Cassington Parish Council IP [redacted]

Cassington Parish Council Responses to Submissions For Deadline 5 and Comments Related to the Issue-Specific Hearing 9th October, 2025

Applicant's Responses to other D4 Submissions and comments on Interested Parties' Responses to ExA's Second Written Questions (ExQ2) Submitted at D4 PINS Ref: EN010147 Document Ref: EN010147/APP/15.2

Introduction

Cassington Parish Council welcome the attention that the Examiners have brought to the Botley West Solar Power Station Examination and thank them. This Deadline 6 submission includes both Cassington Parish Council's responses to the Applicants Submissions to Deadline 5, which formed the substantive part of our verbal interventions at the Issue Specific Hearing, as well as further written comments on discussions during the hearing, some of which could not be explored because of lack of time. We have ordered this document according to the order in which matters related to Cassington Parish Council were raised in the Deadline 5 by the Applicant. For this reason, the document does not follow the order of the Agenda for the Issue Specific Hearing. We hope this does not cause inconvenience.

REP4-054 Bats Q 2.3.5 and Q 2.3.9

Cassington Parish Council welcomes the new information provided at Deadline 5 in terms of the Bat Technical Note 2025 and updated Volume 3 Appendix 9.4 Bat Surveys PINS Ref: EN010147 Document Ref: EN010147/APP/6.5. This documentation confirms many of the statements made by Cassington Parish Council with respect to bats in relation to habitat and in relation to solar installations. These include:

- That there is a negative impact on the occurrence of bats associated with solar arrays.
- That the mechanism driving this impact has not been elucidated.
- The Project site is important to a high diversity of UK and Oxfordshire bat species, including some of the rarest species, such as Bechstein's bat and barbastelle.

- A number of bat species move and forage over fields.
- Bats in the area are using a mosaic of habitats as part of their daily foraging activities and annual patterns of migration and roosting associated with reproduction and the autumn dispersal.
- That the area surveyed is of "at least national importance" to bats.

New data arising from tracking Bechstein's bat and barbastelles indicate that the former are confined mainly to wooded areas for all activities of foraging and roosting whilst the latter are much wider ranging in their foraging activities. The Environmental Statement, Volume 3 Appendix 9.4: Bat Surveys demonstrates very clearly the high importance of the landscape within the Central Section of the proposed solar power station, including fields north of Cassington, north of Purwell Farm and north of the Cassington Sewage Works to barbastelle bats (Appendix 2, Fig. 2 summarises this information). Acoustic recordings furthermore demonstrate the importance of fields for noctules, common and soprano pipistrelles and *Myotis* spp (Bat Technical Note 2025). These are areas that will be covered in solar panels by the proposed project. Despite the data arising from the studies the Applicant still states in Appendix 9.4 Bat Surveys (Document Ref: EN010147/APP/6.5) Paragraph 5.1.3.

"*However, the area to be developed comprises species-poor fields, which are of much lower value for bats*."

As we will demonstrate below, based on the Applicant's own work, this statement very much depends on what species of bats are considered and cannot be said for the bat community as a whole. The Applicant's own work identifies even the surveyed arable fields represent good habitat for bats.

Whilst the Bat Technical Note 2025 acknowledges the findings of negative impacts of Solar Power Stations on bats it does not detail just how serious this impact can be. The investigation by Tinsley et al (2023) demonstrated that 6 bat species were negatively impacted by solar including serotine bats, *Myotis* spp., *Nyctalus* spp (inc. noctules) common and soprano pipistrelle bats and *Plecotus* spp (long-eared bats). Common pipistrelles and *Nyctalus* spp. (a genus that includes the noctule) were negatively impacted in both open field and field margin habitats, *Myotis* spp. and serotines were impacted along field margin habitats, whilst soprano pipistrelles and *Plecotus* spp were negatively impacts in open fields with solar compared to control open fields (Tinsley et al., 2023). Common pipistrelle activity in open field compared to those with solar was reduced by 86%, soprano pipistrelles by 68%, *Nyctalus* pp. 48% (Tinsley et al., 2023). On the margins around fields compared to margins around fields with solar common pipistrelle activity was reduced by 40%, soprano pipistrelles by 71% (not statistically significant) and *Nyctalus* by 30% (Tinsley et al., 2023). As mentioned during the Issue Specific Hearing by the Applicant, who was clearly aware of this peer-reviewed paper, the effects of solar on barbastelle bats were not significant, probably because there were insufficient numbers of this rare

species detected, making it unlikely that statistical analysis would identify significant differences between control sites and those covered with panels. However, it was demonstrated at a landscape scale, that arable land, the type that dominates much of the central section of Botley West, had a positive influence on barbastelle recordings (Tinsley et al., 2023). The work demonstrates that the impact on bat numbers recorded over solar projects, both in open fields and field margins is dramatic and significant.

Further evidence of the effects of solar energy projects on bats is arising from the Gwent Levels. Whilst we do not have detailed information from this project a letter from the Friends of Gwent Levels and Gwent Wildlife Trusts to the Minister for Climate Change in 2022 detailed biodiversity losses attributed to Llanwern Solar Farm. The letter states:

"*The diversity of bat species decreased markedly, and for the majority of locations, abundance of species has dropped dramatically (95- 100%).*"

Concerningly, a report on *Gwent Levels Post Construction Monitoring* by Arup (2024) notes that of the bat boxes, presumably placed for mitigation purposes, only one had been occupied and that additional monitoring years will give insight into the potential decreases of bat abundance in the array fields post-construction. These findings indicate that bats are not simply reducing their foraging in the vicinity of solar arrays, but populations are either being destroyed or displaced, or a combination of the two from solar power stations. The mechanism through which this is happening remains obscure as stated in the Bat Technical Note (2025).

During the Issue Specific Hearing Cassington Parish Council raised the fact that the radio tracking data for barbastelle indicated that as well as commonly flying along specific natural and artificial landscape features, they were also foraging in fields which are to be covered in solar arrays (e.g. fields between Cassington Sewage Works and Begbroke). This is visible in Figure 2, Appendix 2 of EN010147/APP/6.5 Annex B Bat Radio-tracking Survey Report 2025. During the Issue Specific Hearing, the Applicant's ecologist tried to explain this away by stating that this was an artifact of the (in)accuracy of the tracking method. However, it should be noted that this result is not only supported by the kernel density maps (the orange shaded areas on the maps) but also by the point locations for bats estimated by identifying the direction of the strongest echo location signals between two tracking parties (the yellow dots on the maps). What the Applicant's ecologist also failed to acknowledge was that the results from 2024/2025 paired bat detector studies where one detector was located in a hedgerow and one in a field also identified that a number of bat species in the Botley West proposed area use both hedgerows and fields as habitat (e.g. common pipistrelle, soprano pipistrelle, *Myotis* sp., Leisler's bat, noctules and barbastelle; Bat Technical Note 2025). These surveys, mainly undertaken in the Central Site, identified that Noctule in particular, but also *Myotis* sp. and Leisler's

bats occurred more often over the field detector than the paired hedge detector, in some cases, depending on location, much more (Bat Technical Note, 2025).

We note that the sewage farm is an important location for bat foraging. It is highly likely that bats in this location are performing a positive ecosystem service for people in the area by supressing insect numbers around the sewage farm.

Drawing this evidence together it is concluded that:

- The proposed Botley West Solar Power Station is sited in an area at least of national, and possibly international significance for bats.
- The diverse bat community results from a mosaic of habitats favourable to bats.
- The Central Site of Botley West is of particular importance to bats and includes roosting and foraging sites including woods, hedge/tree lines, water bodies, fields and man-made features favourable to bats. The Applicants own consultants point to the high numbers and diversity of bat species captures "over only 14 nights of trapping" demonstrating the importance of the habitats within and adjacent to the project site (EN010147/APP/6.5 Annex B Bat Radio-tracking Survey Report 2025).
- Species include the rare Bechstein's and barbastelle bats, both of which are of a Near Threatened status, as a result of declining populations (IUCN Red List).
- Fields, particularly in the Central Site of the Botley West Solar Power Station, are important habitat for several bat species in the bat community, including noctule, *Myotis* sp. and Leisler's bat as well as barbastelle.
- Solar installations have a very serious and significant impact on bat communities, the driver of which is unknown. Cassington Parish Council have suggested there may be a link to the impact of solar installations on aquatic insects which are prey of bats or a result of direct mortality because of collision. There is some evidence that bats collide with vertical smooth surfaces because of interference with their echolocation and mistake horizontal smooth surfaces for water, also potentially causing collisions (Greif and Siemers, 2010; Greif et al., 2017).

Following on from this evidence Cassington Parish Council note that while the additional buffer zones that will be planned into the Botley West Project are welcome there is no evidence that these buffer zones will mitigate the impacts of the project on what is at least a nationally, if not internationally important abundant and diverse community of bats. It may provide some protection to bats using the specific features for which buffer zones are provided but provides zero protection for species using open field habitat and unprotected field margins that will be carpeted in solar infrastructure. Our lack of confidence in this mitigation also results from the currently unknown cause of bat decline around solar projects and that there is no mitigation provided for open field habitat.

At the Issue Specific Hearing, Cassington Parish Council pointed out that the U.K. was a signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity (https://www.cbd.int/) and the recent Kunming-Montreal 2030 Biodiversity Targets. A 2024 Parliamentary Insight Article into biodiversity loss pointed out that the U.K. is one of the most biodiversity depleted countries in the world and has successively failed to meet targets for biodiversity conservation and restoration (https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/biodiversity-loss-uk-international-obligations/). New domestic targets to meet commitments to the CBD were set in 2021 including to reduce the risk of species extinctions and to ensure overall species abundance is increasing rather than decreasing by 2030. The Kunming-Montreal Biodiversity Targets (https://www.cbd.int/gbf/targets) include:

- Target 1 To plan and manage all areas to reduce biodiversity loss
- Target 4 To halt species extinction, protect genetic diversity and manage human – wildlife conflicts (especially of threatened species)
- Target 12 Enhance green spaces and urban planning for human well-being and biodiversity
- Target 14: Integrate biodiversity in decision-making at every level

Given that the Applicant's survey work has identified an abundant and species rich community of bats in the area of the proposed Botley West Solar Power Station, the new evidence arising from this and other work, that bats use arable fields as habitat and that solar arrays have a strong negative impact on bat communities, this project should be either rejected in its entirety or much of the Central Site of the project reduced. We note that this argument extends to farmland birds as well (see below), although this community is of lower conservation significance than that of the bats. This is especially the case because the U.K. currently benefits from many more solar projects than needed to fulfil the government's renewable energy targets (see Cassington Parish Council submissions REP4-055 and REP5-068). Failing to protect such an important community of bats, including rare species, would be a failure of the U.K. to meet its national and international commitments and could, along with other questionable decisions by the Government on development projects which impact nature, open a potential challenge to inconsistent approaches to biodiversity conservation through Judicial Review.

The body who are tasked with assisting the Government in meeting national and international obligations to protect biodiversity is Natural England. That Natural England did not even show up for the Issue Specific Hearing and state they are happy to answer further questions in subsequent Deadlines, when there will be only one left after D6 is, extremely disappointing. Natural England essentially agree to the Applicants suggested mitigation strategy, despite details being incomplete and withhold further comment on the basis they need to receive further data. They do not need data further to that which is already available and has been since the Deadline 5 documents were published. Their agreement to mitigation based on buffers around migration corridors demonstrates that they have fallen into the trap of old thinking

about bats and utterly fail to appreciate the importance of the wider arable fields and landscape to several species of this “at least nationally important” community. The evidence that arable fields are of importance to bats comes from the peer-reviewed literature and PVDP’s own survey results. Cassington Parish Council believe that it is exactly this *laissez-faire* attitude that has led to the U.K. being one of the most biodiversity depleted countries in the world. Their carelessness over such an important bat population especially given this is one of Europe’s largest Solar Power Stations is breathtaking and irresponsible. Cassington Parish Council has two ecology Professors on its team (one retired), one an expert on terrestrial ecosystems, the other on marine ecosystems with more than 250 scientific publications. This has enabled it to undertake a thorough and scientific evaluation of ecological survey results from the Applicants Environmental Statement. It is a shame that Natural England’s scientists have not examined the matter of bats in this project with more scientific rigour.

We further note that given the evidence provided by the bat surveys and radio tracking studies, the land owners, Blenheim Estates are obliged now to assess all activities related to wooded areas on their land with respect to potential harm to bats including the rare Bechstein’s and barbastelle bats in accordance with U.K. wildlife protection regulations specifically the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017. All species of bats are protected in the UK, and it is illegal to disturb or injure bats, capture, injure, kill, disturb, damage, or destroy their breeding sites and resting places as well as obstruct access to them.

We urge Natural England, the local authorities, especially West Oxfordshire District Council, the local Wildlife Trust, the landowners, Blenheim Estates to collaborate and consider a coherent strategy for the long-term protection and conservation of this nationally important area for bats, including the implementation of spatial conservation measures such as SAC or SSSI designation.

REP4-054 Q2.4.5 and Q2.4.8 Wind resilience of infrastructure

We thank the Applicant for their undertaking for full compliance with EN 1991-1-4 (Eurocode 1, Part 1-4) and the UK National Annex (NA to BS EN 1991-1-4:2005). We note that the Applicant states that these standards reflect UK-specific wind zones, reference velocities, terrain categories, and roughness lengths. What they do not do is reflect the very extreme winds that are now being encountered in this part of Oxfordshire on a decadal basis. This is not reassuring especially in the context of the damage to the Porth Wen Solar Farm by Storm Darragh in December 2024 by wind speeds of up to 96mph, considerably less than estimated for the tornados which affected Cassington and Burleigh Wood in October 2021.

Given that we believe that it is unlikely that PVDP will actually build Botley West Solar Power Station or even necessarily participate in detailed design planning post consent (should consent be granted) we also have little confidence in statements

made by the Applicant regarding ensuring the design is robust and resilient under the weather conditions experienced at the site. We would therefore expect that the Examiners place a specific condition in the DCO or planning consent to ensure that the built infrastructure is at least capable of withstanding the wind conditions experienced in the local area to date. To remind the Examiners these estimated wind speeds currently stand at 93 – 114mph for the Category 3 tornado that hit Cassington and 115 – 136mph for the Category 4 Tornado which hit Burleigh Wood (Horton, 2021a, b; Holley et al., 2022).

REP4-054 Q2.6.3 Suggested Omissions by ICOMOS UK

The Applicant refers to Q2.6.3 of the Applicants Response to the ExA's Second Written Questions [REP4-037] which addresses whether the wider setting of Blenheim Estate contributes to its Outstanding Universal Value. We will address this below, but we point out here that as we have stated previously, and repeated during the Issue Specific Hearing, the Applicant is deliberately conflating the issues of the setting of Blenheim Estate raised by ICOMOS in REP2-069 with specific comments made by Hal Moggridge OBE VMH PPLI FIHort RIBA AADip, a landscape expert commissioned by ICOMOS, with respect to the proximity of Botley West to villages (see Cassington Parish Council comments on REP3-076 in REP5-068). Whilst these comments form part of the overall discussion on the setting to Blenheim Estate they were made specifically because Mr Moggridge concluded the infrastructure associated with Botley West is far too close to villages including Cassington. This is specifically addressed by his comments:

"*ICOMOS-UK's Cultural Landscapes and Historic Gardens Committee recommends omission of those areas which would be especially oppressive to local villages or particularly harmful to this attractive landscape*."

And

"*Solar arrays should be kept apart from all villages by a significant landscape breathing space and never be closer than a 3-minute leisurely walk (200m) from houses on the edges of villages - Shipton Slade, Bladon, Begbroke, Cassington, Church Hanborough*."

And

"*However, solar arrays are proposed far too close to Cassington village. There should be wide open fields between the NW edge of Cassington village with dense new hedges planted along the solar array boundary. The fields NW of Cassington village should be excluded from development to provide the village with breathing space*."

Mr Moggridge makes it very clear that in his opinion areas of arrays should be removed where they are damaging to the landscape, which form part of the setting of Blenheim Estate <u>but also where they are oppressively close to villages</u>, including

Cassington. Notwithstanding the relevance of the Blenheim Estate farms and their land, and associated villages to the setting of Blenheim Estate, proximity to Cassington in and of itself is an issue in the opinion of Mr Moggridge and the Local Authorities as outlined in our submission to Deadline 3 (REP3-074). WODC have also recommended a reduction of the scheme from the hills to the north of Cassington which was also ignored by the Applicant.

We therefore find that the Applicant in this, and in previous submissions has avoided addressing the issue of the Buffer Zone being far too narrow along the northern border of the village of Cassington and Jericho Barns and as a result has simply refused with no grounds to contemplate a reduction of the scheme on the edge of these settlements. These issues are related to the LVIA, which we still regard as flawed, and the lack of an RVAA. As noted by other IPs (e.g. Oliver Boyd Deadline 5 Submission) Botley West has a buffer zone which is notably smaller than other large-scale Solar Power Stations in the U.K. It is abundantly clear that from the outset that both the Developer and Landowner have maximised land take for Botley West with only regard for maximising profit and no regard for the impacts of Botley West Solar Power Station on local communities, such as Cassington. This is not only obvious to Cassington Parish Council and residents of the Parish but also to the independent landscape expert Hal Moggridge. As the Examiners pointed out in the Issue Specific Hearing, why should the Applicant's opinion of whether the proximity of the proposed solar farm to Cassington and Jericho Barns take precedent over the opinions of independent landscape experts as well as local people who live in this landscape and understand it intimately.

ICOMOS Technical Review and the Setting of the Blenheim Estate World Heritage Site

It was made abundantly clear during the Issue Specific Hearing that the Applicant is applying a very narrow definition of "Setting" for the Blenheim Estate World Heritage Site (WHS). This definition essentially contends that the Setting of the WHS is confined by the walls that surround Blenheim Palace and Blenheim Estate Park with the exception of two narrow cones of view that extend from and into the Park from outside.

Cassington Parish Council recognises that ICOMOS and its experts are independent, more so than consultants employed by PVDP or Legal Experts commissioned by Blenheim Estates whose remit is to work on behalf of their clients. Cassington Parish Council also recollects that it was the 2017 Management Plan for the Blenheim Estate World Heritage Site, produced by a consultancy for Blenheim Palace with input from the Blenheim Palace Senior Management Team, the Dept. of Culture Media and Sport, Historic England, ICOMOS-UK, Natural England, Oxfordshire County Council and West Oxfordshire County Council, that stated:

"*….the WHS stands at the core of an extensive private estate, which has - over the centuries - exerted huge influence over the character and appearance of the wider landscape, and neighbouring landowners*."

In Appendix 3 of this report a description of the setting of Blenheim Estate WHS is given as lying in the Cotswolds National Character Area and the southern part lying in the Upper Thames Vale National Character Area.

The value of this setting to the Blenheim Estate WHS is described as:

- *The importance of the village clusters, farmed countryside and woodlands/trees in enhancing local distinctiveness and fostering a sense of place;*
- *The use of local stone in the vernacular buildings which is very distinctive of the area as well as creating a contrast to the high quality architecture of the Palace and its associated buildings;*
- *The contribution it makes to the distinctive quality of the landscape and environment around Blenheim, making it an attractive place to live, this having significant benefits for the economy;*
- *The opportunities the setting provides for recreation and leisure which contributes to a healthy lifestyle;*
- *The opportunities for landscape to contribute to the green infrastructure of the area by supporting a wide range of wildlife habitats which, in addition to the nature conservation benefits, allows people to experience wildlife close to where they live and work.*

The Appendices later state that:

The importance of these elements of the setting of Blenheim in reinforcing the OUV and in maintaining and enhancing local distinctiveness and the high-quality environment, can perhaps best be understood by considering the implications of not protecting them:

> *• The conversion of significant areas of agricultural land for other purposes, or the large-scale loss of woodland would detract from the distinctiveness of the setting;*
>
> *• Tall developments on the skyline, or large-scale development (particularly those of a non-residential nature which tend to be bulkier and non-vernacular, for example industrial development; wind turbines; solar farms etc) could detrimentally influence the character of the adjoining rural areas;*
>
> *• Increased levels of pollution and silt in the river catchments feed into the WHS and affect the highly significant Lancelot Brown lakes;*
>
> *• Views from the Palace to the rooftops and church spire of Bladon could be lost, reduced or impacted on;*

• The historic physical, and occasionally glimpsed visual, connection with Woodstock could be lost or reduced;

• Development that results in the joining of one village settlement to another could result in the settlements losing their distinctive nature.

We therefore find it astounding that following the ICOMOS Technical Review both Blenheim Estates (TOR & Co, 2025) and PVDP (REP 4-037) have taken views at odds with a document produced by Blenheim Palace with the assistance of experts and the Local Authorities. A key to this argument is defining what actually constitutes the setting of Blenheim Palace. Helpfully, PVDP's response to the Examiner in REP 4-037 casts some light on this issue.

"*……the Applicant has provided a detailed explanation in that document of how setting and sensitivity can be linked not just to intervisibility <u>but to other factors such as land ownership (past and present) and land use</u>.*"

The Applicant here identifies that land ownership, including past and present use, i.e. historical connection to Blenheim Estate should be a consideration of setting. In our submission to Deadline 5 we identified:

1. That Cassington Village, because of its historical connections to the Estate and Estate Farmlands, by virtue of its conservation area, including Grade 2 listed houses and the Church of St Peters which is Grade 1 listed, fits within the characteristics of the setting of the Blenheim Estate WHS, even if it was not explicitly mentioned in Appendix 3 of the 2017 report. Several of the roads connecting to the village were included in the Appendix 3 report with the views from them.
2. Regardless of this, much of the land to the north of Cassington, between it and Blenheim Park certainly was included in the Appendix 3 report on setting.
3. Appendix 3 of the 2017 report states categorically that such land contributes to the outstanding universal setting of Blenheim Estate WHS.
4. The Appendix further categorically states that "*conversion of significant areas of agricultural land for other purposes, or the large-scale loss of woodland would detract from the distinctiveness of the setting*".

Historically, the village has been highly influenced by Blenheim Estate and past Dukes who enclosed large areas of land to the north of Cassington following the 1801 Enclosure Act and furthermore modified the village and its road connections, including to Cassington Mill. For all purposes related to heritage, Cassington can be viewed as an Estate Village, both historically and to the present day given recent housing developments in the village by Blenheim Estate and the potential impact of the current proposal.

We will not go into the legal minutiae within the document presented by Tor & Co. (2025) on behalf of Blenheim Estates. In the Summary to this document, they claim

to present an independent approach to OUV, this simply cannot be the case as they are representing the Landowner. TOR identify that:

"*Palace and Park reflect the rejection of French models of classicism and the beginnings of the English Romantic movement; and that Blenheim Palace was the nation's equivalent of a European princely residence*"

And that anything lying in the setting that does not contribute to this foremost reason for World Heritage Status is irrelevant to the Application. However, it is very clear to us that Cassington and many of the villages surrounding the local area of Blenheim Estate certainly do contribute in both a historical and visual sense to the main purpose of the WHS designation as stated by TOR (2025). These villages were highly influenced, modified and subject to land acquisitions by the Estate and as such certainly contributed to its being the equivalent of a European princely residence. Labour for Blenheim Estate, its landscaping, operation of its farms etc., etc., were drawn from these very villages. To Cassington Parish Council, therefore, what sets the boundary for the setting is easily defined by land ownership and historical interaction with the surrounding villages and landscape. "Traditional English Countryside" as a term, attacked by TOR & Co. (2025), is a distraction from what is a discussion about the historical connections between Blenheim Estate, the people living around it (i.e. heritage), as well as a landscape still dominated by agriculture. In this context, the ICOMOS Technical Review is in no way a "wayward assessment" and is in fact fully in harmony with the content and spirit of the 2017 WHS Management Report and designation of the Blenheim Estate WHS. That the landowners are now trying to refute this because it is inconvenient is, frankly, disgraceful and financially motivated. We also note that Tor & Co.'s claim that:

"*…what is required to argue successfully that setting contributes to OUV, we have established that this conclusion has not been adequately made out.*"

works both ways. We believe that PVDP and Blenheim Estate have not made a clear case that setting does not contribute to the Blenheim WHS, especially given the content of the 2017 Management Report, and furthermore, they have not made the case that the huge solar farm proposed for this setting does not constitute substantial harm.

Cassington Parish Council is disappointed in Historic England's rather lax approach to address these concerns in its responses. Their approach on the matter of setting of the Blenheim Estate has been one of fence-sitting and largely allowing the Applicant to set the agenda through a highly questionable and extreme view of setting and OUV of the Blenheim Estate WHS. Even though Historic England have asked the Applicant to respond to the ICOMOS Technical Review of 2024, this has not been followed up. ICOMOS represents a team of internationally recognised independent experts on heritage that advise the World Heritage Convention. Unfortunately, this has resulted in large gaps between Historic England's position and that of ICOMOS. Expressing disappointment that findings in archaeological

investigations is also getting little response from the Applicant given it is now Deadline 6 of the Examination.

The LVIA and RVAA (also Applicants response to Q2.13.15)

As the Examiners pointed out in both the Issue Specific Hearing and the Rule 17 Letter of the 14th October, 2025, the LVIA has probably been one of the most controversial aspects of the Botley West Solar Power Station proposal. There seems to have been some concessions from the Applicant in reviewing the Moderate Impact areas as to whether they are significant or not with the result that (a) some are now regarded as significant and (b) this makes little difference to the Applicants overall assessment of impact (Landscape and Visual Resources Clarification Note EN010147/APP/15.3).

Cassington Parish Council believes strongly that consideration of individual views across the Central Site of the proposal, alongside the reliance on mitigations that are equally damaging to the current landscape and views currently enjoyed by our residents, have overall led to an underestimation of the significance of impacts of the project to our landscape. The vast scale of the project and the change in use from agricultural to an industrial landscape cannot in any sense be seen as insignificant or of low impact. The contoured land of the central area, in particular, means that the proposed Solar Power Station cannot be “lost” in the landscape and alongside its close proximity to residential properties in Cassington means that its impact will be overwhelming. We have visited this issue multiple times in our submissions and remain unconvinced regarding the Applicant’s methodology and particularly its application.

We note two contentions raised by the Applicant in the Landscape and Visual Resources Clarification Note. These are that such assessments are based on “professional judgement” and that according to NPS EN-1 NSIPS often have adverse impacts on landscape, and it is a matter of whether the benefits of such projects outweigh the harm done to the landscape. We note that the LVIA was undertaken by the Applicant’s consultants not, as pointed out by ICOMOS, by an independent landscape consultant. We believe that this has led to a consistent bias in the application of the LVIA methods and in interpretation of results. We also point out, as do the Examiners in the Rule 17 Letter of 14th October, 2025, why should the judgement of the Applicant’s experts be any more valid than those of independent landscape experts (e.g. Hal Moggridge) or those employed for the purposes of this Examination by other Interested Parties (e.g. the Local Authorities and Stop Botley West)? The real experts on the landscape potentially impacted by this development are the local residents who have an intimate knowledge of the area and how it changes over seasons and years. Why should the opinion of this large body of Interested Parties be any less valid than the Applicant’s consultants? The huge size of this development and very large degree of change of landscape has to be seen as a highly significant adverse impact on a highly populated part of the Oxford Greenbelt. We believe, in the light of the number of solar schemes coming forward

for grid connection (see REP4-055 and REP5-068) this means that the benefits of this scheme are far outweighed by its impacts not only on landscape but also on many other aspects of the environment including ecology and heritage.

The fact that an RVAA has still not been carried out, despite a large number of properties potentially being severely affected (visually overwhelmed) by it was starkly raised by the Examiners in the Issue Specific Hearing. Cassington Parish Council would like to point out that the lack of such an assessment, which may have led to some reassurance that appropriate mitigation or reduction of the scheme with respect to resident's properties has been a cause of tangible anxiety and even grief in our community. We are adamant that an RVAA is required because of the high number of residential properties, at least nearly 300 according to Stop Botley West, which are impacted by this development overall. In July 2023 the Scoping opinion of the Examiners stated that a Residential Visual Amenity Assessment (RVAA) should not be scoped out and should be completed. As related in the Issue Specific Hearing the RVAA was also requested in both Examiner's Questions 1 and 2. This position has been repeated during the examination, and this has been supported by calls from the Local Authorities, Parish Councils and many other individual IPs. A number of properties in Cassington lie immediately adjacent to the proposed Solar Power Station, some of these will be within 25m of the red line and others within 250m. These lie along the Eynsham Road, at Willow Court, along the central area of the village and along Yarnton Road, including Barrow Court. We are thankful that the Examiners have chosen to take an unaccompanied visit (USI6) to Cassington and Worton / Jericho Barns to view the situation in our Parish.

Whilst the Applicant has undertaken to provide an RVAA for Deadline 6, Cassington Parish Council believe that this is far too late in the Examination to read and consider prior to Deadline 7 and offers no opportunity for the Applicant to respond or modify their proposal before the end of the Examination. Because of this and other significant deficiencies in the materials provided by the Applicant we are of a view that the proposal should be thrown out as it has not met the rigour required for such an enormous development and in many respects has shown a disregard and even contempt for the residents who live in the proposal area.

REP 4-054 Q 2.6.10 Church of St Peter Cassington

Cassington Parish Council disagrees with the PVDP Settings Assessment (EN010147/APP/6.5) conclusion of negligible adverse effect, and we point out that Historic England have also stated that in their view the Applicants assessment underestimated the impacts of the scheme on St Peter's Church (EN010147-001366 D3 Submission). The views of Cassington Church against the background of the village and surrounding Estate Farmland, rising to the north (viewed from Wytham Woods to the south) or of the church and village viewed from the north towards the south are important in terms of aesthetic appreciation of the landscape overall as well as preserving the historic context of a village in the Upper Thames Clay Vales

and estate lands to the north of the village. We have already described the close historic connections between Blenheim Estate and Cassington. These views of the village will be significantly degraded either by a sea of solar panels bounded by hedges and tree lines, viewed from the south or views will be lost altogether from footpaths to the north of the village as a result of the proposed mitigation. St Peter's Church is a Grade 1 historic building of great local and regional significance and recently Cassington village celebrated the church's 900th birthday.

REP 4-054 2.6.18 Cassington Conservation Area

First, we note that the Settings Assessment has not included at least one Grade 2 Listed property outside of the Cassington Village Conservation Area known as The Laurels which lies on the Yarnton Road just to the northeast of the Conservation Area.

Cassington Parish Council does not agree with the Settings Assessment of Low Adverse Impact on the Village Conservation Area for the same reasons as for St Peter's Church. The Botley West Solar Power Station will significantly detract or even destroy views of the village Conservation Area from the north. The village is an important element of the landscape, is built in the vernacular style, and has historic importance in terms of its interaction with the Blenheim Estate which has shaped the village over time.

REP 4-054 Q2.8.1 Otters, voles and fish

We have no further comment on this matter as the Applicant's response does not change our position.

REP 4-054 Q2.8.14 Woodland fragmentation

The Applicant focuses on connectivity in terms of movement of animals through the landscape. We do not understand whether they have simply failed to understand the full implications of ecological connectivity, specifically the importance of active arable farming to farmland birds. Alternatively, may be the Applicant's consultants are simply ignoring this issue.

Since Deadline 5 the UK Government, specifically DEFRA, has published the Accredited Official Statistics Wild bird populations in the UK and England, 1970 to 2024 (Updated 23 September 2025); see: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/wild-bird-populations-in-the-uk/wild-bird-populations-in-the-uk-and-england-1970-to-2024#breeding-farmland-bird-populations-in-the-uk-and-england . These disturbing statistics indicate that Farmland Birds have declined by 62% since 1970 and continue to decline at a fast rate with an 11% decrease in the five years following 2019. Many of these species are those which occur in the farmland that will be impacted by the Botley West Solar Power Station including, for example, grey partridge, starling, yellow hammer, linnet, skylark (weak increase in the last 5 years), kestrel and reed bunting. Grey partridge, starling, yellow hammer, linnet and sky lark are farmland specialist species.

As previously noted, these birds require the mosaic of habitats within farmland and are also reliant on cropping as a food source. These forms of connectivity have not been acknowledged as a significant factor in the likely impacts of Botley West on farmland bird populations.

In this context we refer to our Deadline 5 submission on the compensatory areas set aside for skylarks. Even if these areas functioned well, they would still mean a loss of skylark breeding territory from the area. We now consider that these compensatory measures will be even less effective given the comments by the OHAs related to Government guidance AHW4: Skylark Plots (https://www.gov.uk/find-funding-for-land-or-farms/ahw4-skylark-plots) which indicate that plots should be on land more than 5ha in size if they have an open aspect or >10ha if bounded by trees to avoid predator attack (OHAs, 2025). A large proportion of the land parcels listed by PVDP are less than 5ha in size and further detail is needed to understand if these areas are bounded by trees or woodland before it can be assumed they will be suitable to support skylark. Other issues are identified with the set-aside areas by the OHA.

We also note that no such compensatory measures are developed by the Applicant for other farmland birds which are in decline, especially including grey partridge, yellow hammer, linnet and starlings. Overall, we agree with the OHAs in that a comprehensive farmland bird strategy should be developed, not just including skylarks but also the other declining species of farmland birds (OHAs, 2025). The Applicant's ecologist seemed to be disparaging of the numbers of these other species for the area of the Botley West proposal during the Issue Specific Hearing, but we note that substantial numbers of breeding pairs of Red List species other than skylark were identified (e.g. linnet 37, yellow hammer 78; figures from the 2024 survey APP 158). Overall, 107 species of birds were identified during the breeding birds survey indicating a diverse assemblage of species. For the wintering bird surveys, the peak counts of some Red Listed species across the entire site are also impressive, although of only County Importance (e.g. linnet 3,074 peak mean count, starling 3,112 peak count, yellow hammer 692 mean peak count; APP-159).

REP 4-054 Q2.10.5 Cassington vulnerability (flood risk)

Nothing new was presented by the Applicant in their D5 submission nor in the Issue Specific Hearing. The Applicant has not undertaken further work on the modelling of surface water movement and neither have they undertaken water infiltration testing necessary to calibrate the model they have developed. They have also specifically failed to model their proposed flood risk mitigation measures. PVDP and their consultants have failed to respond to our submission for Deadline 1, Deadline 3, Deadline 4 or Deadline 5. This is even with the encouragement of the Examiners in their Second Questions to undertake the ground infiltration testing that will enable calibration of the models developed by PVDP's consultants and allow further work on effectiveness of the mitigation proposed. This lack of infiltration testing was also noted by the Oxfordshire Host Authorities in their Local Impact Report.

During the Issue Specific Hearing the Applicant again claimed that the contention that solar arrays increase the rate of runoff was not proven by the scientific literature. Clive Carpenter of GWP Consultants, acting as a consultant for Cassington Parish Council, identified that all the recent literature on the topic was consistent with increased runoff, including, most relevantly the recent study by Galzki & Mulla (2024). This study undertook observations of solar arrays across a range of climatic conditions and soil types in the USA, including those similar to the U.K. Mr Carpenter also repeated, as with his written submissions that the mitigations outlined by the Applicant were not modelled in terms of their effectiveness or tested in any other way for the site, including spacing between arrays, vegetation and filter strips, and balancing ponds. Mr Carpenter has detailed these aspects in his previous submissions most notably in REP1-050. Overall, whilst the Applicant claimed that the outlined measures would mitigate any foreseeable rainfall events there was absolutely no evidence presented that this was the case.

Leaving detailed design of mitigation measures for prevention of increased flood risk to the Detailed Drainage Designs after consent is granted provides no comfort to Cassington Parish Council or the residents of Cassington, Jericho Barns and Worton Farm. Cassington has flooded twice in the last 20 years and is clearly at high risk of flooding, something that was confirmed by the Applicant's own model. People's homes are at risk of flooding, or increased risk of flooding should this development increase the rate of water runoff from the site even marginally. Post consent, Cassington Parish Council and the residents of Cassington will have no power to influence the design or implementation of flood prevention measures despite the reassurances of the Applicant that they will be consulted. Attributing increased occurrence of flooding to the Solar Power Station will be statistically very difficult and would entail employment of further experts and no doubt legal expertise which would likely be out of reach financially of the Parish Council and residents. Furthermore, there are concerns regarding flood prevention measures such as balancing ponds as these require continual and ongoing maintenance, something Blenheim Estates have failed to do for a balancing pond located on the boundary of Cassington Village for two years up until the week before the Issue Specific and Open Hearings, despite numerous requests to do so by the Parish Council.

We also note the Applicants complete failure at the Issue Specific Hearing to provide any reassurance on the issue of destruction of land drainage pipes. The fact that the Applicant had not even inquired whether plans of such drainage existed from the landowner, despite the matter being raised by Cassington Parish Council from the earliest stages of the Examination, speaks volumes. The Applicant intends to sell the Botley West Solar Farm once permission is granted and therefore has no regard to details that may pose a significant risk of increasing the incidence of flooding in Cassington. Mitigation of damage to such drainage is highly unlikely with the current design of the solar farm.

Cassington Parish Council therefore urges, again, that the precautionary principle is applied here, and areas of the development sited on the hills overlooking Cassington Village to the north and Worton Village to the north are removed as detailed in our letter to West Oxfordshire District Council, August 13th, 2024 (see appendices). This would have the additional benefits of reducing landscape and heritage impacts on the villages of Cassington and Worton and the settlement of Jericho Barns, improving the safety of residents in these villages/settlements with respect to hazards associated with the Solar Power Station, as well as reducing impacts on Public Rights of Way (footpaths 152/6/10 and footpath 152/8/10). We point out that the Examiners and the SoS have a legal duty to refuse any development that imposes an increased flood risk to residential or other properties. Given Cassington is at high risk of flooding already and the Applicant has produced no evidence that their proposed mitigation will be effective the proposal must be reduced or refused.

REP 4-054 Q2.13.8 Landscape mitigation and decommissioning

The undulating landscape of the Upper Thames Clay Vales means that the very large and industrial nature of the proposed land use change will not be “absorbed” by the nature of the landscape. Whilst the Applicant appears to rely on the “low lying” nature of the development as visual mitigation (arguable in a landscape as open as west Oxfordshire), it is abundantly clear that Botley West will be overwhelming both up close (including at 25m, the inadequate buffering distance), as well as where currently open views of the landscape are enjoyed by residents and walkers. These impacts are especially evident in the Central Site, namely in the fields to the north of Cassington, to the north of Cassington Sewage Works, along the Burleigh Road and to the east of Lower Road as well as in the Southern Site. Topography does not render this development less visible; it has the opposite impact in many of these cases. We also note, that more than 70% of this scheme is on Oxford’s Greenbelt. As pointed out by Begbroke and Yarnton Greenbelt Campaign (2025), no other NSIP Solar Project, both those granted planning permission, and those in Examination, include Greenbelt land. Cassington Parish Council has already demonstrated in previous submissions that several of the Very Special Circumstances cited as balancing harm to the Greenbelt are spurious as a result of unevidenced statements (e.g. Human Health benefits) or based on flawed analysis (e.g. Economics / Employment case).

The development is far too close to residential properties, including in Cassington. This arises because of the lack of an adequate RVAA and a buffer zone which is too narrow (25m), much narrower than in comparable development around the country.

The statement that the land is low in ecological value is completely contradicted by the Applicant’s own ecological studies. Bats are well known as an indicator of environmental quality (e.g. Jones et al., 2009; Russo and Jones, 2015) and the high diversity of bats, particularly in the Central Site of Botley West can only result from

quality habitat and abundant prey (insects). The Landscape Ecology Management Plan and overall ecology strategy has been based almost entirely on the assumption that Biodiversity Net Gain, based mainly on conversion of arable farmland to grassland has an overriding positive effect on biodiversity. It does not. The two most important biodiversity features of the landscape, bats and farmland birds are both likely to suffer significant and long term serious adverse effects as a result of this scheme. In the case of bats, evidence of negative impacts of solar is based on accumulating evidence both from the scientific literature and real experience with other solar power stations in the U.K. In the case of farmland birds, loss of nesting sites and food sources are two likely drivers of negative impacts, there may be others. The statement of low ecological value reveals the superficial approach and scientific illiteracy of the Applicant to the impacts of this large-scale Solar Power Station, even when cognisant of their own ecological survey results.

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Appendix 1 Letter Cassington Parish Council to WODC, August 13th 2024

Councillor [redacted]
West Oxfordshire District Council,
Woodgreen Office,
Council Offices,
Witney,
Oxfordshire,
OX28 1NB
Email: [redacted]@westoxon.gov.uk

[redacted],
Parish Councillor,
Cassington Parish Council
13th August, 2024

CC: Councillors [redacted]@westoxon.gov.uk); [redacted]@westoxon.gov.uk); [redacted]@westoxon.gov.uk); [redacted]

Dear [redacted]

I am writing to you as a member of Cassington Parish Council on behalf of my fellow Councillors and residents of Cassington and Worton. There are many issues which are of great concern with respect to the Botley West Solar Power Station proposal including:

Damage to heritage including a World Heritage Site;

Damage to the Greenbelt, which in WODC's own words is functioning well around Cassington;

Damage to productive farmland;

Damage to our landscape and the setting in which Cassington and Worton residents live;

The proximity of the solar arrays to properties in Cassington;

Loss of amenity;

And Flooding.

I am specifically focusing on the last of these issues with respect to Cassington and Worton. Both Cassington and Worton have suffered from repeated flooding issues over many years resulting from surface water runoff from the hills lying to the north. This matter was specifically raised with PVDP and their consultants in a meeting with Stop Botley West on the 19th January, 2024 with respect to comments made in the very first response written by Cassington Parish Council to the first "informal" consultation held in December 2022 and the response to the Scoping Report, June, 2023. PVDP and their consultants dismissed without hesitation or discussion our concerns on the grounds that the peer-reviewed evidence we produced on the matter were from other countries and settings and therefore not relevant to this development.

We have now seen evidence from two commissioned reports by hydrologists, one asked to look at the flooding implications for a private landowner in the Parish of Cassington, the second, a report to Stop Botley West. In both cases, these reports indicate that not only are our concerns legitimate but that the Botley West proposal has neglected to deal with the risk of increased runoff resulting from the placement of solar arrays on the land to the north of

the village in its proposals to date. There has been no willingness to alter the footprint of the Central Section of the proposal to ensure the safety of the properties of our residents. There is no sign to date of any specific design features of this proposal to alleviate the increased flood risk that this proposal represents.

Cassington Parish Council are therefore proposing that either the Botley West proposal is rejected which remains both the Parish Council's and resident's favoured option, or it is scaled back from the north of the village to the summit of the hill contours that lie to the north of the village. A rough sketch of what this would look like is indicated in Figure 1 below.

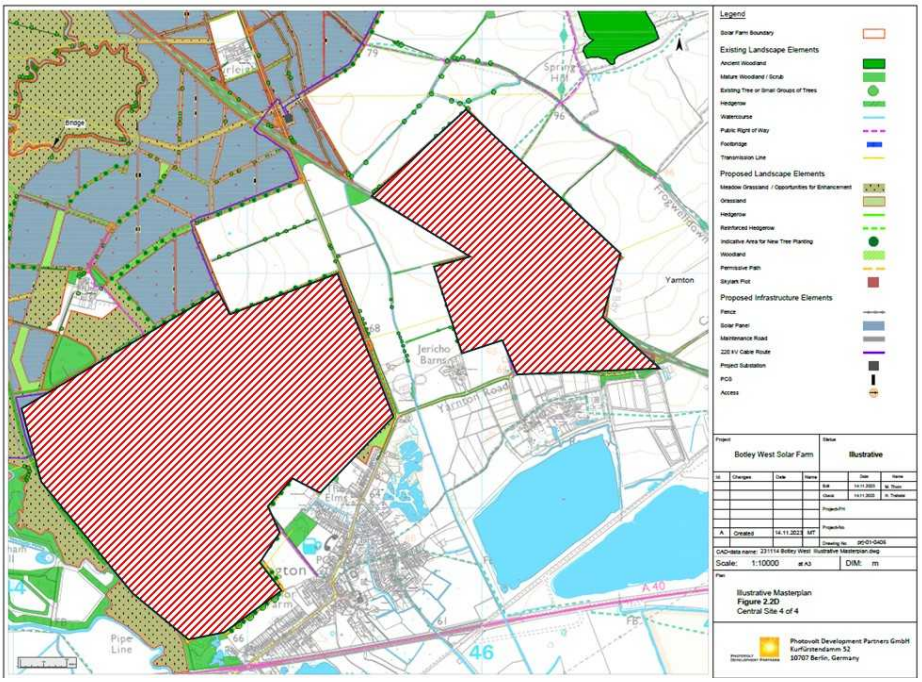

Figure 1. Proposed scaling back of the Botley West proposed solar arrays north of Cassington and Worton. Areas in red hatch are where solar arrays from the proposal are removed.

This proposal has the advantage of moving the entire scheme back from Cassington village where we believe that it is far too close to dwellings in the village. This will help to preserve amenity of at least some of the public rights of way from Cassington and Worton. It also avoids issues around the potential alterations to local temperature that may occur as a result of conversion of solar energy to heat by the vast array of panels across the landscape. It also preserves some of the greenbelt and farmland that would otherwise be lost.

As representatives of residents of West Oxfordshire, we sincerely hope that you are able to support the views of the residents of the Parish of Cassington and to ensure that through the coming months of the planning process our views are heard and fairly represented both in negotiations with PVDP and in submissions to the Planning Inspectorate. We believe that this will require the appointment of legal representation during the planning enquiry (assuming the proposal is accepted for examination) by WODC on behalf of all of the distict councils affected by the proposal. We believe that this is absolutely the wrong proposal in the wrong place and that its imposition will stifle community- based efforts to attain carbon emission reduction targets. However, if the worst should happen and this proposal is accepted then it is critical that it does not pose threats to our residents and their property and has as little impact as possible on amenity, landscape and environment. We are very happy

to meet and discuss this and other issues related to the impact of this scheme on Cassington Parish.

Kind Regards

[redacted] on behalf of Cassington Parish Council

[redacted]