

## **Motcombe Parish Council**

### **Planning application P/FUL/2021/02046**

#### **Solar farm at Fern Brook (Low Carbon)**

Motcombe Parish Council has voted to **oppose this application**.

Whilst we fully recognise the need for developing green energy sources to replace fossil fuels for power generation, the siting of these facilities needs to be appropriate, especially in rural areas. We feel that the fields at Fern Brook are not appropriate for a large-scale solar farm.

**Policy 22** in the **North Dorset District Plan** (2016) provides the main framework to support this decision, as the draft Dorset Council Local Plan has yet to be adopted.

In addition we have also taken into account:

- the Landscape Sensitivity to Wind and Solar Energy in N. Dorset (LUC/Dorset CC 2014) analysis, which concludes that this area is not appropriate for large scale wind or solar farms;
- the Motcombe Neighbourhood Plan;
- the response from Motcombe Parish Council to the Dorset Council draft Local Plan, in which we stated our objection to a possible siting of a wind farm in that area, citing reasons similar to those outlined below.

**Policy 22 (Renewable and Low Carbon Energy National Policy)** includes sub-frameworks for assessing the impact on: Landscape and Visual, Biodiversity, Historic Environment, Water Environment, Transport and Access, and, Noise and Vibration. We believe that this application does not meet the criteria for acceptance for Landscape and Visual Impact, Historic Environment, Transport – and requiring further evidence to prove otherwise, Noise & Vibration.

#### **Visual impact**

The proposed solar farm impacts visually from surrounding vantage points, including a nearby footpath leading downhill to meet the bridleway from Coppleridge. The Infrastructure and Delivery submission in response to the application identifies that the landscape photos do not include potential visual impact from vantage points, apart from the nearby footpath, and requests additional screening to be considered before a recommendation can be made. However, we contend that it will require growth of some years before screening is really affective. In addition, the popular Motcombe-Gillingham bridleway, also part of the White Hart Link circular route, passes round the sites perimeter on two sides creating a significant impact to those enjoying the local countryside.

#### **Historic impact**

The site sits within the boundary of the Gillingham Royal Forest. Dorset Wildlife Trust have secured considerable funding from the National Lottery to increase awareness of this historic area and improve access to it. In the Motcombe Neighbourhood Plan we support this initiative, being a key stakeholder as Motcombe parish lies within the old boundary of the forest area. We believe that this solar farm is incompatible with this project's aims, and it lies near to the two key historic vestiges of the ancient Kingscourt Palace listed site, and the Park Pale.

## **Highways**

Whilst their submission on the application has focussed primarily on the effects of the building phase, we are concerned about the impact of 2-3 months of delays on the heavily used B3081 whilst cabling work takes place to link the site to Shaftesbury sub-station at Hawkers Hill. Not only will this cause delays and congestion on this busy, and dangerous road, it will lead to rat-running through the parish using Motcombe's inadequate rural road network. In addition, Dorset Council spent considerable monies on resurfacing much of the B3081 in this area in recent years, which is also subject to surface water flooding. We are therefore also concerned about the condition of the surface after the work has taken place.

## **Noise and Vibration**

Whilst we have been assured that noise levels will be minimal, Environmental Health in their submission request a noise report be prepared before a decision is made. Whilst there are only two dwellings near the site, their concerns about excess noise need to be addressed, plus there is the impact on bridleway users, including any possible effect on horses. We therefore support the recommendation of Environmental Health.

## **Motcombe Neighbourhood Plan**

Whilst the current Plan did not address the possible future impact of green energy schemes (demonstrating the urgency of the climate change in the past 2 years), residents raised concerns about the future threat to the rural nature of the parish, lying between the two neighbouring towns of Gillingham and Shaftesbury, in particular the plans for the expansion of Gillingham's southern edge which could lead to Motcombe losing its separate identity and become joined to Gillingham. We see this solar farm proposal as 'urban' infill which could encourage other developments in adjacent fields, leading to Motcombe losing its separate rural parish ambience. We have also raised this concern in our response to the draft Dorset Council Local Plan as it includes other potential threats to this status. As mentioned before, in our Plan we fully embraced the Gillingham Royal Forest project, of which we are a key stakeholder.

## **Land Agricultural quality**

We question whether the whole of the site is Grade 4 land as it would appear that some parts of it may in fact be Grade 3a (<https://environment.data.gov.uk/DefraDataDownload/?mapService=NE/AgriculturalLandClassificationProvisionalEngland&Mode=spatial>). This appears to contradict the assessment conducted by the applicant (Soils and Agricultural Quality of Land at Fern Brook Solar Farm Gillingham). If this is the case, we feel this application is unacceptable as these parcels of higher grade agricultural land would no longer be available for cultivation'.

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**24-08-21**