
From:
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To: Planning Comments (SMDC)
Subject: Comment Received from Public Access

Categories:

Application Reference No. : SMD/2023/0523 Site Address: Land At Rownall Farm Rownall Road Wetley Rocks
Staffordshire ST9 0BT Comments by: Pippa Blessington

From:

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Submission: Objection

Comments: I love this place. I was born and brought up in Bagnall. My Grandparents kept the Stafford Arms, so my family goes back well over 70 years and for generations before that in the immediate locality. In all that time I think this application is the biggest threat to our village environs since the Central Electricity Generating Board offered our local communities the choice between the horrendous and the intolerable with their pylon line proposals in 1964. The CEGB also built the Cellarhead substation on an extremely visible elevated point to be as obtrusive as possible and have since extended it without consultation, seemingly overconfident about the aesthetic virtues of its visually brutal apparatus. Perhaps it is no surprise then that the next threatened blight to our environment is another electricity scheme.

Given the much greater understanding and appreciation of our landscape these days and the value of the environment to our health and wellbeing I can scarcely believe that this application is actually under serious consideration. 170 acres of huge panels in serried rows over green fields in the greenbelt, and this is but one of six seemingly related applications totalling more like 300 acres including the 5 battery systems. If this goes through the greenbelt might as well be scrapped as pointless. It is difficult to see how the council could ever turn down any other application citing the greenbelt as part of the rationale if they allow this huge, unsympathetic, industrial development here? This is landscape scale development and the industrialisation of our countryside in an area where agriculture itself is generally not intensified or industrialised. Even worse as the rolling landscape and proximity to lanes means these jarring structures, spreading remorselessly over dozens of acres, are thrust into your immediate view.

This is an area known for its beautifully juxtaposed mix of modest fields with traditional hedgerows, trees, small woodlands, traditional cottages and smallholdings, mixed farms, livestock, dry stone walls and glorious viewpoints whilst nearby are various streams and other features such as village wells, bridges and fords, riparian woodlands and marsh. An intimate and charming landscape and a gentle introduction to the dark and harsh majesty of the expansive moorlands beyond. No wonder people so value this landscape and that many people walk this on a daily basis. I have spoken to a number of these walkers and all said how much they valued this walk for its pastoral peace and beauty. They were a mix of local people and others from nearby places such as Milton. Many had been doing this walk on a regular basis for years, others since Covid.

I think the destruction of the visual amenity of the site and its impact on peoples recreation and wellbeing is the most obvious damage wrought by this out of scale and out of place development, though of course there will be

more damage and disturbance including an extensive build producing noise, dust and heavy traffic for many months, inevitably creating ground compaction and likely erosion and runoff, together with all the infrastructure works producing disturbance to the ecosystem services presently provided by the area. Then after a few decades of reducing efficiency will come the massive scrapping or replacement programme.

Solar panels have poor efficiency to start with of maybe some 11% and probably less than average here given our relatively northern latitude and the elevation together with high rainfall, meaning that fewer photons fall on the panels than elsewhere. I have checked the sunshine hours compared with the other 5 largest UK sites (which these grouped applications will equal or beat for size) and all receive way more sunshine, at least 82 hours more and mostly with over 200 additional hours. These other large sites are also all completely flat, three being on military/ex-military airfields, one on coastal plain adjacent to an industrial park and one on flat agricultural land. Being flat means they are not overseen and very simple to screen. I have solar panels on an unseen part of my roof and can report they hardly produce at all over winter when we need them most, so cannot be a major element of the supply equation or we'd freeze in winter. If we need solar panels then let's have them in places where they will be more efficient, less environmentally destructive and not visually intrusive. As the application states that only 0.3% of UK land is required for solar panels, so it clearly should be possible to find this area on genuinely suitable sites. Everything has its place. We need green energy, but it has to be the right solution in the right place and with offshore turbines 40% efficient and usually viewed at distance if at all, and generate after dark, in the winter and in bad weather, there are better options.

I am aware that other people locally have been offered large sums of money to cover their fields in solar panels and have refused, but that said I cannot blame people for putting these things on their land when they are offered jet-set lifestyles for doing absolutely nothing, it must be enormously tempting - but it is the role of the planning system to balance private benefit with public cost. Here all the profit is private/personal and all the detriment is carried by the community. The SMDC local plan requires that 'Renewable energy schemes are of an appropriate scale, type and location', so it is clear that this scheme cannot fulfil those criteria here.

I have read all the associated reports and they are very disappointing; long on definitions, legislation, planning policy and guidance and desk surveys of surrounding areas, but with generally very modest input on site survey and detail and even weaker on site specific recommendations, mainly around retaining existing trees and hedges plus some modest planting. The closely packed wall to wall panels appear to respect the trees' root protection zones but nothing more. Many of these trees are fully mature with veteran characteristics yet no additional space is provided to allow for the inevitable limb shedding from trees at this stage of life, which given the proximity will result in damage to panels and thereafter likely pressure to remove the 'offending' trees, when what is required is more thought and consideration and willingness to compromise on some panels providing a more appropriate design.

By the timing of this application they have dodged having to carry out a proper biodiversity assessment using the official metric under the Environment Act 2021 which would then have required them to prove a minimum 10% biodiversity net gain. Other planning applications have been volunteering these assessment for some time. The present offers means very little without a meaningful evaluation. If they had any confidence in their scheme they would have volunteered this anyway. Nothing that is offered here could not already be bettered under existing agri-environment schemes. The developers here should be willing to properly prove their case properly if they believe they have one.

There is also no meaningful Landscape evaluation, assessment and plan. Any landscape scale development or change of use needs to consider the scale, topography/landform, groundcover, visual impact, integration in to the landscape and impacts on people, nature and other environmental factors and without this the scheme cannot be adequately assessed. It is rightfully the role of planning to judge these issues and where they fall short, as is the case here, the answer has to be no or think again.

Even the detail that is provided proves to be misrepresented in places such as the claimed effective screening along Thorney Edge Lane by mature hedging. I have been walking and driving this over the last few months and have had almost uninterrupted views over 90% of the land up to the ridge, even with the hedging now in leaf a substantial proportion of the land still remains in full view.

In short this is a poorly designed scheme with little or no thought given to the landscape or the community/neighbours, with a lack of convincing support from the reports which themselves have substantial omissions and errors.

Please send this scheme back for a totally fundamental rethink.

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