

Application by Photovolt Development Partners (PVDP) on behalf of SolarFive Ltd for an Order Granting Development Consent for the Botley West Solar Farm (Planning Inspectorate Ref: EN010147)

Open Floor Hearing – 13 May 2025

Written Summary – Dominic Hare

I am Dominic Hare, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Blenheim Palace 1984 Maintenance Fund and the Vanbrugh Unit Trust. These are the trusts that own the site proposed for the solar farm. I am also the CEO of Blenheim Palace Heritage Foundation, which is the charity responsible for the care of the World Heritage Site.

I want to focus on the things which make this project unique.

Why Blenheim, why here?

It would be far easier for us, as a Landed Estate with 300 years of history, to 'stay in our lane', steer clear and wait for 300 more years to pass. But what will our land look like then?

We already see this with increased flooding and hotter summers making our land unviable for growing crops. You will hear arguments here on the loss of food production and the impact on 'Best and Most Versatile' land - I want to provide more context on that.

We put this land forward above alternative sites based on the experience of farming the land ourselves and with some of the best farmers in the county who, in a world without subsidies, could not cover the costs of growing food on large chunks of this land in the last two harvests. This is from failed crops and poor yields from poor soil.

The three tenant farmers who cared for this land, with whom we reached fair agreement, reported the same challenges.

This is land depleted, struggling to cope with increasingly volatile weather and, whilst our decision to grow food or leave fallow is not a planning consideration, I can without doubt say this is the poorest of our land for food production and therefore the most suitable for this project.

While many solar projects will see land change hands many times during their lifespan, Blenheim's ownership will be constant. This uniquely allows us to care for the land through this project to rejuvenate it, restore nature and return it to a state, such that in 40 years' time it can be used for growing food with abundance once more.

Few institutions can plan so far forward but we can and, in the case of our recent solar site just north of Woodstock, we have already moved from a field barren of biodiversity to one where the soil is recovering, flora and fauna grow to support wild bee populations and carbon is sequestered underground. Hedges have grown up and the site is barely visible today.

These benefits are measured and shared openly through our partnerships with the universities. We are just not seeing the biodiversity or wildlife losses that this project is accused of causing.

In a short time, we, along with the Southill solar park near Charlbury, show what can be achieved with the bold thinking and the credible partners promoting Botley West.

Whilst making a strong case for regenerating the future I must also make the same case for cherishing the past. We are proud to care for a World Heritage Site, which brings over 1m visitors to the local area, supporting over 4,500 jobs in the local community.

We take this responsibility seriously and, working with Historic England, we have carefully shaped where panels are sited. We are confident you will see during this examination a scheme which does negligible harm to the Heritage Asset. One where the benefits far outweigh any harm and one where, if there was any doubt of buried historic features, these have been investigated and panels removed.

It is also a project which through existing funding structures will see in the region of £500k each year ploughed back into the World Heritage Site for vital repairs – and we will seek to increase that during the project.

We do this because we care for the OUV of the World Heritage Site and how we can preserve that for another 300 years.

We also acknowledge the change this project will bring to our landscape which is enjoyed by others.

We have worked with PVDP through the public consultation to mitigate visual impacts as much as possible. Not a single public right of way is removed. We have delivered over 15km of new paths across the Estate in five years and through this project will continue to expand our path network. Proper access through this land and spaces for local communities to grow food will be greater than ever before.

Addressing a fear of increased flooding around Cassington, the project will in fact hold back more water than ever on our land. Our Stage Zero schemes, developed with the Environment Agency along the River Glyme, will be rolled out further, reconnecting rivers to flood meadows, enabling more water to be held back during flood periods

The community benefit agreement will see significant funds reinvested in the local area each year and I know there is agreement to increase the funds available to go further. All this whilst maintaining farming – sheep grazing – underneath and around the panels.

We know the power generated by this project is needed. The population is growing, the grid is struggling to keep up. We can address this on a scale rarely seen.

We have not entered this project lightly, but I hope this clears up some of the misinformation which has followed this project and its importance to Blenheim.

Questions from ExA:

1. Question in relation to what the soil lacks today or what it will gain over the lifetime of the project

Very significant parts of the soils promoted for this project are degraded of nutritional and organic content. This is as a result of many decades of farming practices seeking to maximise yields through the use of modern fertilisers and chemicals.

Simply pausing the act of arable farming will see the land recover in organic and nutritional content, sequestering carbon from the atmosphere and building up soil ecology from not being disturbed and we are already seeing this on our smaller solar site north of Woodstock.

Grazing livestock in and around the panels will improve nutrients and the land will return to farming after the project in a better state to grow crops than it is today.

2. Are you able to demonstrate the Economic Impact of the project to Blenheim Estate?

The economic impact of the project to Blenheim is generated through the flow of rents to owner of the land on which the project sits.

When we refer to Blenheim it can normally be broken down into two sets of businesses:

1. The charity, Blenheim Palace Heritage Foundation, which operates inside the walls of the Parkland and runs the visitor attraction caring for the World Heritage Site. It takes a long-term lease of the parkland from the Parliamentary Trust. All profits from the charity go towards meeting the maintenance and upkeep of the World Heritage Site.
2. The commercial businesses, which generate funds as an investment portfolio mainly from housing, farming, commercial property and renewable energy.

All land proposed for the scheme sits outside the Park (so the land proposed is not owned by the charity) and is promoted by the commercial businesses on unincumbered freehold land owned by either the Blenheim Palace 1984 Maintenance Fund or the Vanbrugh Unit Trust.

Options and leases are in place today formalising the arrangements between the developer and landowner. There are no Crown rights or outstanding mortgages.

Today the land is currently used for arable and livestock farming and that is carried out by either the Estate directly or by local farmers under short term licences or tenancies.

Income to the commercial portfolio from this sort of farming is typically in the region of £100/ac per annum and in recent years that has come under pressure from the removal of subsidy support and the impact of more severe weather patterns.

The proposed shift to solar on land drawn down would see that income rise to at least £1,000/ac per annum through rents received, in addition to any income derived from the Estate continuing to graze livestock in and around the panels during the project.

There are mechanisms within the leases to capture indexation, higher than anticipated performance of the scheme and reinstatement bonds after a certain period, ensuring the land returns to the estate at the end of the lease in accordance with the Development Order.

The economic impact of these rents, alongside the collocated benefits, like biodiversity and improvements to the soil when taken together are significant and almost unachievable by any other single intervention.

3. Can you explain more about the flow of funds back to the World Heritage Site?

Today the charity which cares for the World Heritage Site will generate in the region of £2m p.a for restoration against an annual cost for restoration in the region of £4m.

Together with the independent charity trustees, we are working to close this gap and develop other sources of revenue to ensure the World Heritage Site survives for future generations to enjoy.

The land required for the solar project is held on trust. Income generated by the land must be applied to the World Heritage Site. This is a binding obligation on trustees, who provide account to HMRC on an annual basis. These are existing financial mechanisms in place today, passing funds to the Blenheim Palace Heritage Foundation.

Depending on the final design of the scheme and the exact land drawn down, that flow of funds will increase from around £80k pa today to in the region of £500k pa once developed out. All of this income will be committed to the maintenance and restoration of the World Heritage Site. Accordingly, there is significant public benefit to be derived from the development of the solar project in the form of derived income supporting this important heritage asset.

4. How will the project impact promotional literature taken from the air?

Aerial images are always important and important views of the World Heritage Site are outlined in the Blenheim Palace World Heritage Site Management Plan.

We have worked closely with stakeholders over the siting of the panels and do not have any concerns over the continued promotion of Blenheim Palace through aerials imagery.

We do not recognise some of the aerial imagery used online appearing to show harm to the World Heritage Site and are seeing no detrimental impact to the charity from the project to date.

5. Can you explain more about the increase to Community Funds mentioned?

As a long-term landowner who will continue to hold this land long after the proposed scheme has gone; we have been strong advocates for an appropriately sized and well delivered community fund, which we are happy to play part in delivering, should that be the collective wish of the communities.

We know the developer intends to set out their proposals for an improved community fund within the deadline one submissions.

Dominic Hare

Chief Executive Officer of Blenheim Palace 1984 Maintenance Fund, the Vanbrugh Unit Trust and Blenheim Palace Heritage Foundation

2 June 2025