

ASSOCIATION news

By Sally Leslie, Dorchester and Weymouth BKA

Solar farm sites

In Dorchester and Weymouth, we have had bees on a solar farm site for two years. We put bees there on the basis of the solar farm company's Landscape and Ecological Management Plan (LEMP) which was part of their planning permission. The LEMP included a wildflower meadow, regenerating the hedgerows and other landscaping measures that would result in a net gain for biodiversity in the area.

Unfortunately, the bees on this site have not thrived or even survived. When we investigated, we found there had been no wildflower planting and very little hedgerow regeneration, resulting in a considerable lack of forage for our bees and for other pollinating insects. We approached the management company running the site, who admitted the plan had not been implemented. Taking it further, we approached the County Planning Department. Eventually, a Planning Enforcement Officer responded that the enforcement period for this LEMP had expired, so no action could be taken by the Council. However, they had talked to the management company and were happy with their response, but would not divulge details. We persisted and eventually got a response from the Senior County Ecologist with details of how the management company are going to remedy the situation to give it the ecological benefits they originally promised. This was our first experience of putting bees on a solar farm site but we are being approached by other solar farm companies to do this. These sites do fulfil the beekeepers' needs for security and



easy vehicle access, but a lack of forage does not help the bees, especially as generally there is a wide scarcity of this in farmland. This is why we felt it was so important to follow the issue of the LEMP not being implemented.

The photo shows a section of the solar farm site. The panels are fenced in and surrounded by grass, which was meant to be a wildflower meadow planted up with a butterfly and honey bee mixture 'to provide a sward that is botanically diverse and affords a range of opportunities for invertebrates'. The area was meant to be grazed with a low-stock density but, in reality, the grass is mowed regularly and removed. How different this barren area could have been if the LEMP had been implemented.

The good news is that under the Environment Act it will become mandatory for Local Authorities to report on biodiversity and net gain. I would strongly advise any association involved with a solar farm company to make sure that LEMPs are implemented; those that are should benefit us all, but if they are not the sites will contribute to an already desert-like environment for our bees.