

Berrington Solar Farm Inquiry Oral Representation Transcript

My name is John Dryburgh, [REDACTED] to the proposed solar farm, and referenced in the appeal. I am fully in favour of renewable energy including solar, in the right locations, having consideration to the balance of other societal demands; such as food security, rural amenity and tourism amongst others.

I appreciate this opportunity to speak at the inception of the Inquiry.

We are about to embark on a five day, in depth, no doubt at times legalistic analysis of the proposals in front of us. I therefore propose to be as brief as possible, to the point, and at a high level.

Having spent much of my career engaged in the commercial development of community infrastructure, I recognise that it can be a challenging environment, and my comments aim to be objective.

At a fundamental level this solar farm proposal is, I believe, highly opportunistic. The son in law (who used to live in Berrington) of a landed Baronet joined a solar farm developer listed on the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange as a development manager. The Father in Law owned extensive tracts of land in Shropshire, both in Berrington and elsewhere, where he lives. His land at Berrington, is contract farmed by others, and there are no local employees, buildings, machinery or infrastructure associated with the enterprise.

It is then established that there is a grid connection available locally to the land holding, and proposals for a 44 Hectare solar farm are brought forward. This is in no sense an agricultural diversification, to support a struggling local farm enterprise, or indeed benefiting the local community. It's 100% a commercial enterprise.

I believe it will be shown, supporting the refusal at planning, that the chosen site is materially, probably fatally, compromised. This in relation to ecology, BMV land, visual amenity and historic assets. It is the wrong site.

It is worth noting here, extending slightly the Appellants 3km sequential test connection distance from the grid to a more usual 5km, that there are 11,000 Hectares of land in the grid catchment. The Appellant will seek to suggest that none of this land is more suitable than the chosen site, and sites close to grid connections are like hen's teeth. I hope that it will be demonstrated that there must be materially more suitable sites for the scheme, if only an effort had been made to find them. The existing very local Boreton (and indeed Berriewood) schemes demonstrate much more appropriate siting, that address all the concerns with the site being considered here.

Indeed (noting that the Appellants sequential test sites are in majority part much larger than the appeal site), I carried out an analysis of a 44ha area within their location DS8. It was quite

simple to establish a red line around a site that addressed all of the Appellants reasons for it's unsuitability:

- On substantially flat grade 3 land
- No intervisibility with the existing Boreton solar farm
- No intervisibility with, or to & from heritage assets. Remote from all bar one house
- Outwith the public right of way, and screened from it
- No SSSI/Ramsar proximity

I understand we are likely to see a planning application from a third party, for a further major solar farm within this DS8 red line in early course, which I would fully support.

Shropshire already hosts multiple solar sites, there are two within a mile of this site, and as noted we expect another very local scheme to be brought forward shortly. There have been over 40 applications for major solar farms in the County in recent years, all of which had grid connections. I am aware of a series of further schemes in the planning stages. A local contract farmer friend advised last week that he had been notified of 3 potential schemes on land he farms, amounting to many hundreds of acres - he was concerned about his future livelihood. Shropshire is already in the top 5% of English Counties for renewable energy provision.

In closing, I wanted briefly to turn to community engagement and community benefits. The Appellant has sought to suggest that they fulfilled their obligations on community engagement. I would respectfully disagree. A community engagement exercise was commenced, at the instigation of the community, not the Appellant or indeed the landowner, who has been absent. However the engagement process was ended abruptly, and unilaterally by the Appellant before the community's concerns were meaningfully addressed. This has certainly not endeared the community to it's potential new neighbour.

In relation to community benefits, there are widespread precedents that recognise that the immediately adjacent communities to solar farms, should be financially compensated for hosting them. This given that a level of harm is inevitable, and there are otherwise no local benefits. I, along with another member of the community engaged with Econergies Development Manager at the time of the initial application, to discuss a community benefits package (to be ratified by the Parish Council). A meeting was held, and promises made by Econergy to come back with proposals. Nothing further was heard from them, despite a series of requests and offers of further meetings.

I would however note that, again at the communities instigation, a community benefits offer was received from the Appellant around 10 days ago. Altruistic or not, this offer is acknowledged. However it's current terms do not, in my view, adequately compensate the directly affected parties. We are advised that there will be no formal undertaking that it will be delivered in any case, prior to the Appeal being determined.

In the event that the scheme gains consent at appeal, I believe it would be entirely inequitable for it to proceed, without a meaningful community benefits package being agreed prior; given the harms it will result in for the communities of Berrington & Cantlop.

I think it's fair to say community engagement in general has been poorly handled by the Appellant. The lodgement of the appeal on the last possible day, after many months of preparation, was perhaps typical, putting both Shropshire Council and the Rule 6 Party at a significant disadvantage.

The Appellants handling of the application, and now the progression of the appeal, hasn't felt professional. It feels more like seeing what is the minimum we can get away with, with attendant last minute efforts to backsolve material problems inherent in an ill considered proposal.

I hope that the Inquiry will lead to the refusal of Planning Consent being upheld.

Thank you for your time in hearing this statement.

