

Aeroplane row as decision on £800m Oxford solar farm nears

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[By Matthew J C Evans](#)

A row over aeroplane safety has broken out as the decision on a £800m Oxford solar farm nears.

The developers for Botley West and those objecting to the 2,000-acre scheme are arguing over whether the energy facility would present a danger to planes at nearby London Oxford Airport.

This comes as a decision on the £800 million scheme is due soon having been delayed earlier this year.

Back then Sir Keir Starmer was prime minister and Ed Miliband (now the foreign secretary) was the energy secretary, with the government seeking further information on the project.

They added that the decision would be announced at the end of the September, although since then Andy Burnham has become prime minister with Miatta Fahnbulleh appointed to Mr Miliband's former position.

With judgement day looming, Professor Alex Rogers, chair of the Stop Botley West Community Group, criticised the project as being unsafe for local pilots.

He points to statements from people involved with flight schools Leading Edge Aviation and FTEJerez, both of which operate out of Oxford Airport.

The latter did not respond to comment, but CEO of Leading Edge, Andy McFarlane, who personally objected to Botley West, said "aviation safety cannot be overlooked".

He added: "Oxford is home to a busy aviation community, and large-scale solar farms located near flight operations can create potential risks for pilots.

"These concerns should be carefully considered to ensure sustainability goals are balanced with the safe operation of aircraft in and around the area."

Professor Rogers said: "At the heart of the aviation safety issue is the reality that trainee pilots would be unable to make safe emergency landings in fields covered by thousands of fenced-in solar panels, as well as running the risk of being distracted by reflected sun.

"These significant flight safety risks should be considered as a national issue rather than just a local concern as it is now clear that flying schools from all over the UK use London Oxford Airport

"Stop Botley West believes that Photovolt's inadequate responses and unresolved actions in relation to the safety and wellbeing of thousands of trainee pilots have exposed a number of unmitigated risks that should persuade Miatta Fahnbulleh, the new Secretary of State, to turn down the Botley West application."

Mark Owen-Lloyd, Botley West's project director, said he was "confident" Ms Fahnbulleh would recognise the case for the scheme, including that it represents an £800 million investment in the county.

He added that it would lead to reliable, lower-cost energy, create jobs, a biodiversity net gain,

On concerns around aeroplanes, he said: "Oxford Airport has confirmed that the project poses no threat to aviation in the area.

"As set out clearly in the Statement of Common Ground submitted to the Planning Inspectorate, which is publicly available, we have liaised extensively and constructively with Oxford Airport and relevant aviation authorities to ensure there are no adverse effects.

"For example, we have removed a number of panels located closer to the runway as a direct result of this consultation and commissioned a glint and glare report, which found no danger to aviation."