

# Summary of response to Land at Baker's Road public consultation

June 2023

This document provides a summary of the feedback received during the public consultation for BSR Energy (BSR) proposals for a solar development on Land at Baker's Road, Belchamp St Paul, which took place between 26<sup>th</sup> September and 16<sup>th</sup> October 2022 and reopened between 31<sup>st</sup> October and 11<sup>th</sup> November 2022.

The aim of the consultation was to understand the views of stakeholders on the proposed solar development being brought forward, before the submission of a planning application to Braintree District Council.

The feedback received during the consultation period was balanced and provided some helpful indicators as to the communities' thoughts on the solar development proposed for Land at Baker's Road.

The overall response rate to the consultation was relatively low, at 1.23%, given that only 32 responses to the survey were received from the 2597 households that were issued the leaflet directly. This could suggest that there is limited interest in the proposals from the local community, which may indicate that a relatively small number of people feel that they would be directly impacted by the proposals, perhaps owing to the site's discreet location. Of the 32 respondents, only 9.4% expressed strong views against the proposals, with the majority of respondents either expressing neutral views or support for a solar development in this location.

The public consultation undertaken was promoted in the following ways:

- A leaflet to 2597 addresses, covering the surrounding areas of Belchamp St Paul, Knowl Green, Ovington, Church Street, Clare, Tilbury Green, and Stoke by Clare, among others
- A letter to 150 neighbouring residents and businesses offering a separate one-on-one meeting
- A dedicated project website with up-to-date information on the proposals and timeline
- Social media advertising on Facebook and Instagram to help spread news of the consultation and encourage participation
- Press release issued to Braintree & Witham Times, Essex County Standard, Essex Live, East Anglian Daily Times, Saffron Walden Reporter & Romford Recorder
- Posters issued to Clare Town Council and Belchamp St Paul Parish Council to display, advertising the consultation event

An in-person consultation event was held at The Old School Community Centre, Clare, running between 4pm and 8pm on Tuesday 11 October 2022.

Nine exhibition boards were displayed at the event covering details of the proposal, the landscape, various viewpoints of the potential development, biodiversity on the site, construction and operation, and how to take part in the consultation.

All materials displayed at the event were also made available online, as well as being available in hard copy, and accessible formats, on request

The event was attended by 38 residents, which represents 1.46% of those who had been notified directly through the community mailing. This low attendance could be a reflection of ‘consultation fatigue’ within the community, lack of interest in the site or details of the proposal itself, or the availability of information online.

## **Feedback**

### **Quantitative feedback**

The quantitative data received as part of the consultation was helpful in providing an overview of the attitude towards the Climate Emergency, net zero, cost-of-living, land use, and Biodiversity Net Gain.

- 90.63% of respondents stated that they either ‘agree’ or ‘somewhat agree’ that we need to take steps to tackle the Climate Emergency.
- A similarly high 77.42% of respondents stated that they ‘agree’ or ‘somewhat agree’ that building new solar developments will contribute to reducing carbon emissions and reach the goal set by the Government of meeting Net Zero by 2050.
- Respondents were split on whether they agreed that new solar developments will assist with the current cost-of-living crisis, with 50% stating they ‘agree’ or ‘somewhat agree’ that these new developments will help to provide additional energy security for the UK and reduce the cost of household and business energy bills.
- The proposals providing a minimum 60% Biodiversity Net Gain on site was considered to be of importance to respondents, with 60% considering it as either ‘1’ (very important) or ‘2’ (important).
- Returning the land to agricultural use following any solar development being decommissioned, was considered ‘1’ (very important) or ‘2’ (important) to 81% of respondents.
- 96.77% of respondents stated that it was ‘important’ or ‘very important’ for them that new developments make provision for improvement and creation of habitats, through infill planting, species rich grassland, and native hedgerows.

### **Qualitative feedback**

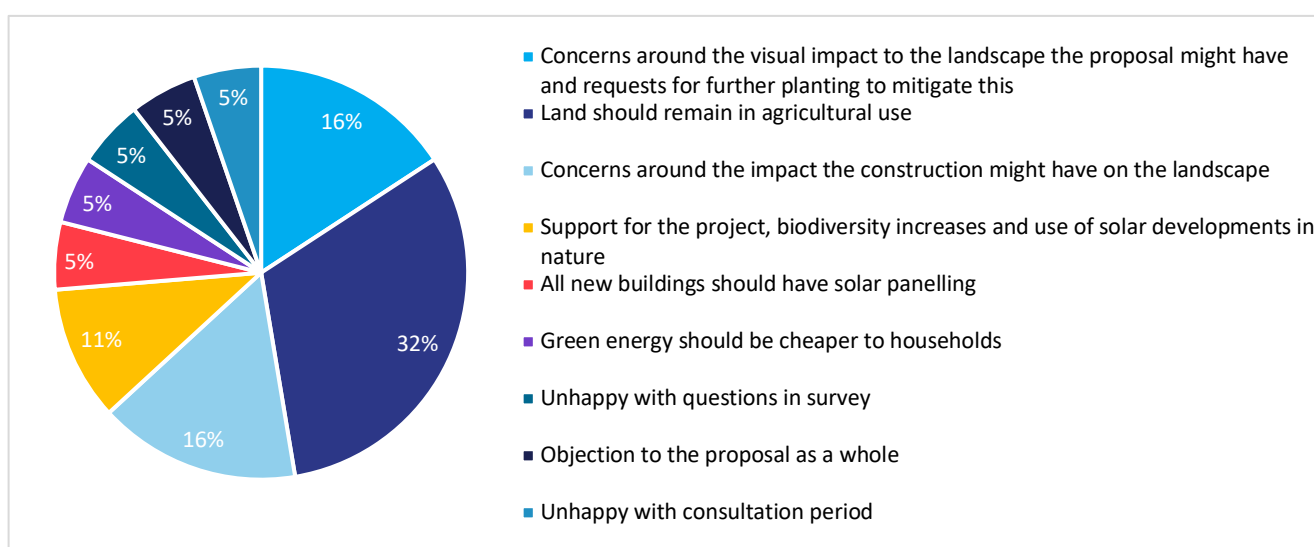
There were a wide range of responses to the qualitative questions at the end of the survey, which asked if there were any other comments that respondents would like to make on the proposals around two core themes: landscaping and biodiversity; and transport movements throughout construction, with one final question seeking any other feedback from respondents.

As is to be expected, the responses were mixed and did not always keep to the designated theme resulting in comments not always aligning with the question. Most responses were constructive and offered suggestions for how to improve the scheme. This included a variety of comments in support of the proposals. A breakdown of the feedback received from the three qualitative questions is below.

**Following a review of the information available, do you have any thoughts that you would like to share regarding the landscaping and biodiversity of the site?**

When asked to provide any further thoughts regarding the landscaping and biodiversity of the site, the majority, 56% of respondents chose not to answer. Those respondents that provided feedback highlighted the belief that the land should remain in agricultural use (32%), concerns around the visual impact to the landscape the proposal might have and requests for further planting to mitigate this (16%), concerns around the impact the construction might have on the landscape (16%) and support for the project, biodiversity increases and use of solar developments in nature (11%). Figure 1 below provides a visual overview of the response to this question.

**Figure 1:**



Examples of comments received for this question include:

Land should remain in agricultural use

- “Leave the site as agricultural land and don’t develop it. It comes with its own naturally occurring wildlife.”
- “I totally disagree with this proposal. I am 100% against building the solar panel on good agricultural land. And it ruins the local environment. Both for the flora, fauna and for people too.”

Concerns around the visual impact to the landscape the proposal might have and requests for further planting to mitigate this

- “My only thoughts would be that the solar panels are hidden by natural hedging i.e. robust hedging to required hight along the main road”
- “We would like to see all hedgerows left in place and preferably double planted so that there is a greater density of habitat for wildlife.”

Concerns around the impact the construction traffic might have on the landscape

- “In addition there will doubtless be a major impact on the old green lane leading from Knowl Green to Clare in Suffolk.”

- “This site is already naturally landscaped and biodiverse. Putting in a solar farm would be destructive to both. Leave it as it is.”

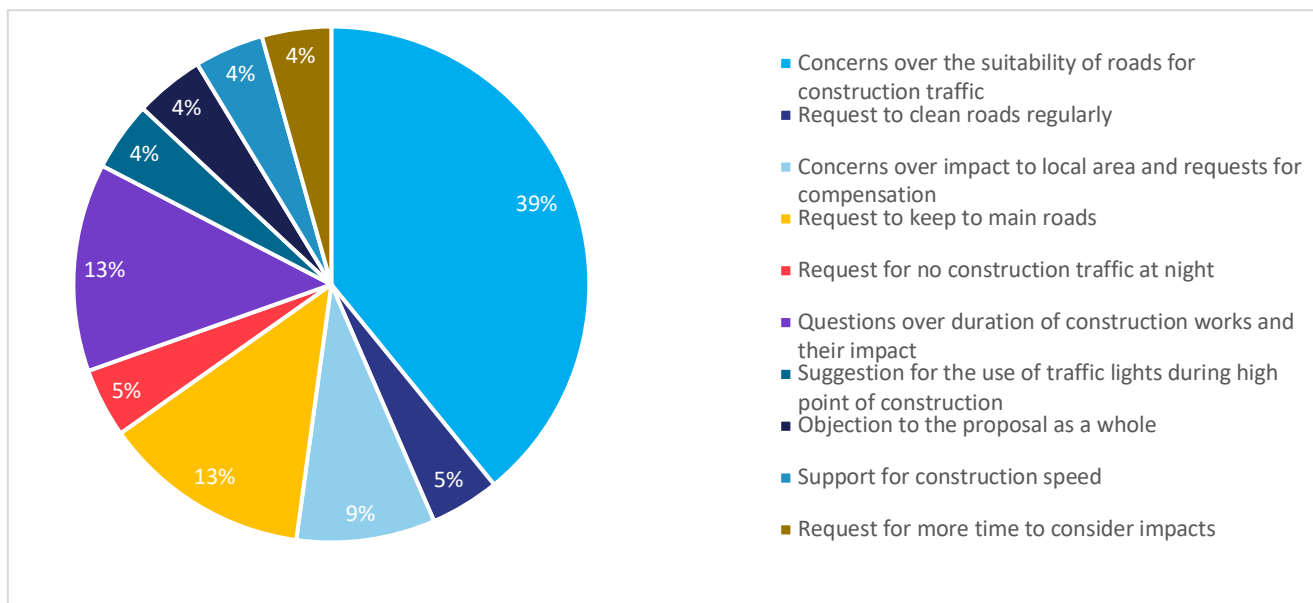
Support for the project, biodiversity increase, and use of solar developments in nature

- “Solar Farms can work in sympathy with the environment”
- “It seems unlikely that the site will be able to be used for animal husbandry as the site is unsuitable, so as long as biodiversity is maintained AND improved-good. I have been assured that the intrusive nature of the development will be kept to a minimum, also assured on archaeological observation.”

**Following a review of the information available, do you have any thoughts that you would like to share regarding transport movements throughout construction or any other transport-related queries?**

When asked to share their thoughts regarding transport movements throughout construction or any other transport-related queries, 50% of respondents chose not to answer. Those respondents that provided feedback shared concerns over the suitability of roads for construction traffic (39%), requests to keep to main roads (13%) and questions about the duration of construction works and their impacts (13%). Figure 2 below provides a visual overview of the response to this question.

**Figure 2:**



Examples of comments received for this question include:

Concerns over the suitability of roads for construction traffic

- “The road in is nearly single lane and unsuitable. If other lorries use this road at the same this will block the road and make impassable. Not the right road to site.”
- “Transport on this narrow rural lane would be both destructive and intrusive.”
- “This will be very disruptive on tiny, rural roads.”

Request to keep to main roads

- “Keep to the main roads where possible and clean mud from local roads regularly”
- “Please don’t bring enormous vehicles through the villages, they always run over my garden.”

Questions over duration of construction works and their impacts

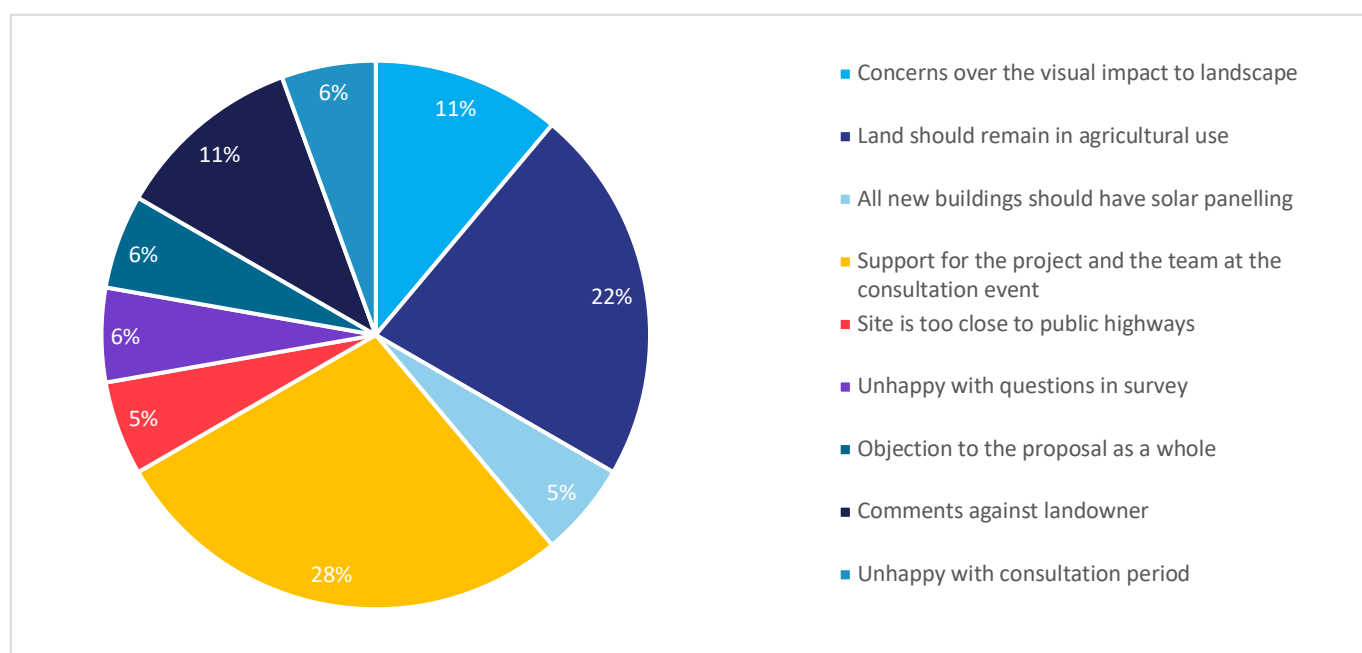
- “How long is the anticipated work and transport movements going to take”
- “How long will the development take to be fully functional and how the local traffic flow will be affected by this development? Example: road closed, heavy plants movement etc.”

**Please provide any further comments**

Finally, when asked to provide any further comments or feedback, 64% of respondents chose not to provide any further comment. Those respondents who provided feedback expressed support for the project and the team at the consultation event (28%), further reiterated that they wished to see the land remain in agricultural use (22%), expressed objections or negative comments about the project and the landowner (11%) and expressed concerns over the visual impact to the landscape (11%).

Figure 3 below provides a visual overview of the response to this question.

**Figure 3:**



Examples of comments received for this question include:

Support for the project, project team and the consultation event

- “Good idea, need as much renewable energy as possible”
- “Hope it goes ahead we need green energy”
- “I generally found it very informative and hope you are successful.”

Land should remain in agricultural use

- “Prime agricultural land should not be lost to solar energy, particularly since this would be to the aesthetic detriment of the surrounding area.”

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- “This should not go ahead. It is valuable grade 2 land that should stay in food production”
- “Grade two farmland must not be turned over to solar power”

### Email responses

In total, 20 email inquiries and responses were received throughout the consultation. The email responses highlighted a range of questions and concerns regarding the proposals including:

- Questions and concerns around the impact to biodiversity
- Objections and concerns about the proposal due to the use of agricultural land
- Questions and concerns around the visual impacts of the proposal and screening mitigations
- Support for the project and the increase in biodiversity
- General questions on the proposals or requests for further information

### Phone responses

Six phone inquiries and responses were received throughout the consultation. These consisted of requests for a meeting with the project team from an immediate neighbour, questions about the site location map that was made available, expressing support for the project overall and a question on the location of the proposed new substation.

## Response to feedback

### Visual impacts to local landscape

Drawing on the feedback relating to the perceived adverse visual impact of the proposal, further investigations have taken place to establish where additional planting can be incorporated. This has resulted in additional screening being implemented along Baker’s Road, along the access track from the main road to the north of Cutbush Farm, and the bridleway running along the western side of the site, where it has been identified that there is currently inconsistent or ineffective screening in the form of hedging and trees. For further information on this matter, please refer to the Landscape & Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) and Landscape Masterplan, which outline in detail the full scheme of mitigation being introduced to the final layout plan for this Planning Application.

### Impact on and suitability of the local road network

Feedback during the public consultation revealed concerns regarding the capacity of the local highway network to withstand the proposed construction traffic, and the perceived impact of large vehicles on the safety of existing users (whether they be travelling via private motor vehicle, bicycle or on foot). BSR is committed to ensuring a safe and efficient build-out of the proposal, and has carefully tailored the construction traffic route to limit the level of disruption caused to local residents. Furthermore, BSR has drawn on this particular feedback to ensure the appropriate measures are in place along Baker’s Road to alleviate any local concerns regarding capacity and safety during the construction-phase of the proposal. For further information in relation to transport and access, please refer to the Transport Statement and Construction Traffic Management Plan (CTMP), which have been submitted as part of the Planning Application.

### **The land should remain in agricultural use**

There is a delicate balancing act between (A) taking effective action against climate change, (B) establishing a secure, independent energy source in the UK, and (C) ensuring that the UK's food security is not impacted.

The proposed infrastructure would have an operational lifespan of 40 years, and following decommission, the land can be efficiently reverted to agricultural use. Throughout the lifespan of the solar development, there is a significant opportunity for biodiversity to continue and thrive on the site. This is because solar developments take up less than 5% of the land, which will allow for plants to continue to grow and animals to still pass through the site.

As part of the proposals, BSR Energy is providing a 179.96% increase in habitat units and 53.59% increase in hedgerow units across the site, this not only meets but far exceeds the minimum 10% Biodiversity Net Gain target outlined by the Government in the Environment Act 2021. As part of this, existing habitats on site will be retained and managed, to ensure that there is no detrimental impact on the existing condition of the habitat over the lifespan of the development.

By supporting renewable energy schemes, such as this, we are taking an important step forward in the fight against climate change and will be helping to contribute towards a secure and stable supply of electricity for the United Kingdom.

### **Community Benefit Fund**

If the proposals were to be granted planning permission, BSR would establish a Community Benefit Fund worth up to £49,990 (£1,000 per MW installed) that would be managed by the Essex Community Foundation. In the meeting held between the project team and Belchamp St Paul Parish Council on 6 September 2022, concerns were raised about the management of Community Benefit Funds in the past. The Parish Council raised concerns that historically funding was stopped at the Braintree District Council level, meaning there was no guarantee that the communities that are directly impacted by the developments that the fund was established for would benefit from the funding. Additionally, a similar concern was raised by Clare Town Council that despite residents in the parish being directly impacted by the proposals, as they are located in the neighbouring District / County they would not benefit from the proposed fund.

It was agreed that if planning permission is granted for the proposals, further discussions would take place to ensure that the local community is represented and are the beneficiaries of the funding. BSR will work with the Essex Community Foundation to ensure that the funds are distributed to important local projects. It is also proposed that local representatives be on the fund so that people who are active in the local community have a say in where the funds are directed. BSR is open to further discussions on the management and distribution of the Community Benefit Fund with Belchamp St Paul Parish Council and Clare Town Council, should the proposals receive planning permission.

### **Additional consultees and extending mailing areas**

Following the meeting with Belchamp St Paul Parish Council on 6 September, a request was made from the councillors to extend the proposed consultation area to include residents of Belchamp Otten and Tilbury juxta Clare to ensure a larger amount of the local community who might be impacted by the proposals during construction or operation were included. The larger consultation

mailing zone was produced following discussion with Belchamp St Paul Parish Council. This request was also made by the local ward member for Stour Valley North.

On 21 October 2022, the Clerk of Belchamp St Paul Parish Council contacted the project team to inform them that following the 18 October meeting of the Parish Council it was established that the residents of Belchamp Otten, Tilbury juxta Clare and Little Yeldham had not received the initial consultation leaflet as had been agreed and expected. Following an investigation into this incident, it was established that due to an administrative error with the printing and distribution provider, the map used to deliver the consultation leaflet was the originally proposed distribution area and not the updated larger map. To correct this error and ensure that all residents who wished to be involved in the consultation were able to, the consultation was re-opened for a further two weeks and the original leaflet and a new letter explaining to residents the error and the re-opening of the consultation was sent via first class mail to those who were missed out on 27 October 2022. Additionally, a follow-up letter which included the site outline map was sent to all 150 immediate neighbours informing them of the extended consultation period and allowing them to provide further feedback if they wished.

A full summary of the feedback received, both online and at the physical event is outlined within the Statement of Community Involvement (SCI), submitted in the suite of documents provided as part of the Planning Application. This can be provided on request.

**ENDS**