

Bicester Strategic Delivery Board

Date of meeting: 18 March 2021	AGENDA ITEM NO: 6
Report title: Garden Town Report	
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1. Purpose of Report

1.1. MHCLG are actively promoting housing growth through the Garden Communities programme. Bicester was one of the first Garden Towns within the programme, identified in 2014, which now comprises a further 49 Garden Towns and Garden Villages.

1.2. Garden Communities are defined by the Government as having the following characteristics:

- a purpose-built new settlement, or large extension to an existing town;
- a community with a clear identity and attractive environment;
- it provides a mix of homes, including affordable and self-build;
- planned by local authorities or private sector in consultation with the local community.

1.3. As well as building new homes, the communities will develop:

- job opportunities
- attractive green space and public realm areas
- transport infrastructure, including roads, buses and cycle routes
- community infrastructure, schools, community and health centres
- a plan for long-term stewardship of community assets

1.4. Garden Communities champion 'best practice', well planned and designed settlements. This work is supported, by MHCLG capacity and revenue funding.

1.5. This report aims to highlight key areas of work that have been progressed since the last SDB update.

2. Garden Town Capital Funding

2.1. As Board members will be aware, during 2014/15 Bicester was identified as a Garden Town by MHCLG. With this, MHCLG provided an allocation of both capital and revenue funding to support the sustained growth of the Town. In total £19m capital

was identified for Bicester, subject to the submission of a business case justifying the spend.

- 2.2. In 2017 agreement was reached with MHCLG to pay £4.25m to Cherwell to pay Network Rail part of a 'shared value' payment to enable the rail bridge to be built at NW Bicester. This funding is no longer required for the 'shared value' payment and subsequently negotiations between CDC, OCC and MHCLG are ongoing to agree if this money could now be reallocated elsewhere in Bicester.
- 2.3. As will be reported during this SDB, the NW Bicester Railway bridge and underpass scheme remain on programme to be delivered during 2021.
- 2.4. During April 2018 a business case was submitted to undertaking three further highway schemes:
 - Pioneer Roundabout;
 - Ploughley Road junction;
 - Banbury Road roundabout.
- 2.5. The delivery of these schemes will enable the acceleration of housing delivery within Bicester.
- 2.6. Despite the impact of COVID-19 restriction during 2020 / 21, progress has been made on all three schemes.
- 2.7. MHCLG is working in partnership with CDC to ensure the delivery of the second tranche of funding in a timely manner and discussions continue to facilitate this.
- 2.8. The Board will recall that OCC will deliver both Ploughley Road junction and Banbury Road roundabout and that the Graven Hill Village Development Company (GHVDC) will deliver Pioneer Roundabout.
- 2.9. Grant agreements have now been finalised with OCC (Banbury Road and Ploughley Road) and with GHVDC (Pioneer Roundabout) to ensure CDC can transfer funds for the delivery of the infrastructure.
- 2.10. Good progress is being made on all capital projects however tighter programme regime have been introduced.
- 2.11. As a critical part this, the SDB Review has been concluded which will, subject to Board approval on 18 March 2021, provide greater scrutiny and programme discipline moving forward.
- 2.12. Finally, the Board will recall that a further bid for Capacity funding was submitted to MHCLG during September 2020, to enable further work by the BDT which will help set the conditions for the delivery of new homes within Bicester. MHCLG has confirmed that the result of this bid will be officially announced on 25 March 2021.

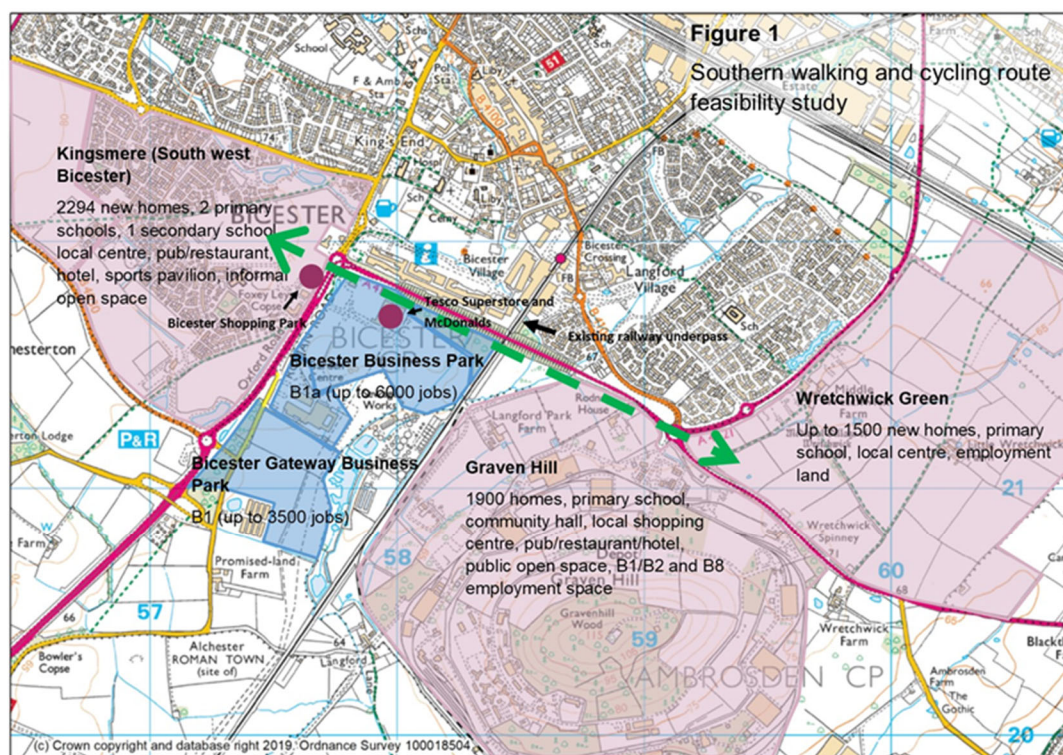
3. Bicester Air Quality Management Area

- 3.1. Funding was secured through the Healthy New Town programme to undertake an innovation project to design and implement a planting scheme to reduce the impacts of poor air quality in the town's Air Quality Management Area.
- 3.2. The first phase of this project has been to appoint Landscape Architects to develop options for the area. After a formal procurement process local firm Applied Landscape Design, a local company, were successful.
- 3.3. Applied Landscape Design have prepared a planting design scheme which has been circulated to key stakeholders for initial comments. The design includes a planting scheme the King's End/Middleton Stoney Road junction where deficiencies in pavement width and current provision for pedestrian desire lines have been identified.
- 3.4. A wider improvement scheme has been proposed and developed with OCC which would address these issues alongside the provision of continuous cycle route connectivity with the existing Queen's Avenue cycle route. Funding has been sought by the County Council as part of the Tranche 2 Active Travel Fund the outcome of which is imminent.
- 3.5. Should funding be secured the environmental planting scheme will integrate with these improvements. Whilst the project has been delayed by the footpath issues as well as Covid 19, issues should be resolved in the near future. Final draft schemes are currently being prepared.
- 3.6. BBOWT have indicated that they will be available to assist with this project to work in partnership within the local community (primarily the West Bicester area), either as part of Wild Bicester or as a separate piece of work, in terms of long term maintenance or custodianship of the newly planted areas.

4. Southern Connectivity in the Town for Walking and Cycling

- 4.1. Consultants EAS were appointed in April to undertake a detailed feasibility study to understand the available options for the creation of a new pedestrian and cycle route to address the gap in the network that exists on the A41 between the roundabout junction with London Road and the roundabout junction with Oxford Road.
- 4.2. There is an overgrown segregated route to the north of the carriageway from Oxford Road ending at the railway bridge and a further existing section of route running roughly east-west from the Talisman road roundabout.
- 4.3. The railway represents a key barrier to overcome to join these routes together and to connect to London Road where a S106 funded route is being progressed by OCC.

4.4. A business clearance process is currently being progressed with Network Rail and once the outcome of this is known, EAS will be able to complete their work and carry out a safety audit, to enable the work with Network Rail to continue to the next stage.



5. Access to the Countryside Project

5.1. The Adopted Cherwell Local Plan sets out the following policy commitment:

“Policy Bicester 7: Meeting the Need for Open Space, Sport and Recreation As part of measures to address current and future deficiencies in open space, sport and recreation provision in the town we will:

“Seek to establish an urban edge park around the outskirts of the town, by protecting the existing network of green spaces and securing new open space and linear route provision linked with public footpaths/cycleways, to create a circular route with connections to the town centre and the countryside beyond”

5.2. With respect to this policy objective and the wider need to achieve modal shift to active modes this project identifies the following aims:

“To provide safe and attractive walking and cycling routes between Bicester and the villages within the immediately surrounding area to provide for both leisure and utility trips by these modes.”

- 5.3. To enhance opportunities for recreation and exercise with the creation of circular walking and cycling routes which readily connects with the Bicester urban area negating the need for an initial journey by motorised means.
- 5.4. The consultant, EAS, has completed all site work now having walked/cycled each potential route, making additional visits where required.
- 5.5. EAS currently preparing betterment drawings and proposals for the scoped areas for CDC feedback ahead of the final options report.

6. Town Centre and Market Square

- 6.1. A “Town Centre Task Group” formed following an event with retail guru Bill Grimsey in June 2019. The group reported back on its work in November 2020, presenting an outline plan for reimagining Bicester’s town centre for the 21st century. Feedback received from this meeting has highlighted the importance of Market Square in providing connectivity with Sheep Street, Crown Walk, Deans Court and also as a focal point when accessing the town centre from the south, Bicester Village and Bicester Gateway (being large visitor attractors). It also has the potential to provide space for events and activities.
- 6.2. CDC officers and OCC have been working closely together to produce an options appraisal. An invite-to-tender (ITT) is currently live, for pre-design stage work with an external supplier, and will close on 18th March.
- 6.3. Some funding is held by OCC to implement a scheme, but it is unlikely to be sufficient on its own to fulfil all aspirations. Garden Town funding provides the opportunity to work with the winning tenderer to the ITT as discussed in 6.2, to review the previous design to alter market square and explore the opportunities to create a destination space within the town centre, bringing in the views, aspirations and expertise of the Town Centre Task Group that CDC are also a part of.
- 6.4. The town centre work has good synergy with a number of other programmes of work, such as the ‘*Meanwhile in Oxfordshire*’ project (utilising Renaissance Funding) to transition empty retail units back into use, ‘*Reopening High Streets Safely Fund*’ which will deliver up to five projects for Bicester, and the ‘*Contain Outbreak Management Funding*’, for which project ideas are currently being progressed.

7. Wild Bicester Project

7.1. Wild Bicester is a new partnership project between Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust and CDC. Bicester Town Council is also a key partner - as they own much of the land which the projects will take part on.

7.2. Good progress has now been made.

7.3. Funded through Cherwell's Community Nature Project, Healthy Place Shaping and Bicester Garden Town. It is an 18 month programme, costing £31,500. After 18 months, it is hoped a sustainable model is established so the project can run on its own (as with Wild Banbury).

7.4. Wild Bicester is designed to improve the overall biodiversity in Bicester as well as promoting the health and wellbeing of those involved through participation in the events/activities.

7.5. BBOWT will work with the local community to enable residents to improve spaces for wildlife whilst highlighting to local people the impact that nature-based interventions can have on their lives and wellbeing. BBOWT empowers local communities to improve space for wildlife and help people connect with local wildlife on a hyper local scale which in turn has a positive impact on the wellbeing of the individuals and the community.

7.6. Outcomes

- Increased skills, knowledge and confidence of local people about wildlife
- Increased nature connectedness for Bicester residents
- More spaces for nature in Bicester
- Improved wellbeing for Bicester community

7.7. Ed Munday, the Community Wildlife Officer will work in Bicester for two and a half days per week for 18 months and will be responsible for working with the wider community to promote the Wild Streets and Neighbourhoods, events and activities and work with BTC and CDC as part of the Wilder Spaces part of the project. Kate Sheard, Community Wildlife Manager (Volunteering) is responsible for the community group network and upskilling, and will work with groups to create bespoke training and support system as required by Bicester groups

7.8. Wild Bicester now has a portal on the BBOWT website:

<https://www.bbowt.org.uk/wild-bicester>.

7.9. Early engagement with a number of organisations has been encouraging, and a comms plan with ideas for the public to learn more and engage with nature will launch in the Spring. It will highlight national campaigns and offer practical solutions for people to try in their own gardens.

8. SPARK Funding/Community Engagement

8.1. SPARK funding is provided for community groups in Bicester jointly funded by Garden Town and Healthy Bicester. Grants are available up to £1,000 to support programmes of work in Bicester and surrounding villages that satisfy one or more of the SPARK funding priorities. The budget remaining is currently just over £10,00.00.

8.2. Priorities:

- Bringing new uses to or improving the town centre as the vibrant heart of Bicester
- Supporting the greater understanding of Bicester's heritage
- Improving opportunities for walking and cycling within Bicester
- Improving access to green spaces and opportunities for food growing or enhancing green spaces or bio-diversity
- Increasing opportunities for participation and reducing social isolation
- Improved health and wellbeing for residents

8.3. Successful applications have included gardening projects, arts and music projects and bike projects. Further promotion of the funding will be publicised at the next Healthy Bicester Stakeholders' Meeting in April and through the Bicester Voluntary Forum which will meet in May. Ongoing officer support to community groups in Bicester is facilitated on a regular basis through the Bicester Forum and wider Cherwell Voluntary Forum network, in association with colleagues in Community Services.

9. Conclusion

9.1. In conclusion, despite the difficulties of COVID-19 pandemic upon the team and the pressure that has put on the Garden Town programme, work continues at pace, to support the delivery of the Garden Town objectives. The BDT is working on a full spectrum delivery of the Garden Town programme providing an exceptional environment to work, live and play.

9.2. The BDT has proven to be agile and innovative, remaining focused on the delivery of the Garden Town commitments and helping to set the conditions for the delivery of new homes within Bicester

9.3. The significant provision of capital funding for infrastructure is supporting the delivery of strategic objectives, whilst capacity funding is helping deliver place shaping initiatives including active travel initiatives.

9.4. The BDT is working with a variety of critical stakeholders and partners to ensure successful outcomes for our communities within Bicester.

9.5. Moving forward there will be Greater focus on the delivery of the Garden Town programme to ensure timely delivery, as set out within the SDB Review and we will ensure that Bicester remains a national exemplar for Garden Communities.