

Botley West Solar Power Station

Further Questions arising from initial three days of the Examination

General points

- Toby Yates of Pinsent Masons for the Applicant stated in answer to questions about the loss of productive arable land should this application be approved, that there was a good supply of other available arable land available for food production - is that in England or elsewhere in the world? He needs to clarify that assertion given the comparative lack of BMV land in England in my own professional experience over 40 plus years.
- Can the Applicant explain what condition they believe the soil under the panels will be like after c 40 years in the shade, reduced levels of nutrients and lack of direct rainfall, given Sheep grazing being impractical on a sensible scale on the area under panels involved.
- Is there any relevant research on the latter matter which might assist everyone? I question the assertion that the soil (under the panels) would be in better condition in forty years time
- How will the community food growing arrangements work- like allotments? Will Blenheim be responsible for letting that sort of user? Rent free?

Best and Most Versatile farmland

- Can I draw the Examiners particular attention to **Mr Roderick Craig's relevant rep ref no RR 904**. Since he knows better than anyone how the land/soil performs, having been the farm manager for Blenheim for many years.
- **Mr David Sherratt FRS (RR 231)** has raised similar/related points on the percentage of BMV land under panels and/or inverters.
- I believe you have rightly asked for a more detailed breakdown on how the BMV figures were analysed - there is a plan on the library showing Grades of soil/land but no separate areas for each Grade. Can the applicant be asked to provide them?

Other key Relevant representations

- I would request that the Examiners read in depth the RRs from the following persons or bodies, as I believe they make numerous particularly strong points that need to be put to the Applicant or their experts as part of the Examination of their application.

Mr Stephen Michael Brown RR 998 and PDA 008

Cumnor Parish Council RR 205

Begbroke and Yarnton PC and Dr Hearne RR 1112

Councillor Dan Levy RR 202

Mr Russ Canning RR 919

Long/Church Hanborough PC and Mr R Devereux Cooke RR 376 and 882

Professor George Smith RR 351

Stop Botley West RR 1007

Woodstock TC RR1108

Worton Park Farms RR1111

The Applicants Photo montage presentation

- The failure to provide a meaningful series of adequate, clear and compliant photos montages before and after, is a singular failing that needs to be corrected - can the Inspectors demand this, especially the “money shots” looking east from Church Hanborough across the Evenlode valley to slopes that will be a phalanx of glass and steel staring one in the face?
- Oxford University have requested a visit to Hill End and Wytham Woods so the Inspectors can see the visual impact of the southern site which is largely on north facing slopes. I support that suggestion (having a permit to walk in Wytham Woods) and seen how views north and south will be compromised by solar panels especially in winter months.
- In the same way no pictures are provided in the vicinity of Shakespeare’s Way a National Trail path that runs up to Bladon and Blenheim from Oxford via Yarnton. There are views from there looking west and north and also from the footpath up past the Cassington sewage works access road to Purwell Farm, which are not shown in the applicants montages at all - they should be. These national trails are used by tourists as well as local residents. **Can the Inspectors ask for them to be provided even though they are late and thus arguably a fatal omission as the public were unable to see them in any consultation process?**
- There are four national trails and one national cycle way that pass through or near the BW application site - the Oxfordshire Way, the Green Belt Way, Akeman Street (roman road part of the Wychwood Way) and Shakespeare’s Way that links Oxford to the Cotswolds.

Grid connection and Timing

- It was frustrating that National Grid Electricity Transmission did not attend to give evidence or be questioned as to their involvement with the project. I hope that the ExA team can apply as much pressure for them to attend to complete the overall assessment of the applicants case.
- In particular, they need to clarify where connections to the 400KV Grid can be made to best effect and what other suitable locations might be possible between Oxford and Gloucester, between where there appear to be large tracts of country much less constrained by comparison to here.
- It has been stated that the applicant has a licence to connect to the NGET grid near Cumnor but that NGET would build their own sub station near the connection point. Can it be clearly established if the licence date has

now actually been formally extended between NGET (and/or NESO) and the applicant or not?

- Equally relevant, when does NGET expect to make their full planning application for their substation? They would have to apply in the usual way to VoWH DC, whose planning officer stated last week they have not even had any pre application communications with NGET. All of which tells me that it may be some time yet before NG can actually apply and it might well take 12 months or so for that sort of application to be decided. Consequently it might be mid to late 2026 before such an approval was available and maybe early 2027 before work could start on its construction - even if the BW solar farm were to start at the same time the current connection licence would have expired and October 2028 maybe too late as well given a forecast of 2 years to build everything.
- **Hence the particular need for NGET to be participants in this aspect of the Examination. Can the Inspectors make urgent requests to NGET?**
- The Aurora Solar Farm to the west of Eynsham, by way of recent example, has only just gone “live” after being under construction for at least two years but it is only 32MW - so one does wonder how Botley West could be constructed in 2 years given the magnitude of the project? Are there enough experienced contractors available and a reliable source of materials?

Panel and fencing replacement and eventual site decommissioning

- Replacing solar panels after c 25 years and then the Decommissioning process. The ExA team rightly highlighted the lack of detail on these and related matters. Perhaps Blenheim’s lease with Solar Five Ltd sets out the guarantees (maybe involving a bond deposit or similar held in escrow by lawyers) as guarantee of performance of the decommissioning specification and restoration of land to farming in forty years or so. An obvious question to be put to Blenheim or the Applicant who could offer greater transparency on the matter to the Examination.
- In the same context, it would be surprising if the efficiency of solar panels had not improved exponentially over that 25 years - given what we know has happened in the last 10 years. If that assumption proved reasonable, surely the output from panels on the same area would be significantly increased and would the transmission cable have the capacity to cope with the extra power output. Can the applicant respond?
- Or would the operator/owners decide to reduce the panel coverage thus releasing land for other uses - in the Green Belt areas, likely to be downgraded to Grey Belt and thus potentially available for housing - in line with the Government’s recent policy announcement to release grey belt land.
- In the context of cumulative impacts, can the applicant and Blenheim (as house builders) be asked if they consider there is any risk of any existing Green Belt being down graded to Grey Belt if covered in solar panels.

What if any provision is made for this scenario in the lease? Can Blenheim remove, after due notice, part of the site for housing ?

- The replacement of panels after circa 25 years could well coincide with the failure of the wooden fencing posts which are likely to rot at ground level and so need replacing to keep the site secure. Combined with replacing many if not all the solar panels much refining may prove necessary enlarging still further the additional construction phase that the applicant does not seem to have addressed adequately as the Inspectors have already pointed out.

Community Benefit

- Can the applicant and or Blenheim put some meaningful figures on their Community Benefit offer and how the reduced electricity charges might be applied/operated locally? At present it is all too vague.
- Pinsent Masons for the applicant avoided any response on the need to produce compelling evidence to justify use of compulsory powers when most of the land has already been secured leaving only small fry owners to agree terms. Can they be asked where this compelling evidence is?

- **Conditions for the DCO assuming ExA can make recommended changes /additions to the draft DCO** - namely on the following matters:-

- ★ Working hours - Mon to Friday 7.30am to 4pm in winter months, 7.30am to 6pm in summer months and 8am till 1pm on Saturdays; none on Sundays nor on Bank Holidays.
- ★ Reversing beepers to be banned on all machinery on site.
- ★ Hedge and tree protection details to be more specific eg avoid drip lines; ten year establishment period of new trees and hedges with replacement of any dead ones in first planting season following death.
- ★ Proper treatment of stored topsoil to protect its integrity. No movement of heavy vehicles in wet ground conditions, for same reasons. Haulage roads to be reinstated.
- ★ Reviewing rules on tree cutting and hedge removal, to ensure they are properly justified with prior consultation. (See paras 38 and 39 in draft DCO and Schedule 12).
- ★ Security cameras and lighting - how might lighting be triggered at night by animal movements? Impact risk to dark skies and annoyance. How will this be prevented and monitored/managed and by whom?
- ★ Can the ExA recommend the imposition of S106 like conditions in the DCO?

Historic Landscape

- Can the historic landscape expert for the applicant be asked why he failed to provide in his evidence, in November 2024, the Blenheim Park Management Plan of 2017 (signed and agreed by the Blenheim Estate and all other relevant stakeholders including UNESCO) - thus omitting it from the supporting documentation in this application - especially in the light of the comments from ICOMOS and their expert Mr Hal Moggeridge on the key importance of the wider setting of the WHS site, back in February 2024 - see App -044 pages 34 to 38 in the RPS text of Ch 7 Historic Environment? (NB - I realise the Inspectors have asked it to be added last week but one could argue that it is being provided by the Applicant **out of time**).
- In the above context, is it possible for the Inspectors to invite Mr Moggeridge back again to be questioned - he came on the first day last week but failed to appear on the second day representing ICOMOS - **I feel his immense expertise, experience and knowledge is vital to this Examination, compared to the applicants evidence or rather lack of it.**

Aviation safety issues

- In the context of aviation safety, I am not sure if it has been made known to the Inspectors that a large number of swans regularly reside (in winter months) in the arable fields between the Evenlode and Lower Road - and they may well be disrupted by the panels and look elsewhere in the vicinity- they would represent a serious hazard to low flying planes, as geese do as we heard last week; given the riparian environment and gravel pits predominant in the area, should this issue not be factored into the air safety angle?
- Can the RAF at Brize Norton and Oxford Aviation witnesses be asked how radar and radio signals might be affected by the electro emissions from the power station stretched out over the area about 10 miles from one end to the other?

Funding

- I have already raised the question of funding in my RR. Someone from Solar Five Ltd - preferably Herr Peter Gerstmann, as owner and Managing Director of both Solar Five Ltd and DVDP, needs to give the Examination evidence of **their current financial position- the figures provided so far are quite meaningless as redacted and being well out of date.**

Site Visits

- I have requested that the Inspectors revisit all the locations they went to in February 2025, after harvest this summer, so they can see the comparison between winter and summer seasons. Also to visit a local solar farm (eg Twelve Acre Farm Eynsham, the community solar and wind farm at Shrivensham or the one near Kencot Hill west of Carterton) to listen to inverters close to and the noise just one makes - given the real likelihood there

could be 156 of them strung out across the site generating a local background hum.

- Surely Blenheim and the other two main owners could be asked by the Inspectors for a carte blanche permission to access any and all parts of the land they own and included in the site so that every angle on site can have been assessed by the Inspectors with the cumulative impact always in mind.
- I have suggested that the Inspectors should gain access to the respective towers or spires of the various listed churches in the villages affected eg Wootton, Woodstock, Blazon, Church Hanborough, Cassington, Eynsham and Cumnor - the views from these historic churches could be seriously impacted to their detriment.

Harry St John
May 2025