

Campaigners against a **solar farm** the size of Heathrow Airport are joining a **rally** in Westminster today [Thursday 18] to push for new restrictions on **solar** development.

Stop Botley West members will join a protest organised by the UK **Solar** Alliance (UKSA), an alliance of community groups across the UK all facing large-scale **solar** development on greenfield land.

The **rally** follows a parliamentary debate for backbenchers on Large-Scale **Solar** Farms.

UKSA opposes large scale projects like Botley West which is one of the largest Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) and believes "**solar** development urgently needs regulating".

Steve Jenkins from Long Hanborough said: "We're going to make our message heard to the Government.

"It is quite clear. Botley West is largely on Oxford's Green Belt, a lot of central part of the proposal sits on farmland that is productive, it's very close to heritage assets including a World Heritage Site and also as an entity it's huge - it's millions of **solar** panels.

"It's unprecedented in this part of the UK and very rare nationally."

A massive 49.9 megawatt **solar farm** was built on an 85-acre site next to the A1 in Grantham in Lincolnshire "but when Botley West was announced it was the largest proposal of its type anywhere in the UK and one of the top 10 largest in the world," said Mr Jenkins.

"It's in the wrong place, it affects assets that we should be protecting for reasons of food production and heritage, landscape, and it affects people as well.

"It's in a fairly well populated area. There are 12 villages affected by the proposal."

He added: "Stop Botley West as an organisation is not against **solar** power per se. What we want to see is community-led **solar** very much in the style Southill **Solar** which is already operating in Charlbury.

"It is run by local people, operated by them, maintained by them and anything going to the grid that they don't use themselves.

"That's the kind of thing we want to see - a patchwork of small **solar** with people sending power to the grid when it's surplus to their own requirements.

"Not paving over three and a half square miles of countryside."

UKSA, which was launched in January 2022, argues that we need to increase our farmland and water storage to maintain food production.

"This is the finding of the Environmental Audit Committee, which also says that food security, and biodiversity and net zero targets must all go hand-in-hand," it said.

It said it supports **solar** energy development but **solar** cells "a fraction of the weight of conventional ground mounted panels with multiple times the generating capacity" are in the pipeline.

There will also be "cells so fine that they can be fitted as a film on windows, and panels that can continue to generate in the dark.

"Global evidence shows that 40-year developments for vast structures on arable fields will rapidly become obsolete. The need for food security will not," it said.

Botley West developers Photovolt Development Partners (PVDP) are expected to submit a Development Consent Order application during the summer which will be determined by the Planning Inspectorate rather than local councils.

However, a decision is not expected until early 2025 with construction anticipated to begin that summer.

Mr Jenkins said he was staying optimistic it would be refused as "although some individuals are pro Botley West I am not hearing a lot of positive noises in West Oxfordshire or in the wider area".

Campaigners are also taking heart from the fact the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy appears to have an ambiguous policy on large scale **solar** farms.

A decision on the 2,500-acre Sunnica plant on the Suffolk-Cambridgeshire border, which would be Europe's largest **solar farm**, has been delayed for the fourth time.

A decision on the **solar farm** was due to be made in September 2023, however that was knocked back to December, before being moved again to March 2024 and will now be made on June 20.

The government has not publicly explained the reason for the decision postponement.

However, West Suffolk MP and former health secretary Matt Hancock has called for the project to be scrapped and East Cambridgeshire District Council and Suffolk County Council have both opposed the proposals.

Photovolt Development Partners have said people would "not notice" Botley West **Solar Farm**, which would cover three sites near Botley, Kidlington and Woodstock, owned by Blenheim.

Project director Mark Owen-Lloyd said people should "focus on the merits" of the project which could provide enough renewable electricity for the county of Oxfordshire.

"We are doing everything to make sure in almost all locations the panels are hidden within the fields and behind hedges - by 2027 those hedges will have grown sufficiently," he said.

He added: "If you look at the statistics on **solar** farms, opposition to them falls away rapidly after they're built and start generating.

"It is a very admirable project that the country needs so I'm confident it will succeed."

Mr Jenkins said: "Because of proposals like Botley West that's why the **Solar Alliance** has organised a **rally**."

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