

Bladon Parish Council

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Deadline 6 - Comments on Proposed Change Request and Other Points

Bladon Parish Council acknowledges the ExA's decision that a consultant is unnecessary for the developer's recent Change Request 2. The Inspectorate has confirmed that the proposed changes will be considered within the current examination and has invited comments on these changes as part of the ongoing process.

Bladon Parish Council was consulted by the developer regarding the proposed changes. Our response is included in the applicant's Change Request Consultation Report; however, the Council would like to formally present its comments here (Annexe 1). The Council's response specifically addressed Change 1: Reduction in Order Limits Boundary and Change 10: Clarification of the role of the community educational facility.

After submitting comments on the proposed changes, it has come to the Council's attention that plans to construct an educational facility in Bladon have been withdrawn and that Hill End Education Centre has offered to collaborate with the developer to provide educational services at their existing outdoor education centre in Farmoor. Bladon Parish Council fully supports both the removal of the educational facility from Bladon and the proposal by Hill End Education Centre to work with the developer in delivering educational support.

In addition to supplying the ExA with a copy of the Parish Council's response, the Council wishes to take the opportunity to reiterate the following concerns we have regarding the Solar Farm. These matters have been previously detailed in earlier submissions by the Parish Council and/or other relevant stakeholders.

Heritage Views

The Parish Council is concerned that the impact on heritage views has not been thoroughly evaluated, as the visual impact assessments for the proposal appear incomplete. Together with other stakeholders, the Parish Council is still concerned with the loss of heritage views from the Parish towards the Blenheim Estate and across the Thames Valley, caused by the installation of the proposed panels, hedges, and tall fencing.

Public Rights of Way

Despite the proposed removal of certain panel areas south of Bladon, the Parish Council is still concerned that all public footpaths accessible directly from the village will continue to be significantly impacted by the Solar Farm.

The Parish Council would also like to re-clarify that, although pedestrian access is allowed into the Blenheim Estate via Bladon Gate and Eagle Lodge, these routes are permissive rather than formal Rights of Way and could be removed at any time, which would mean that the residents will have no access to open spaces without solar panels and fencing.

Effect on Overwintering Birds

The Parish Council understands that there have been questions raised regarding the overwintering bird populations that utilise the land impacted by the Solar Farm.

The Council wishes to inform the ExA that the Bladon area routinely supports flocks of overwintering birds and, in support of this, a Parish Councillor who has been an active user of the public rights of way for many years would like to submit the following witness statement: -

I regularly see the flocks of rooks from the Bladon to Campsfield footpath, which nest in the lime/plane trees by Eagle Lodge. Later in Autumn huge flocks of geese arrive in successive skeins to feed here, settling overnight on the Bladon end of the Blenheim Park lake. Migrating redwings also appear in numbers in many years.

Seeing these beautiful migrants foraging is one of the great pleasures of late-afternoon winter walks around Bladon fields.

Lack of Consultant / Loss of Amenity for Children

The Parish Council appreciates that a speaker at the recent hearing highlighted to the ExA that an important group that will be impacted by the solar farm has not yet been consulted.

[REDACTED]

Given the substantial scale of the Solar Farm, there will be a significant decrease in accessible outdoor areas for children. This reduction will extremely limit the opportunities for exploration and experiential learning, and will affect both current and future generations.

In particular, children in Bladon are likely to be significantly impacted, as the currently available areas, South of Bladon, which are accessible directly from the village, will become inaccessible due to the installation of high fencing around much of the site, and as mentioned above, access to Blenheim Estate is permissive and can be removed at any time.

Community Food Growing/Market Garden

The Parish Council is concerned about the lack of a specific consultation on the proposed areas for community food growing projects and the lack of detail regarding the infrastructure needed to support these growing areas, such as water supply and storage facilities for equipment, etc.

The Parish Council is also concerned that the proposed community food growing areas in Bladon, which will be accessed from lanes currently used only by a few residents, will significantly increase the number of traffic movements along the lanes compared to current farming practices.

An increase in traffic movements is highly likely, as the users of these growing areas will most likely be travelling from outside of Bladon, especially if they are to be used by charities such as Cherwell Collective, who will attract users from surrounding areas.

The Parish Council is also concerned that some of the proposed users of these community food growing areas are to be used by commercial enterprises such as OxFarmtoFork or other market gardeners. The use of these growing areas by commercial enterprises cannot be classed as a community benefit.

Securing Community Benefits from Future Owners

The Parish Council seeks assurance that the proposed Community Benefits, whether the financial contributions or the provision of community food growing facilities, will be legally binding on all future owners/operators of the Solar Farm, thereby safeguarding these benefits throughout the duration of the project.

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Botley West Solar Farm Proposed Changes to DCO Application (Change Request 2) – Pre-submission Consultation

Bladon Parish Council (BPC) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Proposed Changes to the Development Consent Order (DCO) Application (Change Request 2) for the Botley West Solar Farm.

It is important to note that the significant concerns previously raised by BPC in earlier consultations and to the Planning Inspector remain, and this response is focused solely on the Proposed Changes 1 and 10 specified in the current request.

After reviewing the information available, BPC would like to make the following comments:

Change 1: Reduction in Order Limits Boundary

BPC acknowledges the proposed reduction in the Order Limits boundary, which is intended to decrease the solar installation area to the south-west of Bladon and remove solar arrays from land situated to the south-east of the village and north of Heath Lane.

While the removal of solar arrays from several parcels of land near Bladon is seen as a positive step, Bladon Parish Council continues to express reservations regarding the ongoing physical and visual changes that will result from the proposal. The current plans still pose adverse effects on both the Green Belt and the public rights of way (PRoW), with the scale of the reduction not going far enough to alleviate these concerns.

Despite these proposed adjustments, numerous public rights of way near the village will remain bordered by solar panels. Notably, these are the only PRoW available for residents in the vicinity. The Parish Council maintains that the Bladon area will experience significant physical and visual changes, impacting both local residents and visitors who use these routes for leisure and for accessing local amenities.

BPC has observed that the Change 1 area includes several proposed community food growing sites. According to the application's supporting documents, a portion of this land may be allocated for use by OxFarm to Fork as a market garden.

BPC seeks clarification regarding the suitability of this land for commercial market gardening, given that nearly all of the land within the DCO area is being classified as low-grade agricultural land. BPC is concerned that PVDP's evaluation of agricultural land has not been confirmed by an independent third party, and BPC asks that PVDP submit independent evidence supporting the grades assigned to the land within the DCO area as part of the application process.

BPC wishes to express its concern that the areas allocated for community food growing initiatives, especially a commercial market garden, may result in a significant increase in daily traffic compared to the very limited farm vehicle movements that these areas currently attract.

Since the intended access routes to these areas are not yet finalised and their assignment for particular projects is pending, BPC cannot offer detailed feedback regarding the potential effects on local residents associated with the proposed usage and access routes.

Change 10: Clarification of the role of the community educational facility

Bladon Parish Council (BPC) wishes to express its disappointment to PVDP that neither the parish council nor the wider Bladon community was specifically consulted regarding the proposed community educational facility prior to its inclusion in the application. BPC is of the view that a consultation would have enabled the council to raise several important concerns at an earlier stage.

Had such consultation taken place, BPC would have highlighted a number of issues, including the siting of the facility within the Green Belt, the nature of the current access route to the proposed location, and the potential negative consequences for the local community. BPC notes that the documentation provided does not clearly set out the facility's intended purpose, its operational and management arrangements, or whether there is genuine demand from local schools for such a facility.

BPC does not consider that there are any positive benefits to locating the educational facility in Bladon or within the Green Belt. The council is concerned that the facility would bring negative effects to the village, including increased traffic and a rise in visitor numbers using an access road already known for its limitations. There is also concern about potential disturbance to the peaceful environment enjoyed by users of Public Right of Way (PRoW) 132/2/10.

BPC is of the view that there is no justification for locating the facility in Bladon or anywhere within the Green Belt. Given the overall scale of the proposal, the council believes there should be many alternative locations available outside the Green Belt that would be more appropriate. For example, sites with direct access to Lower Road or the A4260 north of Woodstock—both outside the Green Belt—would offer more suitable and accessible options.

Regarding access to the proposed educational facility, BPC notes that the current access road is limited to single-file traffic and lacks designated passing points. There is a pinch point at the entrance, restricting the width further and making the road inaccessible to larger vehicles such as ambulances and skip lorries. There has been a specific incident in which a resident was required to be transported to an ambulance waiting on the main road due to these constraints.

The proposal to use this road as the main access for either the educational facility or the proposed community food growing area raises significant safety concerns for pedestrians. The route serves as the primary walking path to the recreation ground, allotments, cemetery, and St Mary's Church (including Sir Winston Churchill's grave). [REDACTED]

Additionally, visibility at the junction of the lane and the main road is limited, heightening the risk of vehicles meeting head-on and forcing one to reverse onto the main road or to a wider section. This scenario creates further safety hazards for all road users.

BPC requests that, should a need for an educational facility be demonstrated, PVDP consider siting it in a different location outside the Green Belt. The council intends to inform the Planning Inspectors of these concerns as part of the ongoing inquiry.