

# Cabinet



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 district. Blewbury and Harwell, Drayton, Hendreds, Steventon and the Hanneys, Sutton Courtenay, wards in the Vale of White Horse district.

Cabinet member responsible: Cllr Judy Roberts

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To: CABINET

DATE: 3 February 2020

Cabinet member responsible: Cllr Sue Cooper

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To: CABINET

DATE: 30 January 2020

## Didcot Garden Town

### Recommendations

That the Joint Scrutiny Committee considers governance arrangements and project priorities for Didcot Garden Town before the decision for both Cabinets.

Recommendations to Cabinets are as follows:

- (a) Approve operating guidelines, terms of reference and revised governance for the Didcot Garden Town Advisory Board and sounding boards as shown in Appendix 2 and delegate authority to the Head of Partnership and Insight to make any minor amendments.
- (b) Agree to name the nominated Didcot Garden Town Board as "Didcot Garden Town Advisory Board".
- (c) Agree the Didcot Garden Town Delivery Plan project priorities as listed in section 22 to 25.
- (d) Delegate authority to the Head of Partnership and Insight to apply for future funding opportunities that directly align with the Didcot Garden Town Delivery Plan as appropriate.

## Purpose of Report

1. To request that Cabinet consider recommendations for Didcot Garden Town including an updated governance structure and priorities for project delivery.
2. To provide information about activities following recommendations made by the Vale Cabinet on 12 July 2019.
3. To provide information about the discussion of the governance model and project priorities by the Joint Scrutiny Committee held on 16 January 2020.

## Strategic Objectives

4. South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils approved the Didcot Garden Town Delivery Plan on 5 and 6 October 2017. The vision for the plan is: *“Oxfordshire’s gateway to future science, applied technology and vibrant communities”*. Sustainability lies at the heart of this vision with strategies that include fantastic green space, connected and cultural communities and visionary science and advanced technologies.

## Background

5. 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.
6. 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.
7. 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.
8. Project delivery staff includes the following full-time positions: Didcot Garden Town (DGT) 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.
9. 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 a model set out in appendix 2 of the October 2017 cabinet papers.

10. Since the October 2017 approval, a nominated Board has met to further discuss governance. The nominated Board recommended a simplified version of operating guidelines that more closely reflects 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.
11. The nominated 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.
12. In addition to operating guidelines, the revised name: ‘Didcot Garden Town Advisory Board’ (DGTAB) has been proposed by the nominated Board as being more reflective of their role.
13. The Vale of White Horse District Council Cabinet (“Cabinet”) considered approval of the governance model recommended by the nominated Board on 12 July 2019. The Cabinet expressed concern at the lack of community engagement on new governance proposals. Cabinet deferred consideration of the actions to allow the Joint Scrutiny Committee to consider them and comment back to Cabinet.
14. A representative of Sutton Courtenay Parish Council gave public comment at the 12 July 2019 Cabinet meeting stating that they were fully supportive of the project. Sutton Courtenay recommended an amendment to the governance model to include a representative from Sutton Courtenay Parish Council on the new DGTAB.
15. Sutton Courtenay Parish Council first wrote to the Didcot Garden Town staff with the request for a seat on the DGTAB in January 2019. The nominated Board considered the letter and staff responded that the best way for Parish Councils to participate is through the Sounding Boards. Correspondence was received from Sutton Courtenay on 20 March 2019 with the same request for a seat on the Advisory Board. On 12 September 2019 Sutton Courtenay Parish Council wrote to ask that their statement to Cabinet be included in the report to the Joint Scrutiny Committee and a representative spoke at the 16 January 2020 meeting.
16. A total of five parish councils are located partially within the Didcot Garden Town boundary. They are: Appleford-on-Thames, East Hagbourne, Harwell, Milton and Sutton Courtenay. Didcot is located entirely within the DGT boundary. The public statement by Sutton Courtenay and a map of all parish councils located within the DGT boundary are shown in Appendix 2.
17. One additional seat has been added to the proposed DGTAB structure in consideration of the request to provide a seat to enhance parish council participation. A revised set of operations guidelines and terms of reference have been updated accordingly. The representative would be elected by the Parish Council Sounding Board annually. The parish council representative on the DGTAB would not consider Didcot Town Council as a candidate for this seat because Didcot Town Council already has a seat on the Board. Updated terms of reference proposed for the DGTAB and the sounding boards are shown in Appendix 2.

18. On 5 December 2019 all 18 town and parish councils were notified that Didcot Garden Town matters would be discussed at the 16 January 2020 Joint Scrutiny Committee meeting.
19. On 12 July 2019, the Vale Cabinet requested additional community engagement that would include outreach to a wide variety of people, businesses and local parish councils. Ongoing and inclusive community engagement is a key strategy put forward by the DGT delivery plan. Staff will prepare a community engagement plan following approval of governance. The plan will consider the sounding boards for residents, parish councils and businesses as an ongoing engagement strategy along with other avenues for reaching more vulnerable populations.
20. From August 2019, a community survey was offered as part of a process to sign up to receive information about Didcot Garden Town. Survey results show that roads, transport, cycling and walking, open space, community space and housing are the top six priorities of the 261 respondents. Community engagement activities since the Vale Cabinet meeting are shown in Appendix 4.
21. 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, Orchard Centre Phase 2, public art projects, a district heating feasibility study and various administrative actions.
22. The 64 projects defined in the delivery plan are segregated into near, medium and long- term projects. Nine early priority projects include both town-wide and place-based strategies. Town-wide strategies include a cycling network, a public spaces and culture strategy, conference festival and wayfinding to help people find key destinations. Site-specific early priority projects are: gateway spine, cultural spine, community hub, connectivity hub, and the garden line.
23. Projects may move forward for delivery as there are opportunities for funding, project partners, development activity and other strategic factors. Staff considers which projects best meet the criteria for funding applications when applying for grants. Therefore, project priorities are sometimes influenced by a range of factors.
24. The nominated Board has agreed project priorities 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 Board specifically requested that priority be given to a community engagement event which could be used to “launch” the sounding boards once governance is approved.
25. In August 2019 staff responded to an invitation to bid for 2019-20 Homes England garden communities funding with a request of up to £959,500. The bid included the following project priorities: studies related to public transport and the cycling network, housing delivery including elderly housing, innovative construction methods, capacity studies and third-party delivery tools. On 14 January 2020 informal confirmation was received that Didcot Garden Town would be allocated an additional £100,000 in funding from Homes England. The best use of this new funding would need to be evaluated to see which of the projects can move forward with this funding amount.
26. The Cabinet papers for 12 July 2019 included various financial recommendations, which are not being made in this paper. Finance actions for Didcot Garden Town will be included in a future recommendation for South and Vale Council approval. Any

future paper on finance will include a recommendation to accept Homes England funding following official notice being received by South and Vale.

27. A proposed timeline for approval of DGT recommendations is shown in Appendix 5.

## **Financial Implications**

28. There are no financial implications for this report. Didcot Garden Town is funded with grant revenue received from government including the Department of Communities and Local Government (now the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Governments) and Homes England. The funding cannot be used for any other purpose.

## **Legal Implications**

29. The governance model approved along with the delivery plan in October 2017 is considered unviable. The model must either be replaced with a viable model or a decision should be taken that a governance model is not needed to oversee the implementation of Didcot Garden Town.

30. The nominated Board is considered temporary until approved by the Cabinets of South and Vale.

31. The DGTAB and sounding boards need approved operating guidelines and terms of reference to meet over the long term.

32. The DGTAB 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.

33. Any changes to the legal status of the DGTAB will need to be agreed by all key stakeholders and their representative organisations.

34. 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.

35. Terms of reference have been reviewed by the legal team and advice has been incorporated into the final documents.

## **Risks**

36. The nominated Board meetings are not currently open to the public which may cause a public perception of lack of transparency. Approving a governance model to replace the unviable model set forth in the delivery plan would increase the flow of public information.

37. Homes England awarded Didcot Garden Town revenue funding grants in past years to support the programme and a portion of the money has not been brought forward into the budget for expenditure. Homes England may not award additional grant funding without clear progress in spending past grant funds.

38. Didcot Garden Town operates using external revenue funding, largely from Homes England. Funding has been awarded based on project priorities put forward by DGT

staff at the time of the grant bid. If project priorities shift without clear rationale Didcot Garden Town may suffer a reputational loss with Homes England.

39. There is a risk that community engagement on governance and project priorities will be overshadowed by community concerns related to South Oxfordshire's Local Plan and the status of the £218m award from the Housing Infrastructure Fund. Ongoing community engagement through the sounding boards will allow for open discussion of a variety of topics as a matter of routine and replace one-time public consultations as a method of engagement.
40. 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, in consultation with 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**

41. The nominated Board is an advisory board made up of agency partners with oversight of projects and budgets that contribute to Didcot Garden Town's development. They include Homes England, Oxfordshire County Council, the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership and Didcot Town Council. Following the 2019 elections in South and Vale, the nominated Board has been reviewed to confirm it is a good working model.
42. Sutton Courtenay Parish Council has requested a seat on the DGTAB because they are partially located inside the boundary for Didcot Garden Town. Five parish councils are located partially within the boundary. If a seat is offered to Sutton Courtenay, it follows that a seat should also be offered to Appleford, East Hagbourne, Harwell and Milton to be consistent with decision making. Didcot Town Council is located entirely within the Didcot Garden Town boundary and has a seat on the nominated DGTAB.
43. The proposed structure of the DGTAB has been updated to add one seat for a parish council representative who is elected by the Parish Council Sounding Board. The representative would be selected from the 17 parish councils that are located within either the Didcot Garden Town or Area of Influence boundaries. A recommendation was made on 16 January 2020 by the Joint Scrutiny Committee for the Parish Council representative to be selected from among the five parish councils that sit within the Didcot Garden Town boundary rather than being selected from among the 17 parish councils on the Sounding Board.

## **Conclusion**

44. The simplified governance structure 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.
45. Didcot Garden Town is a long-term strategy. A flexible approach will ensure success over time. Some ideas in the delivery plan may not be workable as envisioned, such as the governance model. Recommended actions in the Cabinet papers are intended to

progress near term and early priority projects such as governance, community engagement, meanwhile uses and social infrastructure. Recommendations consider the current context and can be updated as the situation changes.

## **Background Papers**

- Vale Cabinet paper and minutes 12 July 2019:  
<http://democratic.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=507&MId=2654&Ver=4>
- 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 – Statement by Sutton Courtenay Parish Council read at 12 July 2019 Vale cabinet meeting
- Appendix 4 – Community Engagement Summary
- Appendix 5 – Proposed timeline for approvals