

Planning

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By email

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BOTLEY WEST SOLAR FARM (BWSF) REF: EN010147

WRITTEN REPRESENTATION OF VALE OF WHITE HORSE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Introduction

1. The proposed Botley West Solar Farm development (BWSF) comprises approximately 1,418ha of land that is located within the administrative areas of the Vale of White Horse District Council (VWHDC), Cherwell District Council (CDC), West Oxfordshire District Council (WODC) and Oxfordshire County Council (OCC), of which 81ha is within the VWHDC administrative area, comprising the whole of the applicant's Southern Site located to the southeast of Farmoor Reservoir and the applicant's southern part of cable routes between Central Site and Southern Site.
2. In accordance with the Planning Inspectorate's Rule 8 letter dated 20 May 2025, this letter constitutes the VWHDC's Written Representation ('WR') and follows published guidance. It clarifies and updates the Council's views already set out in its Relevant Representation ('RR') [**RR-1086**].
3. The following documents are also separately supplied by the VWHDC in accordance with Deadline 1:
 1. a summary (maximum 10%) of this WR given it exceeds 1500 words (marked VWHDC WR Summary)
 2. a Joint Local Impact Report (LIR) by the Oxfordshire Host Authorities.
 3. a written statement clarifying what input VWHDC had in the information the Applicant used to prepare the Environmental Statement for Point 17 of Action Points from Issue Specific Hearing 1 (ISH1) - 15 May 2025 [**EV5-010**]
4. This WR should be read in conjunction with the Local Impact Report ('LIR').

5. VWHDC continue engagement with the applicant to resolve outstanding matters wherever possible and is progressing statements of common ground (SoCG) to establish matters which, at the time of their submission, remain outstanding. The Council will also continue to engage in the Examination process and will review and provide written comment as necessary on relevant matters, including representations as they become available.
6. A numbered paragraph and subheading format is used to assist navigation.

The Principal Issues

7. National planning policy on renewable energy development is set out in the
 - EN-1 Overarching National Policy Statement for Energy;
 - EN-3 Renewable Energy Infrastructures; and
 - EN-5 Electricity Networks Infrastructure.
8. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) at paragraphs 161 - 169 and Planning Practice Guidance: Renewable and Low Carbon Energy (PPG) are also materially relevant.
9. The PPG on renewable and low carbon energy explains that: *“The National Planning Policy Framework explains that all communities have a responsibility to help increase the use and supply of green energy, but this does not mean that the need for renewable energy automatically overrides environmental protections and the planning concerns of local communities. As with other types of development, it is important that the planning concerns of local communities are properly heard in matters that directly affect them.”* [Paragraph: 003 **Reference ID: 5-003-20140306**].
10. The Council’s RR [**RR-1086**] set out the relevant development plan policies for the proposed development. The RR confirms that VWHDC does not object to the principle of large-scale photovoltaic generation proposals, but it does consider that acceptable mitigation, tailored specifically to the context of a proposal, must be proposed and its delivery can be secured.
11. The principal issues that VWHDC raises in relation to the application are:
 1. Inappropriate development in the Oxford Green Belt
 2. Best and Most Versatile (BMV) Agricultural Land
 3. Landscape & Visual Impacts
 4. Heritage Impacts
 5. Ecology
 6. Lack of clarity on NGET substation / grid connections

Inappropriate Development in the Oxford Green Belt

12. National guidance on proposals affecting the Green Belt is set out in the NPPF at paragraphs 142-160 and Planning Practice Guidance: Green Belt.
13. Paragraph 142 of the NPPF states that the *'fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open; the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence.'*
14. National Policy Statement for Energy (EN-1) states at paragraph 5.11.37 that:
"...when considering any planning application affecting Green Belt land, the Secretary of State should ensure that substantial weight is given to any harm to the Green Belt when considering any application for such development, while taking account, in relation to renewable and linear infrastructure, of the extent to which its physical characteristics are such that it has limited or no impact on the fundamental purposes of Green Belt designation. Very special circumstances may include the wider environmental benefits associated with increased production of energy from renewables and other low carbon sources."
15. It has been established that due to the size and nature of the development, the proposed solar farm is inappropriate development in the Oxford Green Belt.
16. Inappropriate development in the Oxford Green Belt is, by definition, harmful and carries substantial weight. In addition to harm caused by reason of inappropriateness, development can have further harm to the Green Belt by reducing openness (which includes visual as well as spatial considerations) conflicting with the fundamental aim of keeping such land permanently open.
17. National policy is clear therefore, that for this DCO application to be successful, there must exist Very Special Circumstances (VSC) to justify the use of Green Belt land.
18. National Planning Policy Guidance on the Green Belt (December 2023) sets out some of the factors that can be taken account of when assessing the potential impact of development on the openness of the Green Belt stating:

By way of example, the courts have identified a number of matters which may need to be taken into account in making this assessment. These include, but are not limited to:

- *openness is capable of having both spatial and visual aspects – in other words, the visual impact of the proposal may be relevant, as could its volume*

- *the duration of the development, and its remediability – taking into account any provisions to return land to its original state or to an equivalent (or improved) state of openness*
- *the degree of activity likely to be generated, such as traffic generation*

[Paragraph: 013 **Reference ID: 64-013-20250225**]

19. The characteristics of the Southern Site area are set out in Chapter 2 of the Environmental Statement - Existing Baseline [APP-039] at sections 2.5 Southern Site and 2.6 Cable Route. The visual impact of the proposed development is further assessed in the LIR. It is however useful to provide a brief overview to provide context to the Green Belt issue.
20. The landform is predominately rising southwards, with an elevation predominantly between 65 to 100 AOD. There are extensive views available across the site and beyond due to higher land to the south.
21. The surrounding landscape context to the north and south comprises rising hill slopes with woodland blocks interspersed with farmland. There is limited built development on Seacourt and Wytham Hill to the north and on the slopes of Tumbledown Hill to the south. Farmoor Reservoir and water treatment works is located to the north and north west, with the A420 to the east. Pylons cross the landscape, and through the site.
22. Outside the site boundary, the main built form includes some brick-built farmsteads with some more modern housing clusters to the north along the Eynsham Road, the Tudor Court housing area, some large houses set at a higher level at the western end of the Vale, designed to take in the view across the Thames Vale and some more modern houses along parts of the Cumnor Road.
23. The site and the wider Vale landscape form part of the rural landscape to the west of Botley, part of the Oxford Greenbelt. The rural nature of the landscape is appreciated from the rights of way, including Oxfordshire Greenbelt Way, which cross the site and link into the residential areas west of Oxford. The B4017 also runs through the proposed development.
24. Footpath routes link into a wider footpath network to the north, east and west of the site and these routes are enjoyed by walkers but also people using the Hill End Outdoor Education Centre who rely on these rural open surroundings to provide outdoor recreational opportunities (school children and Duke of Edinburgh experiences etc,) to approximately 23,500 people from Oxfordshire per year.
25. Whilst pylons cross the landscape, the area can be characterised as being a rural, relatively unsettled area contained by the slopes to the north and south.

Pylons and traffic along the B4044 and B4017 are considered detracting features however there is a degree of peace and tranquillity along footpaths within the area.

26. At present the southern site and the wider vale landscape form part of the rural landscape to the west of Botley/ Oxford, as part of the Oxford Greenbelt. The proposed development would introduce a substantial amount of development into the countryside. This includes panels and transformer units, along with the associated development of access tracks and security fencing, which are considered to have a significant impact on openness and thus conflicting with the purposes of Green Belt.
27. The second point of PPG guidance on Green Belts considers duration. The proposed development is to be operational for a period of 37 years with solar panels located on either side of rights of way for extensive lengths to have a significant impact on openness and tranquillity, at the very least for a generation.
28. In support of this assertion an Inspector dismissed an appeal for a solar farm in the Green Belt stating *"I acknowledge the appellant's argument that the proposal is temporary in nature (40 years) and that the development would be removed and the land restored to its former condition – in essence openness would be restored at that point. Leaving aside the discussion as to what may happen at the end of the 40-year period – which can only be speculation - I do not find this argument to be persuasive in terms of reducing the effect on Green Belt openness. Although the proposal is for a limited period, the length of that period is very substantial. But even more importantly, the fundamental aim of national Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. With that well established policy background it cannot be right that the fact that approval is sought for a 40-year period is accorded more than very limited weight in favour of the scheme in relation to the loss of openness. To do so would go against the concept of permanence."* See Paragraph 19 of planning appeal reference: **[APP/A1910/W/23/3317818]**.
29. The proposed development would also result in the permanent development of 4ha covered by buildings for the NGET substation, a form of development, urban in scale and appearance.
30. The third point of PPG guidance quoted above factors in the degree of activity resulting from the proposed development. It is accepted that a solar farm, once constructed, requires little maintenance and the traffic and activity generated during the operational phase is minimal.

Very Special Circumstances

31. To outweigh the harm to the openness of the Green Belt, there must be Very Special Circumstances (VSC) for allowing the proposed development. There

are numerous examples of Local Planning Authorities and Planning Inspectors around the country as well as within the Oxford Green Belt finding that VSC exist for solar development citing a variety of factors including:

- the contribution a solar farm would make towards renewable energy targets
- the well screened nature of a site
- limited harm to the surrounding landscape
- where harm is temporary
- visual impact mitigated by planting
- the proximity to a substation with capacity
- the benefits of the production of renewable energy along with the temporary nature of the development outweighed the harm to the Green Belt.

32. VSC that weigh in favour of the proposed development are:

- the contribution to low carbon energy generation and renewable energy targets
- the net gain in biodiversity

33. The visual impact however would not be satisfactorily mitigated.

34. Overall VWHDC consider that the harm caused by reason of inappropriate development in the Green Belt, and the loss of openness will be significant, and the harm is not outweighed by VSC or other considerations, particularly as the benefits of the proposed development can be realised on land elsewhere outside of the Oxford Green Belt.

35. The proposed development is contrary to policies CP13 CP41 and CP44 of the Development Plan and to National Policy.

36. The Southern Site area should be removed entirely from the proposed development.

Best and Most Versatile (BMV) Agricultural Land

37. BMV land is assessed in the LIR, but at least 4ha of BMV will be permanently lost through siting of the NGET substation. VWHDC consider this weighs against the proposed development as land with a lower value of classification could be used to site a substation.

38. The proposed development is contrary to policy CP43 of the Development Plan which seeks to avoid developing the best and most versatile agricultural land preferring use of areas of poorer quality land in preference to that of higher quality.

Landscape and Visual Impacts

39. National guidance confirms planning decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, sites of biodiversity or geological value and soils (NPPF paragraph 187).
40. NPS EN-1 (paragraph 5.10.5) recognises that virtually all nationally significant infrastructure projects will have adverse impacts on the landscape, but there may also be beneficial landscape character impacts arising from mitigation.
41. VWHDC remains of the opinion that proposed development on the Southern Site will result in a significant negative change causing harm to landscape character, both within the wider setting and to the rural landscape setting of Cumnor Parish.
42. The Council's RR **[RR-1086]** previously set out concerns on landscape and visual impacts and further detail is contained within the LIR.
43. It is however useful to provide a brief overview to provide context to this issue.
44. The 2024 South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Landscape Character Assessment (LCA 2024) produced in support of the emerging joint local plan shows the site lies within two local landscape character areas:
- 9G – Northern Vale Edge Slopes
- 14A – Farmoor Reservoir Valley
45. The Southern Site is representative of these Character Areas, of which key characteristics include:
- A lower, flatter, area within the overall ridge, which falls very gently towards Farmoor Reservoir at approximately 65m AOD. Contained by wooded slopes to the north and south.
 - Predominantly large arable fields, with some smaller areas of pasture and tree cover at the eastern and western ends of the area.
 - Limited woodland, but a relatively intact network of hedgerows along field boundaries.
 - Pylons cross east to west (a visually detracting feature within the landscape).
 - There is limited settlement, other than occasional small pockets of housing and isolated farmsteads.
 - Views of surrounding wooded hills are prominent to the north and south and form a wooded horizon.
 - The area forms a gap between Farmoor and Botley, with boundary vegetation filtering views of the settlement edges and providing visual separation between the two settlements.

46. The LCA indicates that key positive attributes to be conserved and enhanced include the views across the low-lying landscape, the network of public rights of way and the rural backdrop in views.
47. The landscape strategy is to maintain the open character of farmland which forms gaps between individual settlements, conserve woodlands, hedges and riparian vegetation which give the ridge its treed character, protect remaining semi-natural habitats and resist further urbanising sprawl of low-density development.
48. Landscape guidelines include:
- *Maintain the open character and recreational value of the landscape, which provides access and a rural setting to the settlements of Farmoor and Botley.*
 - *Minimise the impact of any new development on local character and on views from adjacent higher ground.*
 - *Ensure any new development does not detract from the historic farmsteads and associated barns.*
 - *Consider the impact on views of the solar arrays from the surrounding higher ground.*
 - *Protect and manage the valued recreational use of the landscape on public rights of way, particularly along promoted routes, and at Farmoor Reservoir.*
 - *Consider opportunities to improve public right of way connections, infrastructure and signage.*
49. The proposed development would result in the loss of key features of the landscape and would introduce elements uncharacteristic with these character areas. The development would erode the context of existing features and their perception within the landscape and mitigation measures would not reverse the loss despite delivering some localised benefits. This would result in a major to moderate landscape effect that is significant.
50. It is also considered that for many of the views, the magnitude of visual change would be higher than as stated in the applicant's LVIA, with proposed development causing a dominant or complete change or contrast to the view, resulting from the loss or addition of substantial features that will substantially alter the appreciation of the view.
51. In terms of mitigation, whilst hedge planting may in time screen solar panels and associated infrastructure in some local views, hedges would need to be tall and would also block views which are important to the open nature of the landscape and to the appreciation of the vale location, the views from the higher ground are not substantially changed as the mitigation matures. Proposed steel mesh fencing and numerous cameras would also be entirely at odds with the rural setting and would add to the adverse impacts on rural character.

52. Overall, VWHDC consider it is not possible to locate solar development in this landscape setting without significant adverse effects on the landscape character and views. This is a rural, relatively unsettled area, with a keen sense of place, contained by the slopes to the north and south. Whilst pylons and traffic along the B4017 are detracting features, there remains a degree of peace and tranquillity along footpaths within the area. Due to the proximity to the settlements of Cumnor, Botley and Oxford, this area of Greenbelt provides a recreational resource to large areas of residents.
53. The proposals therefore would be contrary to policy CP41 of the Local Plan, which supports renewable energy development provided it does not cause a significant adverse effect to the landscape. The development would also be contrary to policy CP44 which seeks to protect the landscape including important views and tranquillity.
54. VWHDC consider that the benefits of the proposed development are insufficient to outweigh the landscape harm and policy conflicts identified.
55. The Southern Site area should be removed entirely from the proposed development.

Heritage Impacts

56. Paragraphs 2.10.117 and 2.10.118 of NPS EN-3 state that the impact of solar farms on the settings of heritage assets must be carefully considered and minimised.
57. Paragraphs 212 to 221 of the NPPF set out how to consider the potential impacts of development on heritage assets. In this regard paragraph 212 makes clear:
- “When considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset’s conservation (and the more important the asset, the greater the weight should be). This is irrespective of whether any potential harm amounts to substantial harm, total loss or less than substantial harm to its significance.”*
58. The Council’s RR [**RR-1086**] previously set out concerns on heritage impacts and further information is contained within the LIR.
59. In summary, VHWDC confirm there will be no direct physical impact on any designated heritage asset from the proposed development. However, heritage assets are understood in relation to their existing rural and agricultural landscape setting, where harmful impacts of the proposed development on the significance of the heritage assets will occur.

60. Paragraph 213 of the NPPF states that any harm to, or loss of, the significance of a designated heritage asset should require clear and convincing justification.
61. Given the size of the area and the scale of the change to the agricultural character of the area which forms the setting of these assets VWHDC considers the level of harm sits centrally within the less than substantial harm spectrum. The proposed development would result in the loss of the ability to appreciate heritage assets in their agricultural setting over a wide area, particularly when experienced from walking Public Rights of Way.
62. In terms of how to deal with situations where less than substantial harm is found to exist, paragraph 215 states:
- “Where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use.”*
63. VWHDC remains of the view that the loss of the rural, agricultural character which forms part of the setting of designated heritage assets and contributes to the understanding and experience of those assets is not outweighed by the benefits of the proposed development.
64. The proposed development is contrary to policies CP39, DP36, DP37 and DP38 of the Development Plan and to National Policy.
65. The Southern Site area should be removed entirely from the proposed development.

Ecology

66. The Council’s RR [RR-1086] previously set out issues to be addressed on ecology impacts
67. VWHDC considers, to date, insufficient information has been submitted with the DCO application to make an informed and reasoned judgement on the ecological and biodiversity impacts of the development.
68. Further information on this issue is contained within the LIR and should it not be satisfactorily addressed the proposed development is contrary to policy CP46 of the Development Plan and to National Policy.

Lack of clarity on NGETS substation / grid connections

69. VWHDC remains concerned over the uncertainty of the requirements for the grid connections. This is a large and major component of the application, and

the expected infrastructure and grid connections associated with the project must be fully assessed. To date, information provided by the applicant about the appearance of the grid connection and the NGET substation design is not acceptable.

70. Given grid connection is anticipated to be in October 2028, full design details and who will deliver it must be known by now and should be made public for assessment.

71. The NGET substation is anticipated to be very large and sited somewhere in or adjacent to the southern parcel substation and its scale is unlike anything else in this area and will likely have to rely heavily on topography to reduce its impact.

Local Policy Compliance

72. Whilst not determinative under the Planning Act 2008, the Examining Authority can consider other important and relevant matters, including national and local planning policy. The local policies that VWHDC considers of relevance to this application are set out in the Council's RR [**RR-1086**] and should be considered as important and relevant to the determination of the application.

73. VWHDC considers the proposed development conflicts with the following policies:

CP13 – The Oxford Green Belt

CP41 – Renewable Energy

CP44 – Landscape

DP31 – Protection of Public Rights of Way, National Trails and Open Access Areas

DBC4 – Development in the Green Belt

DBC7 – Important Views

TI3 – Footpaths and Bridleways

CP39 – The Historic Environment

DP36 – Heritage Assets

DP37 – Conservation Areas

DP38 – Listed buildings

Planning Balance

74. NPS EN-1 Paragraph 4.1.5 states

In considering any proposed development, in particular when weighing its adverse impacts against its benefits, the Secretary of State should take into account:

- its potential benefits including its contribution to meeting the need for energy infrastructure, job creation, reduction of geographical disparities, environmental enhancements, and any long-term or wider benefits*
- its potential adverse impacts, including on the environment, and including any long-term and cumulative adverse impacts, as well as any measures to avoid, reduce, mitigate or compensate for any adverse impacts, following the mitigation hierarchy*

75. Paragraph 4.2.14 of NPS EN-1 confirms the Secretary of State will consider the impacts and benefits of all CNP Infrastructure applications on a case-by-case basis.

76. To aid the ExA, VWHDC provides the following consideration of harms v benefits of the proposed development and the weight to accord to each on the following scale: full weight, very significant weight, significant weight, moderate weight, limited weight, no weight.

Harms

77. VWHDC attach very significant weight to the fact that the development is inappropriate development in the Green Belt. Further significant weight is attached to the harm caused by the development to the openness because of the presence of structures on land that is currently agricultural and free from obstruction. Very significant weight is also given to the landscape and visual harm caused by the development. Harms identified to heritage assets further weigh negatively against the proposed development, and moderate weight is attributed to that harm. Limited weight is given to the loss of agricultural land. The impact on the footpaths without appropriate mitigation is given moderate weight.

Benefits

78. In favour of the proposed development, very significant weight is attributed to the need to provide additional energy from renewable sources and the considerable wider environmental benefits associated with increased production from renewable sources as set out in detail above. Limited weight is given to the time limited and non-permanent nature of the installation, as the suggested lifespan of 37 years is a significant period, and elements of the proposed development will remain permanent. The decommissioning of the

infrastructure would allow a return to farmland. Moderate weight is also given to the ecological enhancements proposed. No weight is attributed to the landscaping of the proposed development.

VWHDC position on the project

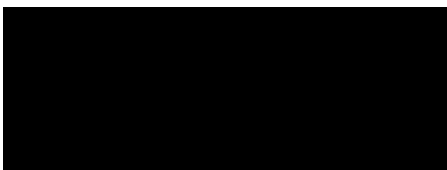
79. As evidenced in the RR [RR-1086], VWHDC does not object in principle to the proposed development. The council has declared a climate emergency recognising a commitment to contribute to the global efforts to tackle climate change and Solar Farms are recognised as an established means of renewable electricity generation to achieve net zero aims.

80. However, it is established that the proposal comprises inappropriate development in the Green Belt. VWHDC consider Very Special Circumstances do not exist to enable the justification of this proposal and that the harms identified in this representation on Green Belt, Landscape and Heritage Assets are not outweighed by the public benefits the proposed development would bring.

81. VWHDC remain of the view that the Botley West Solar Farm is not acceptable, and the proposed Southern Site in the Vale of White Horse district should be removed from the application.

Please contact me should you need clarification on any of the points raised in this response.

Yours sincerely,



Major Applications Team Leader