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Sent: 16 July 2026 12:31
To: Botley West Solar Farm
Subject: #S4 - BotleyWest Solar Farm - Final Representation to the Examining Authority

Registration number for BotleyWest examination: [REDACTED]

BOTLEYWEST SOLAR FARM

Final Representation to the Examining Authority Climate Leadership through Exemplary Landscape Design

BotleyWest presents the Examining Authority with an exceptional opportunity. It can make a nationally significant contribution to climate change mitigation while demonstrating that renewable energy infrastructure can enhance, rather than diminish, the landscapes in which it is located.

These objectives should not be viewed as competing. Through excellent design they can, and should, reinforce one another.

Climate change is the defining environmental challenge of our generation. England's landscapes are among our greatest cultural and environmental assets. The challenge before the Examining Authority is therefore not whether to choose between climate change mitigation and landscape quality, but how to secure both.

In my opinion, BotleyWest has the potential to become the national exemplar of how this can be achieved.

I write as a Chartered Landscape Architect who has worked on major infrastructure projects including strategic highways and power generation developments. Throughout my career I have sought to meet the needs of people, to work within the requirements of engineering and horticulture and to optimise the beauty of a scheme. My comments are offered from that professional perspective.

Climate Change Must Carry Substantial Weight The scientific evidence, the Climate Change Act, the United Kingdom's legally binding commitment to Net Zero, national planning policy and the Government's National Policy Statements all recognise the urgent need to accelerate the deployment of renewable energy.

Every tonne of greenhouse gas emissions avoided reduces future harm. Every year of unnecessary delay increases the burden placed upon future generations through higher temperatures, more extreme weather, biodiversity loss, food insecurity, flooding, migration and the increasing costs of adaptation.

Climate change is therefore not simply one planning consideration among many. It is one of the defining public policy challenges of our generation and deserves substantial weight in the planning balance.

BotleyWest would at peak operation generate sufficient renewable electricity to supply the needs of all the homes in Oxfordshire. It would make a meaningful contribution towards reducing greenhouse gas emissions while strengthening national energy security through proven, safe and rapidly deployable technology.

The need for projects of this nature is compelling.

Nationally Significant Infrastructure Should Exemplify Outstanding Design Meeting the challenge of climate change should never require us to lower our expectations of design.

Indeed, the opposite should be true.

The infrastructure we build in response to climate change should become the finest infrastructure our generation creates.

Good design is not an optional aesthetic addition. It lies at the heart of sustainable development. It creates places that people value, protects environmental quality, strengthens biodiversity, encourages public enjoyment and leaves a positive legacy long after construction has finished.

Too often, landscape mitigation seeks merely to conceal development. The greater opportunity is to improve the landscape itself.

The most successful infrastructure projects become accepted because they are generous in their treatment of the surrounding landscape. They enrich rather than simply occupy it.

BotleyWest should aspire to become internationally recognised not only for the clean energy it generates, but also for the quality of the landscape it creates.

Why BotleyWest is Unique

Few renewable energy schemes possess the unique combination of characteristics found here.

The landscape lies alongside one of the world's finest designed landscapes at Blenheim Palace. It is associated with Oxford, a city recognised throughout the world for scholarship, innovation and leadership. The National Grid connection lies nearby, avoiding the need for extensive new transmission infrastructure. Perhaps most importantly, Blenheim Estate brings more than three centuries of continuous stewardship. Unlike many infrastructure projects, responsibility for the land remains with those who have cared for it over generations and who intend to continue doing so long after the solar panels have been removed.

This long-term perspective creates unusual confidence that environmental improvements can be sustained and enhanced over time.

For these reasons, the project has an influence extending well beyond Oxfordshire. If BotleyWest demonstrates that renewable energy can enrich landscape character, restore biodiversity and benefit local communities while making a major contribution to climate change mitigation, it will become an influential model for future developments across the United Kingdom and internationally.

Creating an Exemplar

The question before the Examining Authority is therefore larger than whether this individual proposal should proceed.

The greater opportunity is to establish a new benchmark for utility-scale solar development.

The landscape surrounding Blenheim Palace demonstrates how thoughtful design transformed ordinary agricultural land into scenery admired throughout the world. Capability Brown did not simply disguise change; he created enduring beauty.

Our generation faces a different challenge. Climate change demands a new landscape response.

BotleyWest presents the opportunity to create a twenty-first century landscape that responds to climate change with the same ambition that eighteenth-century landscape designers brought to their own age.

Rather than viewing renewable energy as something to be hidden, this project could demonstrate how careful landscape design can integrate clean energy, biodiversity recovery, public access and agricultural stewardship into a coherent and beautiful whole.

That would represent genuine sustainability.

Opportunities for Further Improvement

Although I support the proposal, I believe several opportunities remain to strengthen it still further.

Landscape

The surrounding landscape should aspire to become a contemporary extension of the wider Blenheim landscape, drawing inspiration from the enduring principles established by Capability Brown while responding to today's environmental challenges.

The objective should not simply be mitigation, but lasting enhancement.

Biodiversity

The proposed Biodiversity Net Gain is already substantial.

However, given the exceptional scale of the project, there is an opportunity to create one of Britain's leading examples of landscape-scale ecological restoration by increasing biodiversity ambitions wherever practicable and ensuring that habitats become richer, more connected and more resilient over time.

Community Benefit

The scale of the proposal justifies equally ambitious community benefit.

Long-term funding could support habitat restoration, active travel, environmental education, flood management, landscape enhancement and local community initiatives throughout the Evenlode and Dorn Catchments and surrounding villages.

Such investment would leave a lasting legacy extending far beyond electricity generation.

Education

Oxford and Blenheim together provide a unique opportunity to improve public understanding of climate change, renewable energy, biodiversity recovery and sustainable landscape design.

A high-quality interpretation centre or educational programme could inspire visitors from across Britain and overseas, demonstrating practical responses to climate change through exemplary design.

Active Travel

The proposed network of footpaths and bridleways is warmly welcomed.

Where opportunities arise, these should be extended to improve sustainable connections between surrounding villages, Oxford, Eynsham, Woodstock, Yarnton and Hanborough railway station, encouraging healthier travel while allowing more people to experience the restored landscape.

Conclusion

The defining challenge of our generation is climate change.

The defining opportunity is to address that challenge by creating landscapes that are richer in nature, more beautiful and more valuable to society than those they replace.

BotleyWest has the potential to become far more than a successful renewable energy project.

It can demonstrate that climate leadership and landscape beauty are not opposing ambitions but complementary ones.

Future generations should be able to look back on BotleyWest as the point at which utility-scale solar development moved beyond mitigation towards genuine environmental enhancement.

It should become the benchmark against which future solar developments are judged—not only for the renewable energy they produce, but for the quality of the landscapes they leave behind.

I respectfully encourage the Examining Authority to support the proposal while encouraging the highest possible standards of landscape design, biodiversity enhancement and community benefit, so that BotleyWest becomes an enduring exemplar of truly sustainable development.

Jonathan Ford FJ