



DUNHAM HILL & HAPSFORD PARISH COUNCIL MEETING

Tuesday 1st April 2025, at 7.00pm in the Dunham Hill Village Hall.

MINUTES

Present: Cllr K Bradley – Chair
Cllr C Green
Cllr C Jones
Cllr R Johnson
Cllr K Holmes
Cllr S Clarke

Ruth Luckins (Development Manager, Belltown Power)
Cherry Hall (Senior Land Manager, Belltown Power)
Fraser Shepherd (Lead Development Manager, Belltown Power)
Megan Pritchard (Meeting Place)

Clerk: Mrs T Ryall-Harvey

Members of the public: 3

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE – No apologies were received.

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS – no declarations of interest were received.

PRESENTATION BY BELLTOWN POWER – Megan Pritchard from Meeting Place opened the presentation explaining that she was facilitating the consultation of this planning application and handed over to representatives of Belltown Power who explained that the company was established in the UK in 2013 to develop, acquire, build and operate renewable energy projects. Originally the company was set up by three directors who have since separating and each developed their own business, some being overseas. They are currently a team of 25 people operating across the UK and believe they have strong development values and engage in transparent, open and tailored consultations with communities.

They reported that they were proposing to install 30MW Solar Farm over 200 acres of Grade 3b agricultural land, connecting to the National Grid at Ince via a local 33kV substation. They are processing to access the site via Common Lane of the A5117 and expecting that subject to planning permission approval they estimated the construction time to be 6-12 months.

They were offering a Community Benefit and Education fund of £12,000 /year index linked (3400/MW) for local community and £3,000/year available to education initiative.

They answered questions raised by Parish Councillors and residents which included but not limited to:-

Was there an agreement in place for the use of the land – Belltown Power confirmed that they had an agreement in place with two farmers to utilize their land for 40 years, should the land be sold then the lease would be within the title of the land and the agreement would therefore transfer over to the new owners. After 40 years the installation will be removed and the land restored to the same grade of land as currently there. There was a decommissioning bond in place with money set to one side for the end of the lease to ensure this work took place.

The solar panels would be between 0.8 meters off the ground to 3 meters and sheep would be able to naturally graze the fields.

The proposed area of land was ideally located to feed not the national grid at Ince.

Concern was raised by several Parish Councillors and members of the public with regards to this project being sited on Green Belt Land and questions were raised as to why this project could not be undertaken on brown field land such as the waste land on the site at Stanlow that may be contaminated.

Representatives of Belltown Power confirmed that even though Green Belt land was not ideal, they don't look to build solar farms on contaminated land due to the special precautions that would need to be taken when installing on contaminated land.

A Parish Councillor asked why the site needed to be so large (200 acres) and Belltown Power confirmed that it would not be viable on smaller sites.

A Parish Councillor sought clarification as to where the solar panels would be sourced from. A representative of Belltown Power confirmed that they had not tendered out for this project yet and would seek suppliers once planning had been approved.

Belltown Power confirmed that they would build and manage the project.

A Parish Councillors highlighted that in the Neighbourhood Plan within the Wildlife and Biodiversity section it stated that solar panels should not be fitted within 15 meters of hedges, Belltown Power confirmed that they would have to review this as their plans they were working on had the solar panels installed upto 10 meters from the hedges /boundaries.

Belltown Power confirmed that a 2.4 meter high stock proof fence would be installed – mainly to deter deer around the perimeter of the site.

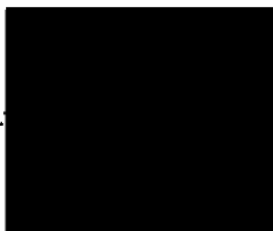
A question was asked as to if there was intended to be any access from Rake Lane, it was confirmed that all access would be from Common Lane onto the site, however they may need to cross Rake Lane with cables at some point.

Belltown Group confirmed that they are an independent group founded initially by two American's and an Englishman in 2013.

Representatives of Belltown Power undertook to provide response in writing to all questions that had been raised by a resident and provided to the representatives in his absence.

The meeting closed at 19.52

Signed:...



Dated: 6.5.2025

Mrs T Ryall-Harvey

Answers provided by Belltown Group to questions raised and not answered at the meeting, following the meeting:

The land is Green Belt and can be used for agricultural purposes. It is Green Belt for a reason and should be left unbuilt upon.

- Belltown Power fully recognises the importance of the Green Belt and the need to protect it. Solar farms are designed to be temporary and reversible developments, with the land retaining its greenfield status throughout.
- Importantly, the proposal does not involve any permanent buildings and is carefully designed to respect the openness of the Green Belt, with landscape planting and screening to minimise visual impact. Planning policy does allow for renewable energy development in the Green Belt where very special circumstances can be demonstrated, which is what the Hob Lane planning application would seek to do as tackling climate change and ensuring a secure, clean energy supply are recognised as key national priorities. As part of the demonstration of very special circumstances in the planning application, we will carry out a sequential test to show that no alternative sites were available in the area which could connect into the same National Grid substation and are not in the Green Belt.

40 years is not "temporary". It is, basically, two generations. After 40 years why would anyone want to remove the structures and what arguments could anyone put against them being left in place? They are and should be regarded as permanent structures in the Green Belt.

- 40 years is a long time and it's a point we do take seriously. However, in planning terms, a temporary permission means the land must be returned to its original condition once the operational life ends. Unlike permanent developments such as housing, solar farms are designed specifically to be reversible, with no concrete foundations for panels and minimal ground disturbance. This allows the land to be fully restored for future generations.
- The planning permission will include a legally binding requirement to decommission the site after 40 years with the full removal of all equipment and infrastructure.

I doubt that any sheep farmer will be interested in using the land. There are no sheep farmed on the land now so why should any farmer be interested in farming it when it is covered in structures? If sheep are not a viable option how will the proposers keep the overgrowth of grass and weeds under control? Will they use selective herbicides and over 40 years what damage will that do to the soil?

- There are many examples of solar farms which have sheep grazing in the fields amongst the solar arrays. At least one of the two landowners has confirmed their intention to bring sheep onto the land.
- If there is no sheep grazing, the grassland would be actively managed underneath the panels, and sown as wildflower meadows around the field edges and across some of the smaller fields on site. These would be actively maintained through regular site visits to keep any weeds under control, not relying on the use of any herbicides. By stopping arable cultivation on site and actively managing the grassland that would be introduced, the soils on site are likely to improve and be in better health after decommissioning than at present.

In their webinar the proposers said they initially looked at land closer to Hob Lane. Will that now be phase two?

- As the grid connection is for 30MW any expansion to the project would not be feasible and so there are no plans for a phase two.

It would appear from Companies House records that their other projects make losses. How will they pay for the proposed community gain? Who will decide which community benefits? What security will be offered for that community gain? Why such a small amount over a long period of time?

- Developing solar farms require lots of initial capital investment which is only returned once the project is operational, so it shouldn't come as a surprise that those project companies are loss making before the solar project is constructed.
- The community benefits are funded by the investment into the project and by the revenue that the project generates once operational. Belltown believes that it is the local communities themselves that know best how to spend the community benefits, and we are keen to hear any ideas on how this money could be spent. A suitable organisation (such as a trust) would be set up to receive the community benefit funds and run by the local community. Belltown would enter a binding legal agreement with the organisation to provide the funds over the lifetime of the solar project.
- The community benefit rate (£400/MW/year) is on the higher end of the typical range for solar farms. We are flexible with how these funds are distributed and could front load some or all of the funds if there is a particular project the community wants to fund.

What security will be given for the cost of removing and disposing of the structures in 40 years?

- As part of our long-term planning, we are committed to ensuring that the land can and will be fully restored once the solar farm reaches the end of its operational life. To provide assurance around this, a decommissioning bond will be agreed upon with Cheshire West and Chester Council.
- This bond is set aside specifically to cover the full cost of removing all equipment and restoring the land, regardless of the site owner or operator's circumstances at the time of decommissioning. It provides a clear and enforceable safeguard, giving the local authority confidence that the site will not be left in place beyond its permitted use.
- We will work closely with the local planning authority to agree an appropriate bond value and ensure that this commitment is in place well before the site becomes operational.

The possible use of Rake Lane as an access point should be positively prohibited.

- There is currently no intention to use Rake Lane as an access point to the site. Current plans are limited to one crossing point over Rake Lane, to link the north and south sections of the project. Access along Rake Lane would be maintained throughout

The possibility of a public footpath/bridleway through or around the site should be considered.

- We take on board your comments and will investigate the possibility.

A better site would be the Mersey Marshland where the enormous windmills have been sited.

- When identifying sites for solar farms we must consider a range of technical, environmental and planning factors. These include elements such as proximity to a viable grid connection, land availability and environmental constraints such as flood risk and wildlife habitats.
- Areas suitable for wind turbines are not always suitable or available for solar development. In many cases, such areas are protected or designated for specific uses and may not offer the grid access or planning feasibility needed for solar infrastructure.
- That said, we understand the desire to see renewable energy developments sited sensitively. This proposal is being designed with that in mind – making use of lower-grade agricultural land, maintaining agricultural use through sheep grazing and incorporating measures to enhance biodiversity and minimise visual impact. We're keen to work with the local community to ensure the scheme brings both local and national benefits in the transition to clean energy.