

# **Cherwell District Council**

## **Executive**

**2 July 2018**

<p><b>Chesterton Community Woodland at South West Bicester</b></p>
--

### **Report of Executive Director: Place and Growth**

This report is public

#### **Purpose of report**

To obtain approval to establish a formal joint committee to develop and manage a community woodland park on land South of Vendee Drive, Bicester.

#### **1.0 Recommendations**

The meeting is recommended:

- 1.1 To agree to establish a joint committee with Bicester Town Council, Chesterton Parish Council, Oxfordshire County Council and local representation to develop and manage a community woodland park on land South of Vendee Drive, Bicester.
- 1.2 Delegate to the Executive Director, Place and Growth, in consultation with the Assistant Director: Law and Governance and the Lead Member for Clean and Green to establish the constitution and terms of reference for the committee.

#### **2.0 Background**

- 2.1 The land South of Vendee Drive Bicester has been secured through the S106 agreement with the developer for Phase 2 Kingsmere. The developer is required to transfer of the land to Cherwell District Council and this could take place later this year.
- 2.2 An informal meeting group was set up in July 2015 to work with representatives from Cherwell District Council (CDC), Bicester Town Council, Chesterton Parish Council and local representation to move forward proposals for the site. An Oxfordshire County Council officer joined in January 2016 and Councillor Debbie Pickford (CDC) and Councillor Ian Corkin (OCC) joined the group October 2017.
- 2.3 A significant amount of research work and evidence collecting has already taken place and a summary of progress to date is attached as Appendix A. Members of

Chesterton Parish Council and local representation have invested a considerable amount of time on this project.

- 2.4 This Council has also commissioned consultants to develop a masterplan for the site and two stakeholder workshops were held. The masterplan shows a potential approach to developing the site but would require significant funding to both layout and maintain. A minimal scheme has also been discussed which could enable some public access to the site and the development of it as funds allow.
- 2.5 The Chesterton Community Woodland Group has discussed options to manage the community woodland. To date, there is no single organisation willing to take responsibility for the community woodland, however, there is an appetite by all members of the group for a formal joint working approach to be established.
- 2.6 Following discussion with the Assistant Director, Law & Governance, a joint committee could be formed with the constitution and terms of reference to be worked up. Initially it is considered membership on the group could comprise representatives from Cherwell District Council, Bicester Town Council, Oxfordshire County Council, Chesterton Parish Council and local representation. This committee could oversee the development and management of the land and commission works.

### **3.0 Funding**

- 3.1 Discussions have taken place with the Woodland Group around the potential to joint fund the minimal scheme for the site. There has been an initial indication that this approach could be acceptable to all parties. It is envisaged that the joint committee, if established, would agree the proposed works for the site and then seek appropriate funding from the constituent members. There is an example of this approach being used successfully for an open space in London.
- 3.2 A joint bid with other authorities in Northamptonshire and Bedfordshire has been submitted for PA6 European funding through SEMLEP for bio diversity enhancement focused on parks and open spaces in Bicester, including the woodland site. Initial feedback has been encouraging and further details are awaited. Funds such as these could help with some initial conversion of parts of the site from arable land to wildflower meadow, hedgerow and scrub.
- 3.3 Other funding options are considered in Appendix A at 'Long Term Funding options' and includes: National Lottery Fund, HS2 Woodland Funding, Plunkett Foundation, and SPARK Funding (CDC grant funding).
- 3.4 The working group members have also agreed, in principle, to funding the project, subject to agreement with their parent bodies.

### **4.0 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations**

- 4.1 By establishing a formal joint working committee this will represent the interests of the various groups; enable decision making to progress the project, pool knowledge and experience and formalise the position around sharing the funding costs.

## **5.0 Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection**

- 5.1 The following alternative options have been identified and rejected for the reasons as set out below.

Option 1: Community woodland implemented by Cherwell District Council. By taking sole responsibility for the land, Cherwell District Council would be able to develop the site but the full cost of delivering and managing the land would fall on the Council. This option is not favoured as the project has already benefitted from partnership working and the approach has the potential of bringing resources from other partners to provide a more sustainable long term future.

Option 2: Creation of a community organisation to run the site. There is potential for a community organisation to be established to run the site in the future, however transfer of the land is imminent and no such organisation currently exists. It is also likely to take time for the organisation to gain strength to take on the project and this would delay any progress. A joint committee approach can include representatives from a local group who could be co-opted on the committee in the first instance.

Option 3: Create a joint committee with Bicester Town Council, Chesterton Parish Council, Oxfordshire County Council and local representation. This would enable a partnership approach to developing and managing the community woodland and a sharing of costs. This approach can also take the benefit of each organisations knowledge and skills.

Option 4: The developer retains ownership of the land. This would result in the loss of the potential to provide a significant new area of open space for the local residents. Whilst the land is currently farmed there would be the potential for further planning applications to be made in the future and development pressure. Open spaces are valuable for the health of residents, increase property values and increase the attractiveness of the town for investors.

## **6.0 Implications**

### **Financial and Resource Implications**

- 6.1 None directly from this report but the joint committee once established would seek a proportion of the budget to layout and maintain the community woodland. A minimal scheme could be funded from existing budgets as shown at Appendix A 'Minimal Scheme & Cost'.

There are existing budgets in Environmental Services from which initial costs can be met. However further development of the site in the future, resulting in additional costs, would need to be considered by Committee, with an analysis of all the expenditure to be occurred, before approval.

Comments checked by:

Linda Turland, Principal Accountant, 01327 322236,  
linda.turland@cherwellandsouthnorthants.gov.uk

## Legal Implications

- 6.2 From the perspective of Cherwell District Council the Joint Committee will be carrying out the function of woodland management which is an Executive function under the Local Government Act 2000 and the Local Authorities (Functions and Responsibilities) (England) Regulations 2000. As such Cherwell can only appoint Executive members to the Committee, local ward members who are not members of the Executive could be co-opted as non-voting members by the committee. Decisions of the Committee would be subject to call-in at Cherwell District Council and Oxfordshire County Council.

Comments checked by:

James Doble, Assistant Director Law and Governance, 01295 221587,  
james.doble@cherwellandsouthnorthants.gov.uk

## Risk

- 6.3 A joint committee could spread the financial risk, however it does leave the risk open if there is non-participation of group members. The joint working to date has however given confidence in the partners and their commitment to the community woodland.

Comments checked by:

James Doble, Assistant Director Law and Governance, 01295 221587,  
james.doble@cherwellandsouthnorthants.gov.uk

## 7.0 Decision Information

### Key Decision

**Financial Threshold Met: No**

**Community Impact Threshold Met: No**

### Wards Affected

Bicester South and Ambrosden

### Links to Corporate Plan and Policy Framework

Cherwell District Council Business Plan includes the following priorities;

- Reduce our carbon footprint and protect the natural environment.
- Provide and support health and wellbeing.
- Enhance leisure facilities.

The development of the community woodland could contribute to these priorities.

Cherwell Local Plan policy Bicester 7 states

'Seek to establish a community woodland between the South West

Bicester link road and Chesterton'

### **Lead Councillor**

Councillor Debbie Pickford, Lead Member for Clean and Green.

### **Document Information**

<b>Appendix No</b>	<b>Title</b>
Appendix A	Land South of Vendee Drive and North of Chesterton - Summary of Progress
<b>Background Papers</b>	
None	
<b>Report Author</b>	Jenny Barker, Bicester Delivery Manager
<b>Contact Information</b>	01295 221828 Jenny.barker@cherwell-dc.gov.uk