

To Steeple Aston Parish/Town Council

Dear Cathy Fleet

BOTLEY WEST SOLAR FARM

I am writing to you in your role as contact person for Steeple Aston Parish/Town Council about the proposed Botley West Solar Farm that, if it went ahead, would be the **fourth largest solar farm in the world** (the first three are in China and India) and would occupy a total of more than 3,400 acres (**more than 2,600 football fields**) North and West of Oxford city, more than three quarters of which would be on Oxford's green belt.

We have only until December 15th to respond to the first of only two developer-led consultations about this proposal, with a second due in Spring 2023. **The Botley West proposal circumvents all local planning procedures and will go directly to the Government's Planning Inspectorate for final approval as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP).**

I have been a resident of Horton-cum-Studley for more than 40 years and am concerned about developments such as these covering green spaces so close to the city, and with little public scrutiny.

Your community is within 6 kms of the solar farm and so is likely to be one of those most affected.

MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROPOSALS

Please download a folder (*scanned with TotalAV anti-virus*) from this [link](#) which contains the consultation brochure from the proposers, two letters about the proposal in a recent issue of The Oxford Times, and some maps of the impact this will have on Oxford.

The Botley West Solar Farm, to be built on land owned by the Blenheim Estate and Merton College, would be in three sections; one North of Woodstock, between Wootton and Tackley (331 hectares, 818 acres) one, the largest, between Kidlington and Eynsham (983 hectares, 2429 acres) and one just North of Cumnor and West of Botley.(81 hectares, 200 acres). The three sites would be joined by a cable (above/below ground) and would feed into the national electricity grid via a new sub-station on the southern-most site near Botley (hence the solar farm's name).

Many new solar farms are being suggested as a response to the need to decarbonise our energy supplies in the face of the climate crisis. This important aim is often used to justify siting such farms in inappropriate places, for example on valuable agricultural land, near internationally important bird reserves (for example the Noke Solar Farm proposal, 43 hectares, near the RSPB Reserve on Otmoor), or within Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty or green belts (for example the Nuneham Courtenay Solar Farm, 125 hectares, South of the city).

The Botley West Solar Farm would be an order of magnitude greater than the controversial Nuneham Courtenay Solar Farm which was approved by South

Oxfordshire District Council following incorrect advice from its own officers about both District Council and Government policy.

LOCAL PLANNING APPLICATIONS AND NSIPs

Most local planning applications are put on the local District Council's website. The public is invited to comment, and all such comments are freely available for all to read. The local Planning Department then takes a decision in light of those comments and explains why some have been listened to and others ignored. The planning decision can be challenged, but this is usually by developers refused an application than by dissatisfied members of the public when an application is approved.

Botley West is being put forward as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) and is thus removed from direct control by the three affected District Councils (West Oxfordshire, Cherwell and Vale of White Horse). Under the NSIP rules developers, in seeking permission to go ahead in the form of a Development Consent Order (DCO), must submit a Statement of Community Consultation (SoCC) that should also involve the affected Councils. The developer is in complete control of gathering information for its SoCC. None of the responses during any community consultation is likely to be made publicly available, so that we will not be able to judge the strength of feeling for or against Botley West Solar Farm.

The developer then submits its NSIP application directly to the Government which appoints a Planning Inspector to examine the case. Planning Inspectors are chosen who have little or no knowledge of the local situation because their job is only to decide if due legal process has been followed. They are, however, in complete control of any examination of an NSIP proposal. Their deliberations need not be in public and, even if they are, any hearings are not obliged to invite any member of the public or Local Authority to speak. As long as the developers have ticked all the relevant NSIP legal boxes, the Inspector is obliged to approve the application whether or not it is a good idea, and whether or not it is appropriate in the landscape where it will be built.

The developers' timetable anticipates this whole process will be over, and the development decision (DCO) taken, by early 2025, with construction starting in summer of that year.

Putting the Botley West Solar Farm proposal forward as an NSIP is therefore a way of short-circuiting any local or even District Council close scrutiny or opposition. It makes a mockery of local democracy and is a rather cynical way of ignoring those communities most affected by such very large developments.

MAPS OF THE BOTLEY WEST SOLAR FARM AND OTHER PLANNED DEVELOPMENTS

The downloaded folder contains the following additional files:

a) A map (OxondevelopmentsandBotleyWest.pdf) of Oxford city and surroundings with all developments in current Local Plans shown in brown, all sites put forward for the stalled Oxfordshire 2050 plans in single cross-hatched grey and the Botley West sites shown in cross-hatched black. For comparison, the very much smaller Noke and Nuneham Courtenay Solar Farm sites are shown cross-hatched in red. The 'official' map from which the Oxon 2050 sites came is also included (OxonPlan2050sitesrs.pdf). Not all of these sites might be selected for future development but it is likely that many of them on this map will be, given Oxon's past commitment to growth.

b) A series of maps on a single page (OxfordsGreenBeltfuture.pdf) showing how much of Oxford's green belt is being taken over by development of one sort or other. The map at the top shows the figures for the whole of the green belt; the one in the middle shows the figures for green belt areas

within 2kms of the city's built-up areas; and the bottom one shows the same for areas within 1km of built-up areas. Areas close to the city are presumably those within easy reach of city dwellers seeking some green spaces for exercise and relaxation. The depressing conclusion from these maps is that **if all proposed development goes ahead, Oxford will have lost more than a quarter of its nearest green belt areas by 2050**. Notice from the top map that the Botley West Solar Farm will occupy almost as much (3.1%) of the green belt as all current Local Plan sites (3.5%), on which will be built c. 20,000 more houses.

c) A map of a larger section of Oxfordshire (OxonLocalPlansites...150.jpg) showing the above proposed developments all the way to Carterton. If all sites go ahead more or less the entire area between Bicester in the East and Carterton in the West will be built over by 2050.

More than three quarters (76%) of the Botley West Solar Farm would be within Oxford's green belt. Is this what we want for our precious green spaces?

A REQUEST FOR HELP

I am writing to you now to ask for your help in publicising this proposal as widely as possible within your local community (through direct contact or articles in newsletters, Parish magazines etc.) and to encourage people to express their opinions:

a) during the developers' consultation exercise (details are in the developers' brochure in the downloaded folder). **Please note there are only THREE remaining chances to interact with the developers in this first consultation exercise** - one on Wednesday November 30th, 1.30 to 5.30 p.m. in Cumnor Village Hall, OX2 9QF, one on Thursday December 1st, 5.30 p.m. to 7 p.m. in Begbroke Village Hall, OX5 1RN (this meeting is advertised on the developers website but is not listed in the brochure), and the other during a Community Webinar on December 5th, 5.30 to 7p.m. For the latter you must register your attendance in advance at this [website](#)

b) to your Local District and County Councillors (some have already expressed an opinion in an Oxford Mail article [here](#)) and

c) to your Local MP. Robert Courts, MP for Witney, has already expressed his reservations on his website [here](#) In it he asks people (not just constituents) to fill in a simple online form *"to ensure that I am able to reflect the strength of local feeling in detail."*

Layla Moran, MP for Oxford West and Abingdon has also expressed her reservations in an Oxford Mail article [here](#).

BOTLEY WEST WILL GO AHEAD IF WE DO NOTHING NOW

If no-one objects, claiming later that they were 'uninformed' about these proposals will carry no weight, either with the developers or the Planning Inspector.

Please do get in touch if you require any further information. I am also trying to alert campaigning groups in our area about these plans that, so far, seem to have been below most people's radar.

Please pass on this email and document links to anybody who may be concerned.

Please be in no doubt. We will experience the world's fourth largest solar farm by default if we do nothing now!

Yours sincerely,

David Rogers

David Rogers, MA, D.Phil. (Oxon)

Professor of Ecology (retired)

Department of Zoology/Biology,

University of Oxford