



CPRE Somerset Speaking Notes to rebut Officer's Report- - 3/39/21/028- solar farm , Land N. Of the Transmitting Station , Williton, for Somerset Council West Planning Committee, John Meikle Room, The Deane House, Belvedere Rd, Taunton, TA1 1HE, on 20 June 2023

I represent CPRE Somerset and am a trustee and its planner.

Taking the officer's arguments in the Committee Report in turn:

1. The Officer says the tenant's farmers desperate plight is '*an emotive matter for the community to which no weight can be given in the planning balance*'. In fact Adopted Plan **Policy CC1-carbon reduction** explicitly states that account must be taken of '*social and economic impacts*'. Furthermore, contrary to the officer's opinion, it is in fact well established in the High Court that tenant farmer's personal circumstances are a material consideration*.

[* e.g. see the judicial review case - R v Vale of Glamorgan D.C, High Court, case no. CO/2775/99]

2. On the question of Best and Most Versatile Land, government policy (and the policy of Lib Dems and the Greens) is that this should be avoided unless there are '*compelling reasons*'*. There are no such reasons in this case. The tenant farmers commissioned a report from Luscombe May LLP showing that the site is Best and Most Versatile Land. The Council commissioned an independent report from the leading firm of Mott Macdonald which completely discredited the developer's opposing report. Why did the Council waste money commissioning that report if it was going to ignore its findings?

[* see the Written Ministerial Statement in the House of Commons (WMS), dated 25.3 2015 and the just published Government energy strategy 'Powering Up Britain' of 30 March 2023 which has not extended the effective ban on BMV land to 3b land, but clear emphasis has now been placed on rooftops and brownfield]

3. Regarding the so-called '*temporary nature of the installation*', appeal inspectors have pointed out that 40 years is a significant period in people's lives, during which the solar development would seriously detract from landscape character, and visual amenity*.

* [eg see the concluding sentence in the 2022 Appeal decision APP/M/ 005/W/22/3299953-Land NW of Hall Farm, Alfreton]

4. As to screening and concealment, the site is on a prominent site sloping down to Washford and is overlooked from higher ground by Exmoor National Park and the AONB. It cannot be effectively screened.

5. As to harm to the settings of Exmoor National Park and the Quantock Hills AONB, both these bodies have strongly and repeatedly objected to this planning application, saying that the proposed development conflicts with national policy and with **Policy NH14** of the adopted plan, which explicitly protects both designated areas and their settings.

[The word 'setting' has a legal meaning in heritage and landscape contexts and refers to views to and from the designated areas].

6. Historic England (HE) say in their strong objection letter that the development will '*harm the significance of several highly designated and nationally important heritage assets*'. Please note that a finding in the heritage context of 'less than substantial harm' is still real and serious harm. In our view it is towards the middle to top end of the scale, given the sheer number of heritage assets that will be affected in this case.

7. The Officer says the harm to tourism in this famous tourism area is '*unevidenced*'. We ask councillors today to use their best judgment and to take note of the objections from the three parish councils and Watchet Town Council; from walkers along the Mineral Line public footpath which borders the site for a very long distance, and is part of the national designated coastal path; and from b and b owners overlooking the thousands of panels.

8. In conclusion, this is a completely unsuitable location. It is contrary to policies **NH1, NH8, NH 14 and CC1** among others*, and we respectfully ask the committee to refuse it.

[* It does not comply with the following West Somerset local plan policies :

- > the protection of the settings of the National Park and QH AONB, as required by **Pol NH 14**
- > the protection of the settings of heritage assets, as required by **Pol NH1**
- > the need to take account of social and economic considerations eg the plight of the tenant farmers who will lose their livelihoods if this is approved - see **Pol CC1** -Carbon Reduction
- > tourism considerations eg **Pol E10** which highlight's Watchet and Williton's role in being gateway centres for tourism
- > the protection of Best and Most Versatile Land - **Pol NH8]**

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