

**PROPOSED WINDFARM AT SPRING FARM RIDGE, HELMDON/GREATWORTH,
NORTHAMPTONSHIRE (SOUTH NORTHANTS COUNCIL PLANNING APPLICATION
S/2010/1437/MAF)**

PUBLIC INQUIRY INTO APPEAL AGAINST REFUSAL OF PLANNING PERMISSION

APP/Z2830/A/11/2165035

STATEMENT BY FIONA DAVIES

**OF THE HELMDON, STUCHBURY AND GREATWORTH WIND FARM ACTION
GROUP (HSGWAG)**

Background

I am a member of the Helmdon, Stuchbury & Greatworth Wind Farm Action Group (HSGWAG). This group was formed in early 2010 following Broadview's initial public consultation in the area. I would like to point out that I, like others in the local Community were not initially opposed to this scheme. The Community retained a largely positive view when Broadview's intentions were outlined to Parish Council's in the autumn of 2009. However following the initial public consultation, a feeling of great unease took hold because it seemed clear to us when looking at proposed turbine location maps the negative impacts to our locality were overwhelming and this changed everything.

The group has eleven committee members and following initial public meetings in Helmdon, Sulgrave and Greatworth (and the many others that followed) it was clear that the majority of residents in our Community wanted to oppose these plans and so our mandate to represent was clear.

The Committee work in a variety of professions and from the outset we intended to approach this on the basis of logical planning argument as I am aware that Action Groups aren't always viewed positively or taken seriously.

This led to us feeling the need to engage qualified professionals in order to undertake an assessment of our case early on. We felt that there would be no point in otherwise vocally opposing this and putting so much of our time and effort in. We therefore instructed the services of Richard Honey, a Planning Barrister, Robert Davies, an Acoustics Consultant with wind turbine expertise and Alison Farmer, a Landscape Architect. All three outlined that they could only present what they thought, not what we wanted them to write. Although further work has been undertaken by Broadview since our original objection submission, I believe that their conclusions (with the exception of bats) remain valid. Their respective reports are attached as Appendices A, B & C.

HSGWAG have also more recently commissioned further Photo Montages, produced in line with the current best practice by a professional. These have been submitted to the Inspectorate and are used and referred to by a number of witnesses.

Summary of Objection

As outlined in paragraph 56 of Richard Honey's Opinion Statement (Appendix A) we believe that this proposal does not outweigh the proposed benefits of the scheme because of:

- The adverse impact on the character and amenity of the Landscape
- The adverse impact on the setting of heritage assets, (including local conservation areas, Sulgrave Castle Hill Ringwork, Sulgrave & Greatworth Church, the ancient village of Stuchbury, Priory Farm and the Helmdon Viaduct, as well as the historic character of settlements and of the local landscape).
- The adverse effect on the amenity of the local Communities and the character of the settlements in which they live, arising from the visual and noise impacts of the turbines, including in relation to nearby rights of way.
- The adverse effect on living conditions of the occupants of a number of nearby residential properties arising from noise and visual impact.

General Unsuitability of the Site Selected

The local Community believes that this location is simply unsuitable. Unlike sites often seen with turbines, this location is not adjacent to, or near a motorway or an "A" road. Nor are there any other existing visual detractors in the immediate surrounding landscape. It is an unspoilt, peaceful rural area sandwiched between two conservation areas with many heritage assets. It is not a flat and open wind swept expanse or a large scale landscape capable of absorbing turbines of this size. When you walk in the locality, particularly north and west of the site, things are perceived in human scale and with such subtle and intimate views in and around the area the turbines will be visually dominant and overbearing for the locality.

Despite its rural location, the site chosen by Broadview is actually a small constrained pocket of land, neither big enough, nor isolated enough to comfortably house turbines of this size. Approximately two thousand people live within a 2km radius. Should this proposal receive permission, many would against their will have to live in what they would perceive as an industrialised "wind farm landscape". We do not believe that this is outweighed by the contribution of this scheme to the Government targets.

Rights of Way

Some of the turbines are substantially under the generally accepted “fallover” distances from locally important Rights of Way which cross all over the site. They do not take into account that these routes are regularly used for formal publicised walking groups as well as informal leisure pursuits. The detrimental impacts on local residential amenity would be keenly felt. These Rights of Way are an intrinsic part of the Communities in which they are situated. They may not be of national importance but they connect our villages, they are well used and they are important to us. The recreational opportunities that they afford us would surely be considered as a public benefit, not a private one.

Underplaying the Impacts

We believe that Broadview’s evidence on local impacts is under represented. As an example, I would like to draw the Inspector’s attention to Broadview’s visual impact studies in both their original planning application and also Jeffrey Stevenson’s subsequent proof of evidence.

An assessment has been made of only 27 properties (or groups of properties). It is stated that these are “representative”. However no comprehensive detailed assessment has been made of any of the three villages surrounding the site and yet there must be over 1000 dwellings. Given this lack of depth in their assessment, Broadview not only under-estimate the impact in its totality but we also note that as some of the 27 locations mentioned are further away than the villages which immediately surround the site, we are puzzled how these locations were selected and furthermore how Broadview can claim to make any valid conclusions on the acceptability of their proposal.

I am not a professional in the field, but it seems logical to me that if you are assessing visual impact for the locality then you should fully assess it. How can Jeffrey Stevenson reasonably conclude on this point when he does not seem to have assessed the properties in Helmdon Road, Greatworth or Wrightons Hill and The Green in Helmdon or Church Street in Sulgrave? No assessment as far as I can see has been carried out in any of these locations and yet I think the majority would have open views towards the site, where the turbines would be a significant and major feature in their main views. Furthermore, if a full impact assessment is made and there are say ,a further 50 properties experiencing significant adverse effects (but not substantial) – surely the sum of such impacts also needs to be given some weight rather than just dismissing them on an individual basis?

In a similar vein, the approach to noise impacts has been simplified. Our local Council probably felt unable to contest on noise at this Appeal (which was an original reason for refusal) because of the applicant’s demonstrated compliance with ETSU-R-97. However compliance does not mean that impacts are not adverse, nor unacceptable.

Both Appendix A & B outline that there is precedent for considering noise outside of Government guidelines. Our Barrister, Richard Honey highlighted that in a court of Appeal Decision relating to Wales (APP/R6830/A/08/2074921), it was recognised that ETSU-R-97 limits were a matter which an inspector was required to bear in mind but was not bound them. Similarly with an appeal case in Rossie, Auchtermuchty (P/PPA/250/675), a scheme was deemed unacceptable on amenity grounds due, in part to the large numbers of people likely to hear the turbines. We believe that the Spring Farm Ridge turbines are so constrained between 3 villages & other dispersed properties around the site that despite compliance with the noise guidelines it will be an unacceptable impact on the local area relative to the tranquillity currently experienced.

The Aggregate Impact

Broadview have always acknowledged that there are a range of adverse impacts on the local Community, however their view is that the need for renewable energy outweighs these impacts and that no one impact is “substantial” enough.

While we don't agree with this, we also don't see that Broadview have considered the aggregate impacts – they only regard each in isolation. This is not the reality of the experience for the receptor.

We think that the combined effects of visual, landscape, heritage, noise and amenity are together so adverse in this location that the impact overall is very substantial indeed and it is not in the public good when viewed against the claimed contribution their scheme is forecast to make.

Stakeholder Engagement & Public Opinion

Broadview's engagement with the local Community has been what I would call “academic”. They were required to undertake a number of public consultations and they did fulfil their obligations in this respect. The experience as a local however was that of a conveyer belt, a standard format for every piece of communication sent out – it is only the name of the village or location that was altered and in our case they didn't even get that right (we all received invitations for example to attend a consultation at one of their other sites which is also in the planning system). The montages produced at Consultations became the subject of much ridicule and the pretence that impacts were not so bad was simply ridiculous. Had they been more upfront and straight with the Community (as TNEI were who undertook their noise assessments) I do think there would have more goodwill towards them.

A substantial number of objection letters were received by South Northamptonshire Council and we would like to stress that **all** were individually sent by those objecting and were from the local community affected who understood the proposal and its impacts.

This is in direct contrast to the letters of support received. Only a handful were from genuine locals who understood the proposal, the remainder were either from wind energy supporters who were encouraged on pro-wind websites to send in a letter of support, or collated by a company employed by Broadview and in a way which somewhat lessened their credibility.

I personally received three telephone calls about this latter issue, two from people from within our Community and one from a complete stranger who lived over 10 miles away. All three callers rang to voice their concern that signatures were being obtained under false pretences. A stall was set up in Brackley and Towcester on two separate days. Whilst the Spring Ridge Information was available at the stall, those observing told me that many people they observed were being asked to “sign for wind” on the bottom of a standardised letter with little, or worse still no explanation about the Spring Ridge site. These letters were then batched up and sent to South Northamptonshire Council. I can only conclude that these people will have had little idea what they were signing for.

Much is often said about the “silent majority” which exist with contentious issues. Our villages are small and everybody knows everybody else. Whilst it is true that not everybody is opposed to the scheme, I am personally in no doubt that the “silent majority” does not exist in Helmdon, Sulgrave or Greatworth. These Communities are overwhelmingly opposed to the scheme.

Whilst we recognise that a renewable energy scheme would not be refused on the strength of local public feeling alone, much has recently been made by the current Government on localism with regards to local planning matters. It is something which requires some weight at least, to be placed upon it.

The Impact on My Family

I reside in Helmdon. I've recently moved house and I've chosen to stay in the village because it's a really special place to live. I've lived in many places in my life and I've never come across an area quite like it. I consider my view to be typical of my fellow residents. The villages in this part of South Northants and their settings are to be treasured. Indeed it was why we chose to locate to this area. We couldn't believe that such a little unspoilt pocket of countryside still existed in this part of the Country.

My husband and I regularly take our children out onto the footpaths in and around the proposed site. When you're walking on these footpaths, it is very reminiscent of the Cotswolds landscape where my parents live.

It may not be classed as an “Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty” but it is so important to us because its part of what makes our area special. It is unaffected by development or Industry, it is tranquil and it is a pleasure to live in.

If these turbines were to be built I would not walk the routes in or around the site any longer. It would render the area unpleasant. The turbine structures and moving blades at such close quarters would be intimidating, overbearing and take any enjoyment of the countryside away. Living in a location like this, what sensible person would ever wish to walk between industrial machines emitting unnatural noise at such close proximity?

I would see a clutter of spinning blades from the school every day when I pick up my children. I’ll also see them from my house and garden and from the centre of the village - the view across to the Heldmon Viaduct (HSGWAG Montage, Pack A & B, view 7). The turbines would dwarf the Viaduct into insignificance.

The reality of the experience to me as a receptor going about my daily life is that they would be ever present wherever I went. I consider this to be great and substantial harm to the character of the area in which I live and what makes it special.

When I really sit and think about the effect this scheme would have on my family and my fellow residents and our amenity, I can only say that it would feel substantial to me.

I would like to finish by saying no-one is pretending that this is the best location for turbines. It is the least windy part of the UK and Broadview is forced to operate in a bottom up environment – only able to go where willing landowners are situated.

As set out in South Northamptonshire Council’s adopted Special Planning Document (Wind Turbines in the Open Countryside), the local Community in which I live believes that “the proposal would have a detrimental effect on the locality generally and on the amenities that ought, in the public interest, to be protected”. We do not believe that this detrimental effect would be outweighed by the contribution of this scheme.

We urge that the Appeal is dismissed.