

Lessons from The Lexicon in Bracknell: Town centre regeneration for the 21st century

Bracknell's award-winning Lexicon development is in the spotlight as the focus of new research from Henley Business School into how to successfully regenerate a town centre.

Researchers from Henley's Real Estate and Planning department have produced a report which draws on first-hand accounts of the regeneration from key players involved, as well as existing records and notes published throughout the project's lifetime.

Called 'The Lexicon – Making it Happen', the report gives the background to the development, and looks at the lessons that can be learned from it.

The Lexicon, a major new retail-led development which has regenerated a large part of Bracknell town centre, opened in September 2017, 20 years after Bracknell Forest Council established its priority to create a 'town fit for the 21st century'. In its first year more than 16million people visited the scheme which includes the luxury fashion store, Fenwick, as well as numerous high street retailers and restaurants. While the development has been seen as a successful example of urban transformation, it was not without its challenges – including technical, political and financial issues.

So how did it happen? And what lessons can be learned from Bracknell's regeneration?

Complexity, collaboration and having a clear vision

Partners were better able to deal with the complex nature of the scheme by working together collaboratively. Like many town centres, Bracknell was under multiple landownerships. Formation of the Bracknell Regeneration Partnership, a joint venture between two major landowners, Schrodgers and Legal and General, was a key factor in driving forward the project. Making the regeneration a cross-political priority by involving the leader of Bracknell Forest Council's opposition party was also an important step in facilitating a shared commitment to the scheme. Together these, and other measures outlined in the report, helped send the message that regenerating the town centre was a priority and provided a stable foundation upon which the council and investors could act.

It was also essential that there was a clear vision for the project. Producing a masterplan helped establish the core principles that would shape the more detailed design for The Lexicon. The master planning process was used to engage with investors, potential tenants, key decision makers and local businesses, as well as to re-engage with residents who had seen previous regeneration plans stall.

Designing a 21st century town centre

It was critical that the redeveloped town centre was fit for the needs of today's residents and businesses. Bracknell began life as one of the 'Mark One' New Towns created in the aftermath of the Second World War, but over the years the Modern style of architecture that characterised the town's design fell out of fashion, and its buildings and the surrounding public realm began to deteriorate. In 2013 it was voted the fourth ugliest town in England in a 'Crap Towns' poll, but less than five years later The Lexicon was winning major industry awards. The report looks at the planning and design process, including the production of a town centre masterplan, which aimed to ensure the regeneration would have wide appeal to a range of users.

Other factors which were central to the development's success and are covered in the report include the management of project risks such as those presented by the Global Financial Crisis, and how to plan for future stages of town centre regeneration.

Victor Nicholls, Lecturer at Henley Business School, former Assistant Chief Executive of Bracknell Forest Council and co-author of the report, said:

"This piece of research was a fitting conclusion to a period of over 17 years where the regeneration of Bracknell town centre was my primary focus. Putting this report together gave me the opportunity to stand back from a project in which I was closely involved, review the approach and celebrate its success. It is particularly appropriate that the research should be published on the 70th anniversary of the New Town. And it is a reminder that developing a community never stops, something that I'm sure the original development corporation would have agreed with."

Dr Emma Street, Associate Professor in Planning and Urban Governance at Henley Business School, and co-author of the report, said:

"What we want from our town centres is changing. Rapidly evolving consumer trends, new technologies and the rise of the so-called 'experience economy' are just some of the drivers of this change. Post-war New Towns such as Bracknell face particular pressures in meeting the needs of today's businesses, visitors and residents. Designed and built to cater to the standards and tastes of the 1940s, 50s and 60s, many New Towns are in urgent need of regeneration. Our research highlights the challenges that were involved in regenerating Bracknell town centre, as well as some of the lessons that can be drawn from how The Lexicon happened."

The report is being published to coincide with Bracknell's 70th anniversary celebrations this month.

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Notes to editors

A copy of the report is attached and images are available upon request.

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