

## **A Green Future?**

It would appear that the government has overlooked a strategic nationally owned asset that could easily be repurposed to both assist with the energy security issue and also allay the concerns regarding food security that form two opposing views to the solar factories that threaten to become a blight in our beautiful rural county of Norfolk.

Thetford Forest comprises 47,000 acres of government owned land which was created in the 1920's to prevent an energy shortage as it was to make sure the United Kingdom was self-sufficient for the timber required for pit props after there were shortages due to World War One.

The forest was created on what was at the time deemed to be low value Breckland Heath (which we now know is a very rare and important habitat and which we lost 86% of since the First World War) only used for sheep farming, wild rabbits and sporting habitat for the local estate owners.

The coal miners this forest was created for have now gone and we have 35 square miles of a 100 year old human created monoculture. We acknowledge that where possible. The Forestry Commission have begun to promote biodiversity with designations of Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and a Special Protection Area (SPA) particularly for its nesting nightjar and woodlark populations. However, we are now seeing considerable solar installations where these species can be further supported and would suggest that the relatively poor sandy Breckland soil would make an ideal home for a sustainable solar solution.

We do not agree with this current solar panel blight being created across huge swathes of productive farmland but the government does have the opportunity to stop being a solar hypocrite, when they could turn around 10% of the forest into solar park, enabling the Forestry Commission to diversify, after all they are already used to a multi-purpose management approach when meeting the needs of wildlife, people, archaeology and timber production. It feels logical to add energy production to the portfolio of the Public Forest Estate.

There is already a power station within the forest connected into the National Grid infrastructure and this could hopefully ensure that the energy generated in Norfolk can be used for the benefit of Norfolk and would certainly assist with Thetford's economic growth. We know that power continues to be a challenge in the area and this would help meet the need of our schools, homes and businesses.

There would also be huge biodiversity and nature restoration as the land beneath the panels would once again become heathland to be grazed by sheep or rabbits, with the added advantage of providing a secure area for iconic ground nesting birds such as those previously mentioned and the Stone Curlew. It would also allow the increase of the 120 nationally important plant species native to The Brecks area along with the invertebrates. This supports the Forestry Commission's own Biodiversity Plan, enhancing habitat availability and quantity and meeting the overall objective of their Open Habitat Plan as we have seen in other, well managed and considered installations such as that on the Euston Estate.

This is probably the only area in the whole of the UK where the creation of a solar park would have so many other benefits both for nature and the local economy, yet ironically it is an area the government has so much control over yet chooses not to.

Over a century ago, the Breckland landscape was radically changed to meet the needs of the country. Today, we have another call to arms to ensure both energy and food security whilst being mindful of the legacy our actions have on our environment to halt the decline in biodiversity in the UK and particularly in the beautiful fragile landscape of the Brecks. Which leads us to ask the question if the solar panels are so needed and so good for the country's benefit, why are not the government doing this on their own land, where the crop is now redundant to our nation's need?

**Cllrs Fabian Eagle and Jane James**

**Norfolk County Councillors for the Brecks and Thetford East**