

Eco Bicester Strategic Delivery Board

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Report title: Garden Town Report	
Author: Jenny Barker, Bicester Delivery Manger	
Tel: 01295 221828	
Email: jenny.barker@cherwell-dc.gov.uk	

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 MHCLG have sought to promote housing growth through their Garden Communities programme. Bicester was the first Garden Town in the programme, identified in 2014, which now comprises of Ebbs Fleet Garden City, a number of Garden Towns and Garden Villages. Garden Communities are defined by the Government as having the following characteristics;
- a purpose built new settlement, or large extension to an existing town
 - a community with a clear identity and attractive environment
 - it provides a mix of homes, including affordable and self-build
 - planned by local authorities or private sector in consultation with the local community
- As well as building new homes, the communities develop:
- job opportunities
 - attractive green space and public realm areas
 - transport infrastructure, including roads, buses and cycle routes
 - community infrastructure, schools, community and health centres
 - a plan for long-term stewardship of community assets
- 1.2 The Government has seen the Garden Communities as providing best practice and creating well planned and designed settlements and supported these with capacity funding.
- 1.3 The approach in Bicester has been to take a whole town approach to the Garden Town working to support the delivery of planned growth and to integrate it with the existing town and ensure the benefits of growth are realised across the whole town. This report aims to highlight key areas of work that have been progressed in the last quarter.

2. Support to Enhance the Cultural Offer in the Town

- 2.1 Since the last meeting the Bicester Cultural Festival has taken place. The Festival has had financial support through S106 funding secured to support the town centre. A weekend festival, with sessions with Age UK for older people, outdoor film and concert, art show, heritage displays, procession and music in Market Square was held in September. The events were well attended and planning is taking place to grow the festival next year which will be the third year it has run.
- 2.2 As part of the festival a new Heritage Trail for the town was launched. Developed with Bicester History Society and Bicester Village it identifies important historic buildings within the town

centre primarily in the Causeway, Market Square and Sheep Street. The town trail has now been made available at the tourist information centre, the library and other local outlets.

- 2.3 Options for further work to celebrate the history and interpret the heritage of the town are being explored and it is anticipated will be reported to the next meeting for consideration of the Board.
- 2.4 The Bicester Team has also had a presence at a number of events that have been run over the summer in Bicester including the Big Lunch, Bike Day, Super Heroes day, Apple Day, Meadow Day and Old Skool replay. This has facilitated conversations with local people and provided opportunities to promote walking and cycling, health and wellbeing and the environment.

3. Improvement of Highway Design and Connectivity

- 3.1 Work to improve connectivity in the town has been continuing. Work with Growth Deal and Housing from Infrastructure Marginal Viability funding is supporting the delivery of the rail bridge infrastructure at North West Bicester. Work is progressing to secure the delivery of the bridge within the track possession Easter 2021 and the securing of funding has been facilitated by the joint working that has taken place between the District and County Council.
- 3.2 Growth deal funding locally is also supporting the delivery of the improvement of the Ploughley Road junction with the A41. This is currently at design feasibility stage.
- 3.3 Work has also continued to secure Garden Town capital funding to facilitate early delivery of Pioneer Roundabout, Ploughley Junction and Banbury Road roundabout improvement. These schemes would facilitate housing delivery of major sites in the town.
- 3.4 Work with OCC is taking place over the developer funded provision of improved walking and cycling provision from Graven Hill along London Road to the Talisman roundabout. Work with residents, who are keen to have high quality provision, and integration with the LWCIP have resulted in some amendments to the scheme. Design of the Talisman Road roundabout is still being developed to ensure safe and convenient provision for cyclists. With over 100 occupations at Graven Hill it is a priority to get the improvement of the route implemented and available for use.
- 3.5 Funding was secured through the Healthy New Town programme to undertake an innovation project to design and implement a planting scheme to reduce the impacts of poor air quality in the Town's Air Quality Management Area. The first phase of this project has been to appoint Landscape Architects to develop options for the area. After a formal procurement process local firm Applied Landscape Design were successful and have been appointed and have started work.
- 3.6 Over the summer monthly Dr Bike sessions have been held to help people ensure their bikes are in good working order and encourage their use. The Bicester Team worked with A2Dominion to hold the Bike day event at Spider Park which continues to prove popular. Work with developer funded travel planners on Elmsbrook and Kingsmere is taking place to encourage the implementation of travel plans that have been approved through the planning process. The evaluation of these initiatives is being explored with Oxford Brookes who have been involved with the evaluation of the Healthy New Town programme.

4. Town Centre and Market Square

- 4.1 Work on the Town Centre has been reported separately. Work on the Town Centre has highlighted the importance to the Market Square in providing connectivity with Sheep Street and Crown Walk and also as a focal point when accessing the town centre from the south and Bicester Village. It also has the potential to provide space for events and activities. The Garden Town funding provides the potential to review the previous design and explore the opportunities to create a destination space within the town centre. The commissioning of work needs to fit within the proposals for the town centre which it is anticipated will emerge towards the end of the year.

5. Green Infrastructure and Access to the Countryside

- 5.1 Green infrastructure was an important component of the original garden cities which sought to ensure the best of the city and the country were brought together. Bicester is fortunate in having a range of attractive parks and open spaces. New areas of open space are also planned at Kingsmere, Graven Hill, NW Bicester and Wretchwick Farm, secured through the planning policies for new development. The Garden Town funding provides the opportunity to support future planning by looking at green infrastructure in a holistic way as well as opportunities to further work in the short term. The progress of work on natural capital for the Oxfordshire Plan and the wider Arc is being reviewed to ensure work in Bicester is complimentary. Discussions are taking place with the Environment Agency re the potential to work collaboratively to develop a natural capital strategy for the town.
- 5.2 Work is progressing on the transfer and programme of the Burnehyll Community Woodland. Land transfer of the 100 acre site is due to take place this autumn. A community group has formed as the Friends of Burnehyll Community Woodland and early community planting is being explored in the area of the new balancing pond that has been dug to the south of Vendee Drive. Before planting can take place over the remainder of the land archaeological investigation is required.
- 5.3 The first piece of work it is proposed to commission with Garden Town funding is to explore how access to the countryside might be enhanced for residents. A brief is being prepared for this piece of work.

6. Garden Town Legacy

- 6.1 One of the reasons Letchworth has remained successful is that it has had the benefit of funding that came from the uplift in land value as the town was developed. Circumstances are now very different and whilst this is not possible to use the same approach in Bicester in the same way, never the less there is the opportunity to explore how a legacy could be created. The brief for this work is being produced.

7. Sharing the lessons from Bicester

- 7.1 Requests are regularly received from other local authorities and organisations interested in the work that has been done in Bicester. In September an event was held for representatives of 16 local authorities, and over 60 people, to share the experiences from the work done in Bicester. The event was very well received and appreciated by those who attended.

- 7.2 Presentations have also been given at events organised by the Town and Country Planning Association on Ensuring New Developments Benefit Existing Communities, Cambridgeshire Clean Tech and Oxfordshire Green Tech events. The TCPA New Communities Group visit to Ashford has also been attended.

8. Garden Town Funding

- 8.1 Since the inception of the Garden Town Programme MCLG has supported sites in the programme with capacity funding to support high quality housing delivery. This support for Bicester has enabled a team to be established and funded and the delivery of a range of activity and projects, including work on the Healthy New Town, funding bids to be pursued, feasibility studies to be commissioned and community engagement. Garden Town capacity funding is the primary source of funding for the Bicester Team.
- 8.2 2018/19 capacity funding proposals were reported at the March meeting and funding has now been received. A further bid for 2019/20 capacity funding has been made, primarily to support the cost of maintaining the Bicester Team.
- 8.3 Staff capacity has limited progress in some areas. To address this, the recruitment process has commenced to fill a vacant Garden Town post and to recruit an urban designer to provide additional capacity to enable work to be progressed more expediently and seek high design quality in new development. In addition measures are being put in place to cover work whilst a member of the team is seconded to work on the climate emergency.
- 8.4 Discussions are taking place with the Environment Agency with regard to the potential to agree work particularly with regard to natural capital and green infrastructure and to second EA staff to support the work. There is potential synergy, particularly with regard to the natural capital work that is taking place across the Oxford Cambridge Arc and the potential for this to be tested at a local level.
- 8.5 Funding has also been used to support two days a dedicated communications support. The dedicated communications support has enabled a more proactive approach to communications than had been possible and is allowing work to be undertaken to refresh the Growing Bicester web site.

9. Conclusion

- 9.1 Housing delivery in 2018/19 in Bicester has been very good with 447 properties delivered out of 1489 in total within the District. Quarter 2 housing figures for this year continue to show good housing delivery. Never the less the work of the Bicester team, particularly in working on areas such as the delivery of infrastructure to unlock sites and work that enhances the overall attractiveness and liveability of the town, remains important in maintaining Bicester as an attractive place to live and invest.

10. Recommendation

- 10.1 The Board are recommended to note the progress on the Garden Town as set out in the above report.