

## **Key Concerns Regarding the Solar Farm Proposal from Community Meeting:**

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On the 14th of January 2025, a community meeting was convened by Councillor Aubrey Holt in Ardeley Village Hall to discuss the proposed solar farm development. The meeting saw an exceptional turnout, with over 100 residents attending, reflecting the deep concern and strong community engagement surrounding this issue. The event served as a vital forum for residents to voice their opinions, share their perspectives, and raise concerns about the potential impact of the proposal on the local area.

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Below is a comprehensive summary of the key issues and objections raised by residents during the meeting:

### **1. Impact on the Local Environment and Landscape**

- **Visual Impact:** The proposed solar farm will significantly alter the rural landscape, introducing an industrial appearance that is wholly inappropriate for the area. The tall fencing surrounding the site will disrupt the open views and tranquil character that define the countryside.
- **Heritage Concerns:** Cromer Windmill, a Grade II\* listed structure, will be severely affected by the development. The visual impact on this historic asset, both in terms of its views and the views it offers, undermines its cultural and historical significance. This is contrary to planning policies that protect heritage assets.
- **Rural Character:** The development would permanently alter the character of a cherished rural area that has been preserved for generations. The proposal goes against the long-standing commitment to maintain the area's natural beauty and tranquillity.

### **2. Inappropriate Use of Agricultural Land**

- **Loss of Arable Land:** The land earmarked for development is classified as Grade 2, some of the "best and most versatile" agricultural land in the country. Its conversion to a solar farm represents a waste of a vital resource, particularly at a time when food security is becoming an increasing concern.
- **Impact on Farming:** Farmers in the area are already facing significant challenges. The loss of productive farmland will further undermine local agriculture, potentially jeopardising livelihoods and reducing the country's capacity for food production.

### **3. Lack of Compliance with National and Local Planning Policies**

- **National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF):** Chapter 15 of the NPPF, which focuses on “Conserving and Enhancing the Natural Environment,” clearly outlines the requirement to protect valued landscapes and prevent significant harm to biodiversity. This proposal is incompatible with these objectives, as it would irreversibly harm the rural character of the area and impact local wildlife habitats.
- **East Herts District Plan:** Policies within the District Plan, including those related to the preservation of rural land and the protection of heritage assets, are directly contravened by this proposal. The development does not adhere to the principles of sustainable development outlined in the plan.
- **Buntingford Neighbourhood Plan:** Local policies emphasise protecting rural vistas and agricultural land, ensuring developments are compatible with the character of the area. The solar farm proposal undermines these policies and contradicts the community's long-term vision.
- **Best and Most Versatile Land (BMV):** The site is classified as Grade 2 agricultural land, which the NPPF specifically highlights for protection. Development of such land should only proceed if there are no suitable alternatives, which is not the case here, as brownfield sites and industrial rooftops are more appropriate locations for solar installations.

#### 4. Negative Effects on Biodiversity and Wildlife

- **Disruption of Habitats:** The installation of tall fencing around the solar farm will disrupt the movement of local wildlife, forcing animals onto nearby roads, increasing the likelihood of collisions and ecological disruption.
- **Loss of Farmland Ecosystems:** Agricultural land supports a range of ecosystems and biodiversity, including pollinators and birds. Replacing this with an industrial site will degrade the ecological quality of the area, contradicting national policies to enhance biodiversity.
- **Cumulative Impact on the Environment:** The potential for expansion of this development, as suggested by nearby speculative proposals, further amplifies the risk to local wildlife and biodiversity.

#### 5. Lack of Proper Consideration for Alternative Locations

- **Missed Opportunities for Brownfield Sites:** The NPPF and other planning guidance encourage the use of brownfield sites and existing infrastructure, such as rooftops, for solar development. This application fails to demonstrate why these more appropriate alternatives have not been explored.
- **Transport Proximity Issues:** The proposed site relies on its proximity to pylons for energy transmission, but this narrow justification overlooks the greater sustainability of locating solar panels near urban centres, where energy demand is highest.

## 6. Traffic and Disruption During Construction

- **Highways Concerns:** The construction phase, expected to last over a year, will lead to increased traffic on rural roads, causing congestion and potential safety hazards. This is a significant concern for residents and contradicts policies requiring minimal disruption during developments.
- **Noise and Dust Pollution:** Prolonged construction activities will cause considerable noise, dust, and environmental disturbance, negatively affecting the quality of life for local residents.

## 7. Precedent for Unchecked Expansion

- **Future Speculative Applications:** If this proposal is approved, it is highly likely to lead to further speculative applications in the surrounding area, including proposals for battery storage facilities and expanded solar panel installations. This would create a sprawling industrial site, exacerbating the negative impacts on the landscape and local communities.
- **Runaway Development Risk:** The developer's stated interest in expansion highlights the need to prevent approval of this application to avoid setting a precedent that could irreversibly alter the character of the area.

## 8. Insufficient Detail and Uncertainty in the Application

- **Missing Information:** The application is incomplete, with key details about decommissioning, long-term maintenance, and visual impact missing. Approving a proposal with such significant gaps is contrary to good planning practice and risks future complications.
- **Decommissioning Concerns:** The lack of a clear decommissioning plan raises fears that the land could become derelict after the lifespan of the solar panels, leaving the local community to deal with the consequences.
- **Financial Bond for Decommissioning:** No contractual assurance has been provided to guarantee the site will be returned to its original state after the panels are no longer in use. This omission puts the future integrity of the land at risk.

## 9. Community Impact and Lack of Compensation

- **Loss of Amenity:** The development will permanently reduce the recreational and aesthetic value of the area for local residents. Views and access to open countryside will be lost, which cannot be mitigated.
- **No Compensation for Affected Properties:** Local residents who will suffer loss of property value and quality of life will not be compensated, adding insult to injury and undermining community trust.

**Summary of Planning Grounds for Objection:**

Residents at the community meeting felt the application should be refused based on the following:

1. **Contravention of National and Local Policies:** Including the NPPF, East Herts District Plan, and Buntingford Neighbourhood Plan, which all prioritise protecting rural character, agricultural land, and biodiversity.
2. **Inappropriate Use of Land:** The development is proposed on Grade 2 agricultural land, which should be preserved for food production.
3. **Harm to Heritage Assets:** Significant visual and cultural harm to Cromer Windmill, a Grade II\* listed structure.
4. **Environmental Impact:** Disruption to wildlife, loss of biodiversity, and failure to propose sufficient mitigation measures.
5. **Insufficient Information:** The application lacks detail on decommissioning, long-term impact, and other critical issues.
6. **Cumulative and Precedent Risks:** Approval would lead to further speculative developments, compounding the harm to the local environment.
7. **Community Opposition:** Strong and widespread opposition demonstrates that the proposal fails to reflect the will of the local community.