

From: Katherine Armstrong [REDACTED]
Sent: 14 August 2022 09:06
To: Section 62A Applications <section62a@planninginspectorate.gov.uk>
Subject: Objection to proposed development - S62A/22/0006



Your Ref.: s62A/22/006

Development of a ground mounted solar farm with a generation capacity of up to 49.99MW, together with associated infrastructure and landscaping

Dear Sir/Madam,

I live in the village of Berden and I am writing to express my impassioned objection to the abovementioned proposed development.

The reasons for my objection are many, but the most important include:

The loss of productive agricultural land

I would like to explain that I am very much in favour of solar development in general, especially in view of the growing climate crisis and the current war in Ukraine with its impact on national and international fuel prices. However, the development in question can in no way be considered of future net benefit in environmental terms, or conducive to national security, when it would entail the removal of 70ha acres of high quality (Grade 2 or 3) agricultural land out of food production for 40 years – this at a time when we have never been more conscious of the fragility of global food supply chains and the increasingly urgent need to feed our own population.

Just this week in a report in *The Guardian* newspaper on the effects of the current drought, Denis Lazier, a French farmer and president of the Chamber of Agriculture of the Maine & Loire Department, pointed out that ‘The Ukraine War has shown how countries must become more independent in their food production. With the conflict and now climate change bringing farming to our knees there are big questions about how we’ll feed our world.’

I would argue with many others that we can (and should) install solar panels on new and existing buildings, industrial roofs and on larger sites next to, e.g., motorways, but that we absolutely cannot afford to place them on a vast scale on prime farmland. It simply makes

no environmental sense, since any gains would be cancelled out by the need to import more food and the enormous carbon cost of such transportation.

The effective loss/degradation of a vitally important public amenity

The proposed development would have a dire and lasting impact on an area of countryside which includes and borders a number of footpaths which are in constant, frequent, year-round use by residents and visitors alike. Beloved of walkers, runners, amateur naturalists, dog walkers – the Covid pandemic underlined their immeasurable value to our physical and mental health, in a village with almost no other public amenities, and several miles from any leisure centres, public swimming baths or parks. If the development goes ahead, these footpaths will be blighted by their proximity to long, 2-metre-high galvanised steel fences (I quote from the developers' own documentation) which, as one resident memorably put it, would resemble the fencing around a concentration camp – whereas currently there are only ragged hedgerows, sentinel trees and open views. Who would choose to walk this area when it has become semi-industrialised? Currently, it includes a view of Berden's Grade I listed church, distant woods, and very little visible infrastructure (except for the recently installed battery unit at Pelham, itself an eyesore but one that is at least contained).

Although the application refers to a proposed new permissive path as part of the development, it would be many years, perhaps decades, until any newly planted trees became a genuine amenity in the form of woodland, and there is proof that they may never do so, as witnessed by the neglected, degraded, little-visited and frankly unattractive belt of trees planted next to the nearby substation at Stocking Pelham and left to decay for the past several years.

Berden lies only around 30 miles from London, and yet its peaceful landscape supports an abundance of ordinary but exceedingly precious wildlife. The site in question is not unremarkable farmland, though it may on paper appear so. Walking through and around these fields in the last two days alone I have heard tawny owls, seen two badgers, a fox, more than half a dozen hares, a fallow deer, a stoat, several bats, and a green woodpecker. There are small flocks of yellowhammers in the hedge running due east-west from the bridle path leading off The Street down towards the substation private road, a hedge which also hosts summer populations of lesser whitethroats, blackcaps, common blue and marbled white butterflies.

Country footpaths are not only about exercise and fresh air, they are about renewing our connection to nature, educating us about the history and ecology of the places in which we live, and providing us with aesthetic experiences of a kind proven to improve wellbeing. Each one is unique and irreplaceable. Some paths may remain if the development goes ahead, but their views will be inevitably so altered, depleted, blighted, and spoiled that I fear few people will use them.

Impact on wildlife

As this suggests, I already mourn the potential loss of the footpaths I love and use daily, but an equally compelling reason to object to the development is its likely impact on the population of farmland birds in these fields—in particular, skylarks.

There is little research into the impact of solar installations on skylark populations, but the reports I have read (after contacting the British Trust for Ornithology) suggest that very few skylarks have been recorded as nesting among industrial-scale solar panel installations.

The population of skylarks in the fields in question is notable. On many occasions in early to mid-summer I have counted at least four singing males at any one time, and there are clearly many more in the location since when walking round the fields I have seen and heard perhaps two dozen on any one day (their territories are quite large, so it is not possible to hear more than a few simultaneously). A neighbour has studied the population of skylarks in Berden for many years, and believes they have probably nested here for centuries, the land in question having been enclosed only in the very late nineteenth century and even now consisting of open fields with few hedges and the kinds of gentle upland grassland (natural and cultivated), especially generous headlands, which these birds require to breed.

All summer I walk up to these fields and listen to the larks singing, an experience which I cherish even more because I know that many people are denied this pleasure, skylarks having died out or departed from large areas of the UK countryside. Other red list birds will also be impacted if the development goes ahead. Some may continue to inhabit the land, but it is unthinkable that skylarks will continue to nest there, and their loss would be egregious.

I note that the developers' supporting documentation makes a vague assertion regarding an area suitable for skylarks to nest in within the proposed solar farm, but I would like to know what evidence they can supply to justify this claim, and how they intend to mitigate the impact of the development on this increasingly rare and much-loved bird.

No doubt the applicants will claim a net biodiversity gain from the proposed development, and it may be true that a few specialist weed and broad-leafed plant species will thrive if the land is no longer in arable cultivation; some insects too may benefit. I only wish I could be convinced and comforted by the thought of such potential gain, but I think it unlikely and at best marginal.

In conclusion, this vast solar installation, with its inevitably ugly and intrusive associated infrastructure, will not help to make the world a better, safer, greener place – quite the reverse. I therefore reiterate my complete and unconditional opposition to this opportunistic, insensitive, and irresponsible proposed development whose green credentials I consider entirely without substance.

Yours faithfully,

Katherine Armstrong