

Botley West/Blenheim/Merton College Solar Farm Consultation

Phase 1 Consultation, December 2022: An Eynsham resident's response offered to Photovolt Development Partners (PVDP) in the spirit of enabling solar development, if it goes ahead here, to be the best it can be

1. Whilst really valuing the principle of solar farms in the UK and in Oxfordshire, as a response to the need to decarbonise our energy supplies in the face of the climate crisis, I find the industrial scale of this proposal very worrying. The Botley West Solar Farm would currently be the world's 17th largest solar farm, but the SECOND largest in Europe (the largest is in Spain). According to retired Professor David Rogers, Department of Biology, University of Oxford, it would occupy a total of more than 3,400 acres (more than 2,600 football fields) and more than three quarters of the site would be on Oxford's green belt¹. So, I am very concerned that too much open countryside and agricultural fields are comprised in this initial proposal. There needs to be balance and perhaps, if it is there, greed related to profitability needs to be reigned in.

Alternatively, I wonder whether there is a deliberate strategy to start off with an unreasonably large and unbalanced plan (unbalanced in relation to responding to our biodiversity and food security crises), and then reduce the size as a strategy to show the public and our local authorities that they are listening to what we say (see point 3 below). Or perhaps, has PVDP gone for such a huge site, so they can submit their plan directly to the Government Inspectorate and frog-leap the opinions of local people and authorities. Who is likely to make more informed decisions about the best place to situate, and the size of, a solar farm – a private company and landowners or local people and authorities. I am not alone in that wondering². However, I understand that PVDP has already financially committed this huge scheme (with a 840MW capacity) to the National Grid. I have also heard that they are prepared to reduce the scale of the scheme to 500MW, but no lower. So there is room for making this solar development for being the best it can be, perhaps by taking my following points into account.

2. At the public consultation in Cassington, I spoke to an Environment Consultant about the close proximity to so many West Oxfordshire villages. I see this as being problematic in terms of our health and well-being, that we accrue through connection with Nature. I am particularly concerned for Cassington residents who live where the panels are marked as coming right up to the back of their houses on the northern boundary of the village (i.e., Fields 2.110, 2.102, 2.100). My concern was confirmed when I talked with a woman from Cassington about this proximity and she said that even though she supported solar farms as an effective Climate Change strategy, she said her village would be blighted. Blighted particularly where the rising land in the fields numbered above, would mean south facing panels being very close and clearly visible, in ascending serried ranks, to residents' homes overlooking those fields. She also told me that two of the fields in that location that did not have panels shown on them were owned by Blenheim Estate and that they were planning to build on them. If this happens, those new

¹ <https://eynsham.org.uk/variable/organisation/837/attachments/David-Rogers-Letter.pdf>

² <https://smartgrowthuk.org/uncategorized/the-tail-wags-the-dog/>

residents would also be looking out on a rising slope of panels. Similar close proximity would occur in a number of villages including Bladon, the Garden Village as well as City Farm and Eynsham Mill.

I strongly recommend moving the panels and visually intrusive sites away from settlements, thus providing buffer zones.

3. In response to my concerns, the Environment Consultant told me that these plans were very rudimentary and he expected them to change, every fortnight or so, as people told them what was unacceptable for a variety of reasons (including the aesthetic and value of Nature for our health and well-being). He said they had already removed a number of fields from the proposal. It was this remark that led me to conclude the possibility of the deliberate strategy point in (1) above (i.e., start off big and then reduce after consultation). The Consultant suggested to me that residents should use the field numbers in their responses, for example, if they felt the panels were too close to their property and the impact that would have on them and their community. I asked him if *the field number maps* were on the website and he said no, so I asked for them to be put on which they have been³.
4. I also pointed out that our planet and West Oxfordshire face a series of crises that are all linked to the climate emergency, so this proposal needs to be looked at in the context of food production and security, biodiversity loss and current evidence on flooding in solar farms, for example. I premised a conversation about context with one of the PVDP representatives, by asking him what were the underpinning philosophical values of his company. In his response, he focussed solely on de-carbonisation. I continued by saying that, like many others in my own community, whilst I support solar farming wholeheartedly, I am concerned about the industrial scale and the taint of greenwashing at this stage. It seems to me that suggesting, in their brochure, that sheep could be grazed under the panels and biodiversity increased by planting wildflowers, was premature because currently this practice is not supported by research. Moreover, when I pointed out that this site was primarily agricultural land, he replied that it was poor quality, so I asked him what the National quality rating of the soil was in the different sites. He said they didn't know because the environmental surveys have not been done yet, but that they would be. So, these particular green claims to 'sell' the project to the public and local authorities seem premature to me. We need to see in the plan, strong assurance that Grades 1, 2 and 3a farmland will be avoided.
5. The Environmental Change Institute at Oxford University has produced a report, "The Pathways to Zero Carbon Oxfordshire"⁴ which was supported by our local authorities. The report concludes that we may need about 1% of Oxfordshire's land for solar energy. Does this therefore make it possible to be selective about what kind of land is brought forward? If so, rather than using so much agricultural land, shouldn't brownfield land and rooftop renewables be used as well? There is the perfect opportunity to offer

³https://botleywest.co.uk/files/cto_layout/img/maps/Site%20Location%20Plan%20%28with%20field%20numbers%29%2012426-0040-01.pdf

⁴ <https://www.eci.ox.ac.uk/research/energy/pathways-to-a-zero-carbon-oxfordshire-report.html>

rooftop renewables immediately adjacent to the southeast corner of the proposed Middle site. A Garden Village is planned here with 2,200 homes, a community centre, schools and sports facilities. Moreover, a Park and Ride for 800 vehicles is currently being built on land beside the Garden Village site which offers more opportunities for roof top panels. Together, these sites appear to me to cover land perhaps about a quarter of the size of the Middle site, so agricultural land could be saved for food production, biodiversity and human health and well-being.

6. Finally, as S 106s won't legally apply to solar farms, I feel that affected communities should press for financial and environmental benefits from Botley West.