

Cabinet report



Report of Head of Partnership and Insight

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Wards affected: All wards within the Didcot Garden Town "Area of Influence": Cholsey, Didcot North East, Didcot South, Didcot West, Sandford and the Wittenhams wards in South Oxfordshire. Blewbury and Harwell, Drayton, Hendreds, Steventon and the Hanneys, Sutton Courtenay, wards in the Vale of White Horse.

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To: CABINET

DATE: 12 July 2019

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To: CABINET

DATE: August 2019

Didcot Garden Town Governance

Recommendations

That Cabinet:

- (a) Approves operating guidelines and terms of reference for the Didcot Garden Town Advisory Board and sounding boards as shown in Appendix 2.
- (b) Agrees to name the nominated Didcot Garden Town Board as "Didcot Garden Town Advisory Board".
- (c) Reviews the expenditure plan for £544,487 in unspent, previously allocated capacity funding to support staff costs and project implementation as shown in Appendix 3.
- (d) Recommends that South Oxfordshire District Council approve the principle of the expenditure plan for approximately £615,500 of £781,000 in unallocated capacity funding to support staff costs and project implementation as shown in Appendix 3.
- (e) Recommends that Vale of White Horse District Council approve the principle of the expenditure plan for approximately £165,500 of £781,000 in unallocated capacity funding to support staff costs and project implementation as shown in Appendix 3.
- (f) Recommends that South Oxfordshire District Council approve the principle of a revised expenditure plan for approximately £123,914 in previously allocated growth point funding to support project implementation as shown in Appendix 3.
- (g) Agrees the prioritisation of Didcot Garden Town Delivery Plan projects as shown in Appendix 4.
- (h) Delegates authority to apply for future funding opportunities that directly align with the Didcot Garden Town Delivery Plan as appropriate.

Purpose of the report

1. The purpose of this report is to seek agreement on various actions to support project delivery of the Didcot Garden Town Delivery Plan (“Delivery Plan”), including governance structure, a proposed budget and priorities for project delivery.

Strategic Objectives

2. South Oxfordshire District Council’s corporate plan 2016-2020 sets out the strategic objective to “unlock the potential of Didcot” and the corporate priority to “create welcoming green neighbourhoods throughout the residential and business quarters”. The Vale of White Horse District Council’s corporate plan 2016-2020 sets out the strategic objectives to support “housing and infrastructure” and promote “sustainable communities and wellbeing”.

Background

3. South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse district councils approved various actions related to Didcot Garden Town on 5 and 6 October 2017. One of the actions was to approve the Delivery Plan and its vision for sustainable growth to deliver 15,000 homes and 20,000 jobs by 2031. The Delivery Plan lists over 60 projects that will contribute to implementation of the strategic plan and provides high-level estimates of their cost.
4. The vision statement of the Delivery Plan is: “*Oxfordshire’s gateway to future science, applied technology and vibrant communities*”. This vision acknowledges the importance of Science Vale, home to a high concentration of enterprise and innovation in the advanced engineering and manufacturing, energy, life sciences and space sectors. The emerging Oxfordshire Local Industrial Strategy leverages the Science Vale and Didcot Garden Town to promote innovation and economic prosperity in the region in partnership with South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse.
5. To achieve the Didcot Garden Town vision, a project delivery team is working to implement key concepts put forward in the Delivery Plan. These include connected green space, cultural communities, inspired green living and a network of public transportation, cycling and walking links to key employers at Culham Science Centre, Harwell Campus and Milton Park.
6. Project delivery staff includes the following full-time positions: Didcot Garden Town Project Manager, Project Officer and Oxfordshire County Council Principal Transportation Planner. In addition, part time positions include: Sr. Communications Officer, Administrative Officer and Public Art Officer. Additional needs are for urban design, events and graphics support.
7. In October 2017, cabinet approved forming a Didcot Garden Town Board (“Board”) to guide implementation of the Delivery Plan. As part of the approval, it was envisioned that working sub-groups would report to the Board. It was agreed that sub-groups would be governed by a set of operating guidelines similar to the model set out in appendix 2 of the October 2017 cabinet papers.
8. Since the October 2017 approval, the Board has met to further discuss governance. The Board has now recommended a simplified version of operating guidelines that more closely reflect their advisory role and typical of other garden communities. For example, Bicester Garden Town and the North Essex garden settlements have

extremely simple, somewhat informal governance structures. Appendix 1 shows the previously approved governance structure and the newly proposed governance structure for comparison.

9. The Board suggested that “sounding boards” replace sub-groups. At least three sounding boards are proposed: residents, parish councils and business. The purpose of the sounding boards is to provide comments, insight and advice about ongoing work to implement the Delivery Plan. Didcot Garden Town project delivery staff would facilitate at least two sounding board meetings per year and report meeting content to the Board. Terms of reference proposed for the Board and the sounding boards are shown in Appendix 2.
10. In addition to operating guidelines, the revised name: Didcot Garden Town Advisory Board has been agreed by the Board as being more reflective of their role.
11. Grant funding for Didcot Garden Town was received between 2013 and 2018 from the Department of Communities and Local Government (now Homes England). South Oxfordshire District Council received £1,984,000 and the Vale of White Horse District Council received £1,534,000. The total amount of revenue received by both district councils is £3,518,000.
12. The grant funding is to be used to build capacity for Didcot Garden Town (capacity funding). Capacity funding has paid for staff salaries and consultant fees to support preparation of the Delivery Plan and studies, to conduct community engagement, public consultation and support project work. The funding was received under an S31 agreement and cannot be used to support capital projects.
13. Of the funding total, £2,737,000 revenue was allocated for expenditure and the unspent balance is £544,487. This balance was carried forward in the budgets for South and Vale for expenditure in 2019/2020. The expenditure plan is shown in Appendix 3.
14. Unallocated funding in the amount of £781,000 is recommended for allocation and expenditure as shown in Appendix 3. The allocation and expenditure of this funding must be made by the full Council. It is anticipated that Council will hear the matter in their first regular meeting scheduled for July 2019.
15. Government funding was received between 2008 and 2015 through their New Growth Points (“NGP”) programme to support growth in Didcot. South Oxfordshire District Council allocated £175,000 in NGP revenue in their 2015/2016 budget for procuring a development partner and paying related costs for land assembly for Didcot town centre development. A balance of £123,914 remains unspent. Other funding has been identified to develop the Gateway site in Didcot and Orchard Centre development work is complete. Unspent revenue can only be used for this programme.
16. A revised expenditure plan is being recommended for the £123,914 in revenue from NGP funding. The new expenditure plan is shown in Appendix 3. The allocation and expenditure of this funding must be made by the full Council. It is anticipated that Council will hear the matter in their first regular meeting scheduled for July 2019.
17. The Didcot Garden Town Delivery Plan recommends 64 projects for implementation, with six projects completed to date. Completed projects include preparation of the Delivery Plan, public consultation, re-construction of the Backhill Lane pedestrian

tunnel to Milton Park and a district heating feasibility study and various administrative actions.

18. The Board has agreed project priorities for the remaining projects, with emphasis on finalising the governance structure, transportation projects, a parking strategy, development of the Gateway project and near term and meanwhile projects. The nominated Didcot Garden Town Board requested that priority be given to a community engagement event which could be used to “launch” the sounding boards once governance is approved. The proposed budget aligns with these priorities and is recommended to be used to continue supporting staff, consultants and community engagement work to advance the implementation of the Delivery Plan. The complete project list is shown in Appendix 4.
19. It is anticipated that further revenue will be needed to extend staffing and project work beyond 2020-2021. The Delivery Plan estimates the timeline for completion as 2031.
20. Staff are currently working under secondment and fixed employment contracts. The project delivery staff will seek additional funding to continue working beyond that time from appropriate outside sources as opportunities arise.

Financial Implications

21. The funding proposals use grant revenue received from government including the Department of Communities and Local Government and Homes England to support Didcot Garden Town. The funding cannot be used for other purposes and the proposed budget does not commit the district councils to any further financial commitment. Therefore, there are no financial implications associated with the recommended approvals.
22. An expenditure plan for both allocated and unallocated remaining balances of grant revenue is shown in Appendix 3. The proposed expenditure plan and budgets align with the Didcot Garden Town Delivery Plan approved in October 2017.

Legal Implications

23. The Board will serve in an advisory role with no legal status. Each member may make recommendations to their representative organisation to take action on a matter that is under the jurisdiction of that organisation.
24. Any changes to the legal status of the Board will need to be agreed by all key stakeholders and their representative organisations.
25. The sounding boards will provide a forum for residents, parish councils and businesses with an interest in Didcot Garden Town. Sounding board participants may submit comments, provide insight and advise the project delivery staff. The sounding boards will be organised and facilitated by the project delivery staff.
26. Terms of reference have been reviewed by the legal team and advice has been incorporated into the final documents.

Risks

27. Capacity funding available to support Didcot Garden Town governance administration and project work is limited. Additional revenue will be needed within approximately two years to continue work to advance these activities. It is recommended that cabinet approve delegated authority to apply for funding to support the Delivery Plan to the chief executive and lead cabinet members as funding opportunities arise. This will mitigate the risk of a funding shortfall by giving the councils the autonomy to make decisions to pursue new funding opportunities that align with garden town principles in a flexible and responsive way.

Other Implications

28. Local involvement in the governance framework is important to make sure project priorities are agreed and the translation from strategy to project delivery is appropriate to the needs of stakeholders. Partnership working plays an important role in implementing the Delivery Plan with successful outcomes. Conversely, failure to work with stakeholders in an ongoing and transparent way may undermine the future chances of success and be reputationally damaging.

Conclusion

29. The simplified governance structure, proposed budget and project priorities are considered the best way to support the delivery of projects for Didcot Garden Town. The proposals reflect that housing and infrastructure projects are being largely implemented by outside partners and private land developers rather than by a Didcot Garden Town development corporation as originally envisioned.

Background Papers

- Appendix 1 - Original and new governance structures compared
- Appendix 2 - Proposed operations guidelines and terms of reference for Didcot Garden Town Advisory Board and sounding boards
- Appendix 3 – Proposed expenditure plan
- Appendix 4 - List of projects with priorities highlighted