

Thankyou for the opportunity to speak on behalf of a community project known as “Forever Fields.”

The project involved over 100 local artists, 1200 visitors to an Art Exhibition in November 23, and the publishing of this 150 page book in February.

A unique project, Forever Fields has two objectives:

- To invite local people to express their feelings about the prospect of losing so much green space; through art, photography, film, pottery and other mediums.
- To create an art archive in the form of a book to be used as a reference point, and support the fields’ return to open space in 42 years time, if the application is given approval.

With this in mind I shall describe three areas of particular focus to strengthen the examination process:

Firstly, mental health and well being.

An overriding theme of Forever Fields is a sense of loss that public amenity currently offered by extensive public rights of way, wide open space and soaring viewpoints at risk from the scale of this application, will not be mitigated by the developer.

Evidence presented by the developer in the Environmental Statement is based on complex methodology which was challenging for the general public to interpret or influence. It is unhelpful that key data points and photo montages which would have assisted understanding during consultation were not available, or inadequate, at the time.

Forever Fields requests that the application is challenged further on this issue and that Environmental Statement Volume 3 Appendix 8.4 “Methodology” November 24, Document (EN010147) APP/6.5 is rigorously assessed for completeness, accuracy and implementation.

In particular, given the scale of the application, more visual examples are required to assess the environmental impact in a way that supports a mitigation plan which will fully compensate impact on mental health and well-being of local people.

Secondly, Heritage and Landscape.

It is well known that this area is rich in heritage assets and surrounded by a beautiful rural landscape.

However, it was clear during the Forever Fields exhibition that there is a growing concern regarding the role of The Blenheim Estate as landowner. This is because Blenheim Palace Heritage Foundation, which is the charity and steward of the World Heritage site, is managed by the same team that manage The Blenheim Estate. Certain directors and trustees of the charity will personally benefit from the application if it is given approval, whilst the charity itself will not receive any financial benefit.

Forever Fields requests that input from Blenheim Palace Heritage Foundation regarding the impact of Botley West on the wider setting of the World Heritage Site takes into account conflicts of interest that exist. Further we would request that the examination offers more time and weight to heritage bodies that offer truly independent perspective on the impact of this

application on the setting of the World Heritage Site and other Heritage assets.

(NOTE : THIS PARA IS NEW AND NOT SAID IN THE HEARING DUE TO TIME CONSTRAINTS:

In the interests of transparency, when asking questions of any representative of Blenheim I would request that the examination clarifies who the representative is speaking on behalf of; The Estate or The Charity AND whether they are likely to personally benefit from a successful application.)

Thirdly, decommissioning and reinstatement.

The name ‘Forever Fields’ is a reminder to all concerned that the application for 42 years change of use is described as ‘temporary.’

However, the Decommissioning Plan presented by the developer lacks detail and commitment. The Decommissioning Document (EN010147)/APP/7.6.4 is just 12 pages, compared to the total application page count of well over 12,000.

More concerning is that section 1.2.1 says that a decommissioning plan will be :

‘produced and approvedfollowing the appointment of a contractor, prior to the commencement of the decommissioning phase of the project’

implying that a detailed plan will not be written until the mid 2060’s.

The issue is made more complex by the lack of clarity on who owns the land today, whether the land will be acquired through

compulsory purchase or not, and who will build and manage the solar farm for the next 40 years.

Forever Fields requests that the following areas are given particular scrutiny during the examination; land ownership, compulsory purchase plans, scrutiny of the developers intentions in respect of building the solar farm if the application is approved, financial assessment of projected decommissioning costs and options for financial reserve/escrow to ensure commitment to decommissioning.

With reinstatement in mind, the Forever Fields book is a powerful document that supports the above requests.

We therefore request that the examination accepts copies of the Forever Fields book for consideration.

Finally

The experience of Forever Fields is one of a community coming together and telling their stories through art and poetry.

I shall finish by borrowing a paragraph in [REDACTED] book 'One Man and His Bike.'

“ I had always loved the saying that we read stories to discover that we're not alone. Well, I don't think I had ever felt less alone than at that moment. Here were people, not extremists, but ordinary people, speaking passionately about the very things that make us human, that make life a thing of richness and fulfilment - and they were the very things that can never appear in a cost analysis, the only modern measure of a man's worth.”

We look forward to an examination that is fair and reasonable and a process that allows local views to be considered with an open mind.

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