



Report by the Stop Botley West campaign, Oxfordshire: PVDP's first (pre-application) consultation with Parish Councils on proposals for BWSF

Introduction

Thirteen Parish Councils (PCs) were invited to respond to a questionnaire aimed at discovering how well the Developer (PVDP) has consulted with local Parish Councils about the proposals for Botley West Solar Farm (BWSF). Nine Parish Councils responded, representing in total 76 councillors.

E-mail from the Developer

On 27 October 2022 PVDP sent out an e-mail to Parish Councils via their Clerks, with the subject heading "Introductory webinar for the proposed Botley West Solar Farm", to be held 2nd and 3rd November 2022. That only provided 4 and 5 working day's notice, respectively.

Six of the nine Councils who responded said that they had received the e-mail, i.e. two thirds of the respondents.

Three (one third) said they had not received it.

Of the six PCs who had received the e-mail, three said there was 'something' in the e-mail indicating that part of the proposed BWSF would be within or near their parish. The other three said there was not. **So only half the PCs were alerted to the significance of this development.**

All six said that the e-mail was forwarded, by their clerks, to their councillors.

Introductory Developer's Webinar

A total of eight councillors registered to take part in the webinar (offered on 2 dates: 2nd & 3rd November 2022) from three of the six councils. Two councils said none of their councillors registered, and one didn't know how many had registered, but they did know that one of their councillors had subsequently joined a webinar successfully. So we can assume there were at least nine councillor registrations in total, from a total of four councils.

Of these nine known registrations for the webinar, eight joined a webinar successfully.

However, information received in an e-mail from the Chair of Hanborough Parish Council - *which is attached to this report as an Appendix* – indicates that many other councillors tried to join the webinar and were unable to join. There was no-one available at PVDP to resolve this issue, and numbers on the call had apparently been limited, **so the webinars did not successfully reach their intended audience.**

Furthermore, as pointed out in the e-mail at the Appendix, the number of councils/councillors wanting to engage in the process was limited as many did not immediately understand its relevance to them given that the proposed Solar Farm is called 'Botley West'.

Experience of the Developer's Webinar

Eight councillors from four councils attended a webinar.

Two councils, with six attendees in total, said that the webinar did not provide sufficient information or inadequate opportunity for questions.

The other two councils, with two attendees in total, said that it did.

So, three quarters of the attendees, and half of the councils they represent, did not feel that the webinar met their needs.

As can be seen in the email at the Appendix, the webinar consisted of a lengthy presentation with only a short amount of time left for questions, and much of this was taken up by councillors protesting at the location, date and times of the five Community Information events being organised by PVDP, which they felt excluded many residents from being able to engage. **This meant that there was little, if any, meaningful discussion about the proposals themselves.**

Follow-up after the Developer's Webinar

In the e-mail of 27 October 2022, PVDP promised that "Following the webinars, we will circulate all information presented in a Stakeholder Briefing Pack".

Only two Parish Councils received the briefing pack, out of the survey's nine PC respondents. One of them had attended a webinar; the other had not.

Therefore three Councils whose Councillors (seven in total) had engaged in the process by attending a webinar did not receive the Stakeholder Briefing Pack, and neither did other Parish Councils who responded to our survey.

Parish Council responses to the Developer

Of the nine Parish Councils who have responded to our survey:

- Five Councils have submitted a Consultation Statement to PVDP about the proposal. Two have not, and two did not say.
- Four PCs oppose the Botley West proposal (3 of whom have formally voted to oppose it).
- Four PCs have voted to delay a decision until later.
(One of these initially expressed an objection, but has now voted to survey the parish to confirm the majority view prior to responding to the formal consultation.)
- **No Parish Councils have voted to support the proposal.**

Parish Council Observations

Bladon Parish Council reported that the initial e-mail was not clear about the impact on their village (which will be especially impacted by the middle section of BWSF as the village will be surrounded), and that they therefore wrote to PVDP to clarify the area affected, as they were at first confused by

the reference to “Botley” in the title. PVDP responded saying that they anticipated Bladon Parish Council being interested in the proposals.

Cumnor Parish Council reported that the only thing in the original e-mail that alerted them to its potential impact on them was the name ‘Botley West’. So their response (one of three saying that ‘something’ in the original e-mail indicated that part of the proposed BWSF would be within or near to their parish) was based solely on the name!

Hanborough(s) Parish Council (*see Appendix* attached) have raised many concerns about the inadequacy of the process of consultation with them, and also about the poor consultations with local residents – pointing out that the consultation document was posted out by second class mail on 31 October, just two days before the consultation launch on 2nd November, which meant that many residents did not receive the information in good time. The Parish Council was also concerned about the limited dates and timings of the planned consultation events, and the lack of publicity for any additional events that were arranged in response to the concerns raised. **Hanborough(s) PC also observed (critically) that the hard copy ‘Phase One Consultation’ feedback forms were only available at the events, and not distributed or posted out to residents.**

Conclusions about the Phase One consultation with Parish Councils

1. The Parish Councils were not effectively or appropriately informed of the consultation, as materials sent were (deliberately?) unclear regarding the relevance to each community.
2. The opportunity to engage in the process was significantly restricted by (unreasonable?) limits placed on the numbers able to attend the two webinars. There was therefore insufficient opportunity for direct engagement, and no in-person engagement arranged for Councillors – unless they chose to attend the open consultation events along with members of the public.
3. The provision of information to Parish Councils was ineffective, as:
 - a. there was inadequate time available for discussion after the long presentation given during the webinar, which was only an hour long in total. This meant that there was no meaningful opportunity for Councillors to ask questions of the Developers
 - b. The promised Stakeholder Briefing Packs were not received by most councils
4. The developers did not respond positively to concerns about the restricted timings of public consultation events, and had to be pushed to add some evening consultations.

The overall conclusion is that the consultation was inadequate; it failed to reach all Parish Councils with an interest in the proposals, and it failed to share information effectively with those Councils that were able to engage.

Dr Anne Gwinnett CMath MIMA FRSA

On behalf of the Stop Botley West
campaign, Oxfordshire.

24 May 2023

Appendix: e-mail from Chair of Hanborough Parish Council

From: Penelope Marcus
Date: Wednesday, 5 April 2023 at 16:14
To: Karen Squibb-Williams
Subject: Monitoring how PVDP conducted the first consultation

Hi Karen

As part of SBW's questionnaire on and response to PVDP's launch and conduct of the first consultation, the group will want to include a report about the initial stages when the consultation was first publicised in early November to the Parish Councils.

On 27 October the following email was sent to the clerks of the parishes that would be potentially affected by the proposal:

Botley West Solar Farm.

This invitation has been sent to community representatives across the host local planning authorities for the project. To allow for as many members to attend as possible, two webinar dates have been provided to choose from:

1. Wednesday 2 November, 4.30pm – 5.30pm:https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_sZDFbbDISfS7UXJg8wBP4w
2. Thursday 3 November, 6pm – 7pm: https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_xOGnIGcJRreOlrwAhZfaoQ

Please click a link to register your attendance at one of the webinars by providing your name and email address.

The webinar will provide an opportunity for you to hear more about the early-stage proposals for the Botley West Solar Farm ahead of the public consultation, which is due to commence on 03 November. We will provide a short presentation followed by a questions and answers session.

It was obviously unclear and puzzling to Parish Councils not immediately neighbouring Botley why they were being sent this invitation and how a solar farm at Botley West would affect them. Therefore, immediate response was very limited.

Following a conversation with a Bladon Parish Councillor, I first heard about the significance of the proposal and about the webinar on Thursday 3rd November. I successfully registered for it and contacted other Hanborough Parish Councillors and our Clerk. They too were successful in their registration.

However, having joined the webinar, I shortly after 6pm received emails from other parish councillors who were unable to join it. Further, there was no one available at PVDP to resolve the problem. So only two of the potentially invited 13 councillors and clerk from Hanborough were able to take part in it.

It appeared that actual participation in the webinar had been restricted to a very small number, and that even the majority of those Councillors who were registered to attend, were not going to be able to. Clearly, 'to allow as many members to attend as possible' had not

been satisfactorily arranged, or PVDP had not fully researched how many council members were eligible to attend.

After a lengthy presentation during the hour-long webinar, much of the brief time allotted to questions was taken up by Councillors protesting at the location, date and times of the five Community Information events being organised by BWSF. All were to take place sometime between 11am and 5.30pm, and only two on Saturdays, and those ending by 4pm.

It was incomprehensible that the timing of these events would only suit retired residents, and that the working population would not be able to attend. The BWSF team simply did not appreciate how inappropriate the timings were and argued that residents could go on Saturdays. Finally, they agreed to hold several more evening events.

Even the Community Webinar on 5 December was being held from 5.30pm to 7pm.

It was clear that the timings were planned to suit the convenience of the BWSF team, but not of the residents who were to be informed.

BWSF launched the First Consultation on 3 November. However, the Phase One Community Consultation leaflet was only sent out on 31 October, second-class post. A very number of Hanborough residents didn't receive it until 5 November or later.

It advertised the public consultation events, but as mentioned above these were mostly during the daytime, and no further leaflets advertising any extra evening events were sent out.

Available only at the events, and not distributed or posted to residents were the Phase One Consultation Feedback Forms.

For project of NSIP standing, and especially of the size proposed, all the above evidence amounts to a serious failure of responsibility by PVDP and BWSF to inform residents sufficiently or adequately of the proposed Solar Farm. Developers have a necessary obligation to carry out consultation events that ensure that residents are fully aware of the details of the scale and scope of the project.

Would you please include this in your report on how PVDP conducted what they are proposing as the first consultation.

Many thanks,

Best wishes

Penelope

Penelope Marcus
Hanborough Parish Council
Chair