

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

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)

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?

Response from Councillor Susan Brown, Leader and Cabinet Member for Partnership Working

Thank you for your address Mr Le Vay. I too expressed my clear and bitter disappointment to Network Rail on behalf of residents and businesses in West Oxford and Botley who have been so severely impacted by the works. The works have taken too long already, and the further long extension is extremely unwelcome news. A number of us were sceptical about the dates as soon as we knew that they depended on Thames Water's engagement.

I would take issue with your description of the City Couci involvement. We have on a number of occasions offered support which was taken up by a number of local businesses to support them in a practical way, with promotion and we have written in addition to ask for support for business rate relief. And I know that both of your city councillors have made strong representations on behalf of local residents and businesses.

Last year, I asked for the Minister's active involvement and I'm pleased to see that Lord Hendy's intervention has at least provided clarity over a final end date and very importantly a commitment to improvements in access to the west of the station and better stewarding of the pedestrian tunnel, which we'd requested as well as the completion of the new improved pedestrian walkway by the summer.

We mustn't lose sight of the purpose of all this – which is the redevelopment of Oxford Station, that will bring real long-term benefits to the city. Without it, proposals to reopen the Cowley Branch Line to passengers or increase the capacity on East-West rail services will not be feasible. However, I am only too aware that this is of very cold comfort to the many residents and businesses who have been so badly impacted by the road closure.

Now that we have renewed plans and a revised timeline, it is essential that we see real progress in the months ahead to rebuild public confidence in this important infrastructure development. These are points that I emphasised to Network Rail.

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.

References

Botley West Solar Farm (BWSF) Environmental Statement PINS Reference: EN010147
Non-Technical Summary Document Ref: EN010147/APP/6.2

1. BWSF Consultation Report Appendix 5.1.10; Section 42 Applicant Responses.
2. Blenheim Palace World Heritage Site revised Management Plan 2017 Appendix 3
3. Non-Technical Summary 6.3.20

Response from Councillor Anna Railton, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Zero-Carbon Oxford

Thank you Mr Lewis for taking the time to address the chamber, and I am pleased that you too are all in favour of renewable energy. This country is desperately in need of more green energy solutions to limit, and eventually remove, our reliance on fossil fuels. Whilst there are inevitably impacts resulting from major applications for solar farms, wind farms and other green energy applications, this must always be balanced with the ever-more pressing climate emergency and the necessity for immediate action.

The application for Botley West Solar Farm sits entirely outside of our boundary. This means we are a neighbouring authority and not a “host authority”, and so are not engaged in the level of challenge and oversight of the application that you seek.

For example, your concerns regarding potential flooding issues in villages in Oxfordshire should be raised by the relevant Local Planning Authority if there is merit in the argument.

It is also worth clarifying that the greenbelt that surrounds Oxford is not controlled by the City, but is in the hands of our neighbouring Councils. They are therefore the relevant Councils to protect it, or indeed to allow much needed development on it. I, along with many other councillors in this chamber would not describe the greenbelt as “functioning well”. The greenbelt was always meant to be regularly reviewed and not strangle necessary housing growth as it does currently.

I would also like to point out that the upstream grid upgrades built with this project would be of great benefit to Oxford.

In response to your questions;

1 & 2 The purpose of our comment regarding green belt was to ensure that the issue was raised and considered. As a neighbouring authority, with no green belt proposed for development, we will review details relevant to the City and submit comment where we believe there is sufficient reason for the Planning Inspectorate to take it into consideration. Something like the setting of a listed building in another Council’s area is not something that the Council intend to comment upon.

3 As the Council is not a host authority it would not be appropriate for us to seek alternative locations. We need both rooftop and groundmount to be able to reach our net zero targets.

4 As mentioned earlier, the host authorities and in this case the Environment Agency are the relevant bodies to assess flooding. I could not find the peer-reviewed evidence about run-off from PV that was not easily mitigated.

We will be submitting a representation to the planning inspectorate on this application but not to object to this scheme.

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