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Solar Panels green-light in Mole Valley a grey area?

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Solar panels powering up to 5,500 homes have been approved for prime Surrey agricultural land that could have been used to put the “wheat in our Weetabix”. Mole Valley District Council’s April development committee green lit the renewable energy plant for Little Flanchford Farm in Flanchford Road, Leigh.

The former green belt site was considered to be some of Surrey’s best and most versatile agricultural land, but the plans were recommended because the council sees renewable energy as central to achieving a sustainable, low-carbon future. The panels will convert light into electricity and contribute enough renewable electricity and low carbon energy to cut 4,052 tonnes of CO2 per year from the atmosphere, with the development standing for up to 40 years before being decommissioned and the site returned to agricultural use.

Residents objecting said special circumstances of the solar farm were not enough to outweigh the harm it would cause to green belt land, with one saying it would significantly affect the area for up to 10 years as planting would be ineffective for the first quarter of its lifespan and, even when fully in place, would not provide screening for several months a year, adding: “A decade of admitted damage is a serious policy conflict.”

Councillor Joanne Willoughby of Leigh Parish said the council was not against the principle of solar development but was concerned that open undeveloped agricultural countryside within the wider rural green belt was being classed as grey belt. The solar farm’s agent said the plant would improve local energy resilience and support businesses and homes through lower network charges, and would also curb the need for pylons crisscrossing the country.

Councillor Simon Budd (Conservative: Brockham, Betchworth, Buckland, Box Hill and Headley) said: “Saying that it is a grey belt, that is an absolute nonsense. That is green belt all day long. Nothing is out there. I’m told that green belt is only to protect Dorking and Reigate merging, well I don’t think it is. I think the green belt is there to protect the villages. I’m in favour of solar panels on top of buildings, on top of car parks, but not now on ‘best and most versatile land. And that is what it is, that is the land that feeds us, that puts the wheat in your Weetabix.”

The plans were approved by eight votes to four with three abstentions.

Chris Caulfield LDRS

Flanchford Road, Leigh (image Google)

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