

Development Control Committee - Monday 24th Feb 2025 Botley West solar power station DCO

Key considerations:-

- Will Members vote on whether they support the BW proposal or not? If the majority support it, then surely nothing more needs to be done as the Examination will told that WODC support the proposal.
- If, however, the majority of Members oppose the proposal as it stands, then the Relevant Representation (RR) needs, in my opinion, to be far more robust from the start. The current version makes a number of good points but overall it is too neutral and understated in its message.
- Might I suggest there is an Executive Summary at the very beginning of the RR; this summary should contain the following stronger paragraphs from the draft RR **starting with Para. 96** and then adding 20 to 22, 32 to 35, 46, 47, 52, 54, 59, and 86 in whichever order the officers find makes most sense- these are the officers key objections to the draft DCO and which the Members can support.
- In addition, I would urge Members to require the draft RR to be cross referenced to the letter responding to this proposal to PINS from ICOMOS (see copy attached) - who advise on World Heritage sites - and in particular to the specific recommendations made by one of the UK's most respected Historic Landcape experts, Mr Hal Moggeridge, whom ICOMOS consulted on this matter.
- He is very robust on what he sees as the likely damaging impact on the important historic landscape that forms a further protective buffer around Blenheim Palace and Park's WH designation; much of this buffer is also part of the Oxford Green Belt. He recommends the removal of a significant number of fields, should the proposal be approved in part.
- I believe Members could endorse his views.
- You will be aware that the Government proposes to change Green Belt policy and introduce a Grey Belt designation where parts of the Green Belt are partially degraded or developed. It would therefore massively increase the risk of long term development on parts of the solar farm in the Green Belt should the owners decide they could be more profitably used.

- If the Members vote to oppose the Application at the Examination, then it follows that a budget needs to be set asap to allow for the likely cost of the work that will be involved attending the public Examination later this year and representing the Council's case viz. Barrister, solicitors and other relevant experts to counter the Applicant's evidence. A decision on that is needed today so officers can report back to Members/Executive/Council asap.
- The applicant's analysis of possible alternative sites for a large scale power station is to say the least inadequate, given the same 400KV pylon line passes through large stretches of flattish sparsely populated farm land between Farmoor and Gloucester.
- The amount of community impact benefit on offer is frankly paltry given the sums involved and the potential profits to operator/landowners alike. WODC should surely ask for the figure to be increased.
- If as seems very likely, new and more efficient solar panels become available, the applicants will generate even more power and make even more money than currently anticipated - but in that scenario there would not reduce the size of the site accordingly.
- It is hard to grasp the concept of 40 years being a temporary use. That is almost two generations.
- You may or may not be aware that the Applicant Solar Five Ltd is one of a dozen off the shelf £100 private companies with similar names (e.g. Solar One Ltd and so on) owned jointly by Herr P Gerstmann (resident of Shiplake, Henley on Thames and Berlin) and Madame Yulia Lezhen -apparently resident of Cyprus, but of unknown nationality.
- It is self evident that neither of them have much interest in how this part of Oxfordshire might be affected by their proposal - a massive energy infrastructure project run for private profit but potentially granted unlimited CPO powers by the 2008 Act.
- No compelling reasons have been given as to why this small private company should be given such powers, rightly exercisable only **where the public benefits outweigh the private loss**. The State building Motorways, bypasses etc or HS2 being ready examples. (See the MHCLG guidance on the Compulsory Purchase process issued October 2024).
- Indeed it is entirely possible that the two owners could just decide to sell the consent, if granted by the S of S, to a third party about whom nothing is known, and take their profit that way.

- The company says it has a Grid connection offer from the National Grid operator valid until October 2027. The project, if approved, would take at least two years to build assuming funding can be put in place first to pay for the construction costs in the interim. That sounds a very tight programme given the Examination may not take place till this summer and a decision reached by early next year at the earliest, supply chains for materials, etc.
- The finances of the company are unknown as the relevant figures on the PINS website have been redacted - so there is no way of telling if they have the funds to pay the estimated £69 million they say will be needed to compensate landowners and a further c £900+ million to construct the solar power station.
- What guarantees that the operator will have the funds in 40 years time to remove the panels etc as promised now. Companies can easily be wound up/liquidated leaving no assets.
- So there is no evidence of how this proposal will actually be funded, by whom and no current guarantee that compensation funds have been deposited anywhere to give affected parties confidence that they will be paid for what might be taken from them by compulsion - as would be the case of a public body exercising CPO powers that the DCO will grant.
- The Application fails to say where the vital 400 KV substation near Farmoor will be actually built (on a c. 3 hectare site comprising a building c.12 m high by 87m x 30m) and the Applicant's agent Mark Owen Loyd has told me that the National Grid - not Solar Five Ltd - will be applying for a wholly separate planning approval from the Vale of White Horse later this year. So the key connection link to the National Grid /400KV pylon line coming west out of Botley to Gloucester, is not part of this scheme!
- There must be serious doubt whether this facility can be approved, the land acquired and the infrastructure built in time for October 2027, if no application has even been made yet.
- It has become clear in the local press that the Duke of Marlborough is himself opposed to this proposal even though one assumes he and members of his family/relations could benefit enormously. It seems the various Blenheim related trusts and two other key landowners have now actually agreed to sell or lease their land to the operator if the scheme is approved.

Naturally I will be making these and other points with PINS and would urge you to ask the same questions.

Harry St John - Resident of Eynsham.
Former Member for North Leigh.

NB - I am not directly affected by the scheme itself like some but I have known and love this stretch of valued rural landscape for over 40 years, and know it is equally enjoyed by so many others living locally.

I wholly support the building of solar arrays on a sensible scale on flat poor quality land or where the panels are largely hidden from view by the existing lie of the land - we have a number such sites already in West Oxon. Generating electricity this way is part of the mix of renewable power sources to gradually replace fossil fuels.