

ANNUAL REPORT. BICESTER VISION. CHAIRMAN'S REPORT.

The past twelve months has been perhaps the most challenging that the people of Bicester have ever known – and promises to have been the base for perhaps the most important period of its growth since Roman times.

The challenges such as dealing with Government Ministers and civil servants in order to see off the major threat to our town from Weston Otmoor have been tempered with much good news such as the promise of Government investment for the town through the proposed Eco project to the north west of the town, the huge investment planned by Chiltern Railways, the final sign-off for the commencement of our town centre with Sainsbury's, Cherwell District Council and Stockdale, and the planned start by Countryside Properties in the south west of Bicester.

It is also encouraging that through the efforts of Vision we have sourced and secured, with agreement from County and District, £1 million for Market Square improvements. What is equally heartening on the latter is that there is clear support for one of the options, following a comprehensive public consultation exercise.

Bicester, during the past 12 months, has become a major focus of attention as witnessed at our autumn Bicester summit, which Vision jointly hosted with Cherwell District Council. Not only did we have a Government Minister attending a working breakfast with leaders of our business community – and a major speech (with the promise of special funding for Bicester) to follow, but we had a raft of high level civil servants presenting to us on matters of health, education, defence, transport and special planning.

At the same time success stories in our town have brought their problems. With around 4 million visitors a year coming to Bicester Village, using the same entrance and exit point to the severely crowded Tesco it has become apparent that new bolder and far reaching planning decisions have to be taken before long as to how we best deal with our growing traffic issues.

It is unacceptable when local people have to travel to Buckingham, Banbury, Aylesbury or Kidlington to do their shopping because some of our road network is gridlocked at weekends. Vision has been working hard with the reconstituted Traffic Advisory Committee to look at short, medium and long term solutions to those problems whilst recognising that Tesco may need to find another home. With over 60% of our population commuting to other destinations and perhaps only 50% or less using our shopping facilities it is vital that we look to change those ratios in the future.

Bicester retailers, must I believe, do much more to help themselves. A tiny proportion belong to our town chamber, and few are showing leadership to tackle the need for some joint marketing at a time when the town centre will be partially disrupted during the rebuilding of our town centre over the next 18 months. Vision is working with the Chamber and a range of other organisations to continually raise the profile of our town, its offer to visitors and residents alike and above all to give as much support to our businesses with a number of well worked initiatives – more of which can be found in the report by Rachel, our Partnership Manager.

I would like to pay particular tribute to the continued hosting of the post of partnership manager by Cherwell District Council and to the way that officers and councillors from all three tiers of local government have worked very well together in supporting the key aims and objectives of Vision. It has not been an easy road as often; we in the private sector have a different way of getting things done. At times the process is frustratingly slow but we get there in the end.

In these times of economic recession our businesses have had a particularly challenging time but we have been there for them wherever possible and one of our key areas of attention this year is to ensure that we do all we can to encourage our local population that it is “business as usual” in Bicester while our new supermarket, multiplex cinema, new shops, restaurants and multi storey car park are added to the range of facilities which also include the refurbished and extended Leisure Centre which reopened a few months ago.

There are a number of clear priorities which have surfaced over the past six months and they will continue to be our focus of attention for the remainder of this year. The Partnership Board has continued to give us full backing and they have made it clear where they believe our priorities lie.

Dealing with the ramifications of the new town centre is at the top of the list, together with traffic, education and skills issues. There are issues around better use of The Courtyard which originally received a chunk of Lottery funding and coupled with this a much wider vision for how we can help our young people as they are the future of our town. We need to look at creating more skilled jobs in the town as we are still a low skill economy. Currently 66% of Bicester's population is of working age and 87% of that proportion is economically active. Interestingly a high proportion of people working in the professions and management tend to live in the rural hinterland. Those surrounding villages must not be forgotten in our future plans – particularly is the new eco Bicester and new infrastructure commenced.

Finally a big thank you to our partners and board members, without whose support Vision could not continue its work. We are just coming to the end of the second of the three year funding programme, but I do hope that all our 20 plus partners will continue their funding support in these difficult times and ensure that Rachel, our partnership manager, who has done a sterling job this past year, often at stressful times, can continue her work during a critical two to five year period of the town's growth.

Bob Langton
Chairman
Bicester Vision.