Wardell Armstrong LLP
City Quadrant, 11 Waterloo Square, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 4DP, United Kingdom
Telephone: +44 (0)191 232 0943 www.wardell-armstrong.com

Our ref: AB/NT16093/013 *Date*: 29 September 2023
Your ref: 23/502210/FULL

Bredgar Parish Council
c/o Ms Teresa Hudson
Friendly Cottage
Tunstall Road
Bredgar
Sittingbourne
ME9 8EB

By email

Dear Ms Hudson,

Application 23/502210/FULL: Solar farm either side of Vigo Lane and Wrens Road, ME9 8LA

Thank you for your consultation comments on the above application which I have reviewed and considered together with the applicant. The purpose of this letter is to respond to your comments, providing you with additional details that will hopefully help allay some of your concerns regarding the solar farm, including on matters of food security and any impact on the AONB.

Food security and the use of Best and Most Versatile agricultural land

As food security can be a sensitive issue, the purpose of this section of the response is to highlight ways in which the solar farm would arguably help support food security. However, I appreciate that there will be differing opinions about this, though importantly, all perspectives contribute to a healthy debate on the subject.

There are many factors that, to greater or lesser degree, influence the UK's food security. This has also been influenced by the war in Ukraine, which although interestingly has had a limited impact in terms of food availability itself, it has however led to increased input costs, particularly fertilisers and animal feed, as well as rising energy costs[1].

A fundamental way to help safeguard domestic food production is by reducing the costs of production. To this end, Vigo Solar Farm would be supporting food security by providing the local farmers with stable and reliable income to continue growing crops elsewhere within their landholding, at a time when production costs are extremely high.

[1] House of Commons Research Briefing: The effect of the war in Ukraine on UK farming and food production, July 2022: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2022-0147/

This solar farm, alongside all other solar farms, would produce affordable green electricity which would also help bring energy costs down over time, benefiting farms (particularly livestock farms) across the country - the solar farm would therefore contribute to an overall positive impact on farm viability, and thus food security, nationally. The president of the National Farmers Union, Minette Batters, in a speech at the NFU Conference 2023 acknowledged the challenges posed by the high food production costs and, amongst other things, stated that *"in the face of climate change we should be unwavering in our commitment to achieving Net Zero, and contributing to our energy security through on-farm renewables generation[2]"*.

As well as production costs, climate change is also a key area of concern for domestic food security. The UK Food Security Report (2021) states that "the biggest medium to long term risk to the UK's domestic production comes from climate change and other environmental pressures like soil degradation, water quality and biodiversity". A recent survey revealed that crop failure due to weather extremes is already one of the greatest concerns for farmers[3]. Combating climate change is also important for continued food production abroad, some of which the UK currently relies upon.

Solar farms also allow the soil to rest from intensive agricultural farming, which has various benefits, including decreased chemical inputs, restoring organic matter which is crucial for soil fertility and structure, enhanced soil biodiversity (earthworms and microbes), halting soil compaction, enhanced carbon storage (no tilling), reducing soil erosion, and improved soil moisture retention. Once the solar farm is dismantled, the soil is expected to be in a healthier condition and be more productive for food production.

Helping biodiversity to thrive is also very important for food security – the UK Food Security Report (2021) states:

> *"Biodiversity plays a vital role in food production. For instance, more than 75% of the leading types of global food crops rely to some extent on animal pollination for yields and / or quality. Therefore, making land use systems sustainable is central to securing continued global food availability."*

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[2] National Farmers Union, President's Conference Speech, 2023: https://www.nfuonline.com/updates-and-information/nfu23-read-minette-batters-conference-speech-in-full

[3] Get Fair About Farming, 2023: https://getfairaboutfarming.co.uk/fairfarmingsurvey

The solar farm would help support domestic energy security by delivering a Biodiversity Net Gain of 190%, with a net gain of 299% for hedgerows. The wildflower meadows, hedgerows, and trees, would have a positive impact on the local pollinator population.

I appreciate that the use of agricultural land for solar farms will always require a careful balance and that the decision to support solar deployment on Best and Most Versatile Agricultural land will seldom be easy. The balance may lie in permitting the borrowing of some agricultural land as a means to help protect all of the other UK's agricultural fields and farmers from climate change-related crop failure, including draughts, flash floods, pollinator decline, and invasive species.

I hope the above text provides some comfort on the various ways that this solar farm, in unison with other renewable projects, planting schemes, and carbon reduction initiatives, would arguably play a part in strengthening domestic food security.

Negatively impact the setting of the AONB, visual impact, and the countryside gap

We appreciate the importance of protecting the AONB, including its setting, from the negative impacts associated with development proposals. Taking this into account, the ways in which the proposal has been designed has sought to minimise its impact on the setting of the AONB. This includes:

1. Making the solar farm 'shallower' compared to its original design by bringing it away from Oad Street – this has had the effect of reducing longer views from the south, and thus improving the ability of existing and proposed trees along the M2 to screen the site from view.
2. Locating the substation near to the M2 and in a dip, to help minimise its visual appearance.
3. Extensive hedgerow planting.
4. Tree planting, particularly where there are existing tree gaps along the M2.
5. Two small woodland corners, helping to screen some views of the site within the north-east part of the site, including along Wrens Road.

The presence of the M2 provides a hard barrier, protecting the AONB from encroachment. The trees along the M2 also already provide a good level of screening, with the proposed planting helping to strengthen their ability to screen the solar farm. The AONB rises gradually to the south, and given existing intervening vegetation, the solar farm would only appear as

a narrow band within the context of a built-up background behind. As can be seen from Viewpoint 7 (15 years after completion) within the planning application, this narrow band would be increasingly screened from view by the proposed vegetation.

The proposed hedgerows would also help soften the presence of the solar farm within the immediate and wider landscape – this in turn, would help protect one's experience of the countryside gap, particularly as the vegetation becomes more established.

Environmental Commitment

Subject to planning permission, a detailed Landscape and Ecological Management Plan (LEMP) would be prepared that sets out how the landscape and ecological components of the solar farm would be managed from the planting/creation stage through to the decommissioning stage. This would include details of how the wildflower meadows, hedgerows, trees, fencing, and litter would be managed and monitored, ensuring that biodiversity is being maximised and visual impact is minimised.

The broad objectives of the LEMP would be to:

- Establish and maintain newly created habitats.
- Maintain and enhance retained vegetation.
- Maintain and enhance species populations.
- Contribute to local and national objectives i.e. by enhancing the habitats to ensure Biodiversity Net Gain.

Weed killer

The LEMP would seek to manage weeds on the site. Weeds would be managed by means of the site's cutting regime, but should any specific species such as ragwort require additional intervention, then these would be removed by hand if necessary. Sheep grazing could also be employed to maintain the sward at a particular height, while at the same time controlling weeds. No weed killer would be used, as this would be detrimental to the site's ability to nurture and promote biodiversity improvements. I am in discussions with the case officer regarding the wording of a planning condition, such that it would specify that the LEMP should explicitly use weed control techniques that do not involve weed killer.

Hedgerow planting and vegetation maintenance

The LEMP would detail the strategy for maintaining all hedgerow types in good condition and ensure optimal growth. The hedgerow species proposed are:

Scientific Name	Common Name
Acer campestre	Field Maple
Crataegus monogyna	Common Hawthorn
Cornus sanguinea	Dogwood
Corylus avellana	Hazel
Prunus insititia	Bullace
Prunus spinosa	Blackthorn
Rosa canina	Dog Rose

The LEMP would include measures to manage the hedgerows, trees, and wildflower grassland. At risk of reproducing an entire LEMP within this letter, I have included the likely management measures specific to hedgerows below. It also provides you with a good idea of what the LEMP is likely to include regarding the management of trees and wildflowers.

Specifications for hedgerow planting would include:

- whips will be planted during the dormant season (November-February), but not during prolonged cold spells where frost might penetrate to the roots;
- planting will be undertaken in two staggered rows with approximately 300mm between plants and 450mm between rows; and
- biodegradable rabbit protection, in the form of shelters/spiral guards, will be installed around transplants.

Establishment and aftercare of planted hedgerows

The establishment and aftercare of planted hedgerows would include management such as:

- new hedgerows to be protected by biodegradable tree guards and rabbit proof fencing which should be 900mm high galvanised mesh and timber stakes (mesh to be buried 150mm below ground with 150mm angled away from planting);
- specimens will be firmed and watered as necessary;
- once planting is established, generally from Year 3 onwards, stakes and guards may be removed;
- hedgerows will be maintained using mulch to reduce pesticide use;
- hedgerows will be maintained free of weeds along the length of the double staggered row and for an overall width of 1m and;
- any dead or diseased planting will be removed and replanted in the next season.

Long term hedgerow management

Long term management (3rd year onwards) of new hedgerow habitat within the site will have the aim to improve their structure and quality as follows:

- hedgerows within the Site will be trimmed on a 3-year rotation, incrementally raising the cutting height each year to ultimately achieve 3m in height;

- all stakes and guards will be removed by the end of Year 5; and
- works will be undertaken in January and February to avoid the peak nesting bird season and following berry production which is a valuable resource for birds and mammals.

Plan for the provision of wildflower meadow

The LEMP would specify the wildflower mix to be employed at this site, given the site's soil characteristics. This mix would offer a range of neutral grasses and forbs to create a varied sward. The LEMP would specify the management of the wildflowers, including:

- Preparing the seed bed.
- When the first cut should take place after first sowing.
- Thereafter, specify late summer cut after flowers have finished flowering, for a period of 40 years.
- Management of weed species, including potentially by grazing.

Proposed trees

The proposed tree species are set out below:

Scientific Name	Common Name
Alnus Glutinosa	Alder
Castanea sativa	Sweet Chestnut
Carpinus caucasia	Common Hornbeam

As well as the above, the proposed woodland trees also include Hazel (Corylus avellana) and Wild Cherry (Prunus avium). As noted above, the LEMP would include tree management details.

Dormouse Corridors

The application has been supported by a Dormouse Survey (desktop and site visit) undertaken by an ecologist qualified and licensed to undertake dormice surveys. A detailed search of the hedgerows to be removed and 10m either side was carried out for evidence of old or current nests and feeding signs, in the form of gnawed hazel nuts, of which none were recorded. Notwithstanding this, areas identified to be least suitable for dormice have been used as crossing points across Vigo Lane and Wrens Road, and the site access. On the whole, these were chosen because of their poor species diversity, gappy nature of the hedge, and because they are intensively managed, restricting flowering and fruiting.

Any hedge removal works would be undertaken in accordance with a Precautionary Working Method Statement (PWMS), encompassing measures such as:

- A pre-commencement check for nests and feeding shall be carried out prior to vegetation removal.
- All removal of shrub vegetation shall be removed by hand tools rather than by excavator.
- Brash to be removed from site or chipped to remove further constraints.
- Shrub removal and ground clearance shall be supervised by a suitably experienced ecologist.
- In the event that evidence of Dormouse or a siting is recorded on site, works will cease with immediate effect and Natural England consulted.

All newly created hedgerows and trees would include berry and nut bearing species to provide food resource at differ times of years for dormice (and other species), which would also create new corridors across the site.

Noise

As solar farms use very quiet technology, and due to the proximity of the M2, predicted noise levels arising from the solar farm would be significantly below background levels – local amenity in terms of noise would therefore be protected.

During the construction phase, mitigation measures have been incorporated within the Outline Construction and Environmental Management Plan. These include limited working hours, making sure any engines are not idling, and that all equipment is in good working order. A detailed Construction and Environmental Management Plan would be submitted as a requirement of the planning permission, should consent be granted.

Light pollution

The Outline Construction and Environmental Management Plan summarises how lighting during the construction phase would be managed to help protect local amenity and local biodiversity. This includes only illuminating the area where works are taking place, only working to the agreed working hours, and using cowled/hooded light fixtures to prevent light spill. Further details would be included within the detailed Construction and Environmental Management Plan.

During the operational phase, the only lighting would be from the site's substation near the M2. These would only be used, if at all they are needed, when operatives visit the site for maintenance purposes, which would be periodic but infrequent (maximum once a month).

On the other hand, lighting is likely to not always be necessary during site visits due to sufficient natural light. Should planning consent be granted, it will request the submission of a Lighting Scheme which would provide the lighting information and specs in a lot more detail.

Dark skies

There would be no requirement to light the site overnight for security, as all CCTV cameras would be using infrared technology. Lighting would only be used when site maintenance personnel visit the substation compound, and only when daylight itself is not sufficient.

Amenity protection during the construction phase

It is important that construction works, including noise, lighting, and the timing of traffic movements, do not have an undue impact on local amenity. This would be secured through the implementation of a detailed Construction Environmental Management Plan and a Construction Traffic Management Plan (CTMP), to be submitted as a pre-commencement requirement of the planning permission, should consent be granted. Outline forms of these two documents have already been included within the planning application (the Outline CTMP is included within the Transport Assessment). The CTMP would specify that no deliveries would take place during peak hour traffic times, wherever possible.

Construction traffic

All construction traffic would enter and leave via Oad Street Farm on Oad Street from the M2, using the A249 Stockbury Roundabout. As a result, there would be no need to travel any further or through the village of Oad Street. Access between the different field parcels would be via crossings along Vigo Lane and Wrens Road.

Site decommissioning

Having taken your comments onboard, we have proposed the below condition to the case officer to be incorporated into the planning permission should permission be granted – discussions about the exact wording are ongoing, but the condition we have suggested reads:

"No less than 12 months before the 40th anniversary of the first export date, a decommissioning and site restoration scheme shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The decommissioning strategy shall include details of how plant and equipment within the site will be removed, including any boundary treatments such as fences, and including the timescale for such works. The strategy shall include copies of pre-decommissioning ecological surveys, and which will inform any mitigation requirements. The site shall be decommissioned and restored in accordance with the details so approved. The

site will revert to Greenfield Land following decommissioning and will not be identified as previously development land."

We have considered your comment regarding the decommissioning plan to be submitted 24 months in advance of decommissioning works. However, unfortunately this is a bit problematic because ecology surveys are generally only valid for a maximum of 24 months, meaning that they would be out of date by the time decommissioning works begin.

It is proposed that the land would return to agricultural use after 40 years of operation. Should planning permission be granted, any future use of the site would require planning permission. I hope that the above text provides the Parish Council with some comfort that the land would not be considered 'brownfield land' when the site is decommissioned.

Additional environmental benefits

I have discussed with the applicant whether it would be possible to introduce additional planting on land to the south of the M2. Unfortunately, this land lies outside the lease boundary for the solar farm, meaning the applicant would have no control over this area and therefore have no influence over the management programme to ensure any planting is looked after. However, as can be seen on the landscaping plan within the application documents, the applicant would be undertaking extensive planting of hedgerows and trees that would significantly boost ecology in and around the solar boundary, including the installation of a wildlife pond. Furthermore, the considerable planting would have a huge positive impact on Net Gain Biodiversity, which would be fundamental to sustaining existing wildlife and, better still, attracting greater numbers of species to the area.

I trust the above has helped clarify a few points and helps alleviate your concerns. Should you have any further queries regarding the solar farm, please feel free to contact me.

Yours sincerely
for Wardell Armstrong LLP

BEN PARKINS
Associate Director
bparkins@wardell-armstrong.com
Encl. Bredgar Parish Council Comments

BREDGAR PARISH COUNCILE RESPONSE ON PLANNING APPLICATION 23/502210/FULL

VIGO SOLAR FARM

Thank you for consulting with Bredgar Parish Council in respect of the above application.

The application raises issues which should result in refusal, namely

1. Loss of grade 2, 3a and 3b agricultural land. Building development on grades 2 and 3a land is inconsistent with Swale planning policies, and is not welcome in this time of reduced food security.
2. The proposed farm will impact negatively on the setting of the AONB, in terms of visual impact, noise and light pollution and also the countryside gap.

However, BPC recognises that due to the climate change crisis and need for urgent action, SBC may take the view that this application merits an exception, and decide on approval. In such a situation BPC would raise no objection, provided that conditions are imposed to reduce the negative impact.

The following conditions and suggestions should be incorporated in the grant of any permission:

1. The application should demonstrate greater commitment to benefit the environment and biodiversity, and to offset the harm and negative visual impact that the plan creates. We would like to know that there is a detailed plan for the provision of the wildflower meadows and the use of the land under the panels – could this include any grazing or cropping?

2. We are aware that, at a similar development nearby, weed killer has been used to manage the land and would want to see a condition prohibiting use of such chemicals.

3. We would like to see more detail on hedgerow planning, including the use of mixed native species, and the plan for maintaining the hedgerow in good condition, to support wildlife.

4. In the interests of protecting dark skies, there should be no use of lighting other than where essential for maintenance and construction.

5. The decommissioning of the plant is a major concern. We note that there is an outline Decommissioning Plan, which states that it should be a condition of any grant of permission that a detailed plan be submitted 12 months prior to decommissioning. 24 months would seem more realistic. The plan states that the intention is for the use of the land to be returned to agricultural use after the 40 years – can this be locked in somehow? We would like to preclude any sort of automatic change in planning use status of the land, which might come about as a result of its solar farm use over the 40 years.

6. Management of the construction phase is also important. Conditions should be imposed to ensure the noise, light and heavy vehicle traffic are controlled and that the contractors work on a 'considerate' basis.

A final suggestion, which would give further depth to the environmental improvements outlined, would be for the applicant and landowner(s) to investigate new ways of providing environmental benefits from the project and gaining income from the land surrounding the proposed solar site. New income sources could be for environmental good works or tackling climate change, such as, the

governments environmental land management scheme (ELMS), by association with a carbon offset scheme or the Kent County Councils Tree Establishment Strategy "Plan Tree". This might enable the planting of woodland on the southern side opposite the solar farm to provide additional benefits for the environment, wildlife, a natural sound barrier against traffic noise from the M2, offset harm to the setting of the AONB and enhance the tranquillity of the AONB. The Parish Council would like to engage with and support any such initiatives if contacted.

We ask members to consider the above potential conditions fully, with a view to enabling a boost to the 'green energy' provision in Kent, while minimising damage and creating a positive impact on the environment.

Yours faithfully

for BREDGAR PARISH COUNCIL