjoy the environment and live in harmony with it when the alternative is an industrial scale development.

Mrs Hamilton will elaborate on these key issues.

Community Harm

Local community concerns and impacts will be described by Mrs Jess Simpson a resident of Great Wymondley and someone who both professionally and as a mother is passionate about the countryside our setting within it and all of our rights to be able to have peaceful enjoyment of the rural setting of the Parish we have chosen to live in.

The Community of 120 residents of Great Wymondley made its views on the application clear with over 90% objecting. The industrial scale of the proposal some 4 times larger than the village will create a shadow over all aspects of life in our community. Entering the village along Priory Lane or Graveley Lane will offer an unwanted vision, walking along the Herts Way or paths to the south of the village will be spoilt by either the direct adjacency of fencing or the damage to more distant views. The feeling of being watched whilst on family walks or bike rides or maybe a romantic stroll will be most intrusive from the CCTV cameras.

The views in the changing seasons and agricultural activity that are an intrinsic part of the setting of our community as well as for the many who visit and walk through the area, will be lost replaced by the monotony of a single unchanging vista as far as the eye can see of solar panels and unsightly buildings. This will have a negative effect upon people's mental health and wellbeing as will be described by Mrs Simpson.

Other matters

Noise and vibration.

We have raised at every point the risk of noise pollution. It is known that the transformers emit noise and we have some 22 of them around the site. That naturally concerns us. What is not known and has not been investigated is the potential impact of the A1(M). given some wind directions the motorway can at times be heard in Great and Little Wymondley

What will the impact be of removing the natural agricultural carpet and replacing it with effectively 160,000 noise deflectors which risk enhancing and carrying the sound particularly given the direction of the panels to Little Wymondley. We have seen the effect of the Todds Green wall on Stevenage residents. The same cannot be allowed to happen again.

In addition, the piling of the 32,000 piles to hold the 160,000 solar panels will be a very noisy operation lasting many weeks if not months as we will hear in evidence at the Inquiry. Vibrations could also disturb the ancient conduit head and Grade 1 Priory.

We will demonstrate our concerns on this subject via our witnesses.

Fire and health risk

We are told the battery storage units will have automatic cut offs if they overheat. This gives some reassurance but it must be recognised that a fire risk does exist

From the local populations point of view what is not in dispute is that the materials in the batteries are toxic. With 22 battery storage units' corrosive chemicals in large quantities will be present if anything went wrong a subterranean aquifer issue could be created downstream. We are surprised not to see a full EHS report from the applicant or Council

There is also real concern over fumes as has recently been highlighted in the report following the Liverpool fire in 2020. The blaze took 59 hours to extinguish and threatened to engulf Liverpool in a toxic plume of gas Add to that a lack of hydrants and inadequate fire service training resulting in a bleak picture.

With the Herts Way metres from the battery storage units as well as Great and little Wymondley and two schools in Little Wymondley and Graveley, within range of the toxic fall out from a fire, this must be taken seriously.

The fire services say that they require dual access points to each part of the site, a perimeter road, dry system installation emergency water and hard standings. We are not sure these points have been taken account of by the applicant. We provide the document that has just arrived from the Herts County Council on this subject.

Flooding and drainage

As has been correctly documented Proiry Lane and Little Wymondley suffer from a flooding problem and have done for years. We fear that the removal of crops and the replacement with concrete and large number of panels that will cause significant water run off could exacerbate the situation.

Changing water movements will also potentially risk the ancient monument of the conduit house and the Priory. The 32,000 piles will with some certainty disrupt or wreck many of the land drains that are laid across the site, many of which are themselves historic.

Whist we note that steps have been taken to reduce the risk we do not believe there can be any certainty that the current situation will not be made worse and these concerns have been echoed by the lead flood authority.

We believe the solution to such an important aspect should not be left to simply be resolved as part of the conditions. We will offer up a village representative to speak on this subject.

Security

We note that the solar array is to be protected by 2.1 m stock fencing secured with wooden posts and watched over by 40 CCTV cameras. What we are not clear about is if there will be any security lighting or security presence. Whilst this fencing when considered in total at 7.8km is bad enough and creates such a break with the openness of the land we are

concerned that things maybe become a lot worse if the Solar Array is subject to break-ins thefts and vandalism. As we are near to major centres of population and through routes, we are vulnerable to passing thefts and more sophisticated crime.

We are told the Solar industry is experiencing major problems and will provide evidence on this point. We understand that in a number of cases insurers are demanding far higher levels of security fencing and security cover to combat losses. Any more intrusive fencing would be horrendous addition to the negative aspects of the scheme. Furthermore, it would have a knock-on effect of bringing criminal minded people to our village.

Transport

We do have concerns about the transport planning both during construction and long term and will offer up a village member to speak on the subject as well as wishing to question the applicant's expert.

The lanes at times seem very rural and little used but they are extremely busy as rat runs at peak morning and evening times. We can envisage substantial holdups and a conflict with the heavy delivery schedule anticipated during the construction phase

Laying the cabling down Priory Lane and along Stevenage Road will cause enormous problems. The location and height of the Little Wymondley railway bridge necessitates a number of vehicle movement down Priory Lane to Old Hall Farmyard every day. Disruption will be very damaging to local businesses and their financial viability.

The same will be the case for The Priory wedding trade. Access must be retained for events or again trade and income will be lost.

On an ongoing basis we have noted from the applicant that only very limited maintenance visits will be made. Is this really the practical reality. With the scale of the overall operation substantial control must be maintained to ensure safety, maintenance and one assumes cleaning of the panels to maintain efficiency and finally keeping the grass in good order under the panels. From all that we hear security visits will also be needed one assumes in the night as well. In addition, as the equipment and panels become obsolete total replacement maybe necessary. All of this adds to the changing scene of what we are used to and has a detrimental impact on residents.

Summary

As the Joint Objectors group we strongly believe that the application should not be approved for the following key reasons

- The scale of the proposals, we understand, one of the largest 5 in size built to date in the UK is totally out of scale with its surroundings
- The Green Belt is already under threat. The loss to the Solar development will bring the coalescence of North Herts one dangerous step nearer
- Loss of open country and open views for the villages and towns as well as damage to the views from the Chiltern AONB

- Damage to the setting of our conservation area 67 Listed buildings and untold damage to an important archaeological area
- Loss of locally rare Grade 2 as well as Grade 3a land all in full essential food production
- Whilst renewables are an important part of our futures climate strategy Solar is the least efficient and as such should not dislodge positive land uses but mainly be adopted as a bonus on buildings, brown field and low yielding non green belt land
- Biodiversity gain will be overshadowed by the loss of fertility in the soil making its return to grade2/3a production very difficult and delayed
- Serious impact upon the ecology of the area with loss of skylark nesting grounds, free routes for animals restricted by the 7.8km of fencing etc.
- Flooding is a problem in Wymondley. Add to that the anticipated housing any other disturbance of our natural field systems can only increase risk
- Replacing 88H of agricultural land which changes with the seasons into a monotonous landscape of 160,000 panels can only damage the local community's wellbeing as well as all those who use the Hertfordshire Way Under what will be the eye of CCTV cameras.
- Fire, general road and health and safety risk are going to be for ever present especially as the equipment becomes old and likely obsolete.

In this application we have the perfect storm of BMV productive agricultural land very precious and under threat Green Belt, the setting of some 67 listed buildings, important Archaeology all being ignored or given less than their deserved weighting.

We have seen and our expert will reference cases where Inspectors have not allowed development for just one of the above core reasons and generally on sites smaller than the colossal 88 hectares proposed here.

We look forward throughout this Inquiry to demonstrate through our presentations and cross examination the major issues that I have outlined in this opening statement and welcome the role that you will play Sir in reviewing all the facts placed in front of you to come to a fair and reasonable conclusion.