

To: Council
Date: 27 January 2025
Report of: Head of Law and Governance
Title of Report: Public addresses and questions that do not relate to matters for decision – as submitted by the speakers and with written responses from Cabinet Members

Introduction

1. Addresses made by members of the public to the Council, and questions put to the Cabinet members or Leader, registered by the deadline in the Constitution, are below. Any written responses available are also below.
2. The text reproduces that sent in the speakers and represents the views of the speakers. This is not to be taken as statements by or on behalf of the Council.
3. This report will be republished after the Council meeting as part of the minutes pack. This will list the full text of speeches delivered as submitted, summaries of speeches delivered which differ significantly from those submitted, and any further responses.

Addresses and questions to be taken in Part 2 of the agenda

1. Address from Julian Le Vay – Support for Motion 16e (Demand compensation from Network Rail for delays in reopening Botley Road)
2. Address from Tom Lewis - Stop Botley West Solar Farm

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1. Address from Julian Le Vay – Support for Motion 16e (Demand compensation from Network Rail for delays in reopening Botley Road)

I don't need to go into detail, since you've each had my report on the impact on our community of the endless closure of Botley Road. In November 2021 I sat **here** while Network Rail boasted to you that they would close the road only for four days. It's now been closed 625 days [and still no date for reopening].

The report tells our story, at last, through graphic statements by 32 local people. Who are they?

First on those with mobility problems, unable to stagger through the narrow, poorly maintained, overcrowded and often scary *Tunnel of Doom* under the rail bridge. They were suddenly cut off from much their lives, even GPs and hospitals.

Second small businesses, suddenly deprived of most of their customers, pushed into loss or closure or quitting Oxford altogether.

And the local economy, deprived, by my estimate, of around £20m and 100 jobs

And the knock-on impact on Oxford as a whole, with journey times rising by 15-20% according to the managing director of the Oxford Bus Company, as an indirect consequence of the closure of Botley Road

But I want to talk of another loss, the loss of faith in our public institutions. For two years, some of us in West Oxford have suffered exclusion from our own city, unbearable intrusion of works and traffic, including piling work all night 40 metres from peoples' bedrooms, and continuing uncertainty from one week to another, as the institutionally incompetent Network Rail constantly miss their own deadlines and change their plans. And no one has listened to us, no one has cared what is happening to us. Not Network Rail, Kier, Thames Water, British Gas, government, the County Council or, I have to say, this council. No difference whether privatised, or nationalised, or elected. All keen to look the other way and get on with other things. In fact, the only official contact from your council was a guy who came to make quite sure small businesses knew that you would not help them.

You may say your functions as a council are not involved. Certainly, not to the extent that's true of the County Council, which we regard as deeply culpable. But you have had *some* involvement. We asked you, right at the beginning, to set up a joint steering group for the project with Network Rail, the county council and residents, **because** we foresaw how profound the effects would be – no answer.

But the issue is much wider than that. Democracy is in a bad way. In America it may not survive. In this country the Tory party has been ripped up. Labour is in power, but quite extraordinarily unpopular. Scary fringe parties are on the rise. Both this council and the County Council are on the hands of minorities. A recent poll showed one in five young people don't think much of democracy.

And thinking about our experience, why should they? We have been suffering for two years something like an occupation by entities that are both incompetent and arrogant, which are completely unaccountable, yet **we are not heard**. You trumpet great plans for Westgate or Osney Mead - which seem to many of us who live in West Oxford to have nothing to do with us, not to benefit us, we had no real say in them. Your city - not ours. Few voters understand the differences between county and City Council. No one understands how you're funded. Planning is carried on in an occult language and the one thing it *always* excludes is what local people actually want. Now seemingly Oxford will be abolished and wrapped up in a much bigger authority, after hard bargaining between politicians. The only people not to have a voice in this are **the** people.

I tell you, this city hall sometimes feels as remote as Westminster, or Brussels.

So, I think our experience is really a challenge to you, each of you. As our small businesses go under and our disabled and infirm live lives suddenly isolated, I ask you whether it is really acceptable that you do nothing and say nothing in this, our city?

2. Address from Tom Lewis - Stop Botley West Solar Farm

Good evening, I am Tom Lewis a member of the Stop Botley West group of volunteers who are all in favour of renewable energy but critical of the unjustifiably large and damaging proposal to build Botley West Solar Farm. I live in Church Hanborough, one of the 15 villages that will be affected by the project.

Just a few facts

- Botley West Solar Farm (BWSF) stretches from Wootton to Botley, and Hanborough to Kidlington, an area the size of Heathrow airport. It will be the largest solar farm in Europe affecting 11,000 homes within 1.5km of the site.
- 75% of the solar farm is to be constructed on the City of Oxford's Greenbelt, which is described by local authorities as "functioning well".
- 36% of the 1400ha is on Best and Most Versatile agricultural land growing National average yields of cereals. This land will be lost to food production for the 42-year life of the project.
- It will involve installing up to 2,200,000 solar panels, ancillary equipment and at least 30km of cable runs, fences, lights and cameras. It will cross beneath The Thames at Eynsham and connect to a new sub-station near Farmoor, before the electricity generated during daylight hours is uploaded to the national grid network and within seconds used throughout the UK, not just Oxfordshire.
- Because BWSF is a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project the planning process is handled by the Planning Inspectorate (PINS) who send their recommendation to the Secretary of State for Energy and Net Zero for final review. No decision is likely before the middle of 2026.

Surveys by both the Stop Botley West and by the developers themselves find that overwhelmingly residents oppose this project. Oxford City Council themselves have made a clear statement that:

"The DCO application will need to provide a strong and robust case for the development of this scale particularly where it will need to demonstrate exceptional circumstances to justify development within the green belt; justify impacts on the setting of a number of heritage assets including Blenheim Palace..." (Ref 1). The Developer has not taken notice of this comment.

The Non-Technical Summary of the Environmental Statement of the DCO states (Ref 2) that:

"There are no significant adverse effects either temporary [or] permanent [effects] on the local landscape character arising from construction and operation of the Project."

- this is patently untrue.

With regards to Historic Environment the same document states (Ref 3):

"No significant effects in respect of any aspect of the historic environment have been identified within the Environmental Statement (ES)."

Given the size and scale of the BWSF and its location on the hills which are visible for miles and valley slopes of the rivers Glyme, Evenlode and Cherwell, it is simply inconceivable that the impacts of such a scheme can be anything other than significantly adverse. The proposed development will cause lasting damage to the City of Oxford's Greenbelt, impacting both the openness of the landscape and the spatial integrity due to its unprecedented scale. The setting of Blenheim Palace was cited in their own 2017 Management Plan (Ref 2) as being important to the landscape and to the surrounding historic villages. This too has been ignored.

Pluvial flooding is also a serious issue already particularly for the villages of Cassington, Worton, Yarnton and Kidlington. The developers have consistently ignored peer-reviewed scientific evidence that solar panels increase runoff. All the water flowing of this area ends up in the River Thames increasing the risk of flooding downstream.

The Stop Botley West group would like to ask the City Council to address these four questions:

1. Are the Council not concerned that the Developer, in the DCO, has ignored the City Council's request and provided no justification for the development which would still represents a significant adverse impact on the city's Greenbelt, visually and spatially, including Public Rights of Way, and that the proposed mitigation is inadequate?
2. Are the Council not concerned about this project's impacts on the surroundings of Blenheim Palace a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and other local heritage, including the city of Oxford itself and the gateway to the Cotswolds AONB?
3. Will the Council ask for more detail on why alternatives to the current scheme have not been investigated?
4. Have the council explored the full implications of an increase in the risk of flooding associated with the BWSF and its impact both on the City and villages local to the scheme?

At this Pre-Examination stage the City Council has a chance now to submit a Relevant Representation to PINS raising what are significant concerns for the city and surrounding area and I would urge you to do so before the deadline of 27 February 2025.