



MP Helen Grant with campaigners at Maidstone Town Hall celebrating the decision not to allow the Great Pagehurst Farm solar power plant development in Staplehurst

Jubilant protesters win battle against solar panels plan

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People battling proposals for a giant solar power plant in the Weald are celebrating after the plans were refused.

After nearly three years of opposition Maidstone council turned down an application for 63,888 solar panels on green belt land in Staplehurst.

The refusal was based on the visual impact on the countryside and was decided at a packed meeting at Maidstone Town Hall on Thursday.

Councillors debated for more than two hours before the vote came and campaigners breathed a sigh of relief.

Sunsave 22 (Pagehurst) Ltd submitted an application in August 2013 covering 72 hectares, currently known as Great Pagehurst Farm.

The site would have provided green energy to roughly 2,800 homes a year.

Details of the scheme, which would have operated for 25 years before the land would be returned to its current condition, sparked more than 374 letters from concerned residents.

Both Staplehurst and Marden parish councils objected, citing

loss of agricultural land and damage to habitat.

Speaking at the meeting, Joan Buller of Staplehurst Parish Council said: "Our open rural countryside is the wow factor of the Staplehurst parish – please don't destroy it."

She said this was one of six solar farms proposed for the lower Weald area, including one less than 1km away at Widehurst Farm.

Five other farms are currently under consideration across Headcorn, Marden and Staplehurst.

Maidstone & Weald MP Helen Grant joined campaigners at the meeting. Speaking after the decision, she said: "I am so relieved.

"This battle has been won, but the war has just begun on preserving our rural heritage. We have a long way to go yet but we have a great team and we will fight it to the end."

Six councillors voted to refuse the site, four voted in favour and three abstained after council planners suggested protecting the countryside outweighed the gains of green power.

Despite no reference to other proposals under consideration, campaigners claim it is a landmark case. Mrs Grant said decision to turn it down on visual grounds could have significance for other applications.

FIVE TO GO



The full list of sites across Staplehurst, Marden and Headcorn

■ Far Acre Farm
 Powers 1,000 homes
 Under consideration

■ Widehurst Farm
 Powers 1,500 homes
 Under consideration

■ Great Pagehurst Farm
 Powers 2,800 homes
 Refused

■ Riverfield Farm
 Details not supplied
 Under consideration

■ Pullen Farm
 Powers 3,000 homes
 Under consideration

■ Tong Farm
 Powers 1,000 homes
 Under consideration