

Summary note of oral representation at Open Floor Hearing 1, held on 13 May 2025, by Stuart Walker on behalf of the Vale of White Horse District Council

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today, the Vale has submitted a detailed Relevant Representation.

The Vale is committed to reducing the reliance on fossil fuels and accepts that there is a compelling need, as a matter of principle, to increase renewable energy generation and consumption to support the Government's national agenda to reach net zero carbon by 2050. Therefore, the Vale does not raise objection to the principle of large-scale solar photovoltaic generation developments within its district. This is reflected in policy CP41 of the Vale's local plan which states renewable energy developments will be supported provided they do not cause a significant adverse effect to:

- landscape, both designated National Landscape and locally valued
- biodiversity
- the historic environment, both designated and non-designated assets, including by development within their settings
- the visual amenity and openness of the Green Belt
- local residential amenity, and
- the safe movement of traffic and pedestrians

The acceptability of this proposal is intrinsically linked with the impacts of the development and whilst the proposed development would make a positive contribution to reducing carbon emissions over its proposed life span, there would be adverse effects that need to be balanced against the benefits.

The principal issues that the Vale raises in relation to the application are set out in the Relevant Representation, but in quick summary the issues are,

inappropriate development in the Oxford Green Belt,

loss of Best and Most Versatile agricultural land,

landscape and visual impacts,

heritage assets,

impacts on public rights of way,

ecology and trees.

The Vale has assessed the proposal and considers it is inappropriate development in the Oxford Green Belt where very special circumstances are required to be demonstrated. In that regard, the Vale currently considers that the benefits that the scheme would bring are not such to amount to very special circumstances sufficient to outweigh the harm to the Oxford Green Belt. As such, the proposal would be contrary to Policies CP13, CP41 and CP44 of the Vale's local plan.

In relation to agricultural land use, there is around 80.5ha of productive arable land in the Vale, identified as a mixture of Grade 2, 3a and 3b arable land and at least 4ha of this will be permanently lost through siting of the National Grid substation. It is also important to highlight the cumulative impacts of solar development on BMV agricultural land, as other solar proposals are currently under consideration locally.

In terms of landscape, the area surrounding the Southern Site is locally valued and as set out in the Relevant Representation is a landscape sensitive to development. The landform is predominately rising southwards, with an elevation predominantly between 65 to 100 AOD and the site comprises of a network of hedgerows which enclose small, medium and large irregular shaped fields and abut small areas of Ancient Woodland. There are extensive views available across the Southern Site and beyond and there are Public Rights of Way that cross the site including the Oxfordshire Greenbelt Way.

The scheme would result in the coverage of a substantial area of agricultural land with solar panels and other associated infrastructure to inevitably and detrimentally change this landscape, resulting in a significant adverse effect that will harm its strong undeveloped and rural character, both within the wider valley landscape between Farmoor to the west and Botley / Oxford to the east and to the rural landscape setting of Cumnor Parish where there will be a loss of attractive views and a negative impact on views from the recreational network of public rights of way in the area. The proposed development is therefore considered contrary to Policies CP41, CP44, and DP31 of the Vale's Local Plan, and to Policies DBC4, DBC7 and TI3 of the Cumnor Parish Neighbourhood Development Plan.

Furthermore, the construction of a large solar farm on the Southern Site would have an impact on the site's appearance and landscape character which contributes to the understanding of surrounding heritage assets, in particular historic listed buildings as listed in the Relevant Representation and the wider setting of the Cumnor Conservation Area. The Vale considers the proposal will result in harm to some heritage assets where the contribution made to their significance by elements of their setting will be impacted, contrary to Policies CP39, DP36, DP37 and DP38 of the Vale's Local Plan.

Overall, the Vale considers the proposal for the Botley West Solar Farm is currently not acceptable as the proposed solar farm would inevitably and detrimentally change the rural character of the land to a more developed character, for a long period of time. To satisfactorily address these issues, the Vale wish to see the proposed solar arrays on the Southern Site reduced and ideally removed altogether from the application.

Thank you.

Post Hearing Note: In reply to the ExA question on which parcels in the Southern Site Area should be removed, the Vale draw attention to the comments made by ICOMOS-UK [RR-0413] and the attached plan. Further information will also be provided in the Local Impact Report.

KEY:



=Areas to be excluded from any solar farm to conserve some of the valuable qualities of this landscape



=Existing public footpath



=Footpath with solar farm on both sides



=Proposed new public footpath



ICOMOS-UK CLHGC
AREAS UNSUITABLE FOR INCLUSION
IN ANY SOLAR FARM (overlaid green)
Botley West Solar Farm
Preliminary Masterplan
- South (section 1 of 1)

Cumnor