

28th September 2025

For the attention of Case Officer: Ben Glover, Senior Planning Officer, Major Projects.

North Hertfordshire District Council
Planning Control & Conservation
Council Offices, Gernon Road
Letchworth Garden City
Hertfordshire
SG6 3JF

By Email only

Dear Mr Glover,

This objection is submitted in response to the planning application for the Westfield Energy Conservation Park.

APPLICATION: 25/01947/FP

AT: Land South Of A507 Near Cumberlow Green, Clothall Road, Clothall, Hertfordshire.
PROPOSAL: Battery Energy Storage System (BESS), ground mounted solar farm, associated infrastructure, access and landscaping.

The proposed development raises significant concerns across multiple areas including agricultural land use, landscape and visual impact, biodiversity, public rights of way, traffic safety, noise, flood risk, and battery energy storage system (BESS) safety. The following sections outline the detailed grounds for objection based on the evidence presented in the planning documents and supporting assessments and I object in the strongest of terms.

Use of Agricultural Land

1. Extent and Quality of Agricultural Land

The Agricultural Land Classification confirms that circa 40% of the site is Grade 2 and 3a, qualifying as BMV land.

BMV land is protected under:

NPPF Paragraph 174: which requires planning decisions to contribute to the protection and enhancement of soils.

Natural England Technical Information Note TIN049: which advises against development on BMV land unless absolutely necessary.

(Extract of letter from RT HN Ed Miliband MP to Richard Fuller MP 17th February 2025)

'There has been no change to the Governments policy on the weight attached to the use of BMV land. Planning policy and guidance makes clear that, wherever possible, developers should utilise brownfield, industrial, contaminated, or previously developed land. Where the development of agricultural land is shown to be necessary, lower-quality land should be preferred to higher-quality land (including 'Best and Most Versatile' land). This was the policy of the last government, There are no plans to change this policy.'

The proposal would result in the long-term removal of productive arable land, with only partial sheep grazing retained under solar arrays.

2. Permanent Infrastructure on Agricultural Land

The development includes over 5.5 acres of concrete slab infrastructure to support the substation and BESS compound:

BESS compound: ~6.9 ha (500m x 180m), including 864 battery cabinets, control rooms, welfare units, and spares containers.

Substation compound: ~2.4 ha (200m x 120m), with transformers, switchrooms, harmonic filters, and auxiliary buildings.

These installations are not temporary in nature, and their construction on a sloping site will require regrading, significant groundworks, excavation, and soil compaction, further degrading the agricultural value of the land.

3. Misrepresentation of Sheep Grazing as Agricultural Continuation.

The applicant claims that sheep grazing will continue, maintaining agricultural use.

However, DEFRA and NFU guidance caution that sheep grazing under solar panels is not equivalent to traditional agricultural productivity.

Stocking rates on solar farms are typically 6–8 sheep per hectare, compared to 10–15 sheep per hectare on traditional pasture.

Grazing is often seasonal and limited, with reduced forage quality due to shading and soil compaction.

The claim that sheep grazing maintains agricultural use is therefore misleading and does not justify the loss of BMV land.

The sheep which is referred to in the Planning, Design and Access Statement were introduced into a localised area adjacent Kingswoodbury House after the public consultation which was held in March 2025. Up until that point there has been no livestock in these fields. This area currently arable open unfenced land.

4. Soil Quality and Reinstatement Risks

The Agricultural Land Classification report identifies wetness and droughtiness limitations, with subsoils often gleyed, slowly permeable, or shallow over stone.

Soil profiles include clay-rich topsoils (up to 44%) and subsoils with up to 70% stone content, making them highly vulnerable to compaction and drainage disruption.

Reinstating BMV land after 40 years of solar infrastructure is not guaranteed:

Restoration requires precise separation and replacement of topsoil and subsoil layers.

Heavy machinery and concrete slabs risk irreversible compaction and mixing.

Poor reinstatement may result in downgrading of land classification and permanent loss of productivity.

The applicant has not provided a soil restoration plan, nor committed to post-decommissioning soil surveys to verify recovery.

5. Local Planning Policy Conflict

The site lies within the Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt, governed by Policy CGB1 of the North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011–2031.

CGB1 restricts development to uses appropriate to the countryside, such as agriculture and forestry. The proposed solar farm and BESS are not listed as acceptable uses.

The Planning Statement fails to demonstrate exceptional justification for overriding this policy, particularly given the availability of lower-grade land elsewhere.

In summary, the proposed development involves the significant and unjustified use of BMV agricultural land, the installation of permanent concrete infrastructure, and the misrepresentation of sheep grazing and land reinstatement. This is in direct conflict with national and local planning policies, and poses long-term risks to soil health and agricultural productivity.

Grid Connection, Viability and Strategic Need

The developer has not demonstrated a viable or necessary grid connection, and the project may be surplus to national requirements under current energy policy.

1. No Evidence of CP30 Compliance or NESO Gate 2 Status

The developer has not provided evidence that the project meets the National Energy System Operator (NESO) Gate 2 criteria, which are now required for a firm grid connection offer:

Ready: Planning permission or demonstrable land rights.

Needed: Within zonal capacity caps or “protected” status (e.g., planning granted before 20 December 2024 or a live CfD/Capacity Market contract).

The Planning Statement confirms a connection agreement exists but does not provide:

A copy of the agreement.

Confirmation of Gate 2 status.

Evidence of “needed” classification under CP30.

2. Oversubscription of Grid Capacity

According to NESO and Ofgem, the UK grid is severely oversubscribed, with over 750 GW of solar and wind projects in the queue—more than double what is needed to meet 2030 targets. Most new BESS and solar projects are now considered surplus, and speculative projects are being removed from the queue.

The Clean Power 2030 (CP30) Action Plan sets clear targets:

45–47 GW of solar

27–29 GW of battery storage

These targets are already exceeded by existing applications.

3. No Transmission Entry Capacity (TEC) Evidence

The developer has not disclosed:

A TEC agreement.

Their position in the grid queue.

Any timeline or milestones for grid connection.

Without this, the project cannot be considered a viable contributor to national energy strategy.

4. Risk of Local Harm Without National Benefit

Approving a project with no guaranteed grid access risks:

Wasted land use.

False sustainability claims.

Community disruption (landscape, noise, traffic, fire risk).

CP30 policy is clear: projects that cause local harm but do not deliver strategic national benefit should not proceed.

The developer has not demonstrated that this project is “needed” under CP30 or that it has a firm, viable grid connection. In the context of national grid reforms and oversubscription, this project is likely to be surplus and may never be connected. The Council should pause approval until NESO confirms which projects are truly viable and aligned with national strategy.

Development Need

1. Unjustified Development Need at This Location

The applicant relies heavily on national policy goals (e.g. EN-1, EN-3, Clean Power 2030) and grid-scale battery storage targets to justify the proposal.

However, these policies do not mandate development at this specific site, nor do they override local planning policies without a clear demonstration of locational necessity.

The Planning Statement and Environmental Statement fail to demonstrate why this site is uniquely required to meet national or local energy targets.

The grid connection agreement is cited as justification, but no evidence is provided that other sites could not achieve similar grid access with less environmental or policy conflict.

The proposal is not allocated in the Local Plan and is not supported by a strategic energy site designation.

2. Flawed Site Selection Process

The applicant admits that only two landholdings over 50ha were identified, and only one landowner was willing to proceed.

This is not a robust or transparent site search. It lacks:

Consideration of brownfield land, rooftop solar, or smaller distributed sites.

A sequential test for avoiding Best and Most Versatile (BMV) agricultural land, despite circa 40% of the site being Grade 2 and 3a.

The Planning Statement dismisses alternative technologies (e.g. wind, hydro, tidal) and smaller schemes without site-specific analysis.

The site selection appears driven by landowner availability and commercial convenience, not by planning merit or environmental suitability.

3. Conflict with Policy CGB1 – Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt

The site lies predominantly within the Rural Area Beyond the Green Belt, where Policy CGB1 restricts development to specific uses (e.g. agriculture, forestry, rural buildings).

Solar farms and BESS are not listed as acceptable uses under CGB1.

The applicant argues that renewable energy requires large rural sites, but this does not constitute policy compliance.

The cited precedent (Bygrave Solar Farm) is not sufficient justification, especially without a rigorous alternatives assessment or locational need.

The proposal introduces industrial-scale infrastructure into a rural landscape, undermining the intent of CGB1 to protect countryside character.

The proposal fails to demonstrate a clear and compelling need for development at this location. The site selection process is inadequate, and the development is contrary to Policy CGB1. The planning

balance does not favour approval, as the claimed benefits are generic and not site-specific, while the harms are localised, long-term, and policy-relevant.

Public Rights of Way.

1. Impact on Public Rights of Way and Access

The proposed development site is intersected by two PRowWs (HD/CLOTHALL/019 and HD/CLOTHALL/020), and lies adjacent to several others, including Byway Open to All Traffic (BOAT) Weston 039, which is not acknowledged in the application. Weston 039 is a key route for vulnerable road users and forms part of a wider network that could be significantly enhanced through integrated planning.

The application fails to take the opportunity to link existing PRowWs and cycle routes in a meaningful way, contrary to NPPF Paragraph 105, which encourages developments to protect and enhance public access and provide better facilities for users.

2. Missed Opportunities for Sustainable Connectivity

The site borders the Baldock recreational route, part of Hertfordshire's cycle network. The development could facilitate safe, off-road access for walkers, cyclists, horse riders, carriage drivers, and those with disabilities. However, the current proposal does not support this, nor does it align with NPPF Paragraph 8(b), which promotes a well-designed and safe built environment that supports health, social, and cultural well-being.

3. Non-Compliance with Hertfordshire's Rights of Way Improvement Plan

The Hertfordshire County Council's Rights of Way Improvement Plan outlines several proposed upgrades and new Restricted Byways in the vicinity of the site (e.g., 11/340, 11/346, 11/131, 11/299, 11/347, 11/342). The development does not incorporate or support these improvements, missing a strategic opportunity to enhance the local access network.

4. Conflict with Local Transport Plan 4 (LTP4)

The proposal conflicts with Policy g of Hertfordshire's LTP4, which seeks to resist development that would severely affect the character or safety of rural roads and rights of way, particularly for vulnerable users such as horse riders. The development introduces industrial infrastructure into a tranquil, rural setting, undermining the safety and experience of PRowW users.

5. Landscape and Visual Impact

The site occupies an elevated position, and the proposed landscape mitigation measures will not adequately screen the Battery Energy Storage System (BESS), solar arrays, or substation. Key PRowWs such as PRow 28 (to Lodge Farm) and PRow 40 (Cromer to Luffenhall) will have clear views of the development, yet the application lacks accurate and representative visual assessments. The photo montages provided are misleading and fail to show the full extent of the development. Viewpoints 16 and 21 do not face the site.

No visual evidence is provided from PRowWs 26, 28, or 40, which are critical to understanding the impact on the landscape and public amenity.

Crucially, the developer has not included any visual representations of how the landscape will appear with the solar arrays, BESS, and substation in situ, despite these being shown at the community consultation. This omission is unacceptable, as it prevents the public and decision-makers from properly assessing the visual and environmental impact of the full development. It undermines transparency and contradicts the principles of informed public engagement.

The proposed development fails to meet national and local planning policy objectives regarding public access, landscape protection, and sustainable development. It introduces significant adverse impacts on the PRoW network, undermines opportunities for connectivity, and does not adequately assess or mitigate visual harm.

Landscape Management Plan

Given the scale, duration, and rural location of the development, a robust LMP (Landscape Management Plan) is essential to ensure the site is appropriately integrated into the surrounding landscape and managed responsibly throughout its operational life. The lack of such a plan raises the following concerns:

Visual Impact and Landscape Character

The BESS compound includes industrial infrastructure such as battery containers, acoustic fencing, and concrete pads.

Without a landscape strategy, these features risk degrading the rural character of the area and impacting views from nearby public rights of way and residential properties.

1 Ecological and Biodiversity Management

The site offers opportunities for habitat creation and biodiversity net gain.

An LMP is needed to ensure long-term maintenance of hedgerows, wildflower meadows, and ecological corridors.

2 Long-Term Stewardship and Monitoring

The facility is expected to operate for up to 40 years.

A landscape management framework is needed to guide maintenance, replacement planting, and adaptive management over time.

3 Decommissioning and Restoration

At the end of the site's life, the land should be restored to its original or improved condition.

An LMP ensures this process is planned and achievable.

4 Policy and Planning Context

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) requires developments to protect and enhance the natural environment.

Local planning policies (e.g. NE2, SP12) emphasise the importance of landscape character and green infrastructure.

The absence of an LMP undermines compliance with these policies and weakens the credibility of the application's mitigation strategy.

BESS

There are serious concerns regarding the interpretation and justification of the benefits of the BESS as presented in the Planning, Design and Access Statement.

1. Overstatement of BESS as "Essential Infrastructure"

The application repeatedly refers to BESS as "essential infrastructure" and implies this designation elevates its planning status. However, the National Policy Statement for Energy (EN-1, 2023) does not automatically confer "essential" status on all BESS projects. Paragraph 3.3.20 of EN-1 refers to

the importance of flexibility, but does not override local planning considerations such as landscape sensitivity or agricultural land value.

Reference: Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (2023), Overarching National Policy Statement for Energy (EN-1), §3.3.20.

2. Misleading Claims About Carbon Reduction

The Planning Statement conflates the role of BESS with direct carbon reduction. BESS does not generate renewable energy nor directly reduce emissions; it enables better integration of renewables. This distinction is critical and should be clearly acknowledged.

Reference: International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), *Electricity Storage and Renewables: Costs and Markets to 2030*, 2017 – “Storage does not directly reduce emissions but facilitates higher penetration of renewables.”

3 Unacceptable risks to public safety, environmental protection, and regulatory compliance.

Fire Safety and Suppression Deficiencies

The proposed water supply (1,900 litres/minute) is inadequate for lithium-ion battery fires, which can burn for 48+ hours.

No firewater storage is included, despite the risk of toxic runoff (e.g. hydrofluoric acid) contaminating nearby watercourses.

Historical BESS fires (Liverpool 2020, Tilbury 2025) demonstrate the severity and complexity of such incidents.

The safety plan relies on generic hazard logs, future testing, and manufacturer assurances—but no specific equipment has been selected, and no emergency response plan (ERP) has been finalised. The fire suppression system is described in theory only, with no confirmed design or operational testing.

Battery Type Not Specified

The battery chemistry (e.g. LFP vs NMC) has not been confirmed.

Fire risk, spacing, suppression, and environmental impact vary significantly by type.

UL9540A testing and fire rating compliance cannot be validated without this information.

Cooling system details are also missing.

Operational Safety and Emergency Response

No Emergency Response Plan (ERP) has been submitted.

Safety management structure is undefined.

Fire service access to remote areas of the site is obstructed by multiple gates and long distances.

His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) report of 11th February 2025 of the Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue Service found that ‘Responding to fires and other emergencies required improvement’.

Environmental Risks

The site lies over a Principal Chalk Aquifer and is adjacent to the River Beane.

In the event of fire, toxic gases (e.g. hydrogen fluoride) and contaminated firewater runoff pose risks to soil, watercourses, and nearby communities.

The containment system (penstock and lined attenuation) is untested and unverified for real-world fire scenarios.

Environment Agency Consultation Response

The EA’s response dated 15 September 2025 identifies:

Groundwater vulnerability
Firewater containment risk
Surface water drainage concerns
Unconfirmed battery chemistry

Despite these risks, the EA issued no objection, conditional on future planning conditions. This defers resolution of critical risks until after consent is granted, introducing uncertainty and potential non-compliance and is wholly unacceptable.

Proximity to Residential Areas

The BESS compound is only 480 yards from Cumberlow Green.

Other homes are within 0.4–0.45km.

Smoke plumes from fire events could affect residents under prevailing wind conditions.

Noise Impact Assessment Gaps

The BESS, substation, and transformers will generate continuous noise day and night, yet the assessment assumes no tonal or impulsive characteristics without real-world verification.

No rating corrections were applied, despite the scale and proximity of equipment to residential areas.

There is limited monitoring locations and no façade or weather data.

The short monitoring period (5 days) fails to capture seasonal variation.

Community Exposure:

The application lacks enforceable noise limits. In similar developments, the absence of such conditions has left communities vulnerable to excessive noise, particularly at night. This omission raises serious concerns about long-term impacts on residents.

The proposal introduces continuous industrial noise into a quiet rural setting, threatening residential amenity and contravening planning policies aimed at protecting health and well-being.

Flood Risk and Drainage Concerns

Parts of the site lie within Flood Zones 2 and 3, yet the proposal includes critical infrastructure (BESS and substation) in areas with moderate groundwater and surface water risk.

The Flood Risk Assessment admits that infiltration drainage is untested, and fallback to watercourse discharge is contingent on future permeability testing.

Surface Water and Runoff:

The solar panels may increase runoff velocity, risking soil erosion and overland flow into sensitive areas.

The attenuation volumes for BESS and substation are based on assumed discharge rates, not confirmed ground conditions.

Infrastructure Vulnerability

The drainage strategy depends on lined granular matrices, cut-off valves, and swales, but these are not yet designed or tested.

The plan lacks guarantees of containment for firewater or chemical spills, especially during exceedance events.

Safety Classification and Risk

The worst-case risks are classified as Class C (Limited Tolerable), primarily affecting maintenance personnel.

However, public safety and environmental risks are understated, especially given the lack of detailed design and operational testing.

No breakdown of solar vs BESS capacity.

If BESS exceeds 50MWh, HSC is legally required under the Planning (Hazardous Substances) Regulations 2015.

There is no evidence of HSC application or HSE consultation.

National Regulatory Gap

The UK currently lacks formal safety standards for BESS.

A moratorium on BESS approvals is recommended until national regulations are established.

Given the unresolved safety, environmental, and regulatory issues, the planning application be refused.

Traffic safety, public amenity disruption

1. Construction Traffic Volume and Timing

The proposal anticipates over 4,000 HGV movements during a 12–18 month construction period, with peak activity reaching 40 HGV trips per day. Construction hours (08:00–18:00 weekdays, 08:00–13:00 Saturdays) overlap with school bus travel times, increasing the risk of conflict with vulnerable road users. The A507 is a designated school bus route, yet the application and supporting documents fail to acknowledge or address this risk.

This directly conflicts with:

Policy T1 – Assessment of Transport Matters, which requires that development must not lead to highway safety problems or unacceptable impacts on the highway network.

Policy SP6 – Sustainable Transport, which requires safe, efficient, and accessible transport infrastructure for all users, including schoolchildren.

2. Road Safety and Suitability

The A507 and surrounding rural roads are narrow, winding, and poorly suited to large construction vehicles. Visibility is limited in several areas due to dense vegetation, and the proposal lacks sufficient detail on how these constraints will be managed safely. Swept path analysis and visibility splays are referenced, but do not fully mitigate the risks posed by high-frequency HGV traffic on unsuitable roads.

This raises concerns under:

Policy T1, which emphasises avoiding highway safety problems.

Policy SP6, which requires infrastructure to be safe and accessible for all users.

3. Public Safety and Amenity Impacts

Increased HGV traffic poses a significant safety risk to pedestrians, cyclists, equestrians, and schoolchildren. Noise, dust, and visual intrusion during construction will negatively affect local residents and users of public rights of way (PRoWs), especially Clothall 019 and 020.

The proposal lacks sufficient mitigation for early morning and peak-hour disruption, particularly for the conservation village Cottered which all construction traffic will pass through.

This is contrary to:

Policy D3 – Protecting Living Conditions, which requires that development does not cause unacceptable harm to living conditions.

4. Security Fencing and Wildlife Movement

The site will be enclosed by extensive security fencing, including:

2.4m mesh fencing around solar arrays

4m acoustic barriers and palisade fencing around the BESS

3.4m Cat2 mesh fencing around the substation

While scrapes under fences are proposed for small mammals, there is no evidence of mitigation for larger wildlife or connectivity across fenced areas. The site is frequently visited by a substantial deer herd. The fencing will fragment habitats, impede wildlife movement, and increase the risk of animals entering roads, particularly the A507, as they seek alternative routes. This poses a road safety hazard, especially during construction when traffic volumes are high.

5. Cumulative Impact

The adjacent Beane Solar Farm may be constructed concurrently, potentially doubling traffic volumes to 80 HGVs/day. This cumulative impact is not adequately addressed in the traffic management plan or environmental assessments, and could significantly worsen road safety and amenity impacts.

This is inconsistent with:

Policy NE12 – Renewable and Low Carbon Energy Development, which requires assessment of cumulative impacts on the transport network and amenity of residents.

The proposed development presents unacceptable risks to highway safety, public amenity, school transport operations, and wildlife movement. The lack of specific mitigation for the school bus route on the A507, combined with the scale of construction traffic, the limitations of local infrastructure, and the restrictive fencing design, renders the proposal unsuitable in its current form.

Biodiversity and Ecology.

There are significant and inadequately mitigated impacts to biodiversity and ecology, as evidenced in the submitted Ecological Impact Assessment (EclA) and associated documents. The proposal conflicts with national and local planning policy, including the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF 2024 para) and the North Hertfordshire Local Plan, particularly Policy NE4.

1. Loss of Habitat for Red-Listed and Priority Bird Species

The site supports 29 skylark territories, 2 yellow wagtail territories, and winter foraging by starling (flock of 380).

All three species are red-listed and Section 41 priority species under the NERC Act.

The proposed development will result in permanent loss of nesting and foraging habitat.

Compensation via tussocky grassland is untested and may not replicate ecological function of arable land.

2. High Bat Activity and Risk of Disturbance

6+ bat species recorded, including common pipistrelle, *Myotis* spp., serotine, and barbastelle.

Static detector 1 recorded 6,941 calls in May, indicating intense bat activity near ancient woodland.

Research (Tinsley et al., 2023) shows solar panels reduce bat foraging and commuting.

Proposed buffers (10–12 m) and lighting mitigation may be insufficient to prevent disruption.

3. Proximity to Ancient Woodland and Veteran Trees

Coldash and Rydal's Woods are ancient woodlands and Local Wildlife Sites (LWS).
Veteran tree T107 lies within the zone of influence.
Risk of pollution, noise, and light disturbance during construction.
Buffers of 15 m are proposed but may not adequately protect irreplaceable habitats.

4. Hedgerow and Ditch Network Fragmentation

The site contains 7.99 km of hedgerows and 1.92 km of ditches, many of which are Habitats of Principal Importance (HPI).
Ditches are in poor condition and vulnerable to construction-related pollution.
Hedgerows are at risk from dust, litter, and indirect disturbance.

5. Inadequate Survey Coverage and Data Gaps

Pond P8, located 5 m from the site, was not surveyed for GCN due to access issues.
Rapid Risk Assessment suggests legal risk if GCN are present.
Veteran tree and badger sett visibility was limited; precautionary assumptions made.

6. Overreliance on Post-Development Management

Many mitigation measures (e.g. fencing scrapes, lighting plans, habitat condition) depend on long-term management.
There is no clear enforcement mechanism or guarantees of ecological success.

The proposed development poses moderate to major risks to Important Ecological Features (IEFs) at local, county, and national levels, and the proposed mitigation is insufficiently robust. It fails to demonstrate that biodiversity net gain will be meaningful, measurable, and enforceable.

Historic Environment

1. Inadequate Archaeological Evaluation

The HEDBA relies solely on desk-based research and geophysical survey results. No intrusive fieldwork (e.g. trial trenching) has been undertaken, despite the identification of anomalies consistent with prehistoric and Roman settlement activity, including ring ditches and enclosures. The site is on top of the route of the Baldock to Braughing Roman Road and contains findspots of a Late Bronze Age hoard and Roman artefacts.

This approach does not meet the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF 2023, Section 16, Paragraph 207), which states that planning decisions should be based on the significance of the heritage asset and that the level of detail should be proportionate to the asset's importance. North Herts Local Plan Policy HE4 (Archaeology) also requires that developers submit an appropriate desk-based assessment and, where justified, an archaeological field evaluation.

The potential for significant archaeological remains warrants further investigation prior to determination and the absence of field evaluation undermines the robustness of the heritage impact assessment.

2. Harm to Designated Heritage Assets

The development lies adjacent to the Site of Cumberlow Manor House Scheduled Monument and within the wider setting of the Grade II* listed Cromer Windmill. While the assessment concludes "less than substantial harm," it acknowledges that the development will alter the rural character that contributes to the significance of these assets.

Section 66 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 requires special regard to the desirability of preserving the setting of listed buildings. NPPF 2023 (Section 16, Paragraphs 212-215) states that great weight should be given to the asset's conservation, and that any harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the scheme. North Herts Local Plan Policy SP13 and Policy HE1 reinforce the need to protect and enhance the historic environment and the settings of designated heritage assets.

The proposal will erode the setting and appreciation of these heritage assets, particularly in combination with other solar developments in the area. The cumulative impact has not been adequately addressed.

3. Cumulative Impact

The assessment references the Beane Valley Solar scheme (Ref: 3/24/2245/FUL), which also affects the setting of Cromer Windmill. The combined effect of multiple solar developments risks degrading the historic landscape character and the visual coherence of the area.

NPPF 2023 (Section 16, Paragraph 207) and North Herts Local Plan Policy SP13 require consideration of the wider implications of development on the historic environment, including cumulative impacts

The cumulative impact on heritage assets has been understated. A more comprehensive assessment is required to evaluate the broader implications of solar development in this sensitive landscape.

4. Risk to Historic Hedgerows and Boundaries

The hedgerows along the western boundary of the site are identified as “important” under the Hedgerow Regulations 1997. These features are of historic significance and contribute to the understanding of land division and use.

North Herts Local Plan Policy SP13 and Policy HE4 require the protection and retention of historically significant landscape features.

The protection and retention of these hedgerows must be guaranteed. The current proposal lacks sufficient detail on how these features will be safeguarded during construction and operation.

5. Underestimation of Archaeological Significance

The assessment often concludes that remains are of “no more than local significance.” This may be premature without excavation. Features like ring ditches and Roman enclosures could be of regional or national importance, especially near a Roman road.

NPPF 2023 (Section 16, Paragraph 207) and North Herts Local Plan Policy HE4 require that the significance of heritage assets be properly assessed and that adequate information is provided to inform decision-making.

The significance of archaeological remains may have been underestimated due to the lack of intrusive investigation.

Community Consultation

Despite claims of extensive consultation, the documents reveal that community involvement was limited, poorly attended, and did not influence key decisions. The process does not meet the

standards of meaningful engagement expected under the North Hertfordshire District Council's Community Consultation Strategy (SP1 and D1) or the principles of inclusive planning outlined in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF para 132 and 134).

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF 2024)

Paragraph 132: Planning processes should be shaped by early, proportionate and effective engagement with communities.

Paragraph 134: Planning decisions should reflect local views and concerns.

North Hertfordshire Local Plan

Policy SP1 – Sustainable Development: Requires development to reflect community needs and priorities.

Policy D1 – Sustainable Design: Encourages community-led design and responsiveness to local context.

1. Limited Local Engagement

Only 12 properties were contacted directly in the initial phase.

Of these, only 3 responded, and just 2 participated in face-to-face meetings.

No evidence of broader outreach to affected villages beyond the 1km radius.

2. Poor Attendance at Public Events

The webinar had only 2 attendees.

The public exhibition reached 68 people, which is low given the scale and impact of the proposal.

The anonymous survey received just 16 responses, with only 3 (19%) in favour of the development.

3. Lack of Parish Council Engagement

No response was received from Clothall with Luffenhall Parish Council, despite being directly affected.

No evidence of engagement with other nearby parish councils (e.g. Weston, Cottered, Rushden).

4. No Evidence of Design Changes Based on Community Feedback

While the SCI claims some fields were removed from the solar layout, this was based on feedback from only two individuals.

Broader concerns raised—such as visual impact, loss of agricultural land, and biodiversity scepticism—were acknowledged but not addressed substantively in the design.

5. Misleading Presentation of Support

The SCI highlights general public support for solar energy (77% nationally), but only 20% of local respondents supported solar in this location.

This discrepancy is not acknowledged or reconciled in the planning documents.

The consultation process for the Westfield Energy Conservation Park falls short of the standards expected for a development of this scale and sensitivity. The applicant's engagement was limited in scope, poorly attended, and did not result in meaningful design changes. The planning authority should require a revised and expanded community consultation process before determining the application.

Decommissioning Plan

1. Lack of Financial Guarantees

The developer has not provided any financial mechanism—such as a bond, escrow account, or decommissioning fund—to ensure that the site will be properly restored at the end of its operational life. Without a secured financial guarantee, there is a significant risk that the site could be abandoned or left partially restored, especially if ownership changes or the operator ceases trading.

2. Environmental Risks and Restoration Uncertainty

The Environmental Statement fails to assess the environmental risks associated with decommissioning, including:

- Hazardous waste from battery units
- Noise and traffic from removal works
- Fire risk during dismantling of BESS infrastructure
- Impact on biodiversity and soil structure

There is no plan for monitoring or mitigating these risks, nor any commitment to restoring the site to its original ecological condition.

3. Agricultural Land Classification and Soil Recovery

The Agricultural Land Classification report confirms that circa 40% of the site is Best and Most Versatile (BMV) land (Grades 2 and 3a). However:

No soil restoration strategy is provided for the solar array locations or the substation and BESS which will have required regrading to construct.

No assessment of compaction, contamination, or drainage changes is included.

No evidence is given that the land will be viable for arable farming after 40 years of solar and BESS infrastructure.

This undermines the claim that the land will be returned to agricultural use.

4. No Binding or Enforceable Decommissioning Plan

The Environmental Statement proposes a decommissioning plan to be agreed at the end of the 40-year lifespan, which is too late to ensure accountability. There is no:

- Timeline or phasing strategy
- Monitoring or enforcement mechanism
- Stakeholder engagement process

The decommissioning plan is vague, lacks enforceable commitments, and fails to address the environmental and agricultural implications of restoring the site. The Council should require a comprehensive Decommissioning and Restoration Plan, secured by planning condition and backed by financial guarantees, before granting permission. This plan must include detailed restoration methods, environmental safeguards, and a mechanism to ensure compliance regardless of future ownership.

In light of the extensive and unresolved concerns outlined above—including risks to agricultural land, public safety, environmental protection, biodiversity, heritage assets, and planning policy compliance—it is clear that the proposed development is unsuitable. The planning authority must not proceed with approval based on incomplete evidence, deferred mitigation, and speculative benefits.

I therefore urge North Hertfordshire District Council to REFUSE this application.

I would be grateful if you could confirm receipt of this letter and its upload to the planning portal as my objection.

Yours sincerely,

Morag Phipson
Chequers
Cromer
Stevenage
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