

Eco Bicester Strategic Delivery Board

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Report title: Garden Town Report	
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1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 This report is to update the Board on the Garden Town and matters arising within the last quarter.

2. Garden Town Capacity Funding

- 2.1 Since the inception of the Garden Town Programme MCLG has supported sites in the programme with capacity funding to support high quality housing delivery. This support for Bicester has enabled a team to be established and funded and the delivery of a range of projects including work on the Healthy New Town, funding bids to be pursued, feasibility studies to be commissioned and community engagement.
- 2.2 2018/19 capacity funding proposals were reported at the last meeting and funding has now been received. This has enabled a number of areas of work to be progressed as set out below.

3. Masterplan for Bicester

- 3.1 Work on healthy place shaping and how this might shape the town in the future has been carried out and work on the plan for the town centre will also feed in but further work on the masterplan has been limited by the staff capacity to progress it. The recruitment process has therefore commenced to fill a vacant Garden Town post to provide additional capacity to enable this work to be progressed more expediently.

4. Design Quality and Embedding Healthy Place Shaping

- 4.1 .A workshop session was held with planning, conservation and landscape colleagues all invited to participate to explore how best raise the design quality of new development in Bicester. Whilst a number of interesting opportunities were explored the outcome was that having urban design advice to support planning officers was considered the first priority. The Council does not currently employ any urban designers and therefore the recruitment process has been commenced to recruit an urban designer to raise the design quality of new development. The aim is to have staff resource to support planning officers but also to be able to take forward work on design briefs, guidance and design reviews working with a wide range of stakeholders.

5. Improvement of Highway Design and Connectivity

- 5.1 This funding was secured to support design work on the central corridor, connectivity for walking and cycling and feasibility of rail connectivity to Graven Hill.
- 5.2 Design guidance for the improvement of the eastern perimeter road has been produced and work on the procurement of the designer of the environmental planting scheme along Queens Avenue to reduce the impact of poor air quality is underway. Details of the Local Cycling Walking Improvement Plan being undertaken for Oxfordshire County Council are awaited so that work on more detailed design to improve routes for walking and cycling can reflect the LCWIP's priorities.

6 Market Square Design for Environmental Improvement

- 6.1 The improvement of Market Square has long been planned. Work on the Town Centre has highlighted the importance to the Market Square in providing connectivity with Sheep Street and Crown Walk and also as a focal point when accessing the town centre from the south and Bicester Village. It also has the potential to provide space for events and activities. The Garden Town funding provides the potential to review the previous design and explore the opportunities to create a destination space within the town centre.
- 6.2 Discussions have commenced with OCC around the development of a brief to commission work on Market Square.

7. Green Infrastructure and Access to the Countryside

- 7.1 Green infrastructure was an important component of the original garden cities which sought to ensure the best of the city and the country were brought together. Bicester is fortunate in having a range of attractive parks and open spaces. New areas of open space are also planned at Kingsmere, Graven Hill, NW Bicester and Wrethchwick Farm, secured through the planning policies for new development. The Garden Town funding provides the opportunity to support future planning by looking at green infrastructure in a holistic way as well as opportunities to further work in the short term. The progress of work on natural capital for the Oxfordshire Plan is being reviewed to ensure work in Bicester is complimentary.
- 7.2 The first piece of work it is proposed to commission is to explore how access to the countryside might be enhanced for residents. A brief is being prepared for this piece of work.

8. Support to Enhance the Cultural Offer in the Town

- 8.1 Funding has been used to support work on the town centre and also to redesign the historic town trail with Bicester History Society, who have also been supported by Bicester Village. The town trail is due to be published in the summer and the relaunch will be supported by some guided walks in the town and the opening of the Dovecote in Old Place Yard for the Bicester Festival. Work is also underway to support the Bicester History Society proposal to install a time line in the library, which Bicester Town Council have also committed funding to. Interpretation of the area of the St Edburghs Priory is also being explored.

9. Garden Town Legacy

- 9.1 One of the reasons Letchworth has remained successful is that it has had the benefit of funding that came from the uplift in land value as the town was developed.

Circumstances are now very different and whilst this is not possible to use the same approach in Bicester in the same way, never the less there is the opportunity to explore how a legacy could be created. The brief for this work is being produced.

10. Staff Funding

- 10.1 Funding has also been used to maintain staff resource and also support two days a dedicated communications support. The dedicated communications support has enabled a more proactive approach to communications than had been possible and is allowing work to be undertaken to refresh the Growing Bicester web site.

11. Conclusion

- 11.1 Housing delivery in 2018/19 in Bicester has been very good with 447 properties delivered out of 1489 in total within the District. Never the less the work of the Bicester team, particularly in working on areas that enhance the overall attractiveness and liveability of the town, remains important in maintaining Bicester as an attractive place to live and invest.
- 11.2 Progress is being made but recruitment of additional staff resource will provide additional capacity to progress planned work.
- 11.3 The Garden Town programme has also expanded with additional Garden Town and Village sites being announced. Homes England asked the Bicester Team to attend and present to new entrants into the garden town programme to share the lessons learnt. In addition a presentation has been made to the local urban design network BOBMK to share locally the work being undertaken and a groups from MHCLG and East Herts have also been hosted in Bicester.
- 11.4 MHCLG have announced a funding round for 2019/20 and a bid is being made to maintain staff capacity to work on Bicester.

12. Recommendation

The Board are recommended to note the progress on the use of the Garden Town Capacity funding as set out above.