

FAVERSHAM FOOTPATHS GROUP

PROPOSED CLEVE HILL SOLAR PARK

1. The Faversham Footpaths Group urges the Secretary of State to refuse this application on the ground that its vast scale would have a massively detrimental environmental and visual impact, ruining the enjoyment of the many people who take great pleasure in walking the coastal path and other paths in the surrounding area.

2. Because the Group is concerned only with the enjoyment, preservation and protection of public rights of way our comments are necessarily confined to the impact which the proposal would have on people using public footpaths in the area. But that encompasses not merely the ability to walk particular routes – which would not be directly affected by the proposed complex – but the nature of the experience that this provides. It is clear that this would be drastically changed for the worse if the solar complex were built as planned: to a degree that makes the proposal wholly unacceptable, in our view, whatever its other merits.

3. Like the great majority of people, our members share the wish to see more of our energy generated from renewable sources and to see carbon emissions reduced. We understand that it is vital that governments take urgent action to halt climate change and that this means, with present technologies, that we must look to wind and solar power in particular to compensate for carbon-based fuels. Offshore in Kent, we already have major windfarms, while, onshore, there are already a number of smaller solar farms, but nothing anywhere near approaching the size of this proposed development, which we understand, is some four times larger than any existing solar park in the UK.

4. The Graveney marshes are a very special area, with a beauty that largely lies in the ability of the eye to take in, especially from the coast path, huge horizons, both out to sea and across the flat landscape. People do not generally walk these paths to get from A to B, as they might do in some other areas. They go there primarily to enjoy the wonderful views, the open, unspoilt nature of the land and the glimpses of its wildlife, including scarce raptors such as marsh harriers, short-eared owls and merlins and other rare species such as little terns. The special nature of this area is recognised by the various wildlife designations given to neighbouring sites and to the popularity of the coastal path from Seasalter round to Faversham, which already forms part of the Saxon Shore Way and which will soon become part of the England Coast Path.

5. Any marring of this landscape would be regrettable but we consider that the extraordinary scale of the present proposal would cause unacceptable damage and loss of amenity. The fine views inland from the elevated coast path would be ruined, to be replaced by a vast sea of panels. The fact that the nearest panels will be set back some way from the coast path would make virtually no difference because of the open nature of the terrain. At 4 metres plus high, the nearest panels will be hugely intrusive and, behind them,

other panels will stretch almost as far as the eye can see. The visual impact will be exacerbated by the east-west configuration of the panels, and their proximity to each other, which will make them appear continuous when viewed from the coastal path. As others have pointed out, it will be akin to looking across a sea of industrial estate roofs.

6. It is important to stress that the visual impact will not just be apparent to those walking the coast path adjoining the development but from many miles around, including even from the high ground at Harty on the Isle of Sheppey. This is because the landscape is so flat and contains very few trees to provide any sort of mitigation of its impact. Indeed, the scale of the project and the fact that the solar complex would be in low-lying land would, in any case, almost entirely obviate any serious attempt to lessen its visual impact.

7. Other bodies, such as Kent Wildlife Trust and the RSPB, will no doubt comment on the proposal's impact on the environment and wildlife. But, as walkers who derive great enjoyment from seeing the area's distinctive flora and fauna, we are concerned about the prospective loss of important habitat, in particular for nesting marsh harriers and for other raptors.

8. We are aware that the developers have proposed some possible enhancement of the footpath network, including some permissive paths, but this does not afford any compensation in our view for the enormous loss which would be suffered as a result of the degradation of this landscape. It is worth adding that this would undoubtedly lead to fewer walkers using this section of the coast path than would otherwise be the case, with a loss of local tourism revenue.

9. We understand that the developers consider that, for financial reasons, the solar farm needs to be of this unprecedented size in order for it to be viable, given the Government's decision to withdraw subsidies. But the corollary of this, in our view, is that it would cause unprecedented, unacceptable, damage to the landscape, especially in an area where its visual impact cannot be significantly lessened. We therefore urge the Secretary of State to refuse the application.

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