

CPRE Oxfordshire Oral Statement – Open Floor Hearing 2 - 14th May –

Botley West Solar Farm

I am [REDACTED] Director for CPRE Oxfordshire, an independent charity working to protect and enhance the countryside.

CPRE, fully support the UK's transition toward clean energy, but we believe this transition cannot come at the cost of our landscape, food security, the Green Belt, or rural communities.

The Climate Change Committee's Seventh Carbon Budget report published in February 2025, requires a further 0.6% of England's surface area to fulfil the Government's target for solar energy by 2040. This is in fact a relatively small land area similar to what is presently occupied by golf courses. Therefore, decision makers need to be selective about where ground mounted solar developments are located and there is no obligation to approve every application.

CPRE has long advocated for solar panels to be installed on rooftops and brownfield sites, as it preserves valuable land and is close to the point of use. This approach is gaining traction: a government leak in the week of 28 April indicated that rooftop solar will become mandatory on all new buildings in England by 2027, as part of the Future Homes Standard.

We recognise the imperative of moving away from fossil fuels, but undue haste combined with suboptimal planning reforms, poor strategic planning, limited stakeholder engagement, and a lack of innovative solutions—risks undermining the government's Clean Power mission and leads to poorly sited, ad hoc solar development.

The publication of the Land Use Framework presents an opportunity to consider how land can be used more effectively to balance multiple needs. Oxfordshire is ahead of the curve, with the County Council funding a project to develop a Land Use Framework for the county, expected to conclude later this year.

Our main concern is the excessive scale of the proposed development and its potential to significantly alter the rural character of the area. Combined with new housing, it risks transforming a largely agricultural landscape into an industrial one. Additionally, the visual impact on visitors approaching Blenheim and Woodstock via the A44, from Oxford, appears to have been completely overlooked.

We believe the impact of flooding in the local area has been significantly underestimated. Many of the surrounding fields are known to rely on land drains, which will be damaged during construction. The disruption of these drainage systems, combined with the slope of the solar panels accelerating surface water runoff, will inevitably increase the flood risk for Oxford and nearby communities.

Another key concern is the impact on agricultural land. Over 38% of the site is classified as Best and Most Versatile (BMV) farmland—though we believe this figure is underestimated, as parts of the land were excluded from the ALC survey without clear justification. CPRE Oxfordshire maintains that the applicant has not adequately shown how the development avoids or minimises harm to BMV land. This area has a history of high-yielding crops, with neighbouring farmers reporting wheat yields of 8.5 tonnes per hectare—well above the national average. Describing it as 'low productivity' is inaccurate and dismissive of its proven value. There is an alternative, land farmed in a regenerative nature will improve soil structure and yields.

Turning to Oxford Green Belt in 2024, CPRE commissioned a survey on the Oxford Green Belt, which revealed that 80% of respondents believe it should remain open and free from development as required by the NPPF. Public opinion is strongly in favour of protecting this vital landscape. The Green Belt serves as the countryside next door for 165,000 Oxford residents, and its loss to development would represent a serious disservice to the community and a lasting impact on the character of the area.

Finally, with regard to public rights of way, we are concerned that the project will significantly impact their use. The public's enjoyment of these routes is likely to be diminished by the presence of solar panels, fencing, and dense hedgerows intended to screen the development, all of which will create an enclosed and visually intrusive environment.

Overall, it is CPRE Oxfordshire's view that the scheme as submitted is contrary to National Policy Statements EN-1& 3, National Planning Policy Framework, the policies of the West Oxfordshire Local Plan 2031, Cassington, Eynsham and Woodstock Neighbourhood Plans.

We strongly oppose this proposed development and believe consideration should be given to removing all panels from Green Belt Land, BMV, Heritage assets and increasing buffer zones near residential areas.

Can it really be viable to build a 1,400 hectare solar farm on productive agricultural land, in the Green Belt, between a world-renowned historic city and a World Heritage site, in an area that would directly impact the amenity of many thousands of residents?

We are inclined to think that, in any reasonable judgement, this is perhaps one of the last places in the world that one would select.

██████████ – Director CPRE Oxfordshire – May 2025