



The countryside charity  
Northamptonshire

## Gayton Solar Farm Appeal

### Dismissed by Secretary of State

- Brian Skittrall

Gayton is celebrating the dismissal of the developer's challenge to West Northamptonshire Council's refusal of the solar farm at Gayton. This decision could mark a turning point in the weight that is given to the visual impact of solar farms in planning decisions.

When I spoke against the Flore solar farm, the WNC planning officer persuaded the committee that it was almost impossible to win an appeal if they voted to refuse the solar farm and, as a result, they gave permission despite over half of the development being within protected landscapes and partly on Best and Most Versatile Land. In effect, officers felt that solar farms had a virtually free pass through the planning system. At that time appeal decisions bore out their warnings as did the Inspector's recommendation for Gayton. However, in Gayton's case the Secretary of State stepped in to overrule the Inspector's recommendation and dismiss the appeal.

Both the Inspector and the Secretary of State weighed the harms caused by the development against the benefits and then considered whether the benefits justified the harms. This process is subjective and in this appeal the Secretary of State disagreed with the Inspector and concluded that the harms outweighed the benefits.

Just as they did with wind farm proposals, the Planning Inspectorate place a very high value on the generation of relatively modest amounts of renewable energy and to date they have placed a similar value on solar farms. Unlike onshore wind farms, solar panels are not restricted to relatively few remote sites and so there is far less excuse to choose harmful sites, especially when most of the generation could be within the built environment. This decision could indicate recognition of that.

At Gayton the Secretary of State felt that the harm from its visual impact would have been greater than the Inspector had judged and also seemed more concerned about the harm to heritage. This was sufficient to sway the decision against allowing the appeal and resulted in its dismissal.

This decision will be useful going forward as it lays out the aspects of solar farms that are considered significant. They are:

- the impact on protected landscapes is significant
- the lack of screening in the early years and in winter is significant
- Best and Most Versatile land is only significant if it can be farmed separately
- Impact on heritage assets is significant
- reversibility is not significant

The developer has six weeks to challenge the dismissal in the High Court, but they may choose not to do so as they would expect to lose some appeals. They may also worry that a High Court judgement against development could trigger a significant change in government policy, making it harder to get permission for other projects. This happened when the High Court ruled against the wind farm proposal near to Lyveden New Bield.

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50/50

## Gigantic Solar Farm planned for Northamptonshire

- *Brian Skittrall*

Island Green Power has announced that they intend to pursue a 60-year permission for a 500MW solar farm with battery storage covering approximately 2,350 acres of land. The majority of the land is currently productive farmland. The proposal is ten times the size of the largest solar farm in the county and would be the largest permitted in England to date. It comprises seven blocks of land of varying sizes connected by underground cable. The batteries would be capable of storing



*The proposed solar farm would be much larger than this one near Wellingborough (Image Credit: Commission Air)*

up to four hours of power generation.

So why is this being proposed in this location? It would seem that the main driver is that Island Green Power has secured an agreement for a 500MW connection into Grendon substation and has sought out sufficient agreements with landowners in order to fully utilise it. At the moment the economics of farming make it more profitable to lease to a solar farm than to farm the land, so it is a very tempting offer, especially to absentee landowners.

The southernmost block of land wraps around three sides of Easton Maudit with Grendon lying between two huge blocks of panels. In the central block, Mears Ashby would have blocks of solar panels on three sides stretching northwards all the way up to the existing small solar farm above Beckworth Emporium and southwards all the way down to the northern edge of Earls Barton. A further block would lie between Holcot and Moulton and yet another, the northernmost block, would be to the north of Walgrave and the east of Old.

The impact on the countryside of such vast swathes of panels would be enormous; particularly for the residents of the most affected villages, who would feel that their homes in pleasant countryside have become homes in an industrial landscape. Our county used to be known as the county of squires and spires because of its rural and bucolic landscape. We are in danger of instead becoming known as the county of sheds and solar farms.

CPRE Northamptonshire has recently published the *Northamptonshire Landscape Design Guide*, its first major guidance document since the publication of the well-received *Northamptonshire Countryside Design Guide* in 2016. With an ever-changing planning system and increasing threats to the countryside from large-scale warehouse and storage facilities, we decided to follow up this previous initiative. Having initially conceived the project during lockdown, a small team of volunteers met regularly by Zoom over a 2-year period to put together the bones of our new publication. Intended to complement its predecessor, this new Guide seeks to assist those wishing to build in the county and local

planning authorities whose responsibility it is to approve locations for development within Northamptonshire.

CPRE believes it is important that new developments should not only relate well to the landscape of the countryside, but also enhance and further promote its appeal. The Guide is designed to help anyone interested in protecting what is special about their local landscape. Our county's countryside is valued for its tranquillity as well as for its productivity, its understated beauty and its intrinsic value and variety. CPRE is concerned that these qualities are being lost as the landscape of Northamptonshire is being steadily eroded by developments

## Northamptonshire Landscape Design Guide

- *Alan Mayes*

detrimental to what is special and unique about it. In too many places attractive and productive countryside is being replaced by bland, indiscriminate and/or uniform development.

The planning system provides the statutory means for protecting landscapes from harmful development. The Guide highlights the factors that developers,



I write this having just received the sad news of the death of our former President, David Laing, DL CBE. As well as a supportive and energetic ambassador for CPRE Northamptonshire, David Laing was a guiding light for charities across



Northamptonshire, and was duly recognised for his services to charity and philanthropy, with an CBE in this year's New Year's Honours list.

David held the office of Lord Lieutenant between 2014 and 2020, was High Sheriff

for the county and pro chancellor of the University of Northampton in 2015. He was vice chair of Northamptonshire Enterprise Partnership, as well as being involved with Northamptonshire Community Foundation, Northamptonshire Association of Youth Clubs and vice president of the Northamptonshire St John Ambulance Brigade.

CPRE extends sympathy and condolences to his widow, Mary, and her family.

Our Executive Committee has, since the beginning of the year, been busy planning for the rest of the 2024. Due to the constant reminder that our countryside is under threat from inappropriate development, we have taken on the services of Nigel Ozier, a qualified planning consultant with local company Aitchison Raffety. I think it's fair to say that Nigel is a "local boy" with lots of local knowledge to help us in our task of providing support with specific planning

submissions.

We also welcome Kevin Binley to our ranks as a new trustee. He is very involved with local development issues

## Chairman's Update

- Geoff Carverhill

and comes with a raft of knowledge which we hope to capitalise on.

Meanwhile we are preparing for the official launch of our *Northamptonshire Landscape Design Guide* at Lamport Hall on 17 April. The Guide is a blueprint for the future of Northamptonshire, so we think it is rather important.

Our next Roadshow, *Focus on Affordable Housing*, will take place at Great Houghton Village Hall on the evening of 9 May.

planners and others should take into account when assessing the landscape impact of proposals and in determining whether that impact is necessary or justified.

The Guide aims to raise the general public's awareness of the distinctive characteristics of our countryside that need safeguarding. It also targets local planning authorities and parish councils, to enable them to fully take into account the impact of developments on the natural landscape and countryside when considering planning applications. The Guide has been written to ensure that, when development does take place, it does not detract from the unique value of the landscape or the setting of the towns,

villages and features of cultural and historic significance that make Northamptonshire unique.

The Guide's emphasis on the importance of context to proposed developments feeds into our current focus on developing a *National Landscapes (AONB) Strategy* for North Northamptonshire, about which you will learn more in our next edition.



In March 2023, First Renewable Developments Ltd with North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) launched a public consultation regarding a *Masterplan for Kettering Energy Park*. For many, this was the first time they had heard of such plans, and on examination of them it was clear that the proposed development had very little to do with Kettering and even less to do with renewable energy.

The plan proposed that 445 hectares of agricultural land located at Burton Wold –

Instead, what was being put forward was specifically high energy demand warehouse and industrial units. The public consultation was flawed, with organisations such as CPRE never being notified. Important documents – including those relating to traffic impact on Finedon and the A14 – were withheld until a FOI request forced their disclosure.

The area is a unique part of Northamptonshire, a high clay plateau forming the southernmost section of the Rockingham Forest National Character

Local communities submitted a large number of objections to the plans. A public petition was raised, public meetings held – including in November 2023 a meeting of NNC’s Executive Advisory Panel to which representatives from the local communities were invited to speak. The issues identified were manifold, but included:

- Unsustainable development with no public transport access, footpaths or cycleways
- Destruction of some 20 kilometres of protected hedgerows
- 16,000 extra vehicle movements on the A510
- Car parking for 3,500 cars
- No highway improvements
- No additional renewable energy generation
- Loss of a unique part of Northamptonshire countryside
- Loss of habitat to listed and endangered species
- Buildings being visible over 20 miles away

## What’s that coming over the hill? - Kettering Energy Park

- Kevin Binley

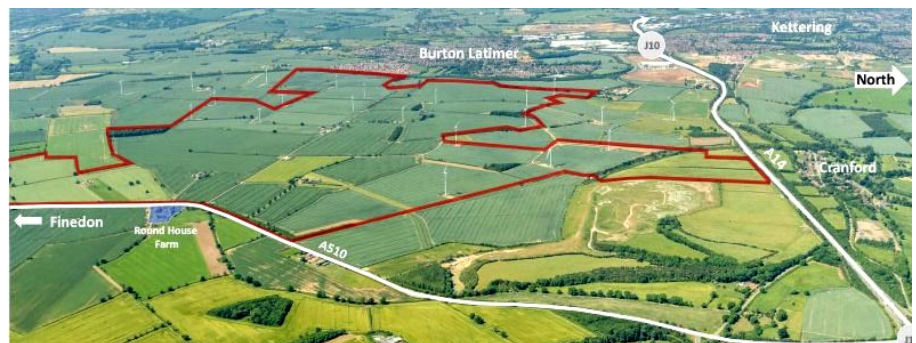
an area of open countryside between Burton Latimer and Finedon – be turned into a large scale warehouse and industrial park with 5 million square feet of buildings, some 100 ft high; the total area of development would be 10 million square feet - equivalent to 174 football fields.

In 2016, NNC published a document known as *The Joint Core Strategy (JCS)* that set out a strategic plan for North Northamptonshire for 20 years, including housing, employment and leisure. In the JCS was the following statement: *Proposals for sensitively located renewable and low carbon energy generation will be supported at Burton Wold...for an Energy Park to add to the range of renewable energy technologies already present.*

The Burton Wold wind farm is located alongside the A14 close to the conservation area of Cranford. An application for four solar farms on the same land was approved in 2015, though none have yet been built.

Whenever the Energy Park had been mentioned previously, it was always on the understanding that the site would be used for renewable energy generation.

Area. It is unusual in having no settlements within it - Burton Latimer sits to its west, Cranford and the A14 form its northern edge, the Nene and the villages of Woodford, Great and Little Addington



lie to the east and Finedon to the south. One road crosses the area, the A510 Finedon to Cranford, which is notable for the roundhouse built as a panorama point in memory of the Battle of Waterloo and the Duke of Wellington. The land is divided by field boundaries visible on the enclosure maps of 1803 and based on medieval parish boundaries. Despite the wind turbines, the land is very much as it has been for hundreds of years. Located close to the Upper Nene SPA, the site is known as *functionally linked* land to endangered bird populations of this highly important ecological area.

In the NNC meeting in November, council officers stated their concerns with the plan, raised with the developer in March 2023, remained. None of the councillors on the Panel spoke in favour of the draft Masterplan and the local communities made their feelings clear, with 13 of the local town and parish councils signing a letter calling on NNC to reject the draft Masterplan – such a concerted action by disparate communities is in itself unique.

CPRE Northamptonshire described the plan as *building yet more warehouses in the open countryside which will encourage 5,000+ people to travel*

## Weekley Hall Wood Victory!

- Alan Mayes

In the Autumn issue of Outlook, we set out the background to the battle to save Weekley Hall Wood near Kettering from inappropriate development. After a massive public campaign to save this much loved area from overdevelopment, a Public Inquiry was held in November 2023, following the non-determination of the planning application by North Northamptonshire Council.

CPRE Northamptonshire, having previously responded to the planning application, also gave a presentation at the Public Inquiry. However, the ultimate credit for the rejection of the application must go to

the local campaigners who left no stone unturned in putting together a very detailed case against the proposed development.

In refusing the application, the Inspector (who is appointed by HM Government to determine the planning application at an inquiry such as this) highlighted in particular the proposals' non-compliance with policy 36 of the Joint Core Strategy for North Northamptonshire and the detrimental impact they would have on the biodiversity of the area.

In our previous article, we too had argued that the application did not comply with

planning policy 36 in the Joint Core Strategy which was published in 2016. The scale and type of the development, comprising mainly warehousing, were contrary to the essence of this policy and the Inspector's strict adherence to policies sets a very good precedent for future proposals where applicants consider it



appropriate to disregard them. The fragile nature of the biodiversity of the area has also been championed in the decision to refuse the proposals and this sets an excellent principle for protecting our countryside.

A new report entitled *Unravelling a crisis: the state of rural affordable housing in England* was launched at a parliamentary reception held at The House of Lords, on 28 November. The comprehensive report shows the impact of this crisis on rural communities and offers solutions on how to fix them.

The event was attended by over 100 people from across the sector, parliament and the CPRE network. There were speeches from Baroness Hayman, Housing Minister; Lee Rowley, Social Housing Campaigner; Kwajo Tweneboa and Pauline Rose, a rural social housing tenant. The reception was opened by Roger Mortlock, chief executive of CPRE, who stated that:

*Decades of inaction have led to an affordable housing crisis that is ripping the soul from our rural communities. Solutions do exist and the next government must set and deliver ambitious targets for new, genuinely affordable and social rented rural housing, curbing the boom of second homes and short-term lets.*

*Record house prices and huge waiting lists for social housing are driving people out of rural communities, contributing to soaring levels of often hidden rural homelessness. We need urgent change to ensure we don't end up with rural communities that are pricing out the very people needed to keep them vibrant.*

A chronic shortage of genuinely affordable housing is forcing people out of the communities they know and love. This worrying crisis is being fed by record house prices, stagnating wages and an increasing number of second

## CPRE Launches its Report on Affordable Housing

- Geoff Carverhill

homes and short-term lets. The countryside, where levels of homelessness have leapt 40% in just five years, is being drained of skills, economic activity and vital public services.

In Northamptonshire, the situation is just as serious. The Northamptonshire Community Foundation commissioned its own report, published in May 2023, highlighting some staggering findings, such as *in just one year - 2022 - rural rough sleeping in Northamptonshire skyrocketed by 24 percent*. Another recent report by Northamptonshire ACRE explores some of the other problems being experienced by rural communities, focusing on rural food poverty and insecurity. These reports combine to highlight some real problems in rural communities and, although the CPRE report is a national analysis, some of the issues and the solutions within it are very relevant to our county.

To find out more about what CPRE Northamptonshire and CPRE nationally are proposing, as a result of the *Unravelling a crisis: the state of rural affordable housing in England* report, make a note in your diary to attend our *Focus on Affordable Housing* roadshow at Great Houghton Village Hall at 6.30pm on 9 May when we will have guest speakers Rachel McGrath, CEO of the Northamptonshire Community Foundation, and Brad Taylor from CPRE National Office, one of the report's authors.



## Community Awards Nominee

### - Woodford Halse Rural Community Larder

- Geoff Carverhill

Following the success of our Community Awards presentation at Yardley Arts in September 2023, in which awards winners were given the opportunity to talk about their own individual community organisation, a member of our Executive Committee suggested the idea of having a Community Awards Showcase, ahead of our prize giving awards next year. This is scheduled to take place in September 2024, so we have been busy finding suitable candidates.



In January, I was invited to take a look at a remarkable community organisation, based in the Daventry area of the county. During the Covid19 pandemic, Karen Pollard set up a food distribution service from her home in Byfield to help local people who were struggling to get good quality food supplies and other necessities. With the help of the Good Neighbour Scheme, around 80 volunteers were called upon to do various jobs from picking up prescriptions, DIY and shopping to helping with hospital trips, mainly for elderly or infirm residents.

Karen was aware that the need for shopping support was growing due to the lockdowns, and she organised the sourcing,

collection and delivery of around 30 food parcels every day, from her home. As well as households in crisis, families with young children who were receiving free school meals were provided with weekly lunch boxes to ensure their nutrition would not suffer due to the pandemic impact. But, with the cost of living crisis and loss of realistically-paid jobs, rural communities are struggling to survive in post-pandemic Britain.

In the summer of 2022, with suitable funding in place, the Woodford Halse Rural Community Larder was officially established. With the help of Miranda Wixon DL, another two community larders have been opened at Brixworth and Daventry. The organisation now has over sixty volunteers, who man the larders, help to collect and deliver food to over 26 villages, in the process helping to feed over 1,700 people a month.

Each household becomes a member for the year for a £10 membership fee and can then attend each week and purchase either a £5 or a £10 fixed fee grocery shop. The Larder has, however, become more than just a way of providing food. It now offers toiletry and cleaning products too, outside agencies come in to give free advice on debt and law, plus an Outreach programme and Household Support funds from West Northamptonshire Council. Karen also has a team of volunteers who befriend people and help with medical support or just companionship.

They also receive food and recipes from FareShare Midlands, which allows members to try new foods that they otherwise would not have access to or would never try for fear of wasting money.

The Woodford Halse Rural Community Larder is a glowing example of what can be achieved by a community from an initiative of one person.

Thanks to Karen Pollard, Miranda Wixon and FareShare Midlands for the statistics and information about the Community Larder.

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*to a site where there are no rail networks and no bus services is not sensible strategic planning.*

The threat posed by the proposed mega-warehouse development of Kettering Energy Park shines a spotlight on the delicate balance between progress and preservation. When the developers come forward with their revised plan, it is imperative for all stakeholders to engage in open dialogue, consider alternative solutions and prioritise the long-term health of the countryside.



**First Prize £60:**  
Robin Jones

**Second Prize £50:**  
Max Nicholls

**Third Prize £40:**  
Glenda Kerruish

Our last 50/50 Draw after thirteen successful years. I took over the Draw from Peter Hopkins, who had run it for the previous twelve years, on the understanding that it would be for one year only. Little did I realise that I would be the last winner of the first prize.

R J