

## **Planning Application 22/00668/AS: Response from Kent Ramblers**

I am a Local Footpath Officer (LFO) for Kent Ramblers – a voluntary role - responsible for commenting on Planning Applications which may affect Public Rights of Way (PROWs) in Aldington and other nearby parishes. As this is a significantly larger proposal than those I have previously considered I have consulted with other Ramblers. I have taken views from and/or spoken with the the Policy and Advocacy officer at our national office, the Chair and the Secretary of Kent Ramblers, my Area Coordinator, Chairs of other Kent Ramblers groups and fellow LFOs in the East of Kent. I have met and talked at length with two members who live in Aldington. I was not involved in the earlier EDF consultation phase but I have met with James Lyons, the EDF Project leader.

The main focus for Kent Ramblers in any matter we comment on is of course the likely affect on PROWs. This is the case now but I think it is pertinent to introduce this response with some reference to our national policy, and my understanding of our members' concerns. I believe most Ramblers would consider themselves “Green” individuals and favour a move away from dependence on fossil fuels, but would wish to encourage developments which do not decrease the wider enjoyment and value of existing agricultural land. Our national Policy statement on Solar Energy reflects this perceived need for balance, expressing support for measures to mitigate against the threat of climate change, but arguing that:

*“ large scale solar PV arrays (solar farms) should be sensitively situated so that they do not damage valued landscapes....(including) areas of high scenic value.”*

We welcome the EDF decision to preserve the existing footpaths which pass through the proposed site, AE432 north of the railway and AE 459 south. We commend the decision, confirmed to me verbally and in writing, to ensure these paths are 5 metres wide with 5 metres between the adjoining fences and the panels, and we approve the proposed stock-proof fencing rather than the “prison type” metal fencing used in some other solar farms. We note also that paths close to or in the site, especially AE 435 and AE 457 will not be “boxed in” with panels immediately next to them. We are pleased that:

*“Existing Prows will remain accessible during the construction phase and be fenced off from the construction site” (Design and Access statement DA 69), but note that “PROWs will remain open although some management may be required during construction for health and safety reasons.”(Environmental statement Vol 1 P21) with “Banksmen used...to minimise risk and disruption during construction” (B 24).*

Some temporary measures will doubtless be needed – this is an aspect that could usefully be considered nearer the time, should the Application be approved, with Kent Ramblers and KCC, especially, involved in agreeing the detail of arrangements.

Some other aspects of path protection and maintenance could also be taken to a bespoke PROW group. It would be good to follow an increasing practice with other PROWs and ensure stiles are replaced by kissing gates and that all entry and exit points are open or gated in a user-friendly way for less able walkers. I understand also that EDF's project team are actively considering how to maintain the condition of the paths - whether the whole width or a part should be mowed, and if so how often, needs to be clarified.

It would be helpful to consider how much natural growth of plants and shrubs will be encouraged immediately next to the fences alongside the paths and panels, and, especially, whether shrub and hedgerow planting will be too robust for the fence. We are not pressing that hedging be planted alongside fences on the paths, particularly as it is not proposed to build high metal fences. As regards AE 432 a width broader than 5 metres will be allowed as there is a permissive path as well as the PROW.

When an array of panels is in a fairly flat field, as near Littlebourne, PROW CB148, hedgerows are effective in screening the visibility of the panels, after a few years growth. In a more undulating or sloping field this effect is reduced. For local walkers and others taking a short walk, hedging some or all of AE 459 will doubtless block the sight of nearby panels and improve the enjoyment of the experience. Most Ramblers will usually be walking several miles, often in a circular route. Their experience will not be as pleasant as now through this section but it will be part of a longer walk - "Oh, this is where we go through the solar farm" being a likely reaction. As above, this is an issue we could consider further but expenditure on planting more trees to reduce visibility of parts of the array for local residents may be a better alternative.

Construction work and especially bringing in and offloading panels and materials with large lorries accessing a narrow country lane is also a concern, not just for local residents but for walkers wishing to access paths from Church lane.

In conclusion, Ramblers appreciate that any proposal to site Solar panels in the countryside inevitably creates a difficult balancing act, considering pros and cons. There are gains and losses for the Council to consider. We will be pleased to cooperate with EDF, KCC and Ashford Borough Council on matters relating to the Public Rights of Way.

Nigel Spencer, August 2022.