

Latest news, inadequate biodiversity protection, plus Forever Fields THIS WEEKEND

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Dear Supporters – please see the latest news below, and this week’s Newsletter from Professor Alex Rogers – Co-Chair of the SBW campaign. As ever, your thoughts and offers of help and support are always welcome.

News

STATEMENT OF PHASE 2 COMMUNITY CONSULTATION PUBLISHED BY PVDP

We remind everybody that PVDP have published the Statement of Community Consultation (SOCC) for the Botley West Utility-Scale Solar Power Station. Consultations will be held between the 8th December, 2023 (Bladon Methodist Church) to the 19th January, 2024 (Eynsham Village Hall). There will also be a Community Webinar on the 23rd January. This is despite a direct call by SBW to delay the Community Consultation until after Christmas and the New Year to allow people the best opportunity to feed into the process. We encourage everybody to engage with this process. Make yourselves aware of what the proposal contains and how it will affect you and be prepared with questions for the consultation events. The SOCC can be downloaded on the following web page under Phase Two Consultation Documents: https://botleywest.co.uk/document_library.html

IN THE NEWS

Botley West hit the Oxford Mail twice this week on the 23rd November with an article reporting on the disappointment of SBW and CPRE Oxfordshire in the timing of the Public Consultation over Christmas and then an excellent article on the Forever Fields exhibition where citizens affected by the proposed Utility Scale Solar Power Station

have used their many talents, whether through photography, painting, prints, poetry or other means of artistic expression to record the current beauty of our local landscape as well as to provide a record of how it looks now so that if the Botley West proposal goes ahead there is record of how the countryside must be restored afterwards. Anthony Thompson, the organiser of Forever Fields also gave an excellent interview on BBC Radio Oxford about the proposed development and the exhibition.

OXFORD LOCAL PLAN 2040 CONSULTATION

The Oxford Local Plan 2040 has now been published in its first draft by Oxford City Council. The plan covers areas such as protecting heritage, house building, net zero carbon policies, biodiversity targets and employment. We note that the headlines to tackling the climate emergency are mainly around net zero building policies. Despite a glossy picture of solar panels over a car parking area, roof-top or brown field solar are not mentioned on the website. There is now an opportunity to comment on substantive issues related to the plans with a deadline of the 5th January. We encourage everyone to read the plan and to respond to the consultation. See [here](#) and go to the bottom of the webpage to link through to the consultation.

FOREVER FIELDS

Please attend the [FOREVER FIELDS](#) exhibition of works from local artists celebrating our incredible green spaces at Worton Park, 24th – 26th November. See the advert at the end of this newsletter.

DONATIONS

Many thanks for the donations. Please continue to donate what you can - we will continue to need your support to stop this inappropriate development.

What can I do?

- 1. Watch out for the Developer's booklet coming through your door soon**
 - 2. Head over to the [SBW website](#) for venues, dates and guidance on the consultations and how to respond.**
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Co-Chair Alex Rogers: The Gwent SSSI; A Glaring Example of the Inadequate Protection of Biodiversity by the Current Biodiversity Protection Regulations

Dear Readers,

The Gwent Levels SSSI is supposed to protect an ancient landscape, rich in culture and important for biodiversity, recreation, flood alleviation, carbon storage and food production. This include the Magor Marsh, one of the last remaining pieces of natural fenland that once covered the Levels and as a wetland, one of the UK's most threatened habitats. Unfortunately, NextEnergy built the Llanwern Solar PV Park inside the SSSI, a ground-mounted solar project which is spread over an area of 260 acres. Gwent Wildlife Trusts report that the post-construction monitoring report for the Llanwern solar farm on the Levels shows a massive spike in damaging pollutants arising from the construction, with silt produced over 14 times higher than pre-construction levels. This is in an area known for its excellent water quality. Lapwings, a ground-nesting bird fell from 8 breeding pairs to two pairs post construction with only one nest recorded despite the provision by the developers of a "lapwing mitigation area. A breeding pair of cranes, a bird which is only just returning to the U.K. through vigorous conservation efforts have disappeared from the site. Reading all this you cannot but conclude that the development of a solar farm in such a sensitive site has been a disaster for biodiversity. Other solar proposals have been put forward for the Gwent Levels totalling 1,200 acres.

As an ecologist this is not a surprise to me as painful as it is to read. Mitigation measures for such developments often fail to the point where one wonders whether we're engaged in a strange form of environmental Emperor's New Clothes. The scientists know these mitigation measures are unlikely to work, I'm pretty sure the developers do as well and the relevant government planning departments and environmental regulators must know it too. Biodiversity Net Gain is unlikely to make a difference. These are new measures whereby developers will have to show, using a government biodiversity metric, that as a result of mitigation and compensatory measures in their plans there will be a gain in biodiversity. The metric is based on

basic habitat surveys which score various habitats within the proposed development area to produce a baseline score of biodiversity units. The developer must show that as a result of measures they take, this baseline score increases. Looking at areas where Biodiversity Net Gain has been adopted early has revealed many issues with this rather crude approach to assessing biodiversity and the measures to improve it post development. Firstly, the calculation of biodiversity metrics appears to be a somewhat subjective process and different experts can have very different opinions especially about habitat type but also, to a lesser extent, habitat condition. There is also the issue that consultants may lack sufficient expertise to make such assessments or are pressurized by their consultants to reduce the biodiversity unit score. Other studies have identified significant errors in filling out the biodiversity metric spreadsheets. Highly distinctive habitats have also been not included in such baseline studies even though they lie within the boundaries of the development or will be impacted by them. Another major concern is that there is a lack of expertise within planning authorities to assess whether mitigation or biodiversity net gain plans put forward by the developer are realistic. Such plans should be based on sound scientific evidence, they should be subject to management to maximise the chances of success and monitoring should be in place to ensure that this is the case. These conditions have rarely been met so far and examples like the Gwent Levels demonstrates that mitigation measures can be nonsense. However, the situation is worse in that the legislation covering biodiversity netgain has very weak mechanisms of compliance monitoring and enforcement to the point where one academic study has concluded that the regulations are unenforceable.

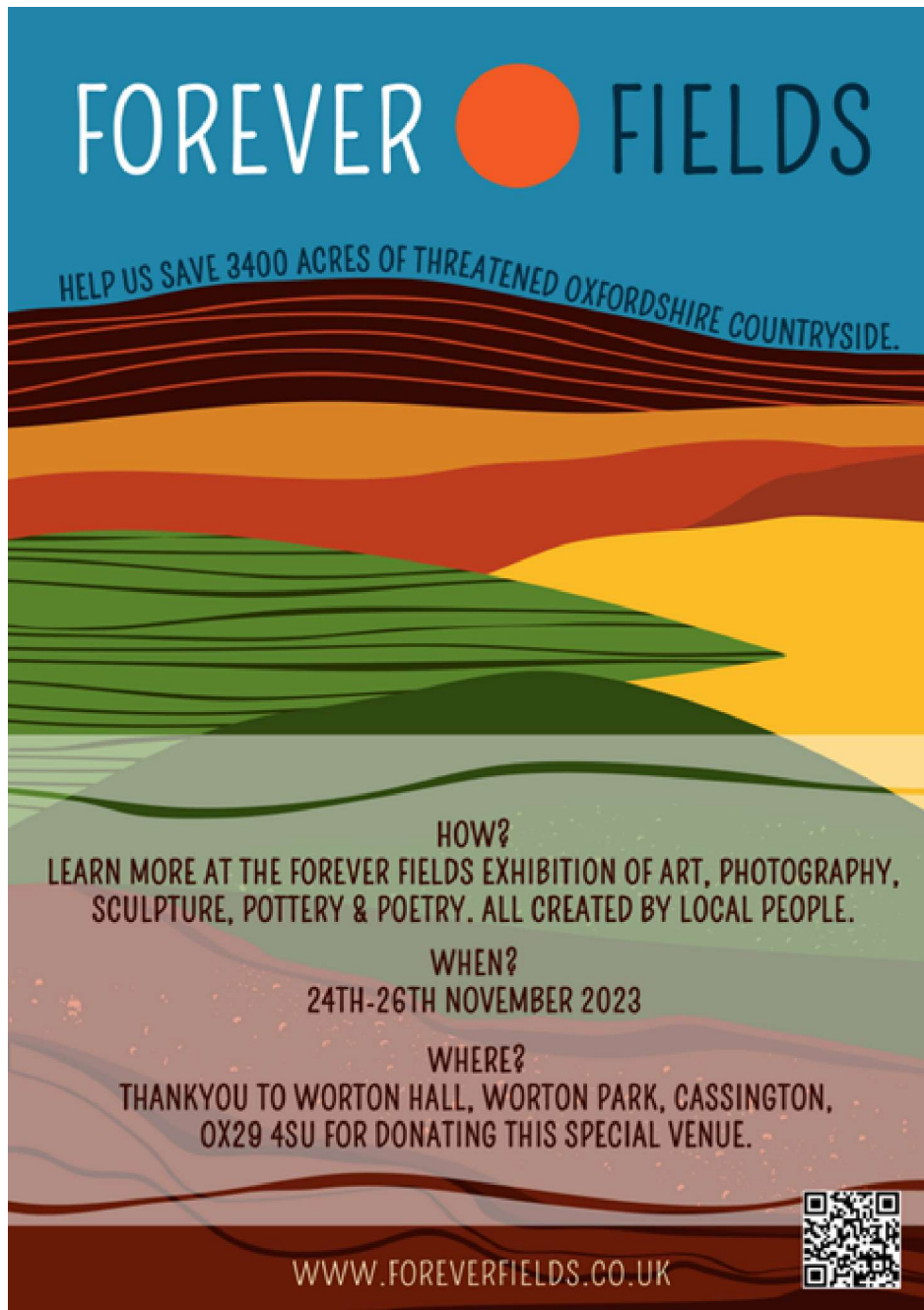
Britain is one of the most biodiversity impoverished countries in the world. We need strong measures to halt a decline in biodiversity which has been going on for centuries but which accelerated following World War II. The current planning system leaves nature with few defences against enormous developments like Botley West. It is very much up to us to point out where such plans are damaging and where mitigation is unlikely to work.

References

Duffus, N., Atkins, T., Nicholas, H., Butler, A., Milner-Gulland, E.J., Addison, P., Bull, J., zu Ermgassen, S. (2023) Assessing Biodiversity NetGain plans: A quick guide for planners and developers. Oxford Martin School & NERC Agile programme.

Ermgassen S.O.S.E., Marsh, S., Ryland, K., Church, E., Marsh, R., Bull, J.W. 2021. Exploring the ecological outcomes of mandatory biodiversity net gain using evidence from early-adopter jurisdictions in England. Conservation Letters 14: e12820.

Gwent Wildlife Trust (2023) <https://www.gwentwildlife.org/news/protected-gwent-levels-under-threat-solar-power-station-takeover>



One of the largest art exhibitions in the area for many years is taking place this weekend, featuring 150 works of painting, photography, pottery, sculpture, installations, words and music.

It's the overwhelming response by local people who were invited to express their feelings about the prospect of losing 3,400 acres of our countryside to Botley West Solar Farm. Over 90 artists, both professional and amateur, have made their contributions.

Forever Fields is also creating a Digital Archive from the artworks, so that if this gigantic power station is built, when the developer has to restore the fields after 40 years, there is a unique and accurate record of what was here.

Friday 24th November, 6.00 – 8.00pm

(6.30 official launch)

Saturday 25th November, 10.30am – 7.00pm

(3.30 – 5.00pm 'Soundfields' – live presentation of readings and music)

Sunday 26th November, 10.30am – 4.00pm

(2.00 – 3.30pm 'Mandolirium' – live music by Rod Craig and John Summerscales)

The Stop Botley West Campaign is entirely dependent on your generosity, both in time and donations. If you are able to contribute, please do give whatever you can - click the link below and scroll down to the donate section.

Together, we will Stop Botley West. Thank you.

Donate



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