

RODE PARISH COUNCIL – PROPOSED SOLAR FARM AT RODE

COMMENTS TO PLANNING COMMITTEE MEETING 7TH MAY 2024

Planning Application 2023/2183/FUL

My name is Jim McAuliffe. I'm a Parish Councillor in Rode. Rode PC formally declared a Climate Emergency in 2021, and set up a Climate Emergency Group, which I have been leading for the past three years. Both the Parish Council and the Climate Emergency Group strongly support the provision of sustainable energy, and we would very much like to support this application. However, this particular application has a number of fundamental flaws, chiefly:

- Scale. This proposed scheme would be the largest Solar Farm in Somerset, and one of the largest in the UK. The scale is very, very significant – the footprint of the development is over two and a half times the footprint of the village, and would result in an area equivalent to more than 100 football pitches being covered in black metal structures, right up to the edge of the village.
- Rode is one of the jewels in the crown of Somerset's heritage – it has an extraordinarily rich history, and therefore it should be very important to preserve the setting of the village.
- 40% of the village is covered by Conservation Area, within which there are over 75 listed buildings (including a Grade I listed church, and six Grade II* buildings). There are, in addition, 30 other entries outside the designated area.
- A recent exercise carried out by Somerset Council concluded that six nearby and adjacent sites in Rode were unsuitable for development, for a number of reasons – most importantly due to the strong negatives and the difficulty of mitigation in relation to landscape, settlement character and distinctiveness. It would seem perverse if the Council subsequently concluded that such a large development, in such close proximity to the village, is actually suitable;
- The very recent research published by Friends of the Earth demonstrates that there is huge potential for solar power generation in England on land which is NOT in close proximity to heritage assets.
- The research undertaken by Friends of the Earth was detailed, and identified further land in proximity to the proposed site, but further away from the village and its heritage assets, which would be suitable. This clearly demonstrates that there is no requirement to develop the land closest to the village in order to deliver a significant renewable energy project.
- Key consultees such as the Conservation Officer, Historic England, and the Landscape Officer have either objected to the application or highlighted significant concerns. CPRE has also objected strongly to the application. Historic England has significant concerns regarding the impact the development would have on the open rural landscape. The Conservation Officer states that the mitigation measures do little to overcome the negative impact the application will have on the surrounding designated heritage assets and "are a poor attempt to overcome this level of harm". The Landscape Officer states that "the proposed development will have a significant impact on this rural, agricultural landscape".
- There were 60 separate local objections, and only four comments in favour. This is a significant level of local objection which needs to be considered very carefully by the Committee, given the level of impact this proposal would have on the village.
- The planning balance outlined in the officer's report is very fine, and is obviously a matter of judgment. This judgment does not take account of the fact that the "Significant harm" to both Landscape and Heritage will last for at least 40 years, whilst the "Substantial benefit" accorded to Renewable Energy Generation can be achieved with some moderate amendments to the scheme, and therefore avoid the significant harms which the council officers acknowledge.

It would be a tragedy if this application were approved today, when an alternative scheme is possible, that would preserve the historic setting of Rode village, address the concerns raised by many regarding the impact on heritage assets, and still provide significant renewable energy generation.

In conclusion, the good news is that an acceptable scheme CAN BE produced which both delivers significantly for the climate, but also preserves the setting of the historic village of Rode for future generations. Rode Parish Council therefore urges the committee to reject this application, to allow an alternative scheme to be put forward which would be acceptable to all. This may delay matters by a few months while the relevant parties agree the changes, but these few months need to be weighed against the significant harm to both setting and heritage assets which the council acknowledges, which will exist for at least the next 40 years.

Indeed, at a recent meeting with the Parish Council the applicant offered to consider amendments to the proposal which would make it more acceptable. There was insufficient time available for such discussions to take place, but – given more time – the Parish Council is committed to working with the applicant and others to identify a proposal which avoids the significant harms identified.