

Case Officer: Suzanne Taylor

Applicant: Photovolt Development Partners and SolarFive Ltd

Proposal: Solar Farm - Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP)

Wards: Launton and Otmoor AND Kidlington West

Councillors: Councillor Gemma Coton, Councillor Julian Nedelcu, Councillor Alisa Russell - Launton and Otmoor

Councillor Jean Conway, Councillor Lesley McLean, Councillor Dorothy Walker – Kidlington West

Reason for

Referral: Major development

Expiry Date: Not applicable

Committee Date: 15 May 2025

SUMMARY RECOMMENDATION: To approve Cherwell District Council's Written Representation / Individual Local Impact Report

MAIN REPORT

1. APPLICATION SITE AND LOCALITY

- 1.1. The application site is split into three separate areas; Northern, Central and Southern. The Northern and Central sections lie predominantly within West Oxfordshire District (WODC) and partly within Cherwell District (CDC). The Southern section lies within Vale of the White Horse District (VWHDC).
- 1.2. The site would cover a total area of circa 1,400 hectares with the majority currently in agricultural use (arable and grazing) and with extensive native species hedges at many boundaries.
- 1.3. Botley West Solar Farm (BWSF) will connect into a new National Grid substation, proposed to be built and located west of Botley (within VWHDC) and hence is the reason for the project name 'Botley West'. Electricity will be supplied through a connection to the new National Grid substation, which will link to the existing Walham – Cowley 400kV overhead line.

2. CONSTRAINTS

- 2.1. Key constraints within and adjacent to the application site include:

- Green Belt;
- Areas of Archaeological Interest;
- London-Oxford Airport;
- Proximity to SSSIs;
- Protected species within and adjacent to site (including bats, great crested newts, badgers, water vole and otters);
- Public Rights of Way (Footpaths and Bridleways);

- Ancient Woodlands;
- Designated and non-designated heritage assets (including Blenheim Palace World Heritage Site and Registered Park and Garden, a number of Grade II* and Grade II Listed Buildings in Begbroke, Begbroke Conservation Area).

3. DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

3.1. Of the 1,400ha total site area, approximately 1,000ha would be utilised for solar panels and associated infrastructure. The remaining circa 400ha would be available for mitigation/enhancements for landscape, wildlife and recreation.

3.2. The key proposals for this project are:

- Solar panels of between 1.8m and 2.5m in height - to be kept as low as possible whilst allowing for sheep grazing opportunities;
- Associated infrastructure including cabling, secondary substations, power convertor stations, fencing and security measures (CCTV) and temporary construction compounds and haul roads;
- New substation and connection to west of Botley (within VWHDC);
- 5m to 10m buffers between panels and existing trees/hedges/woodland and 15m buffer between panels and ancient woodland;
- Biodiversity Net Gain of circa 70% including the creation of landscape/biodiversity corridor around a stretch of the River Evenlode (within WODC);
- Creation of new public rights of way and maintenance of existing PROWs;
- Potential for new cycle routes to improve recreation opportunities and connectivity;
- Potential to manage surface water flows (primarily near Cassington);
- Wildflower planting underneath existing power lines;

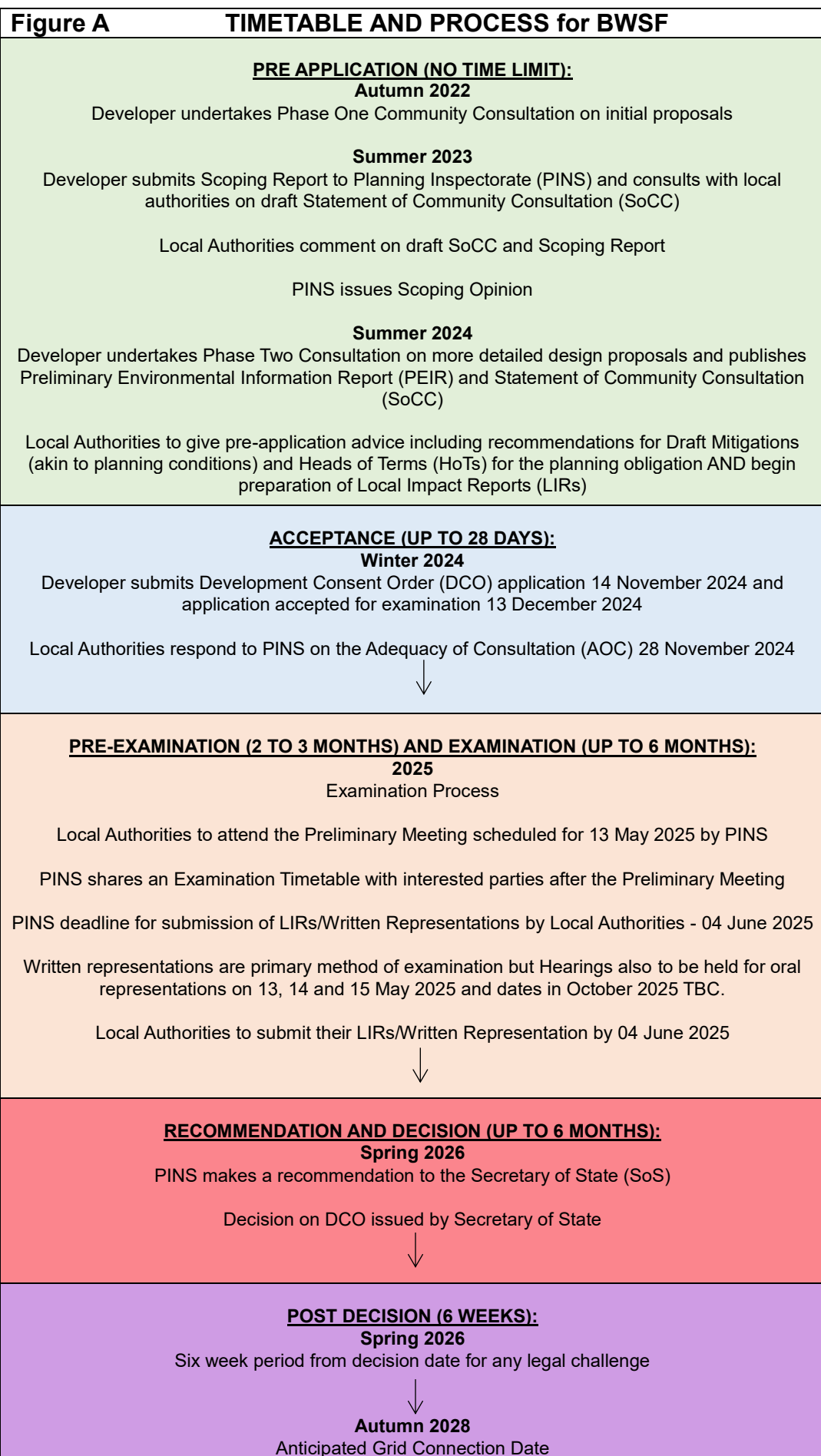
4. RELEVANT PLANNING HISTORY

4.1. There is no planning history directly relevant to the proposal.

5. PROCESS AND TIMELINE

5.1. The scale of this application means that it is defined as a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP). Developments of this type are determined by the relevant Secretary of State (SoS) with the Planning Inspectorate (PINS) acting as the examining authority who make a recommendation to the SoS as to whether a Development Consent Order (DCO) should be granted. Local Authorities (LAs) are consultees in this process and are not determining authorities.

5.2. Figure A below is a table summarising the process so far and going forward for BWSF. The pre-application and acceptance phases have been completed and we are now at the beginning of the examination phase. LAs are invited to take part in the examination and to produce a Local Impact Report along with an opportunity to make other written and verbal representations.



- 5.3. Cherwell District Council have registered as an interested party and have submitted a Relevant Representation drawing on in-house expertise from multiple teams including Development Management, Planning Policy, Environmental Protection, Ecology, Heritage, Economic Growth, Drainage, Landscape Services, Legal Services, Climate Action and Communities. Cherwell have also registered to attend the in-person meetings scheduled for 13th, 14th and 15th May 2025.
- 5.4. Cherwell is working with the other Local Authorities (Las) (i.e. WODC, VWHDC and Oxfordshire County (OCC)) to produce a joint LIR. This will be a detailed report setting out what the LAs consider the impacts to be on their area. The SoS is required to give the LIR particular regard when deciding the application and therefore it is important for this to be a robust document. Though it will assess whether impacts are positive, negative or neutral it will not offer an opinion on whether we support or object to the project. There is an opportunity to do this in a separate Written Representation/Individual LIR and it is for this document that officers are now seeking the Planning Committee's approval.
- 5.5. Cherwell's Written Representation/Individual LIR is presented below, which will be sent as a letter to the Planning Inspectorate:

*This letter is Cherwell District Council's (CDC) individual **Local Impact Report/Written Representation** and provides our opinion on the acceptability of the proposals. A separate, joint Local Impact Report (LIR) will also be submitted in liaison with the other host Local Authorities (i.e. West Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of the White Horse District Council and Oxfordshire County Council). This LIR is not intended to repeat the information and assessments provided in the joint LIR but is to offer Cherwell's individual view on the application as agreed by its Planning Committee.*

*Cherwell District Council has **NO OBJECTION IN PRINCIPLE SUBJECT TO a robust assessment of impacts, the provision of adequate mitigation measures and the amendment of the site area to exclude part of the Central Site.***

In the event that these matters are not adequately addressed Cherwell District Council would OBJECT to the application.

PRINCIPLE

CDC has declared a climate emergency and is committed to tackling climate change. The Council accepts that there is a compelling need, as a matter of principle, to increase renewable energy generation and consumption to support the Government's national agenda to reach net zero carbon by 2050.

Therefore, the Council does not raise objection to the principle of large-scale solar photovoltaic generation developments within the District subject to:

- (i) the appropriate siting of such schemes,*
- (ii) the provision of appropriate mitigation to deal with any significantly harmful impacts that would arise, and*
- (iii) such mitigation being tailored specifically and sensitively to matters of location and related context.*

This is reflected in policy ESD5 of the CLP which states that renewable energy developments will be supported provided they do not have a significantly adverse impact, including cumulatively, on:

- Landscape and biodiversity including designations, protected habitats and species, and*
- Conservation Target Areas;*
- Visual impacts on local landscapes;*
- The historic environment including designated and non-designated assets and their settings;*
- The Green Belt, particularly visual impacts on openness;*
- Aviation activities;*
- Highways and access issues, and*
- Residential amenity.*

The acceptability of the proposal is therefore intrinsically linked with the impacts of the development.

Whilst CDC acknowledges that the proposed development would make a positive contribution to reducing carbon emissions over its proposed life span, there will be adverse effects that need to be balanced against the benefits. In order to fairly weigh up the planning balance, CDC consider that it is crucial to independently assess the robustness of the assertion that 840MW per annum (enough to power 330,000 homes) can be achieved. The amount of renewable energy that can be produced should be reflected in the weight that is applied to this key benefit.

CDC respectfully requests that the examining authority and the Secretary of State are completely satisfied that the evidence and technical reviews that underpin the various topics in the environmental statement are sufficiently robust to enable an accurate assessment of the relevant impacts prior to making a recommendation or deciding whether to issue the Development Consent Order (DCO).

Similarly, CDC respectfully requests that the examining authority and SoS ensure that adequate mitigation measures can be secured to ameliorate or reduce harmful impacts.

REMOVAL OF PART OF THE CENTRAL SITE FROM THE DCO.

CDC objects to the erection of solar panels and associated equipment on part of the Central Site; namely the field south of London-Oxford Airport and east of the A44. The reasons for this are set out in detail in the joint LIR but, in summary, the development of this parcel of land would result in:

- Unrestricted sprawl of a large urban area into the Green Belt in conflict with the NPPF;*
- The coalescence of Kidlington and Begbroke in conflict with Policy ESD14 of CLP and saved Policy C15 of the CLP 1996;*

- *Harm to aviation activities associated with London-Oxford Airport (namely the need to preserve emergency landing areas in the event of engine failure after take-off) in conflict with Policy ESD5 of the CLP; AND*
- *The loss of land identified as Grade 2 quality agricultural land.*

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the application and for your time in considering this representation. CDC looks forward to continuing to engage positively with the examination of BWSF project and working with applicants to progress this scheme.

6. RECOMMENDATION

APPROVE THE WRITTEN REPRESENTATION / INDIVIDUAL LOCAL IMPACT REPORT LETTER FOR SUBMISSION TO THE PLANNING INSPECTORATE.