

Oxfordshire MP says Botley West Solar Farm 'opportunistic'

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Proposals for a supersized solar farm "appear to be driven by developer opportunism", an MP has said.

It comes as a date has been set for the application for consent to be submitted for Botley West Solar Farm, one of the largest solar farms in Europe. Botley West will cover a total of 3,450 acres and stretch 11 miles from end to end at three sites in Woodstock, Kidlington and Botley. More than 70 per cent of the site will cover Oxfordshire greenbelt land mostly owned by Blenheim. Newly elected Liberal Democrat MP for Woodstock Calum Miller said: "I am concerned that the creation of new solar plants is currently unplanned.

"Developers are speculatively approaching large landowners to interest them in major upfront payouts, in return for making their land available for new solar projects.

"This 'dash for solar' is failing to take account of specific local factors since projects are treated as National Strategic Infrastructure Projects and decided by ministers in London, far away from local accountability.

"It is in this context that I oppose the current Botley West scheme.

"It's on a huge scale that appears to be driven by developer opportunism not a careful consideration of the local setting.

"The funding model is not transparent which creates uncertainty about future control of the project, and I share the concerns of residents about the impacts on biodiversity and agricultural production and about the comparatively low level of proposed community benefit.

"I urge the developers to engage with the local community and to listen to their concerns."

The solar farm could produce 840 MW of green energy to the national grid — enough to power 330,000 homes said developers Photovolt Development Partners (PVDP).

The application for a development consent order (DCO) was due to go to the government in July but this was pushed back and a third public consultation was carried out which finished on July 28. Project director Mark Owen-Lloyd said: "No more delays, it is now set in stone. We will submit in the last week of October to the Planning Inspectorate."

The final design will be produced at the application stage.

"I think people will see that we have listened and that we have compromised," Mr Owen Lloyd said. He added: "Having something change completely in a field near your home in a way you don't want it to will provoke anxiety. But if we don't build some generation we are going to run out of electricity.

"We could stay as we are if we hadn't passed the Climate Change Act and if we hadn't agreed to achieve net zero by 2050.

"If you remove fossil fuels from your economy, you have to replace them with something.

"We are building one nuclear power station, that's all.

"We have to build something that is zero or low carbon and at the moment the cheapest, the quickest way of replacing it is ground mounted solar, and also roof mounted solar. It's all part of the fix.

"Things cannot stay as they are because we have decided to change the way we generate our electricity."

However, Anthony Thompson, 62, a former Marks & Spencer retail director who lives in Church Hanborough in the middle of the central site, said: "If you think Blenheim and PVDP are there for a selfless civic duty you are being naive.

"This is about tonnes of cash going directly to their purses."

According to a report in The Sunday Times, Botley West "could make millions for the Blenheim Estate and tens of millions" for PVDP, a German firm whose CEO Peter Gerstmann lives in Henley.

Should it be approved, the facility will be operated by PVDP "which can earn at least £51.2 million per year for the energy it produces there", the paper claimed.

According to The Sunday Times, estimates suggest that the Blenheim Estate could receive more than £2.2 million a year for leasing its land to PVDP.

PVDP is paying about £1,000 per acre "considerably more than the £150 per acre from tenant farmers who use the land for agriculture", the paper said.

Over the 40-year term of the project, it said, this equates to more than £90 million.

It estimated the £800 million construction costs could be recouped in around 15 years.

Oxford West MP Layla Moran said that because the decision on the scheme will be decided by central government it has "a deficit of local democracy and I have raised this directly in Parliament. "My concern is that in bypassing local communities in this way, critical local knowledge will be lost. "Many residents have voiced serious concerns to me about the consultation process itself, alongside serious questions about the scale of the proposal, its impact on the landscape, and the financial links of the developers."

PVDP said it has written to Ms Moran about the consultation process which "was completely in line with all relevant planning regulations and principles as set out by the Planning Act 2008".

On the financial links of the developers it added: "We are of course aware of the statement Layla Moran previously made in Parliament back in June 2023, which was in reference to an article in *Private Eye*.

"However, we're not aware that she has publicly repeated such allegations since."

Blenheim said income from the project will go to SolarFive Ltd, a UK-registered company, and also to other UK companies who contribute to the development and operation of Botley West.

This will mean corporation tax contributions of 25 per cent directly to the UK Government, and also significant contributions to local communities in the form of business rates.

In a statement Blenheim said "in order to protect future generations" we need to "totally decarbonise energy production".

It added: "To do this, as a society at a minimum we will have to use all sites of relatively poor land near major grid infrastructure wherever there is an area which has little or no current energy generation but rapidly rising energy demand.

"All those criteria are met with the Botley West Solar Farm, which has the added critical benefit of having sufficient scale to fund its own connection to the 400kva grid.

"We will add to that a package of community benefit and land rejuvenation which will set new benchmarks for all future sites.

"The commercial arrangements underlying Botley West are commercially confidential but were negotiated in a competitive environment with partners who have 20 years of experience in the industry. "

Mr Owen-Lloyd said: "Profits from the project will be taxed in the UK, contributing directly to the UK economy, on top of the jobs, business rates and employment skills this project will create.

"The local community will be able to buy cheaper electricity generated from Botley West, and they will also receive a substantial package of community benefits."