

Thank you for the opportunity to address this enquiry. This written submission follows my oral submission on the first day of the open hearings.

I am the Oxfordshire County Councillor and West Oxfordshire District Councillor for Eynsham and Cassington. Cassington is a village immediately adjacent to part of the proposed solar farm. Salt Cross, which will be part of the area I represent, is also immediately adjacent to it. In addition the north bank of the Thames falls within my ward.

The submissions from each of the district councils, and in particular WODC, are likely to contain much of what I would say, so I will confine myself to the headings I raised in my oral hearing.

Flooding and hydrology

Cassington currently suffers from periodic flooding when there is heavy rain. This is caused by run off from the fields which lie to the north and west of the village and which are higher than the village. Flooding is particularly experienced in Elms Road in Cassington.

The fields in question are owned by Blenheim. The estate has been requested to improve flood resilience for many years, and has failed to do so.

The fields are earmarked for covering in solar panels. There is evidence, which Cassington Parish Council intend to provide to the enquiry, that solar panels make flooding worse, by concentrating run-off to the edges of the panels, which in turn reduces the absorption of water in the ground. There is a fear that flooding in the village will get worse in the event that the project is approved.

There are also floods associated with the River Evenlode, which periodically affect the A40 in the area between Eynsham and Cassington. The most recent set of floods left the A40 passable only at very low speeds and caused gridlock in the whole area. Run-off into the Evenlode will be increased by the solar farm and by other developments in the area, including Salt Cross (see below).

Cumulative effects of Botley West

The developer asserts that each effect of the scheme, for instance on the amenities for residents, is less than substantial. However the scheme is so large that, even were that to be true, the cumulative effect adds up to substantial harm. Thus for instance, each affected footpath may be individually affected to an acceptable level, but when there are no unaffected footpaths left, the overall effect is unacceptable. This is the case here. Moreover, there does not appear to have been an assessment of the total effect

on views, for instance to and from Wytham Woods (an SSSI) or to and from the prominent spires of Cassington Church and Church Hanborough.

Interaction with other developments.

The maps provided by the Developer failed to show areas set aside for new housing. Salt Cross is a garden village set to the north of Eynsham, covering the area bounded by Cuckoo Lane, the A40 and Lower Road, going as far north as the outskirts of Freeland and Church Hanborough. It is a substantial development, which will add approximately 3000 residents to the parish of Eynsham. Eynsham's population is currently approx. 6000.

Salt Cross is included in the West Oxfordshire Local Plan, and an Area Action Plan for the area was approved by the Planning Inspectorate in 2023. A subsequent judicial review means that part of the AAP, relating to net zero obligations, will be reexamined later in 2025. Following the final AAP, we can expect an outline planning application. The landowners of the area, which include the County Council, have no option but to proceed with a development, under the terms of an agreement which handed control of the development of the site to Grosvenor Estates. There is no mechanism for this agreement to be ended other than with the successful completion of the new village.

There is much more information, including maps, on the WODC website, at <https://www.westoxon.gov.uk/planning-and-building/planning-policy/salt-cross-garden-village/>

Even though there is not an extant planning consent for Salt Cross, it is almost inconceivable that it will not be built, and therefore ought to have been taken into account in this application relating to the Solar Farm.

The omission of Salt Cross from the application from PVDP is a substantial failure. It has not assessed the visual impact of the solar farm from a large number of houses. Salt Cross will be located to the west of Lower Road, on rising ground, overlooking the Evenlode valley and the proposed solar panels to the east of it. It has not assessed the effect on drainage, and in particular to the effect on water levels in the Evenlode in the event of heavy rainfall.

Unless the omissions are rectified, I would argue that the application is so deficient that it should not be sent to the Secretary of State.

Additionally, you might note that Eynsham ward of WODC already has substantial solar farm areas. There are two complete and operational areas of some size, and a third larger one between South Leigh and the River Windrush which has had planning consent for over a year but which awaits a date for connection to the National Grid without which construction is unlikely to commence. The area is already doing its bit.

Crossing of the Thames

The application has failed to be specific about how the River Thames will be crossed by the cables carrying electricity from the central and northern sites to the substation near Farmoor. This is an area of great sensitivity, with restored wildflower meadows to the north of the river and the Wytham Woods SSSI to the south. Such detail should have been made available to the enquiry as it is material to your consideration and that of the Secretary of State.

Financing of the scheme and its impact on the area

The proposed financial structure of the scheme is that PVDP will be the developer. This is a lightly financed entity, with no established track record of completing such projects. The bulk of financing will come from debt provided by as yet unrevealed sources.

You will have seen reports in Private Eye and elsewhere questioning the source of this funding, and will I am sure take a view as to whether this is a matter for the Inspectors to bring to the attention of the Secretary of State.

What is undoubtedly a planning matter is the importance, if the scheme is recommended for approval, of guarantees that it will be completed in full and put into operation. Without such guarantees, which are not apparently yet available, there is a substantial risk that the project could be started but not completed, leaving the landscape blighted by a half-finished piece of work. Such guarantees should cover the construction of the scheme in total (including the substation), its operation, and remedial work at the end of the allocated period. Without guarantees from known and financially assured sources, which might include Blenheim, with substantial bonds held to ensure their worth, there is real risk to the scheme and to the residents of the area.