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**Weston Otmoor - Alternative Eco-Development Proposal for Sustainability Appraisal Testing.**

As an alternative to the Weston Otmoor eco-town proposal, consideration has been given to an eco-development on the edge of Bicester, directly abutting the town.

**Background**

Cherwell District Council has opposed the eco-town at Weston Otmoor. It considers that a large free-standing town like that at Weston Otmoor would harm Bicester. The Council has made clear to Government its commitment to making sure that Bicester remains a balanced community, providing new jobs and facilities for the people that live there.

As part of the Government's assessment of its eco town programme in general, and all of the shortlisted schemes, it is carrying out a "sustainability appraisal". This appraisal is looking at the environmental, economic and social effects of each of the eco-town proposals, including Weston Otmoor. In the light of the views on the eco-town previously made by Cherwell District Council, the Government asked the Council whether we could identify any alternative option which should be assessed against the Weston Otmoor proposal in the Sustainability Appraisal. The Council considers that, notwithstanding our opposition to the eco-town in principle, we should see whether, in theory there is an alternative eco-development that is less harmful to local communities than the proposal at Weston Otmoor.

The Council has been working to prepare our own plans for how future housing growth is to be accommodated across the district - based on the figures given to us in the emerging South East Plan (which do not include any eco-town proposal). As part of this we are currently consulting on a series of "options for growth" and have identified a number of possible alternative major housing sites around Bicester. This work has given us a basis for suggesting an alternative theoretical location in accordance with the Government's request.

In putting this alternative forward, the Council would wish to make the following points clear:-

- We are not formally supporting this as an alternative eco-town location. It is being put forward as a means of testing the "sustainability" of the Weston Otmoor proposal in the event that the Government wishes to see an eco-town in Cherwell District. The Council continues to support the view that growth within the district should be decided through a plan-led system, such as the process that has been undertaken on the South East Plan, and not through speculative landowner/developer schemes such as the proposal at Weston Otmoor.
- The Council's current "options for growth" public consultation has identified a number of possible major housing sites around Bicester. These include land at Howes Lane and at Lords Lane. These sites have formed the basis of the alternative proposal. We are not saying that the two sites are therefore the

Council's "preferred sites" at Bicester for further housing growth. They are being put forward now because the Government asked us to identify a possible alternative location which could accommodate at least 5,000 houses. Neither of the other sites around Bicester that we have identified could, in our view, do this. They are, however, reasonable alternatives for accommodating a smaller number of new homes in accordance with the figures in the South East Plan.

- No specific proposal for an eco-development at north west Bicester has been put together. The alternative put forward by the Council is based on an emerging understanding of where, theoretically, further housing growth could take place. It has not been looked at in any detail at this stage and its assumptions and opportunities have not been tested or discussed with other stakeholders.

What follows is the information that was submitted to the Government on the "alternative eco-development proposal". It should be read in the light of the above.



Cherwell District Council, as part of its Core Strategy, has identified two adjacent sites (land at Howes Lane and Lords Lane) as "reasonable alternative strategic sites" which it believes could yield at least 2,600 homes. The sites, which could be developed together to form the eco town, are on the north-west side of the town and are bounded by the B4030 to the south and the B4100 to the north west. The farm land here is relatively unconstrained and the nearest settlement is the village of Bucknell 1.9 km away to the north-west.

The area could, theoretically, provide for an eco-town of 5,000 homes or more including related employment and community infrastructure. Some work has already been carried out by Cherwell District Council to explore the constraints on this site, and from this there is no reason to believe that an eco-town of this scale could not be achieved [1]. The attached plan, together with the schedule in Appendix 1, indicates the main constraints and some of the opportunities on the site.

Whilst the site has the capacity to establish a self contained eco-town, there are also positive benefits in the location of the site. Bicester lies within the Oxford2Cambridge Arc and development in this location would benefit from this initiative. More locally, the proposal may bring positive benefits to Bicester. The town has grown significantly in population in recent years (45% between 1991 and 2001 compared with 5% across Oxfordshire). Whilst historically Bicester has attracted a number of large B8 uses, it now is experiencing a shortage of space for new smaller start-up businesses and a lack of expansion space as businesses grow. There are also high commuting levels with 65% of people in Bicester travelling more than 5 miles to work. Cherwell District Council is seeking to develop the employment base in Bicester to create

opportunities within other employment sectors. There may therefore be a synergy between the employment opportunities being offered at the eco-town and existing identified needs within Bicester.

[1] An area has been plotted on the plan of approximately 330 hectares. This would be capable of accommodating 5,000 houses at a gross density of 15 dwellings/ha.

## **Appendix 1**

### **Constraints**

- Land ownership difficult to assess – no site submissions received for land beyond that assessed for the Reasonable Alternatives identification (see attached plan), so land ownership difficult to identify. Individual farms throughout the area may indicate mixed ownership.
- No major landscape constraints – predominantly farmland with large scale, regularly shaped fields bounded by hedgerows. No landscape designations within this area. No major landscape impact identified during consideration of Howes Lane or Lords Lane – not particularly sensitive locations. An Ecologically Important Landscape to south of B4030 (Middleton Stoney Road) at Bignell Park. No consultee comments on landscape, i.e. comments from Natural England or OCC. Landscape Sensitivity Analysis required.
- Ecology constraints include Ardley Cutting and Quarry SSSI between Bucknell and M40, described as 'good quality'. Also UK BAP Habitat (low calcareous grassland). Records of Great Crested Newt near to Howes Lane. Also records of 'Cherwell notable species' 2 'locally protected species records' in this area, with more around Bignell Park to the south. Individual woodland parcels and hedgerows throughout the site (Ancient Woodland at Upper Farm), identified as 'species rich' and having potential for breeding birds. Watercourses running through this area are potentially rich in ecological value.
- Flood Zones 2 and 3 along the watercourse which crosses the site in the south eastern corner but flooding not a 'show stopper'.
- No Conservation Areas in close proximity. Grade II listed building at Himley Farm within the site, listed buildings in Bucknell as well as National Monuments. Oxfordshire County Council objected during Non Stat Plan preparation regarding high archaeological potential within this area and a field evaluation is required.
- Impact in terms of coalescence with Bucknell – population in 2001 of 249. Category 2 village with 'few services, limited public transport, relatively remote'.

### **Opportunities**

- Conservation Target Area north of Bucknell at Tusmore and Shelswell Park presents an opportunity for biodiversity enhancement.

- Railway runs through site NW – SE – possibility for new rail station. Previously the companies operating this line have not been supportive (Non Stat Plan preparation).
- M40 crosses western corner of site – possibility for new junction? Alternatively access via the A41 and the new perimeter road at SW Bicester.
- Thames Valley Police Authority is promoting land along Howes Lane to be allocated for TVPA operational facilities (currently the Police Traffic Base is within this site), potentially as part of an urban extension, so opportunities exist for employment generating development.
- Also the existing Avonbury Business Park (high tech employment uses) near to the Bucknell Road junction presents opportunities to enhance employment provision, thus increasing balance of provision across Bicester.
- Opportunities exist to improve accessibility in terms of improvements/upgrade to Howes Lane and potentially the Howes Lane/Bucknell Road/Lords Lane junction.