

HEMPNALL PARISH MEETING

Minutes of the Parish Meeting held on Tuesday 8 November 2024 at 7.30pm At Hempnall Village Hall

ACTION

Present.

For the parish council:

Chairman Mr David Hook, Mr Phil Bates, Mrs Joan Cann, Mr Richard Delf, Mr Robert Elliott, Mr Hamish Rose, Mr Mike Turner, Mr Peter Workman and the Clerk Mr Ian Nelson.

There were many members of the public present, 167 from Hempnall and 94 from other affected villages in the area, a total of 261 people signed the attendance register. The total attendance was around 300 - not everyone signed the register.

Apologies

Apologies were received from Ben Goldsborough MP, Mrs Christine Barnes, Mrs Janette Franks, Mrs Liz Williams and Mrs Hilla Battye.

Opening comments

Mr Hook explained that following significant representation from members of the public at a recent parish council meeting the parish council had called a parish meeting to give people the opportunity to give their views on the East Pye Solar ("EPS") proposals. Parishioners' views will be taken into account by the parish council at its next meeting.

The minutes are not a verbatim record but note the key points made.

Minutes of the previous meeting

Mr Bates proposed, Mr Delf seconded, and it was agreed that the minutes of the previous Parish meeting held on 19 March 2024 were approved and signed by the chairman.

Matters arising from the previous minutes

These will be reported at the meeting on 18 March 2025.

Proposed East Pye Solar ("EPS") Project

Those present

Mr Hook explained that in attendance tonight are the Leader of Norfolk County Council Kay Mason-Billig, County Councillor Alison Thomas together with representatives from surrounding parish councils. He explained that he had met with the constituency MP, Ben Goldsborough, and encouraged him to attend the meeting however he was unable to do so although he intends to be at the EPS presentation on 09/11/24. The parish council asked him whether he was for or against the proposal and he sent the following message in response:

"I first became aware of these proposals at the same time as you, when the letters landed on doormats. I immediately called the developers to a meeting, where I warned them not to repeat National Grid's appalling mistreatment of residents. Since becoming aware of the proposals, I have been working hard to make residents' voices heard and to hold the developers to the highest possible standards.

There can be no hiding from the effects of climate change, especially given the recent catastrophic and fatal weather events in Spain and America. Rural areas like ours will be among the worst impacted by continued climate change and agriculture will suffer more than any other sector. Solar power plays a vital role in meeting the Government's climate targets. To preserve agricultural land and protect our green spaces, the Government is driving forward the use of solar panels on pre-developed land with its proposals for a "rooftop revolution". However, no government can compel pre-existing property owners to install solar panels. We must be clear-eyed about the fact that solar farms are therefore a necessary part of climate change mitigation efforts.

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As an MP I have the same statutory powers as every other person in this room. However, I understand that I am in the privileged position of being able to amplify residents' voices with Ministers and East Pye. I intend to use that privileged position to elevate your voices, so we get replies to your concerns. I continue to hold weekly advice surgeries, if you would like to book to attend a surgery, or if you would like me to raise concerns or questions with Ministers or East Pye on your behalf, you can contact me at ben.goldsborough.mp@parliament.uk or speak with my office on 01603 570332. "

Where we are in the overall process

Mr Hook explained the overall process and expected timetable as follows:

Pre planning non-statutory consultation - now

Statutory consultation - Summer 2025

Groups and individuals can seek permission to present their cases to the Planning Inspectorate

Application put to the planning inspectorate – late 2025

Secretary Of State makes the final decision - late 2026 /early 2027

Building starts (if permitted) – April 2027

Why the parish council issued maps and key data to all parishioners

Mr Hook explained that the map provided by the project developers in their brochure, which you may have seen, does not provide a clear identification of the location of the sites currently included in the proposals. The Parish Council had therefore produced a series of maps, based on ordnance survey maps, in order to clarify these locations. The key data made available was as follows:

Some Key Facts

- Hempnall Parish Council has been told in a phone call to the EPS telephone enquiry line that the total area of the proposed scheme is currently 2718 acres (1100 hectares / 4.25 square miles) and that agreements have been signed with all the landowners of the sites earmarked for solar panels. 2718 acres is equivalent to 74.22% of the total area of Hempnall (i.e. of all the land in the parish not just the built up area). Of course not all of the sites are located within the Hempnall parish boundary but the EPS Community Relations Team has confirmed that sites covering a total of 1601 acres are in, or close to Hempnall. These sites are coloured red on our map of the Hempnall area. The other sites that make up the total area are located in Brooke, Woodton and in and around Great Moulton. These are also shown in red on our map that covers the total scheme area. Development of all 2718 acres would result in around 100 fields and meadows being covered by solar panels, inverters, small sub-stations, access tracks and security fences.
- Worryingly the site boundaries shown on EPS's October maps enclose even greater areas of countryside (*) than the sites currently proposed for solar panels which are coloured red on our maps. Also the number and location of sites in the proposals may change and the land area involved could increase further if more landowners sign up to the scheme. (*) *additional to the 2718 acres*
- The 2718 acres does not include the cable route search corridors which are coloured light brown on our maps. In and around Hempnall the EPS Community Relations Team has confirmed that these search corridors total 2436 acres. They include some parcels of land owned by farmers who have not signed up to the project. Not all of the land in the search corridors will be needed for cables but nevertheless the disruption caused by the cabling process to landscapes, roads, footpaths, flora and fauna would be substantial. Furthermore, once the cabling infrastructure is in place the whole area becomes even more attractive for yet more solar development. The site maps that you may have seen around the area relate to the cable corridors only.

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- The impact on public rights of way (PROW) and other tracks would be huge. An initial study reveals that 22.8 km of paths would have solar sites either on both sides or along one side including the beautiful and tranquil green lanes Pymers Lane and Nobbs Lane. Additionally views from many more PROW, including sections of Boudica's Way, would be negatively affected. Lovely vistas of meadows, fields, trees and woods would be replaced by a view of an industrialised landscape covered by solar arrays, security fences, small substations and access tracks
- The scheme is so large that it will be treated as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP). This means the planning application will not be determined by South Norfolk Council. Ultimately it will be the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (currently Ed Miliband) who has the final say on whether the application is approved

Climate change poses a great threat and Hempnall Parish Council supports de-carbonising energy production through increasing the supply of renewable energy. However, this should not be achieved at the expense of the countryside. With good planning and sensible decision making it is possible to deliver a mix of renewable energy solutions of the "right" scale and in the "right" locations i.e. Renewables Done Well. Research, by the UCL Energy Institute for CPRE demonstrates that installing solar panels on existing rooftops and other land such as car parks could provide at least 40-50GW of solar energy in England by 2035 and by 2050 and, with further investment, there is potential to generate 117GW of low carbon electricity from roofs and other developed spaces – i.e. well in excess of the government's 2035 national target of 70GW.

In the near future technological developments in the harvesting of solar energy will probably make land hungry schemes like this one outdated and irrelevant but if the EPS scheme goes ahead we would be saddled with a countryside dominated by solar panels for at least 40 years.

No amount of financial remuneration could ever compensate for the damage this scheme would cause. A proper policy-based planning system should not depend on the offer of "bribes". If this scheme is permitted it will be an example of Renewables Done Badly. Our local landscape will be decimated. Large areas of attractive and rural countryside would be covered by industrial infrastructure. Valuable farmland will be lost and the whole of our local area will be less attractive to locals and visitors alike. Those who oppose this scheme are not NIMBYs. In our small, overcrowded island we need to protect those parts of lowland Britain that are still relatively un-spoilt, including the Hempnall area, because they are important for everyone's health and wellbeing.

EPS has informed the parish council that "at this time, we anticipate that the panels will be a mixture of tracker panels and fixed panels, with a maximum height (including their supports) to be 4.5 metres." Many of the panels will therefore be much larger than those in existing local solar sites, such as at Trowse, and it is unlikely that hedges will be sufficient to hide such tall panels. It is unclear if there will be noise created by the movement of the panels.

Comments from the floor

The main matters raised were as follows:

Solar panel sites

It was confirmed that agreements were already in place for each of the proposed solar panel sites (red on the parish council map) between EPS and the landowners. In summary these would provide the landowner with a minimum of £1,000 per acre per annum index linked for 40 years with a possible extension to 60 years. With 2,718 acres in the proposal, there is the potential for a lot of money to be earned by a few landowners.

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Cable routes

The light brown areas shown on the parish council's map represented the areas in which EPS had indicated they were searching for land to link the separate solar panel sites with underground cables. It was acknowledged that these areas are thought to eventually return to normal agricultural use.

It was unclear as to whether the cables would be laid via a cut and cover technique or via boring, the former method being much more disruptive.

It was also noted that some of the landscaping programme at the completion of the Long Stratton bypass project could be dug up again in order to lay the cables.

It was reported that Ben Goldsborough MP had spoken to EPS and discovered that they anticipate 3% of cable routes will need to be subject to compulsory purchase.

Potential expansion of the project

It was noted that the solar panel areas identified by EPS had a boarder greater than the area of the position of the solar panels and concern was raised that once any existing proposed development was in place, this extra space may be filled with yet more panels at a later date making use of the then existing infrastructure. It was noted that other projects elsewhere in the UK had significantly expanded once the initial infrastructure was in place.

Norwich to Tilbury Pylon Corridor

It was expected that many new solar and wind farm projects would be put forward along the infrastructure route afforded by the Norwich to Tilbury Pylons, however it was felt that utilisation of this infrastructure should not be disproportionate in the Norfolk area.

Use of roof space

Comment was made that the alternative of placing solar panels on roofs was not always practical and many roofs were not strong enough and would need to be reinforced, thus increasing the cost significantly.

It was considered ridiculous that planning permission could be given to so many large residential developments in the county, such as at Long Stratton without the requirement for the developers to put solar panels on the roofs of all new housing stock.

Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project ("NSIP")

Concern was expressed that the permission for the project would be decided at national level due to its size. Mrs Mason-Billig indicated that Lord Fuller (ex-leader of SNC) intended to challenge that the EPS scheme qualified as a single project as it was in fact a daisy chain of small projects simply linked with cables. If this challenge is successful, the planning authority could be returned to local councils. ***Potential expansion of the project***

It was noted that the border surrounding the solar panel sites, as identified by EPS on their October maps, covered an area greater than the land parcels identified for solar panels and concerns were raised that if the existing proposed development was permitted, this additional space, and other adjacent areas, may be filled with yet more panels at a later date making use of the then existing infrastructure. It was also noted that other solar projects elsewhere in the UK had significantly expanded once the initial infrastructure was in place.

Norwich to Tilbury Pylon Corridor

It was feared that many new solar and wind farm projects would be proposed along the infrastructure route facilitated by the construction of a new pylon line from Norwich to Tilbury. It was felt that utilisation of this infrastructure should not be allowed to produce disproportionate impacts on the landscape in the local area or further afield.

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Use of roof space

Comment was made that the alternative of placing solar panels on roofs was not always practical and many roofs were not strong enough and would need to be reinforced, thus increasing the cost significantly.

However it was pointed out that existing roofs and other artificial surfaces could be adapted for use and are immediately available unlike mega solar farms which could take years to be built and would therefore have little impact on 2030 renewable energy targets. Furthermore in spite of Mr Goldsborough's reservations about the compulsory use of such space the government could legislate to require large areas of existing commercial roof space (e.g. warehouses) to be used for the production of solar energy.

It was considered ridiculous that planning permission could be given to so many large residential developments in the county, such as at Long Stratton, without the requirement for the developers to put solar panels on the roofs of all new housing stock. It was pointed out that the previous government, under pressure from the major house builders, did not insist on this requirement and that Keir Starmer had recently given in to similar pressure and in spite of his government's alleged commitment to roof top solar was not insisting on roof top solar provision on all new buildings.

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It was thought that Labour are looking to increase the size criteria of projects that need to be decided by NSIP to those generating 150MW, however this would not affect EPS, if it remained one project, which is planned to produce 500MW.

County Council Stance / Judicial Review

Mrs Mason-Billig said that Norfolk County Council ("NCC") was working with Suffolk, Essex and Lincolnshire County Councils with a view to opposing such large-scale projects in those counties. They had liaised with the National Grid and discovered that shockingly there is no overall UK energy policy, leaving it open for developers to put projects forward on a piecemeal basis. At the appropriate juncture, the combined county councils were prepared to take any decision made by the Planning Inspectorate to approve the project to judicial review.

Delay / tactics

It was felt that as there are so many large-scale solar projects being put forward affecting thousands of people that there would eventually be a political backlash against such projects. It was considered that a good tactic would be to delay EPS as much as possible to await a change in political climate.

It was suggested that parishioners should not raise mitigation issues / concerns at the non-statutory consultation stage as this would enable EPS to produce some kind of superficial response which they could claim addressed the matter thus potentially facilitating a more rapid progression through the NSIP process.

Mitigation

It was felt that there was no mitigation possible that could possibly compensate for the huge damage to the local landscape that a scheme of this mega size would cause and that comments made in response to the non statutory consultation should state this fact and avoid discussions about mitigation.

It was noted that experience had shown over the years that many planning applications contain promises of mitigation such as tree / hedge planting etc but very often developers do

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not deliver on these promises. The parish council has put many cases forward to SNC compliance officers to try and get action taken to enforce developers to comply with mitigation commitments.

Direct compensation for local communities

It was recognised that all of the power would be fed directly into the National Grid for use in other areas and that there were no inter-connectors to provide power to Norfolk

Food security

It was noted that the NPPF recommended that high grade farmland (classified BMV) should not be used for such projects. However it was noted that the government may well weaken this protection as part of the current NPPF review in order to make it easier for developers to use more agricultural land for solar projects

Biodiversity

A point was made that university research had found that solar panel sites had 10% more biodiversity and 20% more organisms than some agricultural land. It was pointed out that this could be the case due to current agricultural methods of spraying etc, however the real comparison should be with the biodiversity of farmland that is managed in a less intensive way. It was also noted that the 10% increase benchmark referred to in such schemes was to provide a habitat rather than the actual success of that habitat. Empirical observations of local solar panel sites, such as at Tasburgh, provided little or no evidence of a thriving bio-diverse natural habitat associated with a large solar development.

Norfolk Wildlife Trust were considering how to measure biodiversity and the effect on wildlife such as Barbastelle bats for example. The issues are complex and there can be no mitigation if for example the bat population deserts the area as a result of the development.

Comment was made that the best way to preserve some biodiversity and preserve the quality of the land would be to let animals graze underneath the panels but then the trade-off would be higher panels which would be much more visually intrusive

Economic impacts to local community

These should also be considered when responding to the planning application.

Road infrastructure

Concern was expressed about the ability of the existing road structure to cope with building contractors and the maintenance needs of the development. It was noted that EPS was undertaking traffic surveys at the moment as they would need to present an understanding of the current traffic types/volume, usage etc as part of their planning application. NCC would seek compensation from EPS for any extra costs they incurred on the road network as a result of the development.

Battery Storage safety

It was unknown how safe the battery storage facility would be.

Electromagnetic radiation

Concern was expressed as to whether there would be electromagnetic radiation from the development, particularly in relation to the inverters and cable runs. It was noted that the World Health Organisation had started research into this but as so little time had elapsed since this technology was introduced, there were no conclusive findings.

Efficacy of renewables

NESO had reported that even if the UK develops its full capacity of solar and wind potential there will be many days when the UK needed to rely on other energy sources due to lack of sun and wind.

A view was expressed that even if western countries achieve "net zero" domestically in terms

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of the emissions they produce this is not a true measure of net zero because it does not measure the emissions those countries are causing as a result of their consumption of goods imported from other countries e.g. from the far east. The production of these goods often results in an increase in greenhouse gas emissions but these emissions are not included in the net zero calculations of the countries importing and consuming those goods.

No need for such a large site if generation statistic to be believed

It was reported that 2-3 acres of panels are required to generate 1MW, thus the 150MW target of the project should only need 300 to 450 acres and not the 2718 acres in the proposal.

Water run off

Concern was expressed about the need for adequate facilities to deal with water run off if the land is to be sheltered by panels.

BEPS

Mr Bates in his capacity as a member of the steering group of Ban East Pye Solar (BEPS), an action group against the EPS project, pointed people towards the BEPS Facebook page and website. He invited people to a BEPS meeting to be held on 16/11/24 at the Mill Centre at which anybody willing to help would be welcome. Resources would be shared about how to become involved in measuring biodiversity and other relevant topics.

Working together

It was recognised that it would be advantageous for villages opposing this development to work together in order to pool resources and skills and avoid duplication of effort. Mr Hook invited interested parties to provide their contact details to Hempnall Parish Council at the end of the meeting.

Hempnall Parish Council was already liaising with other parish councils and had joined the CPRE Norfolk Alliance and the UK Solar Alliance.

The County Councils were also working together.

Show of Hands

Mr Hook asked for a show of hands to indicate who was in favour of the East Pye Solar development and who was against it. Only one person voted to support the proposals, less than 10 people abstained and everyone else present voted to oppose the scheme.

Next steps

The parish council will formalise its response to the local consultation at the next parish council meeting.

Mr Hook thanked Mr William Walker and David Hardaker for their help with filming and map production and also all those who had attended the meeting.

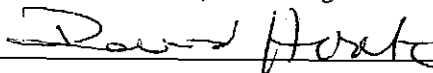
Next Meeting

The next parish meeting is provisionally scheduled for 18 March 2025.

All

There being no other business, the meeting was closed at 21:25

Signed



Date 18 March 2025