

Weston Parish Council response to Planning Application: 25/01947/FP

Battery Energy Storage System (BESS), ground-mounted solar farm, associated infrastructure, access and landscaping

Land South of A507 near Cumberlow Green, Clothall Road, Clothall.

Weston Parish Council submitted a detailed objection to this application on 23 October 2025. Having reviewed the additional information subsequently submitted by the applicant, the Parish Council maintains its OBJECTION.

The Parish Council acknowledges that additional technical information has now been provided in relation to highways, landscape and cumulative effects, drainage and other matters. Our objection, however, concerned the substantive effects of the development, not simply the absence of documents, and we do not consider that the additional information has demonstrated that those effects are acceptable.

We also note that a new National Planning Policy Framework was published on 17 August 2026 and is now a material consideration in determining the application. The Parish Council recognises that current Policy W3 requires substantial weight to be given to the benefits of renewable and low-carbon energy development. However, those benefits must be weighed against the other national decision-making policies and the development plan. Specifically, they do not remove the requirement to properly assess Green Belt, landscape, agricultural land, highway, heritage, environmental and public-safety impacts.

1. Green Belt and rural location

The Parish Council maintains its objection to development within the Green Belt and to the scale of industrial development proposed across this rural landscape.

Current NPPF Policy GB6 provides that development in the Green Belt is inappropriate unless it falls within one of the categories in Policy GB7. Where development is inappropriate, substantial weight is to be given to the harm caused to the Green Belt, including harm to its openness, and very special circumstances will not exist unless that harm and any other harm are clearly outweighed by other considerations. The Parish Council recognises that, for renewable-energy development, the wider environmental benefits may contribute to very special circumstances, but that does not remove the requirement to undertake that planning balance.

The Parish Council understands that the applicant relies, at least in part, upon the contention that affected Green Belt land constitutes “grey belt”. We therefore request that the officer's assessment expressly identifies which parts of the site are considered to meet the current definition of grey belt and explains how all relevant requirements of Policy GB7 are satisfied. It should not simply be assumed that the renewable-energy benefits render development within the Green Belt acceptable.

The Parish Council continues to consider that the enormous physical extent of solar panels, BESS infrastructure, fencing, tracks and associated development would materially alter the open agricultural character of this part of the countryside and should be assessed cumulatively with other existing, consented and proposed energy development in the area.

2. Landscape, cumulative effects and Cromer Windmill

The Parish Council notes the additional landscape material submitted and the production of further visualisations. However, none of this addresses the salient question as to whether the resulting cumulative landscape and visual effects are acceptable.

The Parish Council remains particularly concerned about the transformation of a large-scale, predominantly agricultural landscape by extensive arrays of panels, security fencing and significant energy infrastructure, including the relationship with the adjoining/proposed Beane Valley development.

The site's undulating character means that screening cannot be considered solely in terms of planting immediately around individual components. The Planning Authority should assess the experience of the development from the surrounding network of roads and public rights of way and the cumulative change to the wider landscape character over the lifetime of the development.

The Parish Council also maintains its concern regarding the setting and significance of the Grade II* listed Cromer Windmill. Our concern is specifically the effect of extensive industrial energy development upon the contribution which the surrounding open agricultural landscape makes to the significance and appreciation of this important heritage asset. The officer's report should identify the degree of any heritage harm and undertake the appropriate statutory and policy balance.

3. New and unresolved highway matters

Highway matters were not a principal ground of Weston Parish Council's October 2025 objection. However, the information and Highway Authority comments submitted subsequently raise new material concerns which the Parish Council considers should be addressed before determination.

Hertfordshire County Council's April 2026 highway response described the proposed primary access location and design as substandard when assessed against the scale and forecast traffic generation of the development. It identified several significant highway-safety issues and indicated that relocation of the access further south onto Cromer Heath could be considered.

The applicant has elected to retain the existing access and has subsequently submitted a Stage 1 Road Safety Audit, Designer's Response, revised visibility information and swept-path analysis. These documents are intended to address HCC's concerns, but the Parish Council considers that the acceptability of the access should be established by the Highway Authority itself rather than inferred from the applicant's Technical Note.

Of particular concern is the now-defined proposal for temporary traffic signals on the constrained section of the A507. The August 2026 Highways Technical Note states that these signals would restrict movements through the narrow section to one direction at a time and would remain in place for the full duration of the construction period. It also states that the proposals are to be provided to the Highway Network Management Team for consideration and agreement and that the Construction Traffic Management Plan will subsequently be updated following review and acceptance of the signage proposals.

This represents a material construction-phase impact that was not apparent when Weston Parish Council submitted its original response.

Before determination, the Parish Council therefore requests that the Planning Authority is satisfied as to the anticipated duration of the signal-controlled operation; likely queue lengths and delays on the A507; the hours and frequency of construction HGV movements; the possibility of traffic displacement onto unsuitable local roads through surrounding settlements; the acceptability of the retained eastern access following the Road Safety Audit;

and the agreement of the Highway Network Management Team to the proposed traffic-management arrangements.

The final Construction Traffic Management Plan, incorporating the agreed arrangements, should in the Parish Council's view be available for assessment **before** permission is granted rather than the acceptability of these potentially significant impacts being left unresolved.

This approach is consistent with current NPPF Policies TR3 and TR6. Policy TR3 requires significant adverse effects on highway capacity, congestion or safety to be mitigated to an acceptable degree, while TR6 expressly applies the test of severe network impact or unacceptable highway-safety impact to both the construction phase and completed development.

4. Best and Most Versatile agricultural land

The Parish Council maintains its concern regarding the extensive use of productive agricultural land.

For clarity, our objection should be understood as relating to the substantial amount of Best and Most Versatile agricultural land affected, rather than depending upon whether BMV constitutes a numerical majority of the entire application site.

Current NPPF Policy N2 requires the quality of agricultural land, including BMV land and its grade, to be taken into account and states that, where significant development of agricultural land is necessary, areas of poorer-quality land should be used where possible.

The Parish Council therefore asks the Authority to establish clearly the amount of Grades 2 and 3a land affected, the weight afforded to that loss of agricultural production over the operational lifetime of the development, and whether the applicant has adequately demonstrated why land of poorer agricultural quality could not reasonably accommodate a greater proportion of the scheme.

5. Drainage, firewater and protection of the River Beane catchment

The Parish Council acknowledges that revised flood-risk and drainage information has now been submitted and that the Lead Local Flood Authority was reconsulted on 1 September 2026.

Our original concern nevertheless remains highly relevant. In relation to the BESS, it is important to distinguish between arrangements for ordinary surface-water drainage and arrangements for the containment and management of potentially contaminated water arising from a battery fire or other emergency.

The Parish Council requests that, before determination, the Planning Authority is satisfied that the proposed arrangements demonstrate an adequate design fire scenario. This should include the reasonably foreseeable volume of firefighting water, the means by which contaminated water would be isolated from the ordinary drainage system, the capacity and means by which such water would be retained on site, and how uncontrolled discharge to groundwater, watercourses and ultimately the River Beane catchment would be prevented.

This concern has additional policy relevance under the current NPPF. **Policy P3 requires development to assess and mitigate unacceptable effects upon water quality and specifically identifies chalk streams as sensitive water bodies requiring particular consideration.**

The Parish Council would expect the conclusions of the Lead Local Flood Authority, Environment Agency where relevant, and Fire and Rescue Service to be clearly addressed in the officer's assessment.

6. BESS safety and emergency planning

The Parish Council continues to consider the scale of the proposed BESS to warrant careful site-specific assessment of fire, thermal runaway, toxic emissions, contaminated firewater and emergency response.

For clarity, the Parish Council does not suggest that Control of Major Accident Hazard Regulations 2015 (COMAH) necessarily applies merely because this is a large BESS. Our earlier reference to COMAH should instead be understood as seeking confirmation of the regulatory status of the installation and assurance that all relevant major-hazard and hazardous-substances requirements have been considered.

Irrespective of the applicability of any separate regulatory regime, planning remains concerned with whether the proposed development can safely and appropriately be accommodated at this location. Current NPPF Policy P5 requires development to anticipate and address natural and man-made hazards and provides specific policy for uses capable of posing hazards to their surroundings.

The Parish Council therefore asks that the Planning Authority satisfies itself, on the basis of current specialist evidence, that there is an adequate site-specific emergency response strategy, appropriate emergency-service access and water supply, satisfactory separation and containment arrangements, and adequate measures to prevent serious off-site environmental consequences.

7. Public rights of way and community amenity

The Parish Council maintains its concern regarding the effect upon users of the public rights-of-way network.

The issue is not merely whether the rights of way remain legally open, but the quality of the experience of those routes following development. Extensive fencing, solar arrays and other infrastructure have the potential to transform routes presently experienced within open countryside into corridors through or alongside an industrial-scale energy development.

Current NPPF Policy TR8 requires development proposals to **protect and enhance** the public-rights-of-way network.

The Parish Council therefore asks the Authority to consider the width and treatment of corridors, setbacks from paths, fencing, landscape mitigation, cumulative visual effects and the effects of any glint and glare upon walkers and horse riders, rather than assessing the issue solely on the basis that the legal routes are retained.

8. Noise

The Parish Council also maintains its concern regarding operational noise from the BESS and associated plant.

The Parish Council requests confirmation that the assessment has used representative background sound levels and the actual proposed or appropriately conservative worst-case equipment specification, and that it considers the simultaneous and cumulative operation of relevant BESS, inverter, transformer, cooling and other plant.

Any permission should secure appropriate operational noise limits at the nearest noise-sensitive receptors and require those limits to be capable of being demonstrated and enforced throughout the life of the development.

Conclusion

Weston Parish Council recognises the important benefits associated with renewable and low-carbon energy generation and has taken those benefits into account. Its objection is not an objection to renewable energy in principle, but to the scale, location and cumulative impacts of this particular proposal.

The additional information submitted since October 2025 addresses some of the previous information gaps but does not, in the Parish Council's view, demonstrate that the identified Green Belt, landscape, agricultural-land, heritage, highway, environmental, public-safety and amenity impacts are acceptable.

Furthermore, the later highway submissions introduce a significant new issue: the proposed use of temporary signal-controlled alternate traffic on the A507 for the entire construction period, together with a retained access which had previously been identified by the Highway Authority as substandard.

Weston Parish Council therefore maintains its objection to planning application 25/01947/FP and requests that planning permission be refused.

If the Planning Authority is nevertheless minded to approve the application, the Parish Council requests that no decision is taken until the latest responses of the relevant specialist consultees have been received and considered, particularly Hertfordshire County Council Highways and the Lead Local Flood Authority, and until the outstanding construction traffic-management arrangements have been agreed.