growing bicester

While the first houses at the North West Bicester development have been constructed and are due to be occupied shortly, the wider Eco Bicester initiative has also been yielding sustainability benefits for the whole town, as Jenny Barker explains

A2Dominion

Sustainability issues – such as energy supply – are to the fore in the North West Bicester development

It is now more than six years since it was announced that North West Bicester (NW Bicester) had been identified as an eco-town location, and a lot has happened in the intervening years. The first homes on Elmsbrook at NW Bicester (the first phase of the eco-town), developed by A2Dominion, have now all been reserved and are due to be occupied at the beginning of 2016. This is something of a milestone for the project, but work in Bicester has never just been about a single new development; it has always been about the town as a whole and how it can expand (grow) in a way that brings benefits to everyone.

The first occupations, on Elmsbrook at NW Bicester, are the culmination of a lot of work by all those involved. The NW Bicester development shows how a sustainable scheme can be achieved and delivered as a viable, large-scale development. It has been designed to deliver true zero-carbon development;[1] its high-quality design takes account of climate change and the adaptations that could be necessary in the future; it is planned for mixed use and is designed to support sustainable travel, with ambitious modal shift targets; it delivers 40% of the development area as green space, with measures in place for biodiversity net gain; it provides for reduced water use; and support is in place for local management and community-building.

Achieving the ambitious sustainability and quality targets set for the development has involved looking at each aspect of the scheme and questioning the 'business as normal' approach – and where this was not delivering the standards sought, new approaches have been developed. Credit for the positive working required has to go to all those involved, whether as part of the developer or consultant team, as consultees, as local authority members and officers, or as local people, who have continued to engage positively with the project. Particular acknowledgement has to go to the developer, A2Dominion, who has embraced the

challenge, stuck with it when things were not easy, and ultimately has delivered.

Lessons are being learnt and will continue to be learnt. An example of this learning approach is the Bicester Eco-town Process Improvement Toolkit (BEPIT) project, supported by Innovate UK – a study on reducing the performance gap between the energy and carbon savings promised by new housing designs and what is actually achieved when the housing is built.[2]

As important as the work on new development is the work that has been undertaken within the existing town. This has focused on improving the building stock through retrofitting and measures to support sustainable travel and promote cycling in the town, as well as support for community action and waste reduction. To plan for the existing town at the same time as planning for its expansion seems an obviously beneficial course of action, but all too often, and for a variety of reasons, this does not happen.

The motivation for the work within the town is to increase the town's sustainability, using the new development as a catalyst for change directed at ensuring that Bicester remains an integrated, connected place. Although it has been challenging to find funding for work within the town, 1,700 basic insulation measures have been installed in residential properties, exemplar retrofits have been delivered throughout the town, a zero-carbon sixth-form building has been built and opened at a local school, a sustainable living and re-use centre is operating in the town to reduce the amount of waste going to landfill, cycling has been promoted, and improvements to the walking and cycling network are being delivered.

The need to deliver new housing is now high on policy and news agendas nation-wide. Bicester, with its good transport links, is a growth area, identified in Oxfordshire's Strategic Economic Plan,[3] with a number of large-scale developments planned around the town in addition to the development at NW Bicester. This has led to Bicester being identified as a 'Garden Town' by the Government – a move that has facilitated access to support for the delivery of the planned growth.

The scale of growth is challenging in terms of the need for new infrastructure, the ambitious timescale for delivery, and the need to ensure that development is delivered to the required quality; but it is also providing opportunities. Cherwell District Council has purchased a former Ministry of Defence site and established a company to deliver the site for large-scale self-build/custom-build housing. This enables the Council not just to support housing delivery but also to seek greater benefit for the area by providing new routes to access housing, while also generating business opportunities and maintaining income within the local area.

Looking forward, the challenges of building sustainability into all our plans remain: the climate is changing; energy investment is needed; and there is increasing pressure on water resources. We need to cater for economic activity, the movement of people and goods, and new and better places for people to live, while making best use of resources and safeguarding natural capital. The Committee on Climate Change continues to stress that 'early action in the new Parliament is needed to keep the UK's emissions reductions on track and to adapt to climate change'.[4]

If we can take account of these things in the places built now – if our buildings use less energy and are capable of adaptation and change over time, and if our communities are strong and resilient – we will be better placed to face the challenges that the future brings. Not all innovation will be successful, and much remains reliant on individuals' behaviour, but the aim in Bicester has been to give people more sustainable options (such as better buildings that use less energy and attractive options for walking and cycling for short journeys in the town), to provide a greater range of employment, and to support community action so that the town becomes a better place in which to live, in both the immediate and long-term future.

Lessons on more sustainable solutions gained from experience at Bicester will help others to provide much needed housing while creating a legacy of better, future-proofed places for future generations.

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Notes

1 The definition of 'zero carbon' in eco-towns, as set out in the (now cancelled) Eco-towns PPS (Planning Policy Statement: *Eco-towns. A Supplement to Planning Policy Statement 1*. Department for Communities and Local Government, Jul. 2009, still available at www.gov.uk/government/publications/eco-towns-planning-policy-statement-1-supplement) is that 'over a year the net carbon dioxide emissions from all energy use within the buildings on the eco-town development as a whole are zero or below'

2 Details of the BEPIT project are available at http://bicesterlivinglab.org/projects-to-date/rethinking-the-build-process/ and www.bioregional.com/bepit/. Details of the research undertaken to date by the Eco Bicester Living Lab are available at http://bicesterlivinglab.org/about-the-living-lab/

3 *Driving Economic Growth through Innovation*. Strategic Economic Plan. Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership, Mar. 2014. www.lepnetwork.net/modules/downloads/download.php?file_name=30

4 'Urgent action needed now to avoid increasing costs and impacts of climate change in the UK'. News Story. Committee on Climate Change, Jun. 2015. www.theccc.org.uk/2015/06/30/urgent-action-needed-now-to-avoid-increasing-costs-and-impacts-of-climate-change-in-the-uk/