

NW Bicester: LMO Development Stakeholder Interview Summary Report

Overview

In February and March 2012 A2Dominion organised two Community Governance workshops in partnership with the Young Foundation to raise awareness of plans for a Local Management Organisation (LMO) in NW Bicester and identify early opinions.

There was agreement at the workshops that local stakeholders including residents, voluntary and community sector representatives, local politicians and local business leaders should be involved in the early stages of developing a LMO at NW Bicester.

In follow up to the seminars, A2Dominion conducted a series of one-to-one interviews with key stakeholders identified primarily as participants in the Action Learning Seminars and those that were invited but unable to attend. Between June and July 2012, nineteen people were interviewed, spanning a mix of political, community & voluntary, business and public sector stakeholders.

Objectives

The primary objectives of conducting the interviews are to build positive working relationships with key local stakeholders, raise awareness of the proposals to create a unique community governance structure, give stakeholders the opportunity to influence what this structure might look like (or not look like) and the type of functions it could perform, and finally, to scope individuals interest and capacity to be involved in the development stages.

Key findings of the interviews

The interviews followed a template of 8 questions the key findings of which have been summarised in the table below. (The responses to question 3 have been broken down into four emerging themes).

1. What opportunities and positives do you see (if any) for the principle of establishing a LMO?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Empowerment - local democracy in action. • Shape resources and facilities aligned to what is actually needed. • Helping to foster a sense of ownership. • It will provide a useful learning tool for other Community Groups. • Developing a LMO will assist in creating a positive image of NW Bicester and communicating accurate information about the development. • By involving existing stakeholders, who already have great local knowledge, will help the new community to understand what exists already in Bicester and assist integration. • Assisting residents and stakeholders to feel connected, especially as Bicester has always been seen as fragmented. • A LMO structure will help to stitch the new community together with a common focus & assist people to forge an emotional attachment to the area, hopefully making it less of a dormitory. • By creating a local, visible model it's a way of breaking down the perception that Council Tax doesn't deliver much. • Exploring if it can make CDC service delivery more efficient. • It provides an opportunity to test a model that can be replicated elsewhere.

2. What benefits would you like to see it bring to wider Bicester?

- Share best practice and inspire others.
- Opportunity to test new innovative ways of delivering new ideas.
- Bringing the local VCS together and promoting local collaboration.
- To work with and add value to the existing VCS and BTC activities and capacity.
- Audience development - training and up skilling opportunities for local people that become involved.
- Helping to ensure that NW Bicester does not become a silo community - involving existing stakeholders will help to integrate people and make them feel included.
- Departure from usual governance procedures and formalities in Town Council that often put people off engaging with local democracy.
- Developing a greater understanding of green and sustainable living - the principles of which can then be applied to the whole Town to minimise difference between NW Bicester and the rest of the Town.
- Promotion of the Eco Town as a place where local people can see eco technologies and lifestyle in action so that it has a social and educational element for the existing community. The LMO could lead on projects in NW Bicester that wider Bicester can benefit from and visit / enjoy (e.g. a community farm, wildlife trails, and activities for young people).
- Greater platform for people to raise concerns and be listened to.
- CDC could have the opportunity to speak to one cross cutting and representative organisation; this would be more efficient and coherent for informing service development and delivery.

3. What concerns do you have about the development of a LMO (if any) and how do you think that A2Dominion could work with stakeholders to address them?

Stakeholder Involvement

- Language needs to be made simpler and easier for people to relate to. We need to make sure that the marketing fits with the culture of Bicester and is not too daunting.
- You need people with the right knowledge and skills on board, but you also need people that aren't afraid to try something new – pessimists could block the LMOs development and wider potential.
- Managing conflict of interest: personal gain or fear with existing stakeholders that already represent other established organisations.
- Creating an equal playing field when developing the LMO as it's new to all of us.
- Having big personalities and positions of authority can put people off contributing in workshops. Participants should be briefed before attending at the point of invite and asked to leave job titles behind. Residents need to feel valued and comfortable to voice their opinions.
- How do you manage stakeholder power in a LMO? It's important to achieve the right balance of influence around the table and not have some organisations or groups over represented.
- Managing early stakeholder expectations of the LMO and preparing them to relinquish responsibility to NW Bicester residents when the time is right.
- Making the LMO accessible to all people and representative of the community at large.
- Having the flexibility to adapt when new NW Bicester residents join.

Sustainability

- Is it sustainable? Once passionate people lose their enthusiasm to be involved and the excitement wears off, will we be able to find successors?
- Where does the buck stop if the LMO does not work? Everyone needs to know and understand what the exit strategy is in case it goes wrong.
- A proper risk assessment is required, but by default it would appear to fall to BTC to fix and tax payers to fund if the model breaks.
- Structure and funding to sustain a LMO needs to be clear - don't want to raise people's expectations and then have good work fail.

- People involved should be trained and supported to be true volunteers, not just attend meetings.

Structure

- Give local people a similar example of where this approach already works - show people something that can see and understand.
- Finding a model and structure of involvement that suits people's flexibilities.
- Uncertainty over what structure will look like and how it compliments existing Bicester structures.
- Concerned it will be an unaccountable level of local governance. Individuals will take ownership of it and it won't become a democratic model that everyone can participate in.
- Applaud the idea of trying to bring local organisations together as one to be involved in the decision-making process, but the custodians, BTC, OCC and CDC have to be the owner of the standards that they adopt for maintenance of individual areas. The structure should be a 2 tier process; Local Authorities should be involved at Steering Group Level with doers underneath.

Responsibilities

- How will CDC / BTC relinquish responsibility to a LMO?
- More content with a LMO taking on the community side of things - but fear that volunteers won't want to take on the responsibilities that come with maintenance of space / facilities.
- Overcoming perceptions that it's just another layer of bureaucracy.
- If NW Bicester residents are going to be asked to pay an additional surcharge for the LMO we must ensure that they can see the benefits.
- If the LMO were to take on the management of open space it could lead to differing maintenance standards and a postcode lottery of services in the Town.

4. What issues and questions do you think require more consideration?

- What are the mechanisms for existing residents to get involved in the development stage (if any)?
- How is it going to be made accessible to newcomers without them feeling that people from outside of NW Bicester have made decisions about their community of their behalf?
- How is the LMO going to link in with current structures and community buildings in the Town? It is important not to duplicate functions of BTC and other groups.
- Rather than asking local people what they are prepared to take on as a LMO, would it not be more appropriate to ask what CDC, A2Dominion and BTC are happy to relinquish?
- What level of personal responsibility people are going to be expected to take on - the time commitments required?
- How are we going to use the expertise of local business people - what's in it for them?
- What have we learn from other similar community governance structures?
- What are the ground rules for managing volunteer's involvement?
- Residents may not want to pay an additional surcharge - what control would there be over its level? People already pay a precept to the Town Council, what is the added value for them in paying a LMO on top of that?
- Management of the open space will need careful costing and consideration - more clarity and transparency is needed.

5. What aspects of the LMO are you most interested in and would like to be part of further discussions on?

- Community development and the delivery of engagement activities / events – 7
- Young people involvement - 5
- Social enterprise – 5
- Monitoring eco performance and raising awareness of sustainable living – 4
- Fundraising – 3
- Integration with existing Bicester – 3
- Management of Community Facilities – 2

- Developing a the LMO structure – 2
- Green / open space - 2
- Mentoring volunteers – 1
- Using the facilities as a place of worship in a multi-functional way - 1
- Businesses planning and entrepreneurial activities – 1
- Creativity / arts – 1
- Service providers from CDC would like to be involved in all aspects of the LMO's development as they believe that they have lots to add to each debate.

6. How would you like to be involved and what is your capacity to be involved? (Workshop / smaller focus group etc.)

- All indicated that they would like to remain involved, but that it was difficult to say their capacity without knowing what is required of them at this stage. Solution is to keep everyone in the loop and enable people to be flexible in which bits they attend.
- Those representing organisations suggested that their involvement may be shared depending on the expertise required for each stage / topic of the LMO development.
- Workshops should be themed so that people can pick and choose those they are most interested in.
- People would like to receive more information in advance of workshops.
- Day long workshops are too intense - shorter discussion group's work best - it's useful to feed off what other people have to say.
- To assist in the development stage, it would be useful to identify people to champion certain themes.
- A mix of larger workshops and smaller theme-led discussions are popular and work well.
- Evening appointments are better than day time for some.
- Would like to be involved through partnership collaboration, creative consultation, problem solving and advocating the voice and opinions of young people, not just workshops etc.

7. Would you like to be part of the Interim Management Board established as the first step in the creation towards a LMO?

- 9 x yes
- 5 x would need to find out who nominated rep for their organisation is
- 1 x would need more info of what it would entail first

8. Is there any other individual or group within Bicester that you feel should be involved in the development of a LMO?

- Young people
- People aged 20 - 30 years
- Oxfordshire LEP
- Bicester Green Gym
- Bicester residents
- Social housing tenants
- Green experts (e.g. BedZED residents)
- Residents Associations
- Facilitators that have experience of motivating others
- Sports clubs / associations
- Surrounding villages
- Round table / Lions / WI
- U3A
- Disability Forum

Conclusions

The interviews revealed significant support from key local stakeholders to be involved in the continued development of a LMO, with all participants expressing an interest to be involved in the first phase Interim Management Board.

Stakeholders are positive about the principles of a LMO empowering local people to make decisions about their area, and believe that the bringing together of the various public, private, voluntary and community sectors will strengthen partnership work in the Town and promote local collaboration. The involvement of existing stakeholders early on has been viewed positively as a way to integrate NW Bicester with the Town and as a tool to inspire other groups and share best practice. Many also welcomed the idea of a LMO aligning resources and facilities to what is needed in the community and thereby making service delivery more efficient.

There are concerns regarding the development process itself. These concerns centre on managing stakeholder involvement and personalities; creating an equal playing field that everyone feels valued to voice their opinions on; using language that is meaningful and which people can relate to, and balancing the right level of skills and influence for those involved.

There are still many questions about the LMO that require answering, with several participants finding it difficult to envisage a LMO without being shown a similar model in action elsewhere. The main concerns surround its structure and how it will compliment existing structures in the Town rather than duplicating them; the level of responsibility volunteers are going to take on (with some more comfortable with the idea of it delivering community development activities rather than the management of facilities and open space); retaining the interest and commitment of volunteers and not relying on the passion and enthusiasm of a limited few, and the exit strategy if the LMO were to fail.

Participants felt that the mechanism for existing residents to get involved and the flexibility and accessibility of the model to adapt as NW Bicester residents move in needed further consideration.

Bicester Town Council (BTC) appreciate that the LMO is well intentioned, however recommend that a structure should be set up around the Town Council to expand its services to all growth areas to ensure consistency, democracy and enable opportunities for the wider Town. It believes that by investing in and building on the structure that is already here, BTC could expand combining all new developments in the Town enabling it to achieve greater economies of scale than a NW Bicester LMO could. There is also feeling from the Town Council that the LMO is being talked about too early and that it should grow organically and let NW Bicester residents determine what it looks like and when.

Next Steps

Some clear themes have emerged from this engagement activity that will inform topics for future LMO development work. The outcomes of the one-to-one discussions will be consolidated with the findings of the Stage One LMO Business Plan produced by consultants SQW in September, to inform our next steps in the LMO development.