

# Executive

## Community Use of Places of Worship in Bicester

15 June 2009

### Report of Strategic Director, Environment & Community

#### PURPOSE OF REPORT

The Council has been approached to support three developments planned in Bicester's places of worship, all of which have some clear wider community benefits. This report considers these and proposes support for them.

This report is public
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#### Recommendations

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The Executive is recommended to:

- (1) Approve grant aid of £30,000 for St Edburg's Church and £10,000 each for The Church of the Immaculate Conception and Emmanuel Church.
- (2) Make these grants conditional upon the construction and operational financial viability plus a clear long term programme of accessible community use of each project.

#### Executive Summary

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##### Introduction

- 1.1 This report considers three planned developments of places of worship in Bicester which offer significant community benefit where the Council has been approached for support.

##### Proposals

- 1.2 It is proposed to support each of the three developments to varying amounts.

##### Conclusion

- 1.3 Support for these developments will create new and better opportunities for community benefit.

## **Background Information**

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- 2.1 There are many places of worship in Bicester which play an important part in the life of the town. The Council has been approached by three of these with a request to support their planned developments. They are as follows;

### **St Edburg's Church**

- 2.2 There are major plans to improve significantly the internal features of this most prominent church. These are split into two phases. The first phase planned for later this year includes:

- urgent re-wiring of the whole church;
- the installation of a new sound and visual system with appropriate cabling as part of the electrical work;
- the installation of energy efficient lighting and the other energy efficiency measures;
- redecoration of all walls/high level areas; whilst scaffolding is in place for re-wiring;
- partial removal of pews (rear only) to create a more flexible floor space.

- 2.3 Phase Two is more fundamental and all at ground floor level. It involves:

- creating a raised floor area for the rear part of the main church thereby permitting full disabled access to the whole church;
- new flexible seating throughout;
- a new under-floor heating system;
- a new kitchen and toilets;
- improvements to the rear vestry and altar.

- 2.4 Phase One this year is estimated to cost circa £150,000 for which the church has already raised £70,000. Phase Two has not been fully costed but, because of its nature, is likely to be in excess of £0.75m and will take several years to fundraise and complete.

- 2.5 It is clear that with Phase One alone, the church will be able to offer a much better community venue for large scale events and services. It already has good community use and serves as a focal point for the town for major garrison events, school concerts and other civic events such as Remembrance Day. The improved décor, seating flexibility and technical capability will result in increased opportunities for concerts (up to 400 audience size) and other community events such as exhibitions and conferences and in this respect is worthy of support.

### **The Church of the Immaculate Conception**

- 2.6 This church plans to build a rear extension to include a flexible community hall, a meeting room, toilets, offices, kitchen and storage. It is intended that the hall will operate independently of the main church and, whilst accommodating associated church social activities, will be used largely by community groups. In this way, it will serve as a new community centre with a near town centre location.

- 2.7 The anticipated cost is £1.4m of which £500,000 has already been raised. A professional fundraiser has been employed to generate the funding balance

in 2009 and 2010. There is a separate charitable body which is responsible for the fundraising and the ongoing operation which is expected to be revenue neutral or even generate a small surplus. Any operating surplus generated will be used to maintain the fabric of the church.

- 2.8 Research has been undertaken to determine the potential for community use and due to its near town centre location, many town-wide and other groups have indicated an interest.

### **Emmanuel Church**

- 2.9 The congregation for the Emmanuel Church has outgrown its current meeting space in Bure Park Primary School. The pressure of the lack of space has forced the church to consider having a purpose built facility. As community space within the Bure Park Primary School is limited and already significantly oversubscribed, the need for a building is evident. In addition, the level of community activity already undertaken by the Church is such that it has an excellent local base from which it can manage this project. The Bure Park developers had originally set aside a plot of land for ecumenical use. The church has been able to acquire this land through the Diocese of Oxford.
- 2.10 A purpose built facility would mean that Emmanuel Church Bicester could develop its current activities and develop other much needed community requirements. Close links have already been established with both the Bure Park Primary school and the local residents association who currently do not have a dedicated community building. The local area lacks community provision and this new build would enable the Residents Association to develop their community activities in conjunction with the church, thereby providing a wide range of activities and amenities for local residents.
- 2.11 Full planning permission for a two storey building has been obtained. The building will comprise a reception area, 250 seat auditorium, storage, office and kitchen facilities, together with requisite cloak room/toilet accommodation on the ground floor. The second floor permits multi use that can be divided into a number of smaller areas via a lounge and meeting rooms. The ground floor use will be a combination of religious and community use whilst the second floor will be primarily community use.
- 2.12 The anticipated cost of the project is £1.75m of which £250,000 has already been raised. Other funding sources are being pursued and if successful would bring in a further £500,000 which would mean that there is a potential and significant shortfall. The Church does have the opportunity for a low interest loan from the their church body to bridge the funding gap but clearly wishes to minimise or even avoid this.
- 2.13 The Bure Park estate is lacks sufficient community facilities and this building will provide these much needed amenities for the local community and is therefore a deserving project for support by this Council.

### **Key Issues for Consideration/Reasons for Decision and Options**

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- 3.1 It is clear from the above that additional community benefit can be gained from all three developments. However, the scale of the funding sought in total will be very challenging for each of the fundraising bodies and given the

financial constraints facing the Council, only limited grant assistance can be considered. It is therefore important to consider both timescale and extent of community benefit in any grant decisions.

- 3.2 Bicester does have a number of small community venues but overall these are limited and insufficient for a town of a 32,000 population. Support from the District Council for these developments should therefore be considered to provide greater opportunity for more local community activity and a sense of place. It has been acknowledged for many years that Bicester lacks a good quality medium/large scale performance venue such as concerts etc. St Edburg's Church proposals can therefore assist in addressing in part this deficiency. The proposed community hall of the Church of the Immaculate Conception does have the benefit of a near town centre location and is likely to be attractive to town wide organisations whereas the Emmanuel Church will clearly serve primarily a smaller more local neighbourhood catchment of Bure Park and the immediate surrounds.
- 3.3 Whilst each project is seeking funding from different sources, the scale of the financial challenge, both individually and in total is very big. Each project has good management, professional support and drive which means that each is likely over time to deliver on its ambitions. However, with so much funding being sought at a time of economic and funding constraint, there is likely to be some slippage of planned timescales for delivery.
- 3.4 In terms of the most deliverable elements in 2009, phase 1 of St Edburg's Church is most likely to be delivered. Emmanuel Church is likely to start on site this year due to specific land contract requirements but may not have the full funding package in place when it does. The Church of the Immaculate Conception has secured the most funding to date and this puts it in a strong position to attract more and complete its project in full before the others.
- 3.5 Each request has also demonstrated the willingness to receive bookings from a wide range of community groups and to adopt an open approach to non religious use by the local community. This is an important point of principle which should be a condition of any grant aid.

The following options have been identified. The approach in the recommendations is believed to be the best way forward

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| <b>Option One</b> | The Council could choose not to offer any support to all three developments.                                 |
| <b>Option Two</b> | Based on the approved budget, the Council could part support all three, two or only one of the developments. |

## **Consultations**

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The Council has not undertaken any specific consultation on these developments. The only consultations undertaken have been by the bodies themselves with current and future potential users of each place of worship.

## Implications

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**Financial:** The Council has an approved earmarked reserve with a £50,000 balance which can be used for grant aiding these developments. Any funding beyond this amount will require the approval of a supplementary estimate.

Comments checked by Karen Curtin, Chief Accountant, 01295 221551

**Legal:** The Council has the appropriate powers to grant aid these developments.

Comments checked by Liz Howlett, Head of Legal & Democratic Services, 01295 221686

**Risk Management:** There are no notable risks arising from this report.

Comments checked by Rosemary Watts, Risk Management & Insurance Officer, 01295 221566

## Wards Affected

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All Bicester and surrounding wards.

## Corporate Plan Themes

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A Safe and Healthy Cherwell.

## Executive Portfolio

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**Councillor George Reynolds**  
**Portfolio Holder for Community, Health & Environment**

## Document Information

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Appendix No	Title
None	
<b>Background Papers</b>	
None	
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