



The Rt Hon Secretary of State
Department for Energy Security and Net Zero
1 Victoria Street
London
SW1H 0ET

15 July 2026

**Re: Botley West Solar Farm — Development Consent Order Application
(PINS Ref EN010147)**

**Stop Botley West Campaign Response to the Applicant's Answers (submitted 9 June 2026)
to the Secretary of State's Request for Information dated 14 April 2026 (as revised 20 and 28
April 2026)**

Dear Secretary of State,

SBW's Position

Stop Botley West ("SBW") submits that the Secretary of State does **not** have the information necessary to make a fair and balanced decision on this application. The Applicant's answers of 9 June 2026 fail to remedy the fundamental deficiencies in its case. As set out below, critical assessments remain incomplete, key questions have been ignored or inadequately addressed, and the Applicant now proposes a mechanism that would defer essential decisions to a post-consent stage, depriving affected communities of any right of participation. On no proper analysis can the Secretary of State be satisfied that the application is ready for determination.

SBW have consistently engaged in the process, respected all the deadlines, all in good faith. The Applicant's approach has abused the process by never providing the requisite information when required, especially given this is a transformative piece of development for the site, the surroundings and the community. It simply makes a mockery of the system and the ExA.

The Request for Information: Unprecedented in Scale and Scope

The Secretary of State's request for information letter of 14 April 2026 (revised on 20 and 28 April 2026) posed over 70 additional questions to the Applicant. This is highly unusual and no other DCO that we are aware of has requested the same. It speaks to the poor quality of what the Applicant has proposed and why it should not be confirmed. The number, breadth, and depth of these questions, amounting to what is not far short of a complete redesign of the proposal, is unprecedented in the history of the Development Consent Order regime. This fact alone is a clear indicator of the fundamental inadequacy of the Applicant's case.

The effect of the Secretary of State's intervention has been to extend the Examination by a further two months, affording the Applicant additional time to provide material it has failed to produce over the preceding two years. SBW notes that over 80% of the questions posed in the request for information had already been put to the Applicant, some on more than one occasion, by the Examining Authority during the six-month Examination. Many of those questions have been ignored, or answered incompletely or inadequately. The Applicant has had every opportunity to address these matters and has failed to do so.

No other party would have (or should have) been afforded a similar opportunity.

SBW adopts the position expressed by the Members of Parliament for the affected constituencies in their strongly worded letters to DESNZ in late April 2026: namely that this application should have been refused, and the developer invited to return with a more robust and properly evidenced scheme. That would be the fair and proportionate response. That the Secretary of State instead issued a request for information of this extraordinary scale and complexity underscores the depth of the deficiencies in the Applicant's case.

Objection to the Proposed “Residential Visual Amenity Plan”

SBW objects in the strongest terms to the Applicant's proposal for a new Requirement (#15) establishing a “Residential Visual Amenity Plan” (“RVAP”), under which final panel buffer sizes would be determined *after* the Development Consent Order is granted. This proposal is procedurally unfair and fundamentally undemocratic.

The proposed buffer sizes of 100m minimum to 250m maximum are materially less than the 250m minimum buffer shown on the submitted Masterplans (Ref C1-051). The Applicant is, in effect, seeking consent on one basis whilst reserving to itself the power to deliver a materially worse scheme, with no opportunity for Interested Parties to respond or object to the final determination. This is an impermissible attempt to circumvent proper scrutiny that underpins the legislation under which DCO's are determined.

SBW notes that the Oxfordshire Host Authorities (“OHA”) have independently rejected this proposal on the same grounds: it is procedurally unfair and unworkable in practice. SBW concurs with that assessment in full.

The Secretary of State Does Not Have Sufficient Information to Determine This Application

The Applicant concludes in its cover letter with the assertion that “*the Secretary of State has all of the information before him to make a decision*” and that the DCO should be made in the terms sought. SBW rejects that assertion unequivocally. It is demonstrably wrong.

A number of critical assessments remain incomplete, have not been updated, or have never been properly conducted including but not limited to:

- Heritage Settings Assessment
- Landscape Character Assessment
- Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment
- Residential Visual Impact Assessment (including property-by-property visits)
- Various ecological studies and reports
- Substation location and connection date
- Cable route across the Thames

These are not peripheral matters. They go to the heart of whether the residual adverse impacts of this proposal have been properly identified, assessed, avoided, and mitigated – as expected by the

mitigation hierarchy. Until each of these assessments has been completed to an adequate and legal standard, the Secretary of State cannot lawfully or fairly determine this application. The Applicant's claim to the contrary is untenable. It would result in a legal challenge should the Secretary of State seek to confirm a deficient order.

SBW's Response and Resources

SBW submits this response without the assistance of paid experts. The Secretary of State's request for information was not anticipated at this stage and has imposed a further financial burden on a community campaign with limited funds. The absence of professional consultants does not diminish the substance of the points raised herein, which are based on careful analysis of the Applicant's submissions and the Examination record. All of the points previously made with the assistance of legal professionals remain unanswered and frankly unanswerable.

SBW has submitted a costs application at the conclusion of the Examination and awaits a decision on that application.

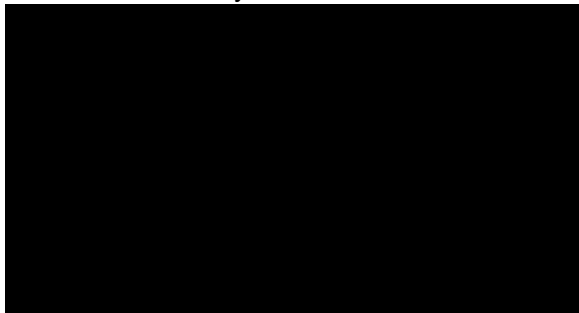
Enclosed Responses

SBW's Executive Summary is attached along with detailed responses to the Applicant's answers of 9 June 2026 submitted in 14 separate sections, each addressing a topic area from the Secretary of State's questions, as listed below and attached to following emails.

Executive Summary

Section 1	Q 6 - 7	Site selection
Section 2	Q 8 - 14	NGET substation
Section 3	Q 15-22	Heritage
Section 4	Q 23-25	Landscape & Visual
Section 5	Q 26-27	RVAA
Section 6	Q 30-32	Soils & Agriculture
Section 7	Q 33-38, 42-43	Ecology, oLEMP and Protected Species
Section 8	Q 39-42	Ancient Woodland
Section 9	Q 44-49	Aviation
Section 10	Q 50	Community Food Growing
Section 11	Q 53-57	Hydrology & Flood Risk
Section 12	Q 68-70	Without prejudice Offer and Viability
Section 13	Q 71 (c)	Appropriate modifications to the dDCO
Section 14		Other Matters

Yours sincerely,



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Response to Applicant's Answers [C1-087]
to the
Secretary of State's Request for Information

Executive Summary

Key points taken from the 14 sections of our submission
covering the 70 questions in the RFI.

Stop Botley West Campaign
15 July 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Section 1 Q6

Site Selection & Substation

Stop Botley West notes the Applicant is now seeking to rely on a new narrative for alternatives and site selection, 7+ months after the conclusion of the Examination phase in which it failed to provide the required information in its ES on numerous occasions despite repeated ExA questioning, as obliged to do so in NPS EN-1 paragraphs 4.3.9., 4.3.20 and 4.13.15.

The new narrative presents contrived costs and options for cable routes, an incomplete assessment of NGET infrastructure options, a convoluted timeline of land acquisition and location choices, and substation site selection criteria not compliant with EN-5's Horlock rules or EN1's paragraphs 4.1.22 and 4.3.15. This work should have been done as the foundation for design and application, not as a retrofit.

Section 1 Q7

Site selection and Locational Disadvantage

The Applicant spends some time arguing about the actual amount of BMV but SBW make the point that regardless of the debated BMV status, the land in agricultural use within the BWSF site is producing good yields - much of it now using regenerative farming methods and its loss would be of serious concern, with consequences for future UK food security.

Other issues are largely overlooked or dismissed including flooding and Blenheim Palace WHS. A specific concern which has been overlooked by the Applicant is the fact that in the Blenheim Palace WHS Revised Management Plan 2017 Appendix III : Setting Study [REP1-037] the proximity of Oxford's Green Belt, right up to the walls of the Palace and Parkland, is specifically cited as a key protection to the setting of Blenheim Palace WHS.

The Applicant relies on the urgent need for significant amounts of large-scale energy infrastructure (e.g. NPS EN-1, para 1.1.2) but the SoS should be aware that NESO's own figures indicate 738GW in the queue c.f. Government target of 70-75GW by 2050 i.e. 10 times the amount needed. This means the SoS can be more selective about which Applications to approve. Note NGET will not be ready to connect until Q4 2031.

Section 2 Q8 - 14

NGET substation

Stop Botley West notes that the Applicant chooses to make no response to paragraph 8 setting out the SoS's evident concerns, previously and repeatedly expressed by the Examining Authority, Calum Miller MP, Layla Moran MP, the OHA and Cumnor Parish Council.

NGET's response shows that its grid connection date is no longer Q4 2029 as reported in November 2025, but is now Q4 2031, a slippage of 2 years in the past 7 months; even that date is caveated as being an '*anticipated*' or a '*target*' with the substation project described as being '*at an early stage*' with dates '*therefore indicative/subject to change.*'

[Stop Botley West notes that] in its response the only dates offered by the Applicant are for the SoS's 'scenario 1' and they are a repetition of the dates submitted by NGET in answer to SoS's question 9. By contrast neither the applicant nor NGET offer any dates for SoS's scenario 2.

The Applicant provides no new information to the SoS, instead choosing to rely on its oft repeated mantra that all such questions will be answered in a detailed design stage that will only take place once they have gained DCO approval. This is unacceptable.

Given the Applicant's current Order Limits its definitive answer of 'yes' to the question of whether works to tower structures would fall within the Order Limits and that '*No extension to the Order Limits would be required*' is impossible to reconcile with the redline boundary for NGET's own proposed substation which extend beyond the Order Limits, with no explanation of why that would be different for the fallback position referred to by the SoS.

The NGET proposed redline not only extends beyond the Applicant's DCO redline but also into a proposed immediately adjacent separate solar power station redline (Red House Farm). However, the Applicant fails to explain whether it too, should it enact its fallback position, would need to carry

out works not just outside its Order Limits but also within the redline of an immediately adjacent and entirely separate solar power station.

The applicant has not provided an updated Grid Connection statement, instead seeking to rely on its November 2024 APP-019 as an updated statement '*has not yet been finalised.*'

Section 3 Q15 - 22

Heritage and Blenheim

The answer about the setting of the palace walls does not answer the question.

No Landscape Character Assessment has been undertaken.

The wider landscape of the Blenheim Estate has been persistently undervalued.

The impacts are not temporary or reversible on the heritage of the farm estate.

Heritage impacts extend well beyond visual effects on which the applicant relies.

The consequences of the scale of the development vis a vis a few hundred acres has never been assessed.

UNESCO and Blenheim's own management documents support protecting the wider setting and are part of the agreement between the State Party and UNESCO.

Financial benefits to Blenheim do not justify heritage harm.

Section 4 Q23 - 25

Landscape and Visual

The Applicant has failed in this response to address the fundamental concern i.e. the suitability of the site. Solar Farms of this scale should be strategically located within large scale, open, sparsely populated landscapes. It is difficult, therefore, to envisage a site less suited to a development of this nature.

The planning and design of the proposed BWSF has been **landlord led**, rather than **landscape led**, with minimal application of the mitigation hierarchy from the outset. The Applicant's fundamentally flawed LVIA process fails to reflect the **magnitude of landscape and visual impacts** of a solar farm development of this **scale** upon this sensitive, highly valued, historic and commercially vital landscape.

A truly representative photographic presentation for this huge proposed solar farm across 1,400 hectares of undulating farmland on three sites and affecting 15 villages cannot be captured in 55 viewpoints and 33 visualisations. Despite falsely claiming the contrary, the Applicant failed entirely to engage with the OHA in the selection of visualisations and ignored the Landscape Institute's guidelines as well as obvious common sense. The consequence was that local knowledge was excluded, Type 3 rather than Type 4 visualisations were produced giving distorted images, and a biased and incomplete series of visualisations resulted.

Section 5 Q26b - 27

Residential and Visual Amenity Assessment (RVAA),

A full and comprehensive RVAA, including visits to each property, which ExA have repeatedly been calling for since the Scoping Opinion on 23 July 2023 should be completed **before** any DCO is granted.

The Residential Visual Amenity Plan (RVAP) added as Schedule 2, requirement 15, in changes to the dDCO [C1-082] as a substitute for an RVAA is unacceptable. It is undemocratic and unworkable. (See OHA response [C1-024])

Without an adequate RVAA, the decision-maker will not have sufficiently reliable environmental information on which to lawfully determine this aspect of the application. It follows that the DCO should NOT be granted at this time and the Applicant should be required to re-submit when the missing work is done.

Section 6 Q30 - 32

Soils and Agriculture

Much has been argued about the Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) of the 1400ha of agricultural land and the loss of Best and Most Versatile (BMV) land. Regardless of the debated BMV status, the land in agricultural use within the BWSF site is producing good yields.

Blenheim Estate, who own most of the land claim that it gives poor yields on poor soils. A tenant farmer who has farmed this land for several years using regenerative agriculture disputes this assertion. He has documented yields of 8t/ha of grain, about the national average.

This farmer has subsequently reported that grain yields from the 2026 harvest are 50% lower than normal because of the weather and if this is repeated nationally in the future because of the increasing summer temperatures then loss of land to Solar Farms will have an impact on Food Security.

Section 7 Q33 – 38, Q42 - 43

Ecology, oLEMP and Protected Species

Skylark

Skylark numbers, along with those of other British and European farmland birds have declined significantly. (62% since 1970). The Applicant's plans do not include suitably large enough areas for skylarks in mitigation and restricting grazing between April and July, as proposed, will lead to a clash in managing the interrow area with grazing livestock.

Other Red Listed Birds

Other Red Listed species require a patchwork of habitats. The Applicant has failed to present a comprehensive and effective strategy to mitigate the impact on Farmland birds preferring instead to put this to one side until after the DCO has been granted.

Bats

The project area surveyed is of "at least national importance" to bats or even of International Importance and is under consideration from Natural England to become an SSSI.

An **SSSI** is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Any activity that might damage the special interest features requires **formal consent from Natural England**. The failure of the officers of Natural England to notify the Examiners and ultimately the SoS of the possibility that the central site of Botley West might be considered for SSSI designation is a failure of this Statutory Authority to adequately discharge its duties in respect of the Botley West NSIP Examination. The information was in the application documents.

Biodiversity

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

Protected Species

The Applicant has failed to carry out the required survey work to establish the populations of such creatures, as dormice, great crested newt, badger, reptiles, arable weeds, otter and water vole.

Plans to use translocation to avoid development impacts on wildlife is at best an unproven mitigation strategy and at worst, likely to fail.

Section 8 Q39 - 42

Ancient Woodland and Veteran Trees.

After two attempts the Applicant has quite simply failed to deliver an accurate or credible SAIA and Veteran Tree Survey, and failed to provide the SoS with the assurance sought regarding the identification and safeguarding of individual veteran trees across the site.

SBW supports the position taken by the OHA who have stated 'there are flaws in the Applicant's methodology' and 'there is potential for ancient and veteran trees to have been missed from the assessment'

Section 9 Q44 - 49

Aviation

Despite further submissions from the Applicant and Oxford Aviation Services Ltd (OASL), the SoS's key flight safety concerns remain unresolved, including residual glint and glare risks and unassessed radar impacts from thermal turbulence, where the precautionary principle should apply.

These are matters of national importance, as London Oxford Airport is used by flying schools from across the UK, with instructors warning that thousands of trainee pilots practice engine-failure procedures over the proposed extensive fenced solar arrays.

The Applicant has also failed to assess or engage with affected aviation businesses regarding the scheme's potential impact on the economic viability of London Oxford Airport, despite the SoS's request and OASL's clear recommendation.

Section 10 Q50

Community Food Growing

The Applicant introduced the "Community Food Growing" scheme in an attempt to add a positive weight in the planning balance. The largest area is planned as a commercial enterprise which has no place on a solar farm and cannot be described as a Community Benefit.

The Applicant has assumed a need and desire for additional Food Growing Areas without consulting the Community who have, nevertheless, sent in well evidenced submissions opposing the plan because sufficient provision already exists. The planned locations are inappropriate due to unsafe access, propensity to flood, being within the setting of heritage assets and on productive agricultural farmland.

To safeguard this land these 4 plots should be removed from the Order Limits of the project.

Section 11 Q53 - 57

Hydrology & Flood Risk

Despite the Applicant's selective reliance on Environment Agency data and reflecting its only recently completed sole infiltration test, its flood risk assessments are deficient for the central site in and around Cassington and across the southern site in Cumnor Parish.

Contrasting with the detailed, locally specific evidence commissioned by both Cassington and Cumnor Parish Councils, the applicant's deficient assessment means its proposed mitigations, which are ineffective of themselves, will not prevent increased frequency and severity of pluvial and fluvial flood events in the central site in and around Cassington and across the southern site in Cumnor Parish's Farmoor valley. In the latter case the deficiency is exacerbated by the absence of an assessment of cumulative impacts of two solar power projects immediately adjacent to the DCO redline.

Section 12 Q68 - 70

Without Prejudice Offer - Viability

The Applicant has created considerable confusion in numerous documents, about the installed capacity and other important performance features of BWSF. This was not progressive evolution to an agreed final size but more like a 'random walk' through the numbers, where installation descriptions changed from one document to another, contradicted each other or reverted to earlier details in later iterations.

SBW wonders why a c39% reduction in solar panel area is not accompanied by a commensurate reduction in the redline boundary area, i.e. a reduction in the installation's 'foot-print' on the landscape and is very concerned that keeping the existing red-line boundary would allow 'panel creep' (i.e. an increase in installation size) post DCO approval.

SBW challenges many of the performance claims made for BWSF (specifically that 840MWe of electricity might reliably be delivered to any future NGET station) and notes the lack of any detail from the Applicant of important ingredients in its LCOE calculations (O&M costs and discount rates) that determine the LCOE values.

We question the high value of the fixed costs assumed, because project viability is particularly sensitive to them. We also note that every single one of the other UK 80 NSIP scale solar proposals for which we have details have installed sizes less than – and often very much less than – the Applicant's minimum viable figure of 935MW. If they can do it, why can't the Applicant? We therefore reject the Applicant's conclusion that BWSF can be no smaller than 935MW.

Furthermore, delays now likely to the NGET substation (Q4 2031 at the earliest) mean that any calculation imagining a 2030 connection date for BWSF should be revisited with a more realistic timeline. This delay also makes BWSF ineligible for the current round of Contracts for Difference (CfD) funding (AR8, opening date for applications 20/07/26; likely announcement of successful applicants no later than early 2027), further threatening the economic viability of the entire project.

Section 13 Q71(c)

Appropriate modifications to the dDCO: Grampian clause issues

At the close of the Examination, the ExA proposed six amendments to the draft Development Consent Order (DCO) which they thought necessary before a DCO could be approved. These are Grampian clauses. The Applicant has omitted some and amended others away from the ExA's original proposals.

All six are important but critical to the commencement of the Project is that the National Grid (NGET) substation must have planning consent before work commences. Recent documents from NGET suggest that no planning consent has been applied for and even if that were successful then they have provided a connection date of Q4 2031. This conflicts with the Applicant's target of Q4 2029.

Modifications to the dDCO: The Residential Visual Amenity Plan

The Applicant has introduced a new requirement 13 in Schedule 2 to enable them to negotiate final buffers (separation of panels from residential properties) **after** DCO consent is granted thus bypassing the need to consult and preventing the SoS from being able to have sufficient evidence to inform their decision. The requirement introduces a minimum buffer of 100 metres.

Section 14

Other Matters: Gate 2 protected connection offer

In June 2026, and valid for 9 months, Solar 5, the license holder for this project, was granted Gate 2 protected connection offer by the National Electricity System Operator (NESO).

Gate 2 is part of NESO's reformed grid-connection process. It confirms a project has met readiness tests and grants a protected queue position for grid connection. It is an administrative safeguard to prevent displacement by less-ready projects. It does not elevate the project to government priority status. It does not guarantee planning approval or override environmental, landscape, or community impacts.

The offer of Gate 2 protection can be withdrawn if progress to develop the project is not maintained and its connection position will be lost.

Other Matters: Order Limits

As a result of agreements by the Applicant to remove panels from several fields currently within the Order Limits, around 300ha of land will not now contain panels. This land no longer needs to be under the control - or ownership - of the Applicant.

To safeguard the land from "panel creep" i.e. attempts to put panels back on the land post Consent - which could happen if the Applicant's Residential Visual Amenity Plan is implemented - and to return it to its former productive agricultural use, these fields should be removed from the Order Limits and the Red-line boundary should be redrawn.

Other Matters: Coalescence

The planning authorities and the Planning Inspectorate must look beyond isolated site assessments. Significant risk lies in the uncoordinated, creeping coalescence of housing and energy infrastructure across West Oxfordshire, Cherwell, and the Vale areas.

Without an overarching strategy that protects the open countryside, the environmental, agricultural, and historic fabric of Oxfordshire will face an irreversible decline. Comprehensive, cumulative impact assessments must be in place and their recommendations implemented before further consents are granted.

STOP BOTLEY WEST

15 July 2026



Response to Applicant's Answers [C1-087]
to the
Secretary of State's Request for Information

Section 1: Response to answers 6 - 7

concerning

Site Selection

Stop Botley West Campaign
15 July 2026

Stop Botley West Response to the Applicant's Answers to the Secretary of State's Questions 6 - 7 on Site Selection

Question 6: Alternatives and Site Selection

6. Having consideration for NPS EN-1 paragraphs 4.3.9, 4.3.10 and 4.3.15, the **Applicant** is requested to provide additional and detailed reasons, and considerations in respect of the following:
- a. Discounting of the National Grid Electricity Transmission Limited ("NGET") substation at Northfleet in East London, briefly referenced in the Environmental Statement Chapter 5 Alternatives considered [APP-042];
 - b. Progress made with regard to securing land in the Cowley NGET substation allocation [APP-042] up to the point of becoming aware of National Grid's proposals for a preferred site at Farmoor, noting that the search began to find at least 250 hectares ("ha") of land in the Cowley NGET substation area;
 - c. Details of the search radius applied from the grid connection point at the proposed Farmoor NGET substation, whether this was incrementally extended and how it compared to the search area and approach applied to the Cowley NGET substation search for land;
 - d. The environmental, social and economic considerations and financial viability and technical feasibility considerations in respect of both the initial point of connection at Cowley NGET substation and the proposed Farmoor NGET substation in line with NPS-EN1 paragraphs 4.1.22 and 4.3.15; and
 - e. The site selection methodology used in relation to the proposed development and grid connection at the proposed Farmoor NGET substation.

SoS Question 6

On first impression the Applicant's 22 page response to SoS questions 6a-e provides an extensive discursive narrative.

To SBW this demonstrates that the Applicant is now seeking to rely on a narrative for alternatives and site selection in the NSIP decision phase, 7+ months after the conclusion of the Examination phase in which it failed to provide the required information in its ES on numerous occasions prompted by repeated ExA questioning, as obliged to do so in NPS EN-1 paragraphs 4.3.9., 4.3.20 and 4.13.15.

Having read the Applicant's new Decision Phase assertions and tested them against the limited openly available information available to it, as best it is able within the confines of an inadequate time to do so (just 35 days from 11th June to 16th July 2026) SBW has arrived at the following assessments.

6a Northfleet substation:

In assessing the Applicant's latest response to this question SBW is minded to refer the SoS back to the ExA's perceptive question/comment some 13 months ago on 13th May 2025 (**EV5-003 EN010147-000804-Transcript ish1 pt 1 at 01:11:35 – 01:12:13:18**):

'it very much reads that you looked at one other alternative, which was Norfleet. You discounted that quite quickly because it's only mentioned once in one sentence in that document, and then almost immediately you're saying, we've got landowners, we've got land, and that's where we decided to build'

This assessment is supported by the fact that the Applicant has previously stated (**APP-042 para 5.6.7 page 6**) that it

'looked at approximately 19 substations'.

Now (**C1-087 page 3**) we are told that:

'Once a substation was identified as having potential capacity, an application for a pre-application call was made to NGET and the likelihood of success of a connection application'

but also that

'Where the land team were confident that there were landowners near the substation interested in letting their land for a solar farm, a pre-application call was booked.'

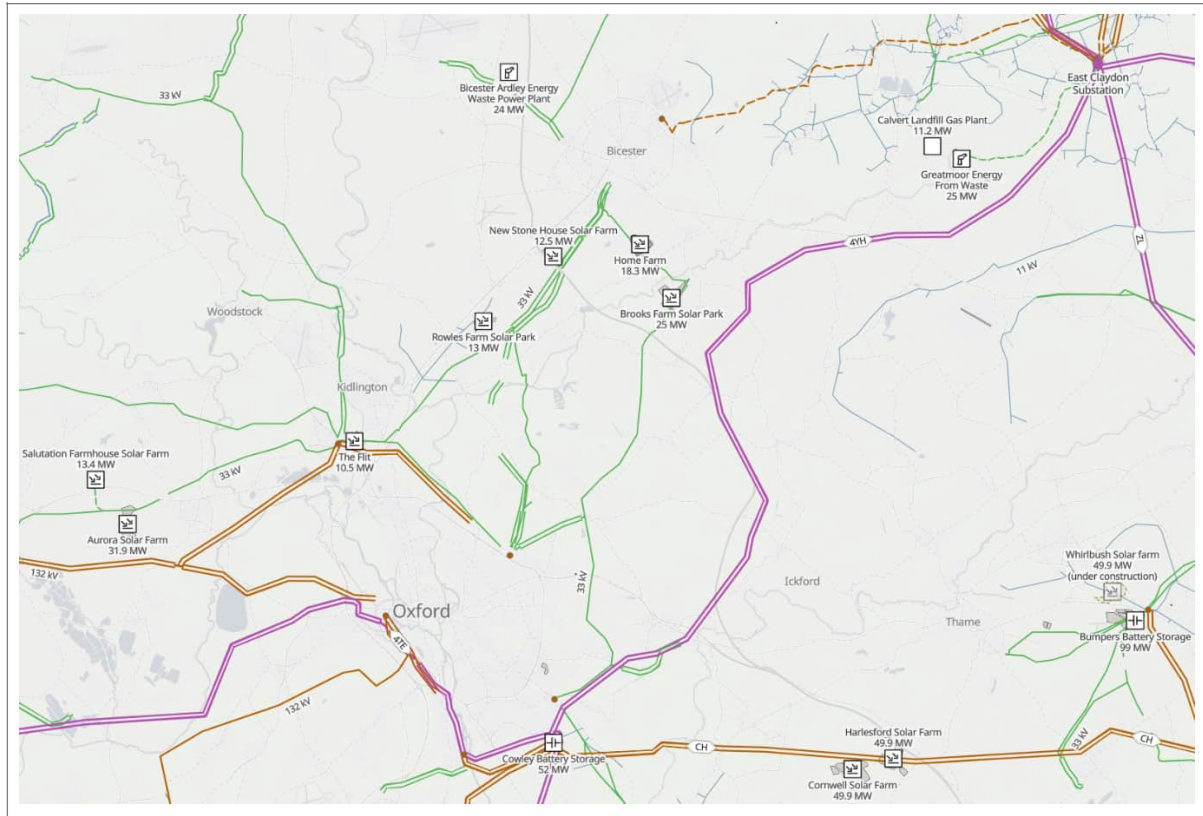
So which was it: land first? Substation first? Or a 'look at' 19 substations?

SBW assesses that the Applicant's evident confusion in **C1-087** as it attempts to reconcile its new narrative with previously submitted information (such as in **APP-042**) has led it to try to convince the SoS of several different things, simultaneously. It has failed to do so.

6b Cowley NGET substation

By their own submission (see **APP-063 Figure 5.6: Substation Locations**), the Applicant did not apparently consider all the reasonable options available to it, and has not informed either the ExA or the SoS of this.

With its focus on NGET's Cowley - Seven Springs 400kV line (NGET designation 4TE) and its inevitable and avoidable Green Belt harms, the Applicant has not shown that it considered connections to the NGET's Cowley to East Claydon 400kV line (NGET designation 4YH), with the East Claydon substation just over the Oxon/Buck border (see Map 1 below), either to the East Claydon substation itself, or via anew NGET substation on NGET's 4YH line.



Map 1 from <https://openinframap.org/#10.53/51.8237/-1.1961>

Given the Applicant's own timeline (**C1-087** table on page 4) this omission is even more surprising since 3 years and 2 months (June 2020 to August 2023) before the Applicant had apparently secured land in what is now called the southern site, and 2 years and 5 months (June 2020 to November 2022) before it secured Blenheim owned land in the northern and central site, it was prepared to enter into detailed discussion with NGET about connection to Cowley, 15.4km from what is now field 2.112, the southernmost field in that central site.

This omission is even more inexplicable given that the Applicant apparently did not also consider (as it is proposing now for NGET's 4TE 400kV line) to secure land and a DCO boundary for a new NGET substation within it on the NGET 4YH 400kV line.

Had it done so, it could have examined a 400kV line connection on the 4YH line which, at its closest – near Boarstall and adjacent to the M40 motorway - is just 14.3km due East across open country (not Green belt) from Botley West fields 2.10-2.17 (nr Begbroke) in the central site, a shorter distance than the Applicant's sole choice of 15.4km to Cowley.

If it had done so the Applicant would have no need for a High Voltage cable crossing of the River Thames in EA Flood Risk Zone 2 and 3, as now proposed, and no need to build large permanent (not temporary) industrial infrastructure on the Oxford Green Belt.

Why?

This, like so much of the Applicant's proposal smacks of opportunism born out of a desire to present to the NSIP planning process with a plausible narrative of site alternatives and evidence led site selection back fitted to a decision already made based on Blenheim Estate land acquisition alone.

Did that desire for a plausible narrative then also determine the Applicant's apparent requirement to place panels and other infrastructure on north facing steeply sloping shaded and flood prone Green Belt farmland in Cumnor Parish?

Did the Applicant judge that while the southern site would contribute a tiny fraction of Botley West's revenue with a commensurate adverse return on investment, it would provide a plausible reason for cabling and other infrastructure to extend across and to the south of the River Thames in EA Flood Risk Zone 2 and 3 on the Oxford Green Belt?

SBW is minded to return to where this assessment started. As the ExA commented in October 2025 (**EV5-003 EN010147-000804-Transcript ish1 pt 1 at 01:11:35 – 01:12:13:18**):

'you're saying, we've got landowners, we've got land, and that's where we decided to build'

6c search radius

In **C1-087** (page 5) the Applicant references a 25km search radius from an NGET substation.

However, the Applicant's Figure 1 on page 6 of its **C1-087** is of such poor resolution that it is impossible for it to be used to test the Applicant's assertions. SBW asks for it to be withdrawn or replaced with something legible.

Instead SBW has used higher resolution mapping for this response - see 6b above and 6e below.

This higher resolution mapping has shown that while the nearest NGET 400kV line to the southern site is the much quoted Cowley - Seven Springs 4TE line, the nearest to the northern site and sections of the central site (all land to be leased to the Applicant by a single landowner: Blenheim) remains the studiously ignored Cowley to East Claydon 4YH line.

The nearest extant substation to the southern site remains Cowley and the nearest to both the north and central sites remains East Claydon.

But given that the Applicant has repeatedly stated its intention in its proposed DCO to build its permanent main substation and the NGET substation on Green belt land within the southern site if NGET does not proceed, why has the Applicant has not informed either ExA or SoS as to whether it ever, if at all, considered connecting to NGET's 4YH 400kV line, which at its closest lies 17.3km from Blenheim Palace, so well within the Applicant's 25km search radius?

This all the more curious – and unexplained – given that the Applicant has asserted (**C1-087 table page 4**) that it only signed its first lease for land with Blenheim 1 year and 5 months after it had accepted NGET's Farmoor connection offer (June 2021 to November 2022), having applied for that connection offer 1 year and 9 months (February 2021 to November 2022) before it secured the Blenheim lease.

6d Cowley & Farmoor NGET comparisons

SBW assesses that the Applicant has provided contradictory, contrived and partial (in all senses of the word) information that does not align with the requirements of NPS-EN1 paragraphs 4.1.22 and 4.3.15

As of the date of this submission, and 5 years after the Applicant states that NGET made their connection offer at Farmoor (June 2021 to date, see **C1-087 table page 4**), NGET has not made a planning application for any such substation.

The Applicant has then hedged its position with a DCO application that includes both its own main substation and an alternative site for the NGET substation in its proposed southern site DCO boundary.

But again, rather than fitting the Applicant's preferred narrative of careful site selection and the consideration of alternatives, this timeline indicates a different motive.

It was 2 years and 6 months (February 2021 to August 2023) after it signed its agreement with NGET for a Farmoor grid connection before the Applicant signed its lease for land in Farmoor comprising what it now calls the southern site.

Does it seem more likely that the Applicant, having committed to Blenheim and NGET, realised that its deficient site selection strategy coupled with a dependence on NGET would be apparent to its funders and the ExA if it did not also secure its own land in or around Farmoor?

Was that not the driving force behind securing land in Farmoor, rather than a requirement for an extra marginal (in all senses of the word) generating capability so far removed from the land leased from Blenheim?

Also, is that only now why the Applicant, in **C1-087 pages 11-12**, has sought to show its supposed economic and other constraints in connecting the southern site to Cowley NGET vs the Farmoor NGET option?

But if those Cowley constraints were apparent to the Applicant when it first '*was introduced*' to the Blenheim estate in January 2020, why did the Applicant continue 5 months later to discuss a Cowley connection with NGET?

Surely, the apparently insurmountable challenges now reported would have caused a re-think in early 2020? Apparently not.

Or is it that the Cowley constraints have been 'back fitted' to a narrative in which all roads lead to the southern site and Farmoor and nowhere else?

Looking at the comparative Farmoor vs Cowley assessment with the benefit of local knowledge SBW is struck just by how contrived the choices are.

Page 15 of C1-087 informs us that the route would pass:

'directly through the Oxford Historic Core Conservation Area on High Street, Magdalen Bridge, Queen Street, and Park End Street.' passing 'Magdalen College (GI), The Queen's College, All Souls College, University College, and Magdalen Bridge itself (GI).'*

SBW assesses that the Applicant has deliberately chosen as its worked example a bizarre choice, reading more like a Baedekers' Guide to Oxford than a rational planning option.

But in doing so they undermine their own decisions made about other sections of their proposed cable route: including between the central and southern sites.

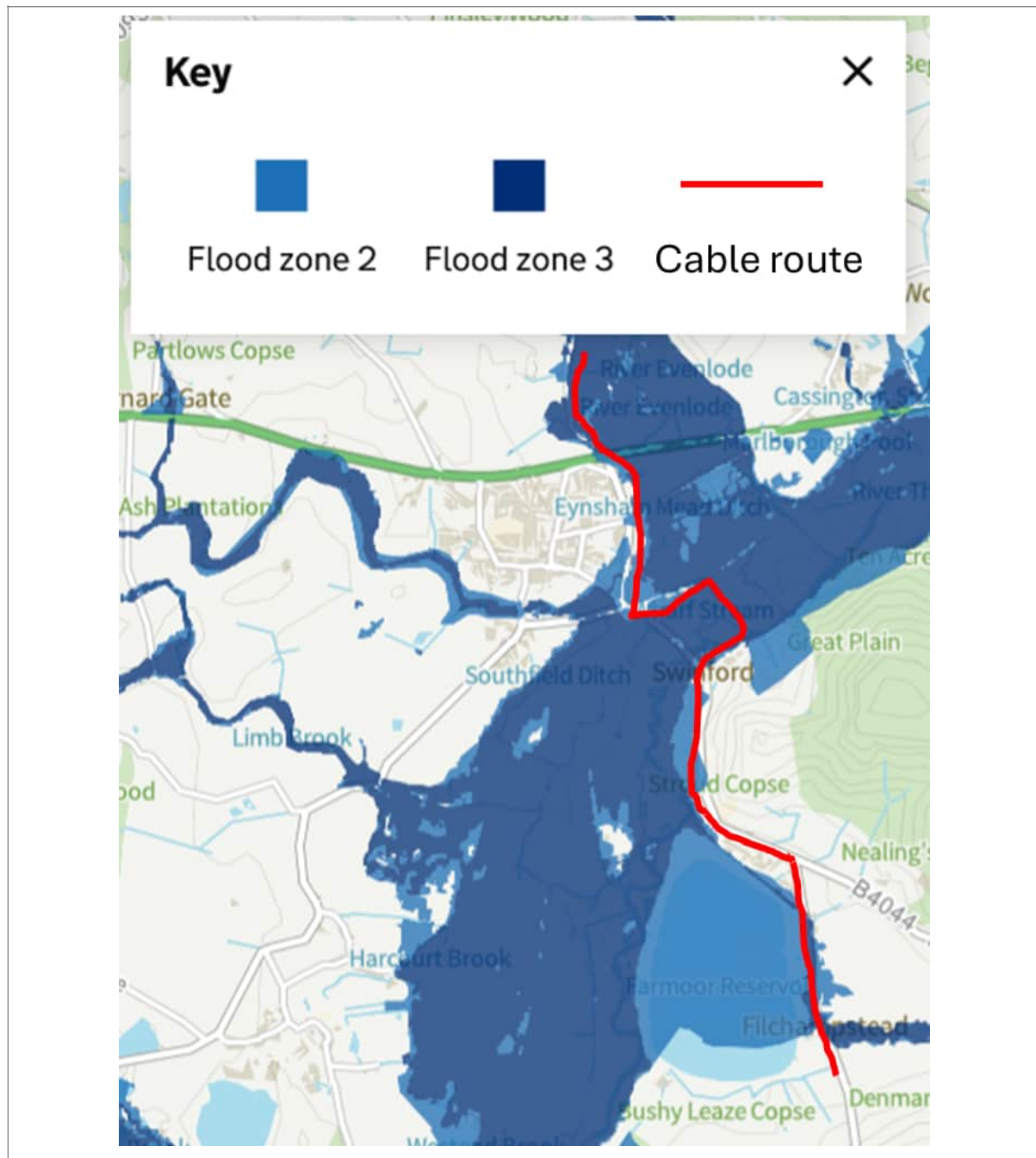
In attempting to explain the insurmountable environmental factors preventing the cable route to Cowley from the Southern site, the Applicant notes on **C1-087 page 16**

- Ecology and nature Conservation
 - Local Nature Reserves are present along the route corridor.
 - Ancient woodland blocks are present in the Wytham / Cumnor Hill area through which the western Green Belt sections of the route pass. Route alignment must maintain appropriate clearance from ancient woodland root protection zones.

- Hydrology and Flood Risk
 - River Cherwell / Magdalen Bridge crossing (~km 7.8): Flood Zones 2 and 3 are present at this crossing Environment Agency consent required.
 - Additional Flood Zone 2 / 3 sections in the Botley / Hinksey areas (~km 2–5).
 - A detailed flood risk assessment is required for all affected sections.

Unfortunately for the Applicant all these impediments are apparently surmountable for their proposed cable connection between the central and southern sites where there are:

- Local Nature Reserves present along the route corridor.
- Ancient woodland blocks (including Wytham woods SSSI)
- River Thames crossing at Swinford: Flood Risk Zones 2 and 3 are present at this crossing - Environment Agency consent required.
- Additional Flood Zone 2 / 3 sections present including the B4044 SW of Swinford (see Map 2 - EA flood risk map - below)



Map 2
EA flood risk zones 2 and 3 for proposed Botley West central site to southern site cable routing

Surprisingly given the Applicant's stated unwillingness to address these impediments for a contrived cable route to Cowley, it is apparently content to cope with them for its central site to southern site cable route.

Except of course it hasn't addressed them in this case either, the prime example being the absence of a '*detailed flood risk assessment*' that satisfies SBW, Cumnor Parish Council or the OHA for the southern site and the central to southern site cable routing.

Also unexplained is why, if the Applicant is unwilling to bear a cost of c. £10m/km for cabling (the Applicant quotes a cost of £150m for 15km to Cowley from the southern site **C1-087 pages 9 and 10**), it is willing to bear a cost of at least £70m, given that the cable route between the central and southern sites is 6.4km plus an additional distance to traverse the River Thames near to Swinford Toll bridge in a EA Flood Zone 3 area?

There seems to be a breakdown of both consistency and financial logic here within the Applicant's own figures which the SoS might ask the Applicant to explain, given that by contrast, the northern and central sites are separated by only c 1km of farmland, presumably bridged at a cost of £10m.

There again, there are so many inconsistencies and logic bombs in the application that another one comes, unfortunately, as no surprise to SBW.

This is exemplified on **pages 11 and 12 of C1-087** (Table 1 below) where the Applicant sets out a number of 'key considerations' for the earlier part of the 'Cowley' cable route which it claims renders the option 'unachievable.'

Approx. km	Road / Crossing	Width (m)	Method	Key considerations
~0.8	Denmans Lane	3.5	Open Cut	Minor rural lane; narrow carriageway.
~1.5	Eynsham Road (B4044)	7.5	Open Cut + traffic mgmt	Rural B road; two-way traffic maintained with temporary lane management.
~3.0	A420 (West Way) — possible trenchless crossing	7.5	To be determined	Open cut in verge possible; trenchless may not be needed. National Highways pre-application consultation required.

Approx. km	Road / Crossing	Width (m)	Method	Key considerations
~3.4	West Way (B4044)	11.5	Open Cut + traffic mgmt	Suburban road
~4.4	A34 (Oxford bypass) — possible trenchless crossing	11.5	To be determined	Open cut in verge / slip road may be feasible. National Highways pre-application consultation required. No compound location identified.
~4.9	Botley Road	7.5	Open Cut + traffic mgmt	Radial road into Oxford; OCC Permit Scheme; Oxford City Council co-ordination.

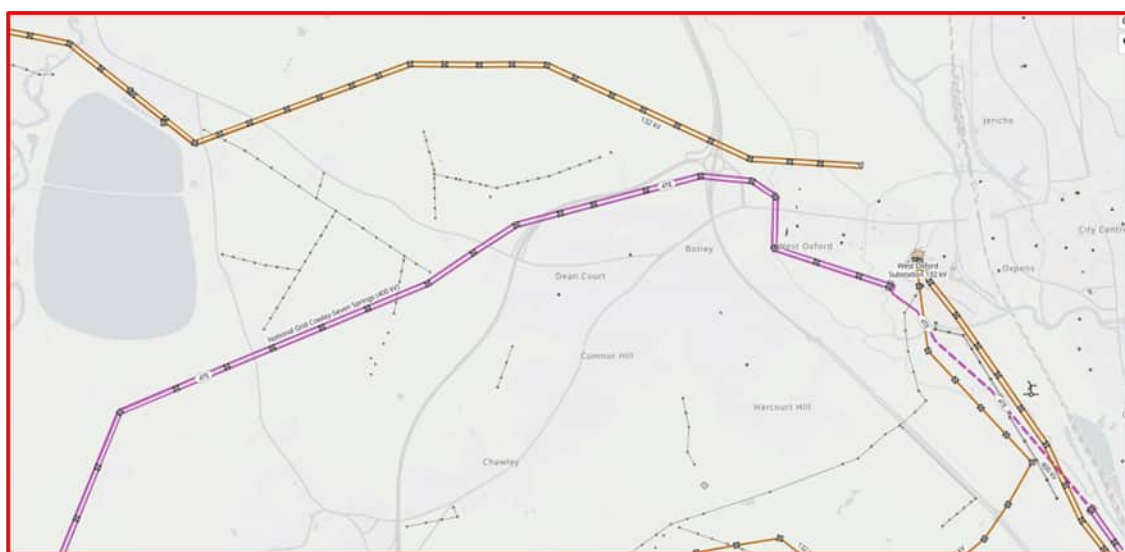
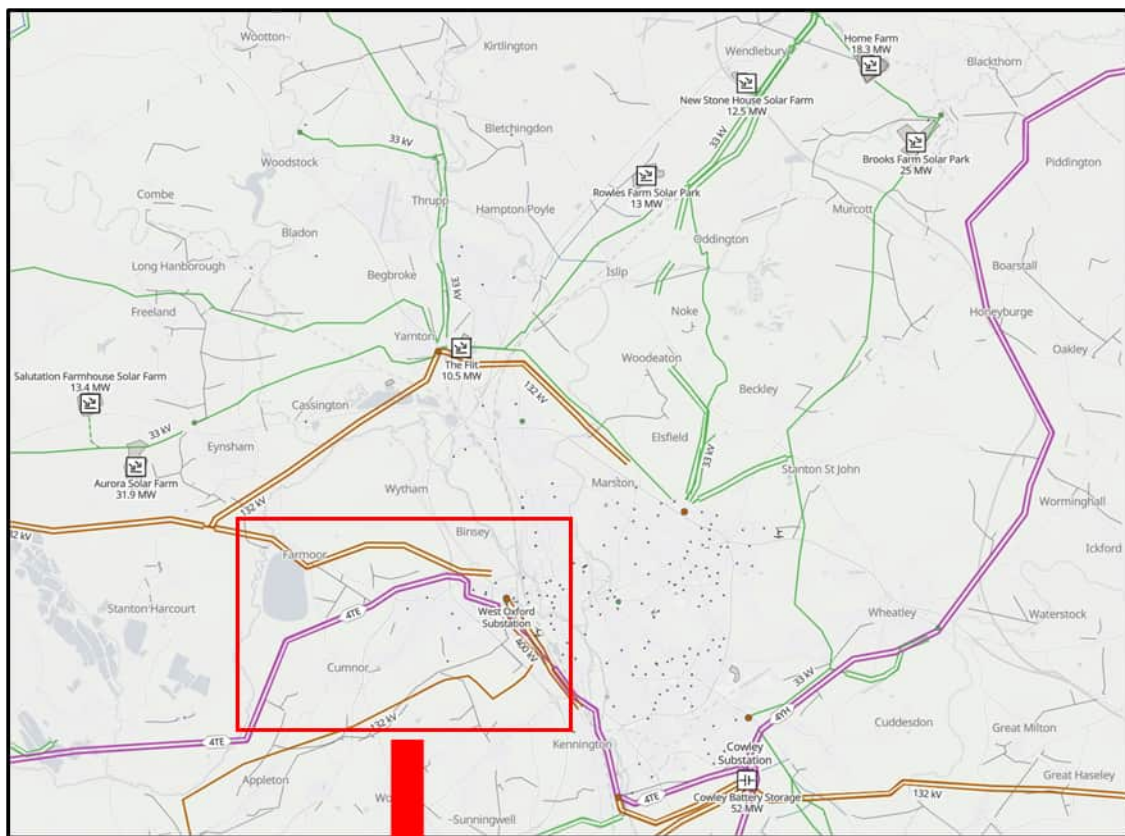
Table 1 from **C1-087** pages 11-12

Unfortunately for the Applicant they are very much achievable.

This has been demonstrated by the proposed Red House Farm solar power station (**VWHDC Planning application P24/V2489/FUL** currently being considered under **PINS appeal reference 6009163** with the public inquiry beginning 20th October 2026) that would be co-located with Botley West's southern site in the Farmoor valley.

This proposal at only 6% the size of Botley West (49MWe to Botley West's 840MWe) and so, presumably only requiring c. 6% of the capital and generating c 6% of the revenue, has successfully applied for planning permission to Oxford City Council for this very cable route to the SSEN substation on Ferry Hinksey Road (**Oxford City Council planning application 23/02816/FUL granted on 27th April 2026**).

This substation is only 50m from NGET's Cowley - Seven Springs 4TE 400kV line, both situated on an underutilised brown field site (see Map 3 below).



Map 3
South Oxfordshire NGET infrastructure with detail of west of Oxford

6e Site selection methodology for Applicant's Farmoor NGET substation site

It is instructive to note that some 12 months after the ExA asked, in effect, the same question (ExQ1 1.3.1 in **PD-008**), the SoS is still having to ask it. This is compounded by the ExA having also requested in July 2025 (ExQ2 2.1.8 in **P-012**) that the Applicant explain how the Horlock Rules (**EN-5** para 2.9.18 and 2.9.19) had been applied. As Interested Party's have previously recorded the Applicant's answer (**REP4-037**) showed they hadn't.

It is surprising then that the Applicant, in addressing the SoS's question over 5 pages (**C1-087** pages 21-25), repeats (on p24) its 12 month old **REP2-025** (page 25) response to the EXA's Q1.3.1 in **PD-008**:

The site selected by PVDP for the NGET substation was within the NGET area of search which by that stage had narrowed to an area with approximately six alternative sites along a short stretch of the 400kV OHL corridor, and on land that was within the Applicants Order Limits. To the knowledge of the Applicant none of the shortlisted site areas lay outside of the Oxfordshire Green Belt. The Applicant did not look beyond this corridor as to do so would fetter NGET's own site search criteria.

So, in June 2026 - as in July 2025 - the Applicant is stating that its site selection criteria for the SoS's 'scenario 2' was to take six alternates identified by NGET for them to build the substation, map them to the Applicant's own order limits and find a site that ticked both boxes.

The Applicant then makes the unevidenced and unlikely assertion that it didn't want to look elsewhere as it didn't want to 'fetter' NGET.

How is not explained, and can't be because the Applicant states NGET had already concluded its site search that arrived at the six alternatives the Applicant then chose one from.

Twelve months on the Applicant's sole answer to the SoS question is the clearly unsatisfactory one it gave a year ago to the ExA.

Despite the Applicant's claims, its assertions about NGET's own selection criteria remain untested in planning terms as no planning application has come forward, and according to NGET won't before Q1-Q2 2027 at the earliest (see **C1-028**).

In addition the Applicant freely admits (**C1-087 page 24**) that

NGET applied their own criteria to that site search, and so the Applicant is unaware of how Green Belt factored into their site search criteria.

So the Applicant is simultaneously asserting that:

- Its site selection process meets the required planning policies,

but that:

- It relied on a prior process carried out by NGET alone, details of which the Applicant 'is unaware of'
- It then applied a filter of which NGET options already sat within the Applicant's own Order Limits – a purely commercial decision made at the Applicant's own risk
- It did not do anything else for fear it would 'fetter' an NGET process already completed and on which it had already relied to make its own decision

SBW assesses that this shows that no site selection process as required by the relevant planning policies ever took place and that the Applicant has not provided evidence of how it applied the required **EN-5** Horlock Rules, if at all.

SBW requests the SoS to rule that the Applicant has not discharged its responsibilities to either you or the ExA in this case, relying as it does on:

- its own uncorroborated account of what it claims was NGET's process – that process being currently untested in planning terms - while simultaneously;
- being '*unaware*' of the details of NGET's site selection process, with
- further constraints it imposed on itself by its own prior choice of Order Limit, a purely commercial decision made at its own risk.
- No evidence that the Applicant applied the Horlock rules for substation location choice (**EN-5** para 2.9.18 and 2.9.19)

The SoS is also asked to note that the Applicant's **REP1-019** (Applicant's written summary of ISH1) page 4 dated June 2025 states

Mr Phillips, on behalf of the Applicant, provided broader context regarding the ongoing engagement with National Grid. He explained that National Grid is actively preparing an application for a substation that would service both the Project and the wider network

If the Applicant's claim about the '*wider network*' was true in June 2025 – although the NESO 'Beyond 2030' document from 2024 shows no such plans for any network reinforcements on the 400kV Cowley to Seven Springs 400kV line (NGET designation 4TE) - then NESO's newly published July 2026 updated 'Beyond 2030' assessment: (<https://www.neso.energy/publications/beyond-2030/web-map>)

confirms that no '*wider network*' reinforcements (substations and/or circuits and upgrades) are recommended before 2045 on the 400kV line identified by the Applicant.

Question 7. The Secretary of State notes that there is no substantive information in the Environmental Statement Chapter 5 Alternatives regarding how Best and Most Versatile Land ("BMVL"), mineral resources, Blenheim Palace World Heritage Site ("WHS"), London Oxford Airport, land within Flood Zones and the Green Belt influenced the site selection, nor whether these locational disadvantages were factored into the strategic equation. The Applicant is requested to provide evidence on how these locational factors were taken into account. In doing so, the Applicant is requested to have regard for NPS EN-1 paragraphs 4.3.9, 4.3.10 and 4.3.15.

This request covers how site selection was influenced or affected by the landscape and other features

Stop Botley West's comments

BMV Land

There was much debate, before, during and after the Inquiry about the BMV status of BWSF land. The ALC map used by the Applicant was first produced in 1988 and has been tweaked in successive iterations ever since, but still retained an undivided ALC Grade 3, meaning it was impossible to distinguish accurately BMV and non-BMV land. The published map also came with a warning that it should not be used to assess the quality of individual fields.

BWSF is only one of a number of solar installations in the county. Work by the citizen-science group SolarQ (www.solarq.org) has shown that other solar installations, either already operational or in the pipeline for the county, would boost that 0.52% figure to 1.5%, a figure that puts Oxfordshire in fifth place for solar land-take of all the UK's county and unitary authorities of greater than 1,000 sq. kms in size.

The consequences for future UK food security are alarming and it should be pointed out that, regardless of the debated BMV status, the land in agricultural use within the BWSF site is producing good yields - much of it now using regenerative farming methods and its loss would be of serious concern. (see SBW's response on Soils and Agriculture - section 6 of SBW's response)

There is no certainty at all that the installation and eventual removal of the 2,500,000 driven piles to support the solar panels [C1-087, p. 117] will avoid causing permanent damage to the land drains beneath BWSF's fields. This means there is a very low likelihood of reverting the land to productive farming afterwards.

Flood risk in the BWSF area

Although included in the SoS's list of concerns here, the Applicant all but ignored it.

Parts of the central area of BWSF, along the River Evenlode, are certainly at High Risk of flooding; these areas are already part of the land set aside for conservation. As other responses make clear, however, flood risk will increase in solar farms because of the effective 'sealing' of the soil surface by the solar panels. Soil 'sealing' is usually brought about by concreting over the soil surface, but solar panels will have the similar effect of concentrating the flow of water onto very narrow stretches of soil, probably leading to soil erosion and increased flood risk. (See SBW's response on Hydration and Flood Risk - section 11 of SBW's response)

Oxford's Green Belt, Blenheim Palace WHS and BWSF

Approximately 69% of the Botley West Solar Power Station is located on Greenbelt land, 2.65% of Oxford's total area of Greenbelt. Oxford's Greenbelt is already under significant pressure and 3.5% has been lost to Local Plans.

A specific concern which has been overlooked by the Applicant is the fact that, in the Blenheim Palace World Heritage Site Revised Management Plan 2017 Appendix III : Setting Study 9.5.67 [REP1-037], the proximity of Oxford's Green Belt, right up to the walls of the Palace and Parkland, is specifically cited as a key protection to the setting of Blenheim Palace WHS. *"The setting of the site will be protected through Policy EW1 and also through other designations: Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Ancient Woodland, Oxford Green Belt and Conservation Areas at Woodstock and Bladon."*

The Applicant claims to have worked with Historic England and Blenheim Palace using the WHS Management Plan to gain a clear appreciation of setting. Inexplicably both of bodies have failed to notice this statement in their own plan!

Neither, apparently, did they take on board their own warning [para.5.04 of the same document REP1-037] that " *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;*

Protection is lost if the development is allowed to proceed on Green Belt land in the setting of Blenheim Palace. The importance of the Green Belt was also made clear in a Heritage Alert raised with ICOMOS by Stop Botley West [REP1-113] which pointed out that *"The proposed development is contrary to the obligations of the WHS Management Plan 2017"*

Very Special Circumstances

The Applicant relies on the urgent need for significant amounts of large-scale energy infrastructure (e.g. NPS EN-1, para 1.1.2) and the substantial weight to be given to this need in assessing applications (e.g. NPS EN-1, para 4.2.6) as well as related policies.

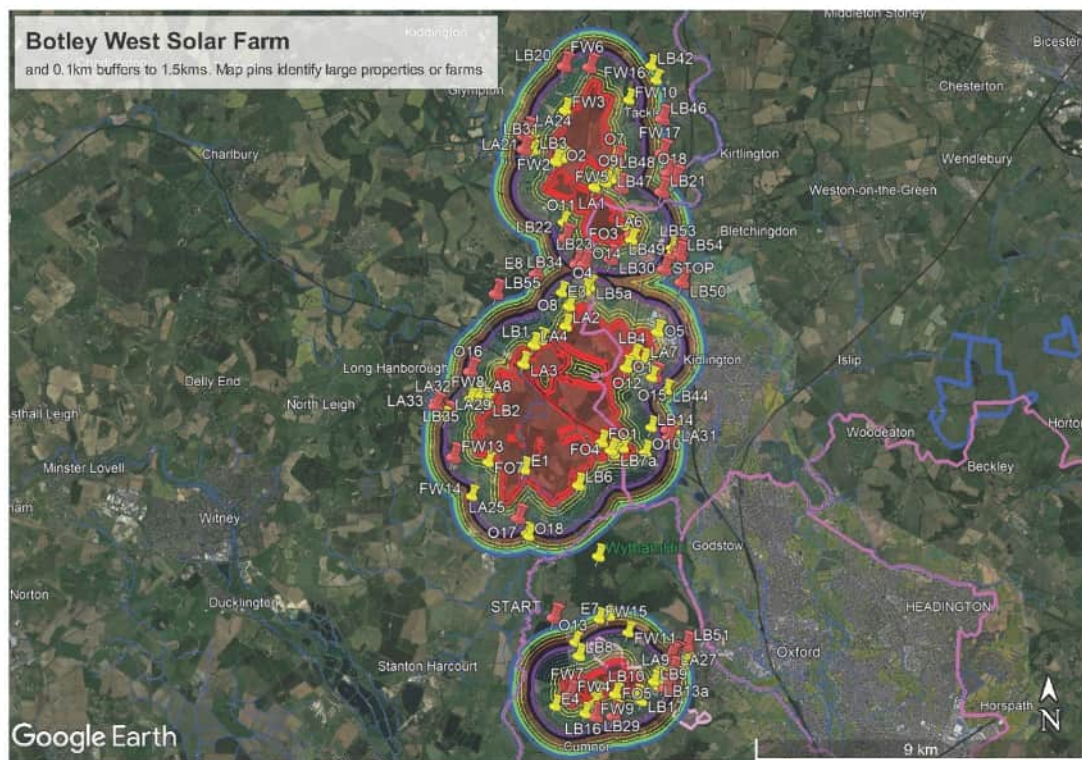
However, the current queue for solar is at 738GW (NESO; <https://www.powersystemsuk.co.uk/neso-opens-evidence-window-to-reform-uk-grid-connection-queue/>). The current Government target for solar is 45-47GW by 2030 and ~70-75GW by 2050. Approximately, 60% of these targets comprised large-scale solar the rest coming from domestic and commercial rooftop (see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/solar-roadmap/solar-roadmap-united-kingdom-powered-by-solar-accessible-webpage>).

This means that despite the substantial weight in favour of solar NSIPs, the U.K. is in a position where targets will be met and exceeded with or without Botley West. This in our opinion lowers the weighting given to any single project and means that the most sustainable projects with respect to renewable energy generation, with the lowest impacts on people and nature can be selected. We point out here that the NGET connection date for Botley West is Q4 2031.

Social and Economic Impacts: proximity of BWSF to Oxford City

Although not mentioned in the Applicant's response to para.7, NPS EN-1 requires Applicants to "consider social and economic effects and including, where relevant, technical and commercial feasibility."

BWSF is unique not just nationally but globally for its proximity to quite so many dwellings. No other solar installation of comparable size on the planet has just under 11,000 properties within 1.5kms of its redline boundary (Map 1) and, significantly, these properties have not been properly assessed for Residential Visual Amenity which belies the claims of the Applicant to have considered Green Belt considerations such as safeguarding the countryside from encroachment or protecting the setting of historic towns in their site selection.



Map 1. BWSF (ver. 1, red outlined area) on a Google Earth image background and with concentric rings (buffers) at increasing distances of 100 metres, out to 1.5kms. The total numbers of houses of different types were counted within each 0.1km buffer. Map 'pins' and labels on the image indicate properties of particular types (large houses, farms etc.). A total of 10,964 dwellings lie within the 1.5kms boundary of BWSF. This number would change only slightly using the ver. 4 map of BWSF.

A recent paper published in the high-impact journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* involved 8.3 million property transactions within 6 miles of solar farms across the USA and found a 7.2% reduction in the value of houses within 0.5 miles of any solar farm (this effect seems to disappear by year +10 of the solar installation's construction, for

reasons that are not clear). (*Impact of large-scale solar on property values in the United States: Diverse effects and causal mechanisms*” by Hu, C. et al (1925), PNAS 122, No. 24¹)

The Applicant continues to deny such an effect exists (on the basis of one non-peer reviewed paper) and points out, correctly, it is not, in any case, a normal planning consideration. But NSIPs do not fall under normal planning laws, and compensation for planning blight – the harmful effects of any proposed NSIP development - must be factored into any DCO application.

Disregard by the Applicant for the impact of BWSF on the local population was also shown by its proposal – apparently serious – when connection to the Cowley substation was being considered, of reaching the substation by digging up the roads to lay cables right the way through the city of Oxford (down the Botley Road, over Carfax – the very centre of town – via the Plain to the Cowley Road and then on to the substation beyond the ring-road). No-one with any regard for the citizens of Oxford would ever consider such a disruptive plan. It is almost as if the historic setting of Oxford doesn’t matter and the local population doesn’t exist.

There was, in any case, a far more obvious route, one that follows exactly the 400kV line from the Southern BWSF site (where the proposed new substation would be built) to the Cowley substation. This route loops to the South of the city and avoids most built-up areas. Since building immediately below 400kV overhead lines is discouraged, the Applicant would have a more or less trouble-free cable run beneath the overhead line all the way to the Cowley substation, at virtually no increase in the total distance involved, and at a considerably reduced cost. Why wasn’t this route even suggested, let alone costed?

Stop Botley West asks the SoS to consider the impacts we have pointed out, that the Applicant has overlooked of BWSF on Blenheim Palace World Heritage Site, flood risk, on Oxford’s Green Belt and on the 11,000 properties within 1.5 kms of the installation, and to take into account the failure of the Applicant to respond to repeated requests for more information (as exemplified by the SoS’s Request for Information, April 2026) or to justify the site selection in regard to these issues when judging the balance between the harms and benefits of the Applicant’s proposal.

¹ <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2418414122>).



Response to Applicant's Answers [C1-087]
to the
Secretary of State's Request for Information

Section 3: Response to answer 24 (a) - (d)

concerning

Landscape and Viisual

Stop Botley West Campaign
15 July 2026

**Stop Botley West Response to Applicant's answers: Questions 24 (a) - (d)
Residential Visual Amenity Assessment.**

Q24 (a)

“Consider and respond to the concerns highlighted by the OHA in Section 2.5 of their Closing Statement in addition to the OHA’s Rule 17 letter”

The shared concerns of the Planning Inspectorate, the Oxfordshire Host Authorities (OHA), ICOMOS, Stop Botley West and many local residents that the conclusions of the LVIA process are simply not credible, remain unaddressed by the Applicant.

Solar farms of this scale should be **strategically** located within large scale, flat, sparsely populated landscapes where the development can be enveloped within a substantial woodland screen belt, providing landscape, visual, bio-diversity and recreational mitigation during operation, whilst creating a permanent environmental asset post decommissioning.

It is difficult, therefore, to envisage a site less suited to a development of this scale and nature.

- 1. “The OHA are concerned that the LVIA is not clear in how it has been used to inform the siting, scale and design of the scheme, including master planning to avoid areas of most significant landscape and visual impacts and how landscape character and visibility have been used to inform the mitigation strategy.” OHA REP7-191***

Rather than using the LVIA to inform the development of the scheme, the Applicant’s site selection and iterative “design/assess/redesign” process has been retrofitted to justify a development which is principally sited within historic estate farmland predominantly in a single ownership. The scheme design has, therefore, been **landlord led rather than landscape led**.

The three constituent solar farm sites and the substation site are all located within an attractive network of valleys which form the dendritic drainage system for the Rivers Dorn, Evenlode and Glyme flowing southwards into the River Thames west of Oxford. As such, the prominent, largely east and west facing valley sides are totally unsuited to the optimum south facing alignment of solar panels, with the north facing slopes proposed for the southern site a particularly egregious example. Panels would either not ‘flow’ parallel to the landform but cut across east/west valley sides - exacerbating both landscape and visual impacts through the aggressive industrialisation of the rural landscape visible and dominate views of north facing slopes from south facing slopes and the valley floor in Cumnor Parish. None of this is identified in the LVIA.

The detailed analysis of the need for panel removal to minimise landscape and heritage impacts, submitted by the OHA in their response to the Rule 17 letter, has not been addressed. Substantial areas of panels remain, e.g. south of Burleigh Wood, east of Pinsley Wood, the elevated valley sides east of Lower Road and the north facing slopes of Cumnor Hill.

The OHA Closing Statement summary [REP7-191] states that the proposed development would result in **significant effects to both Landscape Character and Views**. The

response from the Applicant to IP's and the Inspectors questioning the credibility of the LVIA and the real impact of the loss of countryside, rural character and amenity has focused upon justifying an inappropriately sited and poorly designed scheme, rather than seeking to achieve an acceptable outcome in landscape and visual terms.

The failure to submit an updated LVIA for the 9 June deadline further highlights the inadequacies of the submission - the Applicant stating that they have focussed the time available to '*further embed landscape and visual mitigation*'.

The proposed mitigation offered to increase the residential offsets to a minimum of 100m in lieu of undertaking a new LVIA is an 11th hour knee jerk reaction. The BWSF development cannot be redesigned in an **ad hoc manner** at this late stage in the planning process, particularly **without the basis of a credible LVIA**.

It is unacceptable to address the issue of intolerable visual impact upon residents in isolation from the 'elephant in the room', i.e. the magnitude of landscape impact upon the historic farmland setting to the WHS and the Green Belt, in addition to the visual impacts upon other sensitive receptors, i.e. the millions of tourists who pass through the proposed development sites annually.

2. “The approach and methodology used in the LVIA [PDB-006] underplays the impact of the development. The LVIA assesses the development as not causing significant effects on the landscape character, and with regard to visual effects, no significant effects are anticipated by year 15.” OHA REP7-191

The Applicant's fundamentally flawed assessment process fails to reflect the magnitude of impact a solar farm of this scale would have upon this sensitive, highly valued, historic and richly varied landscape. The development, as proposed, will result in impacts far in excess of its carrying capacity to accommodate change without incurring long term, severe landscape, visual, heritage, ecological and other impacts incapable of effective mitigation.

Specifically, the assessment process is flawed by virtue of:

- Failure to reflect the impact of the **scale of development** proposed upon this landscape through consideration of the **internal cumulative impact**.
- An inherent '**developer bias**' in the assessment of the quality of the baseline landscape and the magnitude of impacts upon the historic estate landscape, the Oxford Green Belt and receptors' view of that landscape. (Ref: SBW PEIR Consultation Response May 2024 [REP2-083].
- The imposition of BWSF, together with the Blenheim Estate planned construction of a further 202 acres of housing (Current Local Plan Review), would result in the loss of approximately one third of the total historic estate farmland in Blenheim's ownership, replacing it with a mixture of housing estates and a semi-industrialised landscape. However, the loss to the northeast of the WHS (c65%) and immediately to the south of the park (c80%) are significantly greater, Ref Figure 1 SBW -ICOMOS Heritage Alert – June 2025 [REP1-113].

- A continued lack of **consistency and underestimation** of visual impact assessments between the text and the tables in Section 8.22 of ES Chapter 8, Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment Rev 4, October 2025 [REP6-012]. The minor changes since Rev 3 do not address these concerns.
- The Applicant's **assertion that the assignment of significance and magnitude are subjective**, and that even professionals may not therefore agree and that, therefore, the most important function of LVIA is the iterative design/assessment/redesign process is without merit. During the Examination process it became apparent that a clear majority of Landscape Architects working on behalf of various Interested Parties were in **agreement** that the LVIA conclusions were questionable..

3. “The OHA are concerned that the proposed mitigation methods such as hedges around Public Rights of Way will fundamentally change the way the landscape and views are appreciated.” OHA REP7-191

The use of dense hedgerows, including reinforced existing hedgerows, if established, whilst screening views of panels in adjacent flat fields, will deny visual receptors the filtered, but expansive views of the open countryside that they currently enjoy for 6 months of the year through existing, more open, traditional hedgerows. This will result in a **fundamental change in landscape character and visual impact**.

Reliance upon this single form of mitigation is totally misplaced given climate change. The increasing likelihood of drier and warmer springs renders the sourcing of sufficient good quality UK grown plants and the establishment of new planting on this scale totally unreliable, as witnessed by recent developments in the area – e.g. Eynsham Park and Ride site, where plant losses are in the region of 50%.

The additional mitigation now proposed comprises increased residential buffers. The offsets proposed in the text to ES Addendum 2 [Ref C1-086] are stated as a minimum of 100m, with the potential for further extension to 250m *‘to craft view corridors responsive to the baseline conditions and people’s visual amenity.’* The reduced area of panels is, therefore, overplayed on plan and the crudely designed residual geometric buffer areas are alien to the field pattern of the historic estate landscape. These are, however, depicted at 250m in width on the change plans in the appendix to ES Addendum 2, and as panel removals on Figures 2.1a – 2.4c - Illustrative Masterplan – Rev 4 [Ref C-051]. These plans are **disingenuous**, in that they overstate the likely panel omissions.

The last paragraph of the Applicant’s response to Q24a suggests further design iteration with the OHA. This proposal is unacceptable given the Applicant’s refusal to engage with IP’s at any stage, in the mistaken belief that the climate emergency overrides all consideration of internationally valued landscape assets comprising the historic setting to Blenheim Palace, the Green Belt setting to the world renowned City of Oxford and the eastern approaches to the Cotswolds National Landscape – the largest National Landscape designated in the UK.

Q24 (b)

“Consider and respond to Interested Parties’ comments received at Deadline 7”

Project scale and visual dominance

No answer to this major concern of numerous Interested Parties is put forward in the Applicant’s response here, which merely defines how scale is measured as well as categorising duration and stating that the effects of the project, although **long term**, would be reversible.

The **vast scale** of the proposed development is not demonstrated on the Applicant’s photomontage images, which are inadequate for a project of this scale and nature. It is SBW’s view that, in accordance with Landscape Institute Guidance Note 06/19, photomontages for a project of this type and magnitude should be prepared to Type 4 quality, i.e. vertical scale of images to be increased by 50%, to more accurately reflect the views from the human eye and perspective.

Residential buffer zone – 25m vs 250m

The offer to increase the buffer distance to residential properties to a minimum of 100m is intended to reduce the visual impact upon residents. The caveat that the appropriate offset will be resolved through **detailed design interrogation** does not reassure that it will be increased up to 250m in most instances. Redesigning this fundamentally ill-conceived development at the Decision Stage, having consistently ignored the concerns of IP’s at all previous stages, is not acceptable.

RVAA methodology and adequacy

(See SBW Response to Question 26 Residential Visual Amenity Assessment.)

LVIA methodology and conclusions disputed

The Applicant acknowledges that the main area of disagreement relates to conclusions on the degree of impact and the methodology for establishing significance. Such conclusions are fundamental to the assessment and are disputed by the majority of IP’s. The Applicant suggests that the LVIA methodology tries to bring objectivity to the assessment process, but – *“given the nature of landscape and visual effects a degree of subjectivity may remain and accordingly divergence among the opinion of landscape professional is commonplace.”* However, during the Hearings it became clear that the consistently underestimated conclusions on the **severity of both landscape and visual impacts** of the proposed development were in conflict with the opinion of the majority of landscape professionals involved in the examination process – including Landscape Architects representing ICOMOS, the three Host Authorities, a number of impacted Parish Councils, the Stop Botley West Group and local residents.

The Applicant asserts that the *“most important function of the LVIA process is not the assignment of significance labels per se, but the role that iterative landscape and visual assessment has played in informing and shaping the proposed development”*. This process, however, has patently not been followed for this development throughout the multiple

consultation periods, whilst the Applicant consistently avoided engaging with the OHA and other Interested Parties in adjusting the design, beyond minor omissions in relation to archaeological sites prior to submission of the DCO and the panel omissions near Bladon and Oxford Airport made at Change Request 2, following pressure from numerous IP's.

The 'blanket' application of new arbitrary buffer zones at this Secretary of State Review Stage is both undemocratic and unacceptable in terms of planning procedure.

Photomontages and viewpoint accuracy

(See SBW response to Question 24c)

Loss of countryside / rural character and amenity.

The Applicant's response to this overwhelmingly important issue fails to address this matter head on and focusses solely upon comments from the Cotswolds National Landscape (CNL). Thereby hoping the 'elephant in the room' will go away – i.e. the massive loss of valued rural historic landscape through the imposition of a semi-industrialised landscape.

Wider IP concerns are said to be covered in the updated Masterplan. The response, however, is limited to the offer of increased buffer zones and the removal of some above ground structures south of Stratford Lane, and will not, as stated serve *"to protect the visual amenity, experience and to maintain rolling countryside views"*. Instead, the proposed dense screening hedgerows will reduce openness and alter the character of the countryside, significantly reducing its amenity and heritage value to both local residents and tourists.

The Applicant, therefore, does not respond to the legitimate concerns expressed by SBW, ICOMOS, the CPRE, the OHA and local residents that there will be a **significant impact on the rural character** of the entire area.

The proposed Botley West Solar Farm is located at the convergence of three international tourism destinations:

- The City of Oxford - 7 million + visitors p.a.
- The Blenheim Palace Estate - 1 million + visitors p.a.
- The Cotswold National Landscape - 16 million + visitors p.a.

The Oxford / Blenheim / Cotswolds tour offer is highly popular with international and national tour operators. These destinations are linked by the quality of their shared rural landscape setting and are sensitive to **any** landscape impacts upon their highly sensitive visual receptors – the tourists who generate well in excess of £1 billion into the local economy.

Thus, whilst the proposed BWSF may not directly impact upon the Cotswold National Landscape, it materially affects its eastern approaches and the setting to this important tourist destination. Equally, tourists approaching the CNL, Blenheim Palace or the City of Oxford by train, coach or flying into Oxford Airport, would pass through or over a semi-industrialised landscape as seen from their elevated viewpoints over perimeter screen hedges. Note – this could be the experience of future high profile international visitors to events, e.g. the 40 number European Heads of State who attended the EPC Summit at Blenheim Palace in July 2024.

The loss of a large part of the internationally significant landscape setting to the Blenheim Palace WHS could **also result in the loss of its WHS status** following the humiliating 2021 de-listing of Liverpool Docks, reinforcing the image of the UK as a nation which does not value its heritage.

Loss of Green Belt openness (visual function)

Similarly, the so-called 'Very Special Circumstances' (VSC) advocated in support of the loss of Green Belt do not justify the exceptional damage BWSF would impose the openness of the Green Belt to the City of Oxford.

Topography – panels on rising land / hillsides

The Applicant states that the nature of ***“the gently undulating landscape is such that it would not be possible or appropriate to screen the Project from all views.”*** This admission demonstrates the fundamental unsuitability of the river valley landscape of the Central site and steep valley sides of the Southern site to absorb a solar farm of this scale (See SBW response to Question 24a). The scheme has patently **not** been *“designed and located in those areas of the landscape considered to be less sensitive to a development of this nature”*, but simply to maximise the development footprint within the ownership of Blenheim Estates, contrary to the Applicant's assertion.

Fencing, CCTV, security infrastructure – visual intrusion, (incl PRow corridor width)

This topic is answered only in terms of the effect upon PRow's. Figure 1 shows the entrance to Blenheim's existing solar farm at Banbury Road, Woodstock. The proposed BWSF entrances to each discrete field similarly have no provision to screen views of the security infrastructure and solar panels (e.g. staggered 'dogleg' entrances). This infrastructure includes wire fencing, cctv cameras, multiple hostile signs, gates, mesh panels and gravel crossovers. If constructed, this 'prison camp' character would be proliferated throughout the 3 areas of the proposed BWSF, further degrading the quality of the rural landscape. The importance of protecting this landscape is set out in Blenheim's own WHS Management Plan 2017, Settings Study, paragraph 5.04 – Managing the Setting:

- ***“The conversion of significant areas of agricultural land for other purposes would detract from the distinctiveness of the setting***
- ***i.e. Large scale development ... (for example industrial development, wind turbines, SOLAR FARMS etc.)”***



Figure 1: View of entrance to Blenheim Estate's existing solar farm off Banbury Road

Substation and ancillary infrastructure – visual impact

The Applicant has not responded to concerns regarding the landscape and visual impacts of the proposed substation in the Thames valley / Oxford Green Belt. This large scale, unsightly industrial facility is sited on the open, rural valley floor and would be overlooked by visitors to Farmoor Reservoir, residents of Cumnor and tourists accessing the western approaches to the City of Oxford.

Construction phase visual disturbance

Similarly, the Applicant does not respond to concerns regarding the visual impacts of construction upon local residents and visiting tourists in particular.

Cumulative visual impacts

The applicant's response to this section (page 68) is not clear, including references to both the RVAA and the setting of heritage assets.

'Temporary' v permanent landscape character change

Contrary to the view of many IP's, the Applicant continues to insist that the Project is **temporary** and therefore that any landscape character change will be temporary. The proposed mitigation planting is assumed to offer long term beneficial effects in terms of biodiversity. However the miles of dense hedgerows proposed will permanently alter the landscape character of the area. Soil structure will be blighted by the engineering works required both for construction and decommissioning, irrevocably damaging centuries of husbandry. To many local residents, a 40 year lifespan for the project equates to a lifetime, whilst two generations of children would grow up during this period. The proposed development is, therefore, considered effectively **permanent**.

Q24 (c)

24c: Confirm whether the visualisations submitted to the Examination are representative and verified in accordance with recognised good practice, including details of viewpoint selection, verification methodology, and any acknowledged limitations.

Viewpoints

The Applicant's response is limited to short summaries of each 'initial consultation' with OHAs in October 2022 referring merely to '*requesting comments regarding viewpoints*' and receiving some additional viewpoint suggestions. This led to 55 viewpoints in the DCO application. There is no indication of compass directions, how accurately the viewpoints were identified, or the extent of any fieldwork.

The Applicant's justification in its response to the RPI for the limited selection is by reference to one or two generalizations in the Landscape Institute Guidance for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment, Edition 3 (GLVIA 3). From the time of Relevant Representations in February 2025 IPs, including SBW, made it clear that the selection was inadequate and not representative of a solar farm with a 110km of security fencing, 35km of footpaths, 156 converter stations and a main and 6 secondary substations, stretching north to south some 11km over varied landscape and topography and affecting 15 villages as well as the setting of a World Heritage Site and including much Green Belt. This could and should have led to a fundamental re-think by the Applicant. However, all that followed were a few additional viewpoints north of Begbroke.

Visualisations

SBW does not believe these were either representative or in accordance with recognised good practice. Worse, the Local Planning Authorities were not involved in the selection of the 33 visualisations from the 55 viewpoints. This is confirmed in three emails from the OHA between 22nd April 2024 and 1st August 2024. Nevertheless the Applicant has repeatedly asserted up to the end of the Examination that the OHA agreed the limited selection of viewpoints for photomontaging.

Not only were the OHA not involved but the limited visualisation selection is contrary both to what was said in the Non-Technical Summary accompanying the DCO Application and what the Applicant stated in correspondence both in April and August 2024. The failure to involve the LPAs also ignored the clear requirement in the PINS Scoping Opinion where at table 7.2 it stated that:

'The Applicant should seek agreement from relevant consultees regarding the appropriateness of selected photomontages and evidence of this agreement should be provided in the DCO application'

At this very late stage the Applicant has now merely stated that: "*the Applicant provided 55 Representative Viewpoints, of which 33 were selected as location for Type 3 photomontage.*"

Regarding the issue of whether the visualisations were in accordance with good practice, the Applicant refers to photomontages being within the requirements described in Para. 4.4 of the LI Technical Guidance Note 06/1 – (presumably 06/19 was intended). Paragraph 4.4 relates to Type 3 visualisations. There is no explanation as to why Type 3 rather than Type 4 was chosen by the Applicant, nor to any consultation with OHAs about this despite the

Landscape Institute Guide's advice that agreement with competent authorities is expected – see references below to paragraphs 3.2 and 3.5.7 of the LI Note below.

At paragraph 1.1 the Guidance Note refers to its aim to help landscape professionals, planning officers and other stakeholders in the selection, production and presentation of type of visualisation appropriate to the to the circumstances in which they will be used. This is followed in paragraph 1.2.2 with the statement: *'it is critical that these visualisations are accurate, objective and unbiased'*, and at 1.2.12: *'any visualisation should reasonably represent the proposal in such a way that people can understand the likely landscape and visual change'*. At 2.3 it refers to the need for 'a reasonable choice of agreed viewpoint locations, view directions, view angles and times of the day' and then at 3.5.7 to 'agreement reached with the competent authority wherever possible'.

Also in paragraph 3.2 under the sub-heading 'Working with the Competent Authority' the Guidance Note states that: *'If landscape and visual issues will be a key issue, submissions of the proposed visualisation approach, suggested viewpoints and a Zone of Theoretical Visibility, will assist in reaching agreement with the competent authority'*.

However the Applicant failed to communicate with, let alone agree with the local authorities either about selecting the viewpoints to be visualised or, it appears, was there any communication over the choice of **Type 3 or Type 4 photomontages**.

Paragraph 3.5.10 of the guidance in Landscape Institute Technical Note TGN 06/19, advises that in choosing the Type of photomontage it is important to consider:

- Contextual Sensitivity and Magnitude and visual effects of the development overall rather than a single location,
- Cost, but this should not override the reasonable requirement for appropriate visualisations,
- Type, size and scale of the development,
- Degree of realism required,
- Nature of development and how best illustrated.

SBW's view is that, based upon these considerations **Type 4 visualisations** clearly should have accompanied the DCO application.

I.e. The visualisations submitted with the LVIA do not give an accurate representation of the severity of the impacts upon either the character of the landscape or visual amenity and are not in accordance with the 5 criteria listed above.

24d

Explain how landscape and visual considerations informed the siting, scale and design of the Proposed Development at the early stages of scheme development, including how mitigation hierarchy has been applied

Introduction

It is key to note the lack of response from the Applicant to consultation feedback during the early stages of the design process. This was commented on during the Examination by most IPs. No discernible changes to the design were made prior to submission of the DCO, despite repeated and consistent verbal and written feedback from consultations, the Local Interest Report etc, whilst any reference or response to consideration of **scale** was lacking from the outset.

The design changes made during Examination were minor and offered in response to the multiple objections raised by Interested Parties and questions from the Inspectors. i.e. these changes were **not** made in response to the rigorous application of the mitigation hierarchy during the site planning and design process, as implied by the Applicant.

SBW cannot therefore agree with the Applicant's assertion in their answer to Q24b that ***"the design process prior to submission was an iterative one, making use of and informed by the mitigation hierarchy"***

4.1 Avoid

The site selection process failed at the outset to identify, inter alia, the significance of this non-designated, but highly valued landscape as the setting to:

- Blenheim Palace WHS
- The Green Belt to the City of Oxford
- The Cotswolds National Landscape
- Numerous Listed Buildings and village Conservation Areas

In addition the proposed site was contrary to the Local Plan policies of all three District Councils, numerous village Neighbourhood Plans, Historic England publications: 'The Setting of Heritage Assets' and Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance for the sustainable Management of the Historic Environment, UNESCO 'Operational Guidelines' and, most bizarrely, **Blenheim's own WHS Management Plan, 2017**.

Together, the landscape, visual, historic, ecological and cultural importance of these **internationally significant assets** should have identified the proposed BWSF site as **inappropriate** for a development of this scale and nature **at the outset**. The scheme has, therefore, been driven solely by land ownership in the face of overwhelming evidence of unsuitability, whilst the refusal to withdraw the scheme or make significant changes to it, have relied upon the Climate Emergency to override any criticism, whilst quoting selective paragraphs from the NPS Guidance.

Although the avoidance of ridgeline zones identified during the LVIA process was identified as a constraint from the outset, prominent slopes and scarps, e.g. to the sides of the Evenlode Valley and Cumnor Hill **were not considered**. NB: The OHA have repeatedly requested removal of these arrays in their response to the Rule 17 Letter and in their Closing Statement [REP7-191]

4.2 Reduce

The Applicant asserts that *"impacts will be reduced as far as possible by a comprehensive designed-in mitigation scheme"*. Any reduction in impact relies upon the retention of existing vegetation and new/ reinforced hedgerows for screening, minimised ground excavations and hardstandings. The reality, however, is that the landscape measures set out on pages 74 and 75 of the Applicant's response are not mitigation, but should be considered obligatory and integral to any development, and are not, therefore, especially noteworthy.

The initial buffer zone proposal of **25m is implied as being generous**, the Applicant stating that *"there is no 'rule' as to what such a buffer should be; instead it is ultimately a matter for professional judgement based on years of experience in the Applicant's landscape and planning team"*.

This minimal buffer zone was only increased to a **minimum** of 100m following pressure from multiple parties, including the Secretary of State. The response here is ambiguous and the buffer, even for sensitive receptors, is likely to be at the minimum distance offered of 100m, rather than the 250m depicted on the plans at ES Change Addendum 2 [REF C1-086] which give an optimistic impression of panel reductions.

Page.76 of the Applicant's response states that ***"A Green Way Plan has been produced, in consultation with the OCC Public Rights of Way (PRoW) Officer, to ensure that the PRoWs are returned to their definitive map route/alignment."***

There is no document called a "Green Way Plan" The "Oxfordshire Rights of Way Management Plan 2015-2025" (now extended to 2029) encourages the development of more PRoW, recognising that "Public rights of way (PRoW) and other local green space and countryside areas are part of Oxfordshire's heritage and landscape."

Equally there is no single "OCC Public rights of Way (PRoW) Officer" with whom the applicant can have had this discussion. There is an OCC Countryside Access Team, which divides up responsibilities according to the current priorities. It seems unlikely that any officer, acting alone would regard any plan as *"ensur[ing] that the PRoWs are returned to their definitive route/alignment"*, given that if the project were to go ahead, it could be 40 years before PRoW could return to their original "route/alignment".

NB: It is also common knowledge that PhotoVolt has not actually built any solar farm for which it has been granted permission, but has sold them on to other companies. So how could PhotoVolt/Solar Five be trusted to "return PRoW to their previous route/alignment"?

The Applicant also claims that *"The Green Way Plan is part of a compensation package to enable improvements to the off-site PRoW network."* They do not put forward any evidence that members of the public feel the need for enhancement of the existing PRoWs. The areas proposed for the Solar Farm are criss-crossed with footpaths (and bridleways) from which people have enjoyed for many years not only health gain from walking but the experience of existing vegetation, and the sound and sight of birds and various other wildlife.

4.3 Mitigate

The inconsistent and minimalist mitigation measures proposed are considered mandatory for such a scheme. The reliance upon hedgerow reinforcement and planting, given the issues now associated with climate change is misplaced (see SBW response to question 24a above).

4.4 Compensate

The list of compensation measures proposed by the Applicant is indicative of an inappropriately sited and poorly designed scheme. In reality the measures proposed will be **insignificant** in relation to the **scale of loss to the rural landscape and visual amenity**

-compared to the scale of the three sites at 900 Ha and the miles of existing footpaths affected.

Updates to the Illustrative Masterplan and application of the mitigation hierarchy

This section largely repeats the Applicant's responses to previous sections, referring to the masterplan to demonstrate how the mitigation hierarchy has been applied. The mitigation measures are repeated and more detail is given on the proposed 250m buffer. However, the "generosity" of this is cast into doubt at several points:

The applicant acknowledges *"that there are a number of locations where principal views from residential properties extend beyond the immediate 100m setting and remain sensitive to change. In these circumstances, the updated Illustrative Masterplan has been designed to accommodate additional offsets extending beyond the baseline 100m offset. These further offsets are proposed to be subject to discussion **such extensions may extend up to 250m in the most sensitive locations** and are focussed on protecting important view corridors where additional separation is required to further reduce potential visual effects."* This text is not reflected on the updated Illustrative Masterplan itself, which shows blanket offsets at 250m, giving a false impression of the reduction in panels.

Additionally the Applicant states that *"the final extent of any enhanced offsets extending beyond 100m will be informed through a combination of further landscape and visual analysis, **additional field work** and ongoing consultation with the OHA."*

Fieldwork, in the form of visiting affected properties and talking to residents, has been lacking until now – a fact noted during the Examination Hearings, as being **a severe defect in the design process**.

The Applicant implies that the proposed increased offsets demonstrate *"the extent to which residential visual amenity considerations have influenced the evolution of the updated Illustrative masterplan and the application of the mitigation hierarchy."*

These concessions have been reluctantly made by the Applicant **post** the Examination Hearings. The applicant's statement that *"the evolution of the proposed development has not been limited to the introduction of mitigation measures but has included the removal and reconfiguration of substantial areas of development in response to environmental constraints and stakeholder feedback"* is, therefore, disingenuous.

In their conclusion to this section, the Applicant quotes NPS EN-1 paragraphs 5.10.5 and 5.10.13 to justify their position that the presence of landscape and visual impacts should not preclude granting of consent to NSIPs. This defeatist admission being principally a consequence of inappropriate site selection and a flawed LVIA process.



Response to Applicant's Answers [C1-087]
to the
Secretary of State's Request for Information

Section 5: Response to answers 26-27

concerning

Residential Visual Amenity Assessment

Stop Botley West Campaign

15 July 2026

Stop Botley West's Response to the Applicant's Answers to the Secretary of State's Questions 26 and 27 on Residential Visual Amenity Assessment (RVAA)

The two questions under consideration ask the Applicant to consider and confirm:

Q26: whether an updated RVAA is required; and

Q27: whether it would be feasible to undertake a property-by-property assessment of residential visual amenity for dwellings within 250m of the edge of any part of the proposed operational solar array.

Q26 — Whether an Updated RVAA Is Required

The Applicant did not submit an updated RVAA on 9 June and instead seeks to shift the blame for this failure onto the Secretary of State's refusal to extend the 9 June deadline, stating that it acted *"In the absence of additional time to be able to refresh its RVAA submission."* This explanation is disingenuous, for three reasons:

1. The RVAA requires far more than a mere "refresh."
2. The absence of an updated RVAA is entirely of the Applicant's own making. Its obfuscation throughout — and indeed before — the Examination (set out in the timeline below) has inevitably brought matters to this point, where its time has now run out.
3. Interested Parties, including the owners of the most heavily impacted properties, have not even been given the opportunity to comment on, or receive a response to, the incomplete RVAA submitted at the very end of the Examination.

As the Secretary of State himself notes at Question 26, the Applicant submitted an RVAA [REP6-064, REP6-065] late in the Examination and revised it further at Deadline 7 [REP7-042]. That late submission denied Interested Parties any opportunity to comment on the updated assessment, and the Applicant did not even respond to Interested Parties' comments on the Deadline 6 RVAA in its Deadline 8 closing statements.

In the absence of a complete and accurate RVAA by the 9 June deadline, the Secretary of State does not have sufficiently reliable information on which to reach a decision. Given the importance of this issue, that fact alone is sufficient reason to refuse the DCO application. To accept the status quo as sufficient enough to make a decision opens up any decision by the Secretary of State to legal challenge.

Q27 — Whether a Property-by-Property Assessment Is Feasible

The Examiners called for a 250m buffer for all properties precisely because no RVAA existed, and a properly completed RVAA would necessarily have included a property-by-property assessment. As matters stand, the Applicant had not entered the curtilage of a single property by 9 June to assess visual impact. The Applicant again cites the refusal of an extension as the cause of this failure; the true cause is set out in our response to Q26 above.

The published Masterplan [C1-051], on which the Applicant relies heavily in many of their answers to the Secretary of State shows a 250m buffer in several areas. Crucially, it remains the only document on which a legally adequate consultation has taken place before the ExA.

The Applicant states that its buffer choice has been *"informed by additional landscape analysis, as explained at paragraph 24(d), and balanced against the need to retain scheme viability."* We repeat and rely upon our response to Question 24(d) in our Landscape submission..

Of even greater concern is the Applicant's stated intention to introduce a "Residential Visual Amenity Plan" (RVAP), to be secured under new Requirement 15, "with appropriate assessment and justification, for approval by the relevant planning authority" after the DCO is granted in which the minimum buffer proposed is 100m not the 250m shown in the Masterplan. This is totally

against the spirit and purpose of an examination. Requirement 15 as drafted states a buffer of “no less than 100m and must not exceed 250m”. This minimum of 100m contradicts the 250m minimum shown on the masterplan and cannot be accepted.

The RVAP is wholly unacceptable, for the reasons set out below under “The Residential Visual Amenity Plan (RVAP),” and the outstanding work must be completed before any DCO is granted. The DCO should not be granted at this time; the Applicant must be required to resubmit once the missing work has been done.

Above all, to accept this approach would result in a precedent that will be followed by future applicants for a DCO.

Timeline — Evidence of Missed Opportunities for an RVAA

The Applicant resisted completing an RVAA until three weeks before the end of the Examination, despite being asked throughout the Examination by the Examiners to undertake one. To summarise what has taken place to date it is necessary to state the following.

- The need for an RVAA was first raised by the ExA in its Scoping Opinion [APP-126, 6.5 ES – Appendix 4.2 Scoping Opinion] on **23 July 2023**, at ID3.2.3, table 7.3, where the ExA advised that, in the absence of LVIA conclusions, the Inspectorate did not agree to scope out an RVAA at that time, and that the need for an RVAA should be justified by reference to the conclusions of the LVIA in the ES and agreed with the relevant consultation bodies.
- The Applicant’s response, at 6.3 ES Chapter 8 Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (**2 December 2024**), stated that the need for an RVAA would be determined through the outcome of the ES and further consultation, and that residential properties (predominantly individual farmsteads) in proximity to the Project had been identified as part of the iterative design process.
- On **10 June 2025**, at Q1.14.4 [Ref: PD-008], the Examiners reminded the Applicant of the need for a more in-depth assessment in accordance with the four-step methodology in Landscape Institute Technical Guidance Note 2/19.
- The Applicant’s reply at Deadline 2, **1 July 2025** [Ref: REP2-025], asserted that *“Due to the low level of the Project and proposed mitigation, it is anticipated that there is no potential for any private views to be adversely affected to an extent that would result in a level of effect, which would trigger the requirement for RVAA.”*
- On **30 July 2025**, at ExQ2.13.15 [Ref: PD-012], the Examiners required evidence to support that assertion and asked the Applicant to respond to representations made by OHA’s consultants on the methodology underlying the assumption that an RVAA was not required, which properties had initially been considered, what mitigation had already been undertaken since public consultation, which properties might have residual effects, and what further mitigation was proposed.
- The Applicant’s reply at **Deadline 4, 22 August 2025** [Ref: REP4-037], stated that individual and groups of properties closest to the Project had been “looked at on a case-by-case basis” during the iterative design process as part of an analysis of buffer zones, with account taken of existing boundary vegetation, and identified only 18 properties/groups for consideration. That “looked at” did not include a single site visit: the analysis was a desktop exercise using maps and Google Earth only, with no ground-level photography.
- At **Deadline 6, on 20 October 2025**, the Applicant produced its first RVAA [REP6-064 and REP6-065]. In its Rule 17 Letter of 23 October 2025 [PD-018], the ExA identified ten errors and omissions in that RVAA and challenged its methodology, including the failure to consider views from upper-storey windows, gardens and curtilages, and the failure to justify the 75m buffer proposed in the Applicant’s “without prejudice” offer. Several Interested

Parties, including the OHA [REP7-191] and Cumnor Parish Council [REP7-077], separately identified further properties omitted from the assessment.

- In the same **Rule 17 Letter**, the ExA proposed a new requirement: “There shall be a distance of no less than 250 metres between the edge of any part of the proposed operational solar array and any residential dwellinghouse (as measured from the curtilage of any private residential property or address), unless otherwise demonstrated to be acceptable in writing to the satisfaction of the relevant local authority, such satisfaction to be given formally in writing subject to Schedule 16 of this Order.”
- At **Deadline 7, on 10 November 2025**, the Applicant submitted its final Updated RVAA [REP7-042]. Once again, no site visits were made within the curtilage of any property. Ground-level photographs were included for the first time, but all were directed inward toward the properties rather than outward to show the view experienced by residents. Significant errors and omissions remained, particularly in the assessment of “existing vegetation” as screening.
- Of approximately 42 properties considered [table 2], only 24 were assessed [table 4], and only seven were found to experience significant effects at Year 1, with none at Year 7. Despite these deficiencies, the Applicant maintained its previous conclusion: *“Based on the assessment and professional judgement, it is considered that there are no residential properties that are to be considered for Step 4 of the RVAA. It is considered that the effects resulting from the Project would fall below the Residential Visual Amenity Threshold referred to in LI TGN 2/2019 as visual effects ‘of such nature and/or magnitude that it potentially affects “living conditions” or Residential Amenity’ (Paragraph 2.1).”*

The OHA rejected this conclusion. Its Local Impact Report had already identified flaws in the Applicant’s methodology for assessing whether the RVAA threshold was met — a methodology that has not since changed. In the absence of a robust LVIA methodology and evidence-based assessment from the Applicant, the RVAA’s conclusions cannot be relied upon. Moreover, the “final” RVAA was submitted only three days before the end of the Examination, denying Interested Parties any opportunity to respond to what is the most serious issue in this Application.

The Applicant failed to submit any further update to the RVAA in its **9 June 2026 submission** responding to the Secretary of State’s letter of 10 April 2026 (as revised on 26 April 2026). The Secretary of State was right to refuse the Applicant’s request for an extension to September 2025 to complete work that had been outstanding for nearly two years.

Conclusion

This timeline demonstrates that the absence of a complete and accurate RVAA is entirely the result of the Applicant’s obfuscation. The Secretary of State does not have the information required to make a fair and balanced decision on this issue.

The Residential Visual Amenity Plan (RVAP)

In a last-ditch attempt to secure the DCO, the Applicant has produced updated Masterplans [C1-051] showing 250m buffers for some, but not all, impacted properties, creating the false impression that this is what is actually being offered. This is disingenuous: in truth, the offer is entirely provisional upon the Applicant’s newly proposed Residential Visual Amenity Plan (RVAP) [Ref: C1-082], set out in Schedule 2, Requirement 15, under which buffers of between a “minimum of 100m and a maximum of 200m” would be fixed on a property-by-property basis only after the DCO is granted.

In its answer to Q29, paragraph 5, the Oxfordshire Host Authorities (OHA) stated:

“A detailed assessment (including site visits to each impacted property) needs to be carried out in order to determine the level of impact. The level of harm of these

residual impacts would then need to be considered against the benefits of the scheme.”

Given this, the OHA does not accept that the impacts on Residential Visual Amenity can be left until after the scheme has been consented; they must instead form part of the Secretary of State’s weighing and balancing exercise when determining the application. Paragraphs 8 to 17 of the OHA’s response set out in detail why the RVAP is impractical in terms of time, resources and expertise, and why it would preclude public scrutiny.

We endorse the OHA’s position in full and submit that the RVAP must not be permitted, for the following reasons:

1. **It is unlawful and makes a mockery of the consenting procedures.** Interested Parties, including impacted residents, would have no opportunity to respond after Acceptance. This mirrors the very concern the Secretary of State himself raised in refusing the extension, namely that such an approach “undermines confidence in, and the integrity of, the planning process” and “may also give rise to concerns of fairness.”
2. **It improperly shifts the burden of work.** The Applicant has had ample opportunity to complete this work during the Examination, at its own expense. That burden must not now be transferred to the Local Authorities. The scale, scope and costs of this future work has not, and indeed cannot, be calculated at this time. What recourse will there be for the local authorities who will now be faced with this extra work to come.
3. **It is unworkable and costly.** By the Applicant’s own admission, around 330 properties lie within 250m of the site. The OHA, while agreeing that property-by-property assessments are necessary, has confirmed that this work cannot be completed post-Acceptance given the constraints on time, resources and expertise.

Conclusion

The Applicant’s scheme for a post-consent Residential Visual Amenity Plan is neither fair, workable nor democratic. It has been rejected as unworkable by the very body — the OHA — that would have to administer it. It sets a dangerous precedent for future proposals that will now see a way of postponing significant work to a later stage in order to circumvent the consenting regime. Permitting this approach would bring the planning process into disrepute nationally. We call on the Secretary of State to protect Interested Parties from this conduct by a developer that, despite its denials, is likely to sell its interest and exit the project as soon as a DCO is granted.

Feedback from Impacted Property Owners

Between April and October 2025, Stop Botley West (SBW) conducted in-person visits to more than 80 impacted properties, entering the curtilage of over 30. We have spoken directly with residents, entered their homes and gardens, and taken photographs. We have not been granted access to tenanted properties owned by Blenheim Estates.

Because the Applicant submitted no updated RVAA by the 9 June deadline in response to the Secretary of State’s request for information, we have independently assessed the accuracy of the Applicant’s most recent RVAA, submitted at Deadline 7 on 10 November 2025 [REP7-042 and REP7-043].

We contacted around 30 residents at the most impacted properties, including some never selected for assessment by the Applicant. We asked them to review the Applicant’s description and assessment (where one exists) of their property in the Deadline 7 RVAA and to answer a series of questions on the position as at 10 November 2025. Many property owners will also submit their own responses by 16 July 2026.

The results are set out in the tables below, beginning with a summary table. The properties listed are those we have been able to contact since 9 June 2025; other impacted properties are not included. Those listed nonetheless include most of the properties closest to the redline boundary, other than those owned by the site's majority landowner, Blenheim Estate.

Findings:

- No property received an RVAA site visit (a small number received visits relating to Land Rights or Ecology only).
- No photograph was taken from within the curtilage looking outward from the property.
- Several properties within 50–100m of the site were omitted from the assessment entirely.
- The most frequently recurring factual inaccuracies were: (i) errors in assessing the orientation of the house, windows and/or main outlook; and (ii) errors in assessing the extent of existing vegetation and screening.

Most seriously, the Applicant's assessment wrongly assumes that existing vegetation partially or fully shields every property, despite no visit or on-site inspection having been carried out. A selection of photographs and visualisations demonstrating these errors is attached.

Conclusion

The Applicant's assessments are deeply flawed: inaccurate, incomplete and insufficiently verified, as this survey demonstrates. The Secretary of State must therefore consider whether he has been provided with sufficiently reliable environmental information to lawfully determine this aspect of the application. On the evidence before him, he has not.

Appendix A. Survey Results

1. Summary of Impacted Properties Survey	Yes	No	Partial	Not assessed	Total
Did PVDP visit for an RVAA?	0	28			28
Did SBW visit for an RVAA?	28	0			28
Was your property considered for assessment (table 2 of RVAA)	21	7			28
Was your property assessed (table 4 of RVAA)	12	16			28
Do you have existing screening above 1.5m *	0	21	7		28
Does the assessment claim screening exists now	18	0	3	7	28
Are there other factual inaccuracies	20	1		7	28
Is future mitigation proposed	7	14		7	28
Do issues remain unresolved.	28	0			28
	Away (out)	Toward (in)	None taken		Total
If a photograph was taken did it look away/towards the house	0	18	10		28
Note: Five of the survey responses are from properties representing others with much the same outlook in the same road. This gives a total of 51 additional, similarly impacted properties.					

2. Impacted Properties Survey, North	Shipton Slade Farmhouse	Amhurst Cottage	Reeves Cottage	Guinea Fowl Cottage	Dornford Cottage	Hordley House	Samsons Cottage
Village	Shipton Slade				Wootton		
Did PVDP visit for an RVAA?	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Did SBW visit for an RVAA?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Distance to panels from property	50	25	25	25	60	70	160
Was your property considered for assessment (table 2 RVAA)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Was your property assessed (table 4 of RVAA)	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
If a photograph was taken did it look out from/ in to the house	None	In	In	In	In	In	In
Do you have existing screening above 1.5m	No	No	No	No	No	Partial	No
Does the assessment claim screening exists now	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Are there other factual inaccuracies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Is future mitigation proposed	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Do issues remain unresolved.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

3. Impacted Properties Survey - Centre	Village End	Hall Farm Paddocks	Barrow Ct (8 props)	Williams Ct (5 props)	Farways, Yarnton Rd	The Elms, Yarnton Rd	Eynsham Rd (25 props)
Village	Begbroke		Cassington				
Did an RVAA visit happen	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Distance to panels from property	190	240	50	120	25	25	100
Was your property considered for assessment (table 2 RVAA)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Was your property assessed (table 4 of RVAA)	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
If a photograph was taken did it look out from/ in to the house	In	None	In	In	None	None	None
Do you have existing screen above 1.5m	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Does the assessment claim screening exists now	Yes	Not assessed	Yes	Yes	Not assessed	Not assessed	Not assessed
Are there other factual inaccuracies	Yes	Not assessed	No	Yes	Not assessed	Not assessed	Not assessed
Is future mitigation proposed	No	Not assessed	Yes	Yes	Not assessed	Not assessed	Not assessed
Do issues remain unresolved.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Note: The Barrow Ct, Williams Ct and Eynsham Rd assessments represent 8, 5 and 25 other properties respectively							

4. Impacted Properties Survey - Centre	New Barn Farmhouse	The Stables	The Paddocks	College Farm	Pelican House	Goose Eye Farm	Long Down Cottage
Village	Church Hanborough						
Did PVDP visit for an RVAA?	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Did SBW visit for an RVAA?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Distance to panels from property	100	150	170	25	25	25	220
Was your property considered for assessment (table 2 RVAA)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Was your property assessed (table 4 of RVAA)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
If a photograph was taken did it look out from/ in to the house	In	None	None	In	In	In	None
Do you have existing screen above 1.5m	Partial	No	No	No	No	Partial	No
Does the assessment claim screening exists now	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partial	Not assessed
Are there other factual inaccuracies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Not assessed
Is future mitigation proposed	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Not assessed
Do issues remain unresolved.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

5. Impacted Properties Survey - Centre/South	Heath Lane (3 props)	Burleigh House	Grove Rd (10 props)	Lake View House	Heidersbach	Upper Whitely Farm	Jumpers Farm
Village	Bladon (centre)			Cumnor (South)			
Did PVDP visit for an RVAA?	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Did SBW visit for an RVAA?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Distance to panels from property	100	40	140	150	160	200	50
Was your property considered for assessment (table 2 RVAA)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Was your property assessed (table 4 of RVAA)	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
If a photograph was taken did it look out from/ in to the house	In	In	None	In	In	None	None
Do you have existing screening above 1.5m	No	No	No	No	Partial	Partial	Partial
Does the assessment claim screening exists now	Yes	Yes	Not assessed	Partial	Partial	Not assessed	Yes
Are there other factual inaccuracies	Yes	Yes	Not assessed	Yes	Yes	Not assessed	Yes
Is future mitigation proposed	No	No	Not assessed	No	No	Not assessed	No
Do issues remain unresolved.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Note: The Grove Rd and Heath Lane assessments represent 3 and 10 other properties respectively							

Appendix B - Site Photographs

Site Photographs - North

Dornford Cottage.



Comments

Vegetation located along the northern and eastern boundaries of this property filters direct and oblique views to the northeast from side elevations of this property.



Burley Wood, Slade Farm
Date of photographs: 14/10/2022

P17 - Dornford Cottage, located to the north of the B4027

Residential properties survey
Figure: 2.17

Applicant's dark photo taken towards the house claims "*vegetation filters views*". SBW's photos look outwards from the garden of the house across an open fence onto fields proposed for panels with 40m.



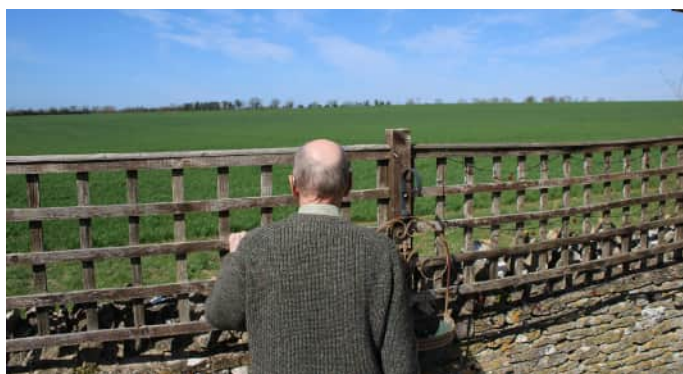
View to NE from a property on Dornford Lane



Wootton Dornford Cottage looking SE

Amhurst Cottage and others in Shipton Slade Hamlet

These properties were not taken forward for assessment because the Applicant says "*There are no windows located west facing near elevations of these properties.*" but they have overlooked the gardens. At SBW's visit, the owner of Amhurst Cottage was in his well tended and frequently enjoyed garden looking towards the panel area



Site Photographs - Central

College farm.

SBW photos taken from inside the house looking east. Photomontage shows panel placements to the horizon.



Examples of SBW Photos of other properties - not considered by the Applicant for assessment.

Both properties have open fences and panels originally planned on two sides within 25-40m

Burleigh House, Bladon (considered but not assessed)



Farways, Yarnton Rd, Cassington (omitted)



Site Photographs - South

Lake View House and Heidersbach

P31 - Cumnor Road looking towards Lakeview, Heiderbech, and Tumbledowns		
	Lakeview	Heiderbech
Comments Lakeview and Heiderbech have some mature trees but largely open elevated views to the north.		
 	Botley West Solar Farm Date of photographs: 14/10/2025	P27, P28, and P29 - Driveways to Lakeview, Heiderbech, and Tumbledowns

It is not clear why the Applicant includes photos looking along their drives towards two of the Cumnor properties. In their assessment Applicant agrees “*largely open elevated views to the north*” but their assessment says

“with the land falling away from these properties, the Project southern section would be below the eyeline of views available from them. With views to Farmoor Reservoir and higher ground to the north remaining the predominant feature. The small part of the Project visible would not form a prominent feature in the view.”

The SBW photo, taken in summer from within the property’s ground over the low fence in the foreground shows the extensive view across open land falling steeply away to the North. All fields between nearest and furthest hedge would contain panels. The second SBW picture, taken last winter, looks North-West and includes Farmoor Lake and SSSI Wythan wood. The substation would also be near the lake (exact location still undecided).





Response to Applicant's Answers [C1-087]
to the
Secretary of State's Request for Information

Section 7: Response to answers 33-38 & 42-43

concerning

Ecology, oLEMP and Protected Species

Stop Botley West Campaign
15 July 2026

Stop Botley West Response to the Applicant's Answers to the Secretary of State's Questions 33-35 on Ecology and Biodiversity and Questions 42-43 on Protected Species

Secretary of State's Question

33. The OHA and the Berks Bucks Oxon Wildlife Trust have raised the issue of habitat loss for breeding skylark throughout examination [REP5-125, RR-0098 REP7-191]. The Secretary of State observes that the Skylark Technical Note [REP4-037] indicates that the Proposed Development site could potentially support 33.19 skylark territories. The 2024 surveys (APP-159) record 228 territories. If impacts to breeding skylark cannot be mitigated on site, the Applicant is requested to provide a Skylark Compensation Strategy providing off-site habitat to compensate for the net loss of breeding skylark. The strategy should be developed in collaboration with the OHA, and include details of long-term management, monitoring, reporting, and data-sharing. Compensation should not incorporate areas within the array, or areas owned by third parties unaffiliated with the Project. The Applicant is requested to provide drafting to secure this Strategy within the dDCO and relevant control documents.

Applicant Response

The Applicant proposes the following:

- Establish a baseline of average number of skylark breeding territories based on a third year of surveys (completed by July, 2026).
- To establish the number of territories that are supported within the Botley West Development area not covered by solar panels and associated with the following features: grassland, greater than 50m from hedgerows, trees or solar infrastructure. The project aims to uplift Skylark numbers in these areas.
- To establish compensatory skylark areas outside the site which are then managed to enhance skylark numbers through measures such as moving from winter-sown crops to spring-sown crops or to convert the land to meadows with other management measures related to grassland maintenance and prevention of grazing from April to July. In addition, the provision of skylark plots in winter-sown crops.

Stop Botley West Response

It is well understood that skylark numbers, along with those of other British and European farmland birds have declined significantly. DEFRA, updated the Accredited Official Statistics Wild bird populations in the UK and England, 1970 to 2024 on the 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 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.

The decline in skylarks has been attributed to intensification of farming which has resulted in a decrease in favourable crops (e.g. spring-sown crops) and an increase in unfavourable habitat (winter-sown crops, oilseed rape, intensively managed or grazed grassland; Chamberlein and Siriwardena, 2000; Rahman et al., 2012; Blösch et al 2025). The impact of solar arrays on skylarks has been poorly studied although a recent Master's thesis (Secker, 2024) indicated that no skylark nests were identified within 28 solar parks across the U.K.

although they may provide foraging areas for farmland birds. This included skylarks which may bring food from solar arrays to nestlings or recently fledged chicks located adjacent to solar parks (but see below; Secker, 2024).

Stop Botley West objects to a number of aspects of the Applicants proposed skylark compensation strategy:

Baselines: The Applicant is proposing to base the extent of compensation on an average of three years, given the large differences in nesting skylark numbers (72 in 2023 and 228 in 2024). Adding another year's data to these observations will not substantially improve the estimation of average numbers of breeding territories held by skylarks in the area. This is likely to depend on the type of arable cropping or grazing undertaken and patterns of weather during the year. Instead, we would suggest a more precautionary approach would be to take the highest number of territories over the three years and use this as the baseline on which to calculate necessary compensation. This is a more conservative approach, but given the decline of skylarks nationally, a more appropriate approach to compensation.

Within site uplift: The Applicant aims to estimate the number of skylark territories within the site (redline) by identifying areas:

- greater than 50m from hedgerow, tree, woodland and solar infrastructure (including fence lines) (i.e. area is away from any location where avian predators may perch);
- grassland habitat;
- >16m² in area; and
- within an area of grassland >5ha in overall size

We note that according to Government guidance AHW4: Skylark Plots (<https://www.gov.uk/find-funding-for-land-or-farms/ahw4-skylark-plots>) 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). We note that the Applicant's Skylark Compensation Strategy fails to include the case where compensation areas are bounded by trees which require an area of grassland of >10ha. This is also important given the impact of fragmentation of grassland on skylark territories (see below).

For the area mapped as suitable for skylarks within the redline a high density of territories is assumed as a result of management measures to enhance skylark numbers (e.g. management of crop heights to be optimal for skylark nesting and other measures outlined in Table 11.1 of the OLEMP as well as the provision of skylark plots in solar arrays). First, we note that skylark plots or strips are a tried and tested method of maintaining skylark breeding territories within arable fields. However, their use in solar arrays is untested and may risk higher predation rates of foraging skylarks.

We also note that there are contradictions between the measures outlined to enhance skylark territory densities between Table 11.1 in the OLEMP and measures outlined in Section 5 of the Outline Skylark Compensation Strategy (Doc. Ref. EN010147/APP/20.4). For example, the OLEMP states that grazing will be reduced to avoid trampling of skylark nests, whereas in EN010147/APP/20.4 it states that "Grassland grazing will be shut up between April and July". Presumably these measures should be the same whether the compensatory land is inside or outside the redline and measures should be consistent between the Outline Skylark Compensatory Strategy and OLEMP. Further, we do not understand why the observations used to estimate skylark breeding territories in the project

area as a whole based on surveys in 2023, 2024 and 2025/2026 cannot be used to give the maximum number of annually observed territories in areas within the redline but outside the array areas, since these data have been collected. This would seem a more accurate measure than an area-based estimate based on high skylark occupation.

Offsite provision: We find the approach used to estimate the numbers of skylark territories in offsite land very approximate. Rather than relying on surveys the Applicant will use Fox (2022) to estimate the number of territories prior to management measures to improve the land for skylark occupation and then again to estimate the number of territories with management measures in place. Simply stating that such measures “can double the skylark territory density” is not good enough. These measures, and the land area on which they are implemented must be adaptive and must respond to direct evidence of their effectiveness through the comparison of post development monitoring results with a baseline survey for these areas. As stated in the preceding paragraph, the management measures to improve skylark occupation in the Outline Skylark Compensatory Strategy contradict those in the OLEMP. Furthermore, it is important that the recommendations in Government guidance AHW4: Skylark Plots (<https://www.gov.uk/find-funding-for-land-or-farms/ahw4-skylark-plots>) are followed and 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, as well as being greater than 50m from hedgerow, tree, woodland and solar infrastructure (including fencelines) and >16m² in area.

Avoiding fragmentation of such compensation areas is extremely important as work on restoration of brownfield sites for skylarks has demonstrated that as well as mean vegetation height, the size of sites was a significant predictor of the number of skylark territories (Rahman et al., 2012). The presence of woodland in or bordering grasslands can also reduce skylark numbers presumably because of the interactions with predators (Rahman et al., 2021). Furthermore, we note that countermeasures, such as set asides or land managed for conservation often cover insufficient area for compensation and are considered high-risk habitats (especially for breeding), as predators are also increasingly attracted to them (see Blösch et al., 2025 and Refs. therein). We also find that the contention in EN010147/APP/20.4, that skylarks are capable of raising four broods of chicks a year is an over-optimistic statement of the capability of single territories to contribute to overall population numbers. Observations suggest up to three broods per year (less in unfavourable habitat) and that a number of these broods are often lost to predation or other forms of mortality (e.g. Chamberlain and Siriwardena, 2000 and Refs. therein).

So, overall, whilst many of the skylark compensation measures are based on observed effects of compensatory measures in arable land and grassland we find that the Outline Skylark Compensation Strategy is deficient in several areas, experimental in aspects of approach, contradictory to Table 11.1 of the OLEMP to which it refers and in need of a clearly stated monitoring and adaptive management strategy (clearly stated responses if the compensatory measures fail) which is lacking. However, all of this is hearsay given that as with many other aspects of the Applicant's responses to the SoS, the details of the actual skylark compensation measures are kicked beyond the granting of the DCO which means that it is likely to lack public consultation and scrutiny.

Cumulative Impacts: The Applicant has chosen to ignore the cumulative impacts on skylarks of two solar power station projects immediately adjacent to its southern site DCO redline: the proposed NGET substation and the 49MWe Red House Farm solar power station application, subject to a current PINS appeal (PINS REF 6009163).

Thus the southern sites' skylarks are to be expected by this Applicant and the Red House Farm applicant to simultaneously swap fields to an assumed untouched adjacent habitat that sits within the other's redline, while being attacked by predators taking advantage of the lofty viewpoints afforded by NGET's 15m high and 75m long substation, the Applicant's own substation and PCS units, and the extensive deer proof fencing and CCTV towers.

If the Applicant had set out to actively reduce skylark populations in the Farmoor Valley – a area notably rich in skylark habitat for foraging, roosting and breeding - it would have been hard pushed to make better proposals.

As an attempt to maintain – or heaven forbid enhance - skylark populations the proposals are negligent and unacceptable.

Finally, 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 starling. Overall, we agreed with the OHAs during the Examination 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 during the Examination 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 Listed 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).

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.

Failure to present a comprehensive and effective strategy to mitigate impacts on farmland birds by the Botley West Solar Power Station would be a failure of the SoS's and Government's national and international commitments to protect wildlife. Just this month the UK Government's new Planning and Infrastructure Bill has drawn criticism from the European Union, which warns that the reforms could jeopardise the UK's trade relationship with the bloc. The core issue lies in a perceived weakening of environmental and habitat protections, which may conflict with "level playing field" obligations under the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA). We note that although this refers to wider legislation regarding development it is relevant here because it notes increasing international concern at the lack of effective protections for nature within the U.K. These concerns are justified based upon statistics which demonstrate the continued decline of species such as farmland birds and bats.

Secretary of State's Question

34. The Secretary of State requests that the Applicant provides further information regarding the wintering and breeding bird monitoring protocol proposed in the Outline Landscape Ecological Management Plan ("oLEMP"). The Secretary of State requests that the oLEMP be updated to include the wintering and breeding bird survey methods, survey programmes,

timescales for the monitoring/monitoring reports to be delivered, and relevant parties to whom the reports will be provided.

Applicant's Response

The Applicant proposes breeding and wintering bird surveys according to a walking transect method as outlined in the OLEMP sections 12.11.2 and 12.11.3 broadly following the survey areas set out in the baseline Wintering Bird Survey Report at ES Appendix 9.10 [APP-159] and Breeding Bird Survey Report at ES Appendix 9.9 [APP-158]. These surveys will be undertaken in years 1,2,4,6 and 10 and every five years thereafter and results reported to the local Planning Authority, Natural England and BBOWT.

Stop Botley West Response

The methods previously employed for bird surveys and outlined here are effective for large area surveys and have revealed the rich diversity of farmland birds present in the area of the proposed Utility Scale Solar power Station.

We request that the SoS asks for these surveys to be extended to offsite areas used in the Outline Skylark Compensation Strategy as these are not explicitly included in the OLEMP or in the Applicant's response to Q34.

Finally, and contrary to the OHA's position during the Examination phase that a comprehensive farmland bird strategy should be developed (e.g. **REP5-125**), not just including skylarks but also the other declining species, the Applicant has chosen not to submit compensation measures for other farmland birds that are in decline.

For example, IUCN Red List birds recorded in the Southern site by the Applicant, such as starling, linnet and yellow hammer require the existing mosaic of habitats within the Farmoor valley's farmland and the adjacent Local Wildlife sites. These and overwintering birds and waterfowl that graze these fields next to the Farmoor reservoir and its Local Wildlife Sites rely on cropping as a food source. These forms of connectivity between species and habitats have not been addressed by the Applicant.

We note that as with the Skylark Compensation Strategy this is an Outline Landscape and Environmental Management Plan and that yet again the details of the Landscape and Environmental Management Plan (LEMP) will not be settled until after the DCO is granted assuming this is the outcome of the SoS determination.

As with so much else in this application, work that the Applicant should have been done before the end of the Examination phase, at the latest, it now proposes to do only after DCO consent.

This is yet another example of important aspects of the proposed development being kicked down the road to after consent which will again limit public scrutiny and influence on the LEMP.

The limits placed by this approach on public scrutiny are clear and with it a challenge to the SoS's position (**EN010147-002472** 8th June 2026) that recognises *'the importance of ensuring that robust information is available to inform the decision-making process'*

Secretary of State's Question

35. The Secretary of State requests that the Applicant updates Section 17 of oLEMP to ensure that any remedial actions considered necessary will be agreed with the local planning authority. Furthermore, due to the bespoke mitigation developed for bats, the

oLEMP should be updated to include Natural England ("NE") as a consultee in the event that remedial action may be required.

Applicant's Response

The Applicant states that they have updated Section 17 of the oLEMP Rev 8 [EN010147/APP/7.6.3]. Section 17.1.8 of the updated oLEMP now explicitly states: Any necessary remedial measures will be set out in the relevant monitoring report for agreement with the relevant planning authority, in consultation with Natural England, BBOWT (where it relates to the Evenlode Corridor) and any other relevant stakeholder. Agreement from consultees to the remedial management is required prior to their implementation.

Stop Botley West Response

General comment

Our first response to the Applicant's answer to the SoS question is that there is a complete lack of any reference to what remedial measures might be. Given that the impact on some aspects of biodiversity may be severe, most notably to bats (see below) we would like to understand just how far remedial measures might go. For example, could this result in removal of solar arrays if significant declines in a species or group of species was detected? Without these important details being included in the OLEMP or LEMP we believe the powers of the planning authorities and Natural England to recommend or enforce any remedial measures will be limited.

Bats

The information provided by the Applicant at Deadline 5 of the Examination 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 confirmed many of the statements made by Stop Botley West during the Examination with respect to bats in relation to habitat and in relation to solar installations. These include:

- That solar arrays cause a negative and severe impact on the occurrence of bats.
- That the mechanism driving this impact has not been elucidated (see below).
- The Project site is important to a high diversity of UK bat species (14 out of 18), including some of the rarest threatened 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 or even of International Importance (Table 9.6.4; EN010147/APP/6.3).

The new data arising from the tracking Bechstein's bat and barbastelles undertaken by the Applicant's consultants 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 largely covered in solar arrays by the proposed project. Despite the data arising from their own 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 that the surveyed arable fields represent good habitat for bats. Overall, an area with a mosaic of different habitats, such as woodland, hedgerows, fields and water (lakes, rivers and streams) will be favourable for bats (Stebbing, 1988). The Central Section of the Botley West Solar Power Station represents such a mosaic.

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 is. The investigation by Tinsley et al (2023) in the U.K. 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 impacted in open fields with solar compared to control open fields (Tinsley et al., 2023). Common pipistrelle activity in open fields 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 in the study, 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.

During the Examination Stop Botley West cited evidence from the U.K. and elsewhere in Europe that the presence of solar arrays has a significant impact on bat numbers over open countryside (e.g. Montag et al., 2016; Szabadi et al., 2023) which for some species is severe. **This evidence has continued to accumulate** with recent papers such as Baudouin et al. (2026) set in southern France and Tavernier et al. (2026) set in the Netherlands. The reasons that solar arrays cause significant declines in bat populations, including across all seasons (Tavernier et al., 2026) is still unclear but may relate to an impact on insect populations upon which bats feed and collision with solar panels causing bat mortality (Tavernier et al., 2026). Three-dimensional acoustic recording of bat behaviour above solar farms has detected that their behaviour changes compared to over control sites (Barré et al., 2024). This change in behaviour is associated with the bats flying faster and straighter with a lower occurrence of feeding buzzes, in other words reduced feeding effort (Barré et al., 2024). There is also 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).

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 by solar power stations. The mechanism through which this is happening remains obscure as stated in the Bat Technical Note (2025). These observations have been repeated in a BBC News article which has also identified declines in bird, bat and insect numbers on the Llanwern Solar Farm (<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx27nd0kn2no>).

During the Issue Specific Hearing, Cassington Parish Council raised the fact that the radio tracking data for barbastelle, a highly threatened species, 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). This is of no surprise as it is clear from the scientific literature that bats do forage over arable land to a varying extent depending on species (e.g. Heim et al., 2017; Finch et al., 2020; Tinsley et al., 2022; Foxley et al., 2023; Szabadi et al., 2023).

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 suppressing 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 and Southern Sites 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.
- In the case of the southern site the Applicant has based its assessment on just two static bat location sites comprising just one paired static location (**REP5-009**).

This lack of research is doubly concerning when set against the more extensive surveys conducted for the immediately adjacent Red House Farm solar power station (VWHDC application **P24/V2489/FUL**)

The Red House Farm bat survey in contrast to the Botley West survey found 9 species of bats present, including barbastelle, an Annex II species.

The Red House Farm survey also noted that 14 species of bat had been identified in the last decade within a range of 4km, so encompassing this Applicant’s DCO boundary for the southern site.

Given the detail provided by the Red House Farm bat survey, in contrast to the lack of detail in the survey conducted by this Applicant, Stop Botley West concludes that:

- The Applicant’s bat study cannot be relied upon for the southern site.

Had this Applicant done a commensurate amount of onsite studies for the power station’s southern site its assessment of bat activity could have been more reliable.

- Given that the redlines for the Red House Farm power station and Botley West’s southern site are co-located for much of their East – West alignment in Cumnor Parish, the SoS should assume that bats present in the Red House Farm survey will also be present within the Botley West southern site redline.

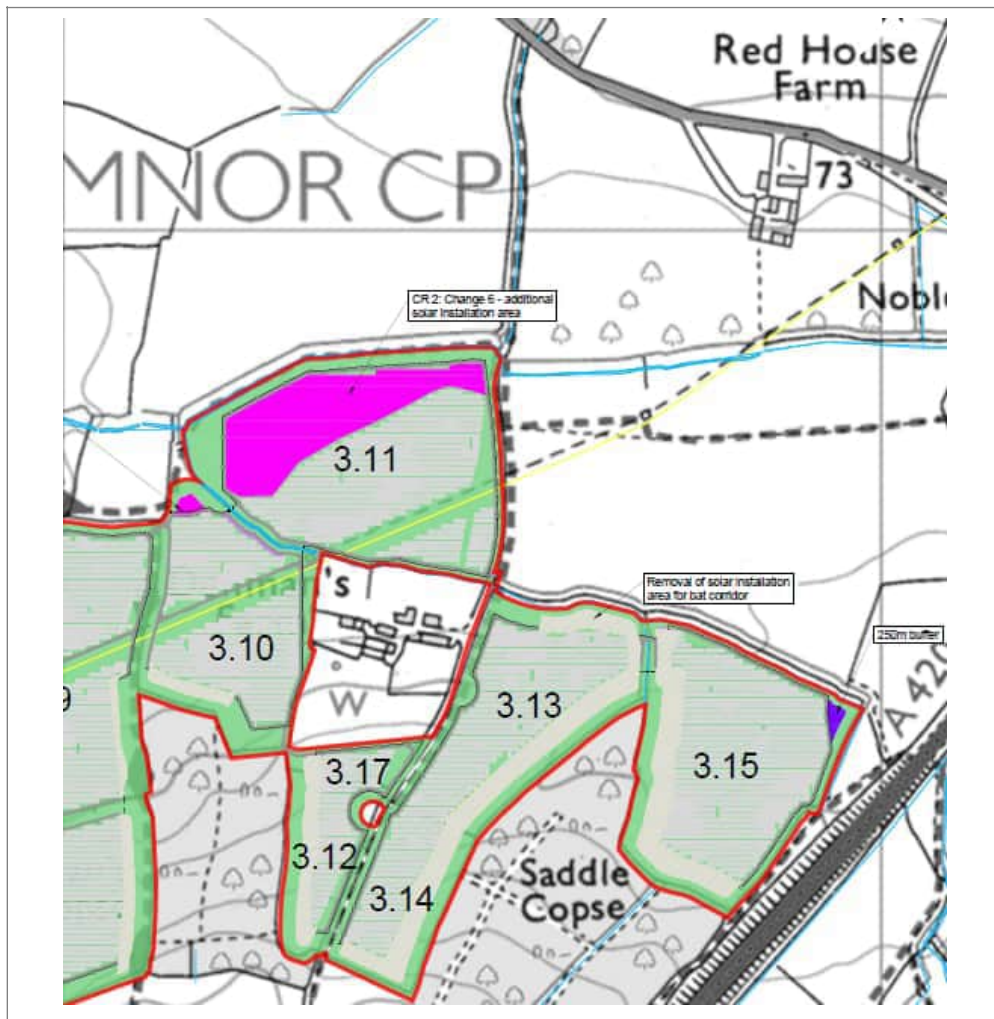
Unless this Applicant is claiming that bats in Cumnor Parish do not cross planning application redlines, it would be perverse to insist that bat species recorded within the Red House Farm redline, given those recordings include bats crossing the redline to the south into the area within the Botley West redline, somehow are not present within the Botley West redline, and vice versa.

- That being so, the Applicant’s oLEMP describing the southern site is deficient, needs to be withdrawn and resubmitted after it has conducted a more comprehensive – and so representative - bat survey.

- This Applicant should be required to present to the SoS a cumulative impact assessment for bats for its southern site, taking into account both the Red House Farm proposals and its own associated NGET substation proposal (including SoS scenario 1 where NGET builds the substation), both of which it has chosen to ignore in its sparse statements on cumulative impacts.

Without such a cumulative impact assessment the current situation where Botley West is proposing 'bat corridors' that point directly north into fields within the Red House Farm redline will become reality.

See for example the map below with bat corridors in Fields 3.13, 3.14 and 3.15 pointing directly to the Red House Farm field that application has chosen to call 'Mousefield'.



Extract from map on page 156 of **C1-087**

Stop Botley West and Cumnor Parish Council both conclude that it's as if the Red House Farm Applicant wishes to claim all is OK because bats can and do use fields to the south of their red line – but which lie within the Botley West redline – and in any case they will provide a few bat boxes as mitigation.

Simultaneously, the Botley West Applicant claims the converse: that their minimal survey shows there aren't any bats to worry about, not least because they can and will continue to

be able to forage and roost within the Red House Farm redline, thanks to Botley West's 'bat corridors'.

Stop Botley West invites the SoS to ignore these evident contradictions and instead to require more evidence for the Applicant's claims, with a mandatory requirement to seek independent assessment of cumulative impacts in the southern site.

- Solar installations have a very serious and significant impact on bat communities, the driver of which is unknown although new studies are suggesting impacts on prey availability and collision mortality.

Following on from this evidence Stop Botley West 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 arrays 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, including threatened species, 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 largely removed. We note that this argument extends to farmland birds as well, although the bird community is of lower conservation significance than that of the bats which is important at the level of the U.K. and possibly at a European level. 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.

Natural England and Evidence at the Examination

At the end of the Examination Natural England agreed to the Applicants suggested mitigation strategy, despite details being incomplete and withheld further comment on the basis they needed to receive further data. In fact, they did not need data further to that which was already available and has been since the Deadline 5 documents were published for the Examination. Their agreement to mitigation based on buffers around migration corridors demonstrates that their officers 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 which we have detailed above. Stop Botley West 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 the Parish Council 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.

The most significant omission by Natural England was the failure of its representatives to identify the conservation importance of the Central Site to bats and the possibility it could be designated as a Special Site of Scientific Interest (SSSI). The revelation that the site has the potential for SSSI designation would have been important in the context of the Examination with respect to Ecology and its outcome in terms of recommendations. However, the SoS’s questions now give Stop Botley West the opportunity to reveal that in fact **the site is now on the list for consideration as a SSSI for bat conservation** based on the evidence gathered by PVDP’s consultants and subsequently presented to Natural England by Stop Botley West following the Examination.

We include in this document Appendix A which is a copy of the case for SSSI designation of much of the Central Site of the Botley West proposed development, named here as The Three Rivers potential SSSI site based on the presence of the rivers and river valleys in the region. This was submitted to Natural England after a series of email communications during which a staff member stated that all such designations had been suspended (Stop Botley West can supply this email if required). Following a Freedom Of Information (FOI) request this indeed has proved to be the case (Appendix B). Designations of SSSI have been suspended since March 2025 across all of England with the exception of work on the Flamborough & Filey Coast in Yorkshire, and North Thames Estuary & Marshes in Essex. However, we note that no designations for SSSIs have occurred since 2024 and only two after 2022. The reason given for this suspension is to enable a review to be completed to align with Natural England’s strategy, *Recovering Nature for Growth, Health and Security* (Appendix B). This may explain why the matter of SSSI designation was never raised during the Examination. Subsequent to the submission of Appendix A to Natural England by AD Rogers from Cassington Parish Council, the Deputy Director of the Thames Solent Team, [REDACTED] replied that:

“You have made a compelling submission and although we were already well aware of the exceptional ecological value of this area to support the bat species you have referenced, I can see how this might fit into a broader vision for nature recovery in the area which includes the exciting work happening in the Evenlode catchment and on the Blenheim Estate.

As you’ll be aware, the designation of new SSSIs is a decision for Natural England’s Board, rather than myself. We know that SSSIs are the foundation of England’s most precious habitats and species and form the core from which wider nature recovery can spread. Natural England has a rolling programme to keep under review places that may merit and benefit from designation as SSSIs. I would like to add this site to that programme so that we can consider its merits and take a view.”

The full email from [REDACTED] provided in Appendix C.

It is important to recognise that SSSI designation is critical in enabling the planning process in the U.K. at all levels, District, County and National (NSIPs) in enabling Councillors, Examiners and the SoS to ensure that important sites for biodiversity, especially those harbouring threatened species, are protected (Chapman et al., 2026). The failure of the officers of Natural England to notify the Examiners and ultimately the SoS of the possibility that the central site of Botley West might be considered for SSSI designation is a failure of this Statutory Authority to adequately discharge its duties in respect of the Botley West NSIP Examination. This failure extends to DEFRA’s responses to The Right Honourable Calum Miller’s MP questions to Parliament on the 22nd April, 2025. These questions were in response to evidence presented by Stop Botley West and Cassington Parish Council on failure to identify the possibility of SSSI designation to The Right Honourable Calum Miller MP, who is the Member of Parliament for Bicester and Woodstock, within which the Parish is located. The MP’s questions included:

Question

*Calum Miller
Liberal Democrat
Bicester and Woodstock Commons*

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, whether Natural England has (a) paused and (b) delayed the designation of any Sites of Special Scientific Interest.

Answer

*Mary Creagh
Labour
Coventry East Commons*

*Answered on
28 April 2026*

&

Natural England has a rolling programme to keep under review places that may merit and benefit from designation as SSSIs.

The answer to The Right Honourable Calum Miller MP’s question was clearly incorrect at the time of the question and response on the basis of the evidence produced in Appendix C.

Another question asked by The Right Honourable Calum Miller MP on the 22nd April was:

Question for Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Sites of Special Scientific Interest

To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, how many Sites of Special Scientific Interest have been designated in England in each of the last five years.

Answer

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) designation is a two-stage process. Sites are first notified, at which point they become legally protected. Notifications are then confirmed, usually within nine months, once any objections or representations have been considered.

For the purposes of this answer, “designated” is taken to mean confirmed SSSI notifications. On that basis, the number of SSSIs designated in England, by calendar year, is as follows:

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of SSSIs designated</i>
<i>2021</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>2022</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>2023</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>2024</i>	<i>0</i>
<i>2025</i>	<i>0</i>

Confirmation often takes place in a year following notification, so notified and confirmed figures do not necessarily relate to the same sites.

This information is confirmed by Natural England's response to the FOI by AD Rogers on behalf of Cassington Parish Council (Appendix B).

Stop Botley West have to ask whether the answer to The Right Honourable Calum Miller MP's question relating to SSSI designation suspension was a genuine mistake or whether the answer from DEFRA was deliberately misleading. Pressure has been mounting on the lack of progress on SSSI designation by Natural England following a report by the non-governmental organisation Wild Justice (Chapman et al. 2026) and subsequently highlighted in the national press. We note that no SSSIs have been designated since 2023 and only two in the last 4.5 years. The question is therefore raised as to whether a suspension was already in place before March 2025, whether official, unofficial or as a result of lack of resources, or de-prioritisation by Natural England.

To conclude, Stop Botley West puts it to the SoS that Natural England made a major omission to the Planning Examination for the Botley West Utility-Scale Solar Power Station and subsequently in terms of the SoS's own further questions regarding the proposed development. It is now clear that SSSI designations have been officially suspended since March 2025 and no sites have been designated since 2023. It is likely that this policy, which has not been communicated to the public until the Wild Justice Report (Chapman et al. 2026), had an influence on the failure of officers of Natural England to recognise the true importance of the Central Section of the Botley West proposed development, that it could host a future SSSI. This failure has now been rectified, and Natural England have placed the area on the list for consideration as a SSSI. This is fully in line with Oxfordshire's Local Nature Recovery Strategy, Priority Species List (Oxfordshire County Council, 2025) which lists as Potential Measures:

- Design, create, and enhance wildlife corridors to support bats (in both urban and rural areas).
- Manage woodlands for bats. Typically, retain deadwood and mature trees with dark, humid conditions with well- connected foraging/commuting corridors nearby.

It further notes: *There are 18 bat species in the UK, 14 of which were recorded in Oxfordshire between 2019 – 2023. In 2024, a very rare, almost extinct species of bat was also found in Oxfordshire's woodlands – Bechstein's bat.*

Bechstein's bat is one of the species that form the community of 14 species in the Central Sites of the Botley West Scheme.

Given this new evidence and based on the findings of multiple peer-reviewed papers, Stop Botley West believe that the Botley West Utility-Scale Solar Power Station, even with the proposed mitigation, has a high risk of severe damage to a nationally or even internationally important bat community. The importance of this community of bats is now recognised as a large area of the Central Site of the scheme is now under consideration for designation as a SSSI. Natural England should determine the exact dimensions of the area under consideration based on the evidence already in hand and further survey work as they deem necessary to determine whether the site should be designated as a SSSI. The SoS must consider this new evidence and reject the Botley West Proposal in its entirety or insist the Applicant redesigns the scheme to remove solar arrays from areas that form important habitat for the bat community.

Protected Species - Secretary of State's Question

42. The Outline Code of Construction Practice states that pre-commencement surveys will be conducted for dormice, great crested newt, badger, reptiles, arable weeds, otter and water vole, as well as method statements prepared for protected species, as necessary. The Secretary of State requests that the Applicant updates the oCoCP to provide the methodology to be used for each species-specific pre-commencement survey and detail the method statements expected to be required. As surveys for otter and water vole have not been undertaken to inform the Environmental Statement, the Applicant is requested to set out how any mitigation measures, method statements or licence requirements will be developed in consultation with NE.

Applicant's Response

The Applicant provides outline methods for surveys for dormice, great crested newt, badger, reptiles, arable weeds, otter and water vole. Examples of precautionary measures to protect these categories of wildlife are outlined including translocation (great crested newts, reptiles).

Stop Botley West's Response

Again, Stop Botley West ask why these surveys have not already been undertaken and why, yet again, both the detailed methods, and results of the surveys will not be available until after the DCO is granted. This means that both the methods, and results of these surveys as well as mitigation measures will lack public consultation and scrutiny through an Examination process.

Translocation to avoid development impacts on wildlife is at best an unproven mitigation strategy and at worst, likely to fail. In a review of 91 translocation projects for reptiles and amphibians only 42% were found to be successful, 28% failed and the rest were of uncertain

outcome (Germano and Bishop, 2009). Work within the U.K. examining the success of 6 mitigation translocations for slow-worms (*Anguis fragilis*), viviparous lizards (*Zootoca vivipara*), adders (*Vipera berus*) and / or grass snakes (*Natrix helvetica*) encountered very few translocated individuals in post-translocation monitoring (Nash et al., 2020). Only 1.6% of populations we recaptured following translocation and at three of the study sites (50%) no recaptures made (Nash et al., 2020). Explanations for failure to detect translocated populations are that individuals disperse away from release sites or that release sites represent poor habitat and a high mortality is suffered by the translocated populations (Germano and Bishop, 2009; Nash et al., 2020). Nash et al (2020) conclude that there was no evidence from their study that mitigation-driven translocations are compensating for the losses of populations to development. It is notable that mitigation-driven translocations are much less successful than those undertaken for the purposes of species conservation (Germano and Bishop, 2009; Germano et al., 2015). Because mitigation releases are economically motivated, outcomes may be less successful than those of releases designed to serve the biological needs of species (Germano et al., 2015). As one review states, “translocation as a regulatory tool may be ill-suited for biologically mitigating environmental damage caused by development” (Germano et al., 2015).

Stop Botley West therefore, has no confidence that translocation is a viable and successful mitigation strategy for amphibians and reptiles and probably other groups of species. This is a case of “Emperor’s new clothes”, translocation is employed by developers to convince planning authorities in the U.K. that they are not destroying wildlife populations through development. Planning authorities lack the resources or interest to follow-up on whether or not such mitigations are effective and so this mitigation strategy persists. Evidence suggests that the majority of such translocations fail.

Secretary of State’s Question

43. Natural England is requested to provide an update on the progress of issuing any protected species Letters of No Impediment, including whether they consider that a mitigation licence for bats should be sought. The Applicant is requested to provide details of how construction impacts to roosting bats will be managed if a licence is not pursued.

Applicant’s Response

The Applicant’s position is that no licence for disturbing bats is required as the buffer zones implemented will avoid or mitigate any impacts on bats. Specifically they state:

“Botley West has produced a novel and innovative mitigation strategy which we advise is likely to avoid or mitigate any potential impacts to bats’.”

Stop Botley West’s Response

As can be seen in our response to the Applicant to the SoS Q35, Stop Botley West has provided ample evidence that the buffers proposed to avoid / mitigate impacts on the rich population of bats in the Central Site of Botley West will not protect bats using arable fields for foraging. This evidence is backed up by multiple peer-reviewed scientific surveys which also demonstrate how damaging solar arrays are to bat populations. Both the Applicant and the Natural England Officers have fallen into the trap of only considering flight lines along field margins / hedgerows that the bats use to fly between roosting sites and feeding sites and have ignored species-specific behaviour which means that the proposed mitigation will fail to protect this exceptional and diverse bat community. We note that **the wording “novel and innovative” in fact means experimental** in this context and given the evidence of how

bats use the landscape it will inevitably lead to a decline of this element of biodiversity in the proposed project area. The importance of the bat community of the Central Site of the Botley West Utility-Scale Solar Power Station is now recognised through the area now on the list to be considered a SSSI.

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Appendix A Letter to [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Prof. [REDACTED]
Deputy Director, Thames Solent Area Team, 8 Orchard Close,
Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Cassington,
Natural England, Oxfordshire,
Foss House, Kings Pool, OX29 4BU
1-2 Peasholme Green,
York,
YO1 7PX 28th April, 2026

CC: [REDACTED] II, Nature Recovery Officer, West Oxfordshire District Council
CC: [REDACTED], Senior Biodiversity Officer, West Oxfordshire District Council
CC: [REDACTED], Executive Member for the Environment, West Oxfordshire District Council
CC: [REDACTED], Director, CPRE Oxfordshire
CC: Calum Miller MP for Bicester and Woodstock

Dear [REDACTED]

Many thanks for your letter of the 30th March, 2026. I am very pleased to see the clarifications with respect to the policy regarding the public's ability to notify Natural England of potential SSSIs sites for consideration for designation. As you have outlined, and which I would only expect, such designations require assessment by an evidence-led process that tests data against selection guidelines, combined with expert judgement. I have considered the designation criteria outlined in the SSSI Guidelines, Part 1 and Part 2 and remain convinced this site requires urgent designation as a result of poor land management and high pressure of development in this location. Therefore, what follows in the rest of this letter are the full details of why I believe this area of the Thames Clay Vales should be considered for designation as a SSSI. Much of this material is a repeat of my first letter to Natural England but with revisions according to my re-reading of the SSSI Guidelines. I would be very grateful if you can forward this material, along with the additional attached documents which present survey data to your team for consideration for inclusion in the SSSI Designation Programme for investigation. Of course, this

depends on whether Natural England have lifted the suspension on designations, a matter which I have not had an answer to in terms of my FOI request. I will be writing to your Legal Department to clarify matters relating to suspension.

The Three Rivers Bat Potential SSSI

Introduction

Recent environmental impact assessment work with respect to the Botley West Solar Power Station NSIP has led to the discovery of an exceptional site for bats of at least national importance, and potentially international importance in West Oxfordshire. The Botley West proposal is currently under consideration by the Secretary of State as to whether to recommend acceptance or refusal of the proposal. Irrespective of the decision, it is critical that this bat community is afforded protection because of the extremely high pressure of development in the region and the poor management of woodland by the landowner that is used for roosting and hibernation by some of our rarest bats. The area is named The Three Rivers because of its location in the vicinity of the River Evenlode, River Glyme and the River Thames.

The area of concern lies in the district of West Oxfordshire but also borders Cherwell District Council. It lies roughly between Blenheim Palace and the villages of Woodstock, Long Hanborough, Bladon, Yarnton, Cassington, and Church Hanborough. To the north the area is bounded by the A4095 and to the south, the A40. However, the bat community discovered may migrate on a daily or seasonal basis outside of this area as both the Blenheim Estate Park and Thames valley include habitats which may be used for roosting, hibernation and foraging (Blenheim Estate Park has forest, including ancient oaks and is an SSSI; the Thames Valley has neutral grassland flood meadows inc. the SSSI, Cassington Meadows). The area is mainly agricultural land, used for growing grass and cereals, generally of Grade 3 but with areas of Grade 2 and Grade 1 land. Importantly, the land includes a mosaic of habitats including farmed fields, mature and diverse hedgerows, the Evenlode River Valley running into the Thames to the south and patches of woodland including Pinsley Wood, Burleigh Wood and Bladon Heath. Pinsley Wood contains fragments of the ancient Wychwood and is noted locally for its bluebells and other woodland flowers. Other landscape features include a railway cutting, Cassington Sewage Works and a number of gravel pits, now restored to form lakes. The land rises from south to north. It is this mosaic of habitats and the abundance of insects, including aquatic insects, that believe makes this area so favourable for bats.

Area of Search

National Character Area 108

Upper Thames Clay Vales

The Upper Thames Clay Vales National Character Area (NCA) is a broad belt of open, gently undulating lowland farmland on predominantly Jurassic and Cretaceous clays. Blenheim Palace World Heritage Site falls within the NCA, along with around 5,000 ha of the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and smaller areas of the Chilterns AONB and the Cotswolds AONB. Two of its Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) are designated for their lowland meadow vegetation communities, while Little Wittenham SAC has one of the most studied great crested newt populations in the UK. There are contrasting landscapes, including enclosed pastures of the claylands with wet valleys, mixed farming, hedges, hedge trees and field trees and more settled, open, arable lands. Mature field oaks give a parkland feel in many places.

Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscapes Study Classification (OWLS)

(<https://owls.oxfordshire.gov.uk/wps/wcm/connect/occ/OWLS/Home/>)

The following Parishes are included in The Three Rivers area and habitat has been outlined in the OWLS scheme.

Begbroke

Wildlife Habitats

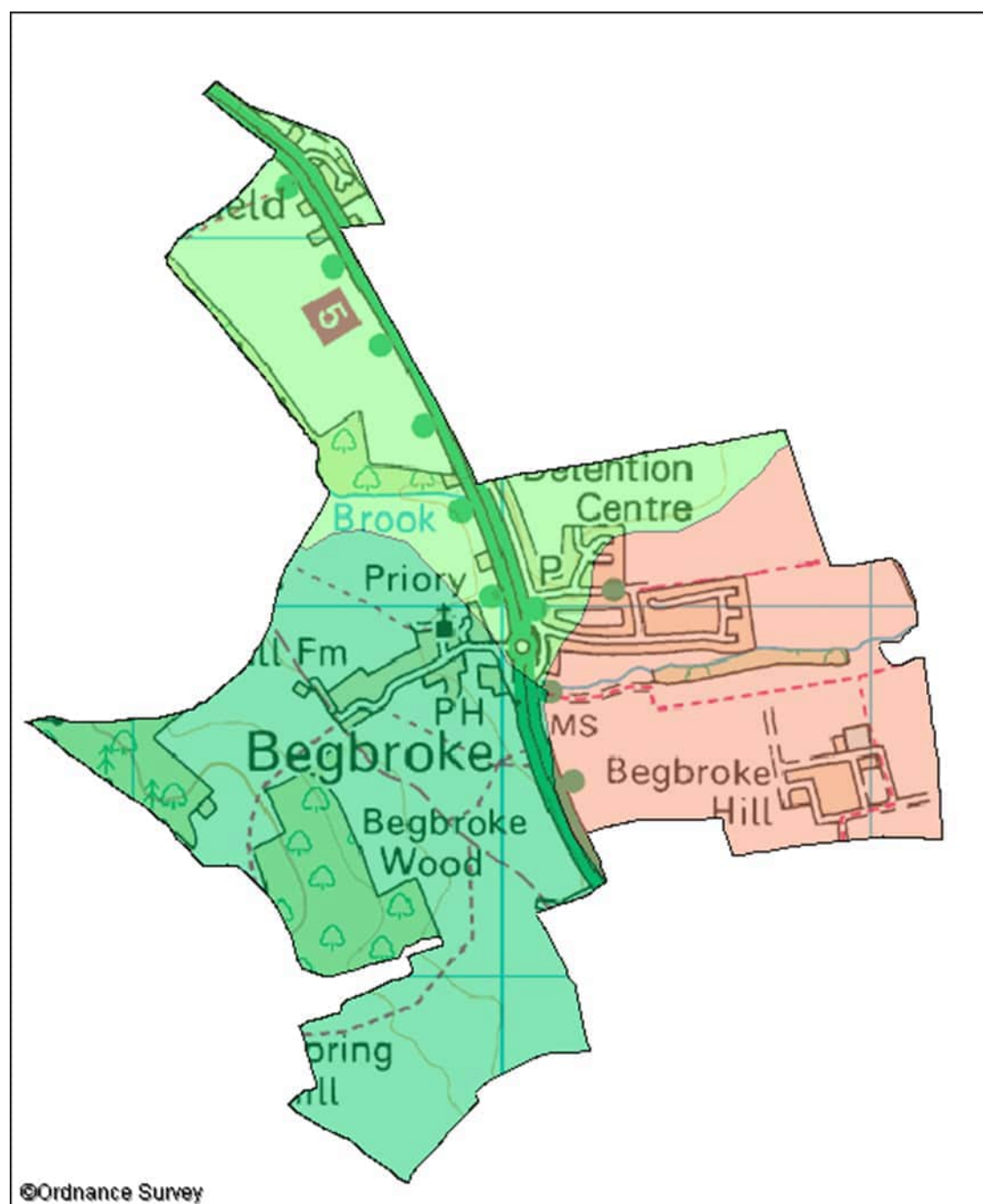
Wooded Estate lands

Site Code: 41R03

Area: 18.8ha

This site is an area of long established woodland. It is not ancient woodland but has the typical appearance of old woodland with mainly native trees and shrubs and a variety of woodland wildflowers. Broadleaved woodland such as this is a national priority for nature conservation.

The canopy of this wood mainly consists of oak trees along with some ash. There are also a few areas with conifers. There is a mixed shrub layer with hazel, buckthorn, guelder rose, hawthorn and wych elm. Woodland wildflowers present include primrose, bluebell, pignut, wood spurge and wood anemone.



Landscape Types

- Estate Farmlands
- Lowland Village Farmlands
- Wooded Estatelands

Bladon

The following wildlife habitats fall within this parish. They are listed according to their associated landscape type or local character area.

Wildlife Habitats

Wooded Estatelands

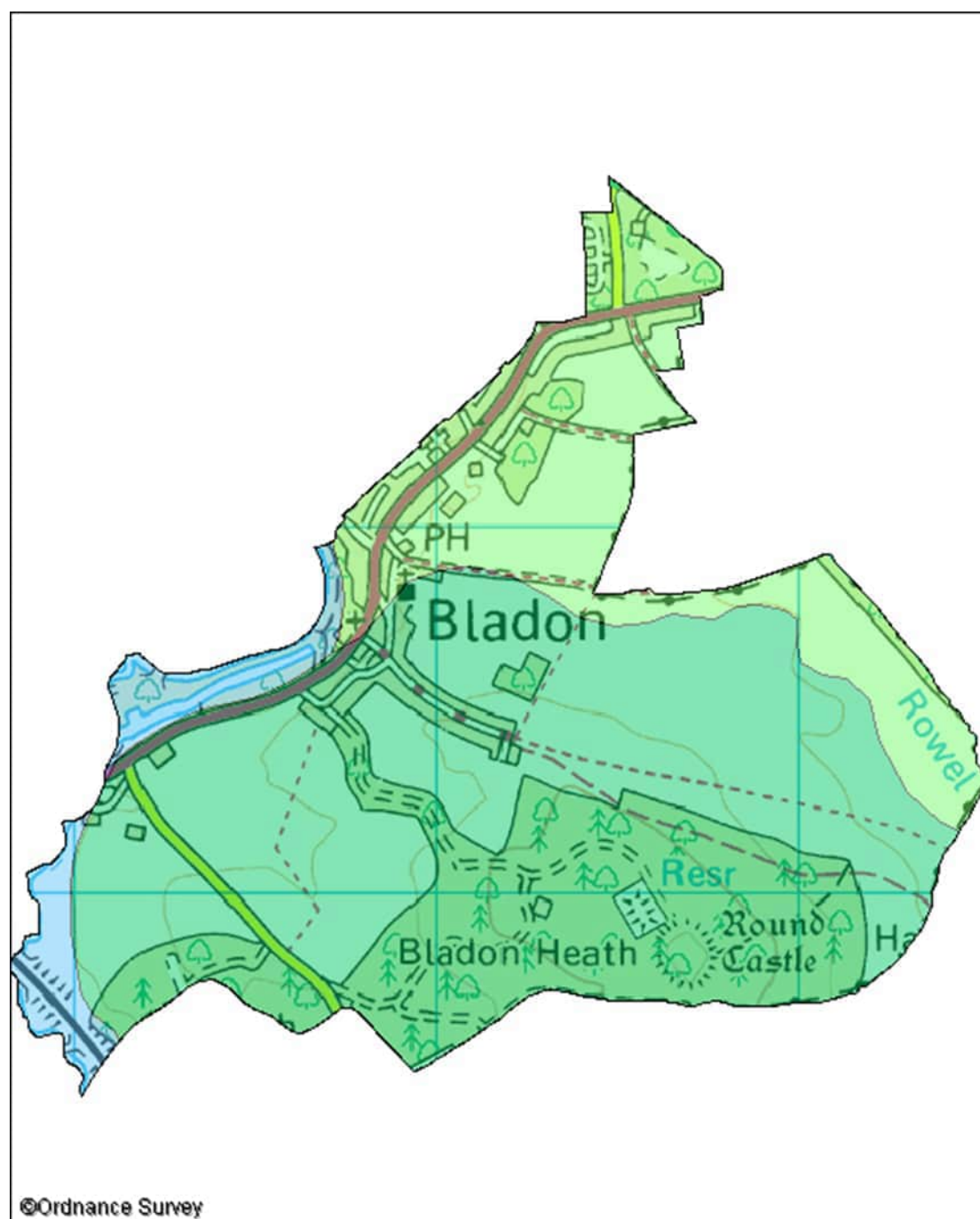
Site Code: 41L02

Area: 97.3ha

Grid Ref: SP455138

This site is a large area of woodland. Parts of the site have been continuously wooded for at least 400 years, and these are classified as ancient woodland. However, this site is largely plantation with large amounts of conifers. There are remnants of old woodland composed of native trees and shrubs with woodland wildflowers such as bluebell and primrose. This type of woodland is a national priority for nature conservation.

Heathland has been present here in the past. It is not unusual for the acidic sandy soils typical of heaths to have been planted with conifers. Some remnants of heathland remain and there is potential that it could be restored here. Patches of heather have been seen occasionally. Many rare and scarce insects have been recorded at this site. These include the silver-washed fritillary and purple hairstreak butterflies. The site is also good for birds. All three species of woodpecker are present, and this is one of few sites in Oxfordshire where woodcock nests.



Landscape Types

- Estate Farmlands
- River Meadowlands
- Wooded Estate Lands

Cassington

Wildlife Habitats

Lowland Village Farmlands

Site Code: 41K04

Area: 15.4ha

This site is an old disused gravel pit. Of the three areas of water that were left when gravel extraction finished in the 1950s two are now completely filled with beds of common reed. Between these areas there are areas of wet willow and birch scrub and woodland. These habitats are a national nature conservation priority.

The site is particularly important for birds. Reed bunting and song thrush, both national nature conservation priorities, nest here. Water rail has regularly nested in the past and there are good numbers of reed and sedge warbler. The rare bittern has been an occasional winter visitor.

Site Code: 41K07

Area: 5ha

This disused gravel pit has a number of pools of water with wooded areas between. The pools have shallow areas where plants that live in water are found along with wetland species. These include water lilies, yellow flag iris, marsh horsetail and the uncommon mare's-tail. Rich areas of water such as this are a national priority for nature conservation. The site supports a good range of dragonflies and damselflies. The nationally scarce club-tailed dragonfly has been seen here.

Fringing the pools and on the land between there are many willows along with birch, hawthorn and dogwood. There are open grassy areas where colourful wildflowers such as oxeye daisy can be seen. Common spotted orchids have been seen here in the past.

River Meadowlands

Site Code: 41Q02

Area: 7.03ha

Cassington Meadows SSSI

Cassington Meadows lie next to Thames south of Cassington village. The meadows have not been agriculturally improved through the use of herbicides and fertilizers or through ploughing and reseeded. Consequently, the meadows are rich in wildflowers. There is also an area of tall wetland vegetation dominated by reed grasses. Both habitats are national priorities for nature conservation.

Wildflowers found here include great burnet, dropwort, meadowsweet, adder's tongue fern and cowslip. The meadows are surrounded by tall hawthorn hedgerows with many willows which are also found along the riverbank.

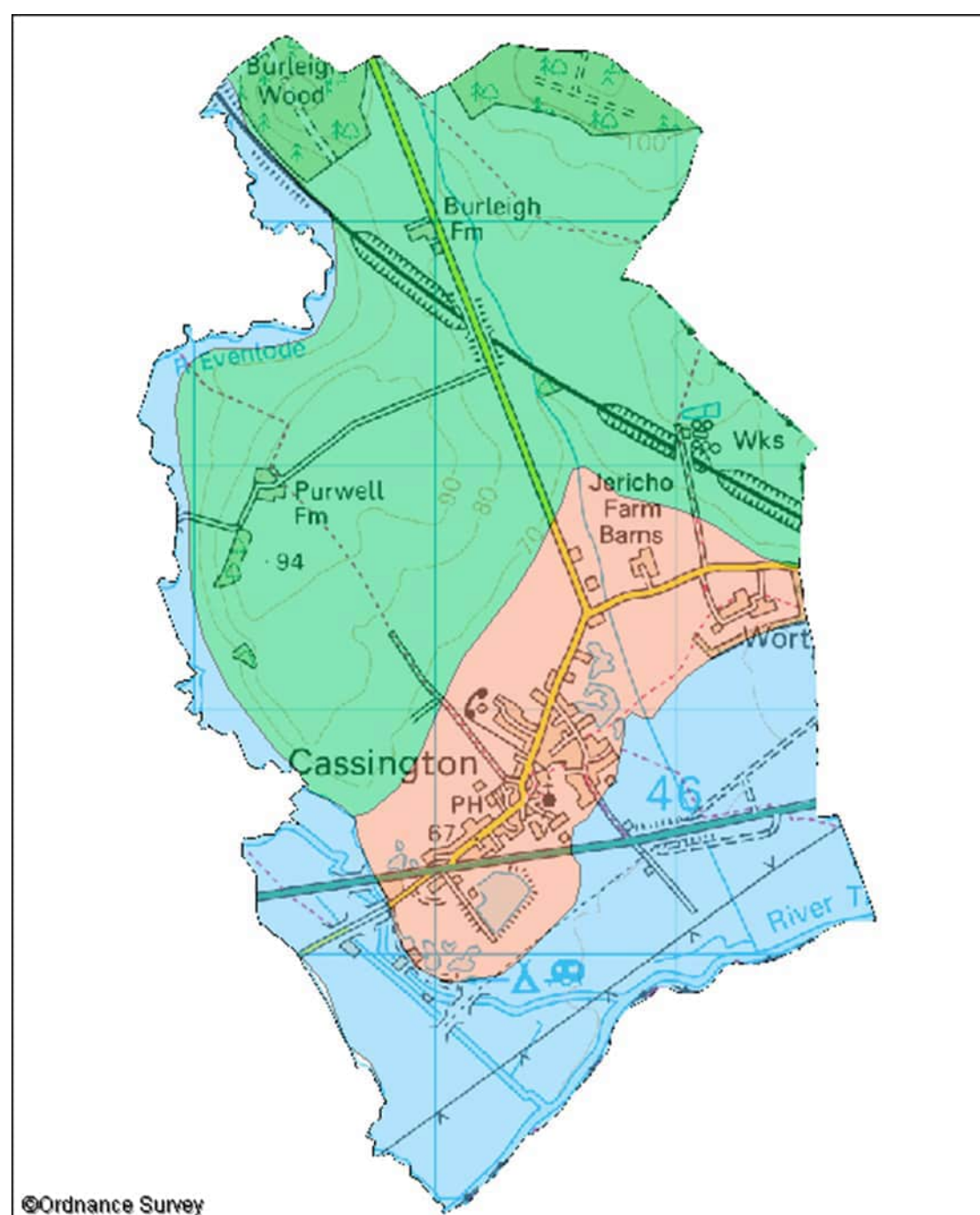
Wooded Estate lands

Site Code: 41L01

Area: 38.6ha

This site is a good-sized ancient woodland which means the site has been continuously wooded since at least 1600AD. Most of the woodland has been replanted with conifers and an area of beech. However, the remains of the old oak woodland can still be found in strips along the wood edge, in the south east corner and along the wide woodland tracks. Such woodland is a national priority for nature conservation.

There is a good variety of woodland plants associated with old woodland. The uncommon wild service tree is found along one of the tracks. Bluebells form carpets on the ground in the spring. Other woodland wildflowers present include early purple orchid and primrose. The white admiral butterfly has been recorded here recently.



Landscape Types

- Lowland Village Farmlands
- River Meadowlands
- Wooded Estate lands

Hanborough

Wildlife Habitats

Wooded Estatelands

Site Code: 41G04

Area: 46.6ha

This site is a good sized ancient woodland which means that it has been continuously wooded for at least 400 years. Large parts of the wood have old traditional woodland with a canopy of oak, ash and field maple trees which carpets of bluebells on the ground. This type of woodland is a national nature conservation priority. Most of the centre of the wood has been replanted with conifers

The wood has many plants associated with ancient woodland including the uncommon wild service tree. Wildflowers found here include early purple orchid, yellow archangel, primrose and wood anemone. In the past purple hairstreak, wood white and white admiral butterflies have been recorded in the wood.

Site Code: 41G03

Area: 4.3ha

Long Hanborough Gravel Pit SSSI

The quarry faces at this disused gravel pit have exposures of rocks that are important in the understanding of geological history. Here there are fossil rich exposures of the gravels that underlie the Hanborough area where Palaeolithic hand axes have been found.

Wooded Estate Slopes and Valley Sides

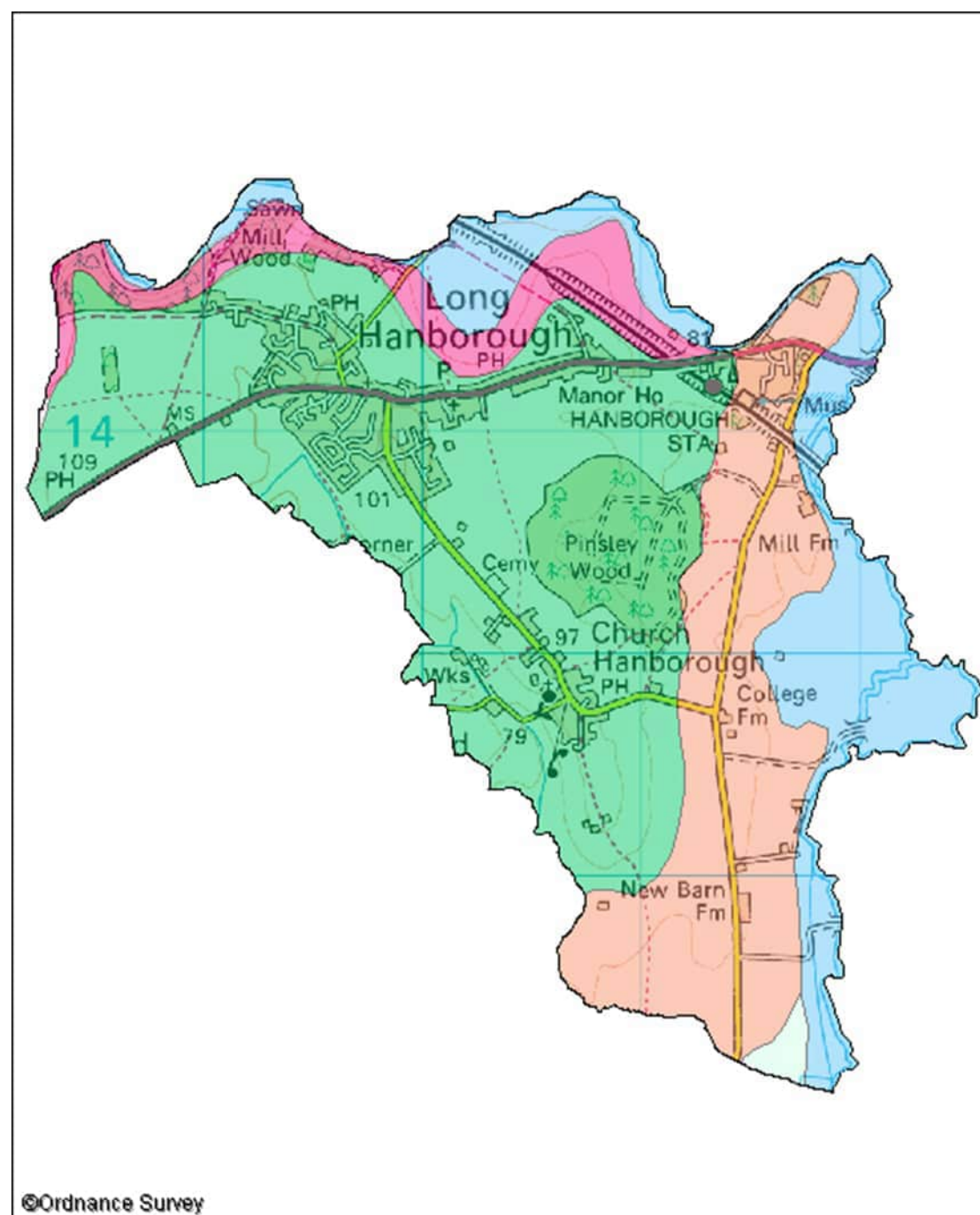
Site Code: 41C01

Area: 2.4ha

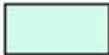
This site consists of two banks which are important for the presence of areas limestone grassland, which is a national priority for nature conservation. The rare limestone grassland wildflower meadow clary is found here. This species is found mainly in this part of the Cotswolds and is protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

The eastern bank, where the meadow clary occurs, is mainly covered in scrub and the limestone grassland is restricted to small glades. The grassland on the western bank is quite recent in origin and less rich in species. Other limestone grassland species found on the banks include pyramidal orchid and harebell. The banks support a good variety of birds including linnet, skylark, bullfinch and song thrush

which are all national priorities for nature conservation due to the rapid declines in their population. A nationally scarce snail has also been recorded here.



Landscape Types

	Alluvial Lowlands
	Lowland Village Farmlands
	River Meadowlands
	Wooded Estatelands
	Wooded Estate Slopes and Valley Sides

Yarnton

Wildlife Habitats

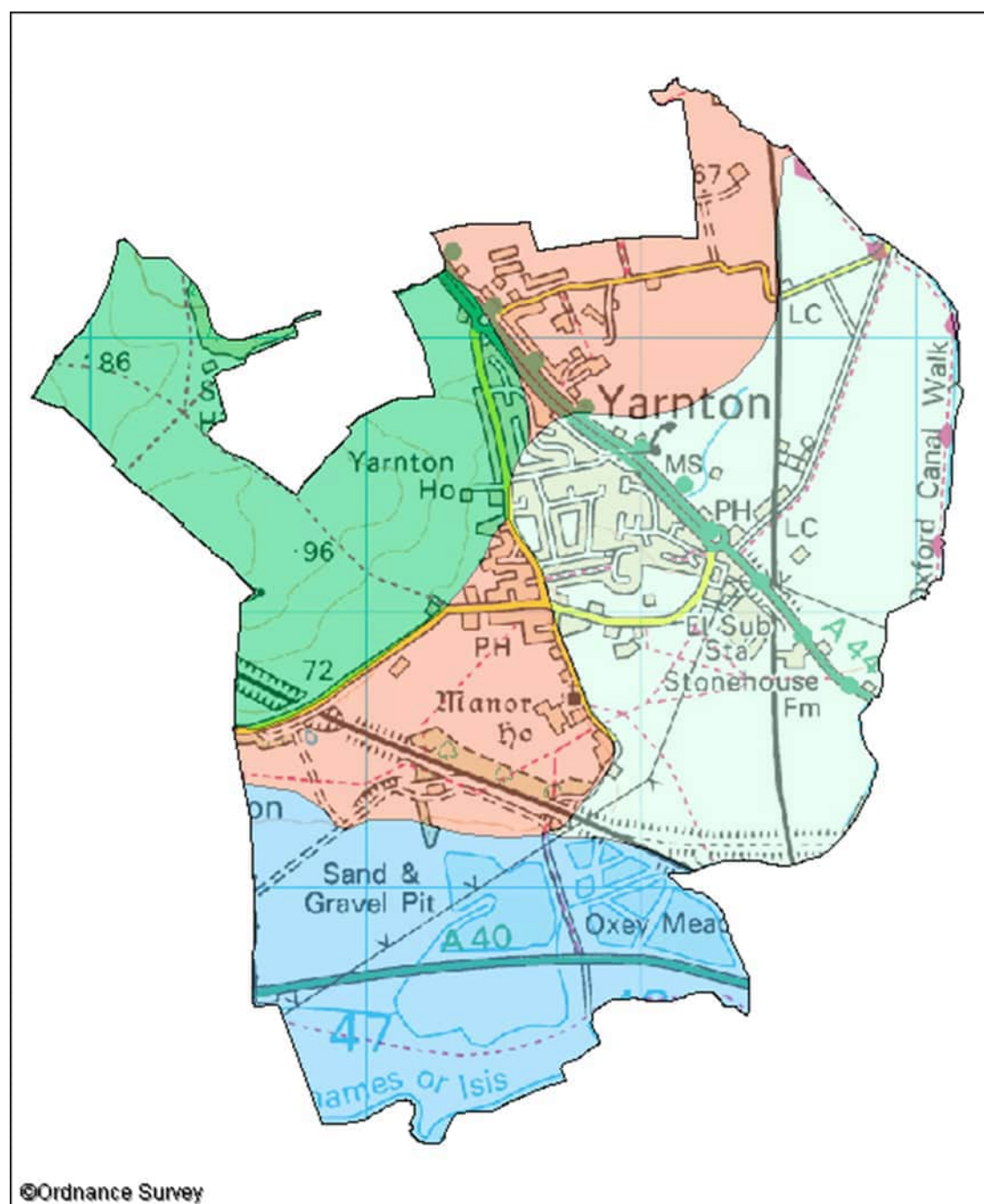
Alluvial Lowlands

Site Code: 41V08

Area: 1.5ha

This site consists of two small borrow pits which were probably dug during railway construction in the area. Tall wetland vegetation with large sedges and reed-grass is now found in the pits along with areas of wet willow woodland. Both habitats are national nature conservation priorities. There is also a bank of drier ash woodland along the southern edge.

Wetland wildflowers found here include the tall colourful purple loosestrife, meadow-rue, common valerian and yellow flag iris.



Landscape Types

- Alluvial Lowlands
- Lowland Village Farmlands
- River Meadowlands
- Wooded Estate lands

Rationale for Consideration of The Three Rivers Site as a SSSI

The Three Rivers site superficially appears as being of low conservation priority with the exception of the SSSIs already listed at Blenheim Estate Park and the very rare lowland flood meadows along the banks of the Thames (Cassington Meadows SSSI). Most of the area is habitat modified for agriculture over time, mostly for arable farming and the growing of hay. A number of infrastructure features also lay within the area including a sewage works and a railway cutting. Whilst Part 1 of the Guidance for SSSI Designation identifies such habitat as being of relatively low conservation interest recent survey work for the environmental impact assessment for the Botley West Solar Power Station, an NSIP, has identified a diverse community of bats, including IUCN Red Listed and Habitats Directive Annex II species. I have included as attachments to this email the relevant section of the Botley West Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) undertaken by RPS environmental consultants, and the Bat Technical Report prepared by Sylvan, another environmental consultancy on behalf of the Applicant, PVDP. Static detector surveys were undertaken late spring to autumn in 2022 and 2023 focusing on high-value habitats likely to be used for commuting or foraging of bats. Walking surveys and static detectors were deployed in 2024 alongside trapping and radio tracking of bats to gain a better understanding of local distribution. To summarise, the following bat species were identified during the earlier surveys:

- Barbastelle, *Barbastella barbastellus* – widespread though uncommon;
- Bechstein's bat, *Myotis bechsteinii* – very rare;
- Brandt's bat, *Myotis brandtii* – uncertain, few in-hand identifications;
- Brown long-eared bat, *Plecotus auritus* – widespread and relatively common;
- Common pipistrelle, *Pipistrellus pipistrellus* – common and widespread;
- Daubenton's bat, *Myotis daubentonii* – widespread;
- Leisler's bat, *Nyctalus leisleri* - widespread though uncommon;
- Lesser Horseshoe bat, *Rhinolophus hipposideros* – rare;
- Nathusius' pipistrelle, *Pipistrellus nathusii* – rare;
- Natterer's bat, *Myotis nattereri* – widespread though uncommon;
- Noctule, *Nyctalus noctula* - widespread though uncommon;
- Serotine, *Eptesicus serotinus* - widespread though uncommon;
- Soprano pipistrelle, *Pipistrellus pygmaeus* - common and widespread; and
- Whiskered bat, *Myotis mystacinus* – uncommon

Note that this represents a minimum number of species because of the difficulties with identifying *Myotis* bats to species level from acoustic data, these bats were generally grouped into genus level. Total identifications per detector per night were close to 1000. The common pipistrelle was the most frequently recorded species.

Ten Bechstein's bat roosts were identified during radio-tracking surveys. Of the ten roosts, nine were classified as maternity roosts either because of the number of bats recorded emerging from the roost during surveys, or as a result of the breeding status of the bats. The other roost was classified as an autumnal dispersal roost. The majority of maternity roosts were located within Bladon Heath and Burleigh Wood. A total of 41 barbastelle roosts were recorded including:

- 20 maternity roosts – concentrated in Pinsley Wood, Burleigh Wood and parkland trees / woodland within the Blenheim Estate;
- six autumnal dispersal roosts – split between Pinsley, Burleigh and Begbroke Woods;
- two summer day roosts in Wytham Woods and Great Park (to the south of the area)
- 14 solitary (male) roosts dispersed throughout the wider landscape.

A single Daubenton's bat roost was identified on the Blenheim Estate during surveys. This roost was classified as a maternity roost because of the breeding status of a radio-tagged bat. A single female post-lactating Natterer's bat was radio-tagged, and this bat used three different tree roosts in Bladon Heath, all classified as maternity roosts. The maximum count of Natterer's bat emerging was 25 bats from an oak tree.

Foraging and flightline analysis by radio tracking recorded distinct spatial patterns of behaviour. Barbastelle activity was strongly associated with linear wet features and woodland. Core foraging zones (50 % kernel density estimates) lay (i) along the River Evenlode (ii) along field boundaries flanking Worton Heath and Begbroke Wood, and (iii) at the sewage works/Oxford to Hereford railway north of Worton. Regular commuting flight lines linked these foraging areas from roost sites along the River Glyme, Rowel Brook and the Oxford to Hereford railway. Re-use of identical routes by multiple tagged barbastelle bats on successive nights emphasises the importance of these corridors within the core sustenance zone (CSZ). The spatial distribution of Bechstein's bats during the radio-tracking period was over a markedly smaller footprint. All tagged bats restricted core foraging activity to woodland blocks predominately within Bladon Heath and Burleigh Wood.

The surveys and radio tracking indicated that in this area there are a number of key bat foraging and commuting resources:

- the woodlands, in particular the ancient woodlands at Pinsley, Bladon, Burleigh, Begbroke and those within the Blenheim Estate;
- the river corridors, in particular the River Evenlode;
- the sewage treatment plant north of Cassington;
- the Cotswold Railway Line;
- the green lane within the Northern Site Area; and
- smaller watercourses and other water bodies.

Bat activity (in particular, Annex II species) within the woodlands across the landscape around the Project site was generally high across all survey types indicating their importance for the bat assemblage present for roosting and foraging. The use of different woodlands varied with season; for example, Bladon Heath was important during the maternity periods but less used during autumn dispersal. However, overall, they appear to form a key element of the bat population's range, in particular for the two woodland Annex II species identified.

Similarly, all data collected also suggest that the River Evenlode corridor currently forms a key foraging/commuting corridor – statics placed here showed very high counts while the radio tracking data highlighted its use by barbastelle, in particular. In addition, from the radio tracking data, within the wider landscape, the corridors of the rivers Dorn and Glyme were also used by barbastelle for commuting with bats roosting in woodlands adjacent to the rivers.

Radio tracking data also suggest that the sewage treatment plant north of Cassington is a key foraging resource for bats with tagged bats observed moving from the woodlands to forage in the tree lines surrounding the plant. Of particular importance to commuting bats of all species, especially barbastelle, appeared to be the corridor formed by the Cotswold Railway Line.

The current conservation status of the observed bat species is as follows:

Barbastelle, *Barbastella barbastellus*: IUCN RL Vulnerable; EU Habitats Directive Annex II and IV; Bern Convention Annex II and Revised Annex I of Resolution 6 (1998); CCMS (Bonn Convention) Annex II; Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 2 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2017).

Bechstein's bat, *Myotis bechsteinii*: IUCN RL Vulnerable; EU Habitats Directive Annex II and IV; Bern Convention Annex II and Revised Annex I of Resolution 6 (1998); CCMS (Bonn Convention) Annex II; Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 2 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2017)..

Lesser Horseshoe bat, *Rhinolophus hipposideros*: IUCN RL Near threatened; EU Habitats Directive Annex II and IV; Bern Convention Annex II and Revised Annex I of Resolution 6 (1998); CCMS (Bonn Convention) Annex II; Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 2 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2017)..

Brandt's bat, *Myotis brandtii*: IUCN RL Least Concern; EU Habitats Directive Annex IV; Bern Convention Annex II; CCMS (Bonn Convention) Annex II; Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 2 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2017)..

Brown long-eared bat, *Plecotus auritus*: IUCN RL Least Concern; EU Habitats Directive Annex IV; Bern Convention Annex II; CCMS (Bonn Convention) Annex II; Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 2 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2017).

Common pipistrelle, *Pipistrellus pipistrellus*: IUCN RL Least Concern; EU Habitats Directive Annex IV; Bern Convention Annex II; CCMS (Bonn Convention) Annex II; Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 2 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2017).

Nathusius' pipistrelle, *Pipistrellus nathusii*: IUCN RL Least Concern; EU Habitats Directive Annex IV; Bern Convention Annex II; CCMS (Bonn Convention) Annex II; Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 2 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2017).

Daubenton's bat, *Myotis daubentonii*: IUCN RL Least Concern; EU Habitats Directive Annex IV; Bern Convention Annex II; CCMS (Bonn Convention) Annex II; Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 2 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2017).

Leisler's bat, *Nyctalus leisleri*: IUCN RL Least Concern; EU Habitats Directive Annex IV; Bern Convention Annex II; CCMS (Bonn Convention) Annex II; Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 2 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2017).

Natterer's bat, *Myotis nattereri*: IUCN RL Least Concern; EU Habitats Directive Annex IV; Bern Convention Annex II; CCMS (Bonn Convention) Annex II; Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 2 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2017).

Noctule, *Nyctalus noctule*: IUCN RL Least Concern; EU Habitats Directive Annex IV; Bern Convention Annex II; CCMS (Bonn Convention) Annex II; Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 2 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2017).

Serotine, *Eptesicus serotinus*: IUCN RL Least Concern; EU Habitats Directive Annex IV; Bern Convention Annex II; CCMS (Bonn Convention) Annex II; Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 2 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2017).

Soprano pipistrelle, *Pipistrellus pygmaeus*: IUCN RL Least Concern; EU Habitats Directive Annex IV; Bern Convention Annex II; CCMS (Bonn Convention) Annex II; Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 2 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2017).

Whiskered bat, *Myotis mystacinus*: IUCN RL Least Concern; EU Habitats Directive Annex IV; Bern Convention Annex II; CCMS (Bonn Convention) Annex II; Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981); Schedule 2 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2017).

All bats are particularly vulnerable at their breeding and hibernation sites and some of these sites can support a significant proportion of the species' population (Walsh et al., 2022). The lesser horseshoe bat, *Rhinolophus hipposideros* is widespread but rare species across its European range and has suffered population declines. In England and Wales, both species of horseshoe bat are at their northern limits of their range. Nevertheless, the UK supports one of the largest populations of the lesser horseshoe bat in Western Europe.

As can be seen above, three species within this diverse bat assemblage are in Annex II of the EU Habitats Directive. All species on Annex II of the Habitats Directive (1992), require the designation of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs; Walsh et al., 2022). Protection of SACs is delivered primarily through the SSSI mechanism in the U.K. (Walsh et al., 2022). The Wildlife and Countryside Act (WCA, 1981) enabled the UK to ratify the Bern Convention by transposing it into UK law. Signatories to the Bern Convention are obliged to protect all listed species. All species of bats are listed under Schedule 5 and 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) and Schedule 2 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2017).

Given the data acquired during the Botley West I am proposing that this area be placed on the list for consideration of SSSI designation because it forms habitat for some of our rarest bat species and because the area hosts an outstanding bat assemblage of at least national and if not international importance. This is fully consistent with duties within England, nationally and internationally to fulfil

commitments under the EU Habitats Directive, Bern Convention and Bonn Convention as well as fulfilling commitments under the Convention for Biological Diversity, including the Kunming-Montreal Biodiversity Targets.

I note that the area is modified by human activity but point to Paragraph 3.9 of Part 1 of the Guidelines for Selection of SSSIs that states:

However, there are certain situations where sites are of SSSI quality given their species complement (e.g. rare bats or rare lichen assemblages on or in buildings). These sites may include artificial waterbodies, mining features, old buildings, and also certain coastal and floodplain pastures, plantations, arable fields, and areas of previously-developed land.

I believe this is an exemplary site (Para. 4.6 Pt 1) based on both the presence of rare bat species and the overall diversity and abundance of the bat community. It is also fragile given the high pressure for development in the area and the sensitivity of bat species to disturbance of roosting, breeding and hibernation sites (Para. 5.1 Pt 1). The site also would form part of a local network of SSSI sites including Blenheim Estate Park, Cassington Meadows and further afield Wytham Woods and Wytham Ditches. It would also include County Wildlife Sites as well as part of the local Nature Recovery Network. As such it would be coherent with a network of conservation and recovery sites in West Oxfordshire (Para. 5.11 Pt 1). I also note the wording of Para. 7.1 Pt 1:

A site has to reach the qualifying standard for only one habitat or species to be eligible for selection as SSSI when the critical standard principle is being applied.

I firmly believe that the bat community is present in this area because of the mosaic of habitats present. This is specifically identified within the Paragraph 9.1 of Part 1 of the Guidelines for Selection of SSSIs that states:

However, there are a great many situations where different habitats are contiguous or associated in various combinations. Many organisms depend on more than one, often quite different habitats, and some live in the transition zones (ecotones) between habitats..... Bats and some birds and dragonflies range over very different habitats for feeding, away from those in which they breed or roost.

This is evident in the survey data present in the Bat Technical Report by Sylvan. I also note that the mosaic of habitats also makes this area rich in aquatic and other insects (e.g. rugged oil beetle), as well as hosting a diverse community of wintering and breeding birds (of County Level importance) including farmland bird species such as yellow hammer, skylark and linnet which are in decline nationally. Water-associated mammals occur in the area as well as populations of badgers, hedgehogs, hares and other farmland-associated species. More extensive analysis of existing data and further survey work may reveal other species and habitats of conservation interest.

Finally, referring to Part 2 of the Guidelines I note that (Para 4.5):

Bats

Designating roosts alone offers only partial protection for bat species as they are reliant on feeding areas and commuting routes within their territories. When designating new sites for bats, efforts should be made to include key feeding areas and commuting routes where possible.

I also note that Barbastelle (Para 4.5.3, Pt 2) and Bechstein's (Para 4.5.4 Pt 2) bats are specifically identified as rare, with relatively few known roosts and as species which require complex mosaics of habitat.

This is the rationale for including the entire area described so that the full range of habitats in use by bats is part of the SSSI.

Finally, I would point out that this area is under high pressure for development. The local authorities are keen to receive information on conservation assets to assist in their sustainable planning. Without designation this important bat site will continue to be degraded through poor forest management and development encroaching on roosting and hibernation sites. This matter is therefore urgent.

The attached documents fully describe the data on bats acquired in this area of Oxfordshire including maps of the survey areas, specifically related to the central section of the Botley West proposal. Further survey data are available for the breeding and overwintering birds of the area and other elements of wildlife. I am very happy to provide these to you, discuss what I know of the area and to host a visit if required.

I very much look forward to hearing from you.

Yours Sincerely



References

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Sylvan Biodiversity Experts 2025. Botley West Solar Farm, Oxfordshire Bat Technical Note 2025 Prepared for: PhotoVolt Development Partners GmbH (PVDP) for the Applicant, SolarFive Ltd (SolarFive) (note, two versions of this).

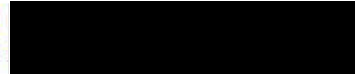
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Appendix B Letter Natural England to AD Rogers

26 June 2026



Foss House
Kings Pool
1-2 Peasholme Green
York
YO1 7PX



Dear [REDACTED]

Access to Information Request – Internal Review - IR2026/05421

Thank you for your email dated 28 April 2026, asking for an internal review of Natural England's handling of your request for information, EIR2025/01711 under the Environmental Information Regulations 2004 (the EIRs).

Process

In accordance with Natural England's internal review procedures, your request has been reviewed by a senior officer who was not involved in the original decision and is in discussion with colleagues who handled your original request.

Original Request

The original requests can be found in Annex A.

Natural England Response

The original response is in Annex B.

Review

Natural England has reviewed how we handled your request for information and whether we correctly complied with our obligations under the EIRs.

We originally extracted 3 points/questions from your letter dated 4 February 2026 addressed to Dawn Kinrade to be the scope of your request reference EIR2026/0711. The scope of the request was reiterated in our acknowledgment email dated 12 February 2026. We did not scope in the additional questions from your letter dated 17th February 2026 (incorrectly dated 4th February), nor did we address them separately. We apologise for this omission and have now addressed those questions below:

- **How wide is the pause on SSSI designations? Is it just my geographic area, is it wider (multiple areas) or is it the whole of England?**

The pause on the SSSI designation programme applies across the whole of England, with two exceptions. Work has continued on two cases: Flamborough & Filey Coast in Yorkshire, and North Thames Estuary & Marshes in Essex.

- **How long has this pause been going on and when is it expected to cease?**

This pause has been in place since March 2025. We are currently completing a review of our approach to the SSSI designation programme, from this financial year onwards. Once the review is complete, we will know more about when the pause will cease.

- **Why has the pause in SSSI designations been put in place?**

Some of the sites on the current published programme have been "paused" to enable a review to be completed to align with Natural England's strategy, [Recovering Nature for](#)

[Growth, Health and Security](#), and to ensure SSSI designations are prioritised effectively to support nature recovery at scale, climate resilience and long-term sustainability.

- Over the last 5 years how many pauses of designation have taken place and how long have they lasted?

This is the only pause on designations in the last five years. It has been ongoing since March 2025.

- How many new SSSIs have been designated over the last 5 years on an annual basis (i.e. how many each year) in England?

SSSI designation is a two-stage process. Sites are first notified, at which point they become legally protected. Notifications are then confirmed, usually within nine months, once any objections or representations have been considered.

For the purposes of this answer, "designated" is taken to mean confirmed SSSI notifications. On that basis, the number of SSSIs designated in England, by calendar year, is as follows:

Year	Number of SSSIs designated in England
2021	6
2022	1
2023	1
2024	0
2025	0
2026	0 to date

Confirmation often takes place in a year following notification, so notified and confirmed figures do not necessarily relate to the same sites.

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Regulatory Regime

We have concluded that the EIR Regulations are the applicable information access regime. This is because the information requested and held by Natural England meets the definition of environmental information in Section 2(1)(a-f) of the Regulations.

Timeliness (Regulation 5)

We have considered whether Natural England complied with the Regulations' requirement to respond to a requester within legal deadlines after receiving the request. Natural England's response to EIR2026/01711 was sent to you on 2 April 2026, which was 37 working days after the date of receipt (4 February 2026). Although Natural England did not respond within 20 working days it did respond within 40 working days after taking an extension to the deadline under Regulation 7 and therefore met its obligations. Under the Regulations, Internal Reviews must be responded to within 40 working days. We are responding today on 26 June 2026 which is 40 working days after receipt and therefore meets the Regulation requirements.

Conclusion and Decision

Natural England has completed an internal review of your information request. The decision is that your internal review is successful because we did not address your additional questions either within

the original response or separately. We have now addressed these additional questions within this response.

If you remain dissatisfied following this review, you may apply to the Information Commissioner for an independent review and decision. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at: <https://ico.org.uk/global/contact-us/> or call on 0303 123 1113 (local rate), www.ico.org.uk.

Yours sincerely

Access to Information Senior Officer
Legal and Governance
Natural England

Enc

Appendix C Letter [REDACTED]

RE: Proposal that an area of West Oxfordshire is considered as a SSSI for its outstanding bat community

Inbox

G

[REDACTED]@naturalengland.org.uk>

Fri, May 15,
5:36 PM

to me, SM-NE-Natural, SM-NE-FOI, Rebecca

Dear [REDACTED]

Many thanks again for sending this detailed submission over which I have read with interest. Please accept my apologies for the delay in replying to your email.

You have made a compelling submission and although we were already well aware of the exceptional ecological value of this area to support the bat species you have referenced, I can see how this might fit into a broader vision for nature recovery in the area which includes the exciting work happening in the Evenlode catchment and on the Blenheim Estate.

As you'll be aware, the designation of new SSSIs is a decision for Natural England's Board, rather than myself. We know that SSSIs are the foundation of England's most precious habitats and species and form the core from which wider nature recovery can spread. Natural England has a rolling programme to keep under review places that may merit and benefit from designation as SSSIs. I would like to add this site to that programme so that we can consider its merits and take a view. I'm afraid I can't give you a timeframe on how long this might take, but I would be happy to periodically update you on progress if that would be useful.

You might also be interested to know that we are currently in the process of preparing our response to the Botley West solar NSIP scheme. We shall be advocating that more needs to be done to protect the bat communities that live and forage in these areas. We will be attending the hearings shortly to publicly set out our position.

I hope this sets out our position, please do get in touch if you have any further questions.

With Best Wishes

[REDACTED]

Natural England

Please note I work Tuesday to Friday



Response to Applicant's Answers [C1-087]
to the
Secretary of State's Request for Information

Section 8: Response to answers 39-42

concerning

Ancient Woodland

Stop Botley West Campaign

15 July 2026

Stop Botley West Response to the Applicant's Answers to the Secretary of State's Questions Questions 39-41 on Ancient Woodland & Veteran Trees.

Two questions ask the Applicant to provide/update:

Q39 asks the Applicant to provide an update of Strategic Arboricultural Impact Assessment (SAIA) using Woodland Trust's Ancient Tree Inventory.

Q40 asks the Applicant to provide an update of SAIA to state there will be no trenching in veteran tree root protection areas.

A further question Q41 asks the OHA & FC to comment on SAIA submitted at deadline 6.

The Applicant has provided an updated the Veteran Tree Survey (VTS) (EN010147-002604-C1-066 - EN010147_APP_6.5 ES -Appendix 9.15 Veteran Tree Survey Report Rev1 _Part1 etc).

Areas we would draw to the attention of the Secretary of State (SoS) highlighting shortcomings in the Applicant VTS submission:

Timing of the Applicant's VTS

The Applicant chose to complete their first attempt at the VTS over a 12 day period during the winter of 2023-2024 (29th January – 9th February). At this point in the year there would have been no visible leaf canopy. Identification would have relied on other factors such as shape, structure and bark characteristics together with indicators such as fallen matter distributed around the base of the trees.

The Applicant's second attempt, the updated VTS, was completed during May 2026. The Applicant has not stated how many days were spent in the field for the updated survey searching for, identifying and recording trees.

The Applicant states that surveyors were tasked with different sections of the site and that 'Due to many of the trees being located in hedgerows access to the base of the trees was in many cases restricted due to the dense hedging, ivy, understorey and bramble, so visual inspection of some trees stem, main scaffold limbs/branches and overall crown forms was undertaken from as close as possible'. This suggests interpretation and estimation hindered accurate completion of the survey and assessment of risk.

Adherence to Stated Methodology by the Applicant

The Applicant states the methodology used 'was in compliance with the Veteran Tree Initiative (VTI) – Specialist Survey Method produced for English Nature (now Natural England) in 1996'. The VTI method states 'The girth (circumference) of the tree is measured at 1.3m height above ground level, and is entered as an accurate measurement in metres to two decimal places'.

(Ref Section 4.1, Page 7 English Nature Veteran Trees Initiative Specialist Survey Method – Designed by Treework Environmental Consultancy on behalf of Veteran Trees Initiative 1996)

The Applicant lists trees based on stem diameter measurement only (a convention used within BS5837:2012). This approach is not in compliance with the stated VTI method and the reason for this is unclear. Furthermore, the Applicant lists trees measured at 1.5m height above ground level. The VTI uses a measurement of 1.3m height above ground level. Again, the rationale for this variation is unclear. The Applicant has not followed the stated methodology and as a result the VTS may be incomplete and inaccurate or misleading.

(Ref: BS5837:2012)

It is correct to state that there is no universally agreed or adopted UK Standard for the assessment of trees. However, the Applicant has set out to use the VTI methodology and has failed to do this. This flaw will inevitably produce inconsistent and unreliable data. There is potential for ancient and veteran trees to have been missed altogether.

We fully agree with the response provided by the Oxfordshire Host Authorities (OHA) at Para 41 – Point 19 where they state: *‘there are flaws in the Applicant’s methodology for identifying ancient and veteran trees and as a result, there is potential for ancient and veteran trees to have been missed from the assessment’*.

The OHA’s point about *‘flaws in the Applicant’s methodology’* can be readily illustrated by Cumnor Parish Council’s observation of the western side of Denman’s Copse from PRoW 84/15/30 (also named the Oxford Greenbelt Way), this being the only ancient woodland in the southern site accessible from an adjacent PRoW.

In addition to showing deep shade cast 30m-40m into fields 3.8 and 3.9 at 0730 on 6th July 2026 with the sun at an inclination of 37° (elementary trigonometry showing the oak and ash trees on the western edge of Denman’s Copse have a height of 22m-30m), the photographs in Cumnor Parish Council’s submission to the Secretary of State demonstrate just how easy it should have been for the Applicant to conduct both their claimed tree surveys.

We also record our support for the overall position taken by the OHA in their response to SoS at Points 19 to 38.

(Ref: EN010147-002474-C1-024 - OHA response to SoS request for additional information- 09 June 2026 – specifically Para 41 - Ecology and Biodiversity: Ancient and Veteran Trees – Points 19 to 38)

Unclear SAIA VTS Findings

The Applicant’s updated VTS lists just 80 individual trees and 3 tree groups comprising 9 species. However, the table in section 4 Overview of Findings section appears to be incomplete totalling 73 trees and 3 tree groups. The reason for this is unclear.

In question 39 the SoS notes that the Applicant’s:

‘Strategic Arboricultural Impact Assessment & Method Statement [REP6-014 to REP6-018] intends to use NE’s buffer zone recommendations for ancient woodland’

The Applicant confirms this on **page 101 of their C1-087** noting that:

‘Ancient woodlands are shown on the figures within Appendix 8.3 Strategic Arboricultural Impact Assessment & Method Statement (Rev 1) [REP6-014 to REP6-018]’

This statement by the Applicant is not true for their proposed southern site.

There are significant omissions of ancient woodland in the Applicant’s **REP6-017** and **REP6-018**.

This may account for the Applicant’s new June 2026 claim (**C1-069**) that it only need consider 11 veteran trees for its entire southern site and the cable route to it from the central site, with apparently no veteran trees in any of the designated ancient woodland

The Applicant has failed to inform first the ExA, and now the SoS, of 4 areas of ancient woodland immediately adjacent to their Order Limits, with trees growing to the redline boundary with their foliage overhanging it:

- Shadwell Copse (surrounded on 3 sides: north, west and east) by the DCO redline
- Denman’s Copse (surrounded on 3 sides: north, west and east) by the DCO redline
- Smith Hill Copse (surrounded on 3 sides: north, west and east) by the DCO redline

- Stroud Copse – mislabelled as ‘Strond’ on the Natural England ancient woodland map (DCO red line following B4044 for underground cable works lies on Copse’s western boundary)

One further area ignored by the Applicant is immediately adjacent to the proposed NGET substation:

- Bushy Leaze Copse (NGET substation redline lies on the Eastern boundary of this copse)

The Applicant also ignores ancient woodland immediately adjacent to its proposed crossing of the River Thames including the internationally renowned Wytham Woods SSSI incorporating Hither Hill, Further Clay Hill and Hither Clay Hill.

It is not credible for the Applicant to state that such a huge site covering in excess of 1,400 hectares (stretching 17km north to south and 4.5km east to west at the central section), that has been largely maintained for many centuries as estate farmland and woodland, contains so few important trees.

Also, in respect of the Secretary of State’s Q40 on Horizontal Directional Drilling impacts on ancient woodland: since the Applicant has failed after 4+ years to identify the world renowned Wytham Woods SSSI as ancient woodland, and given it is immediately adjacent to the Applicant’s proposed crossing of the River Thames north of Swinford, no credence can be given to any statements made by the Applicant in its response to Q40.

Globally significant location

The immediate area is globally significant from an arboriculture perspective. Blenheim High Park ancient woodland and pasture is recognised as one of the most biodiverse locations in the UK and is a Site of Specific Scientific Interest (SSSI).

(Ref: <https://www.blenheimpalace.com/estate/strategy/natural-balance/high-park/>)

It is located less than 2km north of Worton Heath, Bladon Heath, Burleigh Wood and Pinsley Wood which together form a chain of ancient woodlands spanning the valley of River Evenlode. The woodlands contribute significantly to the setting of the Blenheim estate and status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site as recognised within the published estate management plan.

(Ref: *Blenheim WHS Management Plan 2017*)

Woodland Trust Ancient Tree Inventory data

In their response, the Applicant has commented the Woodland Trust Ancient Tree Inventory (ATI) was updated with additional trees being added after their VTS was completed. This is to be expected as this is a continuous process, with volunteer recorders and Woodland Trust assessors adding to this valuable open-source database on a regular basis.

Despite ancient and veteran trees being added to the ATI after the initial VTS, we can assure the SoS that the trees recorded by Woodland Trust volunteers were, indeed, there all along notwithstanding the Applicant’s continued failure to identify them.

The SoS notes the southern perimeter of Worton Heath woodland where the ATI shows the presence of multiple veteran trees very close to the proposed cable route.

The ATI also shows the presence of multiple veteran trees in other sensitive locations where cabling work is proposed including Bladon Heath woodland spur (Ref: Manor Road, Bladon) and at Burleigh Lodge at the point where Burleigh Wood and Bladon Heath woodland touch.

(Ref: *Cassington Road and Field Numbers 2.39, 2.41, 2.44*).

(Ref: [REDACTED])

Access to measure trees

The overall picture presented by the ATI is influenced by a number of factors including access.

The Woodland Trust ATI has UK wide coverage, however as the Applicant's VTS notes 'its data completeness across the UK varies widely'. This situation exists not simply because 'tree entries are provided by members of the public' as the Applicant's VTS suggests but also because access to the land where important trees are located is regularly restricted or not possible due to ownership restriction or safety considerations.

It is very important to note that the majority of the land in this application is private and either restricts or prevents access completely. It is simply not possible to access areas of woodland and individual trees in many parts of the Botley West application area. This prevents volunteer recorders from gathering data.

It is noted that the ATI contains an enormous number of important trees recorded within Blenheim High Park presumably with the permission of the landowner. It is questionable why there are so few recorded in the surrounding ancient woodlands that form part of the application site. It is likely that much effort has been put into recording trees within High Park. This is understandable because the tree collection located within the park is globally significant. However, lower recorded numbers in the surrounding woodlands should not be taken as an indication of the absence of ancient and veteran trees, rather a lack of volunteer access opportunities and other unrelated factors.

Conclusions and Recommendation

The Applicant is asking the SoS to accept that they have surveyed the 1,400 hectare site accurately, in accordance with their stated methodology and only identified 80 ancient and veteran trees and 3 tree groups. This equates to just a single recordable tree per 17 hectares (equivalent to 1 tree per 40+ acres) across a site that forms in very large part the setting of the Blenheim Palace World Heritage Site and for the southern site 4 tracts of ancient woodland including the world renowned Wytham Woods and its SSSI.

Furthermore, they are asking the SoS to overlook the fact that Woodland Trust volunteers, with very limited time, resource or access to private land, were able to easily identify specimens missed by the Applicant. The Applicant is responsible for clearly identifying ancient and veteran trees and this is something that they appear unable to do.

In their response, the Local Authorities (represented by the OHA) have highlighted flaws, inadequacies, omissions, underestimations, vagueness, unacceptable practice and a lack of clarity in the Applicant's SAIA and VTS submission.

The ancient and veteran trees remaining in the UK comprise a precious natural asset and provide a unique habitat and refuge for wildlife and, accordingly, are afforded protection. The trees across the application site are part of this irreplaceable natural asset.

It is clear that the Applicant does not know where important trees are located across the site and is asking for development consent to go ahead without this information.

Unfortunately, the mitigation approach proposed is minimalist, ignores the recommendations of ICOMOS and the OHA and does not deal with risk adequately - or at all - for an unknown number of trees. The Applicant is effectively asking for consent to self-police an unknown problem across inaccessible private land.

This application places ancient and veteran trees at risk of damage, deterioration and loss.

We believe the Applicant's updated VTS, is not credible. The Applicant has failed to provide the SoS with the assurance sought regarding the identification of individual veteran trees across the site. Trees and woodlands are a very important in this location and form a key element within the setting of Blenheim Palace. We ask that this information is considered as significant by the SoS when deciding on this application.



Response to Applicant's Answers [C1-087]
to the
Secretary of State's Request for Information

Section 9: Responses to answers 44-49

concerning

Aviation

Stop Botley West Campaign
15 July 2026

Stop Botley West Response to the Applicant's Answers to the Secretary of State's Questions 44 - 49: Aviation

Introduction and context: The Stop Botley West community group (SBW) has reviewed the responses to the SoS's questions from Oxford Aviation Services Limited (OASL) and the Applicant. We believe that none of the important flight safety concerns highlighted by the SoS have been adequately resolved to answer the genuine fears of thousands of residents and their communities who are regularly over-flown by trainee pilots operating from London Oxford Airport.

The following submission substantiates our continued focus on significant flight safety risks that we believe should be considered as **a national issue** rather than just a local concern. We now understand that flying schools from all over the UK, not just those based at Kidlington, use London Oxford Airport's unique location and facilities for technical aspects of flight training.

OASL's submission on 10 April 2025 to the Planning Inspectorate (PDA-002) confirms the scale of flight operations from LOA: *"Some 75% of all the flying activity is training-related today, with close to 70,000 movements a year under a permitted limit of 160,000; no other peers have a similar capability."*

OASL's submission continues: *"The Airport stands out among other general aviation airports due to its ongoing focus on providing an environment ideal for professional training requirements, including long opening hours, seven days a week operating, facilitating night flying all through the year and an air traffic control set-up, replicating the same environment as one would find at a commercial airport hosting airline activity."*

"Geographically, the airport resides in busy and complex airspace which - compared to other aerodromes - is a very positive environment for trainees to establish the necessary skills and disciplines required."

Our detailed observations about the responses from the Applicant and OASL (below) have been informed by discussions with senior management of two of the major flight training schools operating at LOA.

Para 44 - Engine Failure After Take-Off (EFATO)

Statement by the Applicant: *To clarify, EFATO issue was successfully resolved between the parties during Examination.*

SBW observation: It is a significant overstatement to claim that the EFATO risk has been resolved by minor changes to the area of panels removed immediately beyond the end of the runway, which was the bare minimum required by OASL. The discussion of the EFATO issue ignores the fact that engine failure can occur anywhere in the Airport circuit. By definition, emergency landing areas available to afflicted pilots will be dangerously reduced by the vast solar panel arrays proposed. Trainees regularly practice engine failure procedures while flying over areas in the proposed central and northern sites that would be covered by solar panels, if the development is approved.

Additional EFATO comment by the Applicant (Para 49): *EFATO in the UK is extremely rare - partial power loss is more common allowing the aircraft to choose its landing site and land in a controlled manner. Further, noise abatement rules at Oxford Airport require aircraft to climb straight to 1000 ft, meaning that only an engine failure over the runaway would result in the aircraft having to land on the fields within project order limits. A light aircraft taking off at the beginning of runway 19 will be at 50 feet after 2000 feet of runway; runway 19 is 5000 feet in length, meaning the aircraft would land back on the runway in the event of EFATO, or clear of the solar farm fields if over the airport boundary.*

SBW observation: This is misleading. Partial power loss will result in much lower or even negative climb rate, which would severely reduce the landing areas available to a pilot.

Flying school executives have told us that one of the decisive factors in their selection of LOA as their operational base was the large area of open countryside near the airfield with consequential safety benefits. It is essential that a much larger area of solar panels be removed to maintain the aviation safety environment.

In the past decade, members of the local community have witnessed and responded to several fatal crashes on the area proposed for solar panels, and they are concerned that pilots in trouble will aim for the roads or school playing fields instead. There can be no justification for putting the public at increased risk, particularly when previous development proposals have been declined because of these obvious aviation risks.

Para 45 - Glint and Glare

Statement by OASL: *OASL does not consider the proposed development likely to have an unacceptable effect on LOA. OASL nevertheless wishes to record that a residual risk of unforeseen glint and glare effects will always remain where ground-mounted solar arrays are installed close to an airfield.*

SBW observation: OASL admits that there is residual risk from glint and glare. The potential for dangerous glint and glare outcomes from nearby solar panels has been clearly demonstrated by the costly enforced shutdown of Schiphol Airport's runway in March and April 2025. Commercial airline pilots had to re-route to other airports after being dazzled on sunny days as they tried to land in the face of glint and glare from a solar farm close to the airport. The Dutch government at national and local levels became involved, and legal action is being taken to get the solar panels removed, with damages estimated to total around €300 million.

Para 46 - Thermal Turbulence

Statement by OASL: *OASL has been unable to identify suitable technical expertise to independently peer review the reports on thermal plume impacts.*

SBW observation: Since neither OASL nor the Applicant have been able to review this issue, it remains a possible risk, and the precautionary principle should apply. This is important given initial concerns raised by RAF Brize Norton about the potential for thermal plume activity to have a negative effect on the effectiveness of its radar systems. It is worth noting that the MoD is officially opposing the development of a large-scale solar farm near RAF Marham in Norfolk, home of the legendary 617 Dambusters squadron. The MoD is concerned about the impact of metal solar arrays on its radar systems, as well as glint and glare from the panels.

Para 47 Bird Strike

Statement by the Applicant: *Since the close of Examination, the parties have been negotiating a Wildlife Hazard Management Unit Agreement.*

Statement by OASL: *The agreement between the parties provides for funding from the Applicant to OASL in relation to bird strike risk at LOA. The funding covers an independent assessment of any increase in bird strike risk attributable to the development, together with the planning, implementation, operation and maintenance of a Wildlife Hazard Management Unit at LOA. The agreement remains on draft and awaiting finalisation and signature.*

SBW observation: The Applicant admits this has not been finalised, so no detail is available for public scrutiny. OASL management raised its initial concerns about bird strike risk with the Applicant at least two years ago, and we regard it as insulting to the local community's

legitimate concerns about flight safety that this important issue has not been resolved in time to allow for detailed public scrutiny.

Paras 48 and 49 - Socioeconomics

Statement by OASL: *London Oxford Airport is home to numerous small and medium-sized aviation businesses. To properly assess the proposed development's potential economic effects on the Airport, the Applicant should have engaged with those businesses during the DCO process, particularly the flying schools.*

OASL does not seek to raise a new objection. Its purpose is to draw the Secretary of State's attention to the fact that the Applicant should have undertaken an economic impact appraisal in consultation with those businesses. In the absence of that work, the economic impact cannot be properly quantified.

SBW observation: The opinions of these flying schools are crucially important in assessing the damage which would result from the proposed Botley West development, and the Applicant should have consulted them well before the June 9 deadline.

We have spoken to senior management at two flight training business operating out of LOA, who emphasise their view that a much larger area of the rural countryside surrounding the airport should be free of solar panels. They cite four key risk areas:

- emergency landings on acres of solar panels
- pilots distracted by glint and glare
- engine bird strikes
- radar disruption from thermal plumes.

To quote Mr Oscar Sordo, CEO of FTEJerez, which uses LOA for some of its pilot training programmes for British Airways: "For these reasons, we join other local businesses and residents in opposing the application to develop the Botley West solar power station in its proposed location." (REP7-187)

We note that the Applicant has failed to comply with the SoS's request that it should "provide comments on the potential effects of the development on the economic viability of LOA and associated aviation operators, having regard to representations and submissions including, but not limited to, the submission from FTEJerez..." We regard this failure to comply with the SoS's request as an abuse of process by the Applicant.

The only related reference in the Applicant's response is this statement: "(FTEJerez) signed the agreement with Oxford Airport in June 2025, during the Examination, meaning it was aware of the Applicant's plans for the solar farm at the time it agreed terms with OASL." This is clearly an inference by the Applicant, not a factual statement.

SBW's understanding from communication with FTEJerez is that at the time of committing to LOA, FTEJerez had no awareness or understanding of the scale and proximity to LOA of the proposed development – as borne out in FTEJerez's submission to the Planning Inspectorate.

In summary: SBW believes that the Applicant's inadequate responses and unresolved actions in relation to ensuring the continued safety and wellbeing of thousands of trainee pilots a year present an issue of national importance. This scale of unmitigated risk should disqualify the Applicant from being able to proceed with its plans, particularly for the proposed central site.



Response to Applicant's Answers [C1-087]
to the
Secretary of State's Request for Information

Section 10: Response to answer 50

concerning

Community Food Growing

Stop Botley West Campaign

15 July 2026

Stop Botley West Response to the Applicant's Answers to the Secretary of State's Question 50. Community Food Growing.

Question 50 concerns Community Food Growing.

"The Applicant is requested to provide an update on the interest in community food growing, further to [REP5-005], (noting that two areas up to 30 ha are proposed), details of the location of the site and how, if taken forward, they would be allocated, managed and maintained, including the mechanism to secure appropriate controls for the erection of any structures and other associated paraphernalia in these areas, there these areas, notwithstanding that monitoring details are to be further set out in the Operational Management Plan" [REP6-032]

Update on Interest

A) Interest among the Local Community

The Applicant provides no update on any engagement with local stakeholders (District/Parish Councils or residents) since the superficial consultation in Dec 2024. This question was also asked in ExA's First Written Questions [PD-008] Q1.16.8 At that time, the Applicant's answer included the comment:

"The village of Bladon expressed interest in establishing an area for allotments, given current high demand and limited availability in the village" (no source provided)

This was subsequently found to be untrue as confirmed in submissions from Bladon Parish Council [REP3-073 and REP6-076], Bladon Village Sir Winston Churchill Memorial Hall [REP3-086] and many interested parties including Frances Stevenson who wrote [REP3-095]:

"It is unclear who the Applicant is referring to as 'the village of Bladon'. Existing groups that might represent the village on this subject are Bladon Parish Council, Bladon Gardens Society and Bladon Allotments Association. I have spoken to each of these groups and all confirm that they have not been approached or consulted by or on behalf of the Applicant for their opinion on the community food growing proposal. The Chair of Bladon Allotments Association, which is responsible for managing the existing allotments site in Bladon, also explained that the provision of allotments in Bladon is roughly in balance with demand."

At this 11th hour, the Applicant adds:

"The Applicant will work with bodies such as the parish councils to attract growers from local villages."

The obvious reply to this belated offer is "why now"? The Applicant failed to make any approach to these bodies during the planning stage. During the examination there was still no engagement despite the considerable amount of well evidenced factual feedback from District and Parish Councils, Church Hanborough residents and other IPs that the Applicant's plans are inappropriate, unworkable and neither needed nor wanted. Ref [REP6-076, REP5-072, REP5-082, REP5-093, REP3-036, REP3-073]

(B) Interest by 3rd parties

In response to (1) the Applicant says

"The Applicant has signed Memoranda of Understanding with Cherwell Collective and with Plot 4." (the same answer given in answering ExQ1.13.4 in July 2024. [REP2-025]

They go on to say:

"The scheme with OxFarmToFork will involve setting aside a part of a field, deer - fencing it and ensuring there is a water supply. Plots would then be offered to small growers, with OxFarmToFork providing a market for the produce and using their electric vans to deliver the food to Oxford college kitchens."

But there is no evidence of an agreement and no confirmation that the onion grower shown around the site on 20th June 2024 is still interested. The Applicants response on 22 Aug 2025 to ExQ2.5.5 [REP4-037] said:

"this field [2.116] was of interest to a grower of organic onions selling via the Farm to Fork scheme."

OxFarmToFork, when asked by SBW if they knew of any plans to use the Church Hanborough field (2.116), confirmed that while they had visit the BWSF site in June 2024, they questioned whether field 2.116 was viewed. They say:

"I think the land he [the Applicant] was offering one of our market gardeners was adjacent to Bladon, not Church Hanborough - and not as much as 30 hectares."

"We have had no further conversations with [the Applicant] about this land - the only land we have talked about is the land adjacent to Boldon [Bladon] and this also has gone very quiet."

Background on Cherwell Collective, Plot 4 and FarmtoFork

The first two organisations run a few allotments but have no links to the Communities in which the plots are being proposed and neither of them have contacted the residents of the Villages involved or the Councils who represent them. The third organisation connects institutions with local farmers and producers on a commercial basis.

Cherwell Collective

According to the Applicant.

"Cherwell Collective teaches food growing skills to those it supports through establishing food forests, composite allotments, and providing training to those in need of help in all of the villages around the Botley West site."

This statement is wrong on several counts. Cherwell Collective's own website states

"We manage several greenspace gardens across Oxfordshire, located in Kidlington, Oxford, Banbury, and Bicester. Our Community Leads at each of these sites manage volunteers, partnerships, and activities to suit their gardens."

So they only operate in towns/villages between 3 and 25km from BWSF. Their Bicester gardens are closing since Bicester Town Council, who own the land, have not signed the required land agreement. The Council declined to comment [Ref. BBC News 1 May 2026]. SBW have identified one garden in Kidlington and one in Banbury. These two areas are run principally for the mental health and well being of those meeting there. The small Banbury garden is especially designed as a communal space for homeless youngsters run by Banbury Youth Homeless Project. These are laudable aims but not principally about food growing.

1. Kidlington



2. Banbury



So Cherwell Collective have no experience of establishing "food forests" or "composite allotments" nor have they made any contact to establish want or need in any of the the villages around BWSF . They simply do not have the expertise, resources, manpower or local interest to scale up their food growing area to even 1 hectare (the equivalent of 40 allotments).

Plot 4 (Cutteslowe)

In their answer to question 50 the Applicant says:

"Plot 4 has been established by local Green Party politician Chris Goodall; it will grow produce for supply to local food larders such as Cutteslowe Larder in north Oxford".

In fact Plot 4 is a single allotment among 30+ others at Cutteslowe Allotments. By all accounts it is productive and does supply Cutteslowe Larder. Another laudable project but again not scalable to manage, provide or recruit volunteers for the 120 allotments that would be required to fill even the 3 hectares Chris Goodall has expressed interest in, let alone the full 7.7 hectares (308 allotments) allocated in Bladon. The project would be a challenge in Cutteslowe (pop.7000) on the outskirts of Oxford (pop.166,000). For the villages of Bladon (pop.1,000), Long Hanborough (pop. 3,500) and Church Hanborough (pop. 150) it would be impossible.

FarmtoFork

OxFarmToFork is an effective organisation described on their own website as “*a collaborative, non-profit project led by Good Food Oxfordshire that connects institutions with local farmers and producers through a short, fair, zero-emissions supply chain – built on collaboration, not profit*”.

While the project itself may be worthwhile and “not for profit”, the growers expect to make a profit on selling their produce to the institutions so this is clearly a commercial enterprise and cannot be described as “Community Food Growing” and therefore of no benefit in the planning balance.

Locations

The actual locations chosen by the Applicant are poorly described with no description, field number or sizes given. The Applicant merely says;

“The areas set aside for community food growing are at [REP 7-020 6.4 Environmental Statement - Figures 2.1a - 2.4c - Illustrative Masterplan (Rev 3)]. All the sites are in the central section, adjacent to public roads and easily accessible.”

The Masterplan is difficult to interpret with poor differentiation between yellow used for the food growing area boundaries and that used for the transmission lines. Additionally, the Bladon plots are split between map sections.

There appear to be 4 plots, not 2. There are 2 separate plots in Bladon, 1 in Church Hanborough and 1 just outside Long Hanborough

Using other sources and best estimate from the Masterplans provided, SBW calculate the four plots to be:

Area 1. Size 2.3ha in Bladon - behind Grove Rd. Part of Field 2.001

Area 2. Size 5.4ha in Bladon - near the school + beside Heath Lane. Parts of Fields 2.002 + 2.005

Area 3. Size 13ha Long Hanborough. outside the village. Field 2.034

Area 4. Size 13.3ha Church Hanborough. on edge of village Field 2.116 + part of 2.115.

Total = Size 34 ha

It is claimed that Memoranda of understanding have been drawn up for around 4 or 5 hectares and a possible 10ha might be used by the unidentified onion grower. This still leaves around 20 hectares unallocated.

Notes on Locations

Area 1. Bladon

The area behind Grove Rd is, like areas 2 and 4 in this list, producing good crops and contributing efficiently to UK food security.

Area 2. Bladon.

This area is in a field where panels have already been removed because of its sensitivity in the setting of Blenheim Palace so it needs particular protection. Contrary to the Applicant's claim, the area does not have safe vehicular access for users from outside the village. This is one of the reasons the Education Facility in the same location was removed from the plans.

Bladon Parish Council point out [REP3- 073]

"The access road is limited to single-file traffic and does not have designated passing points. Additionally, a pinch point at the entrance further restricts the width, rendering the road inaccessible to vehicles such as ambulances and skip lorries."

This route serves not only as the primary walking path to the recreation ground, allotments, cemetery, and St Mary's Church, including the grave of Sir Winston Churchill, but is also used daily by students and parents to access the only entrance to Bladon Primary School.

Furthermore, visibility when entering the lane from the main road is limited, increasing the risk of vehicles encountering each other head-on and requiring one party to reverse onto the main road or another wider section, which presents additional safety concerns."

Area 3. Long Hanborough

This area lies outside the village of Long Hanborough, the field entrance is not easily accessible and has no parking nearby. It is currently sown as a meadow because it floods most years so is totally unsuitable for allotments. It is shown on the master plan but never mentioned.

Area 4. Church Hanborough

In their response to the OHA response to ExA written question 2.5.5 [REP5-050], the Applicant states

"The land at Church Hanborough is not suitable for Cherwell Collective or Cutteslowe Larder/ Plot 4. It has been offered to a single grower of organic onions"

Firstly, the Applicant mentions no agreement or evidence that the grower of organic onions is still interested since their visit of 24 June 2024.

Secondly, this would be a purely commercial arrangement for a farmer wanting to use the land to grow products he will sell to local businesses - the Oxford Colleges are specifically named. In no way can it be considered "Community Food Growing"

The Applicant is correct to say this plot is not suitable for Cherwell Collective or Cutteslowe Larder/ Plot 4 but gives no reasons. For the following reasons, the Church Hanborough Plot (field 2.116 + Part 2.115) is unsuitable both for Allotment style enterprises and, in points 2, 3 and 4 below, for growing onions.

1. At 13.28ha this area is equivalent to 531 allotments, far in excess of the number which could be used by the residents of Church Hanborough (population 150)
 2. It is in a conservation area within the setting of the Grade 1 listed church of St Peter and St Paul, a Heritage Asset of national importance.
 3. The land is currently well farmed producing average or better crops thus contributing to the UK's food security. Growing crops of wheat, oil seed rape, and other crops in rotation, the responsible tenant uses regenerative agriculture and not, as claimed by the Applicant, "intensive methods" or as the CEO of Blenheim Estate claimed "drenching it with chemicals"
- The farmer also points out that the land is not suitable for growing a single root crop every year.

Church Hanborough field 2.115/6



Grove Rd, Bladon Field 2.001



Management and Control

The Applicant's answer on this topic says

"By agreement a tool store may be sited beside the entrance gate to a field, lower than the hedge line, subject to consent from the LPA. This will be a communal store. No 'associated paraphernalia' will be permitted. Plots that are not being worked would be taken back in hand. As stated, monitoring details will be set out in the Operational Management Plan."

This seems likely to be an unworkable agreement for allotment style plots and the Applicant does not explain how it would be managed or by whom plots *"would be taken back in hand"*. The absence of a clear plan now, gives little confidence that these fields will actually be used at all, never mind managed productively with the consequential loss of the crops currently being produced from the land.

Even if the onion grower wanted to and was allowed to take the 13 ha at Church Hanborough and the other two organisations took 5 ha between them (the equivalent of 200 allotments) that still leaves 12-15 ha unallocated.

Conclusion

- The Applicant has provided insufficient evidence that any of these plans will be taken forward or that these plots would all be filled and used productively. Cherwell Collective and Plot 4 have no track record of being able to manage even a tiny fraction of the land they have been offered. Even 3 hectares (120 allotments) is an impossibly ambitious target for them.
- The Applicant has assumed a need and desire for additional Food Growing Areas without consulting the Community who have, nevertheless sent in well evidenced submissions opposing the plan.
- The plans include a commercial enterprise so not, as claimed, a Community benefit. A commercial enterprise has no place on a solar farm. It cannot be given any positive weight in the planning balance.
- The locations do not, as claimed, all have "safe and easy access". The Bladon access is restricted and hazardous.
- The Applicant has failed to justify the need for these 4 areas to be retained within the Order Limits of the project.

For these reasons and to safeguard this land the Applicant should remove the fields currently designated for Community Food Growing (parts of fields 2.001, 2.002, 2.005, 2.115 and the whole of fields 2.035 and 2.116) from the Order Limits and the red-line boundary should be re-drawn as there is no justification for them to be part of BWSF.



Response to Applicant's Answers [C1-087]
to the
Secretary of State's Request for Information

Section 11: Response to answer 57

concerning

Hydrology and Flood Risk

Stop Botley West Campaign

15 July 2026

Stop Botley West Response to the Applicant's Answers to the Secretary of State's Question 57 Hydrology and Flood Risk

Secretary of State's Question 57

57. Noting the concern raised by both Cassington and Cumnor Parish Councils [REP7-068 and REP7-076], and the ExA's second written questions [PD-012, Q 2.10.3] and paragraph 5.8.36 of NPS EN-1, the Applicant is requested to provide further data to evidence the efficacy of the mitigation measures suggested within the Conceptual Drainage Strategy [REP4-018], in particular for the central and southern areas of the Proposed Development. The Applicant is requested to share the results with the Environment Agency for review and comment.

Applicant's Response

The Applicant's response represents absolutely no shift in position regarding the elevated pluvial flood risk that the Botley West Solar Power Station poses to the village of Cassington and to the pluvial and fluvial flood risk in and around the southern site in Cumnor Parish. Instead, they double down on the contention that vegetation underneath the solar arrays will mitigate any increased runoff resulting from rain falling on hard surfaces and forming drip lines along the lower edge of the arrays. They then, as before, put forward several measures, including the creation of a drainage pond to the north of Cassington, ditch widening and the creation of bunds to redirect water flow. We note the latter will in themselves create environmental impacts and should be subject to review by the public and by the local authorities. There is no evidence, whatsoever, that these measures will mitigate increased runoff from the solar arrays to the north of Cassington and to the north of Cumnor village and east of Filchampsted; no modelling, no testing or any other work.

Stop Botley West's Response

The infiltration testing requested by was undertaken only in Cumnor, not Cassington although both areas are very prone to flooding. We note that in these tests, only conducted in Fields 3.1 and 3.3 during May 2026 - after multiple requests to do so - in three out of four test pits showed no infiltration at all and the pit which did show some infiltration "*cannot be considered sufficient for the effective use of soakaways for the disposal of surface water*".

That this testing has only just been undertaken in fields that the Applicant identified in the 2023 consultation and the November 2024 DCO application as the location for PV panels, the Applicant's own substation and its preferred site for the NGET substation within the order limits is indicative of its lack of engagement with this crucial planning issue.

That there is no infiltration in the Farmoor valley is unsurprising as much of the low-lying areas surrounding Cumnor and Cassington are formed of clay which prevents efficient drainage of surface water. In Cassington, the elevated nature of the landscape to the north, proposed to be covered in solar arrays, is why the village is prone to flooding. Similarly in Cumnor Parish, the applicant has proposed panels on steeply sloping north facing slopes at elevations up to 40m above the valley floor.

It may explain the reluctance of the Applicant to undertake infiltration testing as this demonstrates that the soils around Cumnor and presumably Cassington represent the worst possible situation for drainage in that they have a very low permeability for water and cannot be relied on to take up increased runoff from solar arrays (see below).

Stop Botley West has repeated in submissions throughout the Examination that the localities of Cassington, Jericho Barns and Worten are all at a high risk of pluvial flooding with Cassington being at particular risk as it has flooded twice in the last 20 years (2007 and 2024).

Similarly fluvial and pluvial flooding in the Farmoor valley has been repeatedly highlighted by Cumnor Parish Council and the OHA.

The vulnerability of Cassington to flooding is not contended by the Applicant. To justify building the proposed scheme in a flood-prone area, the Applicant has to apply the Exception Test. One of the criteria for this requires the Applicant to demonstrate that “the project will be safe for its lifetime taking into account the vulnerability of its users, without increasing flood risk elsewhere, and where possible will reduce flood risk overall”. The Applicant contends that evidence (Pisinaras et. al., 2014; Cook and McCuen, 2013) indicates that the solar panels do not change volume or peak rates of runoff and base their entire contention that the proposed scheme will not increase flood risk to Cassington on the basis of these two, now rather old papers.

Cassington Parish Council employed the consultant, Clive Carpenter, from GWP Consultants, an expert with 30 years’ experience in water management and impact assessment projects in the U.K. and overseas. His evidence in REP3-076 points out that:

*“As before to support their [the Applicants] statement solar panels do not increase storm run-off, they refer to **out-dated research by Cook and McCuen published in 2013**, which they advise concluded that full vegetation cover is required beneath the modules to make changes in run-off flows insignificant. As before the Applicant goes onto dismiss research by Pisinaras (2014) and Yavari (2022) which report increases in storm run-off, considering these results as inappropriate given the semi-arid environment the work was undertaken in.”*

And further:

“It is very noticeable however, that the Applicant does not challenge the more recent research, referenced by ourselves in our July 2024 report letter, in this technical area, which provides consistent conclusions that solar panels increase peak run-off, increase total flows and increase erosion compared to the pre-development situation. This more recent research is considered to better represent the micro-hydrology of, and the inter-relationship between, the solar panels, the below-panel shaded vegetation and the inter-panel access corridors.

For ease of the reader, the following research summaries are repeated here from our July 2024 report letter:

- Gullotta et al (2023) found that whilst there were no practical changes in run-off immediately after installation, that in the long-term, peak run-off rates increased by 20-35% due to changes to the vegetation and soils, principally: increased saturation of the access corridor due to panel run-off drip-lines; corridor soil compaction due to maintenance vehicles resulting in reduced infiltration; and lower*

250611.v01 BOTWEST Independent Review of Botley West Solar Farm Env... (Report Letter) 03/06/2025 5 vegetation growth under the panels due to shading. The 3 contributing factors result in faster surface water run-off, greater total run-off volumes (up to 5%) and increased velocities, which logically will result in more erosion. It should be noted, it is peak run-off which is primarily responsible for flooding.

- Galzki et al (2024) undertook research on 5 commercial solar farms in the USA over a wide range of climatic conditions. They found that run-off from a fixed panel was approximately 10 times that from the incident precipitation rate on average, and that run-off increased by 14% for widely spaced panels, to 23% for narrowly spaced panels – note this did not include soil compaction in the access corridors. Panel orientation relative to the ground slope angle was also found (as would be expected) to be important, with panel rows orientated on the landscape contours generating less run-off than those installed up and down the hillslope. Increases in soil density in the access corridors (as would be caused by maintenance vehicles) also increased storm water run-off.

- Lastly, Liu et al (2023) investigated the effects of solar farms on soil erosion. He concluded that the effects of concentrating rainfall along solar panel downslope edges and the reduction in vegetation beneath the panels (due to 67-90% less solar radiation from panel shading), increased storm run-off peak flow rates by between 7% and 73%, and annual total run-off by between 14% and 4,046%, with erosion increasing by 58% to 88%. Liu identified rainfall intensity increasing by 5 times at the drip line compared to natural rainfall intensity. Liu also highlighted that once erosion commenced, this accelerated erosion rates increase further as it further concentrates overland flow into run-off channels. Liu also highlighted the particular risks during the construction period when vegetation removal and vehicle movements are at their greatest.

Whilst the above is a rather technical discussion, the concluding point is that contrary to the Applicant's submissions, research shows that solar panels do increase storm rainfall run-off. Because the Applicant cannot demonstrate the vegetation solution has a guaranteed reliability and effectiveness up to a given design event (ie a regulator specified required 1 in 100 Year plus climate change return period), then the vegetation and filter strip mitigation measures cannot be considered to be reliable to maintain storm run-off at predevelopment levels up to and including 1 in 100 Year return period storms.

The consequence for the Applicant is that they will need to manage (capture, store and slowly release) the storm water rainfall run-off from nearly all 14km² (1,400 hectares) of the development that contains the 840 hectares of solar panels, as opposed to the 2.2 hectares they are proposing. This is a fundamental error on the part of the Applicant, which underestimates (if we assume hectares to be managed as a reasonable metric) surface water flood risk by almost 3 orders of magnitude. On this basis the application should be refused."

We note that some details of the design of Botley West Utility-Scale Solar Power Station have changed, but the fundamental point that solar arrays potentially cause an increase in runoff remains a significant issue for Cassington which lies on low ground to the south of the hills on which the Applicant still plans to site solar arrays.

Whilst the Applicant still contends that solar arrays do not increase runoff rates, contrary to the up-to-date and strong evidence presented by Clive Carpenter we note that our consultant is not the only hydrologist who has raised this issue in the U.K. Richard Skeffington is an Emeritus Professor of Geography and Environmental Science at the University of Reading. He has been involved in hydrological research since 1977, first as an environmental scientist in the electrical generation industry working on the effects of acid rain on freshwaters, and after he returned to academic life in 1999, working on modelling and monitoring freshwaters, and hydrology and climate change. He is the co-author of a key paper on climate change and the water environment in England and Wales and co-led the modelling work packages of two large EU-funded projects, EUROLIMPACS and REFRESH,

which investigated the predicted effects of climate change on waters across Europe. His publications on hydrological topics have been referenced more than 1000 times. He is currently looking at the potential impacts of the Lime Down Solar Power Station on flood risk.

Here, we cite the evidence presented in EN010168-001403-SLD_Appendix F2 Runoff from Solar Panels at Lime Down by Prof. Skeffington which has been submitted to that Examination. Note that in this evidence “The Applicant” refers to the applicants for the Lime Down Solar Power Station.

Research on the Effects of Solar Panels on Runoff

9. The difficulty facing all models of the effects of solar panels on runoff is how to represent the fact that there is an impervious surface, the panels, raised above the ground surface. UK regulation seems to have started from the premise that the panels are therefore irrelevant, since there is the same amount of ground after the panels were built as there was before. In contrast, the initial regulatory approach in the USA was to specifically regulate solar farm storm drainage and treating the panels as impervious surfaces on the ground (Yavari et al., 2022), and mandated engineering measures to prevent the consequent excess runoff and erosion.

10. Both views are clearly wrong. The US view ignores the capacity of the ground under the panels to infiltrate water and mitigate runoff. The British view ignores the fact that the panels redistribute water. In particular, the panels concentrate water at the lower edge of the panel slope, often as discrete drip points, and that the ground under the panels is considerably drier.

The question then arises as to whether the soil can assimilate the volume of water under the drip points, which is much greater than the natural rainfall rate. If the answer is “no”, then a surface water flow will develop. If it continues to flow over a saturated or impervious surface then there is the risk of soil erosion and a rill or small gully may develop. These transfer water much more quickly to drains and streams than percolation through the soil, leading to quicker runoff and higher flood peaks. If the surface water reaches the drier area under the panels, then it may return to the soil water or groundwater without causing flooding. On the other hand, drying some types of soil can cause an impervious surface crust to form, and the soil under the panels may no longer be able to assimilate much water. The soil under the drip line is likely to be saturated more frequently than it was before, and this may also increase runoff rates. Clearly the small-scale configuration of the panels, such as the orientation of the panels relative to the slope of the ground, and where any engineered mitigation is placed, will have a large effect on the outcomes. Modelling and measuring these effects is a considerable challenge as will be seen below.

11. The Applicant’s FRA makes reference to the paper prepared by Cook and McCuen (2013), an early review of the hydrological effects of solar farms. The authors identify several potential problems, including increases in the volume of runoff, increased height of flow peaks, and increased kinetic energy of runoff from the panels leading to soil erosion. They built a computer model on hydrological principles to test these issues, which concluded that “the solar panels themselves did not have a significant effect on the runoff volumes, peaks, or times to peak”. This conclusion is often quoted by solar developers in the UK. In the paper itself, however, the conclusion was contingent on appropriate ground management, in the absence of which the model could show significant increases in peak discharge and potential for soil erosion:

“The addition of solar panels over a grassy field does not have much of an effect on the volume of runoff, the peak discharge, nor the time to peak. With each analysis, the runoff volume increased slightly but not enough to require storm-water management facilities. However, when the land-cover type was changed under the panels, the hydrologic response changed significantly. When gravel or pavement was placed under the panels, with the spacer section left as patchy grass or bare ground, the volume of the runoff increased significantly and the peak discharge increased by approximately 100%. This was also the result when the entire cell was assumed to be bare ground.”

“The potential for erosion of the soil at the base of the solar panels was also studied. It was determined that the kinetic energy of the water draining from the solar panel could be as much as 10 times greater than that of rainfall. Thus, because the energy of the water draining from the panels is much higher, it is very possible that soil below the base of the solar panel could erode owing to the concentrated flow of water off the panel, especially if there is bare ground in the spacer section of the cell. If necessary, erosion control methods should be used.”

12. Cook and McCuen (2013) suggested some management strategies to alleviate the risks identified: “Bare ground beneath the panels and in the spacer section is a realistic possibility (see Figs. 1 and 5). Thus, a good, well maintained grass cover beneath the panels and in the spacer section is highly recommended. If gravel, pavement, or bare ground is deemed unavoidable below the panels or in the spacer section, it may necessary to add a buffer section to control the excess runoff volume and ensure adequate losses. If these simple measures are taken, solar farms will not have an adverse hydrologic impact from excess runoff or contribute eroded soil particles to receiving streams and waterways.”

13. However, Cook and McCuen (2013) did not model or assess proposed mitigation measures. There is no evidence that the Applicant’s proposed “planting” would be effective. Additionally, as many subsequent authors have commented, Cook and McCuen’s (2013) modelling was not validated by field measurements from real solar farms. Work over the last 15 years has somewhat clarified the range of factors which need consideration and shown that many of Cook and McCuen’s conclusions are flawed. These are reviewed below. The Applicant should not be quoting outdated work simply because it supports a pre-determined position.

14. Cook and McCuen (2013) were not the only authors to attempt to model runoff from solar panels. In a review of solar farm hydrology, Yavari et al (2022) noted that, up to that time, evaluation of runoff generation was confined to model-based studies. They drew attention to several papers, some of which come to contrasting conclusions to Cook and McCuen:

a. Barnard et al (2017) used a combination of HEC-HMS hydrological models from the US Corps of Engineers and the Flo-2D routing model to design a drainage system for a large solar farm in West Texas. The system required both hard engineering (retention ponds) and SuDS-like features (swales and berms), as well as regrading of the site in places to prevent excess runoff and soil erosion. There was no suggestion that allowing water to infiltrate under the panels would be adequate on its own. The area has a similar annual rainfall to Lime Down, but rain typically comes in large convective storms so requires the ability to cope with heavier short-term rainfall than in the UK. The paper illustrates that it was felt necessary to use a connected set of models on a wide spatial scale, involving modelling of over 130,000 grid elements, to produce estimates of not only flood depths but velocities and off-site flows. These models were used to design flood mitigation works.

b. Pisinaras et al (2014) used the SWAT model to predict the effect of replacement of agriculture with solar farms in the Vosvozis river basin in NE Greece. The model demonstrated increased surface water runoff and percolation, although changes were not significant at the watershed scale. For small river basins (c. 10km²), replacement of 1% or 5% of current agriculture with solar panels led to increases in surface runoff of up to 110 mm, according to the model. For the large river basins (c. 300km²) the effect was much smaller, about 6 mm, though not all the basin was modified. The area has a Mediterranean climate, with most rain falling in winter.

c. A non peer-reviewed study by Edalat (2017) which showed a modelled increase in runoff after solar panel installation. In this case, however, the model assumed the panels were flat impervious surfaces on the ground, which would exaggerate the effects.

15. A later model-only study by Gullota et al (2023) used the US EPA Storm Water Management Model (SWMM). A variety of hydrological and soil conditions were simulated, with and without panels. In the short-term, the panels made little difference. However, when the model was parameterised to incorporate the redistribution of soil moisture by the panel structures over time, peak flows increased by 6-35%, and total runoff by 1-5%. These would be significant values for a project meant to last 60 years.

16. Nair et al (2024) also used the SWMM, set up somewhat differently, to model a range of conditions in a model solar farm. In this case both peak runoff and total runoff volume were increased by the solar panels. The magnitude of the results depended on how the panels were oriented relative to the slope. These model-only studies show that different but credible models, with varying model parameterisations, applied in different climates, yield a wide range of results, including increases in peak runoff and runoff volume. There is no basis for assuming that the presence of solar panels will have no effects on runoff.

17. Genuine experiments where the experimenter is in control of artificial rainfall on an experimental solar setup are difficult to perform. Baiamonte et al (2023) studied the effects of a pair of solar panels on runoff in a bare soil in Sicily. The panels increased runoff rates by a factor of about 11, and shortened the time to peak by a factor of about 4. These would be huge effects in the real environment. In contrast, Wang and Gao (2023) worked with a similar plot-scale setup in a soil from the Loess Plateau in China, and found that the panels made little difference to runoff, but perhaps not surprisingly, reduced soil erosion. In practice these studies, which have bare soil, relatively steep slopes, and high rainfall rates are not very relevant to typical British conditions.

18. Modelling predictions which are tested against real data offer the most reliable way to predict the effects of solar panels on runoff. Mulla et al (2024) measured soil hydrological values at 5 contrasting solar sites across the USA, with annual rainfall rates varying from 406 mm to 1245 mm. They built a hydrological model based on the observed facts: that solar panels collect and concentrate runoff along a drip edge; that this water percolates into the soil and migrates both downwards and laterally; that the open area between panel rows is available for water infiltration; and that the dry area under the rows of panels is also available for infiltration. They applied an established soil hydrology model, Hydrus-3D, to this framework, and calibrated it to each of the five sites. Their model gave good simulations of the observed soil moisture parameters during subsequent storm events. They used the model to predict the effects on runoff of the 100-year design storm for each site.

19. One of the aims of the Mulla et al (2024) paper was to demonstrate to US regulators that simply treating the solar panels as an impervious surface would lead to an exaggerated effect on runoff, and their model succeeded in this. The study yielded other insights,

however, which are not mentioned in the paper Summary. One was that, averaged over the 5 sites, stormwater runoff was 14% higher in the presence of panels than it would have been in their absence.

Another was the importance of soil type. The soil at the Minnesota site was a deep, coarse textured soil with a high saturated hydraulic conductivity, and produced no excess runoff even in the 100-year storm. The other 4 sites all produced excess runoff in the 100-year storm in the presence of panels. The site in Georgia also produced excess runoff in the 10-year storm, and the sites in Oregon and New York in the 10-year and 2-year storms. The soil at the New York State site was shallow with limited storage capacity, and generated about 125 mm of runoff in 24 hours, from a rainfall input of 150 mm. The authors note (Mulla et al., 2024; Section 3.7) that:

“one of the primary strategies solar developers should use for mitigating runoff is to select sites for development that have good potential for infiltration, avoiding development on sites with low permeability or shallow soils.”

20. The Lime Down soils are mostly shallow with low permeability (see Section 6 below). The Mulla et al (2024) paper, which is one of only two which have tested a hydrological model of a solar farm against real data, thus demonstrates that: (1) solar panels can increase water runoff in a range of soils, even in short return period storm conditions; and (2) that soil infiltration and storage capacity are vital attributes that need to be assessed. The authors used their data to generate an assessment model (Galski et al. 2024) which could be used for assessment in UK sites.

21. The other study which developed and tested a hydrological model of a solar farm against data is Liu et al (2023). Liu and co-workers developed a complex hydrological model (SOFAR) which takes into account the concentration of rainfall by the panels into driplines; soil moisture dynamics; vegetation growth; landform evolution; and hydrological connectivity, defined as “the internal physical linkages between runoff/sediment generation in the upper parts of a catchment and the water/sediment received through the fluvial system”. They calibrated the model in a solar farm in the Loess Plateau of China, with an arid continental climate (annual rainfall, 186 mm). They then used the model to predict runoff and soil erosion under a range of conditions. Runoff due to the panels was considerably increased in all situations (99% to 150%), as was soil erosion (25% to 76% during operation). This is in a very different climatic environment to the UK, but it does show that the same physical processes that apply in the UK can produce large increases in runoff. It is also the only model which attempts to model the larger scale effects, through its hydrological connectivity parameters.

Conclusions on Research

22. It is clear from the above that it cannot be assumed that the existing ground surface will absorb all the water running from the panels as the Applicant claims, such that there will be no effects on runoff or soil erosion. Credible models, including the only ones tested against data, consistently show that the panels can increase runoff given certain conditions. The Mulla et al (2024) paper highlights soils with a low infiltration capacity, low hydraulic conductivity and low storage capacity as particularly vulnerable. To assess the risks at Lime Down, it is thus necessary to know the condition of the soils, and also the characteristics of the panels which are to be used. These are discussed in the following sections.

On the basis of evidence from Clive Carpenter and Prof. Richard Skeffington Stop Botley West concludes that the Applicant's position that solar arrays do not influence rates of runoff

of rainfall is simply untenable. Given the expertise available to the consultancies employed by the applicant to look at the environmental impacts of the proposed Botley West Solar Power Station, we find it difficult to believe that they are not aware of the recent peer-reviewed publications that all indicate that contrary to their position, solar arrays can under certain conditions increase runoff. We can only assume that this evidence does not suit the narrative of the Applicant and therefore they have attempted to bluff their way through the examination and now through the SoS questions so that they do not have to account for increased runoff in their scheme. We believe this is because this issue potentially threatens the entire feasibility of the proposed Solar Power Station. Clive Carpenter concluded:

“Surface water management of this scale will require considerable land take, which will need to be outside of the river flood zones in order to be effective. It is not clear whether this is achievable on the site with the number of solar panels proposed and as such this questions the feasibility of the proposed development. Conversely if the Applicant choses to reduce the number of solar panels to accommodate the necessary surface water management infrastructure, this would presumably impact the cost effectiveness of the development and may result in the financial viability of the scheme becoming problematic.”

At this point Stop Botley West would like to remind the SoS that should the scheme go ahead with such lack of consideration of the potential for increased runoff, especially given the positioning of solar arrays on slopes above the village on soils with low permeability, then it is likely that residents will be subject to increased occurrences of flooding. This is unacceptable and contrary to the planning regulations.

However, the issues of potential flooding related to this proposal are not just related to increased runoff resulting from the solar arrays themselves. A second issue is the likely destruction of land drainage. Stop Botley West were astonished to find that the Applicant, even at the late stage of the Issue Specific Hearing had not requested field drainage plans from the landowner, Blenheim Estates, or even enquired as to whether such plans even existed. The Applicant undertook to do this during detailed planning and to repair any damage to land drainage incurred during construction. We note that now, the number of estimated pilings to install the solar arrays for Botley West has approximately doubled previous estimates to 2.5 Million. The Applicant admits that these pilings will disrupt field drainage but states that maps of field drains have now been obtained and measures will be taken to avoid field drains or repair them following damage. The claim that such mapping, avoidance and repairs for such a high density of pilings stretches credibility. Stop Botley West are highly skeptical as to whether this will be even partially possible. This risk was identified early in the Examination by an agricultural expert who actually managed this land for more than 20 years (Roderick Craig; see Appendix A). These drains are typically 0.7m below the soil surface and are emplaced in soil using a trenching tool deployed behind a tractor (AHDB, 2018). Mr Craig has pointed out that: *“A lot of the land is under drained at 22-yard intervals all of which will be severely compromised during construction. This will change water flow and certainly increase surface run off from untapped springs.”* Stop Botley West cannot envisage a method to repair such drainage over the very large scale of the fields to the north of the village of Cassington as well as Jericho Barns and Worton. Furthermore, the disruption and disturbance to soils from such activity will be much larger than previously conceived of in the original application. Again, this poses a significant risk of increase of flood risk to offsite locations.

Stop Botley West point out that both of these issues have been raised repeatedly throughout the Examination. It became clear during the Issue Specific Hearing that despite continual requested to investigate this matter the Applicant has done nothing. Again, they have instead

effectively kicked this issue into the long grass by undertaking to look at it post consent and to “repair” damage done post construction, a statement which is simply not credible given the likely scale of damage and obstructions presented by the pilings and other structures of the Solar Power Station. Further evidence of our fears is presented by the repeated flooding of fields between Pinsley Wood and Long Hanborough Station. According to the farmer who worked this land for 47 years, the field pictured in Fig. 1, floods every winter because Blenheim failed to repair a damaged land drain there many years ago.



Figure 1. Field between Lower Road and Pinsley Wood. Photo C/O Rosemary Lewis.

The Examiners should note that rather than pooling in a flat field, such damage would result in excess water moving downhill towards Cassington, Jericho Barns and Worton.

The Applicant States *“It is noted that the general approach to be adopted is in line with current solar PV standards accepted across the UK.”* Stop Botley West puts forward that with all due respect, the topography and soil characteristics of the proposed site for Botley West Solar Power Station is not necessarily typical of solar developments elsewhere. Both in Cumnor and Cassington solar arrays are placed on slopes on soil with a low permeability to water.

To conclude Stop Botley West’s opinion on the Applicant’s drainage strategy is that it simply is not credible.

- Scientific evidence is massively weighted to the view that solar arrays can lead to increased rates of runoff as a result of the drip-line effect. In some cases, this can be a substantial increase.

- The Applicant's view that solar arrays do not increase runoff rates is not only not credible but undermines their entire approach to drainage across the site because of underestimation of the amount of water to be controlled.
- The Applicant's plans to deal with land drainage lack credibility and will lead to substantial damage of the soil potentially increasing flood risk through compaction.
- Leaving the detailed design of drainage from the site until after the DCO is granted is not acceptable. This project represents a significant risk of increasing the vulnerability of homes to flooding.
- That the Environment Agency have simply ignored the evidence presented and given the go ahead for this approach is another example of a statutory authority failing in its duties with respect to this project. We see no evidence that the Environment Agency has considered the likely impacts of this project on pluvial flood risk, instead they have simply accepted the Applicant's position which we have demonstrated is materially incorrect.
- In the case of the southern site in Cumnor Parish, the Applicant has failed to assess both pluvial and fluvial flood risks from this project, choosing to effectively ignore the Flood Risk assessment incorporated as part of that parish's made Neighbourhood Plan and its flood risk policies in 2021. The Applicant has also completely failed to even acknowledge any cumulative impacts – not even flood risk - of the two other solar power station projects immediately adjacent to its DCO redline, even though one of them is the oft referred to NGET project to build a substation to serve this application. More detail on this, including anew updated flood risk assessment commissioned by Cumnor Parish Council can be found in that Interested Party's submission to the Secretary of State's 28th April RFI.
- We note that the connection date given by National Grid is Q4 2031 not 2029.

As a result of no apparent shift of position by PVDP on flooding, despite the evidence that has been presented throughout the examination and which has increased, we see no alternative but to request that the SoS ensures that solar infrastructure of any kind is removed from the hills above Cassington, Jericho Barns and Worten as detailed in the letter in Appendix B. Furthermore, we request that similar modifications are imposed in other areas prone to pluvial and fluvial flood risk such as the southern site in Cumnor Parish. We view the current flood / water management plans presented by PVDP as wholly inadequate.

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Appendix A Email from Roderick Craig January 29th 2024 07.32

I attended the Botley Solar farm consultation at Cassington village hall on 12th January 2024. I had been involved with the agricultural management of all the land in question from 1978 to 2001 and have subsequently consulted farmers of the land up unto 2022.

I obviously refute the claim that the land is all classified as 3c and 3d for agricultural purposes, this is gross oversimplification of the fact. A far more in-depth study of this needs to be undertaken as this affects how the water movement off the panels will behave. I believe that there has never been such a large area of solar panels placed so close and ABOVE such a complicated river catchment area I.e Rivers Glyme, Dorn Evenlode and Thames. Manor Farm Purwell Farm and all the surrounding land south of Bladon all have complicated soil profiles involving soils other than 3c&3d involving heavy impervious clays. A lot of the land is under drained at 22 yard intervals all of which will be severely compromised during construction. This will change water flow and certainly increase surface run off from untapped springs. There is 92 pages of print supplied by the developer regarding hydrology none of which addresses in any depth the increased flooding risk downstream all the way to Cassington, Botley and Oxford. If your statement is correct that the developer has to demonstrate that all the above issues have or will be addressed, then they clearly as yet have not been addressed. If water goes down a plug hole then I think this could also affect Witney and the windrush. What affect does this water movement have on the existing housing stock and that to come, what affect does this have in times of flood on the already over loaded sewage system in the catchment area. Further the water level in Blenheim Lake has to be managed, both the Glyme and the Dorn feed into the lake, how is the increase in rapid flow going to affect water levels in the lake and in extreme circumstances the relief sluice has to be opened to protect the main dam letting yet more excess water into the Evenlode to head to Cassington and beyond. The developers will argue that the grass cover will prevent all this but it will not in times of severe storms as it will move off the panels too fast to permeate into the soil but will run off the surface. The houses below the allotments at Cassington at the bottom of Manor Farm were flooded some years ago and a flood pond was installed, this will not be sufficient to protect those houses. I believe at the very least the development should not continue beyond Bladon for the reasons stated above and someone needs to do some in depth research to address my concerns and scientifically prove me wrong.

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

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

Alex Rogers,
Parish Councillor,
Cassington Parish Council
13th August, 2024

CC: Councillors Andy Goodwin [REDACTED]@westoxon.gov.uk); Dan Levy
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED])

Dear Andy, Callum, Councillors, County Councillors,

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;

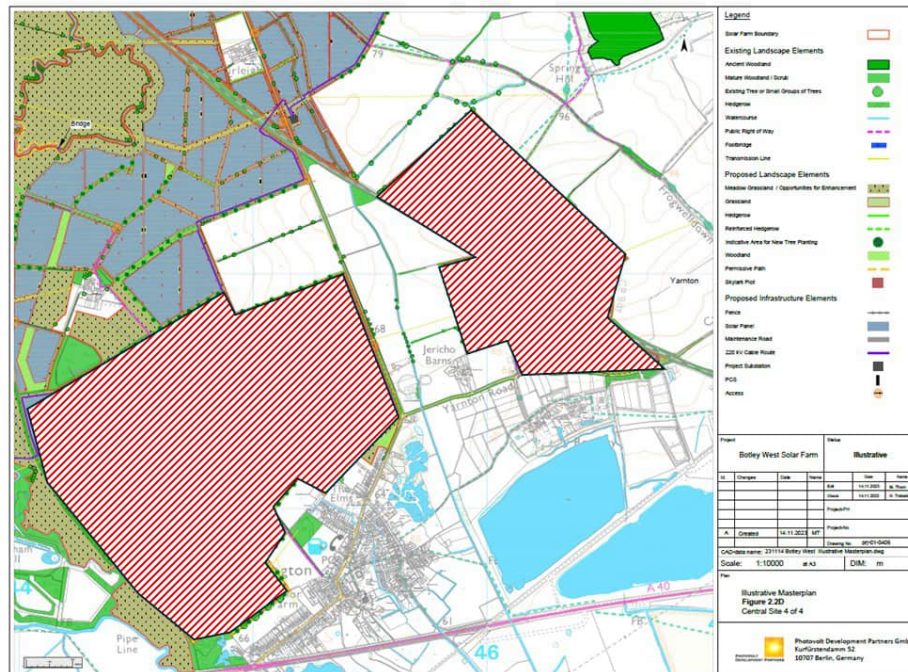
Loss of amenity;

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

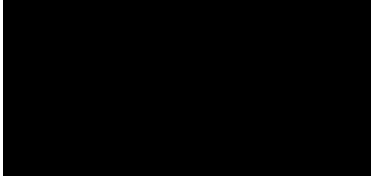
Central Section of the proposal to ensure the safety of the properties of our residents. There is no sign to date of any specific design features of this proposal to alleviate the increased flood risk that this proposal represents.



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 district 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.



Alex Rogers on behalf of Cassington Parish Council

Barbara King, Chris Metcalfe, Graham Mills, Stewart Thompson



Response to Applicant's Answers [C1-087]
to the
Secretary of State's Request for Information

Section 12: Response to answers 68-69

concerning

Without Prejudice Offer and Viability

Stop Botley West Campaign

15 July 20

Stop Botley West Response to the Applicant's Answers to the Secretary of State's Questions 68-69. Without Prejudice Offer and Viability

Para. 68. Without prejudice to his final decision, the Secretary of State requests the Applicant to consider where further reductions to the array layout can be made to address the impacts of the Proposed Development by maximising solar panel removal whilst maintaining a viable development. In providing this information, the Secretary of State encourages the Applicant to consult with the OHA.

Interpretation. This is a request for further reductions in the total size of array layout (i.e. number of panels) in order to reduce the visual impact of BWSF.

Applicant's response.

1. The position as submitted with this Applicant's response to the Secretary of State's RfI request represents the maximum viable reduction

The applicant claims it has reduced the total installed capacity from 1422MW to 935MW (a reduction of 34.2%) and applied a maximum 250M buffer to residential properties.

2. Further reductions would remove viability

According to the applicant, these changes now mean that BWSF is barely financially viable (see para. 69) such that further reductions are not possible.

3. Consultation with the OHA

In response to the OHA requests, the applicant has adjusted various aspects of the design to "improve the impact balance without affecting the installed capacity and hence the economic viability".

Stop Botley West's comments.

- 1) The Change Process Table (Appendix B **C1-087**) suggests a series of progressive changes in both the area of Botley West Solar Farm (BWSF) and the installed capacity that are not borne out by the submitted documents. Eleven successive revisions of *The Guide to the Application* all state that the installed capacity (sometimes inaccurately called the delivered power) is approximately 1307MW, that it will deliver power to approximately 330,000 homes, and that it will occupy approximately 1,418ha of land, approximately 839ha of which will be covered by solar panels (**APP-004** November 2024; **AS-002** – Rev.1, January 2025; **CR1-001** – Rev.2, March 2025; **PDB-002** – Rev.3, May 2025; **REP1-002** – Rev.4, June 2025; **REP2-002** – Rev.5, July 2025; **REP3-002** – Rev.6, July 2025; **REP4-002** – Rev.7, August 2025; **REP5-002** – Rev.8, September 2025; **CR-002** – Rev.9, September 2025; **REP6-002** – Rev.10, October 2025; and **REP7-002** – Rev.11, November 2025). The Applicant's Closing Submission also states that BWSF will provide 'secure and clean energy of an equivalent level to meet the needs of approximately 330,000 homes' without giving any more details (MW, area occupied etc.). It is difficult to detect any significant changes between the Non-Technical Summary of November 2024 (**APP-037**) and the Outline Layout Design Principles of November 2025 (**REP7-029**).
- 2) The reported installed capacity was never 1422MW. The applicant has not changed the redline boundary of BWSF since Rev. 2 of the Land Plans, produced in September 2025. Discussions and exchanges since the Inquiry have thus apparently not changed the total area affected. Changing buffer sizes and removing panels from certain areas within the red-line boundary, while providing some relief to individual houses, do not change the overall impact of BWSF on the wider landscape.

- 3) The absence of any changes in total area, and in many other details of the application, is shown by a comparison of Table 5.1 of the Environmental Statement Non-Technical Summary, dated November 2024 (**APP-037**), and Table 1.1 of the Outline Layout and Design Principles, dated June 2026 (**C1-080**), as follows:

Environmental Statement November 2024	Outline Layout and Design Principles June 2026
Total installation area North approx. 247.3ha	Total installation area for solar arrays North; up to approx. 247.3ha
Total installation area Central approx. 545.2ha	Total installation area for solar arrays Central; up to approx. 545.2ha
Total installation area South approx. 46ha with NGET, 50ha without	Total installation area for solar arrays South; up to approx. 46ha with NGET and up to 50ha. Without.
Indicative number of Solar PV modules; range from 1,800,000 to 2,200,000	Indicative number of Solar PV modules; range from 1,800,000 to 2,200,000
Watts peak; 1200 to 1375MWp	“current position” of 935MWp (see footnote 1)
Power Converter Stations, PCS; total installed capacity 936,000kVA	Power Converter Stations, PCS; total installed capacity 936,000kVA
Indicative slope of PV modules; 12 to 18 degrees	12 to 18 degrees slope of modules from horizontal
Height of PV modules above ground level; 0.8m lower edge, 2.20m or 2.30m higher edge.	Approx. 0.8m lower edge; approx. 2.20m or 2.30m higher edge.
Indicative North South separation distance between tables; 1.5m to 3.0m.	Indicative North South separation distance between tables; 1.5m to 3.0m.
Indicative total number of piles; 780,000 to 1,600,000	Indicative total number of piles; 780,000 to 1,600,000.
Depth of pile below ground level; 1.0 to 3.0m	Not stated in Table 1.1, but “<3.0m. depth” in SoS Response, p. 32

From the above, it seems the applicant has not taken seriously the requests from the Secretary of State, the Inspector during the inquiry, the OHA and numerous affected residents to reduce the overall impact of BWSF. At the very least a reduction in capacity, from 1422MWp to 935MWp – as indicated in the Without Prejudice offer, should result in a reduction in the total area affected (i.e. the redline boundary), a reduction in the total number of panels to be installed (and the piling required for their support)¹ and a reduction in some of the accompanying infrastructure. For example, the original requirement of 156 PCSs is replaced by ‘up to 156 PCSs’ in the June 2026 document. A reduced total power output from a reduced number of solar panels should not require “up to” the same number of PCSs. The frequent use of “up to”, with the same 2024 target figures in the June 2026 document, indicates a cavalier approach to addressing the serious issues raised by the SoS.

- 4) Why does the overall redline boundary remain effectively unchanged in light of all the above changes? The applicant’s response in para 69 (see below) suggests a reduction in panel area from 843 to 516ha (a reduction of 38.8%; on a par with the 34.2% reduction in installed capacity – see above). Why hasn’t the redline boundary area been proportionately reduced (it cannot all be due to an increased buffer size)?

¹ The Change Process Table DOES report a reduction in the number of solar panel modules, from 2,122,410 for a 1422MW capacity installation to 1,395,981 for a 935.31MWp installation – a 34% reduction in panel numbers. Why is this not reflected in any of the ‘Guides to the Application’ or in the June 2026 Outline Layout and Design Principles?

- 5) The applicant has simply copied and pasted many of the original 2024 figures, with minimal editing, and presented them in June 2026 as a radical revision, claiming it to be in response to the many comments requesting a reduction in the overall impact of BWSF made before, during and after the Inquiry. No further changes or reductions are possible because – it is claimed - the proposal would no longer be financially viable (see para. 69).

Para. 69. The Secretary of State notes that during the Examination, the Applicant discounted the OHA's proposals to reduce the size of the Proposed Development citing viability issues, however, no direct evidence of these viability constraints was provided [REP6-052]. If the Applicant is to proceed with a Without Prejudice Offer, then the Applicant is requested to evidence the viability considerations and constraints of any changes to the design of the Proposed Development.

Interpretation. This is a request for evidence to support the applicant's claims for the financial viability (or otherwise) of BWSF arising from requests to reduce the overall impact of BWSF (para. 68).

Applicant's response.

1. Starting position and subsequent reductions.

The applicant lists the various changes that have been made since 2024 that have reduced the area for solar panels within the BWSF redline boundary, and hence the installed capacity, to what is claimed to be the "marginally viable" figure of 935MW. The various reductions are listed in the table in section 4 of the applicant's response in this para. (in **C1-087**), from the original capacity of 1422MW, to 1300, 1200, 1100 and finally to 935MW. These values are accompanied by the applicant's estimate of the installation (i.e. panel) area (down from 843ha originally to 516ha), the CAPEX costs (£717.9 millions to a figure likely to be £601 millions – the table is here incomplete), the resulting CAPEX /MWh, The Fixed-cost share, the LCOE (from £57.37/MWh to what is likely to be £69.3/MWh – again the table is incomplete), the Min DSCR and finally the Status (from "Generally viable" to "Marginally viable"). The applicant looked at a further reduction to the panel area (and hence total panel capacity) proposed by the OHA but found it to be "not viable" financially.

2. Second criterion: Bankability (Debt-Service Cover Ratio)

The DSCR values for all the viable options in the Table in section 4 of para. 69 are 1.8x or 1.9x, above the lender required minimum (floor) of 1.20x

3. Independent Criterion: contractual connection-capacity

The applicant points out that a 685MW capacity installation (as suggested by the OHA) would not enable it to *"meet its contractually agreed connection capacity with National Grid of 840MW. This criterion rests on a contractual fact and is independent of the model-based assumptions."*

4. Break-even capacity analysis

The key to viability here is the Levelised Cost of Electricity (LCOE), which is the Net Present Value of all costs (of original construction at year zero and of Operation and Maintenance (O&M) annually thereafter) divided by the net present total electrical output of BWSF in MWh. The resulting figure of £/MWh is the minimum figure at which the electricity must be sold to break even. If the market price for renewable electricity falls below the LCOE, the

solar installation is not viable; if it is above the LCOE, the installation is viable, and the difference between the market price and LCOE is the net profit of the installation owners.

The applicant claims that the considerable fixed costs of BWSF will apply to all values of the installed capacities considered, resulting in the LCOE increasing as the capacity decreases. The economically viable threshold is essentially determined by these assumed large, fixed costs within the LCOE calculations.

The applicant assumes that the LCOE at 2030 (£69.3/MWh) will need to be less than the estimated selling price of the generated electricity of £71.8/MWh, based on the Contracts for Difference (CfD) prices in the UK Government's recent Allocation Round and allowing for inflation between now and the commissioning date (assumed to be 2030).

The LCOE of the lower capacity option of 685MW is £86.1/MWh, well above that selling price; hence a 685MW BWSF installation would not be financially viable.

5. Conclusion

This section re-iterates points made in the previous four and concludes *"It is clear that for the purpose of obtaining financing at market conditions the Proposed Development must be attractive for potential investors"*. Unsurprisingly, economics is the key to the success of BWSF.

SBW's comments.

1) Even before any changes, the applicant provided a number of different figures for the installed capacity of BWSF.

The applicant claims the original DCO stated the installed capacity would be 1422MW. The November 2024 Non-Technical Summary, however, gives a range of values, 1200 to 1375MW, and we have been unable to find the 1422MW figure in any of the applicant's documents. Various other capacity figures occur throughout the application, for example a specific 1375MW in response to **REP1-131**; a 'total installed capacity of 936,000kVA' in response to **REP1-081**; and 'AC output – total installed capacity approximately 936,000kVA' (Project Description Chapter 6, 6.1.1, November 2024, **APP-043**) (the kVA figure appears to assume the 'contracted' 840MW divided by a power factor which is always less than 1.0²); figures of 1307MW (e.g. Guide to the Application, November 2024, **APP-004**, and March 2025, **CR1-001**) and 1350MW (e.g. 15.1.2 in Vol. 1 Chapter 15 Socio-Economics, **APP-052**) occur in various documents, and the former value, frequently mentioned in the application, is used in the calculations reported here.

It is not completely clear from this section that the 935MW capacity, minimum viable size (economically) for BWSF is the size that the applicant has now agreed to deliver if the DCO is granted. All versions of the dDCO are devoid of any details, beyond saying that the capacity of BWSF would be *'in excess of 50 megawatts'*, thus qualifying it for the (original) NSIP route of planning approval. What certainty can we have that if a lower capacity system is approved (e.g. 935MW) it won't be subject to panel creep after DCO approval? The minimal changes in the redline boundary suggest this is a possibility.

2) The applicant continues to claim that BWSF will provide 840MW of clean power to the proposed new NGET station at Farmoor.

Regardless of the installed capacity, the applicant continues to claim that BWSF will deliver 840MW of 'clean electricity' into the National Grid, even though the installed capacity has been reduced to 935MW. The applicant also continues to suggest that the reduced output from the reduced installed capacity will somehow continue to supply the entire electrical requirements (kWh p.a.) of c. 330,000 homes. This is made very clear in the Change Process Table, where the last three columns report 'AC Before Losses' of 890MW, 'Electrical Losses' of 50MW and 'AC Output at POI' of 840MW for all of the installed capacity figures there (from 1422MWp to 935.31MWp). In other words, it appears that BWSF will continue to be able to provide its contracted 840MW to the National Grid regardless of the reduction of over 30% in the number of installed panels.

This sleight of hand is achieved by reducing at the lower capacities the 'DC/AC Ratio' (the fourth to last column in the Change Process Table in **C1-087**) that essentially allows for what is imagined to be over-sizing of the PV array in relation to the transformer/inverter/substation (i.e. the 'gateway') into which BWSF feeds its output. It is a common practice to install solar panels with a combined total output greater than the capacity of the accepting gateway; excess electricity above the gateway's capacity is clipped off, but the gateway's capacity – the '840MW contracted amount' in the case of BWSF – is reached for more hours each day. Reducing the total size of the PV array will mean that its output exceeds the gateway's capacity less often, and less electricity is 'lost' through clipping, but at the 'cost' of the output reaching its contracted level for fewer hours each day. The applicant refuses to acknowledge that reducing the total solar PV installed capacity **MUST** reduce the total output of electricity. If that final figure of 840MW in the last column of the Change Process Table was ever reached by the original system, it would be reached much less often by a system only 66% of its size.

3) The output of BWSF will be much less than the claimed 840MW of power.

The actual performance of a 1307MW solar PV installation at the location of BWSF was investigated using the interactive European PVGIS system³ (the following calculations were made using EUPVGIS version 5 in 2024). Various characteristics of BWSF (from the applicant's documents) were entered into the interactive site with a request to model solar PV output using the PVGIS SARAH2 radiation database that consists of hourly records for the entire period 2005 to 2020. Thus, solar PV output can be examined on an hourly basis over 16 years.

The output of the EUPVGIS system (in irradiance Watts/msq.) was turned into an estimate of the MWh output of BWSF over that 16-year period. The average annual MWh modelled by the EUPVGIS was 1,243,941,306kWh p.a., within 1% of BWSF's own figure of 1,256,539,474kWh p.a., the figure used to calculate that BWSF could supply 330,000 homes. It is extraordinary that a 16-year series of recorded hourly irradiance data (a series of 140,160 data points) can come to effectively the same conclusions about the annual output of BWSF as the applicant's 'back-of-envelope' calculation that starts off with BWSF's

³ [REDACTED]

claimed 840MW output (this figure is being used in the calculations as a measure of the installed capacity of BWSF, not a measure of its actual output) and uses a single specific yield value – a function of the average irradiance – to calculate annual output in kWh (see applicant's response to **REP1-131** and elsewhere).

The 16-year series allows us to see how often any particular MWhourly yield is exceeded. This is shown in Figure1.

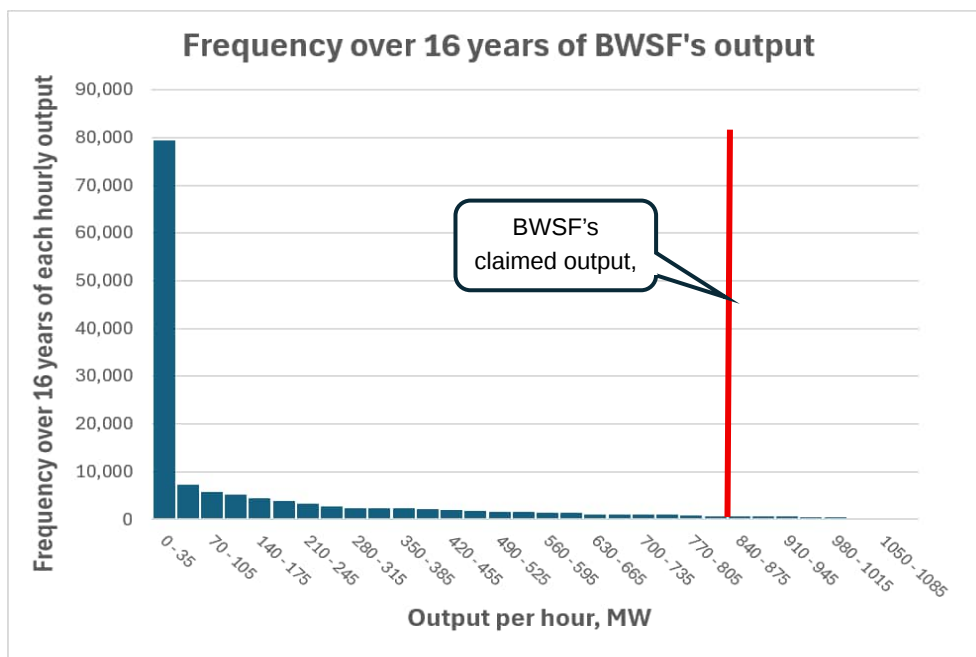
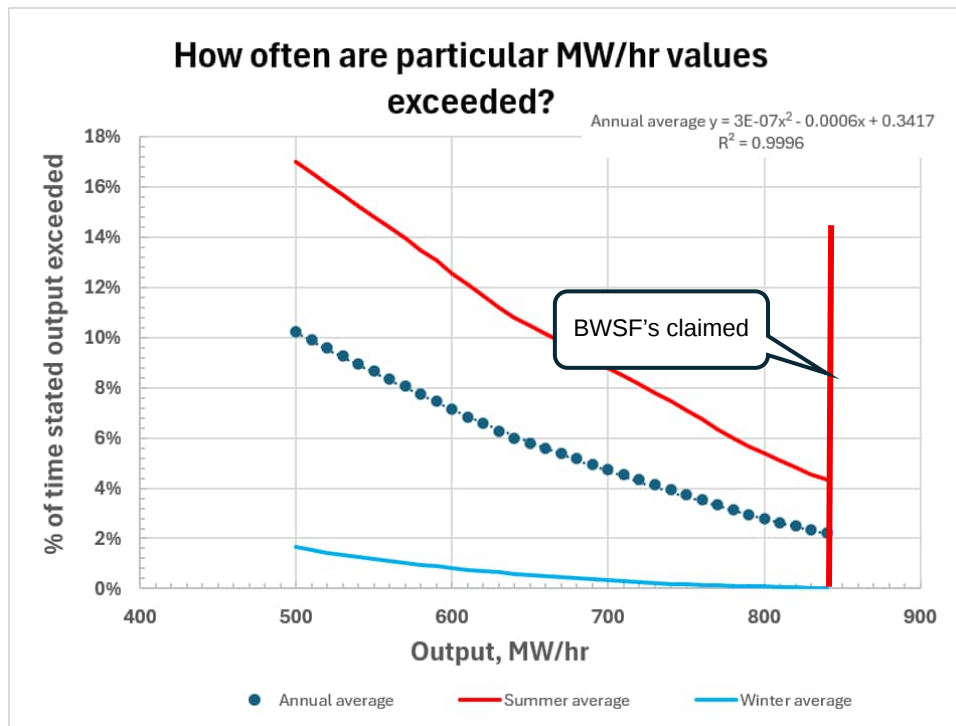


Figure 1. The frequency distribution of predicted output from BWSF (total installed capacity of 1307MW) over a 16-year period, 2005-2020, using hourly recorded irradiance data. For the vast majority of hours, BWSF produces less than 35MW of actual power (i.e. ≤ 35 MWh of electricity). BWSF's output exceeds its 840MW target (the vertical red line on the graph) only 2.18% of the time. Even allowing for the fact that half of each 24hr period is night-time, this >840 MW figure is unlikely to rise above 5% of daytime hours.

Figure 2 shows the same results as the percentage of time any particular output value (MW/h) is exceeded. The beaded line shows the annual average figure; the red line shows the results for Summer and the blue line the results for Winter.

Figure 2. The graph shows how often particular outputs from BWSF – in MW/h - are reached or exceeded during the year. Average annual figures are shown by the beaded line, Summer results by the red line and Winter results by the blue line.

The average results show that in a 1307MW capacity system, an 840MW output is exceeded just over 2% of the time (as reported in the legend of Fig. 1). BWSF's



performance is particularly poor in Winter when its output reaches more than 500MW less than 2% of the time. Even the comparable Summer figure (c. 17%) is quite poor.

The applicant simply cannot continue to claim that BWSF regularly delivers 840MW of power. It cannot and will not.

In trying to support this contention in response to **REP1-169** that showed the average monthly outputs of BWSF will never exceed 840MW in either Summer or Winter, the applicant produced the following Table in **REP1-018**, calculated by the “*trusted solar industry software (PVsyst)*” (applicant’s words) and claims it shows “*that the 840MW AC was reached in 8 months over one year*”.

	0H	1H	2H	3H	4H	5H	6H	7H	8H	9H	10H	11H	12H	13H	14H	15H	16H	17H	18H	19H	20H	21H	22H	23H
January	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	29	144	289	347	376	347	274	87	14	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
February	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	43	202	376	578	679	693	520	390	260	101	14	0	0	0	0	0	0
March	0	0	0	0	0	0	58	289	534	751	852	852	852	852	823	636	390	130	0	0	0	0	0	0
April	0	0	0	0	0	58	274	549	737	852	852	852	852	852	852	751	520	274	58	0	0	0	0	0
May	0	0	0	0	29	130	361	607	823	852	852	852	852	852	852	809	607	361	130	29	0	0	0	0
June	0	0	0	0	29	159	376	621	838	852	852	852	852	852	852	823	621	390	173	43	0	0	0	0
July	0	0	0	0	29	130	347	563	780	852	852	852	852	852	852	823	621	404	173	43	0	0	0	0
August	0	0	0	0	0	58	231	491	708	852	852	852	852	852	852	737	506	303	101	14	0	0	0	0
September	0	0	0	0	0	14	130	347	578	780	852	852	852	852	794	636	404	159	14	0	0	0	0	0
October	0	0	0	0	0	43	246	506	708	823	852	823	650	491	303	116	14	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
November	0	0	0	0	0	0	14	130	274	361	390	361	303	231	58	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
December	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	29	72	188	274	260	144	72	29	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Year	0	0	0	0	29	159	376	621	838	852	852	852	852	852	852	823	621	404	173	43	0	0	0	0

Hourly maximum values for Energy injected to the grid [MW]

Table 1. From **REP1-169**, p. 7 reporting the maximum output from BWSF as predicted by the PVsyst software.

As the Table legend states, these figures are maximum values, not usual or even average values. In fact, if the above were the average values for each hour/month, the total annual output from BWSF would be 2,213,495,000kWh/yr, more than 76% higher than the applicant’s own figure for BWSF’s output of 1,256,539,474kWh/yr. Once again, the applicant is stressing the maximum value for something that on average will be very much lower. Any public benefit arising from BWSF, or any corporate profits arising from it, will depend on average not maximum values.

We stress that we are in full agreement with the applicant over the total amount of electricity generated by a 1307MW capacity system each year (MWh p.a.). To dress it up as providing some high or constant value of output is both dishonest and incorrect.

The apparent offer in the without prejudice section suggests that the applicant might be content with a 935MW capacity installation. But what would the effect of this be on total and peak outputs?

The above calculations (Figs 1 and 2) for a 1307MW system were adjusted to predict the output of a 935MW system by multiplying the output of each hour in the 16-year period by the ratio of the two systems' capacities, $935/1307 = 0.7154$. Figure 3 shows the results in the same way as Figure 1, and Figure 4 the same way as Figure 2.

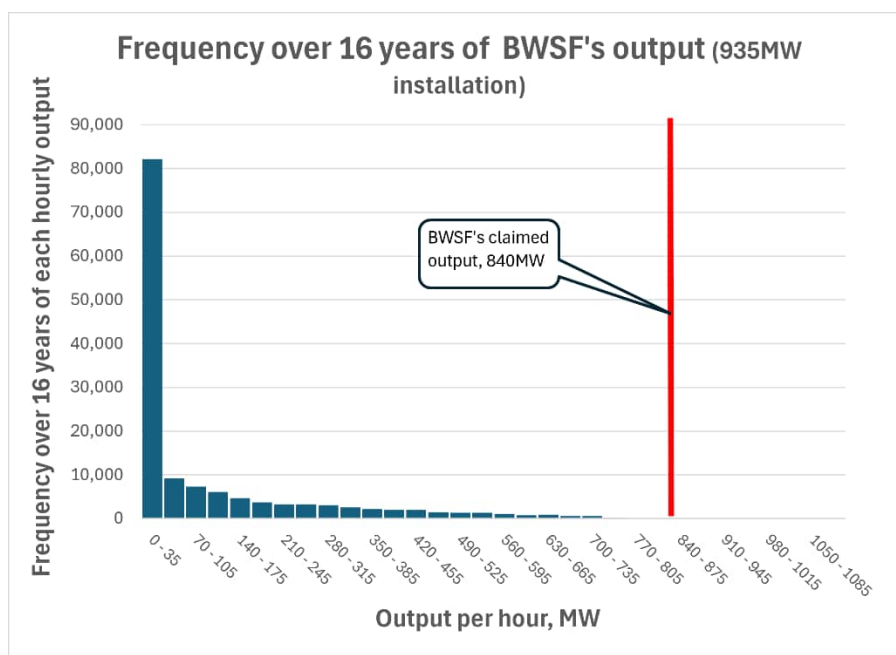


Figure 3. As for Figure 1 but for a reduced capacity BWSF (935MW rather than 1307MW). With the lower capacity, system, performance is shifted to the left. Now, there are no hours at all – in the entire 16-year period - when output exceeds 840MW.

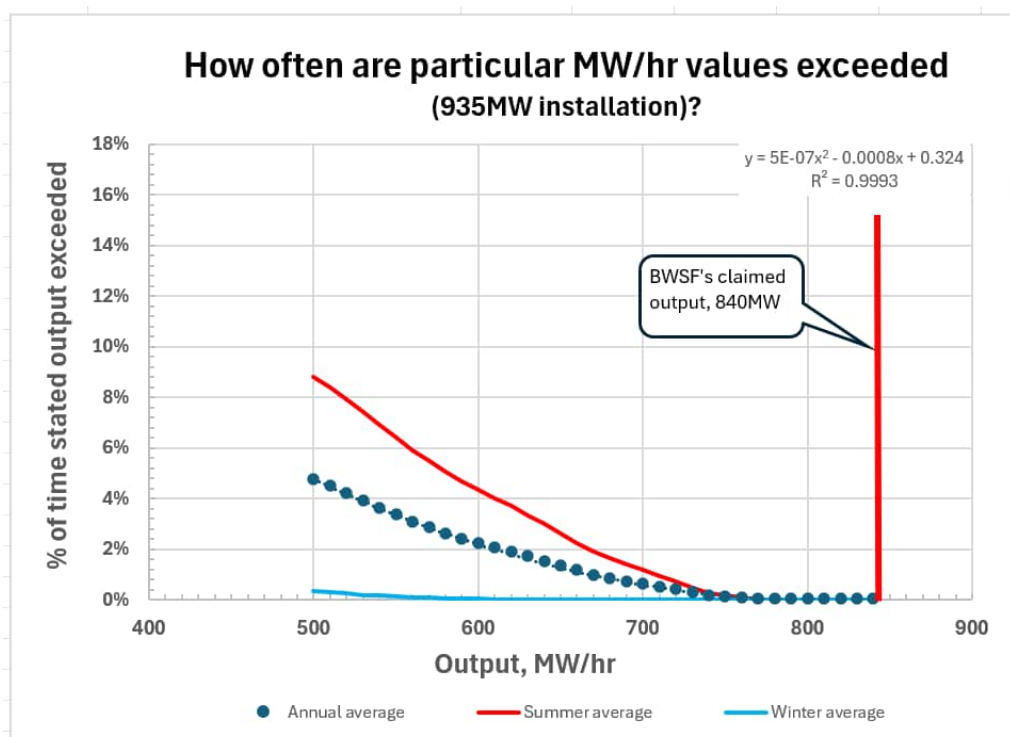


Figure 4. As Figure 2, but for a 935MW installation. The graph shows how often particular outputs from BWSF – in MW/h - are reached or exceeded during the year. In this case, BWSF never produces more than 790MW in any hour of that 16-year period (Average and Summer figures). In Winter, output never exceeds 640MW.

Once again, the average total annual production (kWh/yr) from these hourly figures in a smaller capacity installation is very similar to the EUPVGIS system's predictions for the year based on monthly average values (used in the LCOE calculations below – see Table 2).

4) Why hourly output is important.

While the hourly output from BWSF might not be of particular concern to investors who are interested only in the return on capital invested in BWSF, something that depends on the total output in MWh/yr (see LCOE calculations below), they should be of grave concern both to the SoS and to the National Grid that is expected to provide a new substation to serve BWSF's output. Electricity must be supplied 24/7 in response to varying demand from industry and households, and Figures 1 and 2 show that even a 1307MW BWSF installation will consistently under-deliver on its contracted 840MW figure. A 935MW system will be even worse. The National Grid must know this, which may explain why building a new 840MW substation in this location does not seem to be a high priority at present.

In the absence of any battery storage in BWSF, any electricity produced in excess of current demand on the National Grid will be wasted. It is unlikely that there will be any excess from BWSF in Winter (because it produces so little then), but more likely there will be national excess near mid-day in summer when the whole 'fleet' of UK solar reaches peak output. There may then be occasions when BWSF's output is surplus to national requirements. Only if the Government continues to guarantee curtailment payments to over-producing NSIPs that are required to shut-down at peak times will BWSF get any returns on the electricity it produces but does not put into the National Grid at such times.

Curtailment payments are just one of the numerous subsidies applied to renewable energy sources that effectively increase the price of electricity to consumers (subsidies are paid for through general taxation or increased electricity prices).

Another form of subsidy is the Contracts for Difference (CfD) payments that are crucial in determining the economic viability of BWSF, as evidenced in the applicant's response to the SoS's request in this section for more information on its viability assessment. It is by no means certain that future administrations will continue the present level of subsidies for renewable energy installations, making their economic viability even less certain. Nor is it certain that the entire output of any one large-area NSIP solar installation will be covered by any subsidy scheme.

5) Why total output is important

For calculations in the next section (on LCOE) it was necessary to determine the total output of BWSF at various values of installed capacity. The various capacities for BWSF, from the Table in para. 69 in **C1-087**, were used in the EUPVGIS version 5.3⁴ to calculate total output in MWh p.a., from which the total number of houses supplied with electricity from BWSF could be determined (by simply dividing the total output in kWh by the annual per household demand of 3,731kWh, a DBEIS figure). At an installation capacity of 1422MW the output could supply 363,387 houses (higher than the usual BWSF figure, which assumes a lower

⁴ There were two options in EUPVGIS version 5. One used the 16-year hourly dataset and gave predictions of radiance (Watts/sq.m over that time) that can be converted into MW output from a PV array (used here to produce Figures 1 to 4). The other, simpler version gave average monthly predictions of output (kWh or MWh) based on installed capacity, site location, solar cell type, panel angle etc. The simpler version was used to produce the performance figures for different MW capacities given here in Table 2. Cross-checking showed the two methods give very similar predictions of average MWh output per year.

total capacity). A 1307MW installation could supply 333,999 houses (near to the applicant's usual figure) but the output from a 985MW system would supply only 238,936 houses, a significant reduction of 28% on the 1307MW figure (all figures in Table 2 here). SBW hopes the SoS will take note of the fact that the public harm of BWSF essentially remains as it was originally (the same total area will be occupied) but the public benefits have fallen to 72% of those originally promised.

6) LCOE results and calculations

In response to the SoS's request, the applicant produced a series of LCOE estimates without giving any details of the assumptions underlying them – specifically the expected discount rate, the assumptions about Operation and Monitoring costs and so on. These figures are given in section 4. **Break-even capacity analysis**, on p. 144 of **C1-087** and are reproduced as the first eight columns in Table 2 below (with some corrections for omissions, and with the addition of a 1307MW capacity option that was not included in the original Table).

DC capacity, MW	Installation area (ha)	Capex (£M)	Capex £/MWp	Fixed-cost share	PVDP's LCOE (£/MWh)	Min DSCR (50)	Status	Year total kWh	MWh/a	Houses supplied	SBW's LCOE over 40 yrs
1422	843	717.9	£504,865	0.525	£57.37	1.9x	Generally viable	1,355,797,015	1,355,797	363,387	£57.64
1307		690.3			#N/A		Generally viable	1,246,150,984	1,246,151	333,999	£59.75
1300	771	688.6	£529,728	0.547	£59.90	1.9x	Generally viable	1,239,476,878	1,239,477	332,210	£59.89
1200	711	664.7	£553,878	0.567	£62.35	1.9x	Generally viable	1,144,132,502	1,144,133	306,656	£62.07
1100	652	640.7	£582,418	0.588	£65.24	1.8x	Generally viable	1,048,788,127	1,048,788	281,101	£64.65
935	554	601.1	£642,824	0.027	£69.30	na	Marginally viable	891,469,908	891,470	238,936	£70.11
870	516	585.4	£672,920	0.643	£72.20	na	not viable	829,496,064	829,496	222,325	£72.82
685	406	541.1	£789,908	0.696	£83.60	na	not viable	653,108,970	653,109	175,049	£83.39

Table 2. The applicant's figures from the break-even capacity analysis (first eight columns) and Stop Botley West's calculations for these options (last four columns)

The applicant's figures for total Capex and for Capex/MW installed capacity (in para. 68, **C1-087**) are shown graphically here in Figures 5 and 6.

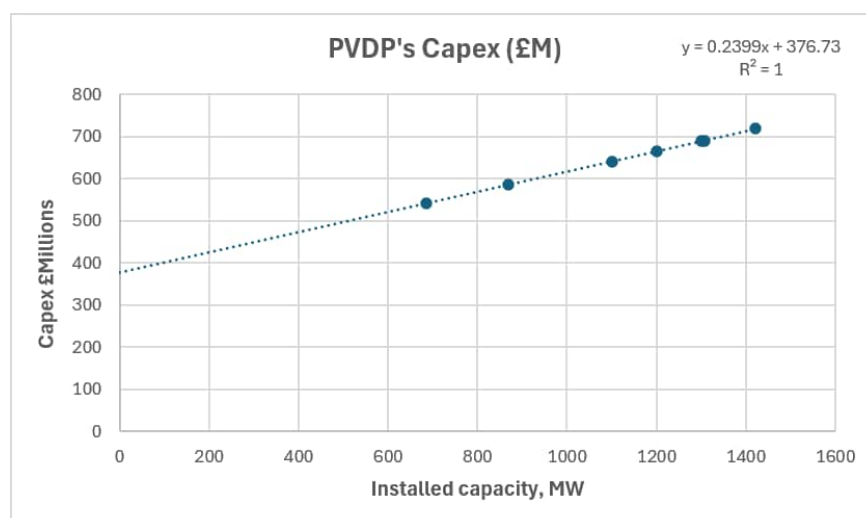


Figure 5. PVDP's figures relating BWSF's Capex (£Millions, y-axis) for various installed capacities (MW, x-axis). Note the linearity of the data and the apparently large, fixed costs (implied by the intercept of the line with the y-axis)

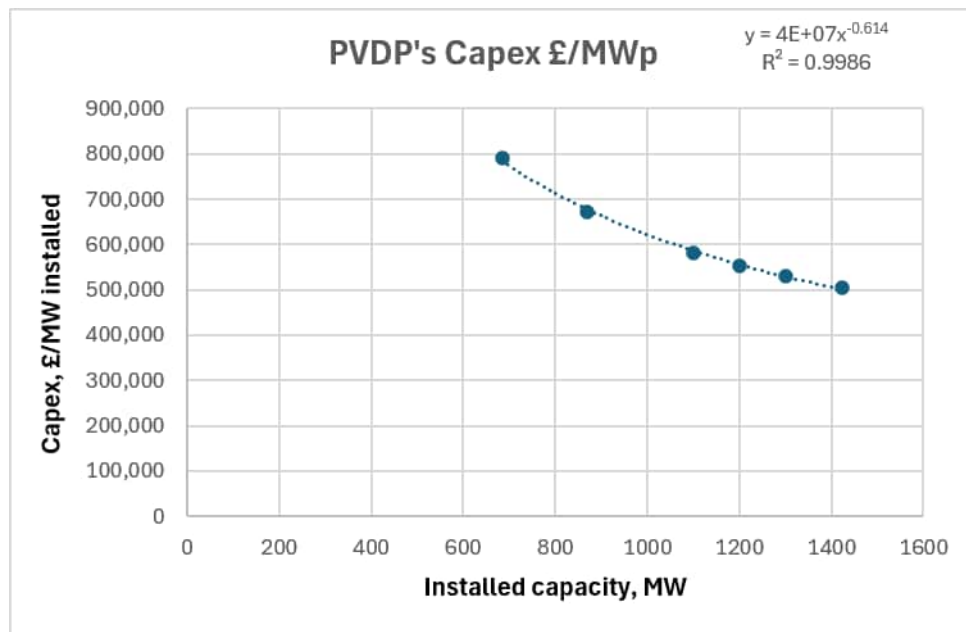


Figure 6. PVDP's figures relating BWSF's Capex/MWp installed (y-axis) for various installed capacities (MW, x-axis). Note the non-linearity of the data indicating a disproportionate increase as Installed capacity decreases. It is this increase that, the applicant claims, makes BWSF non-viable economically below an installed capacity of 985MW.

We have attempted to reproduce the applicant's LCOE figures given in Table 2 here, using realistic LCOE assumptions based on information from various sources, with the results shown in the last four columns of Table 2 and graphically in Figure 7.

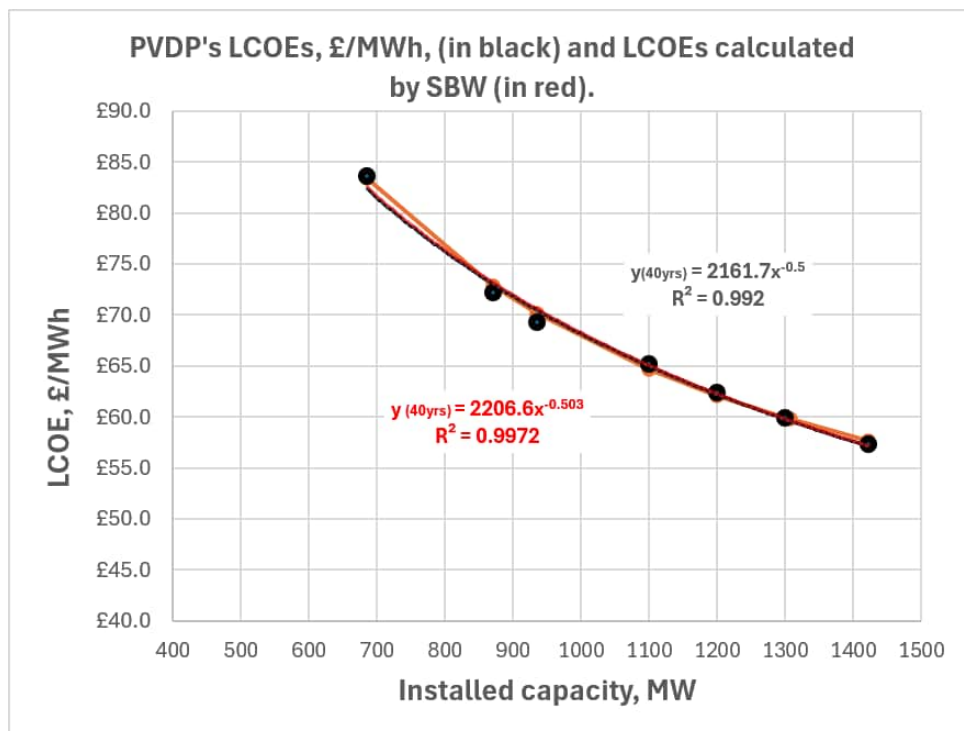


Figure 7. The applicant's LCOE estimates plotted against installed capacity (black dots, black line and black equation call-out) and those estimated using the assumptions and values given in the text here (red line, red equation). LCOE results are similar and appear to change in the same way with changing capacity.

Once again, our figures are sufficiently similar to those of the applicant that we can examine (and question) what assumptions the applicant may have made in producing them.

We start with the simplest approach to calculating LCOEs⁵. We use the applicant's figures for the initial CAPEX (i.e. full installation costs), which gives reasonable industry values for CAPEX/installed MW. We also use a realistic assumption about commercial interest rates (7% p.a.).

The total energy generated each year by the installation at each capacity was calculated by the EUPVGIS system, version 5.3. A rate of solar panel degradation of 0.5% per year was assumed, reducing the annual output of electricity by this amount. 0.5% is a little on the low side of a number of estimates for this value, some of which are as high as 2% p.a.; improving technology should keep such losses to a minimum.

The initial amount of electricity generated each year, before degradation, is shown in columns 9 (kWh/yr) and 10 (MWh/yr) of Table 2 above, and the number of houses they might supply (using the same household demand per year as used by the applicant i.e. 3,731kWh/yr) is in the last but one column. The figures there show that a reduction in installation capacity from 1307MW to 935MW causes a 28% reduction in the number of houses that might be supplied by BWSF. This must surely be taken into account when calculating the public benefit of BWSF.

Finally, O&M costs were estimated to be £10/kW p.a., with no assumed increase due to inflation. Estimates of O&M costs vary greatly, and our figure is on the low side of most of them. So, if anything, we may be under-estimating LCOE.

For simplicity in our calculations, net present values of O&M costs, revenues and solar installation outputs all use the same discount rate; hence the final LCOE values are very sensitive to this rate.

Both sets of LCOE estimates are based on the applicant's assumption of an installation lifespan of 40 years. A long lifespan is assumed by many developers because it reduces the predicted LCOEs and so makes installations commercially more attractive on paper. But many have pointed out that solar panel degradation (reducing MW outputs and hence revenues) and increasing O&M costs (including the replacement of inverters and transformers that currently have a shorter lifespan than do solar panels) will limit the effective lifespan of solar installations to possibly no more than 20 or 25 years – a time when O&M costs begin to exceed annual revenue. This is more likely to happen in the absence of subsidies (which artificially inflate the revenue stream).

⁵ [REDACTED]

Developers of DCO proposals are probably assuming a long lifespan of solar installations in order to make any granted DCO project attractive to potential purchasers. It is important for such purchasers to ignore over-optimistic LCOEs based on the assumption of impossibly long installation lifespans. It is also important for the SoS to draw attention to this practice, because installations that become non-viable may result in the current owners going bankrupt and hence failing to decommission the installation (a cost which is then likely to fall upon a Local Authority). Solar developers tend to create Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs) for each installation (e.g. SolarFive for BWSF), making it easier for them to abandon it when it becomes unviable.

7) LCOEs and expected revenues from solar installations

In the absence of any knowledge of future market prices for renewable electricity, the BWSF applicant compares the calculated LCOE of £69.3/MWh for a 935MW system with the strike price of recent Contracts for Difference (CfDs) auctions of £65/MWh, adjusted to a predicted value of £71.8/MWh in 2030, the original expected commissioning date of BWSF. BWSF is barely viable on the basis of these two numbers, hence determining the minimum size of 935MW for BWSF.

Assuming particular values for CfD prices is problematic for large-area solar installations since not all their output might be covered, even if the installation is accepted into the CfD scheme. Figure 8 shows the relationship between the capacity of large-area, NSIP-scale solar accepted into the CfD schemes during all previous rounds (AR1 to AR7) (not all of which accepted solar installations) and the total installed capacity of each proposal.

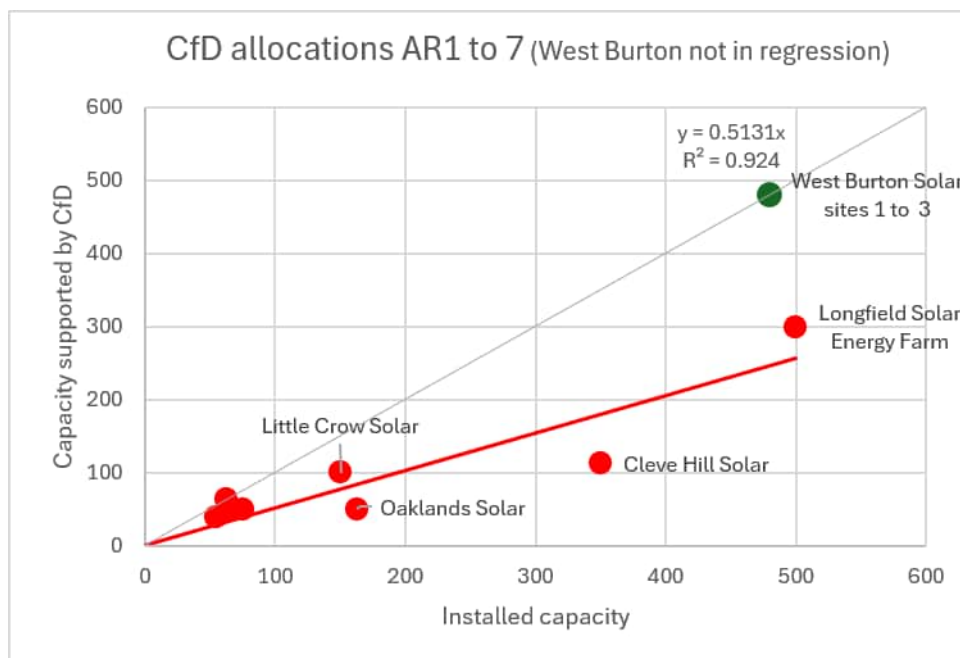


Figure 8. Relationship between the capacity of large-area, NSIP-scale solar installations accepted into the Contracts for Difference scheme (CfD), Rounds 1 to 7, and the total capacity of each application.

The regression through the red points in Fig. 8, with a slope of 0.51, indicates that about half the capacity of the installations shown there will be supported by the CfD scheme. West Burton Solar was the exception in AR7 and uniquely is fully supported. Its entire 480MW output is covered by the CfD guaranteed price for the electricity it will produce for the 20-year duration of the AR7 contract (and even for the electricity it won't supply to the grid, if its output is curtailed because of over-production elsewhere).

All predictions at present are that future CAPEX and future market prices will fall, so the break even point may be determined by which falls faster. Future solar installations should overall be 'cheaper' than existing ones, meaning that they should be able to outcompete established installations on price alone, by driving down the market price during solar electricity auctions. This creates a problem for those considering investing in solar installations.

8) The LCOE and CfD balance sheet

Even with the best possible outcome for an NSIP-scale solar, with all of its output within the CfD scheme, investors need to remember that CfD contracts last for only 20 years (in previous AR rounds it was only 15 years). Any LCOE calculations should therefore use only a 20-year period to examine the commercial viability of a solar installation. Beyond 20 years, solar output is likely to continue to diminish (panel degradation), O&M costs will continue to rise, and output is not under-written by the CfD guarantee. The commercial returns of an ageing solar system are much more uncertain. For this reason alone, covering the full costs of decommissioning should be a statutory requirement of any approved NSIP-scale solar.

BWSF is unlikely to be eligible for CfD support in the next round of funding (AR8, applications from 20th July 2026). Results of the previous round, AR7, were announced in February 2026 with connection dates for the accepted NSIP-scale solar of no later than 2029, i.e. three years ahead. Results of the AR8 applications are expected to be announced no later than early next year, 2027, therefore with anticipated connection dates of no later than 2030. The completion date for the NGET substation for BWSF has now slipped to Q4 2031. It therefore seems very unlikely that BWSF will be accepted into the AR8 funding round.

9) Commercial threats to BWSF

BWSF's costs appear to be in the 'middle of the range' of values given for large-area installations. What appears to dominate the LCOE is the fixed costs that set the installation CAPEX at such a high value for all the options considered, and limiting the minimum viable size of BWSF to 935MW.

Here we challenge the applicant to explain why its fixed costs are so high. Why would not a 'smaller' BWSF be just as viable as a larger one? It would certainly be more acceptable to both the OHA and to local residents.

We do not accept that 935MW is the minimum viable size for a UK solar installation in Oxfordshire, on the basis of the 80 other UK large-area NSIP solar schemes at various stages of development at present, all of which are smaller than BWSF, and some considerably so.

The sizes of all 81 NSIP-scale solars (including BWSF) are shown in Figure 9. They range from a few tens of MWs to BWSF's 1307MW, indicated by the thick blue line in Fig. 9.

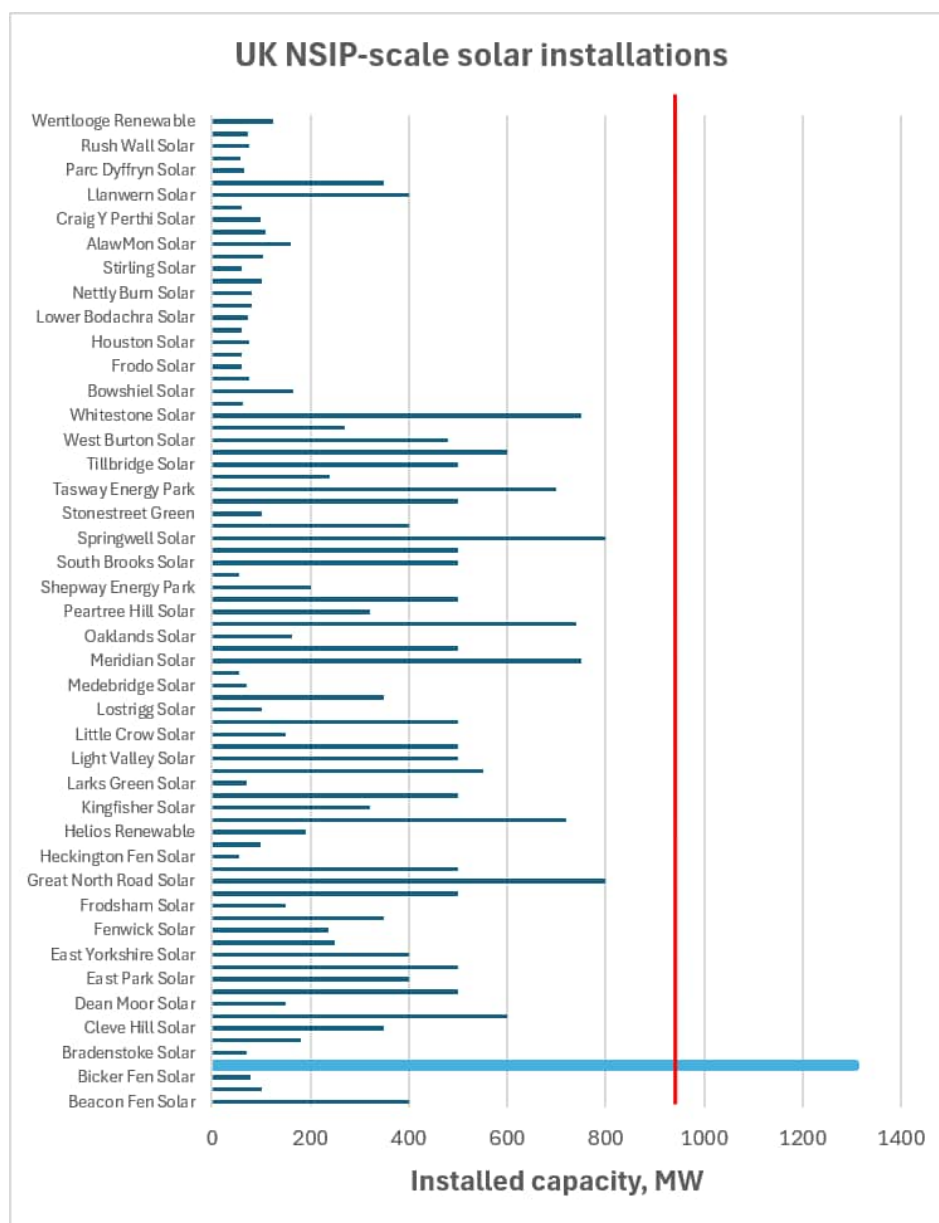


Figure 9. The names and sizes (MW) of 81 NSIP-scale solar installations in the UK at various stages of development. Each bar represents the installed capacity of a single installation (x-axis scale). Botley West is shown as the thick blue bar near the bottom. The red line is set at a capacity of 935MW, claimed by the applicant to be the minimum economically viable size of BWSF. (NB all NSIP-scale solars are indicated by the bars on the graph but not all names could be accommodated on the y-axis legend.)

BWSF is by far and away the largest NSIP-scale solar in this list. All other solars are well below even BWSF's minimum viable 985MW. If all these other solar proposals are economically viable at much lower installed capacities, why can't the applicant learn

something from them so that BWSF's size can be reduced to the sort of level requested by the OHA and that would be more acceptable to the local population?

10) Does Oxfordshire need BWSF?

In response to numerous questions about alternatives to solar, and Oxfordshire's need for energy, the applicant in **REP1-020**, June 2025, pp8-9, claimed that *"Just maintaining the current ratios of installed capacity to meet local energy demand in Oxfordshire would require 2.3GW of solar. There is no clear or obvious prospect that other forms of renewable energy could step up to meet this demand"* and concludes *"Botley West solar would materially help to address that local demand but, even then, there would still be a shortfall in capacity. Botley West would meet about one third of that demand (840MW of the 2300MW demand – 37%)."*

Once again, the applicant is using data rather selectively. First, the output of Botley West will not supply Oxfordshire's needs, because it will enter the national transmission system. Second, **REP1-169** pointed out that Oxfordshire already has, either operational or in the development pipeline, ground-mounted sub-NSIP solar capacity of 1469.3MW (and an uncertain amount of rooftop solar), far in excess of Oxfordshire's 2030 needs of 728-868MW of solar, as specified in the *Pathways to a Zero Carbon Oxfordshire (PAZCO)* report produced by the Environmental Change Institute in the University of Oxford, a document signed up to by all of Oxfordshire's Local Authorities.

The applicant's comments in **REP1-020** refer to the 2050 solar target of the PAZCO Report (2.3GW, i.e. 2,300MW) not the 2030 one (of 728 to 868MW solar). At present, we do not need BWSF to meet our 2030 target, and technological advances will almost certainly find alternatives to ground-mounted solar by 2050, with the result that we can continue to use productive agricultural farmland for growing food, recently identified as one of the nation's major security threats.



Response to Applicant's Answers [C1-087]
to the
Secretary of State's Request for Information

Section 13: Response to answers 71 (c)

concerning

**Request for Appropriate modifications to the
draft Development Consent Order**

Stop Botley West Campaign

15 July 2026

Stop Botley West Response to the Applicant's Answers to the Secretary of State's Question 71c. Request for appropriate modifications to the draft Development Consent Order (dDCO)

This submission addresses two issues

- A. Failure to Address the Examining Authority's Recommended Changes to the dDCO
- B. The introduction of New Requirement 15 in Schedule 2

Issue A. Failure to Address the ExA Recommended Changes to the dDCO

1. Introduction

Following the close of the Examination, the Examining Authority ("ExA") issued its **Schedule of Proposed Changes to the Draft Development Consent Order** (18 September 2025). The document proposed six amendments to the draft Order which, in the ExA's judgment, were necessary or desirable before any Development Consent Order ("DCO") could properly be made.

This submission addresses the necessity of including Grampian style Requirements within the draft Development Consent Order (dDCO) for the Botley West Solar Farm (EN010147). Such Requirements are essential to ensure that the development does not commence until critical offsite infrastructure and other matters, has been fully secured. (see para 2 on the basis for a Grampian Clause.)

The Examining Authority's schedule of proposed changes to the draft Development Consent Order (dDCO) are set out as follows.

Ref 1:Deadline 5 issued 18 September 2025

- PC001 Commencement of work (see para 4 for further detail on this)
 - The proposed development should only take place once there is certainty that the important and relevant national grid infrastructure is in place. Without that infrastructure first being secured, it would be a waste of resources and/ or disadvantageous to landowners for the applicant to commence construction or acquire land compulsorily until the National Grid substation has received planning approval.
 - NGET have now suggested a commencement date of Q4 2031 (Ref 7). This conflicts with the Applicants date for the commencement of operation of Q4 2029.
 - There still no clear indication of where the NGET substation is to be sited.
 - The Applicant has not included the clause proposed by ExA but submitted an alternative proposal.
- PC002 Decommissioning Fund (see para 5 for further detail on this)
 - The provision is deemed necessary to ensure that decommissioning would be adequately financed and the restoration of the land to its original condition is secured and approved by the Local Authority.
 - The Applicant has not included a clause to this effect which was proposed by ExA.
- PC003 Highways
 - Whilst recognising these matters are subject to different regimes (i.e. section 111 of the Local Government Act, section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act and section 278 of the Highways Act), the ExA consider such matters should not be left to side agreements in the post-consent phase but formally recognised in the DCO process. The proposed new requirement would give legitimacy to the legal obligations being sought by the OHA for the project.

- PC004 Farmland Bird Strategy (FBS)
 - The ExA proposed that no work should commence on the project until a FBS has been submitted and approved by SoS.
 - The retention of 17.6ha of land as skylark mitigation, whilst welcomed, is not detailed to any degree as to its management or how nesting/ breeding bird habitat is going to be created. None of the other species noted by the OHA appear to be provided for.
 - The Applicant has agreed a substantial change to the skylark mitigation but nothing for other bird species.
- PC006 Demonstrate how the strategy will achieve 81.28% biodiversity net gain (BNG)
 - The delivery of an ambitious biodiversity net gain by the Applicant who has now agreed a strategy to secure a BNG of a minimum of 70 percent BNG in the dDCO.

2. The Legal and Policy Basis for a Grampian Requirement

- The development is dependent on thirdparty works;
- Those works may not included within the application boundary;
- The development would be unacceptable without them; and
- There is no guarantee that the external works will be delivered on the same timescale as the project.

This aligns with:

NPS EN1 (need for adequate grid capacity and timely delivery of associated infrastructure) (Ref: 5)

NPS EN3 (solar NSIPs must demonstrate viable and deliverable grid connection) (Ref: 6)

PINS Advice Note 15 (use of Requirements to secure offsite mitigation) (Ref: 4)

3. External Dependencies - other works for which a Grampian condition is relevant

3.1 National Grid Reinforcement (Primary Dependency)

Botley West's proposed 840 MW export capacity requires:

- A new 400 kV substation;
- Reinforcement of the transmission network in Oxfordshire;
- Delivery of National Grid's separate infrastructure programme, which is not part of this dDCO.

There is no certainty that these works will be consented, funded, or constructed on a timeline compatible with Botley West.

(Ref: 7 NGET response to SoS RFI 28 April 2026)

Without these reinforcements, the development:

- Cannot export power;
- Risks creating grid instability;
- Would result in stranded assets and unnecessary landscape harm.

3.2 Highways and Construction Traffic Mitigation

Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) has identified the need for:

- Junction improvements;
- Road safety measures;
- Construction traffic management on constrained rural routes.

Where these works fall outside the Order limits, they cannot be delivered by the Applicant alone. A Grampian Requirement in the dDCO is therefore necessary to prevent construction until the relevant highway authority confirms that the Acquisition of Rights issue is resolved.

"The Council still objects to the proposed acquisition of rights over highway land."

(Ref: 2: OCC CA1 20 October 2025)

(Ref: 3 Deadline 8 Letter 13 November 2025)

3.3 Flood Risk and Drainage

The Central and Southern Sites include sensitive hydrological areas. If the Environment Agency or OCC as the Lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA) require offsite drainage improvements, these must be secured before any ground disturbance occurs.

Additional Requirements may be needed for highways and drainage, depending on the OHA's findings. No agreement with OCC has been reached on the approach to solar panel drainage. (Ref:[Rep1 072] and [Rep6-117])

4. The Applicant's Response to the Examining Authority's Proposed Change PC001:

The ExA proposed a **Grampian-style restriction** preventing commencement of the authorised development until planning permission had been secured for the associated National Grid Electricity Transmission ("NGET") substation.

(a) The Examining Authority identified a genuine planning risk:

The ExA's proposed Grampian provision addressed a straightforward planning reality.

The proposed solar generating station cannot operate without connection to the National Electricity Transmission System.

However, the essential connection infrastructure remains subject to considerable uncertainty.

As matters presently stand:

- planning permission for the NGET substation has not yet been obtained;
- the precise location remains uncertain;
- environmental assessment has yet to be completed;
- National Grid has indicated only an anticipated connection date (Q4 2031), conditional upon planning permission being granted.

The ExA therefore proposed a conventional planning safeguard.

Such Grampian-style provisions are a well-established mechanism for ensuring that development does not commence before essential enabling infrastructure is capable of lawful delivery.

The recommendation addressed sequencing and deliverability rather than merely drafting.

But the Applicant included no Grampian clause.

(b). The Applicant's revised Article 6 appears to address a different issue:

Rather than adopting the ExA's recommended restriction, the Applicant has introduced extensive new drafting within Article 6.

According to the accompanying Explanatory Memorandum, these amendments are intended to address interactions between the DCO and future planning permissions granted under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, including any permission subsequently granted for the National Grid substation.

The Applicant expressly refers to the Supreme Court's decision in:

Hillside Parks Ltd v Snowdonia National Park Authority [2022] UKSC 30.

That decision concerns circumstances in which multiple planning permissions affecting the same land may become legally inconsistent, potentially rendering completion of one permission impossible.

It is therefore principally concerned with preserving the continuing legal effectiveness of overlapping planning permissions.

That is a materially different issue from the one identified by the Examining Authority.

(c). The Hillside drafting does not answer the Examining Authority's concern:

Even if the Applicant's revised drafting successfully addresses the legal implications arising from *Hillside*, it does not appear to answer the question posed by the Examining Authority.

The ExA's concern was not whether future planning permissions could legally coexist with the DCO.

Its concern was whether construction of Botley West should be permitted to commence before the essential transmission infrastructure had itself obtained planning permission.

Those are different questions.

One concerns legal compatibility between separate planning permissions.

The other concerns whether development should be allowed to proceed before its critical enabling infrastructure has been demonstrated to be deliverable.

Accordingly, the revised Article 6 should not be regarded as a substitute for the ExA's recommended Grampian restriction unless the Applicant has expressly demonstrated why that safeguard is no longer considered necessary.

5. The Applicant's Response to the Examining Authority's Proposed Change PC002:

The ExA proposed the introduction of a **decommissioning fund**, intended to provide financial security for restoration of the land at the end of the project's operational life.

The proposed development would occupy a substantial area of productive agricultural land for several decades. The purpose of such a requirement is self-evident.

The Applicant's revised Draft DCO submitted on 9 June 2026 does not appear to include the safeguard recommended by the Examining Authority to set up a decommissioning fund.

That omission raises important planning and legal questions.

The restoration obligations extending many years into the future necessarily create financial risk should ownership structures, corporate arrangements or project economics change during the operational life of the scheme.

If the Applicant considers such protection unnecessary, it should provide a clear planning justification for rejecting the ExA's recommendation.

Absent such justification, the omission itself becomes a relevant consideration for the Secretary of State.

6. Wider implications for the Secretary of State's decision:

These omissions should not be viewed in isolation.

Throughout the SoS's recent Request for RFI process, a recurring issue has been whether important matters have been left to future approvals, future assessments or future management plans rather than being resolved before the decision on development consent.

The present issue follows the same pattern.

Instead of directly addressing the safeguards recommended by the Examining Authority, the Applicant appears to have adopted alternative drafting which addresses a different legal issue whilst leaving the underlying planning concern unresolved.

The SoS should therefore be satisfied that:

- the practical deliverability of the Grid connection has been adequately secured;
- the reasons for departing from the Examining Authority's recommended safeguards have been fully explained;
- any alternative drafting provides equivalent protection.

If those matters cannot presently be demonstrated, the SoS may reasonably conclude that insufficient information remains available to determine the application lawfully and that the planning balance cannot yet be undertaken with confidence.

Conclusion

The ExA recommended a number of amendments to the draft Development Consent Order following a lengthy Examination of the evidence. Those recommendations were made after consideration of submissions from the Applicant, statutory bodies, National Grid, local authorities and IPs, and therefore carry significant evidential and planning weight.

The Applicant has chosen not to adopt those recommendations nor explained why or how the same level of protection is otherwise achieved.

In the absence of such an explanation, the question is whether the SoS can be satisfied, on the evidence presently available, that the concerns which led the ExA to recommend these safeguards have been properly addressed. Unless that can be demonstrated, the omission of those safeguards remains a material consideration which the SoS should take into account before deciding whether development consent may lawfully be granted.

Issue B. The introduction of New Requirement 15 in Schedule 2

In the absence of the much requested and long overdue Residential Visual Amenity Assessment and going against the ExA proposal for a minimum 250m separation for all residential properties, the Applicant has added an alternative new requirement 15 in schedule 2. They have called it a residential and visual amenity plan.

In essence, this plan would be submitted to the relevant planning authority for approval **after** the DCO is granted and the plan would set out the "minimum distance as no less than 100 metres and must not exceed 200 metres" [sic], unless otherwise agreed with the owners of residential dwellings, together with justification for the inclusion in, or exclusion from, the plan, as the case may be, of residential dwellinghouses adjacent to the authorised development.

SBW object to this plan for the following reasons

1. This additional requirement has only been added because the Applicant did not submit an adequate RVAA during Examination period, including detailed property assessments with site visits, as requested several times. This is despite having ample opportunity to complete the work. The SoS has acknowledged this in their refusal to extend the period for the Applicant to submit this and other missing documents.
2. The Applicant now uses a minimum figure of 100m separation without any justification and despite showing 250m (as proposed by ExA) on the latest Masterplans Rev 4 [C1-051].
3. It is undemocratic because IPs, including impacted residents, have **no** opportunity to respond post Acceptance. This plan raises the same arguments that SoS use in their letter of 8 June 2026, refusing “the request to extend” in that it “*undermines confidence in, and the integrity of, the planning process. It may also give rise to concerns of fairness*”
4. It is unfair to exclude those properties who have “already agreed” a buffer. Those agreements were made without proper assessment with residents worried about panels 25m from their open fences. The 40-60m agreed is considerably less than the 100-250m now being proposed for all.
5. It is unworkable. OHA in their response [C1- 024] say:
“A detailed assessment (including site visits to each impacted property) needs to be carried out in order to determine the level of impact.”
“The OHA do not consider it appropriate for such reductions to be considered post consent. Instead, a sufficiently detailed assessment of the potential impacts of the scheme of residential amenity should be submitted to the SoS to inform their decision
6. By moving these decisions to post acceptance, the Applicant is denying the opportunity for the SoS to consider this important issue in their decision;.

One further important point.

There is an apparent error in the measurements given by the Applicant when they say
“a minimum distance as no less than 100 metres and must not exceed 200 metres”

Everywhere else in their documents, the Applicant uses the figure of 250m not 200m. So, even if this requirement is not removed from the DCO, this error must be corrected in the final DCO.

Conclusion.

Requirement 15 in Schedule 2 should be removed from the final DCO.

References:

1. [Botley West Solar Farm - Examining Authority's Schedule of Changes to dDCO](#)
2. [EN010147-002004-OCC Written Summary of Oral Submission- CA1.pdf](#)
3. [EN010147-002406-Oxfordshire County Council Deadline 8 Written Statement.pdf](#)
4. [pins advice note 15](#)
5. [\[Withdrawn\] Overarching National Policy Statement for energy \(EN-1\) - GOV.UK](#)
6. [National Policy Statement for renewable energy infrastructure \(EN-3\), 2025 - GOV.UK](#)
7. [NGET response to SoS RFI 28 April 2026](#)



Response to Applicant's Answers [C1-087]
to the
Secretary of State's Request for Information

Section 14: Response to Other Matters

concerning

**Substation connection, Order Limits and
Coalescence**

Stop Botley West Campaign
15 July 2026

Stop Botley West Response to the Applicant's Answers to the Secretary of State's Questions. OTHER MATTERS

1. SUBSTATION CONNECTION
2. ORDER LIMITS
3. COALESCENCE

1. SUBSTATION CONNECTION

Under 'Other Matters' in their cover letter [C1-033] the Applicant¹ writes that
*"BWSF has received a Gate 2 protected connection offer.
This confirms that the Project is very much a critical national policy"*

SUMMARY

NESO Gate 2 protection does not confirm that Botley West Solar Farm (BWSF) is a national critical priority. Gate 2 is an administrative grid-connection milestone indicating readiness and strategic alignment within NESO's modelling. It does not confer

- national-infrastructure status,
- government priority designation,
- immunity from planning challenge.
- confirms alignment with one modelling scenario.
- The NESO Tech Register² does not show BWSF as having a Gate 2 position. In fact it shows that BWSF is still at the 'Scoping' stage with a connection date of October 2026. This Register claims to be updated weekly.
- NESO³ map of new substations and cable routes show no plans to build either in Oxfordshire up to the year 2045

NESO Gate 2 Protection⁴:

- Gate 2 is part of NESO's reformed grid-connection process.
- It confirms a project has met readiness tests: land control, planning progress, deliverability.
- It confirms strategic alignment with NESO's Clean Power 2030 modelling.
- It grants a protected queue position for grid connection.
- It is an administrative safeguard to prevent displacement by less-ready projects.
- It does not elevate the project to government priority status.
- It does not imply national security, resilience, or emergency planning relevance.
- It does not guarantee planning approval or override environmental, landscape, or community impacts.
- It does not confer special status under DESNZ, Cabinet Office, NPSA, or National Policy Statements.

¹ [EN010147-002627-C1-033 - EN010147_APP_20.1_SofS Response Cover Letter 9.6.26.pdf](#)

² [TEC Register | National Energy System Operator](#)

³ [Web map | National Energy System Operator](#)

⁴ [Gate 2 Criteria Methodology \(December 2025\) - FINAL CLEAN.pdf](#)

*NESO “The statement of approval is valid for 9 months from the date of this letter”
(Gate 2 Protected Connection letter sent to PVDP). See in ‘Other Matters’¹*

Failure to maintain compliance during this period may result in NESO removing Gate 2 protection, reassigning the connection date, or reverting the project to Gate 1, in accordance with the Queue Management provisions referenced throughout the methodology.

The ninemonth protection period therefore safeguards BWSF’s queue position but does not guarantee connection, nor does it imply national priority status or urgency. It is a conditional administrative milestone, not a construction or energisation deadline.

Contract for Difference Scheme⁵ (CfD)

Whereas Solar 5, the license holder for BWSF, are confirmed as an ‘eligible generator’ to enter the CfD Scheme the offer is valid for 9 months from 1 June 2026. With reference to the letter from NESO regarding the readiness of an electricity substation as Q4 2031. It may be that the offer of entry to the CfD Scheme will be unavailable by that time and this could have a significantly detrimental effect of the viability of BWSF as the price of electricity is forecast to be reduced.

Gate 2 protection is a procedural grid-connection milestone, not a national priority designation. It does not imply that BWSF is essential, urgent, or nationally critical. We respectfully request the Secretary of State to assess the project on its planning merits, environmental impacts, and public-interest balance. Gate 2 does not alter the fundamental question: whether industrialising 1,400 acres of countryside is justified when alternative, less harmful solutions exist.

CONCLUSION

- Gate 2 is not evidence of national necessity.
- Gate 2 cannot be used to argue that BWSF must be approved regardless of harm.
- Gate 2 does not weaken the case for alternative sites or distributed generation.
- Gate 2 does not diminish landscape, heritage, agricultural, or community impacts.
- Gate 2 does not reduce the weight of local opposition or cumulative impact concerns.
- Gate 2 does not imply urgency: NESO modelling is flexible and non-binding.
- Gate 2 does not confirm that BWSF is required to meet 2030 targets; it simply confirms alignment with one modelling scenario.
- The viability of the Project is very dependent on the Government’s Contract for Difference Scheme which may not be available if the Gate 2 designation is withdrawn because neither the solar farm nor the NESO substation are operational in time.

⁵ [CfD Resource Portal](#)

2. ORDER LIMITS

There are a number of fields where panel removal is already agreed and an additional large area where the potential for up to 250m buffer means many more whole or partial fields will not contain panels.

As a result, according to the latest Masterplans Rev 4 [C1-051] submitted by the Applicant on 9 June, the land currently within the red-line boundary but not be used for panels is now extensive.

In the Change Process Table in Appendix B of their answers to SoS. [C1-087] the Applicant states that the whole area within the order limits is now 1328ha and that the remaining installation area is 554.45ha, so 773.55ha now without panels, of which a total of 288.52ha have been removed since the Application was submitted in Dec 2024.

Some land - eg the Evenlode river valley - was never planned to be used for panels and presumably was included in their calculations of 70% BNG. This could be retained on BNG and Ecology grounds but a great number of other fields totalling at least 300ha should not be retained, for the following reasons;

1. In the absence of an agreed and binding plan to manage this land and without regular maintenance, these areas will become wastelands of scrub, changing the nature of the landscape.
2. Without the legal safeguard of being outside the Order Limits and outside the control of the Applicant, there is a danger that the Applicant will negotiate to place panels in these areas (so called "panel creep"). Indeed, the Applicant's proposed Residential Visual Amenity Plan - to decide exact buffers after grant of the DCO is designed exactly to allow this to happen.

For these reasons, areas agreed or currently offered for panel removal should be removed from the red-line boundary so they can continue to be farmed, contributing to UK food security and retaining the landscape character to which the Applicant has already agreed to return the land after 40 years.

In the previous sectional responses, SBW have identified a number of fields that are still within the Order Limits which either;

1. have already been agreed as areas that will not contain panels:
 - 1.1. Parts of fields 2.001, 2.002, 2.005, 2.115 and the whole of fields 2.035 and 2.116) - see SBW Response section 9: Q50 on Food growing areas. c34ha
 - 1.2. Area designated for the now withdrawn Education Facility: part of field 2.002
 - 1.3. Fields removed at Change 2 on 1 July on Heritage Grounds: the whole of field 2.001, 2.002 and 2.005 c17ha
2. areas being offered by the Applicant (9 June 2026) as areas that will not contain panels
 - 2.1. the 250m buffers shown on Illustrative Masterplans Rev 4. In many cases these do not follow field boundaries but the red-line could be drawn at the nearest field boundaries (see SBW Response section 3: Q24b on Landscape and in section 4: Q26/7 on RVAA and C1-081)
3. areas being recommended by IPs (July 2026) as areas which should not contain panels
 - 3.1. On grounds of flood risk in Cassington (see SBW Section 10: Q57: Hydrology). Fields 2.95 to 2.104 +(fields 2.100, 2.109 and 2.110 already included in 250m buffer offer.)
 - 3.2. On grounds of Safety. Q44 Aviation - further reductions (as training circuits cover the whole central site and Shipton Slade)

Question 2.5.4 in ExA 2nd Written Questions [PD-012] asks:

*“(1) Government’s ‘Guidance related to procedures for the compulsory acquisition of land’ advises that the SoS needs ‘**to be satisfied that the land to be acquired is no more than is reasonably required for the purposes of the development**’ (paragraph 11). Given the project was already stated to provide up to 80% net gain, why is this 17.6ha of land needed to be acquired to deliver biodiversity net gain (BNG)?” and*
“4) Would the land not be better served being kept in its current agricultural use?”

Note. The applicant has since changed their stated 80% BNG to 72% in their changes to the dDCO schedule 2, requirement 7 [C1-093]

CONCLUSION

An estimated 300ha of land (note: ExA asked for justification for retaining just 17.6ha), formerly in productive agricultural use, that is not not now expected to contain panels, needs to be returned to its former use and protected from “panel creep” post consent.

This can only be guaranteed by changing the Order Limits and moving the Red-line boundaries to remove the fields where panels are to be removed.

The Applicant should identify these fields in consultation with Oxfordshire Host Authorities (OHA) and move the red line boundary.

It is understood that this would require an additional change request with time for a full consultation to be carried out and a report written.

Since it is unlikely that this could be concluded by the SoS to receive it in time to make his decision by 10 September, the only alternative is for the SoS to reject the Application in its current form.

3. COALESCENCE

There has been a failure to consider the multi-district impact of uncoordinated infrastructure and development sprawl.

SUMMARY

The Applicant does not address the profound and unmapped cumulative impacts arising from the simultaneous expansion of major housing allocations and proposed utility-scale solar infrastructure across large parts of West Oxfordshire, Cherwell and the Vale of White Horse (Vale) District Council areas.

Planning applications like the Botley West Solar Farm and adjacent commercial schemes are largely treated by the Applicant as isolated developments. The reality is one of overlapping spatial boundaries forcing an unprecedented, multi-district coalescence.

By pushing residential masterplans directly against expansive ground-mounted solar panels, the planning system is systematically eliminating the open, rural gaps separating historic Oxfordshire settlements. Removal of these gaps will rapidly transition a predominantly rural and agrarian landscape into a continuous urbanised-industrial sprawl.

The visual impact of this cross-district infrastructure collision is acutely demonstrated in West Oxfordshire, specifically along the rural buffers of Hanborough Parish:

- The ancient boundary of Pinsley Wood stands as an invaluable ecological, historic, and recreational asset.
- Under current dual-pressure scenarios, new greenfield housing allocations are being driven directly toward the northern and western flanks of the Botley West installation, resulting in landscape industrialisation and a loss of openness across countryside forming part of the setting of the Blenheim WHS.

The threat of landscape coalescence is not confined to the central sector; it replicates severely to the south within the Vale District Council boundary:

- In Cumnor Parish, the open agricultural valley situated between the Cumnor Village Conservation Area, Wytham Woods, and the Farmoor Reservoir is facing total industrial saturation.
- The southern extents of the Botley West collide directly with the proposed 160-acre Red House Solar Farm area.
- Compounding this is the massive National Grid substation application also in Cumnor.

Multi-district coalescence risks creating severe and irreversible visual blight ruining designated protected views across the Oxford Green Belt.

CONCLUSION

The planning authorities and the Planning Inspectorate must look beyond isolated site assessments. Significant risk lies in the uncoordinated, creeping coalescence of housing and energy infrastructure across West Oxfordshire, Cherwell, and the Vale areas. Without an overarching strategy that protects the open countryside, the environmental, agricultural, and historic fabric of Oxfordshire will face an irreversible decline. Comprehensive, cumulative impact assessments must be in place and their recommendations implemented before further consents are granted.