

## **Report of District Councillors for Bladon, Blenheim and Woodstock to Woodstock Town Council Tuesday February 13th 2024**

### **Botley West Solar Farm**

Development Control Committee met on Monday February 5<sup>th</sup> to discuss the draft WODC response to the current statutory pre-application consultation on the Preliminary Environmental Information Report (PEIR). This was not the occasion for WODC to say whether or not to support the Botley West proposals, but an opportunity to review the PEIR and make comments or suggestions about what should be changed, added or broadened in detail if the later full public consultation were to be approved by the Inspector. The proposal when – if it does – comes in its final form, then WODC can give an opinion on the merits or not of the proposal but consent will be granted (or not) at government level.

WODC Planning department had produced a lengthy comment on the PEIR. It was widely felt that the merits of the proposal could not be considered without more detailed description of the environmental ambitions of the proposal. Mitigation of the effects of large areas of solar panels on the Green Belt, on good agricultural land and within the setting of many listed buildings and ancient monument sites, most notably the World Heritage Site of Blenheim needed much more detailed explanation by the developers. Much more detail on how the proposed 70% increased biodiversity would be accomplished was requested.

The PEIR offers £50,000 per annum for project within the communities to help mitigate the effects of the proposal on their lives and their environment. Members felt that the amount suggested as an improved amount in the WODC response drafted by the Officers was still far too low and a specific figure was not suggested although it was indicated that WODC expected a very significant annual contribution from the project. (Wind farm companies have agreed between themselves on £5000 per annum per MW output as the contribution they would give to affected communities. There seems no such agreement amongst solar farm developers but some other solar applications are suggesting that rate. This would suggest that, at over 800 MW production, Botley West, if it receives consent, should be proposing very significantly greater contributions than the £50,000 suggested in PEIR.

The next stage will be that the Inspector at some point will request comment from WODC on whether the public consultation on the project has been adequate in its reach and content. Then the Inspector will acknowledge that the application may go forward so that at some later date there will be the final version of the application for public and statutory consultee comments.

### **Woodstock Swimming Pool**

We had a discussion with Officers involved in Leisure activities in the District about the opening time for the Swimming Pool this year. Last year the Pool was only open during the summer holidays despite our efforts to have a longer period of opening. GLL, the company managing WODC's leisure centres had been left in a very difficult financial position after

Covid and the swimming pool always runs at some loss which last year was felt to be too much of a strain on an already difficult financial situation. We feel that to run a pool for just a few weeks in the summer is not serving the expectations of our communities and are asking that the Pool goes back to its previous opening time from Easter until the end of September. Currently the final decision has not been taken as the Officers were going to have further discussion with the local Schools and others about likely usage.

#### **Thames Water.**

Thames Water has been notorious over recent years being very slow to act, failing to act or apparently paying no attention to the great variety of complaints from West Oxfordshire residents. Over the past couple of years however there does seem to have been a working relationship established which would appear to be having more success in getting Thames Water to act on issues. One major issue – which is not unique to West Oxfordshire – is the frequent dumping of sewage into local rivers. At full Council on January 31<sup>st</sup>, a motion was proposed and seconded by Conservative members expressing concerns about dumping of sewage in the rivers. The motion suggested a cross party task force to work with campaigners to bring Thames Water to account.

The Alliance members felt that setting up a new task force overlooked the progress made already by the regular Executive-led and Officer-supported meetings with Thames Water and proposed some changes to the initial motion. There was vigorous debate but the amendments were passed and Council, apart from one abstention, ended up all voting for the amended motion which read:

*Council notes the concerns from member of this Council and members of public in the continued dumping of sewage in our local rivers by Thames Water. The Council regrets the lack of action on the part of the Government to ensure proper regulatory oversight and control of the sector.*

*The Council supports the work so far of the administration to do what it can to put right this wrong and to hold Thames Water to account. Given the continued concerns from residents across West Oxfordshire, this Council resolves:*

- 1. to request the Leader to continue with the regular Executive-led meetings, supported by Officers, with Thames Water to ensure appropriate investment is made in the system in West Oxfordshire*
- 2. Ensure the meetings take place at least once every quarter*
- 3. Ensure the Executive Member for Environment reports back to Overview & Scrutiny and to full Council on a regular basis.*

**WODC Cllrs Julian Cooper & Elizabeth Poskitt**