

Cherwell District Council

Executive

4 September 2023

Bicester Garden Town Programme - Market Square Project Business Need & Next Stages

Report of Assistant Director – Growth & Economy

This report is public

Purpose of report

- (i) to provide the Executive with the background and context for this capital project;
- (ii) to set out the business need for the Bicester Market Square enhancement proposals;
- (iii) to gain approval to appoint consultants to undertake feasibility studies, further design work and consultation with key stakeholders and the wider public.
- (iv) to provide the Executive with an understanding of the governance of the project and gateways to full scheme approval

1.0 Recommendations

The meeting is recommended:

- 1.1 to confirm the business need for transformational public realm improvements at Bicester Market Square
- 1.2 to approve the expenditure (up to a level of £180k) required for consultants to undertake detailed design through to planning permission and consultation with stakeholders; to include associated studies on;
 - the relocation of parking and wider impacts of parking within Bicester
 - traffic movement and flows through Market Square and around the Town Centre, including access for existing businesses/users

- a full design of the Market Square public realm improvement project with full business case for the capital expenditure and future revenue impact from changes to car parking income and any future costs
- 1.3 to note the governance of the project to monitor and review development of the full business case which will return to Executive for approval prior to delivery of the project.

2.0 Introduction

- 2.1 Bicester has grown significantly over the last two decades, most of this through residential and commercial development on the periphery of the settlement. The Town Centre has received some regeneration, including the £70m Pioneer Square development which opened in 2013. There are, however, limited opportunities to bring people together for events or experiential activities within the town centre, because appropriate spaces or locations for such events do not currently exist.
- 2.2 In 2019 a visioning workshop conducted with key stakeholders with Bill Grimsey (the renowned retail and town centre expert) identified the need to transform the market square into *'an inclusive 'cultural hub' as a multifunctional space for the arts and community.'* As a result of this workshop, an informal Town Centre task and finish group was established, consisting of Council members, officers, and key external stakeholders. This group subsequently formulated the *'Reimagining Bicester's Town Centre Outline Plan'* (see Appendix One). From this work the concept of creating a community hub which will transform the *'market square to become the vibrant epicentre of the town, meeting local need'* was reaffirmed. This area will provide a venue for events and cultural activities, with dedicated spaces for the community to enjoy a wide range of experiential activities.
- 2.3 There has been a long held desire for environmental enhancements to be delivered at the Market Square by the community and Council. Several projects have been promoted or designed in the past but these have not materialised.
- 2.4 Bicester is witnessing further sustained growth and changes. Given the significant attractions of Bicester Village and Bicester Heritage, combined with the growing residential population of the town; new commercial developments; and improvements to the town's rail infrastructure and services, there is the potential for Bicester's Town Centre footfall to be significantly increased and for the economic vitality of the town centre to be improved through targeted investment on public realm improvements.

- 2.5 During 2021, as a direct result of the Outline Plan, and focussing on the Community Hub key theme and foundation stone, OCC, in partnership with CDC, commissioned Wood consultants (now a part of WSP) to undertake some research and produce some concepts. Evidence from research into a range of recent public realm improvement schemes which reduced the dominance of motor vehicles shows that this has a beneficial effect on health, business prosperity and the economy. The research demonstrates that such schemes might have the potential to:
- Boost commercial trade by up to 40%
 - Improve retail sales and turnover by 15 - 25%
 - Improve retail footfall by 10-45%
 - Provide rental and capital value increases of between 15-20%
 - Achieve 20% decline in vacancy rates in areas with high quality public realm
- 2.6 Further research undertaken by Wood also indicates retailers have tended to over-estimate the importance of the car for customer travel, with many people coming to Bicester Market Square by walking, cycling or by bus.
- Local businesses believed:
- 63% of their customers arrived by car
 - 37% walked
- A survey of visitors revealed that actually:
- 20% arrived by car
 - 64% walked
- 2.7 The Government has also recognised that High Streets and Town Centres are changing and funding has recently been made available through the c.£1bn *Future High Streets Fund* for 72 towns to improve their town centres. (Members will recall that in March 2019 the Council made an unsuccessful Phase One Expression of Interest to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)'s *Future High Streets Fund* for Bicester.) The aim of the Fund is to *renew and reshape town centres and high streets in a way that drives growth, improves experience and ensures future sustainability. It will do this by providing co-funding to successful applicants to support transformative and structural changes to overcome challenges in their area.* Many of the projects are focussed on market square regeneration and public realm enhancements and should offer a wealth of learning and guidance for Bicester's approach.
- 2.8 There is strong support and justification for the Bicester Market Square project through existing and emerging planning policy and the Corporate Business Plan. The current Cherwell Local Plan 2011-2031 acknowledges the need to 'support the viability and vitality of the existing town centre' and to 'improve the

character and appearance of the centre of Bicester and the public realm'. The emerging Local Plan (Cherwell Local Plan 2040 reg 18 Consultation – yet to be approved by members) states that there are specific areas of change identified for Bicester, with the Market Square being one of them;

Site 3 - Market Place (Square) - This area offers the opportunity to become a focal point of the Town Centre and a venue for periodic events that could drive interest and footfall in Bicester. Removal of car parking would facilitate improvements to the public realm, including widening of pavements, enable outside seating for the nearby food and beverage traders and create an attractive 'café culture' environment where visitors will want to spend more time. It is important this area provides a successful multi-functional space, enhanced landscaping and a high quality pedestrian environment.

3.0 Report Details - Business Case - Project Outline

- 3.1 Further consultation, engagement and research on various issues is now required to understand the full scope and implications of the project and to develop the concept ideas into a final design. Other factors such as the London Road Level Crossing requirements and whether vehicular traffic will be restricted here could influence the design ethos. It is important that this is considered and investigated, but that it does not define the Market Square project which may need to come forward ahead of any decision on this.

Table One: Pros and Cons of proceeding with the Bicester Market Square regeneration - summary

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides opportunity to build on previous Town Centre regeneration (Pioneer Square) creating something which is fit for purpose. • Will strengthen the visitor and resident attraction for the Town Centre - particularly linking to Bicester Village and the Station • Supports events and activities in the Town Centre • Supports additional footfall, dwell time and local enterprise in the Town Centre • Supports community cohesion and civic pride • Promotes higher utilisation of car parking assets across whole of town centre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential loss of some car parking revenue (£80-90k worst case scenario) • Loss of car parking in this area of the Town Centre • Temporary impact on businesses, shoppers and residents during construction phase

- Promotes active travel and sustainability agenda

3.2 Project Funding

- 3.2.1 In February 2023 Council approved £4.25m to be allocated towards this capital project and further funds of c.£880k may become available through OCC s106 town centre funding which could reduce resources required for this project or further resources could be requested depending on the agreed final project plan.
- 3.2.2 The concept work by Wood in 2021 estimated that, based on their feasibility work and the costing of the public realm improvements alone, the costs would be within the budget now available. However, this estimate does not include the ambition of transforming the Market Square into a multi-functional Community Hub and the cost of developing concepts to create this multi-functional space. Until further design work is completed and an outline business plan drafted it is impossible to quantify any risks in relation to operation and delivery and identify what their impact might be. Hence the need to undertake further design work and studies before requesting further approval to proceed with the project in its final form.
- 3.2.3 It is anticipated that a budget of up to 20% of the total project budget would be required to cover all professional fees for the entire project. An initial £180k is sought to undertake relevant feasibility studies, design work and consultation in order that officers can report back to members to achieve the required Gateway approvals through the Strategic Place Shaping Programme Board (SPSPB) and allow members to consider a full outline business case for the project. The design work will include extensive consultation and engagement with a wide range of stakeholders (including residents and businesses), as well as providing a draft business case for the operation of the assets which will be created and consideration as to where these assets should be vested. This would then allow members the opportunity to fully scrutinise the project before agreeing to let it proceed reducing the risk and maintaining oversight. There would be a risk that if the project did not proceed and be completed for any reason then the budget expended to that point would have to be converted back into revenue. The table below sets out the likely tasks and feasibility reports, and their overall potential costs, necessary before members consider the full business case and final design plans.

Table Two: Initial Project Tasks To Develop Fully Costed Business Plan

Task	Description	SPSPB/SOP/Exec	Cost
1.	Define project brief & principles	SPSPB	
2.	Feasibility - Car Parking Study and Strategy	Update to SPSPB	
3.	Feasibility - Impact from Traffic Modelling, Area Travel Plan & Active Travel – specific issues such as taxi rank and public transport	Update to SPSPB	
4.	Feasibility - Utilities studies, Topographical, services & stats, drainage, archaeological	Update to SPSPB	
5.	Design - Initial design options building on Wood concept designs	Review feasibility & material prior to public consultation- SPSPB	
6.	Consultation – Public Realm design proposals	Consider Consultation materials - SOP	
7.	Consultation – Community group activity		
8.	Consultation feedback & report	Consider consultation feedback - SOP	
9.	Design - Draft proposal (costed plan)	Consider Draft Proposals – SPSPB/SOP (Gateway 1)	
10.	Reconsult stakeholders/community		
11.	Outline Business Plan for Community Hub	Consider Final plans – SOP/SPSPB	
12.	Full Business Case	Executive approval for final design and Full Business Plan (Gateway 2)	>£180k
13.	Develop Planning Application		

3.4 Project Delivery and Next Steps

3.4.1 Governance of the project is proposed through a wide Project Team incorporating relevant Council and OCC officers, with senior officers involved through the Bicester Garden Town Officer Programme Board and full member engagement through the Bicester Garden Town Strategic Oversight Partnership (SOP). Regular reporting would also occur through the Council's Strategic Place Shaping Programme Board and Corporate Leadership Team as set out above.

3.4.2 The envisaged key stages of the project to achieve final designs and provide a fully costed business case for members to consider and approve are set out in table two above.

A significant amount of design work, feasibility studies and consultation will be required in order to progress the scheme to Gateway 2 at which point Executive will be able to assess the full implications of the final proposals before approving the next stage to develop a planning application for the project. Full scrutiny of the project up to this point will be provided through the governance arrangements set out above and at the milestones indicated.

3.4.3 Landownership being OCC and CDC means that OCC will work closely with the Council on the project board and with a S106 contribution potentially available from them (design not yet determined therefore unknown). OCC will also provide by virtue of partnership working, pre-planning advice through the officer project board.

3.4.3 The procurement of consultants to assist in the design and consultation process with stakeholders and the general public, therefore, should take place on approval of this recommendation through Executive. A further report summarising the conclusion of that work, the implications arising and recommendations on how to proceed will come back for member deliberation in due course.

4.0 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

4.1 Significant resources (£4.25m) have been made available to progress this project through the Council's capital programme and officers are now seeking to bring forward more detailed plans in consultation with stakeholders and the public for members to approve.

4.2 Therefore, officers are seeking to have the business need for delivering this project at the market square in Bicester affirmed and for authorisation to expend up to £180k of the anticipated £900k professional fees on relevant studies, consultation and detailed design (to the point of planning application

submission) to enable a further report to members recommending approval for the final scheme and how it will be delivered.

5.0 Consultation

- 5.1 Significant consultation with key players has already taken place over a number of years and it is envisaged that an extensive consultation and engagement programme will commence shortly once the design and engagement consultants have been procured.

6.0 Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection

- 6.1 Options would be evaluated as part of the consultation process

7.0 Implications

Financial and Resource Implications

- 7.1 There is a capital budget of £4.25m within the Capital Programme to fund this project.

No revenue impacts of the scheme were identified at the time of budget setting and so the 2023/24 budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy has not made provision for a loss of car parking income or ongoing revenue costs e.g. to maintain the “Community Hub”. The service should identify how the ongoing revenue impacts of this scheme will be addressed before it goes ahead.

As the report says, if any resource is spent on this project and it does not proceed then that will result in the costs becoming a revenue cost. Therefore, the minimum should be spent on this project to identify the ongoing revenue impacts so that they can be brought back for approval to continue with the scheme or not.

Michael Furness, Assistant Director – Finance (S151 Officer),
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Legal Implications

- 7.2 This project requires a thorough business case. It needs an enforceable project agreement between the parties. It is necessary for project heads of terms to be developed. Once the business case and the project agreement/ heads of terms are in place then there should be scoping of services and works to be finalised. Need to ensure that Woods initial works can be carried forward so Intellectual Property rights, etc implications should be checked. There will also be a need for a development agreement depending on how this progressed. The

development agreement should be in two phases and should be procured (framework is an option subject to value for money via an independent QS /project manager role). First phase should be designed etc and the second phase to be construction. The risks associated with the project should be highlighted and how they will be mitigated.

Shiraz Sheikh, Assistant Director of Law and Governance and Democratic Services and MO, Shiraz.Sheikh@Cherwell-DC.gov.uk, 01295 221651

Risk Implications

7.3 There are various risks associated with the project and a detailed risk workshop and register will be created at the point of project initiation and mitigations considered. The key risks however are as follows:

- If the capital project does not for any reason proceed and is not completed, then the budget expended up until that point would have to be converted back to revenue.
- Cost inflation and Mission Creep – capital projects at the present time are subject to rapidly increased material and labour costs. It will be important to take account of this and provide adequate contingencies in order that the project does not have a cost overrun. It is suggested that in this current environment 20% contingency may possibly be required, but this will be evaluated and set out in the full business case. Equally the ambitions for the project should be kept realistic and within the budgets available and consultation/community engagement should not lead to mission creep and increased costs.
- Officer Resource – The project will require adequate officer resource and skill sets. For the construction phase there may be a case to employ a construction QS consultant to manage the contract with the main contractor.
- These and any further arising risks will be managed through the projects' risk register and will be escalated to the Leadership Risk Register as and when deemed necessary.

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Equalities and Inclusion Implications

- 7.4 There are no immediate equalities nor inclusion implications associated directly with this report. Through the design process there will be a need to take account of groups with protected characteristics such as the elderly, young people and people with disabilities. This will be set out as a requirement to build this into the project as part of the consultant's brief. All proposals, changes and decisions are made taking careful consideration of the Council's commitments to equalities and inclusion as set out in the equalities framework, keeping those principles at the core of everything undertaken. An Equalities and Climate Impact Assessment (ECIA) will be undertaken and reviewed as part of this process and will provide mitigations for any impacts on groups with protected characteristics.

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Sustainability Implications

- 7.5 The full implications for sustainability will need to be considered as part of the development of the detailed design plans, but in principle if the Market Square is enhanced to make Bicester Town Centre more appealing to visit and use, then the need for people to travel further afield for services and entertainment should be reduced. This would accord with the County Council's Area Travel Plan and Active Travel measures and align with Government's aim to reduce reliance on the motor vehicle and widen the use of other sustainable modes of travel. There would be a degree of carbon emissions generated by the construction process and there will also be the embedded carbon within the material being used within the Public Realm scheme. The sustainability credentials of the project will need to be evaluated and assessed against the wider economic, societal and environmental benefits of the scheme.

Jo Miskin, Climate Action Manager,

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8.0 Decision Information

Key Decision

Financial Threshold Met: Yes

Community Impact Threshold Met: Yes

Wards Affected

All

Links to Corporate Plan and Policy Framework

The Bicester Market Square aligns with the Council's Business Plan 2023 – 2024, in particular linking to the objective to “*Work with partners to promote the district as a visitor destination and attract investment in our town centres*”. The project also links to the Council's Annual Delivery Plan 2022 – 2024, particularly to the strategic aim of “*supporting the delivery of the garden town programme*”, of which the project is a key part, and “*design[ing] out/solutions based on healthy place shaping principles and using public art to best effect to develop distinctiveness and civic pride*” in relation to Public Realm.

Lead Councillor

Councillor Donna Ford - Portfolio Holder for Regeneration

Document Information

Appendix number and title

- One. Reimagining Bicester's Town Centre: Outline Plan

Background papers

None

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