

Planning Application Reference: PL/2024/04926 – Land East of Blounts Court Farm, Devizes, SN10 5PH ("OTH" or "the Site")

Response from Potterne Parish Council

Potterne Parish Council STRONGLY AND UNANIMOUSLY OBJECTS to this application on the following grounds (each set out in more detail below):-

- Section 1 - Wiltshire's Strategic Objectives and Core Policies
- Section 2 - Landscape, History and Culture
- Section 3 - Ecology
- Section 4 - Agriculture
- Section 5 - Technical implications for the local grid
- Section 6 - Access Issues
- Section 7 – Flooding
- Section 8 - Security Concerns
- Section 9 - The Neighbourhood Development Plan

This Objection Notice is unapologetically thorough and therefore lengthy. It has taken many hours to fact-check the 1,000+ pages supplied by the applicant. Despite its advantage of time we have identified a number of pieces that are either missing or incomplete, and which has made our task of responding all the more difficult.

We do not believe that it is equitable that the applicant should be able to come back and have a 'second bite of the cherry' as it has already had ample opportunity to present their case: the application should be rejected out of hand. However, should the applicant be requested to provide any further information/critical surveys, we would expect a reasonable period of public consultation.

Section 1 - Wiltshire's Strategic Objectives and Core Policies (Wiltshire Core Strategy, adopted January 2015)

1.1 Strategic Objective 1.19

This objective states "*A strategy which will ensure that the most is made of Wiltshire's outstanding environments*" "*This means **the careful stewardship of our environmental assets** so that growth is complementary and does not erode the very qualities that make Wiltshire so attractive in the first place*" (our emphasis).

One Tree Hill is an extension of the beautiful Pewsey Vale and thereby neighbours the North Wessex Downs National Landscape. The impact on the landscape of the proposed development will be severe and "permanent". The Site is on the crest of a hill, elevated above the surrounding countryside and **visible from practically everywhere**. It is regarded as iconic. There are 3 Public rights of way (PROWs) directly impacted by the Site that are well-used by residents and visitors alike. The tree that gives the hill its local name dates back

to the Battle of Waterloo and can be seen on maps dating to 1820 and has been a **site of local significance for over 200 years**.

1.2 Government Food Security Strategy

The Government's Food Security Strategy published in June 2022 stresses the importance of maintaining agricultural land for food production. **95% of the Site is classified as BMV land** (see Section 4 below) and this is not disputed by the applicant. Land particularly when food security is becoming more of a threat in today's world. There is as much need to protect farmland due to the pressures on feeding a growing population (40% of our food is imported) as there is to convert and lose this land area for energy production.

1.3 Climate Strategy Delivery Plan

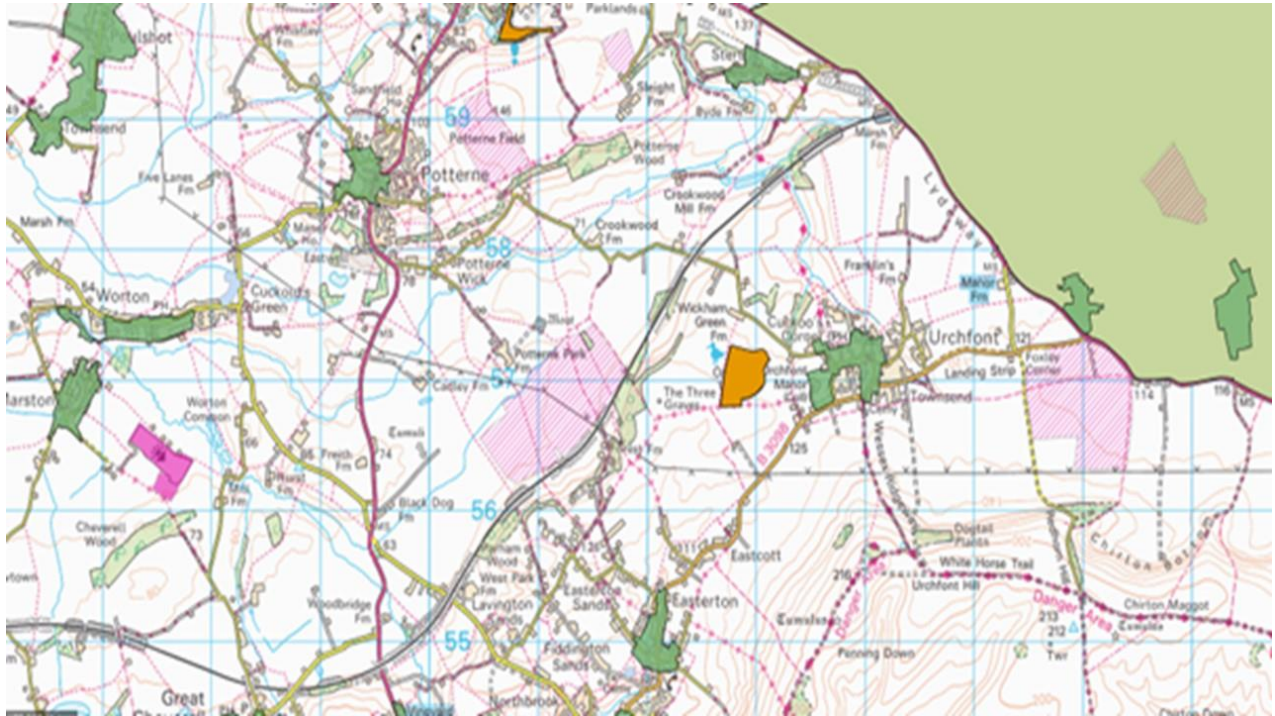
In Wiltshire Council's [Climate Strategy Delivery Plan](#) there is a 'High Ambition Pathway' to facilitate 590MW of solar capacity by 2030. Including recently approved solar farm developments, a total of **819MW** should be operational in Wiltshire well ahead of that time. **This means Wiltshire's solar target will have been exceeded by 39% several years before 2030, with still more solar proposals in the pipeline.**

1.4 Cumulative Impact of Solar Farms in Wiltshire

At the May 2024 Wiltshire Council meeting a motion was proposed by Cllrs Alford & Botterill calling upon the government to ensure solar developments be more evenly spread across the UK - given the fact that Wiltshire has the highest concentration of these industrial developments. The motion also stressed the importance of protecting agricultural land, our communities, and our rural way of life. The motion was passed with a huge majority – 74 votes to 2.

"The need to protect farming and the rural way of life is extremely important and Wiltshire Council is determined to do everything we can through planning policy and every other means at our disposal to support our farmers and our rural communities. We support the need for solar power, on the roofs of our houses and industrial buildings and on land of low agricultural value, but we do not want to see villages entirely surrounded by solar farms, industrialising the countryside" - Cllr Richard Clewer, Leader of Wiltshire Council, press release 22nd May 2024

To give this motion some local relevance to Potterne; consider that there are already 6 solar farms in a 5 mile radius of Potterne. There are a further 5 potentially in the pipeline in the area east of Potterne along a 7 mile corridor into the Vale of Pewsey (namely: the Site, Potterne Park Farm, Sleight Farm, Wedhampton and Wilsford) according to this map in the Wiltshire Council's EIA screening report for PL/2023/10332 (Wilsford not shown).



Each of these proposed developments is

1. within sight of or in the North Wessex Downs National Landscape and in beautiful countryside
2. on good quality agricultural land, and
3. contrary to their relevant Neighbourhood Development Plan

Such industrialisation of the countryside will completely change the character of Potterne and surrounding villages and the local farming landscape. As stated in the Alford & Botterill motion referred to above *“this area has been farmed for time immemorial”*. It is in an area designated as not-for-development in the Potterne NDP.

1.5 The project does not comply with Wiltshire Core Strategy.

The proposal does not meet the thresholds of **CP 42 on renewable energy installations** – the proposal will have a detrimental impact on **CP42i the rural landscape, CP42iv the biodiversity of the site, CP42vii residential amenity (visual amenity) and CP42viii Best and Most versatile Agricultural land.**

In addition, the application is contrary to **CP 50 on Biodiversity, CP 51 on Landscape, CP 58 Conservation of the Historic Environment and CP 67 Flood Risk.** It is also contrary to *Wiltshire Council Renewable Energy Study (March 2023)*, planning guidance document.

Section 2 - Landscape, History and Culture (Core Policy 42i and 51, CP58)

The area around One Tree Hill and the valley of Potterne Park is a **special tranquil area** that we have a duty to preserve, as stated in our objection to PL/2023/10332 (Potterne Park Farm). This is re-enforced by an independent LVA document commissioned by Steve Holt of the Potterne Solar Action Group that was conducted by *MHP Landscape Architects and Master Planning Associates*, which has been submitted separately under Comment number WC-24-08-308168 ("**the MHP LVA**").

Although the applicant's LVA ("**the ADAS LVA**") and the MHP LVA follow similar methodology, they come to very different conclusions. The main difference stems from the ADAS LVA limiting (para 2.6.1) their spatial scope to a 3km radius, concluding that "*Professional judgement and initial site appraisal, indicates that landscape and visual effects of note are likely to be limited beyond this distance*". The MHP LVA, however, uses a 5km radius. As a consequence of restricting the survey area, ADAS seeks to minimise the significance of the Site as a visible feature. Any local knows that you can see the One Tree Hill from great distance and likewise OTH affords the visitor tremendous panoramas when visiting the Site, including the Poulshot Solar Farm some 4km away. Journalist John Leech highlighted the importance of this hill in the Wiltshire Gazette of 11 August 1977, describing the tree at its summit as one of "*Wiltshire's great landmarks, standing to remind us of one of the most significant events that has shaped the history of the world, the Battle of Waterloo*".

2.1 A "Valued Landscape" (CP 58 Conservation of the Historic Environment)

The second major difference between the two LVAs is that the MHP LVA classes the site as a Valued Landscape as defined by NPPF:

*"Due to the distinctive physical landform features, visual prominence, and aesthetic attributes of the site along with the historic and cultural associations from the tree and hill feature combined, it is judged that the site forms part of a **Valued landscape**, as defined by the NPPF and with reference to NPPF paragraph 180 a) when tested using TGN 02-21: Assessing landscape value outside national designations."* (Section 3.7.4)

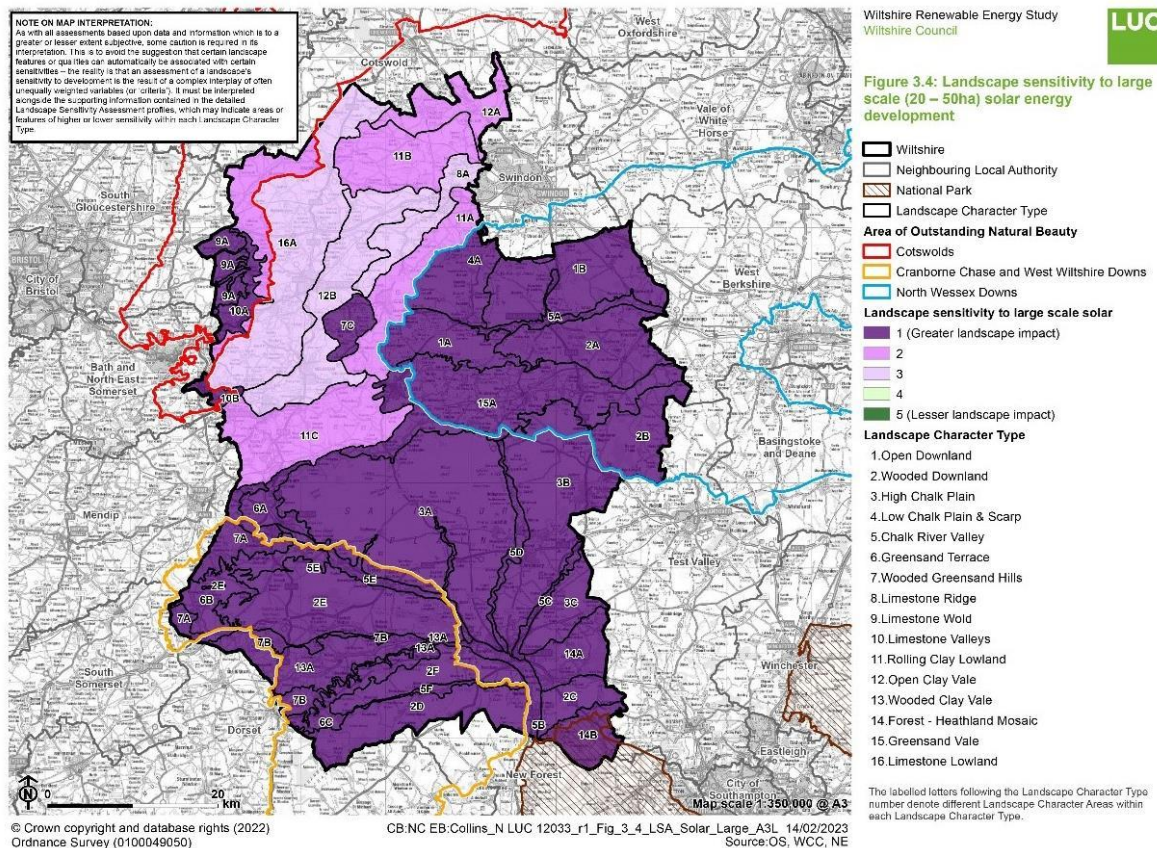
The MHP LVA accentuates the cultural and social aspects (paras 3.6.5 – 3.6.7) of the Site: "*The standard tree atop of the hill forms a local landmark that defines "one tree hill" and is identifiable from over 6km away*", and "*the tree contributes to a distinctive sense of place and makes an important contribution to local character and identity*".

On the other hand, the ADAS LVA sees the "Little Tree" (as they so disparagingly call it) as having limited cultural association (paras 5.2.45-5.2.46). It is clear that **the applicant is minimising the importance of the landmark**.

2.2 Landscape Sensitivity

According to the *Wiltshire Council Renewable Energy Study (March 2023)* the Site falls within Landscape Sensitivity Area 1 for large scale (20-50ha) solar energy development - as depicted in the chart (figure 3.4 of that report) shown below.

Figure 3.4: Landscape sensitivity to large scale (20-50ha) solar energy development



This is a 27ha site and the starting point is clearly that large solar implementations are detrimental to the landscape in zone 1 and therefore not suitable nor wanted in this area. **This is important context that the ADAS LVA and the Site Selection Report choose to ignore.**

2.3 Site selection

The Site Selection Report ("SSR") identifies 10 alternative sites within a 2.5Km radius drawn around the overhead line between substations at Devizes and Easterton, does a brief analysis of each in comparison to the OTH site and concludes that none of them is more suitable for solar development than OTH, so each of them is rejected.

This is a blatant application of double standards because all the grounds for rejection of these 10 sites also apply to One Tree Hill. Examples follow below:

- Public Rights of Way:** the OTH development "*would be appropriately screened from these PRow and the routes enhanced as part of a wider landscaping works*" (para 4.1.8); but **different rules apply to the alternative sites:**
 - sites 1,4,6,7 and 8 - "*users of both routes currently experience open and unrestricted views over the Site, which would be negated by the placement of the development within this location*" - all such sites were rejected.

- b. site 2 - "*[several ProW] currently experience open views over the site from these elevated positions. Consequently, extensive screening would be required to mitigate this potential impact as part of the wider proposals*" - site was rejected.
 - c. site 10 - "*Considering the location of these routes, and the sloping topography of the land, it is assumed the proposed development would have a degree of impact to the amenity of any users to these routes*" - site rejected.
2. **Access route:** regarding the OTH development, "*There is an existing access point to the south eastern flank, which currently serves agricultural purposes. This would be suitable for both the construction and operational phases of the project and require minimal upgrades*" (para 4.1.9). **Different rules apply to the alternative sites:**
- a) Site 5 - "*The Site would require access via the existing single-track route (Stern Valley Lane) to the north of the Site. This may not be suitable for larger construction vehicles due to the absence of passing-places, as well as low hanging branches from the adjacent tree lines.*", and so such site was rejected.
 - b) site 6 - "*In terms of options for access, this would be obtained via either Crookwood Lane, or the other unnamed track to the east. These both appear to be single-track routes and would potentially be unsuitable for the purpose of larger construction vehicles.*", and so such site was rejected.
3. **Site visibility:** the SSR makes no specific reference to the effect the development of the Site would have on the landscape, but accepts its relevance in the following alternative sites:
- a) site 1,5,7 and 9 - "*a qualified landscape consultant would need to be instructed to understand what level of cumulative adverse landscape and visual impacts would result from the development in this location*". All sites rejected.
 - b) Site 3 - "*Rowde Village is located to the north west of the site. The properties on the south western periphery of this undesignated settlement currently experience open views to the southeast over site DS3. Due to the close proximity and lack of intercepting screening, it is assumed the development of this location would result in a loss of amenity, by way of noise generation of visual intrusion*". Site 3 rejected.
 - c) site 4 - "*The Site is predominantly flat, but increases in height steeply towards the east. This topography would result in sections of the development being particularly visible to nearby sensitive receptors, including from the ProW network, and users of Conscience Lane to the south west*". Site 4 rejected.
 - d) site 5 - "*Online imagery suggests that there may be an events space located on Stern Valley Lane, adjacent to this Site to the north east. Residents/occupiers at this space, currently experience open views of this Site, which the development in this location would prohibit*". Site 5 rejected.

e) site 8 - *"users of surrounding highway network, experience open views over [the site]. Depending on the location of the development [within the site] it is likely that a loss of amenity would be experienced by users of the highway".*

4. **Efficiency:** re the OTH development *"The land gradually slopes down to the southwest towards Potterne, however this gradient is not so severe as to be unsuitable for the installation of panels, or so that it would impact upon the infrastructure's ability to generate electricity".* Contrast that to what the SSR says about rejected site 10: *"Whilst a completely flat site is not a necessity, a ground level change of this level, may impact on the effectiveness of the panels in receiving maximum sunlight throughout daytime hours".*

5. **Ecology:** according to the SSR no research has been done into this aspect, but reference to it is made for the need to require a survey by a chartered ecologist in respect of all the alternative sites.

2.4 Landscape and Culture - Conclusions

See paras 8.1.12-8.1.15 of the MHP LVA (our emphasis):

*"In summary, landscape effects have been assessed to be extensive resulting in **adverse effects to landscape character** not only locally but at some distance due to the prominent hill top location of the proposals surrounding a local landmark feature of notable cultural and historic value that has inspired place names. **The greatest impact will be on the site's cultural and social aspects** due to the cultural significance of the site in local history, artworks and folklore. The proposed change is uncharacteristic of the wider character areas and **goes against published landscape character guidelines** by situating the proposals at a ridge top and prominent location using the best and most valuable land. The adverse effects impact not just the local landscape but nationally protected North Wessex Downs National Landscape and the valued landscape of the site itself assessed using TGN 02-Assessing landscape value outside national designations.*

*The overall impact on landscape receptors is **moderate substantial adverse**.*

Visual Summary - visual effects have been assessed to be sizable. Long/ mid distance views and visual effects on the AONB have been found to have moderate to substantial adverse effects on receptors. Receptors from local footpaths outside of the AONB are moderate to substantially adversely affected by the proposals. Overall, most receptors will experience moderate substantial adverse effects on their views before mitigation is established, experienced both within the local vicinity and at distance.

Overall, the level of harm assessed to local and longer distance views from the development proposals is identified to be a moderate substantial adverse effect. "

Section 3 - Ecology and Biodiversity Core Policy 42iv and 50

Core Policy 50 in the Wiltshire Core Strategy relates to retaining the valuable natural environment including priority species and habitats, and in our view the application fails to comply with this policy.

One Tree Hill is part of an important wildlife corridor connecting Drews Pond Nature Reserve on the edge of Devizes with Potterne Woods and beyond the untouched Stert Valley

(Potterne Park) to the south. The whole area is rich in wildlife and contains rare and protected species such as bechstein bats, barbastelle bats, brown hares, hedgehogs, grass snakes, barn owls, skylarks and cinnabar moths, to name a few.

3.1 The Site

The proposed solar development site is 71u acres with 3.3 metres high panel, 2metre high security fences, lighting stands, inverter cabinets and 3.6 metre high mounted CCTV cameras. It will cover most of the hill, running all the way from Potterne Woods to Drew's Pond Nature Reserve. The effect of this upon wildlife will be multiple:

- It creates a large and intrusive man-made barrier to wildlife
- It severs the wildlife corridor between Potterne Woods and Drew's Pond Nature Reserve
- It destroys the existing habitat for protected species such as the endangered skylarks and brown hares that live on the arable land at present
- It will drive away endangered bats, sensitive to disturbance, that are known to commute, forage and roost across the landscape including between Potterne Woods and Drew's Pond Nature Reserve

3.2 The Construction Phase

From what little information the applicant has provided it seems that the construction phase will involve up to 130 vehicles on site every day. We calculate that on average one vehicle will enter or exit via Potterne Woods every 3 minutes of the 12 hour working day over a 9 month period. There will be heavy lorries, concrete mixers, articulated vehicles, grab vehicles, tipper trucks, heavy loaders, vans and more. Over the period of 9 months the developer plans to transport thousands of tonnes of solar panels, concrete, metal frames, inverter cabinets, fencing and cabling onto the site. The lorries will drive through the narrow woodland earth track that runs from the east end of Potterne Woods through the normally tranquil woods and up to the access point to the site where the solar array will be. Trees and hedges will be removed to create access. Overhanging trees will be cut back to allow lorries through. Seventeen mature beech trees that line the woodland track and whose roots extend underneath it, will be damaged. Apart from being **highly dangerous** for walkers and their pets, runners and cyclists this operation will have **the following impacts upon wildlife, trees and the health of the woodland:**

1. The huge noise and disturbance will drive away wildlife from the woodland
2. The narrow, ancient woodland track, created by drovers hundreds of years ago, will not be able to sustain this kind of wear and tear and will undergo permanent damage
3. Tree roots will be damaged by the impaction of the ground from heavy vehicles
4. Trees will be damaged
5. The track and its banks will be eroded and become a river of churned up mud in winter
6. Seventeen mature beech trees on the bank will, in turn, be damaged by this erosion and compaction. Their position on a bank which drops away sharply on one side, makes them uniquely vulnerable, having root systems that can only anchor them on the side of the track. Generations of Potterne children have inscribed their names in the bark of these beautiful trees.
7. Trees and hedges will be lost at the access point to the site
8. The developers will demand to widen or asphalt the woodland track causing further damage and permanently turning the tranquil woodland track into a road

3.3 Endangered and Threatened Species Affected by the Development

1. **Bats** - Eleven of the eighteen species of bats in the UK are known to be present in the Stert Valley area which includes Potterne Woods and Drews Pond Nature Reserve adjacent to the solar site plus the ancient woodlands of Folly Wood, West Wood and Parham Wood. These species are:

Greater Horseshoe** Lesser Horseshoe** Bechstein** Barbastelle** Pipistrelle* Natterer* Whiskered* Brandts* Brown Long Eared* Noctule** and Serotine**.

The bats using these ancient woods are facing a two-pronged attack. This is due to a second solar site application at Potterne Park Farm that will be one mile long and further break up their foraging and commuting ranges.

A colony of rare barbastelle bats is known to exist in Potterne Woods and radio tracking has demonstrated that they forage extensively over the farmland upon which the solar industrial array will be sited. At other times in their life cycle, these bats use sites in Devizes such as Drews Pond Nature Reserve and Devizes Castle for roosting.

It is a criminal offence to harm protected species of bats. Specialist surveys by independent experts will have to demonstrate that there will be no negative impact on them from the solar array. Yet scientific studies* have shown the opposite to be the case. Bats are sensitive to glint and glare and artificial lighting and have been known to crash into solar arrays. Studies show their populations decrease when solar arrays are introduced to their habitats.

* 2022 joint study by Universities of Bristol, Stirling and Sorbonne: “Renewable Energies and Biodiversity – the Impact of ground mounted solar photovoltaic sites on bat activity”

2. **Skylarks**** nest on the ground in the fields that will be covered by solar panels. Their habitat will be destroyed and this protected species will be driven out. They are on the “UK red list” as a species in rapid decline.
3. **Brown hares and hedgehogs**** also inhabit these fields and will, too, be driven out once the land is converted to the proposed solar industrial site. Hedgehogs are classified as a species “vulnerable to extinction” in the UK. Hares are designated a 'priority species' in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan 2010.
4. **Little owls* barn owls*** and other raptor species known to hunt and forage over the area of the site will permanently lose this habitat. Their roosts in Potterne Woods will be badly disturbed during construction.
5. **Reptile species** such as **slow worm,* lizard,* and grass snake*** will be impacted. They are all in decline in the UK and listed “priority species” in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.
6. **Badgers*** living in Potterne Woods, the woods around Sleight Farm, the banks of Sleight Lane and the whole area close to the proposed site will be badly impacted by the traffic. They will suffer noise and vibration disturbance and are very likely to fall victim to injury or death from vehicles traveling through the woodland and narrow lane. Under the **Protection of Badgers Act 1992**, it is an offence to injure or kill a badger.

**** protected and endangered/vulnerable species** *** protected species**

3.4 Core Policies and Countryside Act

Wiltshire's Core Policy No 50: Biodiversity and Geodiversity (2016)

“Development proposals must demonstrate how they protect features of nature conservation and geological value as part of the design rationale. There is an expectation that such features shall be retained, buffered, and managed favourably in order to maintain their ecological value, connectivity and functionality in the long-term.”

“The valuable natural environment includes not only identified sites, but also other features of nature conservation value including:

- *priority species and habitats (including those listed in the national and Wiltshire Biodiversity Action Plan)*
- *areas of habitat with restoration potential.*
- *features providing an ecological function for wildlife such as foraging, resting and 261 breeding places, particularly wildlife corridors of all scales which provide ecological connectivity.”*

Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981 – Under the Act it is a criminal offence to intentionally destroy any wild bird, its nest, or eggs, or to harm any bat, damage, or block access to its roost (even if it is not occupied at the time), or to disturb a bat whilst it is occupying a roost. For some birds listed in Schedule 1 of the Act, such as barn owl, it is also an offence to disturb them while they are nesting, building a nest, in or near a nest that contains their young, or to disturb their dependent young.

As shown from the above sections, this application directly contravenes these policies/acts.

3.5 Biodiversity Net Gain

Base Line Calculation

The developer's base line calculation is important because it pretends to establish the amount of valuable nature contained in the site they want to plant solar panels on. A low number is set, so all the developer needs to do is slightly increase this number by putting up one or two bat and bird boxes and then claim they've improved the biodiversity of the site (so called “net biodiversity gain”).

The developer's base line calculation does not take into account Potterne Woods, its trees and the diverse creatures and plants in it. Yet the solar industrial site is immediately adjacent to it and the whole woodland will be heavily impacted. The same is true of Drews Pond Nature Reserve. The developer's biodiversity calculation for trees includes just the short single line of trees on the southern edge of the solar industrial site plus the heritage tree (“One Tree”) swallowed up by the site.

Claimed Net Biodiversity Gains

These will be very minor compared to the loss of habitat and green wildlife corridor that will occur when the hillside is covered in solar panels.

Should we be impressed by the developer's proposal that one third of a hectare of existing border grassland be "improved" and turned into "species rich grassland" for the wildlife? No, because this is a trifling amount. And in any case, their plan also includes turning half a hectare of arable land into barren sealed road for site maintenance. For this, no mitigation is required they say.

It is also worth noting that species rich grass, even when it is a small amount has to be maintained. It does not maintain itself for 40 years. But there is no mention of employing anyone to do this task.

3.6 Surveys

The developer has applied for full planning permission but has only carried out a **preliminary** biodiversity assessment to date with very small surveys. This is inadequate and full, proper field surveys of flora and fauna will be required to include: Breeding birds survey, bat surveys (roosting and tracking), reptile survey, badger survey and tree surveys.

The preliminary biodiversity assessment (by ADAS for the developer) focuses narrowly on the land covered by the solar panels and ignores the impact upon Potterne Woods and Drews Pond Nature Reserve and the important green wildlife corridor running between them across the solar site. It also ignores the line of mature beech trees located just one meter from the woodland track.

3.7 Mitigation Strategy

At the end of the day, no amount of small improvements such as hedge planting can compensate the creatures that live on the arable land at One Tree Hill for destroying their habitat. And no amount of bat boxes will make up for building on the fields that bats use to forage for insects and commute across as a safe green corridor to other woodlands. No mitigations can alter the fact that another piece in the jigsaw of connected woodland strips and untrammelled countryside will be removed.

Section 4 Agricultural Land - Core Policy 42viii

The then secretary of state for energy security and net zero, Claire Conthinho on 15th May 2024 sought to clarify the need to preserve agricultural land when assessing solar farm applications: *"applicants should, where possible, utilise suitable previously developed land, brownfield land, contaminated land and industrial land. Where the proposed use of any agricultural land has been shown to be necessary, poorer quality land should be preferred to higher quality land avoiding the use of "Best and Most Versatile" agricultural land where possible"*. She went on to clarify BMV is *"defined as land in grades 1, 2 and 3a of the Agricultural Land Classification"*.

The applicant admits that the site is good quality land - see section 3.1.10 of the Planning, Design and Access statement which declares **95% of the total site comprises BMV agricultural land** - 9% grade 1 land, 17% grade 2, 69% grade 3a and 5% grade 3b.

The secretary of state's statement, along with the recent statement from Wiltshire Council quoted in section 1.4 above, plus this land classification makes it perfectly clear that agricultural land of the quality seen here on One Tree Hill should not be for solar use.

According to ADAS's Planning, Design and Access Statement ("**DAS**") *"At the end of the facilities lifespan it will be decommissioned and all the associated equipment will be removed. The land can then be efficiently reverted to agricultural use **without negatively impacting on the soil's quality**" (para 4.6.1) (our emphasis). This is highly unrealistic, and there is likely to be permanent damage **because** according to a report ("The Impact of Solar Photovoltaic Sites on Agricultural Soils and Land") prepared by the same ADAS in March 2023 for the Welsh Government ("**ADAS Welsh Report**") *"The main impact of the three phases of development is deep soil compaction resulting in the loss of versatility of Best and Most Versatile agricultural land...It can take many years for soils to recover from compaction and compaction may be permanent. Runoff from panels can result in rivulets which can lead to soil loss by erosion."* (Executive Summary).*

DAS para 10.3.5 says *"Proposals would present the opportunity for livestock grazing", but* according to the ADAS Welsh Report *"Grazing of grassland by sheep required careful management. Excessive stocking rates and/or grazing on soils susceptible to damage during wet weather may negatively impact the soil during the operational phase and may pose environmental issues such as increased surface water runoff"* (para 4.1).

Finally, no outline plans have been provided for decommissioning. Bearing in mind that there are likely to be changes in ownership of the Site with a possible change of priorities, there is no mention of any contingency plans should operators encounter financial instability or the economics of solar PV change during the project life and trigger early decommissioning.

Section 5 – Technical Implications for the local grid

For the Potterne Park Farm application Ashley Wilson submitted a paper describing the implications of the proposal for the Transmission network, which highlighted the constrained nature of the grid in this area (see comment WC-24-01291543 on PL/2023/10332). Although the One Tree Hill implementation is on the Distribution Network not the Transmission Network the implications are similar and, if anything, more pronounced.

If this One Tree Hill application were to proceed it would use up the remaining capacity on the distribution network into Devizes and Easterton (see Figure 1: Site Area map of the applicant's submission showing the grid connection into the substations at Devizes and Easterton). This basically means that the capacity impact is a lot more local - i.e. if granted to an external commercial entity, this implementation will reduce the ability of local businesses and local new housing developments to engage in smaller scale generation projects (like roof top solar) for the foreseeable future. Indeed, an operational OTH solar farm would make District Network Operator approval of anything larger than a basic domestic 3.68kW system very problematic.

This is counter to the national / regional energy strategy and counter to the statements made at Wiltshire Council (see section 1.4 above) which is putting its support behind roof top solar which is more flexible.

What is needed here is more top down strategic input into the planning process, aligned with the 2023 BEIS/Ofgem Connections Action Plan, to give direction as to where these types of

industrial developments can and cannot be sited – ie non-agricultural sites and in areas that make sense from a grid perspective. These constraints need to be part of planning approval consideration. These are important national infrastructure decisions and progressing with sub-optimum applications that conveniently ignore the wider implications for us all is not the way ahead.

5.1. Exaggerated Benefits

Greenmatch.co.uk are an organisation that tries to help people move towards a more sustainable future by providing information on renewables: heat pumps, solar panels etc.. Greenmatch say: *"based on the average annual electricity consumption of a household for every 5 MW installed, a solar farm will power approximately 1,500 homes per year"*. Typically, solar farm proposals tend to conform broadly to this approximation, although importantly no mention is made of the extreme seasonal or diurnal intermittency inherent in their electricity generation.

The **One Tree Solar** brochure (distributed widely to 658 households according to para 3.3.1 of the Statement of Community Involvement) quotes 15 MW as the output of the solar farm which will therefore power approximately **4,500** homes. The submitted proposal documentation, however, actually quotes a larger cumulative panel design capacity of 20.9 MW (16.5 MWac). Therefore, the Greenmatch approximation would suggest annual generation would equate to the equivalent average power requirement of between 4500 - 6000 homes depending on your starting point. Yet, the applicant **misrepresents the true picture by a factor of nearly two** by claiming (para 9.1.5 Design and Access Statement) the grossly inflated figure of 10,000 homes in their brochure. This point is more fully explained in the Comment by John Peak filed 8th August 2024, which we endorse.

Section 6 – Access Issues

6.1 Access route totally unsuitable for any heavy traffic.

The access from the A342 to the Site is a distance of 1.3 miles (2.1km), the whole of which is single-track. The first part (0.54 miles, 0.87km) is along a lightly used narrow unclassified metalled road which serves the small hamlet of Sleight and has very few passing places, none of them line-of-sight. The remaining part (0.77 miles, 1.24km) of the proposed access is along a narrow un-metalled byway (POTT50) with low-hanging branches from adjacent tree lines; there are no passing places and it is used by riders, walkers and occasional agricultural traffic.

Inconceivably, the applicant's Construction Traffic Management Plan ("CTMP") states (para 2.3) *"The site is readily accessible"* along this route and that it will accommodate construction traffic associated with the development *"without causing adverse effects"* - all of which we strongly refute. The CTMP states *'there are natural widenings to allow two vehicles to pass'* but over the entire route none are sufficiently large to allow the largest HGV to pass without damaging the verges significantly. The proposed mitigation measures for this site are not suitable for the challenging access. For example, the CTMP cites *'holding vehicles at a specific location'*. This 'specific location' is not identified but will not be within the proposed site access route without blocking the route.

6.2 Developer acknowledges unsuitability of access route.

We endorse the Comment by the Wiltshire Bridleways Association (WC-24-305901) regarding access difficulties, which mirror our comments above in section 2.3 - Site Selection. Significantly, access conditions in respect of two of such sites are almost identical to those of the Site: (a) site DS5 "*would require access via the existing single-track route ... This may not be suitable for larger construction vehicles, due to the absence of passing-places, as well as low hanging branches from the adjacent tree lines*" (SSR para 3.8.3), so that site was rejected "*due to the potentially inadequate access*" (para 3.8.6); and (b) site DS6 has two access options both of which "*appear to be single-track routes and would potentially be unsuitable for the purposes of larger construction vehicles*" (SSR para 3.9.3), and that site was rejected "*due to limited access options*" (para 3.9.6)".

The applicant has cited that at peak there will be 130 vehicle movements per day during construction period, this level of traffic would cause **significant disturbance on this route**. It equates to nearly 3 vehicles on average on the route at any one time based on the applicants own assertion that '*traffic will arrive throughout the day*'. This will cause **significant damage to the surface and to passing places**. Furthermore, these vehicles will share POTT50 with other users for the entire 9 month construction, less the two week proposed closure. It would also be **highly dangerous** to walkers, their pets, joggers and cyclists using the route. The proposed mitigations are not detailed enough to give confidence that the risk has been appropriately mitigated.

6.3 Disruption and damage resulting from the access route.

According to the CTMP the construction period is "*anticipated*" to last for 9 months (para 6.1) with an aggregate total of 25,649 two-way vehicle movements (CTMP Table 6.1).

Planning permission has recently been granted for the building of a 170-house estate (PL/2021/07203) immediately to the west of the Sleight Lane/A342 junction, so **any additional traffic there (especially HGVs, moving or queuing) will cause major congestion over a long period on this important route into Devizes**.

It is self-evident that there will be significant **damage** to the surface of the proposed access route and the trees overhanging it.

The condition of the byway POTT50 is such that a significant amount of **dust** will be generated by the construction traffic and this will in summer be a major **nuisance** for houses nearby and for walkers/riders, necessitating suppression systems. In winter it is likely to turn into **mud/runoff** which would block **drains** and impede access to the Site.

There are a lot of horses in fields or stables on Sleight Lane and a stud nearby, and because of its beauty and ecology the area is very popular for the riding of horses. The two bridleways POTT45 and POTT46 and the byway POTT50 will be **unusable for riders** during the whole of the anticipated 9-month construction period, which is wholly unacceptable. The proposal

(para 2.2) to close POTT50 for two weeks seems wholly inappropriate against the significant number of vehicle movements over 9 months. There is no legal speed limit on POTT50 and so enforcement action against dangerous driving would be difficult. The applicant has applied no mitigations to this.

6.4 Lack of detailed construction method statement.

There is no method statement on the construction method for this development.

No comment has been made about the requirement for ground improvement to support vehicle turning circles, parking and off loading/ storage areas. Nor has the impact of this been considered in the applicant's Flood Risk Assessment ("**FRA**").

The CTMP cites the use of concrete mixers. The areas to be concreted have not been determined, nor how much concrete is required. This could be as foundations for transformers or for footings for the panels themselves. Without this information it is difficult to determine the ground disturbance, the actual number of vehicle movements and the increased risk of flooding.

Section 7 Flooding - Core Policy 67

The applicant states that there would appear to be little chance of flooding on site itself. This is not the issue, however. Coxhill Lane is at the bottom of the bridleway that comes down the steep hill from the Site to the centre of Potterne village. Over recent times this lane regularly floods and the siting of a solar farm on the crest of the hill is concerning residents - due to the increased rates of run off. This is a serious issue not addressed by the applicant.

Flooding in Potterne is a growing problem for the village that has not been resolved. Flood waters cause damage to private properties in the conservation area, including listed buildings. Damage is also caused to public assets, mainly roadways and drainage systems in many parts of the village.

Most of the water that causes this flooding originates from rainwater that falls in the catchment to the east of the village. A substantial part of this catchment is on One Tree Hill where the proposed project is situated. From this catchment, the water flows into the village, mostly down the steep valley of Coxhill Lane. We believe the FRA submitted by the applicant to be inadequate because it does not consider the potential impact on neighbouring areas when we clearly have a growing problem.

As already mentioned, there is no construction method statement and as we point out in section 6 above there is likely to be concrete standing areas on the site which will affect runoff. We also don't know if the stanchions for panels will be concreted in – again affecting runoff. There is reference in the FRA to chalk being the base layer upon which this construction will be fixed; if chalk is indeed the base layer this could be problematic – chalk is an excellent filter but once disturbed it cements like concrete and water can only run off, not through. It is not for us to do the work of the applicant, but the case has not been made to address these issues.

The Planning Application Form answers the question “Will the proposal increase the flood risk elsewhere?” in the negative, but there is a real risk that the flooding in Potterne village will increase.

7.1 Policy Compliance - NPPF

The proposal fails to take full account of the requirements of the ‘National Planning Policy Framework - Section 14 - Meeting the challenge of climate change, flooding and coastal change’, notably paras 157,158 and 159.

The following points, from the subsection titled “Planning and flood risk”, are highlighted in particular:

Para 165 “...*the development should be made safe for its lifetime **without increasing flood risk elsewhere***”

Para 166“*They should consider **cumulative impacts in, or affecting, local areas susceptible to flooding,***”

Para 170 demonstrate“*b) the development will be safe for its lifetime taking account of the vulnerability of its users, **without increasing flood risk elsewhere,** and, where possible, will **reduce flood risk overall***”

In conclusion, note Para 173“*When determining any planning applications, local planning authorities should ensure that flood risk is not increased elsewhere.*”

Section 8 – Security Concerns

According to national data reported so far, **reported crimes on solar farms has increased by 93% comparing 2021 to 2022.** This is driven by a 48% increase in thefts of cables, and thefts of solar panels has quadrupled comparing 2021 to 2022. Cables on solar farms are usually copper and the price of copper which remained consistent in 2023 but forecast to increase in 2024. **There is a high level of repeat victimisation**, once a solar farm has been targeted once; it is likely to be targeted again. 61% of solar farms that reported a crime in 2022 either suffered another offence in the same year. Historically, it has **mainly been organised crime gangs** that target solar farms, travelling the length of the country. However, in 2023 it is thought that around 25% of the reported offences on solar farms are due to local offenders who repeatedly target the same area. Source: Northumbria Police Designing Out Crime Officer in response to a solar farm application (Ref 23/01717/FUL: Land At Whittonstall Consett Northumberland), who have not yet seen theft of metal from solar farms, but said that Opal SOAC (Serious Organised Acquisitive Crime) has stated in July 2023, that nationally there is an emerging threat of metal crime from the renewable energy industry.

Obviously the existence of a solar farm would **expose nearby properties and residents to increased risk of crime.**

According to DAS para 4.7.1 the main sections of the boundary treatment will be livestock fencing to a height of 2m comprising timber posts and wire material. In the application referred to above Northumbria Police states that a 2.4m (let alone one 2m high) stock proof boundary fence would **provide little deterrence value at all**, and that security fencing

(specified to LPS1175, issue 8.1:D10), rather than post and rail, is the minimum requirement. The applicant's arrangement would therefore be wholly inadequate, because **in order to deter theft realistically and to obtain insurance for the Site** it would require a 3m steel palisade fence with steel posts set in concrete around the whole perimeter. However, that would make the Site completely unacceptable, both visually and aesthetically. It would seem the applicant has not made proper arrangements to protect and insure its investment: what other aspects of the development have been overlooked?

Section 9 - The proposed development violates the NDP.

This is not a rejection of the need for renewables or solar - it is a rejection of this particular site. The people in this part of Wiltshire have more than demonstrated their support for solar investment. There are 6 solar farms within a 5-mile radius of Potterne and given the proximity of the NWD AONB this is quite a concentration and demonstrates a serious commitment. Wiltshire is more than doing its bit on solar. This is a designated area for agriculture not development.

9.1 Area Priorities

The priority for this area is agriculture and the protection of a Special Landscape Area and a historic monument. We would support that categorisation to prevent future industrialisation of this tranquil rural landscape. Tourism is an important plank in our growth strategy going forward for the Devizes area and **access to the countryside is one of our best assets.**

Devizes was recently ranked the Number 1 location to visit in the whole country, being described as "*Wiltshire's Best Kept Secret*" (Source: London Economic in 2021, published in the Wiltshire Gazette). One Tree Hill is the closest vantage point to the south of Devizes. Our priority for this area is not development and not solar. We have been quite clear in our Neighbourhood Plan that specific areas are not for development and this hill is one of them. More Parish Council time has been spent fighting to preserve this rural gap than on any other planning issue since the Potterne Neighbourhood Development Plan was approved by Wiltshire Council, we are not about to surrender it for this inappropriate industrial monstrosity.

9.1.1 Extracts from the Potterne Neighbourhood Development Plan ('NDP')

1. The NDP is a serious, objective strategic development plan that took nearly five years to complete; at every stage of its development, it involved detailed and protracted research by its steering group and close involvement with our community. It takes into account all the constraints as well as our actual housing needs - matters that, living here, we know best; and we believe it remains just as relevant, realistic and practical now as in 2016, when it was made.
2. *"The Plan should maintain the distinctive character of the village by ensuring that there remain green corridors between the settlement boundaries of Potterne, Devizes and other nearby villages. **The Plan also seeks to ensure that there is protection to specific views in and out of the village.**"* ("Vision and Objectives of the Plan" (NDP para 2.1.1.1).
3. *"Sites on the edge of the village outside the settlement boundary shown in the Wiltshire Core Strategy Policies Map have **been carefully chosen to avoid any land of high potential ecological value** - the majority are on land presently used for arable agriculture."* ("Site Allocations - Preamble" (NDP para 3.1.5)