

# *Stowe by Chartley Parish Council*



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## **Planning application 25/40571/FUL Yew Tree Farm, Drointon**

**This planning application was debated at the Stowe-by-Chartley Parish Council meeting held on Thursday, 22 May 2025. It was agreed to recommend to the Planning Authority of Stafford Borough Council that the application should be refused.**

The reasons for this decision are clear, unanimously agreed, and, we would argue, are unanswerable:

- **The cumulative effects of this proposal together with the Inspector's earlier decision to allow the application for a solar farm at Lower Farm Drointon will overwhelm the hamlet of Drointon. In the region of 80% of Drointon will be covered by solar panels.**
- **The size and location of the proposed solar farm is totally unsuitable for a rural setting.**
- **The plan to use Grindley Lane for access is unworkable both during the construction period and during the lifetime of the site. We do not believe that there is a viable alternative route.**
- **Major Health and Safety issues have been ignored, or at best, trivialised.**
- **The planning application makes scant reference to the decommissioning of the site at the end of its workable life span. There appears to be no plan defined to set aside finances for removal and safe handling of solar panels and battery storage buildings.**
- **The proposed scheme will increase contributions to Greenhouse gas emissions rather than diminish them.**

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## Attachments:

Owing to the very short period of time allowed for public consultation, it has proved impossible to receive responses from a number of bodies we have attempted to question on several key points affecting highway security and health and safety. It would appear that the developers have not taken these points into consideration in their proposal. We argue that these very real concerns must be addressed satisfactorily before any permission is granted by the Planning Authority.

Therefore, the attachments show which bodies we have contacted and the questions we have asked.



National Gas  
Transmission.eml



British Pipeline  
Association.eml



HSE.eml

## Detailed explanation of the above points:

### The cumulative impact:

Granting of planning approval for the solar farm at Lower Farm, Drointon was agreed by the Inspector after the appeal by the developers. Originally the local Planning Authority refused permission. It was held by the Planning Authority that the proposals were seriously flawed in a number of ways.

The aforementioned Lower Farm proposal and this much larger Yew Tree Farm solar development proposal are situated closely adjacent to each other. If constructed, they will be seen as one overpowering threat to the surrounding community.

This even bigger plan, if approved, would heighten all the earlier identified problems. It has been estimated that in the region of 80% of the hamlet of Drointon would be covered by solar panels.

There are often many points of debate when considering planning applications, and very often emotions are to the fore without sufficient notice being taken of legislation and advisory papers from Central Government. In this case the proposals seem to be unaware of published government advice. If developers are aware, no mention is made in their very detailed proposal.

We would refer you to guidance issued by Central Government to help local councils in the consideration of planning applications.

**“Guidance to help local councils in developing policies for renewable and low carbon energy and identifies the planning considerations,**

**From: Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2018 to 2021) and Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities**

Published:

18 June 2015

Last updated:

14 August 2023

In thinking about criteria the National Policy Statements published by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero provide a useful starting point. These set out the impacts particular technologies can give rise to and how these should be addressed.

In shaping local criteria for inclusion in Local Plans and considering planning applications in the meantime, it is important to be clear that:

- **the need for renewable or low carbon energy does not automatically override environmental protections**
- **cumulative impacts require particular attention, especially the increasing impact that wind turbines and large-scale solar farms can have on landscape and local amenity as the number of turbines and solar arrays in an area increases**
- local topography is an important factor in assessing whether wind turbines and large-scale solar farms could have a damaging effect on landscape and recognise that the impact can be as great in predominately flat landscapes
- great care should be taken to ensure heritage assets are conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance, including the impact of proposals on views important to their setting
- proposals in National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and in areas close to them where there could be an adverse impact on the protected area, will need careful consideration
- **protecting local amenity is an important consideration which should be given proper weight in planning decisions**

*(The bold type is our amendment, as the three paragraphs seem particularly pertinent to the current situation in Staffordshire.)*

Paragraph:

007 Reference ID: 5-007-20140306”

This document provides guidance on the **National Planning Policy Framework** which sets out the expectations that local authorities will protect and enhance valued landscapes and sites of biodiversity. [See paragraphs 174 to 188 of the NPPF.]

It is interesting to note that **all** the planning applications for solar panel farms which have been granted approval in the environs of Stafford and Rugeley have been based on greenfield sites. To our knowledge at this point in time, not one is based on a brownfield site. As a Parish Council, we seek that the Borough Council should explore this option with applicants before the use of valued greenfield land is used.

## **The unsuitability of the proposal for this rural setting:**

The nature and extent of the site in question are not in keeping with the surrounding environment. This is essentially a farming community and the proposed development would seriously disrupt surrounding farms and businesses. The developer fails to recognise that, whilst this land is largely Grade 3, it is capable of being used for crops, grazing and other means of providing food for the nation. The land has been let as grazing and mowing grass for numerous years. It has been accepted widely in the farming community that the installation of solar panels is not compatible with any form

of farming – not even sheep grazing. By definition, solar panels are placed to “collect” sunshine. If this is effective there is not sufficient sunlight to allow growing grass to acquire the nutrients it requires to feed stock effectively.

Covering this enormous area of countryside with solar panels will move the designation from rural to urban. For the forty years envisaged to be the life-span of the scheme nothing will be grown on the land affected. The visual amenity will be blighted by the solar panels, the substation equipment and the containerised support accommodation. In addition, it is proposed to locate multiple inverters throughout the site, along with numerous large shipping containers where the BESS batteries would be housed. The whole impression would be of a huge urbanisation in the middle of the countryside. In effect, at the end of the forty years there would be left a huge brownfield site which would be extremely difficult, if not impossible to return to productive land.

Noise and light pollution associated with both the construction and future operation of the site risk affecting farm animals grazing in nearby fields. There are additional concerns of waste materials during construction and during the life of the Solar Farm leeching into soil and/or water supply thereby affecting farm animals and the ecosystem as a whole. This development and the one at Lower Farm are situated close to the SSSI Chartley Moss, an internationally protected RAMSAR site and one of only four floating peat bogs in the United Kingdom.

The developer of the plan for Yew Tree Farm and the developers for Lower Farm seem not to have provided an accurate assessment of noise levels to adjacent properties from BESS fans and inverters. It would seem vital to this application that noise levels should be stated at a number of set distances from the boundary of the Solar Farm. Residents will have to endure the increased levels of noise day and night. It would be reasonable to expect stated levels to which any operator would be held as a condition of approval.

In the previously-quoted Government guidance to help local authorities: “Renewable and low carbon energy” it makes a clear statement about the cumulative landscape and visual impacts. It states: *“Cumulative visual impacts concern the degree to which proposed renewable energy development will become a feature in particular views (or sequences of views) and the impact this has upon the people experiencing those views. **Cumulative visual impacts may arise where two or more of the same type of renewable energy development will be visible from the same point, or will be visible shortly after each other along the same journey.**”* The application for the development of Yew Tree Farm is described perfectly in this quote from the Government guidance for local authorities. If this plan were to be approved, the visual aspect in Drointon would be changed completely, and would be seriously marred. Three historic buildings will be affected visually by this development should it be approved:

- Chartley Castle from its elevated position will be affected
- St John the Baptist, the parish church in Stowe-by-Chartley
- Old Hall farmhouse – a historic building which was mentioned in the objection to the Lower Farm application, but will be even more impacted by this application

## **Road access during construction and during the proposed lifetime of the site:**

Stowe-by-Chartley Parish Council previously considered the planning application for the siting of a solar farm on land at Lower Farm, Drointon. One major concern was the inadequacy of the planned route to access the site, and this plan for the solar farm on Yew Tree Farm uses almost exactly the

same country lane. It is clear that our earlier objections are exactly the same as before, but very greatly intensified.

During the construction period it is accepted by the developer that there will be in the region of at least 3,000 movements of articulated Heavy Capacity Vehicles, plus movements of smaller and lighter vans and lorries along Grindley Lane. *(The developers have failed to give precise numbers of traffic movements, but extrapolating from the figures given in the application for the plans at Lower Farm it can be expected that there could be in the region of 6,000 HCV movements and 6,000 movements of smaller vehicles. Half of the HCV movements would be laden and half would be empty. This extrapolation is based on the acreage of the two areas concerned: Lower Farm 155 acres and Yew Tree Farm 220 acres.)*

This country lane is, for the most part, wide enough for only one vehicle, its surface is not good, and it is used largely by farm traffic and people who live along its length. It is not a well-used thoroughfare. Its severe limitations were illustrated in May 2023 when for two days the A518, which runs largely parallel to it, was closed completely to traffic following a major road traffic incident. Grindley Lane was blocked by cars and lorries which needed to travel between Uttoxeter and the A51. For these two days, the life of residents was made very difficult, tempers of drivers were severely frayed as vehicles became jammed, and the road surface, narrow verges and hedgerows were seriously damaged. In our opinion, Grindley Lane is not suitable for unladen 44 tonne articulated HCVs, let alone fully laden ones. *(Please see the attachment which shows visually the unsuitability of the lane for HCVs.)*

The disruption and damage caused by this proposed planning application would follow the damage which will be left by the Lower Farm construction. We can find no reference in either plan for the repair and refurbishment of Grindley Lane. In the absence of a clear condition requiring the developers to reinstate this country lane the major costs would fall upon Staffordshire County Council as the highway authority. We argue that this would be completely unfair, as the application is presented by a private company on behalf of a private individual. One assumes that there is a financial interest for both parties - public funds should not be used to finance the clear-up. At a meeting earlier in the year, the developers proposed a system of traffic lights on Grindley Lane. This is seriously flawed, as residents living in the mile and half between the two ends of the controlled roadway would be unaware of which direction traffic was flowing at any one time. In addition, there has been experience in the past two years of the A518 being blocked for two days; the only route from east to west is Grindley Lane. There were two days of gridlock. If a similar situation was to arise there would be a major traffic incident.

Once construction had finished, there would be forty years of increased wear and tear on the lane as well as increased traffic on a carriageway which would not be wide enough to accommodate it.

To compound the problems with using Grindley Lane as the prime access route for all construction traffic, the developer seems to be unaware that a major gas pipeline runs across it. We are informed that the pressure in the pipeline varies across the time of day, but on occasions can be as high as 1800lbs psft. Its crossing point on the lane is clearly marked with the appropriately coloured posts and with a notice giving the telephone number to ring in the event of an emergency. There is a very real concern that the vibrations caused by the excessive number of extremely heavy HGV traffic from the development of Lower Farm and Yew Tree Farm will damage the pipeline. The opinion of a very experienced drainage expert who has worked on the land in question is that the gas pipeline was laid across unstable, peaty ground. In the decades since its laying the large bore pipe has moved and flexed; at places in the field adjoining the road the pipeline is covered by only 0.5 of a metre of soil. Our understanding is that minimum coverage should be one metre. We believe that Transco is responsible for the pipeline and that the company is aware of the movement in the pipeline. It was

extremely worrying that when the published number was telephoned, the call-handler employed by Cadent seemed to know nothing of the pipe-line or which organisation was responsible.

**If planning approval were to be granted to this application, we believe that there would be a real danger to public health and safety brought about by vibrations caused by the excessive weight of HCVs.**

In addition, a major water main crosses Grindley Lane and there seems to have been little consideration by the developers that it too may well be damaged by the vastly increased weight and frequency of the planned traffic.

## **Major Health and Safety Issues have been ignored, or at least trivialised:**

As detailed in the paragraph above, the possible and likely fracture of the major gas pipeline would create a cataclysmic explosion in this rural setting.

An equally concerning factor is that the developer seems to have paid little attention to the potential dangers created by such a dense collection of lithium-ion batteries contained in shipping containers. It has been shown that in such a large solar farm there is a risk of an uncontrolled explosion and fire which would be likely to spread quickly to other parts of the site and adjacent woodland. This would threaten surrounding properties, and toxic smoke could easily reach nearby villages and schools. In the planning application there do not appear to be any emergency protocols for dealing with a potential fire and its management

It concerns us greatly that the Fire and Rescue service is not a statutory consultee, and as such, their reported response is very limited. However, it is patently obvious that in the response to a fire alarm, fire crews would be hampered by the single-track approach roads that surround the site. The single access to the site does not satisfy the requirements set out by Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service. Similarly, there appears to be no consideration in the planning application for sufficient water supply in the case of a fire. It is generally accepted that the volume of water required is extremely large. It is pertinent to note that the explosion and fire at a relatively small battery storage site in Belgium in 2017 required 1.4 million litres of water to provide containment. The application does not seem to recognise this danger and, therefore does not address it. In an earlier paragraph we have talked of the Cumulative Effects of having two large solar farms next to each other. This magnifies the danger of fire to a much greater effect and poses the question: "how can a fire be prevented from spreading to the nearby Booth Lane gas storage facility and the related underground pipelines?"

## **Decommissioning of the solar installations at the end of their useful life:**

We note that the developer will provide a **decommissioning strategy**, but that one is not available at the present time. It might legitimately be assumed that, as such a strategy has not been presented with all the other details of the plan, it is a complex and difficult document to produce. We argue strongly that if it is accepted that the solar panels, their associated infrastructure and the cabling require to be decommissioned, there must be some suggestion how this might be accomplished and how it will be financed. Decommissioning the site is likely to cost a similar figure as the construction in current day figures. Without a plan for the decommissioning strategies, we argue that permission to create the solar farm should be refused.

Decommissioning is made more complicated by the fact that the developer is one agent and the land owner is another. From conversations with PUSH it appears that once the solar farm is operational it will be offered for purchase by a third party. This will mean that in forty years' time there could be an 'interesting' legal debate over the responsibility for decommissioning the site. We argue that agreements between the developers and the landowners should be made available to ensure that there are defined and water-tight strategies and bonds in place to ensure that it will not be the taxpayer who will be required to pick up the costs.

- In the event that this application is not refused there must be in place a decommissioning strategy which details a cost analysis of how much would be required to return the site to "greenfield" based upon a current and projected forecast.
- The decommissioning strategy outlined must state clearly that the developer and/or landowner will be responsible for funding the removal of equipment and buildings, and the clear-up of the land. The taxpayer should not be liable.
- The decommissioning strategy must include a signed agreement by developers and landowner that there is a sufficient bond in place to cover the costs. This should form part of any formal condition if the application were to be approved.

Without such assurances, the planning application should be refused.

## **Contributions to Greenhouse Gas Emissions**

The applicant for this development, or indeed for the Lower Farm one, has not indicated the volume of CO<sub>2</sub> that will be produced by the mining of rock, transportation and construction, along with the replacement of the batteries and panels over a period of forty years. It is impossible to know definitively what, if any, savings are achievable during operations. Therefore, the scheme cannot be considered to be a major contributor to net zero regardless of its size and scope. Indeed, in the short to medium term it will cause an increase in greenhouse gas emissions owing to the fact that all materials, equipment and personnel required for both construction and operation of the site must arrive by road. The round-trip efficiency rating of 85% means that huge quantities of energy will be lost as waste heat during operation. In addition, the applicant's calculations do not account for emissions associated with the shipping and import of key component parts from overseas sources, including from China. In China it is generally accepted that such components receive far less scrutiny in terms of safety in terms of how the panels and batteries are made.

Furthermore, the United States government has identified the use of "slave labour" and forced labour practices as well as cruelty in the manufacturing processes in China. The Borough Council's own anti-slavery policies prohibit the use of such practices and these should be upheld.

In the planning application there is no mention of "The Companies Act 2013" nor "The Social Value Act 2021". Each has a relevance to the procurement of materials.

- The Companies Act 2013 states: *"Corporate Social Responsibility describes a company's commitment to carry out its business in an ethical way. This means managing their business processes while taking account of their social, economic and environmental impact, and considering human rights."*
- The Social Value Act 2021 places a requirement on organisations who are awarding certain services contracts to consider the economic, environmental and social benefits of their approaches to procurement before the process starts.

The developer's application appears to have ignored both of the above acts of parliament.

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The application in question provides great detail of a number of issues, but ignores or provides only passing acknowledgement of others which have great relevance to the feasibility and appropriateness of the scheme as a whole. There appears to be no reference to the substance of the Government paper quoted earlier: “Guidance to help local councils in developing policies for renewable and low carbon energy and identifies the planning considerations”, nor to “The Companies Act 2013”, nor to “The Social Value Act 2021”.

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**In summary, Stowe-by-Chartley Parish Council believes that the proposed development must be opposed and refused by Stafford Brough Council for the six reasons elaborated above and the arguments outlined.**