

Eco Bicester Strategic Delivery Board

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Report title: Bicester Masterplan update	
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1. Purpose of Report

1.1 To consider the issues that have informed the preparation of the Bicester Masterplan, to review progress and consider next steps.

2. Background

Cherwell District Council appointed consultants WYG to prepare a Masterplan for Bicester in November 2011.

WYG were asked to complete a conceptual plan by the end of January 2012, with a full Masterplan being completed in May 2012 for adoption by the Council as planning policy guidance for the town.

2.1 The role of the Masterplan process

The Masterplan has been commissioned to examine the town and its future needs over the next 20 years. It aims to provide a clear vision for the future of the town and set a framework for the integration of new developments with the rest of the town, to ensure that opportunities for securing a stronger economy and economic improvement can be captured.

A number of opportunities exist in Bicester which are critical to consider in a comprehensive, planned way. The Masterplan process is a powerful means to capture the aspiration of the town and to consider how best to realise its full opportunity to bring benefit to the economy, environment and wellbeing of residents.

The Masterplan seeks to amplify and build upon the strengths of the town. Bicester has a range of current strengths, from the development of the Eco-Bicester concept, a strong commercial and retail partnership in Bicester Vision, the Bicester Outlet Village which draws millions of visitors per annum, an attractive historic core, a substantial amount of defence estate land for potential redevelopment, a dynamic local College, access to the M40, good rail links to Birmingham and London and proximity to the major economic driver of the City of Oxford. The Masterplan for Bicester seeks to harness these factors into a coherent view of how the town might grow by building on these assets.

These include taking advantage of the new East –West Rail link, the potential for creating a larger town centre with more shops, restaurants and overnight accommodation. The Masterplan is also considering areas such as transport pressures, retail needs, green infrastructure and future education needs and other aspirations for the coming decades. It will also consider the potential gains from proposed development in the wider Bicester area including the Graven Hill MoD site.

The Masterplan is intended to help ensure that the NW Bicester development is fully integrated into the existing town and that all future plans for the town demonstrate a commitment to the 'Eco Bicester Vision' in order to bring long term benefits for the environment, economy, and quality of life for residents. The Masterplan will also establish a new green edge to the town, a new boundary that sets a limit to the town's growth.

The Masterplan will build on the work that has started on the NW Bicester development which will itself bring many benefits to the town, including improved public transport, local jobs and retrospective energy efficiency measures.

The main aims of the Bicester Masterplan are to:

- Guide the growth of the town up until 2026, having regard to the potential for additional development that secures the sustainable future for the town in the period beyond.
- Identify opportunity sites in the town and potential land uses.
- Identify the key physical and social infrastructure that is required to meet the requirements of the current and future population and relating to and informing the emerging Core Strategy assessment.
- Set out an urban design framework for the town that reflects the use of the emerging Eco-Bicester standards and considers appropriate design principles for other developments.
- Identify how best to present the town as a destination.
- Examine how the town's considerable heritage might be used to develop new cultural activities and a new tourism offer.
- Highlight to potential landowners, developers and investors the opportunities that Bicester has to offer.
- Secure the future role of the town centre, ensure its vitality and viability, widen and secure the retail offer, reduce the number of vacancies and prevent against unsuitable out of town development that would undermine the role of the town centre.
- Provide a sustainable movement strategy for the town.
- Secure a stronger employment base for the town.
- Provide a robust document that the Local Planning Authority can use in pre-application discussions, to assess future planning applications and assist in the determination of proposals.
- Highlight where on site provision and potential planning obligations may be required.

Many of the opportunities will take time to secure, requiring the sustained commitment from many agencies.

2.2 The key issues being considered

2.2.1 Guiding and shaping growth

Bicester is recognised as a Rural Service Centre in the current South East Regional Spatial Strategy, one of the main locations for development within Central Oxfordshire and together with its local demographic growth is planned to grow in size between now and 2026.

The South East Regional Strategy stated that a minimum of 670 dwellings will be provided per annum within the Cherwell District up until 2026. This growth is planned to take the form of key sites within the existing town, town centre regeneration and a series of urban extensions on strategic sites of which the NW Bicester site is to 'Eco-Town' standard (PPS 1 supplement – Eco Towns), a step change in the standard of development that can be implemented.

2.2.2 Providing coherence and avoiding sprawl

With this starting point, the Masterplan is an important means to consider the development of the town in a coordinated, planned and integrated way.

The Masterplan process is intended to provide a clear spatial vision for the town and setting a framework for the development of key opportunity sites. It will also enable Cherwell Council and its partners to take a proactive role in guiding future development within a clear town boundary that prevents urban sprawl. The Masterplan will examine ways of best integrating all new developments with the rest of the town.

Bicester is a market town that serves a substantial rural catchment. As a result of the planned growth, the role and functions of the town centre will need to be expanded and enhanced both to maintain and strengthen the role of the town within this catchment. The challenge is how best to shape this town growth so that the town uses its key opportunity sites in a coordinated, integrated and planned way and to expand the retail, employment, leisure, education and social portfolio of the town to cater for the existing and a growing population.

2.2.3 A stronger town economy

The Masterplan seeks to address the availability of employment land to ensure local companies can grow and the economic base of the town be both maintained and strengthened.

The Masterplan process is considering how best Bicester might build on its role as a market town, by involving the Town Council and the aspirations of the multi-stakeholder partnership Bicester Vision in considering how best to market the town as a place to visit and invest in.

The Bicester Masterplan is considering how to prepare the town to take advantage of the next economic upswing by considering how best to develop a distinctive approach to establish its employment and retail offer, a new economic niche and to maximise the opportunity to establish new successful SMEs within the context of being 'Eco Bicester'.

The Bicester Masterplan is also exploring current retail trends and needs of the town and surrounding District. This is to inform consideration of how best the town should strengthen the retail sector of its economy and promote the town as a shopping, tourism and cultural destination and secure a closer relationship between the potential for future development of the successful Bicester Outlet Village and a larger town centre.

The Masterplan seeks to address a number of other challenges faced by the town, including:

- How to reposition the town in the face of competition from neighbouring towns with consequential retail leakage, leading to it becoming more of a dormitory town than a competitive, dynamic, attractive retail centre.
- How to reduce the number of vacant shop premises within the town centre.
- How to strengthen local resident's perceptions of a positive future for the town.
- Identifying potential new employment sites within and around the town to assist in reducing the current high level of out commuting and responding to the restructuring of employment within the town, with a particular focus that matches the 'Eco-Bicester' concept.
- How to build on the success of the Bicester Outlet village as a foundation for a more dynamic and diverse town economy.
- How best to strengthen the economic benefits from Higher Education provision in the town.

- How best to relate the potential use of Defence Estates land into the town for new residential and employment uses, that help strengthen the economy and demographics of the town.
- How the town centre might be further developed as a high quality attractive place that meets wider business needs as well as providing an attractive mix of national and independent retailers.
- How to use its locational advantages and maintain its excellent connectivity.
- How best to promote the town as a tourism centre, by exploring the potential use of the former RAF Bicester site.
- How best to announce 'arrival' into the town.

2.2.4 Creating sustainable communities

The Bicester Masterplan will include an assessment of the likely volume of new housing, securing high building standards such as the use of Eco-Town standards.

The plan is considering how best to integrate areas of potential urban expansion with the existing town to ensure that the town benefits from this growth, with new community facilities and the impact on existing services fully assessed. This will include consideration of the educational needs of the town, the relationship between potential education locations (of all types – primary, secondary and higher) and the appropriate level of health facilities, together with the potential for new and extended cultural, arts, sports and leisure facilities.

The aims are to consider how best to:

- Provide a wide range of high quality, sustainable housing choices and build safe neighbourhoods.
- Strengthen the cultural life of the town, the public realm, arts and facilities for community use.
- Secure a high quality leisure, sport and recreation offer.
- Ensure that the proposed urban extensions to the North West, South West and possibly to the South East of Bicester at Graven Hill might best be integrated with the rest of the town.

2.2.5 Transport improvements

Central to the Masterplan project is the aim of improving public transport services; both bus connections within the town and to surrounding villages; the gain from the investment in the Chiltern Rail service from Birmingham, to Banbury, Bicester and London; the opportunities to be gained from the East-West Rail project linking Oxford, Bicester, Milton Keynes and Bedford through a new frequent rail service.

Alongside the expansion of the range of commercial and social facilities available, Bicester faces a challenge of how to secure an improved sustainable transport network for walking and cycling together with new bus connections that will collectively help to reduce the level of out-commuting and encourage 'modal shift' and promote the 'well-being' of residents of the town.

The Masterplan process will include consideration of the need for enhanced Green Infrastructure, such as an expanded network of footpaths, link trails and new cycle paths, together with other investment in the public realm and ensuring that Bicester becomes a greener more attractive town.

Clearly considering potential land use changes will raise the possibility of altering transport patterns in the town, the opportunity to remove pinch points and how the constraints on economic growth from M40 junctions 9 & 10 might best be resolved.

Importantly, WYG have also now been commissioned by Oxfordshire County Council to consider the detail of a new 'movement strategy' for the town and guidance to support their role as the local highway body.

2.3 Links to the Cherwell Core Strategy

The Bicester Masterplan will assist with the completion of the Core Strategy for the District having considered the issues facing the development of the town as a whole in depth.

The Core Strategy will incorporate the conclusions of the Masterplan onto a statutory footing, placing the future of Bicester into the context of Cherwell District as a whole.

Completion of the Proposed Submission Core Strategy is due in April 2012, followed by a final 6 weeks consultation and submission planned for July 2012. This will lead to an Examination in Public in the autumn and Adoption anticipated in Spring 2013.

2.4 The process of plan preparation

WYG are at the first stages of preparing the Masterplan and have been gathering information and liaising with key stakeholders to inform its production.

Key stakeholders include elected members and officers from the 3 tiers of local government - District, Town and County Councils; Oxford and Cherwell Valley College, Defence Estates and local businesses through Bicester Vision and the Chamber of Commerce.

Engagement has so far included a series of workshops and one to one interviews.

2.5 Consultation on the conceptual plan

Cherwell District Council will be consulting more widely on the conceptual plan in the late spring. This will ensure that the final plan has taken account of all those with an interest in Bicester, in shaping the future of the town.

In the next stage of the development of the plan there will be a deeper examination of infrastructure needs of the town including future education, health, green infrastructure and leisure requirements.

The final report will include an executive summary of the key findings and be a high quality document that is readable and well presented. The report will contain an appropriate mix of photographs, maps and drawings to illustrate the concepts that underpin the strategy for the town, as well as site options in a well designed, accessible format.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 That the report and presentation are noted
- 3.2 That the conclusion of the first stage of the preparation of the Masterplan is reported to the Cherwell District Council Executive for consideration.