

# Europe's Biggest Solar Farm

By Charlotte Holmes. As published in the Eynsham News on 25 November 2022

Many of you will have been surprised by a leaflet in the post which outlines an ambition to create a vast solar farm in West Oxfordshire, which would feed into a new National Grid substation to the west of Botley.

The development has been prepared by German consultancy Photovolt Development Partners, with support from landowners Blenheim Estate and Merton College.

Titled Botley West, much of the solar project would cover fields and pasture stretching from Eynsham to Oxford Airport (or perhaps more succinctly, from Eynsham north as far as the eye can see) and would become the largest solar project in Europe.

The proposal is that Botley West solar farm will cover approximately 1400 hectares (nearly 3500 acres) at least 1000 hectares of which will be panels and infrastructure - almost 2500 acres.

For context, Britain's largest solar project to date, Shotwick Park in Flintshire, Wales, is spread over 250 acres.

There has never been anything on this scale before in the UK. Europe's biggest solar farm, a mega project Nunez De Balboa, in arid southern Spain, is made up of more than 1.4 million solar panels and would be dwarfed by this current proposal for Oxfordshire.

The proposal is that the energy from Botley West would feed directly back into the National Grid and provide power for up to 330,000 homes nationally. To make sense of that number, the county of Oxfordshire including Oxford City is made up of approx. 260,000 homes.

Granted it will provide clean energy and help support Oxfordshire's target of achieving carbon net-zero, but so could solar on new housing, for example the Salt Cross Development, but so far developers are not interested; they've watered down their commitment to green energy and national government won't enforce it. In other development, the Eynsham Park and Ride might have had a solar roof. There is not a solar panel to be seen on Blenheim Estate's new housing near Woodstock, so it seems somewhat oblique to be building a solar project on a swathe of green fields. Will this improve your access to clean energy, yes, you can buy the energy from a clean energy supplier via the National Grid. Will it make your energy cheaper, debatably, no.

The development proposal literature talks about enhancing biodiversity, which seems an impossibility when so much land is covered over, though studies on the long-term impact of this are in their infancy. The proposal describes "creating wildlife corridors"; a misnomer, since they already exist and solar farms require more fencing

Maps are provided for the proposed farm's three sections, but are hard to understand in so far as villages are gently greyed out, and labelled in an approximate fashion, if labelled at all – for example Church Hanborough and Begbroke aren't referenced, despite being in immediate proximity to the proposed middle site, Cassington and Bladon are omitted altogether from the downloadable Concept Plan drawings available on the Botley West website, despite bordering the proposals.

It is highly unusual to propose such an extensive farm in immediate proximity to so many villages. In West Oxfordshire alone the proposal will directly impact upon Tackley, Wootton, Glympton, Bladon, Woodstock, Long Hanborough, Church Hanborough, Rousham, Yarnton, Begbroke, Eynsham and Cassington, as well as west Botley, Cumnor, Chawley, Filchampstead and Farmoor to the south.

The development literature states "Solar farms are temporary in their nature and are quick to build, as well as quick to remove. Typically, solar farms will have a lifespan of between 35 and 40 years." It promises that after this time the land will be restored to agricultural use, however is this commitment binding, or could the infrastructure create brownfield land in the greenbelt, increasing the landowners' land value and the potential for development into housing?

Is it nimbyism, or a shirking of our environmental responsibilities in a time of ever-deepening climate crisis not to support this extraordinary development? Perhaps, but the loss of greenfield, both high quality productive pasture used in food production, and land rich in biodiversity, alongside the loss of amenity and access to this historic landscape seems to some devastating, especially when the locality already earmarked for housing and infrastructure development is not meeting nationally recognised environmental and energy targets.

The scale of this proposed solar development means it is classed as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (i.e. a new power station) there's a process for consultation, but it's decided upon by the Secretary of State and bypasses the usual local planning approval and local consultation. It has come as a surprise to all of us including Oxfordshire councils and our MP. Eynsham is not included in the list of "community information events" however, you can still have your say and explain what this development would mean to you. How to submit your comments can be found on the developer's website: <https://botleywest.co.uk/Home-Botley-West.html>

Their target is to commence building in the summer of 2025.