Green Southwell initial response to the proposals for Halloughton Solar Farm

Background

Comments have been invited on the proposal to develop a solar farm in Halloughton capable of generating 50MW, covering 107 acres. This will generate enough renewable power to generate the equivalent annual energy needs of around 12,209 homes and will not require subsidies as the costs of solar PV have fallen 90% since 2009.

Full details are available here, and comments should be submitted by 5pm on Sunday 24th May 2020.

Newark and Sherwood District Council and Southwell Town Council have both declared a Climate Emergency, and recognise the urgent need to decarbonise our society. To deliver this we need to reduce demand significantly and switch remaining energy supplies to renewable sources.

The following sections cover issues raised by members of Green Southwell, a local group of citizens concerned about the health of our planet. We are currently seeking charitable status in order to support the sustainable development of the town and its surroundings. We value our green and pleasant landscape but we also recognise the urgency of switching to decarbonised energy sources if we are to retain the climate that allows it to flourish.

Our recommendations:

1. Include natural flood risk management measures, in consultation with the Trent Rivers Trust, Nottinghamshire County Council, National Flood Forum and Southwell Flood Forum. into the development of the land to mitigate current and future flood risk to Southwell.
2. An independent assessment of the agricultural grade of the land.
3. Newark and Sherwood District Council (NSDC) to develop the potential for renewable energy generation on brownfield sites.
4. The growth of natural screening to protect visual amenity and the retention and enhancement of wildlife corridors alongside rights of way and along other existing hedgelines.
5. This should join other local renewable energy developments by actively supporting the sustainable development of local communities by donating a proportion of revenue to local initiatives that reduce energy demand, enhance biodiversity and build community resilience.

Flooding

Southwell has been significantly impacted by surface flooding, most significantly when Potwell Dyke burst its banks in July 2013 after two months-worth of rain fell in the town in just 30 minutes. Road closures continue to follow significant rainfall, and such heavy rain is expected to happen with more power and frequency as the climate changes.

It is noted on the proposal that the entire Solar Farm's site is situated with Flood Zone 1, the area at least risk of flooding.The concern is not whether the site is at risk of flooding but the effect that it could have on the catchment area that channels rainfall towards the town. Southwell sits in a bowl, and surface water run-off from the site of this proposed solar farm flows directly into Westhorpe dumble and Potwell Dyke.

Some flood mitigation measures are planned for the town, following a detailed study by Nottinghamshire County Council, the lead flood authority. In addition, natural flood risk management measures have been installed in the catchment area around the town including leaky barriers, earth bunds as well as online and offline storage ponds. These temporarily attenuate water during high flow events and were shown to work effectively and help with flattening the peak flow during the heavy rains in October and November last year and February of this year. However, flooding still occurred, resulting in the closure of Nottingham Road at times and the climate science predicts that rainfall could continue to become heavier at times.

We therefore ask that natural flood risk management measures are incorporated into the landscaping of the site, in consultation with the Trent Rivers Trust, Nottinghamshire County Council, National Flood Forum and Southwell Flood Forum.

Land use

Members support the development of renewable energy systems, but there is a general preference for use of rooftops and brownfield sites for solar PV. Some stated a preference for wind turbines which have a minimal footprint on greenfield sites.

The entire site has been assessed as Grade 4 agricultural land which does not form Best and Most Versatile Land. According to gov.uk this land is "mainly suited to grass with occasional arable crops (for example cereals and forage crops) the yields of which are variable. In moist climates, yields of grass may be moderate to high but there may be difficulties using the land. The grade also includes arable land that is very dry because of drought."

However, we have seen claims that this is Grade 1 farmland, which would have a very different and detrimental impact on the ability to maintain a sustainable local food supply. Gov.uk describes Grade 1 land as “Land with no or very minor limitations. A very wide range of agricultural and horticultural crops can be grown and commonly includes top fruit, soft fruit, salad crops and winter harvested vegetables. Yields are high and less variable than on land of lower quality.”

This development will cover a significant area of farmland (this is not defined in the proposal), which currently appears to be used for arable crops, and the developer says that the land will be used for grazing sheep to maintain the grassland underneath the solar panels.

We understand that grassland beneath solar PV can provide a useful natural habitat as it is not subject to intensive farming. Soil health could improve and grass may grow longer with deeper roots, this improves soil structure and water absorption reducing the speed of runoff water. We would like this considered when planning grassland maintenance by sheep.

In summary, there is a tension here between the need to build sustainable local food supply chains and the need to develop supplies of renewable energy. The big picture requires us, as a society, to rapidly rethink and reduce our energy demand, and there is the potential for nature to thrive alongside renewable energy systems, but for this project our concern is the different assessments of the agricultural quality of the land. We would therefore like to understand the independence of the assessor who graded the land, and whether this is checked by the planning officers.

We would like NSDC to develop a plan for the use of brownfield sites that provide an opportunity for community-owned solar PV farms, and to promote the installation of solar PV on rooftops, to minimise the impact of solar PV on the green environment.

Community Benefit

The proposal notes that the Public Rights of Way which pass through the site will be retained and unaffected by the proposals. As this is a development on a greenfield site we would like to see plans for the growth of natural screening to protect visual amenity and the retention and enhancement of wildlife corridors alongside rights of way and along other existing hedgelines.

Finally, development of renewable energy will only deliver Net Zero if the UK concurrently reduces demand. Other renewable energy developments in the area have provided a percentage of their revenue to support social and environmental projects in their local host communities. In the development of the Hockerton wind turbine this was seen as a thank you to the village for acting as hosts for the development, and the fund was defined in order to further the

environmental benefit of the development. We therefore ask the developer and NSDC how this and other commercial renewable energy developments will support demand reduction and affordable energy for local households and small businesses.

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