

BROME and OAKLEY PARISH COUNCIL

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EcoPower Suffolk

via Email to contact@ecopowersuffolk.com

Response to Non-Statutory Consultation to deliver a Solar Farm and Battery Energy Storage System

1. Context

Brome and Oakley Parish Council represents the rural villages of both Brome and Oakley. Both villages have a similar electoral roll of approximately 200 residents. The Council has a full complement of eight councillors and meets on a monthly basis. One of the statutory functions of the Parish Council is to be informed of (Article 13 of the Town & Country Planning (General Development Procedure) Order 2015) and respond to planning applications.

2. Consultation

Brome and Oakley Parish Council were first made aware of the proposed development when the Village Hall in its custodial management was booked for a consultation event. Prior to this, there had been no formal engagement directly with the Parish Council. Representatives from EcoPower were invited to attend the Brome and Oakley Annual Parish Meeting (an assembly of the whole village not a Parish Council meeting) on Monday 24 March but were unavailable and subsequently attended a Parish Council meeting on Monday 14 April where approximately 20 members of the electorate were in attendance along with the Parish Councillors.

The Parish Council is concerned that the six week non-statutory consultation period is not sufficient for a proposal of this scale and engagement with the Parish Council has only taken place in the latter stages of the consultation period.

3. Planning Policy

The following should be taken into consideration when considering this proposal to minimise in impact on our villages and the people living within:

3.1 Neighbourhood Development Plan

Brome and Oakley Parish Council have a made Neighbourhood Development Plan (<https://www.southnorfolkandbroadland.gov.uk/asset-library/imported-assets/ddnp-adopted-version.pdf> Diss and District Neighbourhood Development Plan 2023). This sets out planning policy for both villages to 2038 and determines where development should take place. The NDP sets out to enhance the natural environment, to protect biodiversity through the creation of 'green' corridors, protects local green spaces and designates development boundaries and key view points.

In the NDP the landscape in Brome, and the immediate surrounding area, is characterised as Rolling Valley Claylands. The settlement consists of primarily linear 20th century residential development along Rectory Road, with a number of dispersed individual listed buildings and a small cluster of listed buildings in Brome Street.

3.2 National Planning Policy Framework

The National Planning Policy Framework (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework>) sets government's planning policy for England and expectations on how these policies should be applied. Of particular note are:

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Paras 124 to 130 Making Effective Use of Land;

In particular, para 124 states decisions should promote an effective use of land in meeting the need for homes and *other uses*, while safeguarding and improving the environment.

Paras 187 to 201 Conserving and Enhancing the Natural Environment

This application should be considered inline with para 192(a) and 192 (b) which set out to protect and enhance biodiversity and identify, map and safeguard components of local wildlife-rich habitats and wider ecological networks as well as promote the conservation, restoration and enhancement of priority habitats and securing measurable net gains for biodiversity. The principles of para 193 should be adhered to and in particular if significant harm to biodiversity resulting from a development cannot be avoided then permission should not be granted.

3.3 Biodiversity Net Gain

Biodiversity Net Gain (Environment Act 2021) seeks to ensure development has a measurably positive impact on biodiversity, compared to what was there before development.

Specific application of the above policies is set out in section 4 and 5 below.

4. Project-wide considerations

High-level objections on matters of principle are expected to be addressed in detail through Suffolk County Council's and Mid Suffolk District Council's responses. Brome and Oakley Parish Council shares many of these concerns and as a matter of principle the Parish Council is fundamentally opposed to the use of productive (defined by the government as best and most versatile) agricultural land for solar farms. The Parish Council is concerned about other issues, including:

- 4.1 Ethical sourcing of solar panels and ancillary equipment;
- 4.2 The use of the EcoPower Suffolk Special Purpose Vehicle to deliver the project and subsequently decommission and return to nature;
- 4.3 Protection of wildlife habitat and wildlife movement corridors;
- 4.4 Minimising impact on private property;
- 4.5 Protection of public amenities, visual amenity, footpaths and other matters relating to promotion of physical and mental wellbeing; and
- 4.6 Disruption caused during installation phase.

5. Parish-wide considerations

The Parish Council requests early and robust engagement with EcoPower and Warren Hill Farm (the landowners) on the following issues:

- 5.1 Scope for locating panels on Grade 3 agricultural land as an alternative to existing proposals;
- 5.2 Wherever feasible, solar panels should not be erected, and cable routes should not be dug, within 200 metres of any private house boundary;
- 5.3 The solar panels should be screened from view from private households, roads and footpaths, with native trees and hedges;
- 5.4 Panels and ancillary equipment should not emit any unnatural light or noise;
- 5.5 Individual households and local interest groups should have a right and clear mechanism through which to apply for specific boundary mitigation measures;
- 5.6 No footpaths should be closed or unnecessarily diverted and generous buffer zones should be created between footpaths, roads and solar panels;
- 5.7 New permissive footpaths may be required to compensate for loss of visual amenity;

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5.8 Plans to accommodate wildlife should be clear and generous, for larger mammals such as deer in particular. The placement of solar panels and the perimeter fencing should take specific account of migratory patterns of all species and respect the 'green corridors' outlined in the adopted Neighbourhood Development Plan. The Parish Council requests the public be allowed to contribute to ecological surveys;

5.9 Transport plans for the installation phase need to be available and indicate clearly the route taken by HGV traffic bringing panels etc. to site; including minimising traffic going through Brome and Oakley villages, and off-road site access minimising disruption to residents;

5.10 Installation phase working patterns should be limited to 9-5 Monday to Friday with no work at weekends or on Bank Holidays;

5.11 Plans and budgets should be in place in the event of corporate failure, or commercial risk or technology advances rendering solar panels redundant. A decommissioning plan must be included in the project plan and a suitable security deposit should be held in escrow to fund necessary decommissioning and 'return to nature'.

6. Specific concerns relating to the 'East End' land parcel

Please note: the Parish Council reserves the right to submit further specific concern statements relating to other parcels of land but due to the time constraints of the consultation period these cannot be included in this submission.

The following comments refer to the land parcel at the eastern end of the development, south of Upper Oakley – see diagram below. This area comprises Grade 2 agricultural land and ideally should be used entirely for biodiversity net gain measures.

6.1 The parcel is used for grazing and transit between woodland locations by a regionally-significant population of wild red deer. Other fauna reliant on the land parcel are:

- Roe, Chinese Water and Muntjac deer;
- Buzzard, red kite, sparrowhawk, kestrel, hobby, barn owl and tawny owl;
- Ground nesting birds – primarily skylark
- Brown hare.

6.2 In the event that panels are essential on this site, the panelled area should be reduced in order to reflect concerns relating to:

- Proximity to footpath;
- Wildlife disruption;
- Impairment of visual amenity;
- Surface water run-off.

6.3 Proposed modifications:

Modification 1 – Create a 150m buffer zone (edged in purple in diagram below right hand side) between footpath and northern edge of panelled area, by moving the northern boundary of the panelled area (edged in yellow on diagram below, right hand side) 150m to the south, and use for wildflower or other biodiversity net gain purposes.

Reason - The footpath makes a major contribution towards people's physical and mental health and well-being. Creating a buffer zone will maintain that sense of wellbeing.

Evidence – used by residents and visitors on a daily basis. Was a major part of

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people's exercise regime during Covid lockdown and residual use remains high.

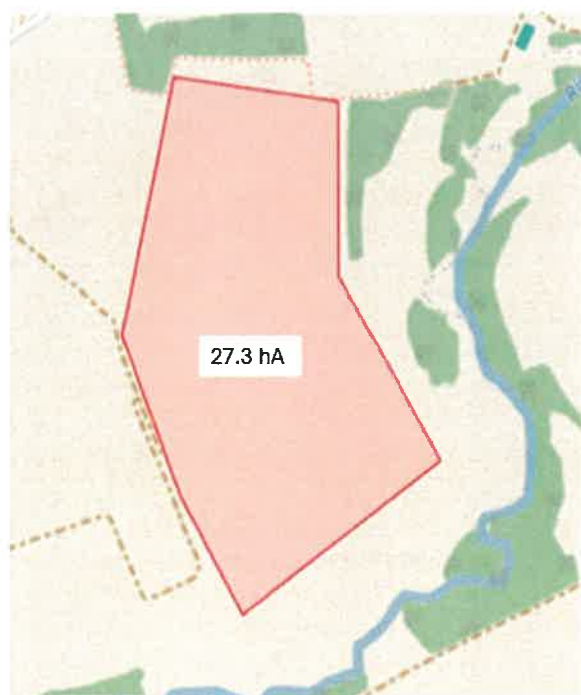
Modification 2 – Move the north-western boundary of the panelled area 150m to the south east and use for wildflower or other biodiversity net gain purposes.

Reason – This is an important red deer transit route and would enable deer to move around, not through, panelled areas. By virtue of the topography the panels would be restricted to lower elevations thus minimising the visual amenity impairment from the footpath, from Upper Oakley and from local dwellings.

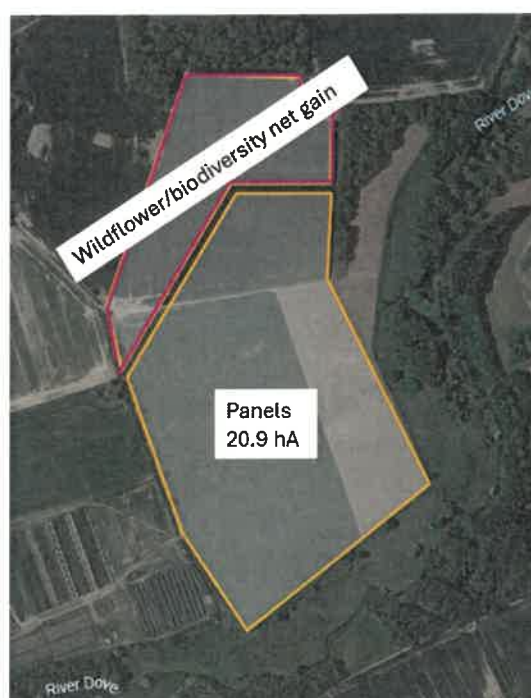
Evidence – there is a significant body of photographic and video evidence of the red deer grazing and transit, hares and birds of prey.

The net result of the proposed modifications would be the creation of a broad arc of wildflower and/or biodiversity net gain habitat at the northern and north-western margins of the land parcel. This would minimise disruption to wildlife, maintain a feeling of being in the countryside for walkers on the footpath, and screen the panelled area from the Upper Oakley road. The net reduction in panelled area is estimated at approximately 24%.

EPS proposed East End Parcel



Modified East End Parcel

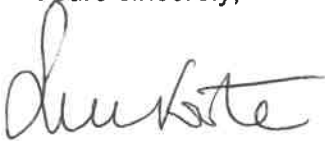


The Parish Council is also concerned about HGV and other vehicular access to this land parcel. The only practical existing access is via a farm track off Upper Oakley. That track crosses drainage ditches, water pipes etc. which could potentially be damaged by HGV traffic. The Parish Council wishes to understand the proposed access arrangements to the site in order to minimise on- and off-road disruption.

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Given the above, the Parish Council believes further and significant engagement and consideration is needed before an application of this scale and density should be delivered, if at all, in a rural villages such as Brome and Oakley. As presented, there is significant harm to both the well being of community and to natural environment. The Parish Council also requests that comments submitted by residents of Brome and Oakley and that of the Diss and District Neighbourhood Development Plan Group are also taken into consideration.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Sarah Foote', written in black ink.

Sarah Foote FSLCC
Clerk.