

Bicester: A 'true' Garden Town



Carbon Zero homes at North West Bicester

It was once a quiet market town tucked away in north Oxfordshire but in recent years Bicester has become internationally recognised as a town spearheading growth, sustainability and innovation. Bicester boasts Garden Town status and is home to both the UK's only true zero carbon development and its largest self-build scheme. In its bid to deliver the 13,000 new homes, 21,500 jobs and supporting infrastructure as outlined in Cherwell District Council's Local Plan, Bicester is continuing to explore pioneering projects across one of the faster growing towns in Europe.

Garden Town

At the end of 2014 the Government announced Bicester was to receive Garden Town status in recognition of its genuine ambition and plans to deliver significant growth in new homes and jobs. The status brings resource funding of £1.5 million in the form of a capacity grant which enables the council to fund the commissioning of feasibility studies and facilitate the delivery of quality development.

The status is based on a shared concept of Bicester as 'one place' where future developments and the existing town are planned and delivered in a comprehensive, integrated and sustainable way. The

intention is for Bicester to remain a town – rather than grow into a city – in terms of size and feel with a close connection to its rural hinterland. The town will ultimately be shaped by its people, its heritage and the natural environment. It will include places and architecture that are not only designed to a high standard but that also integrate trees and open spaces. Ultimately we are creating a cosmopolitan town that blends new and old and that has the vibrancy of a place that is both flourishing and welcoming.

Sustainability

Developing a green and sustainable town is central to Bicester's growth and this stems from the last Labour Government's designation in 2009 of North West Bicester as an eco-town. Since then Cherwell has worked with sustainability charity Bioregional to use the development as the catalyst for the pioneering Eco Bicester initiative. Working with partners, the council has developed a town-wide low carbon strategy to boost local awareness and introduce initiatives to benefit all 30,000 existing Bicester residents.

The 'Eco Bicester' concept has delivered numerous residential projects including subsidised boiler replacements and insulation improvements to 1,700 properties;

new energy efficient homes and a portfolio of loan schemes including bicycles, energy monitors and thermal imaging equipment. The vision has also extended to public buildings with projects including a zero carbon secondary school extension; installation of a biomass boiler at the municipal swimming pool and an innovative retrofit of The Garth, a local landmark heritage building which houses Bicester Town Council.

Looking ahead, the council is exploring opportunities for a low carbon heat network to channel heat from Ardley's Energy Recovery Plant into strategic development sites and the wider town.

Graven Hill

Graven Hill represents a unique opportunity not seen before in the UK as the site will not only deliver the country's largest self-build housing project but it is subject to the first-large scale Local Development Order to simplify the planning process.

The 187 hectare site was purchased by Cherwell District Council and has outline permission for up to 1,900 homes and one million square feet of commercial space with the capacity to create up to 2,000 jobs and apprenticeships as well as supporting amenities. Homes are expected to vary from detached properties or terraces to apartments and bungalows depending on individual designs.

This year the first 157 plots will be released for purchase and people can build their home themselves, appoint a contractor to build on their behalf or purchase a 'kit home'. The site will be delivered over ten years and there will be opportunities to work as a group as well as affordable rent and shared ownership schemes which will see properties built to a complete fabric shell ready for an internal fit out.

The first phase is subject to a Local Development Order specifying guidelines such as the buildings' maximum height and approved materials. Self-builders who work within these parameters will not need to apply for individual planning consent.



Woodland at Graven Hill

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Transport

In a recent residents' survey one third of responses identified transport improvements as their top priority for the town. This followed the publication of Oxfordshire's Strategic Economic Plan which identified three

main commitments to make it easier to move around Bicester.

The first commitment is to improve the links to the strategic network including diverting through traffic around Bicester, away from its centre. Elsewhere a decision on the



An aerial view of Bicester Town Centre

route for a new south east perimeter road will be announced in spring while feasibility work will soon begin on a potential new motorway junction for the M40.

Bicester has benefited from the £300 million investment in East West Rail improvements. To date, this project has delivered the replacement Bicester Village station (formerly Bicester Town) and sees the doubling of 18km of track, construction of 12 new bridges and rebuilding of five existing bridges. The second commitment to improving movement around Bicester involves stakeholders agreeing alternative solutions to longer closures at the town's level crossings that result from the increasing train frequency of East West Rail.

The final commitment is to improve walking and cycling links to the town centre at an estimated cost of £7.5million. All of Bicester's homes will be within a 15 minute cycle ride of the centre and so existing pathways will be upgraded and new routes introduced to better link and integrate key areas of the town.

Apprentices

Bicester's growth will create thousands of new construction jobs and by creating apprenticeship opportunities now, Cherwell is working to create employees for the future. Over the next 15 years 300 apprenticeship opportunities will be created at North West Bicester.

The council has set up The Apprenticeship and Training Company Ltd which has been recognised by the Skills Funding Agency as a not for profit Apprenticeship Training Agency. This organisation will de-risk the employment of apprentices for developers and their contractors by smoothing out some of the logistical difficulties that can exist and will provide a seamless service that makes it as easy as possible for developers to provide apprenticeships.

This project follows on from Cherwell's successful Build! project where at the end of 2015, eight apprentices completed Site Carpentry Apprenticeships as part of the authority's self-build housing project.

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