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Anthony Thompson's Interview on behalf of SBW on Radio Oxford

Speaking to Sophie Law live on Radio Oxford, Anthony Thompson for SBW praised Merton for "having the courage to pull out" but criticised the size of the project and Blenheim's failure to consider more sensitive alternatives including community solar farms. He said Blenheim are now pursuing a plan that will crush the natural bio-diversity of the site.

Full text

I think Merton college's decision shows true leadership and real courage. What's important, and it is a significant development, is that the reason for their withdrawal was to focus on their existing sustainability and biodiversity plans which contradicts what the earlier speaker has just said. I think that they've realised that this proposal is simply the wrong proposal in the wrong place at the wrong time. And I think they've judged as well that rather than looking at this as a solar farm as listeners may be imagining it in their minds, it's such a vast project that it really ought to be described for what it is. It is a utility scale Solar power station it's not a solar farm and as such Merton have made the right judgement by listening to their colleagues, the fellows and also to the general public who've written to them.

Sophie intervened to say there had been a suggestion of nimbyism (in a tweet to the programme)

I think people are right to be concerned, I think they're wrong to suggest this is nimbyism. I would describe that as a lazy argument. Merton have looked at the details of this plan and decided quite rightly that it's not the right plan for this area in terms of sustainability and biodiversity. There are a number of reasons why this plan doesn't make sense. It's flawed in its scale. If built it wouldn't just be the largest in Europe, it would be in the top 20 across the entire world. 18 of the top 20 by size are in deserts.

What I would say about the Botley West Power Station that's being proposed is that it will crush natural biodiversity. There'll be no natural biodiversity gains through this plan and the scale of it people need to understand, your listeners might not realise that in order to capture this and to protect this power station there will be 110km of 6-8 ft high metal fencing around it. It's a huge project. It's far too large for this particular space and it criss crosses too many important things that we already hold dear so while I recognise, and the Stop Botley West campaign recognises that solar power is an important part of the jigsaw of renewable energy, this particular proposal is in the wrong place. It's going to cross Green belt ... (cut off)

Sophie intervened to ask about Alternatives

I think it's a very fair challenge. I think what's interesting about alternatives is that in front of me have 3 documents - a lot of paperwork - 2 of these reports were actually commissioned and written by Blenheim themselves. I've got a Blenheim Palace World Heritage Site Management Plan from 2017 and a Sketchbook of an Emerging Vision for Blenheim Estate written in 2020. - These 2 - and they're huge documents - had a really fantastic alternative plan written by Blenheim themselves which included Community solar farms - lots on a smaller scale - but that's a great opportunity to support renewables in Oxfordshire. If you look at what we're already contributing in Oxfordshire we represent already 3% of the solar production in the UK which is 3 times per head more than the rest of the UK. So this on top of that commitment would seem a little bit too much.

The final document which is really significant is an amazing document called "The Pathways to a zero carbon Oxfordshire" written by the Environmental Change Institute at the university of Oxford. That report gives you lots and lots of alternatives. Read it and you get the answers in there.