

Bicester Garden Town – SDB Review

Best practice / lessons learnt summary and options for consideration

1. Introduction & purpose

- 1.1. Intrinsic within the DNA of Garden Town is a willingness to share ‘best-practice’ and ‘knowledge’ and to ‘learn’ between the 49 Garden Communities. We are actively encouraged to do this by Homes England.
- 1.2. By understanding both what works and what does not, it will help us to ensure we make the necessary changes and adopt an appropriate governance structures so-as-to deliver Garden Town programme efficiently and at a high tempo.
- 1.3. This is a continuous process (which does not end with the conclusion of the SDB Review), which helps identify the appropriate ‘role and function’, ‘membership’ and ‘structure’ for the Bicester SDB. This process, in consideration with what we currently do well and what is considered to be best-practice with other Garden Communities, feeds into the best-practice ‘recommendations’ set out below for the consideration of the SDB Review Task & Finish Group.

2. Options for consideration and discussion

- O1. The Bicester Strategic Delivery Board is held in **Private** so-as-to allow for more sensitive items to be discussed such as the budget. A private meeting may encourage open dialogue and scrutiny of the GT programme.
- O2. The Board continues to meet on a **quarterly** basis with the ability to also meet on an **ad-hoc** basis if required – this might be to endorse a new Masterplan for example.
- O3. The Board Membership (strategic level) consists of representatives from OCC, CDC, BTC (Councillors with officer support) and HE. A representative from OxLEP should also be considered to represent business and provide sight on alternative funding streams. A smaller and more dynamic group to provide strategic overview and scrutiny of the GT Programme. Officers, organisations and relevant agencies / firms (such as Utilities) will be invited by the Board to attend and contribute when required.
- O4. SDB Working / Sub-Groups established (operational level), that will include CDC / OCC officers and key elements of the community (such as Elmsbrook LMO) and business (such as Bicester Vision) to identify and deliver critical elements of the GT programme. The Working / Sub-Groups, will provide critical information, outputs and recommendation for the ‘consideration’ and ‘endorsement’ of the SDB. The Working / Sub-Groups will provide critical ‘intelligence’ to the Board relating to the GT programme.

O5. The Board will receive informal email updates, between SDB meetings, from CDC / OCC officers of key outputs / events as and when appropriate to improve communication and core knowledge of Members.

O6. The Board will have the opportunity to hold additional 'Briefing' meetings on key outputs / events between SDB meetings at the discretion of the Board. This might include a briefing on the Masterplan or NW Railbridge programme for example.

O7. The GT Communications plan is to be comprehensively overhauled so-as-to encourage and proactively seek a 'championing' narrative promoting the benefits of the GT. This process includes branding, vision and social media engagement. Board Members will have clear sight of messaging so that they become 'champions' of GT.

3. Engagement

- 3.1. The Bicester Delivery Team (BDT) is part of the Oxfordshire Garden Towns Forum which meets monthly to share experience and knowledge between the five Oxfordshire Garden Communities. Via this network we are able to routinely understand the 'best practice' of our nearest Garden Communities in an open forum.
- 3.2. Also, we have engaged with other Garden Communities such as Aylesbury and Harlow & Gilston to further exchange knowledge, experience and lesson learnt. This has been a two-way process.
- 3.3. On a regular basis, we speak to Homes England (HE) / Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to understand what their expectations are and what they consider to be appropriate level Garden Town governance and scrutiny. We have spoken to David Crook at HE to understand whether our approach to the SDB review and the proposed future arrangements for Bicester are acceptable. Overall, David Crook supported the proposed structure (as set out in the SDB Review – proposed governance structures [organogram]) and the 'Options' set out in this paper.
- 3.4. We have used this network to understand the governance processes that other Garden Communities employ. This knowledge exchange provides a 'hand-rail' guiding the Bicester SDB review to ensure we utilise 'best-practice'. No one GT has provided a 'silver-bullet' solution and much of the current practice employed by Bicester remains relevant.
- 3.5. As a team we actively engage with other Garden Communities and partners to ensure we:
 - **Work smarter** to ensure the efficient delivery of GT and at a high tempo
 - **Locate experts** to exchange knowledge, experience and lessons learnt
 - **Retain knowledge and expertise** within the delivery team and the SDB
 - **Encourage collaboration** between us, partner organisations and other GT's.

4. Summary of selected ‘best practice’

4.1. Set out in the below is a summary of the selected ‘best practice’ which we have used to inform the Recommendations within this document for the consideration of the SDB Review Task & Finish Group.

GT	Reviewed	Frequency	Membership	Comments
Aylesbury	New structure adopted during July 2020.	Quarterly meetings with the option, within the ToR's, for ad-hoc meetings.	Buckinghamshire Council, Buckinghamshire Thames Valley Local Enterprise Partnership, NEP, NHS Health, Aylesbury Community Board, Aylesbury Town Council, Parish Councils and Homes England	Known as the Strategic Oversight Board , it is supported by several ‘Working Groups’ at an operational level. It is worth noting that the new structure is largely untested and working groups are being formed now. The meetings are held in private to allow sensitive topics to be discussed freely such as budget. Proactive communication plan seeking to promote GT benefits with endorsement of the Board.
Harlow & Gilston Garden Town	Under review & in transition	Quarterly (or more if required)	Appointed an Independent Chair. Officers from Harlow, Epping Forest and East Herts District Councils, together with colleagues from Hertfordshire and Essex County Councils. Each authority has committed additional staff and financial resources to the project.	Known as the Harlow & Gilston Garden Town Board. New governance processes are being agreed by the partners.

Didcot	Under review	Quarterly	<p>Leader of Oxfordshire County Council, Chair, Courtenay Parish Council,</p> <p>Leader of South Oxfordshire District Council,</p> <p>Didcot Town Council,</p> <p>South Oxfordshire District Council,</p> <p>Leader of Vale of White Horse District Council,</p> <p>OxLEP (Local Enterprise Partnership),</p> <p>Homes England</p>	<p>Known as the Advisory Board.</p> <p>Working Groups are providing community engagement, workstream identification and helping guide the GT Programme.</p>

5. Communication (internal / external)

5.1. Dialogue with other Garden Communities has highlighted the need for a strong and proactive Communication Plan to champion the benefits of the GT programme. Many of the GT's employ external communications / public consultants. Set out below is an example of 'best-practice':

GT	Internal	External
Aylesbury	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular 'informal' updates to Board Members via email Regular Board Member updates on specific items in addition to Board Meetings Quarterly Board Meeting with the provision for ad-hoc Meetings for specific important tasks 	<p>Active webpage including Twitter feed and use of Facebook page.</p> <p>Provide a regular community newsletter</p> <p>Working groups working with the community</p> <p>Bi-weekly news-letter'</p> <p>Prominent GT brand and use of social media to engage with local community</p>

6. Conclusions

- 6.1. HE considers Aylesbury GT to be an example of best practice and we were strongly recommended to look at the arrangements they had recently put in place. Of note, Aylesbury GT reviewed its governance and structures recently and adopted the new arrangements in July 2020 with the guidance of HE. Whilst this is a useful guide for the review of the Bicester SDB it is worth pointing out that the new arrangements are yet to be fully tested. We have considered carefully the new arrangements in place in Aylesbury however we have been very conscious of the unique circumstances that effect Bicester and indeed what we currently do well!
- 6.2. Didcot GT provided an example of a GT programme under close-scrutiny from HE and undergoing a review of its arrangements. Harlow & Gilston GT were provide as an example of good practice by HE and subsequently we have used it to guide our review.
- 6.3. What appears to be a common theme is the need for small and dynamic Board, working at a strategic level, which is empowered to review, scrutinise and endorse the GT programme. What is clear is that the Board Membership must feature a representative of Homes England. Many Boards also feature a representative from business, in our case this might be OxLEP which would also give us sight on alternative funding streams that could benefit Bicester.
- 6.4. The Board also needs to be well informed to help it scrutinise and endorse effectively. The flow of information needs to be both a mix of 'informal' and 'formal' undertaken between Board meetings.
- 6.5. A resounding theme is to ensure the Board does not seek to do too much i.e. it remains 'strategic' and does not seek to 'deliver' GT objectives itself but empowers others to do that for it. To enable this to happen, many GT's have formed 'Working or Sub Groups' to operate at a 'operational' level seeking to encourage Officer and Community (residents and business) partnerships. The Working / Steering Groups feed into the Board and seek the Boards direction and endorsement. The Working / Steering also provide the Boards with vital 'intelligence' of what is happening on the ground.
- 6.6. We have been careful to ensure that HE is comfortable with our proposed arrangements for the SDB and that we adopt 'best-practice'. It is worth noting that the process is continuous and the ToR will reflect the need for 'rolling' review.
- 6.7. Finally, it has become apparent that the Board must focus on the GT programme and have a firm grasp of what is 'in' and 'out' of scope. Focus is critical to effective scrutiny and overview of the GT Programme.