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For: Somerset West and Taunton DC,  
FAO Jeremy Guise, Case Officer

17 January 2022

Dear Sirs,

**PLANNING APPLICATION REF: 3/39/21/028-Solar farm, Land North of the Transmitting Station, Washford and Williton**

CPRE Somerset wish to OBJECT to this planning application for a solar farm in the Washford River valley, following our site visit on 7 January 2021.

**Use of BMV agricultural land**

1. The National Planning Policy Framework ( the NPPF ) and Planning Practice Guidance ( PPG ) expects poorer quality land to be used in preference to higher quality land, in cases where use of agricultural land is shown to be necessary for a solar farm.
2. At appeal hearing APP/U1105/W/15/3007994 into a proposed solar farm at Clyst St Mary in East Devon, which would have occupied 16.4 ha of BMV land, the Inspector quoted a Ministerial Statement " *we want it to be clear that any proposal for a solar farm involving the best and most versatile agricultural land would need to be justified by the most compelling evidence*". In that case the Inspector concluded that a departure from local and national policy was not justified. In this case, there is compelling evidence available to the Council to confirm that the application site is mainly high quality Grade 2 agricultural land, used for arable and producing good yields for many years.
3. Two tenant farmers on separate holdings within the application site, whose family livelihoods will be impacted significantly adversely if this proposed development is given planning permission, commissioned an Agricultural Land Classification report undertaken in accordance with DEFRA guidelines from Luscombe Maye LLP dated June 2018, which proves that the majority of land on the application site is Grade 2, with four fields considered to have some limitations due to sloping land which are classified 3a. If the case officer does not have a copy of this report, a copy should be requested.
4. The Luscombe Maye LLP Agricultural Land Classification report was undertaken on behalf of the tenant farmers by a qualified expert, a member of the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors ( RICS ) and a Fellow of the Central Association of Agricultural Valuers ( CAAV ). The report concludes that: 'It is considered that the land at Washford is an example of some of the better quality land in this area of West Somerset, consistently producing high quality crops, a variety of crops in rotation and good yields'.

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5. This report, which confirms that the site is inappropriate for a solar farm according to both government and BRE National Solar Centre guidance\*, is disputed by the applicant which claims that ‘ *The [ applicant’s ] desktop ALC Report concludes that the land is of poor agricultural quality and versatility ( Grade 3b and 4) and the magnitude of impact in this regard as a result of the proposed development is considered negligible* ’ [ Design and Access Statement, in the section headed ‘Agricultural Land’].

\* *BRE guidance states that for Grade 2 land national planning policy would not normally support development and for Grade 3a land information needs to be provided by the applicant on the viability of the farm to continue to function with development in situ. Our information in relation to one of the tenant farms which would be impacted, and who we contacted to verify this point, is that the farm would suffer a significant fall in income and would be unable to invest in replacement machinery if this proposal is approved.*

6. Tenants rights are heavily protected under the applicable Agricultural Holdings Act 1986 - particularly security of tenure and succession rights- and there are limited routes to terminate a tenancy under the Act. We are concerned that one of these routes to termination might be a Notice to Quit served under Case B Schedule 3 on the grounds that the land is required for use other than agriculture. Alternatively, there is a significant risk that the loss of a sizeable percentage of farm income resulting from the grant of planning permission would weaken the farmers’ ability to service rent on the remaining land, hence potentially culminating in termination on the grounds of failure to pay rent. There is a real possibility of hardship in this case as compensation might be limited to 4-5 years rent, and loss of succession rights would be onerous.

7. In our view the circumstances of the tenant farmers, whose livelihoods will be seriously impacted by this proposal if it were to be approved, is a material consideration in this case, as for planning purposes the NPPF identifies three roles for sustainable development: economic, social and environmental.

### **Harm to the Character and Appearance of the Landscape**

8. The applicant’s Landscape Appraisal conclusion is that ‘ *The overarching value of the application site and its surroundings are considered to be ordinary* ’. [ LVA, Summary of Baseline Conditions, para 4.33]. In our view this characterisation is wholly inaccurate. It seriously understates the landscape value at this location, and understates the importance of this area to local tourism.

9. Regardless of the agricultural land classification, in our view the site is an entirely inappropriate location for this change of use due to the harm to the character and appearance of the landscape. The site sits prominently in the high quality landscape of the beautiful River Washford Valley, and within the landscape settings of the Exmoor National Park, the Quantocks AONB, and Cleeve Hill. The site also comprises the rural settings of the magnificent Grade 1 listed 13th Church , St Decumans, and the Grade 2\* listed Kentsford Farmhouse. The site is adjacent to the entire length of one of the best loved and most used public footpaths in the area - the long former ‘ Mineral Line ’ along which iron ore was transported to the coast. This footpath ( WL 18/8 on the Somerset County Council Footpath network ) is a key component in the extensive footpath network in the area, as it links the inland footpath network around the Brendon Hills with the nationally important coastal path.

10. The application site is also close to the West Somerset railway, which runs along the Mineral Line footpath. One of its main attractions is the famously beautiful landscape that it traverses. The site would be highly visible from the elevated carriages.

11. VP 1 taken from Beacon Hill in the Quantocks clearly demonstrates both the cumulative impacts of the proposal taking into account the adjacent solar farm at Higher Bye farm, and the sheer scale of the proposal in the Washford river valley landscape between Watchet and Washford.

### **The erroneous LVA claim that the site is not prominent in the landscape**

12. The various claims made in the LVA that the site is not prominent in the landscape, and that it is hidden ('nestled') in the valley, are wholly inaccurate. The top half of the site above Furzey Plantation is on elevated ground with wide ranging and magnificent views of the Quantocks, Exmoor AONB and the nearby Cleeve Hill, as we verified on our site visit. The lower half of the site occupies the immediate rural setting of the village of Washford. The development would dominate the village landscape, which would change its character from entirely rural to quasi-industrial.

13. The site occupies a significant part of the rural setting of Watchet. This can be best appreciated from the tower of St Decuman's Church, and from the footpath WL 30/6 which descends from the church into Washford river valley (from which no photos were taken in the LVA). Watchet is a hugely popular tourist attraction and in our view it is entirely inappropriate to change its rural setting into a quasi-industrialised landscape with thousands of panels, cameras on 3m security poles, etc.

### **St Decuman's Church, 13thC, Grade 1 listed**

14. We disagree with the claim in the LVA at para 4.24 that '*there are no known historical or cultural elements or characteristics in the landscape of the application site that should be conserved*'. In our view the landscape value at the baseline stage of the landscape assessment has not been fully considered, and there is inadequate acknowledgement or understanding by the applicant of the historic and cultural aspects of the landscape, for example the fact that the application site lies in the landscape setting and context of the Grade I listed church of St Decumans which stands prominently at the head of the river valley and overlooks the whole site. The entire site would be plainly visible from its tower, and it would be clear that its hitherto entirely rural setting would be dominated by the thousands of solar panels, inverter buildings, security fencing and 3m high camera poles.

15. The historic importance of the Grade 1 listed church and its close relationship to the Washford river valley, most of which would be covered by the development, is clearly shown in the LVA Viewpoint 9 (2) taken from Belle Vue playground, Washford. This photo confirms that the rural setting of the church, which has been intact for hundreds of years, will be seen to be dominated by the development, particularly when viewed from Washford.

16. In the latest iteration the edge of the proposed development has been pulled back from the church and the Mineral Line footpath, but not by a significant amount. The amendment does not materially alter the fact that a large part of the river valley settings of Washford, Cleeve Hill, St Decumans Church, and Kentsford farmhouse will be covered by thousands of the solar panels, with security cameras on an undisclosed number of 3m poles around the fenced perimeter. The panels will remain highly visible the entire length of the important Mineral Line public footpath, and from the important WL 30/6 footpath descending from Watchet/ St Decuman's into the valley near Kentsford farmhouse (no photo has been taken from this latter footpath in the landscape assessment).

17. We note that the landscape appraisal is described as a 'Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment' (LVIA) in the Design and Access Statement, but in fact it is a Landscape Appraisal (LVA). This means that a system-

atic and transparent assessment of the likely significance of the effects identified has not been required ( see Table 3.1 in GLVIA 2015 ).

18. We disagree with the Heritage Assessment's assertion that '*the intervisibility* [ of the Grade 1 listed church and the application site ] *would affect the landscape rather than the heritage significance of the church*'. We interpret this phrase to mean that the applicant considers that the hitherto intact agricultural setting of the rural Grade 1 listed church is not the most important aspect of the building's significance and special architectural and historic interest. It nevertheless makes a very important contribution to the visual setting and understanding of its location.
19. The Heritage Assessment also places great reliance on the argument that '*the churchyard is enclosed*' , and thus argues that the visual impacts will be negligible. This argument takes no account of the impact on views to the Grade 1 listed building from Washford, or views from the tower of the church. From there, and from numerous other viewpoints, the panels would be very intrusive.
20. We consider that the introduction of thousands of panels in geometric rows, turning the character of the Washford river landscape from purely agricultural to quasi-industrial, would be alien and incongruous features in the agricultural landscape that would result in harm to the settings and context of the Grade 1 church, and the Grade 11\* listed Kentsford farmhouse discussed in the next section, and some harm to their overall significance categorised in NPPF terms as ' less than substantial harm '. In our view this is still real and serious harm in heritage terms and it needs to be balanced against public benefits.

#### **Kentsford Farmhouse, early 17thC, Grade 11\* Listed**

21. Kentsford Farmhouse is a Grade 11\* listed building, a very high listing only shared by 6% of listed buildings. Again, in relation to this important building, we challenge the applicant's erroneous claim that: '*There are no known historical or cultural elements or characteristics in the landscape of the application site that should be conserved*' ( LVA, para 4.24). Pevsner states that this building is medieval, rebuilt c 1600, and that it sits just west of a low two arched packhorse bridge across the river.
22. The ancient packhorse bridge is a non-designated heritage asset that is not referred to in the heritage assessment. The listed house, its superb medieval barns and the pack-horse bridge are features in the landscape that attract large numbers of walkers onto the path descending from Watchet/St Decuman's church. The panels would be highly visible from the higher slope of the path, and would impact walkers.
23. The listed farmhouse sits by the river in a hollow between steeply rising topography, and thus the panels will sit on higher ground above the house. In the latest iteration the edge of the development has been moved further south and thus the panels will not be visible from the house, despite their close proximity.
24. The applicant relies on this lack of intervisibility to claim that the impacts on the listed house are negligible, however the agricultural and rural landscape of the Washford river valley remains an important part of the context of Kentsford farmhouse. This will be changed by the development from an entirely agricultural landscape to a quasi-industrial one, thereby detracting from the heritage significance of the farmhouse. This change in character of the historic rural context of the house has not been discussed in the heritage assessment, which concentrates only on intervisibility.
25. Furthermore the river connects the house with Cleve Abbey within a short walk from Kentsford farmhouse to the SW of Washford. Monks from the abbey occupied one of the medieval barns in the courtyard

of Kentsford farmhouse, possibly as a staging point. The Washford river valley landscape was therefore an integral element in the life of the medieval monks of Cleeve Abbey. The quiet and tranquil rural, religious, historic and cultural landscape character at this location should remain intact. The thousands of solar panels will be highly visible along almost the entire length of the walk along the river from Kentsford Farmhouse to Cleeve Abbey, which can be undertaken along the public footpath. A drastic change of character will be perceived in the landscape if the application is approved.

26. Viewpoint 13 in the LVA is taken at the top of the footpath descending Cleeve Hill towards the packhorse bridge adjacent to the Grade 11\* listed Kentsford farmhouse. On our site visit we verified that from a position about two thirds of the way down this important Watchet footpath it will be possible to see much of the site all the way to Washford, and to see the site in the clear context of the listed farmhouse.

27. The application site, which is part of the agricultural landscape, is relatively close to the listed farmhouse and can also be seen to be visibly associated with it from a second public footpath: WL 30/6 footpath leading down to the farmhouse from St Decuman's Church (no viewpoints have been selected from this path in the LVA).

28. In a 2016 appeal decision in Devon, APP/K1128/W/15 3135465, one of the main issues was the effect of the solar farm proposal on the setting of Little Belsford, a grade 11 listed building. The Inspector noted at para 35 that: 'Even with intervening planting, the extent, elevation and quasi-industrial of the proposed solar farm would remove the characteristic context of the Listed Building and result in 'less than substantial harm' to the significance of the designated heritage asset. The ability to see the site, or otherwise, from the heritage asset, is of no material consequence to this assessment' [Emphasis added]. In our view, the accident of the location of Kentsford farmhouse in a hollow by the river, with its land lying above it in the landscape, resulting in a lack of intervisibility despite the proximity of the thousands of panels, does not mean that the impacts on the setting of the house will be negligible, as claimed by the applicant.

#### **The LVA claim that 'There are no public footpaths within or adjacent to the application site'**

29. The landscape appraisal gives an incomplete account of the extensive network of footpaths in the area from which the site will be visible. For example, no photos have been selected of the site from various public footpaths in the close vicinity of the application site, including: WL 28/16 (which joins the B3190 from Five Bells opposite the entrance to Kentsford farm); WL 28/18 (which joins the B3190 from Five Bells further north); WL 30/6 (this is an important and well used footpath descending from Watchet/St Decuman's church down the slope of the head of the Vally towards the packhorse bridge at Kentsford Farmhouse- the thousands of panels will be highly prominent in the landscape from the higher part of the slope on this footpath); and WL 28/14 (this footpath runs east-west south of the A39, and the site will be visible from it. The panels will be seen to dominate the rural setting of Washford).

30. We have spoken to the parish footpaths officer of Williton PC who informs us that the site will also be visible from the following footpaths in the vicinity: WL 28/15, WL 28/29, WL 18/31 and WL 28/12 (in the latter case from the part running north-south up to Rallyes Cross).

31. The LVA underplays the importance of the mineral line footpath, WL 18/8 on the SCC Network, and its role in linking the nationally important coastal footpath to the extensive rural footpath network in the Brendon hills south of Washford. This footpath runs for a long distance close to the edge of the entire site. The fact that the edge of the proposed development has been pulled back from the river by a short distance in the latest iteration has enabled the applicants to claim that the footpath is 'not adjacent' but, as we verified on our site visit, this would not in any way mitigate the change of character to the landscape that would result

if approval is given. Walkers have a high susceptibility to change, and the impact would be considerable. The serried rows of panels would be clearly visible to path users the entire length of this important footpath and would appear in stark contrast to the existing rural outlook.

32. The selected viewpoints of the site in the LVA have been taken at each end of the Mineral Line footpath ( VP 7 at the north end, and VP 8 at the south end in Washford ), whereas in fact ( as we verified on our site visit ) the application site will be highly visible along its length, prominent in the landscape, and close to the footpath, but no photos have been taken along the sections of the footpath from which the site will be most visible, particularly closer to Washford.

## Visual Impacts

33. Only a limited number of carefully selected viewpoints have been selected for the LVA and these do not give a fair or complete impression of the landscape impacts. A significant percentage of the selected Viewpoints are those from which the application site is '*screened by topography and vegetation*', rather than viewpoints of the site from the many footpaths in this part of Somerset.

34. At LVA para 2.8 it is stated that the fieldwork was undertaken during Autumn 2017 , early Spring 2018 'when deciduous vegetation had only partly come into leaf' and late Spring 2021. On all those occasions vegetation was either in part leaf or full leaf. In contrast, on our site visit 7 January there was no leaf. It was clear that the northern part of the site enjoys sits on elevated land and enjoys full and unrestricted visibility in the wider landscape. Due to its prominent position, it will highly visible from multiple viewpoints in the wider landscape. On the lower slope below Furzey Plantation, vegetation will not screen the development in the river valley landscape in any significant way, particularly in views from Washford or the Mineral Line public footpath.

35. The LVA claims that people in the Belle Vue playground and the Mineral Line Multi-Use Area at Washford would not be looking at the landscape as they would be engaged in playground activities. This argument takes no account of carers and parents who enjoy the intact landscape setting of the valley. VP 9(1) taken from the Belle Vue playground confirms that the development will dominate the rural setting of Washford looking northwards.

36. The insistence in the Planning Statement that people in residences, whether in Washford or elsewhere with views of the site ( eg along the ridge near St Decuman's Church ), do not have a right to a view underplays the adverse impacts on visual amenity arising from the change of character to the landscape from entirely rural to quasi-industrial. The argument to the effect that people will only notice a 'change of colour' in the landscape resulting from the serried ranks of thousands of solar panels seriously underestimates people's high sensitivity to, and aesthetic appreciation of, landscape, specifically in this case the high quality landscape of the Washford river valley.

37. We disagree that the claim at LVA para 4.49 that people travelling on the West Somerset railway line along the edge of the site have a medium sensitivity '*unless they are working in which case they have a low sensitivity*'. The line is extensively used by tourists, who typically are not visiting Somerset in order to work on a tourist train, and who have a high susceptibility to the beauty of the scenery at this location. The unspoilt and intact landscape around Watchet, Williton and Washford is a major selling point which attracts large numbers of tourists into the area. The site would be highly visible from the elevated railway carriages, as the railway track runs alongside the Mineral Line public footpath.

38. One of the selected viewpoints ( VP 13, taken from the public footpath on Cleeve Hill which descends to Kentsford farmhouse ) confirms that the huge development would dominate the Washford river valley all the way to Washford. This can be seen more clearly when descending the path. Likewise VP 7 taken from a position at the north end of the Mineral Line confirms that the landscape will be dominated by thousands of panels on the other side of the nearby river when viewed from the footpath.

### **Cumulative Impacts**

39. There will be unacceptable cumulative impacts on the landscape due to the proximity of the Higher Bye solar farm. This is clearly evidenced in a. Viewpoint 9 ( 2 ) taken from Belle Vue playground in Washford, and b. Viewpoint 1 taken from Beacon Hill in the Quantocks AONB. The former photo confirms that views from Washford will be dominated by the thousands of panels; the latter photo demonstrates that the cumulative impacts are significant, and also demonstrates the sheer scale of the proposal as it will occupy much of the landscape between Watchet and Washford, even when viewed from the Quantocks at 6.33km distance.

### **Conclusion**

For the reasons given above we conclude that this highly sensitive landscape is an entirely inappropriate site for a large solar farm, and that the application should be refused.

Yours sincerely

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Planner  
CPRE Somerset