

Eco Bicester Strategic Delivery Board

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Report title: RAF Bicester	
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1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 This report is to provide information for the Board on RAF Bicester, relevant planning policy and its potential future uses.

2. History

- 2.1 RAF Bicester site began life as a flying corps aerodrome at the end of the Great War. The clearance of the site in 1920 was a short lived interlude in the history of aviation at the site and construction of a reincarnated Royal Airforce Station began in earnest in 1925. Construction continued through the inter war years and was still underway at the outbreak of war in 1939.
- 2.2 The site remained in use until the mid 1970s when the strength of the RAF was much reduced and RAF Bicester was managed on a care and maintenance basis. In 1978 the site was made available to the United States Airforce in Europe. This use came to an end when RAF Upper Heyford was vacated by USAFE in 1994.
- 2.3 The flying field is in use by Windrushers Gliding Club who run the gliding activity from the site and also make provision for social members, allowing access for informal recreation to the perimeter of the flying field, <http://www.windrushers.org.uk/>.
- 2.4 In 2012 planning permission was granted for the conversion of the domestic site (west of the B421) to residential properties with some limited new build. Conversion of these buildings is now underway.
- 2.5 Further details of the history of the site and its significance can be found within the Conservation Appraisal for the site.

3. Listed Buildings and Conservation Area

- 3.1 In 2000 English Heritage undertook a thematic study of aviation sites. The resulting report describes RAF Bicester site as;

'better than any other military airbase in Britain, the layout and fabric relating to pre 1930s military aviationIt comprises the best preserved bomber airfield dating from the period up to 1945....it also comprises the best preserved and most strongly representative of the bomber stations built as the Sir Hugh Trenchard's 1920s Home Defence Expansion Scheme' (English Heritage).

- 3.2 As a result 13 buildings on the Domestic Site and 21 buildings on the Technical Site were designated listed buildings. Airfield defences and bomb stores were designated scheduled ancient monuments. However it was not just the buildings that are significant but the completeness of the layout and the airfield. As a result a conservation area was designated in 2008. An appraisal was published to accompany the designation. The Appraisal can be viewed at <http://www.cherwell.gov.uk/index.cfm?articleid=1672>
- 3.3 Although not all the buildings are listed there are also a significant number of the unlisted buildings that make a positive contribution to the character of the conservation area and the settings of listed buildings.
- 3.4 The site is identified on the English Heritage Risk Register. In 2009 the site was described as being in the following condition.

The scheduled monument, which includes the southern group of bomb stores, is included on the English Heritage's Heritage at Risk Register 2009 as in a generally unsatisfactory and declining condition with major localised problems. All the statutorily listed buildings within the Technical Site and on the Flying Field are identified as being 'at risk' in English Heritage's 'Biennial Conservation Report on the Government Historic Estate', with the exception of Building 113 (in use by the Windrushers Gliding Club). Twelve of these buildings are identified as Category A - 'Immediate risk of further, rapid deterioration or loss of fabric; no solution agreed'; the other six buildings are identified as Category C - 'slow decay; no solution agreed'. In November 2008 a letter from Will Holborow, Head of the Government Historic Estates Unit at English Heritage, described the technical site as "the most worrying heritage site on the whole government estate in terms of the number of neglected buildings and structures, the scale of the maintenance backlog and the lack of progress that has been made towards finding a new use for them". This assessment was repeated in a letter from EH's Chief Executive Simon Thurley, in April 2009.

4. Planning Policy

- 4.1 The development plan for the area comprises of the Cherwell Local Plan (1996) and the South East Plan (2009). The Cherwell Local Plan contains policies to protect listed buildings and conservation areas (Policies C18, C21, C23). At the time the plan was produced it also contained proposals for the airfield but these policies pre dated the identification of the historic importance of the site and have not subsequently been saved.
- 4.2 The South East plan is currently part of the development plan but the Localism Bill includes provision for the withdrawal of regional spatial strategies (including the South East Plan). The Plan contains policies to protect heritage and support sensitive reuse (Policy BE6). The plan also supports tourism development where it would promote longer stays in the Oxford Region (Policy TSR7).
- 4.3 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) provides government guidance on planning. The NPPF promotes sustainable development and advises where the development plan is out of date planning permission should be granted unless there are significant and demonstrable adverse effects that out weigh the benefits. With regard to heritage assets the NPPF advises that local plans should identify a positive strategy for the conservation and enjoyment of heritage assets. With regard to planning applications the NPPF advises;

In determining planning applications, local planning authorities should take account of:

- the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets and putting them to viable uses consistent with their conservation;
- the positive contribution that conservation of heritage assets can make to sustainable communities including their economic vitality; and
- the desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness.

4.4 In 2003 CgMs were appointed by Cherwell District Council to advise on the development potential of the site in connection with developing policy for what is now known as the Non Statutory Cherwell Local Plan. CgMs concluded that, because of the level of heritage interest, there was no development potential at RAF Bicester beyond the reuse of existing buildings, so the housing allocation was made at SW Bicester.

4.5 Over a number of years at both officer and member level significant pressure was put on Defence Estates to, firstly, allow officers access and, secondly, to undertake maintenance to bring buildings back to a wind and weather tight condition. The Head of the Government's Historic Estate at English Heritage also exerted pressure, without any appreciable response. This culminated in the, then Chief Executive Mary Harpley and the, then, Team Leader Design and Conservation together with the Head of English Heritage's Head of Government's Historic Estate meeting the, then, Minister of Defence. It was agreed that The Council, English Heritage and DIO should jointly prepare a Planning Brief that set out an agreed acceptable future for the site as a whole in advance of marketing of the site. The Council accordingly published a Planning Brief in 2009. This Brief makes reference to the earlier work by CGMS , sets out informal development principles for the site and provides guidance for management of the heritage assets.

4.6 The Brief supports the following uses of the site;

- Gliding and possibly other aviation uses.
- Public access to the flying field including informal low key recreational uses, compatible with aviation uses
- Heritage centre/museum
- Uses that preserve the openness of the flying field possibly including temporary uses such as festivals, concerts and markets
- Limited potential for sports provision

The Brief also supports the following uses for the buildings

- Reuse of buildings for their original purposes connected to aviation use
- Heritage, cultural, sporting and community uses
- Employment uses

4.7 The Brief highlights the importance of a masterplan for the whole site and ensuring that new uses and the activity associated with them is not harmful to the buildings, their settings or the character of the conservation area. The Brief can be viewed at; <http://www.cherwell.gov.uk/index.cfm?articleid=1735>.

4.8 The LDF draft Core Strategy (paras B.29 -30) highlights the need for a conservation led approach and the potential uses highlighted in the Brief for the site.

- 4.9 Current work on the Bicester Masterplan identifies enabling the development of RAF Bicester as a tourism and visitor destination as a key initiative. This can be viewed at; <http://www.cherwell.gov.uk/index.cfm?articleid=8476>

5. Current Position of the Site

- 5.1 The site is currently in the ownership of the Ministry of Defence. As can be seen from the policy section above, the sites disposal has been anticipated since the formulation and adoption of the Cherwell Local Plan in 1996.
- 5.2 Representations were made by DIO to the draft Core Strategy seeking allocation of the site for mixed use development. Earlier this year DIO confirmed that they no longer considered the site had residential development potential although have declined to confirm the same with regard to commercial development.

- 5.3 The Defence Infrastructure Organisation advised in February 2012;

'The Ministry of Defence is finalising the consideration of the Critchel Down issues and in due course, which I expect to be shortly, will be conveying that decision to former owners.'

RAF Bicester is not currently on the market'

In a response to a request for the information on the timescales for the decision DIO advised;

'MOD is finalising the decision. When a decision has been made it will be conveyed to former owners.'

Depending on the decision then this will determine what follows.

I will contact you in due course once more is known.'

- 5.4 DIO has therefore been very unforthcoming with regard to the progress of the Critchel Down process or their future aspirations for the site.
- 5.5 We understand from English Heritage that DIO intends to market the site during the financial year 2012 -13. Further information is awaited.
- 5.6 A group Bomber Command Heritage (BCH) has been set up with the aim of setting up an education centre and museum at RAF Bicester to tell the storey of Bomber Command. They have identified a four stage plan to bring about their ambition;
- STAGE I
Use by BCH of one or two small buildings on the Site to form an initial foothold workshop and display storage area
 - STAGE II
Other facilities are restored to enable public access to some areas - a small museum is established
 - STAGE III
More buildings are taken on and the display of full-size aircraft becomes possible - the museum becomes a significant contribution to the subject in the UK
 - STAGE IV
Full potential of the Site is realised as a major WWII-Themed visitor attraction, with great benefit to the local population and the country

See web site for further details: <http://www.bc-heritage.org/bicester/>

- 5.7 BCH have also had difficulty in getting co operation from DIO with regard to access to the site and information on its disposal. This is also hampering their ability to progress proposals for the site.

6. Conclusions

- 6.1 RAF Bicester is an important heritage site. The poor state of the buildings and MODs lack of maintenance of the site over a number of years is a significant concern.
- 6.2 The interest from BCH indicates there is good potential for an exciting education centre and museum that could contribute to the preservation of the site and be an important asset to the town and wider district. This could complement other local military sites of interest such as the former RAF Upper Heyford site, which has been identified as nationally important for its Cold War heritage, and where a small heritage centre is due to open as part of the reuse and development of the site.
- 6.3 The continuation of gliding from the site could also be part of a long term use of the site providing an appropriate use for the flying field that is an important part of the site.
- 6.4 The Bicester Master plan identifies the potential direction that emerging policies in the pre submission draft Core Strategy will take, supporting tourism development at the site. Policies with regard to the protection of heritage will also be included in the Core Strategy.
- 6.5 However DIO hold the key to the future of the site and their lack of engagement over the planning for the future of the site is very unhelpful. The Planning Brief continues to provide clear advice over the potential future use of the site which can be used to guide any potential purchasers of the site in the event that the site is to be disposed of. As information becomes available with regard to the disposal of the site the Board can be updated.

7. Recommendations

- (i) The Board note the content of the report.