Little Staughton Parish Council – Response to Consultation.

Little Staughton Parish Council, having considered the information provided in the recent Statutory Consultation process, and overwhelming feedback from residents have decided to unanimously **OBJECT** in the strongest possible terms to the proposal put forward by East Park Energy.

The key objections are as follows:

1. It is our opinion that the scheme is too large and not in keeping with the rural setting of the area. The majority of the proposal will be visible from dwellings and well-established footpaths, bridleways and indeed the roads into and out of all the villages affected.

2. In terms of planning policy. The Government stated in August 2023 that renewable energy should be acceptable for their proposed location. In terms of large scale solar it stated:

   > "The deployment of large-scale solar farms can have a negative impact on the rural environment, particularly in undulating landscapes".

   The report goes on to state that planners will need to consider the following points:

   I. Encouraging the effective use of land by focussing large scale solar farms on previously developed and non-agricultural land, provided that it is not of high environmental value.
   II. Where a proposal involves greenfield land, whether the proposed use of any agricultural land has been shown to be necessary and poorer quality land has been used in preference to higher quality land.

   The East Park application does not adhere to these points.

3. The East Park proposal states that 74% of the land is classified as Best and Most Versatile. The Government's consultation draft changes of the NPPF state:

   > "We have been clear that food security is important for our national security, and that safeguarding BMV land is an important consideration."

4. The Bedford Local Plan 2030 contains the policies below:

   > **Policy 56** – identifies suitable locations for large scale solar energy developments, these being areas of lower quality agricultural land, existing built-up areas and other areas of previously developed land.
   >
   > **Policy 57** – requires that impact must be fully addressed if a proposal is to be supported. These include the visual appearance and landscape character, local land use, social and economic impact, surface and ground water, the BMV land.

   The East Park proposal meets none of these.

5. **Policy 37** of the local plan requires that development proposals will protect and enhance the key landscape features and visual sensitivities of the landscape character areas identified in the Bedford Borough Landscape Character Assessment.

   Proposals will be required to protect and enhance the character and qualities of local landscape through appropriate design and management and to

   Safeguard and where possible, enhance key views and vistas.

   We do not feel that the East Park scheme reflects these policies and furthermore:

6. Several properties are surrounded by solar panels as part of this scheme. Not only will properties become significantly and detrimentally affected visually by the East Park scheme, two of these properties run businesses that deal exclusively with animals. The owners of both businesses have significant concerns, especially regarding the construction phase and the associated noise disruption and traffic movements that this will bring. We do not feel that is acceptable to put small businesses at significant financial risk due to their proximity to the scheme.

7. We have concerns regarding the traffic movements during the construction phase of this scheme. East Park has stated this will take approximately 3 years to build and that there will be a total of 7,200 HGV deliveries made during this period. All access points will be reached via local roads which we feel will be damaged by such a large volume of traffic movements. We feel that the sheer volume of larger vehicles in conjunction with farm traffic could result in damage to the road surfaces and verges and could also lead to an increase in traffic collisions.

   This combined with a workforce of up to 850 people per day, will also have a significant affect in local country roads that have not been designed for large traffic movements.

8. We have concerns relating to the screening and planting of the scheme. East Park has stated that they will use saps, which will be planted once the construction phase has taken place. This means that there will be a minimum of 10 years from the start of construction before screening will begin to become effective.

   The scheme in Pertenhall that was completed some 8 years ago is still not screened satisfactorily despite the developer assuring the community that this would be done.

   What reassurances can be provided regarding the maintenance of the planting post build?

9. We feel that there will be a significant and negative impact on local wildlife from this scheme. Miles of high fencing is not going to enhance the environment for wildlife and the area is well populated by various mammals and a wide range of bird life including Sky Larks, lapwings and English Partridge, these particular birds are all classified in the UK as Red under the Birds of Conservation Concern.

10. Flooding is a major concern, particularly through Pertenhall Brook and the River Kym. We would like some more clarification relating to the water run off from the solar panels.

    Further to this point we also have concerns relating to the contamination run off from the solar panels. Solar cells contain a variety of materials that can be hazardous in certain concentrations and if they enter the drinking water supplies. This is a further concern for the wildlife who will ingest this water.

11. We would request more information of how East Park has come to choose the land/layout they have submitted. There are other fields and farms that are positioned closer to the grid and indeed to other sites within the scheme. There appears to be land near sites C and D and which runs closer to the A1 on land that is not used as a public right of way.

    This land is already serviced by several hard standing tracks and some of these would have been used during the construction of the solar scheme currently running on Little Staughton airfield.

    Not only would the grid connection be much closer if this land were used for the scheme, but it would make the road traffic movements more manageable and traffic could be kept away from Little Staughton, Great Staughton and Pertenhall. If planned properly, using this site might mean that Site A could become redundant, and Site B drastically reduced in size.

12. Representatives of East Park mentioned that the solar panels will need to be replaced at some stage during the 40-year life of the site. We understand that the number of panels would be 'substantial' and so struggle to see how it can be classified as green and clean energy when the carbon footprint required to deliver the panels alone and project in general would be monstrous. We note that this will add to the local traffic issues, and we wonder how these solar panels will be disposed of in an environmentally friendly way?

13. In terms of the community grants there needs to be much more discussion around this.

    The current offer of £2m, across all sites is derisory in light of the impact to the landscape and the local community. A number of parishioners have been made aware of the significant loss of value to their homes as a result of the scheme. There are also people who have concerns that they will not be able to move home, either through a job move, downsizing or illness due to the uncertainty this scheme has brought to the local area.

    We feel that there should be significant benefit to those who live here for the long term and suffer from the industrialisation of the rural area they have chosen to live in.

14. It was noted at the Little Staughton consultation that East Park is not responsible for the "making good" of the land, back to productive arable land at the end of the project. This, we are led to believe will be the responsibility of the landowners,

    We will be proposing a "significant" sum be placed in escrow to fund and ensure that this rectification does take place in 40 years' time. It is our experience that these

schemes will be “sold on” at some stage and quite probably more than once during the 40-year period so it is very important what is promised at the outset is actually carried out at the end.

15. Battery Storage – Up until this point there has been no mention of how this will be managed and how the risk of fire will be mitigated. It was reported during August 2023 that a Private Members Bill had been proposed by the MP for Basingstoke, Dame Maria Miller, calling for England’s fire and rescue services to be made statutory consultants in the planning applications for proposed industry lithium-ion battery storage facilities. During a House of Commons debate, she outlined the potential hazards of Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS). In 2020 a 20 MWh BESS in Liverpool took over 11 hours to contain and resulted in an explosion and the release of toxic gasses. Given that this proposal is some 20 times that size, in the event of a fire explosion the damage could be extensive and far ranged with the toxic fumes/smoke.

To conclude we believe that the East Park scheme has absolutely no positive benefit for any of the local communities affected by it and to that end the Little Staughton Parish Council strongly opposes the scheme.