

From: [Steve Massey](#)
To: [Arne Swithenbank](#)
Cc: [Planning Comments \(SMDC\)](#)
Subject: SMD/2023/0523 - Land at Rownall Farm, Rownall Road, Wetley Rocks
Date: 05 January 2024 16:39:52
Attachments: [image001.png](#)

Arne,

I have the following comments on this application:

Existing Trees and Hedgerows

The application is supported by a comprehensive Arboricultural Impact Assessment (AIA). For the most part, existing trees are situated within overall site boundary or internally dividing field hedgerows; a few trees stand individually in isolation, and are remnants of original hedgerows previously removed – presumably for field amalgamation purposes.

No trees on/adjacent to the site are protected by TPO. The site is not within or adjacent to a designated Conservation Area. The nearest scheduled Ancient Woodland is Hall Wood, immediately to the west of Cicely Haughton School; at minimum 330m distance from the application site, with intervening highway, built properties and several fields, and also taking account of the nature of the proposed development, it is considered that there would be no direct or indirect impact on Ancient Woodland.

Almost all the existing trees would be retained, with the arrays of solar panels, associated electrical installations and internal access tracks arranged to avoid the trees and avoid encroachment within Root Protection Areas. Three individual field trees (T51 Oak, T52 Ash, T53 Oak) standing in the western field are indicated for removal, in order to maximise space for solar arrays and on the basis that they are currently early-mature and anticipated further growth would cast increasing shade over adjacent solar panels. As an Ash, T52 may be susceptible to future infection by Ash Dieback Disease, although it is noted as showing good resistance at present; obviously the Oaks T51 and T53 do not have this risk. Given that elsewhere across the site the layout has specifically been designed to accommodate tree retention (including a number of early-mature trees also having future growth potential), and that the proposed development is described as “temporary and reversible”, I consider that the layout should be amended to allow retention of T51, T52 and T53. These are potentially excellent long-term trees which could make increasingly significant landscape/habitat contribution long after then development lifespan. In the context of the very large scale/extent of the overall proposal, loss of a few solar arrays (which might anyway be relocated elsewhere rather than omitted altogether?) would be an appropriate measure. Although an indicative landscape masterplan suggests new copse and hedgerow planting, such trees would effectively be “starting from scratch” and would not provide the same level of existing contribution as nT51/T52/T53 within the projected development lifespan nor soon after.

Approximately 8m of existing hedgerow is indicated to be removed, at the southern end of hedge H13. In the overall context of existing hedgerow retained, such loss would be inconsequential, and readily/quickly mitigated/replaced to provide similar contribution through a development landscaping scheme.

The AIA suggests that the development boundary/security fence would provide effective temporary tree protection barrier to peripheral trees if erected at the outset and with project arboriculturalist supervision – I would not disagree. The AIA also notes and proposes temporary tree protection barriers for notable “internal” trees, which would be appropriate.

Subject to the additional retention of T51, T52 and T53, and to implementation of suitable tree protection measures and working practices in accordance with an Arboricultural Method Statement (appropriate heads of terms for this already included in the submitted AIA), I have no objection to this application on the grounds of impact on existing trees/hedgerows.

Landscape and Visual Impact

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The application is accompanied by a comprehensive Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA).

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1. Landscape Character and Impact

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This is concerned with how the proposal may affect the physical features which make up the landscape, and the extent to which it would affect its visual character.

The site is not within, adjacent to or visually related to any high value or quality-based landscape designation.

The development has been designed to fit within the existing field structure, and other than the few trees and short stretch of hedgerow noted above, the proposal would not result in the loss of physical features making up the existing landscape. The existing field structure would therefore be retained. The development would fundamentally alter the visual character of the landscape across the vast majority of the site by introducing extensive arrays of solar panels, together with the associated electrical infrastructure and compacted stone access tracks. The proposal is described as “temporary and reversible” – at the end of its working life it could be removed - in theory relatively easily compared to more “permanent” forms of development – and the fields restored to agricultural appearance/use. It is noted that the temporary lifespan is stated as being 40 years – this is still a substantial amount of time (half a human lifespan, or a full human working life) which would see most of us out; assessment of the application should therefore consider its impact as long term.

The application itself is located precisely within the “Ancient Plateau Farmlands” landscape character type identified in the Landscape and Settlement Character Assessment of the Staffordshire Moorlands, and immediately abuts the Ancient Slope and Valley Farmlands landscape character type on both its eastern and western boundaries. Both types are essentially agricultural/rural in character, but with some notable incongruent influences including pylons and power lines. For either character type, the large expanse of solar panels would be a significantly incongruent introduction into the landscape. Although there are pylons and high voltage power lines crossing the site these have very little land-take and do not alter the use/character of the land they cross. There are no closely-related urban visual influences seen from or in conjunction with the site, and it therefore currently retains a strongly agricultural/rural visual character which would be substantially affected by the proposed

development – inevitably detrimentally so.

2. Visual Impact

Closely associated with landscape character impact is visual impact – i.e. from where and to what degree would the proposed development be seen, would this be positive or negative impact etc.

The application site occupies a wide plateau with a central ridgeline running approximately north south; the ridgeline runs from a high point at the northerly edge of the site (adjacent to a trig point at 262m) running gently downhill towards the Cellarhead electric substation just beyond its southern boundary. From this central ridgeline there are also gently rolling/descending slopes eastwards down towards Rownall Road and westwards down towards Thorneyedge Road. From this elevated plateau there are wide ranging views out over the surrounding landscape.

A public footpath (Cheddleton No. 19) traverses the site and its ridgeline from Ivy House Farm on Rownall Road westwards, becoming Bagnall No. 38 after crossing the parish boundary within the western part of the site to emerge onto Thorneyedge Road. The application site boundary directly abuts Rownall Road along its north-east and south-east edges, and between these points wraps closely around Ivy House Farm, and Rownall Farm with its closely associated cottages and converted barns. The site boundary also directly abuts Thorneyedge Road along its western side.

From the footpath through the site, there would be expansive and prominent views of the fields full of solar panels; these would be completely incongruous and dominant, and would radically and detrimentally alter the views from the path and the experience of using it. Whilst not within a designated landscape or following a promoted route, nor leading specifically to/from notable countryside recreation destinations, this footpath in a relatively remote sparsely developed area would not in practice simply be a convenient route from A to B, and users are more likely to be specifically engaged in outdoor recreation to experience and appreciate the landscape and natural environment. In this regard I would suggest that the applicant's LVIA slightly plays down the receptor sensitivity of users of an "ordinary" rural public footpath such as this.

From the public highways immediately alongside the site, the extensive development on this scale would be visually obvious on rising ground towards the central ridgeline, and again obviously incongruous and out of keeping with the existing visual character of the landscape.

The application includes an indicative landscape masterplan which proposes the planting of new hedgerows and small copses, and infill/reinforcement to existing gappy/poor quality hedges. Where these are alongside receptor viewpoints eg along the Rownall Road and Thorneyedge Road boundaries, they will provide more effective screening more quickly than in relation to more distant viewpoints. Even so, it is likely to be some 10 years or more before new hedge planting achieves sufficient height and density to achieve substantially effective screening and significantly reduce the visual impact of an extensive and visually incongruous development. In addition, such screening would be reduced after leaf fall, and it is noted that this typically renders deciduous hedges leafless for 4 – 5 months of the year.

In relation to more distant viewpoints, proposed new planting would provide little benefit as the site rises significantly to levels elevated well above hedge heights. Therefore expansive areas of

regimental arrays of solar panels would remain visually obvious on ground rising up away from the viewer and straddling/covering skyline ridge landform. At distance, the development would be particularly prominent on the western skyline when viewed from properties and locations along the A520 through Wetley Rocks and the southern/western parts of Cheddleton village. There is also one ridgetop location within Wetley Moor Common (which is a notably sensitive visual receptor location) which is fairly specific and limited but from which there are elevated views to the north-east towards and over the Cellarhead substation with the currently open fields of the application site clearly visible on the rising landform beyond; the proposed development would be in clear view as an incongruous intrusion in the landscape, albeit already impacted by the presence of the substation and pylons.

Overall, due to its exposed, elevated location, the proposed solar scheme would result in a prominent, incongruous, large scale developed feature having substantial detrimental effect on landscape character and significant adverse visual impact, readily visible from close-range and distant point and continuous linear locations over a wide surrounding area.

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