

Botley West Solar Farm – Closing Comments

Mary Ann Canning 10.11.25

The sheer scale of this project, both in terms of size and the volume of documentation involved, is somewhat overwhelming. Despite this mass of information, the examination process has highlighted the numerous gaps in the evidence that has been submitted, and the lack of timely responses to the Examiners' requests for information.

A further raft of information has been submitted since the Open Floor Hearings, giving Interested Parties, and the Examiners themselves, little time to assimilate and respond before the final deadline.

Like so many others, I really appreciate the professionalism of all the Inspectors during this process and the amount of time that has been given to studying the evidence and hearing the views of those affected.

Set out below is an overview of my concerns, based on my experience as a retired Landscape Architect. I live outside the proposed Order Limits, so I am not directly affected, but am nonetheless invested in the outcome of this process.

Assessment of Need

Balanced against the lack of rigour in the Applicant's evidence is the question of need for the project.

It appears that the undoubted National need for clean energy is being used as a trump card to eliminate rational argument. Selective reference is made to clauses from NPS EN- 1, whilst not addressing clauses which set out the requirement for comprehensive assessment of heritage (paras. 5.9.9-15) or landscape and visual impact (paras. 5.10.4, 5.10.6, and 5.10.14).

In assessing the planning balance, as the Secretary of State himself said in an interview with the BBC, the proper process still needs to be followed and each project should be decided on merit.

Alternative locations and design

I share the view of many others concerning the lack of any iterative design process from the outset, deferring this to the Examination stage and consequently consuming public resources and time.

The issue of battery storage remains unresolved, yet it is likely essential for the scheme's efficiency. The cumulative impact of this and the new substation, must be considered, even if they are subject to separate applications.

From the outset, feedback from Host Authorities and the public during the consultation phase received minimal acknowledgment and the project submitted for examination remained largely unchanged from the initial plans presented at public consultations.

Visual Impact

The proposal would introduce a large-scale industrial development onto the rural patchwork landscape, blanketing vast areas with uninterrupted arrays of

solar panels. This would fundamentally alter the character of the countryside for at least the next forty years.

The recently submitted RVAA by the applicant appears incomplete, with notable omissions, yet it maintains the conclusion that the project's effects would fall below the threshold for significant impact on living conditions. I strongly disagree with this assessment.

Reduction in Area of Solar Installation

The Applicant has repeatedly failed to address the OHA's early request for reduction in panel area. Following a request from the ExA, the OHA have clearly set out the methodology and reasons for omission for each area, whether for landscape or heritage reasons. These reductions could somewhat mitigate the impact of the development.

Heritage

The landscape into which this industrial scale development is being imposed includes the setting of Blenheim Palace WHS, the Cotswolds National Landscape, the historic city of Oxford, as well as numerous other Listed Buildings, Conservation Areas and Archaeological sites. Inadequate consideration has been given to the totality of these and the cumulative impact.

Although some mitigation has been enabled by the omission of certain fields close to the Palace boundary wall, the impact on visitors passing through swathes of panels along approach roads and the railway line from Oxford to Hanborough has not been considered.

The great weight that should be attached to the protection of the Blenheim Palace WHS must be included in the planning balance as well as the negative impact on the 8 million visitors who access Blenheim Palace and Oxford City as they pass through swathes of panels.

Green belt

Groups such as CPRE and BYG have articulated the damaging precedent set by permitting such a large development within Oxford's Green Belt.

Legacy

The notion of reinstating the land to an improved condition after the project concludes is, in my view, unrealistic. The heavy machinery and extensive trafficking required to remove the infrastructure will likely damage soil structure and fertility. The proposal to leave the solar array piles in situ post restoration is totally unacceptable.

Finance

I would also like to emphasise the fundamental question of financing the project and the concerns that have been highlighted in the Written Parliamentary Questions tabled by our MP Callum Miller on 5 November.

Summary

The Applicant has treated the 'Need' argument as an overriding justification, but it is critical to establish what that need truly entails—considering the national context and latest technical knowledge—rather than settling for potentially short-sighted or damaging solutions such as this.

While landscape inevitably changes over time, a project of this magnitude and scale is fundamentally different, with potential for long-lasting harmful legacy over a wide area and to numerous designated assets.

Smaller, more flexible solar installations could integrate better with the landscape, respond more effectively to actual energy needs, and be operational more rapidly. In terms of achieving net zero targets, clear analysis is needed of when this project would break even in carbon terms, especially given the significant short-term emissions from manufacture—often outsourced abroad, thus shifting responsibility.

I fully endorse the SBW Group evidence, which has been comprehensive and well-argued, reflecting strong local support and concerns.

In conclusion, therefore, it is difficult to envisage a less suitable location for a development of this nature and scale.