

DARNHALL PARISH COUNCIL

Cheshire West and Chester Council Planning Reference 23/02370/FUL

Hebden Green Solar installation

Date: 21.09.2023

Darnhall Parish Council wish to make representation concerning the above planning application.

On 29th August 2023, the parish council held a public meeting at Darnhall Village Hall to listen to the views of residents on this planning application, twenty-five members of the public attended this event. In submitting this response, we have included the views of these residents and referenced the Darnhall Neighbourhood Plan (DNP) that was formally made on 20th May 2021.

The site falls entirely within Darnhall Parish on the land of Beech House Farm, we find it anomalous that the applicant has chosen to name the site as Hebden Green which is within the Winsford boundary.

Darnhall Parish Council Considers that this this application is in conflict with the following policies within Darnhall Neighbourhood Plan (DNP)

Policy CE1 – Biodiversity (DNP Pg 13)

The Solar installation if approved would be situated adjacent to the Ash Brook, an important wildlife corridor. The site is close to large areas of interconnected woodlands which form important wildlife sites, linking Ashbrook valley with its ancient clough woods and species rich sloping grassland. About one quarter of the arrays would be mounted in an area designated for restoration in CWACC Local Plan part 2 policy DM44. (See DNP Fig B map attached with solar site boundary overlaid)

At present the fields, Ashbrook and ponds are available to foraging birds in the winter for example, flocks of Fieldfare are often seen here as are owls, bats, and brown hare.

There is an Owl nesting box within the site that is used by breeding Barn Owls. These birds are very sensitive to disturbance, they are known to forage over the whole site area and to use nearby oak trees. The plans to focus mitigation measures on the area immediately around the nest box will be of limited protective value.

While the area outside the perimeter fence has an adequate plan for the sowing of seed for flora and fauna, the information explaining what would be done around the solar arrays is confusing and contradictory. The grazing of sheep under the solar arrays is referred to, however, we consider this to be inconsistent with enhanced biodiversity within the site. For example, the application offers *“Given that the proposals include establishment of grassland and wildflower beneath the solar arrays it is likely that the foraging resource for bats will be significantly improved.”*

If sheep are grazed within the site, there will be no wildflowers.

The plans for wildflower meadows are not specific to this site. It would be difficult to establish wildflower meadows in heavy wet soil. The seed specified would not be suitable for the heavy soil type which is often waterlogged in winter months on this site. Wildflower meadows require some degree of active management to be sustainable; there is insufficient information in the application to explain how this is to be achieved.

We reference a recent article in the British Beekeepers journal July 2023 page 216. A beekeeper was asked to put hives by a solar installation, but the bees died out due to lack of forage. The grass has been mown and wildflowers did not survive.

DNP Policies RCLE6 and Local Plan DM52 both state that a solar installation larger than 6 hectares is unlikely to be supported except in exceptional circumstances (which are not specified)

Development should make a positive contribution to the borough's ecological network. Proposals should increase the size, quality, or quantity of priority habitat within core areas corridors or steppingstones. In restoration areas development should improve structural connectivity, resilience, and function of the network.' (See policy DM44 and map of area Eco network within Darnhall Neighbourhood Plan. Page24)

The area offered for mitigation is approximately .5 hectares, a very small proportion of a total of 25 hectares (one fiftieth) we do not believe that the mitigation plans are sufficient to meet the above criteria and to provide a net gain in biodiversity.

Policy RCLE 1 – Rural Economy

The Darnhall Neighbourhood Plan is a forward-looking document that seeks to support the rural economy and agriculture, horticulture, forestry, equestrian enterprises, and rural tourism where they contribute positively to the environment and do not cause unacceptable visual or landscape harm.

Beech House Farm is a dairy farm of approximately 250 acres the whole farm is owned by Darnhall Estate. The tenants are the Ward family who moved to Beech House in 1986 from another nearby Darnhall Estate Farm. As tenants of the applicant's client, the Ward family are not in a position to make representations on this application. The family have been at Beech House farm for 37 years and have been dairy farmers and millers in Darnhall for approaching 150 years. The farm currently supports three branches of the Ward family. The proposed solar site installation is made up of a mixture of long-term tenancy (three generational) and shorter-term contract tenancy land. The land at Beech House farm including the proposed site is currently actively farmed dairy pasture. To our knowledge this land has been used for this purpose for hundreds of years. It is likely that the removal of such a large proportion of Beech House farmland from agricultural production will inevitably reduce the productivity of the farm and may have a significant impact on the viability of the farm business.

The solar installation offers no benefit to Beech House Farm tenants in any way.

We note the Land Classification report commissioned by the applicant which grades the land a poor quality. The classification of agricultural land is a highly subjective process with complex variables, and it is apparent in the wording of this report that this is the case. The land at Beech House farm is very typical of the Darnhall plain; the majority of which is productive dairy pasture. The undisputable fact is that the land in question is currently in well managed, agricultural use for food production and has been so used for many hundreds of years.

The Parish Council recognises the importance of renewable energy developments but does not believe that this site justifies prioritisation over the rural agricultural economy and loss of good agricultural land in current use for food production.

Policy RCLE6 Renewable energy installations (DNP Pg34)

Policy CE5 – Landscape Character (DNP Pg17)

Both these policies recognise the importance of preserving the landscape character of Darnhall

RCLE 6 extract

In particular, consideration must be given to the preservation of the local landscape character and sensitivity of the NP area, to ensure that there is no adverse impact on the network of fields, hedges, woods and ponds and views across the Darnhall Plain to the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge and Beeston Castle

CE5 Extract

In order to protect the identity of Darnhall Parish within its open countryside and farmland setting, new development must, where appropriate, respect and enhance.

the landscape character of the area, as defined in the Cheshire West and Chester

Landscape Strategy 2016 or any updated versions. Development will not be supported if it causes significant harm to the character of the rural setting of the parish.....In particular, the visual prominence of the Sandstone Ridge looking west, Jodrell Bank and the Derbyshire Hills looking east, and the special landscape character and scenic value of the Weaver Valley Area of Special County Value (ASCV) should be protected. Other notable vistas include the tree lined avenue of Hall Lane and views from the Darnhall Plain towards the prominence of St John the Evangelist's Church at Over. New development should seek to maintain or reinforce these views.

Recognising the relatively low height of the development, it is likely to have minimal visual impact from the urban areas of Winsford. The site will be visible from Beech House Farm, Pool Head Farm and Pool Head Cottage. It is possible that the site will also be visible from Woodford Hall which is a Grade II listed building. Residents at the Pool Head side of the development are very close to the site and likely to experience intrusive glint and glare from the arrays.

The solar installation will be visible from the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge at Beeston, Peckforton and the Sandstone Trail; this is due to the orientation of the arrays and the glint and glare that may be experienced by walkers on the sandstone ridge. Local people will remember how prominent the Winsford Over Estate used to be from the Cheshire Sandstone Ridge as sunlight from the West was reflected back directly to the Sandstone Ridge before the estate's visible impact was reduced. This site could damage one of the most valued landscape vistas over the Cheshire Plain.

Policy CE6 – Surface Water Management (DNP Pg21)

Residents at Pool Head are concerned at the impact of run off from the site. Ash Brook has experienced more flood events in recent years possibly due to run off from housing and industrial development. We would like to see more detailed assessment of this impact and mitigation plans in the application.

Policy RSI3 (DNP Pg40)

Access to the Countryside

The proposed access road Woodford Lane West – Hebden Green is used for two houses plus farm traffic currently there is planning permission for two more houses at Pool Head Farm, this route is a public bridleway with pedestrian and equestrian use, it is frequently used by dog walkers. There is a connecting PROW footpath from this Route towards Beech House farm & the proposed construction access road from Darnhall School Lane. The site will be visible from sections of this route.

The Construction access road from Darnhall School Lane is a public bridleway with pedestrian and equestrian traffic, it is frequently used by dog walkers. The lane services two dwellings and Beech House farm. There is no separation of pedestrians and vehicles available for users of the two bridleways / restricted byways.

We are unable to find any safety or mitigation plans in the Construction Traffic Management Plan for pedestrian users of these PROWs.

Where the construction access road cuts across the field east of Beech House Farm it dissects a PROW footpath close to a large marl pit pond and oak tree. We can find no plans to manage the footpath route or to protect this sensitive wildlife area where it is known there are great crested newts.

We find that the likely impact on public rights of way, the safety of pedestrians and other non-vehicular users has not been adequately addressed in the application. The

information provided is inadequate to address or mitigate the requirements of this DNP Policy area.

The Construction Traffic Management Plan restricts but does not rule out access via Darnhall School Lane. Darnhall Nursery and Primary School is a split site school with a site on either side of Darnhall School Lane. There are children, families and staff crossing throughout the school day, the narrow section of road outside the school is a 20mph zone. The school day starts at 8am for breakfast club with class start time of 8.30am. It is our strong view that Darnhall School Lane should not be used by construction traffic at all.

In conclusion we must represent the views of local residents and on their behalf to support the vision of the Darnhall Neighbourhood Plan –

The local character of the area will be preserved as open rural countryside maintained through active farming. Its community facilities and open spaces will benefit people in both our own and neighbouring areas. The environment and wildlife will be conserved, and it will be a place where local people can safely live, work, play and enjoy a high quality of life.

We consider that for the reasons outlined above this planning application fails to meet the requirements of many important DNP policy areas and does not support the Vision and Objectives of the Darnhall Neighbourhood Plan. We believe that on balance the solar site will have detrimental impact in particular in the areas of biodiversity, connectivity of priority habitats, landscape character, the rural economy and access to the countryside. Darnhall Parish Council strongly objects to this planning application.

Darnhall Parish Council