

Plans for Botley West Solar Farm set to be submitted

By Miranda Norris, Senior reporter



Campaigners against a supersized solar farm joined a rally in Westminster to push for new restrictions on solar development as plans are set to be submitted within months.

Stop Botley West members joined a protest organised by the UK Solar Alliance (UKSA), with other pressure groups fighting against mega sized 50 megawatt-plus solar developments being proposed throughout the UK.

Botley West, which would cover three sites near Botley, Kidlington and Woodstock owned by Blenheim is one of the largest Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs).

These projects will require the submission of Development Consent Order (DCO) applications to the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero.

The DCO process was designed to streamline the decision-making process and can include compulsory acquisition powers to accelerate upgrading the UK's electricity grid network.

PVDP said its DCO application will be made this summer, probably in July.

A decision is not expected until early 2025 with construction anticipated to begin that summer.

The rally took place on the same day that MPs were debating large scale solar farms in nearby Westminster Hall.

Stop Botley West said: "We don't oppose solar energy, we are proponents of the right source of renewable energy, in the right place, at the right scale.

"We expect our representatives to support the views of local communities, and we want to see a UK green energy strategy to stop the destructive and uncoordinated rush by landowners and developers that we are seeing right now."

The group said following the developer's consultation it has received a huge amount of feedback including over 1,400 questionnaire responses.

Project director Mark Owen-Lloyd insisted: "We are proponents of the right source of renewable energy, in the right place, at the right scale.

"The reality is that we need the rapid delivery of renewable energy on a large scale if we are to meet our net zero targets and do our part in mitigating the very worst effects of climate change.

"The Government has recognised the crucial role that solar power will play in achieving this, committing to a five-fold increase in capacity by 2035.

"If it hits its target, solar farms would take up 0.3 per cent of the UK's total land area – roughly half of the space taken up by golf courses."

At the same time PVDP submits the DCO application, West Oxfordshire District Council, incorporating Stop Botley West's findings, will submit their Adequacy of Consultation report.

In January Professor Alex Rogers, chair of the group, accused PVDP's second round of consultation as being "shamefully inadequate".

He described the consultation process, which started in the run-up to Christmas, as "triggering emotions ranging from concern and frustration to anger and tears".

The developer did not hold meetings in all the affected villages and, Prof Rogers said, failed to provide "objective, independently verified answers" to complex technical issues.

These included 'Best and Most Versatile' land use and 'special circumstances' to justify the scale of the development on Oxford's green belt.

He said the visualisations were "misleading" and the developer's representatives had "limited relevant knowledge".

He called for PVDP to restart the consultation process from scratch.

Mr Owen-Lloyd said: "We conducted a rigorous 10-week second consultation process in tandem with the local community, that has gone over and above the regulatory requirements for a 28-day process.

"The scope of this process was set out clearly in the Statement of Community Consultation, on which PVDP consulted all host local planning authorities.

"PVDP distributed materials and held in-person events over a broad range of locations, all advertised and agreed with the LPA in advance.

"It worked closely with the community in all cases, with certain consultation meetings arranged at locations that were not required, but requested by local people or an LPA.

"We expanded the consultation in these ways because we are absolutely committed to engaging openly with local people, and are now focused on drawing on the feedback received."