The Lexicon
making it happen

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Where business comes to life

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FOREWORD

Delivering the comprehensive redevelopment of any town centre is complicated and difficult. Delivering the first substantial renewal of one of the UK's first-generation New Towns presented even more of a challenge. And then there was the Global Financial Crisis.

This guide tells the story of how Bracknell's town centre was transformed from a place that nobody wanted to visit into an award-winning, commercially successful destination of choice, and one of the biggest construction projects in the UK. It sets out how Bracknell Forest Council, Legal and General and Schroders worked together over many years to create a new social and cultural heart for the residents and businesses of the town, restoring pride and self confidence in commercial, cultural and architectural terms.

We each learned major lessons along the way which are set out here. We're delighted to introduce this guide in the hope that it will help others facing similar challenges.

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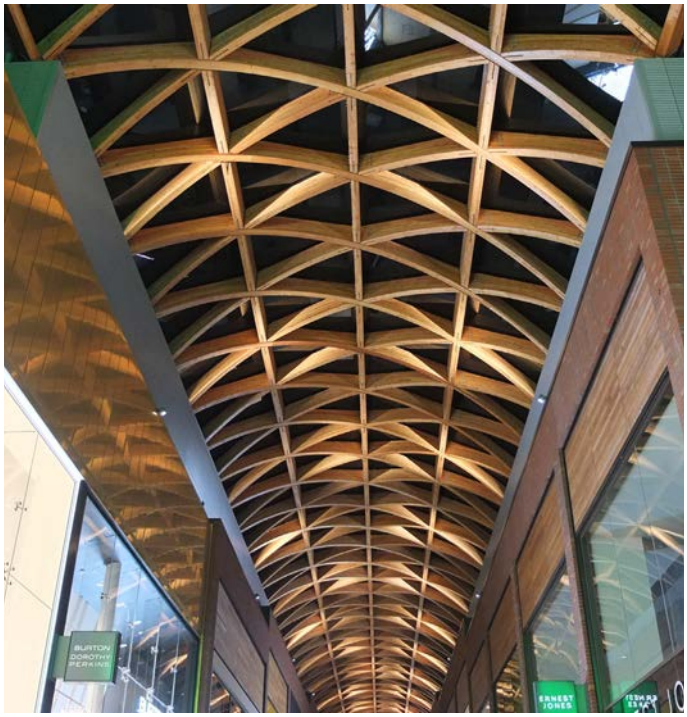
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

7 September 2017 saw the opening of The Lexicon, a major new retail-led regeneration scheme located in Bracknell town centre. In its first year, more than 16 million people visited the scheme. It has won major industry awards, including Revo's 'Development of the Year', and is the first regeneration of one of the UK's post-war New Town centres.

The Lexicon is located in Bracknell, 30 miles to the west of London. Home to 82,000 residents, Bracknell is the principal centre of Bracknell Forest Borough[1]. It is one of the 'Mark One' New Towns built post-World War Two, and was officially designated on 17 June 1949.

It was a long and often challenging road to the completion of The Lexicon. This report identifies several key lessons from this regeneration journey, including the importance of partnership working, risk-taking and of collaboration.



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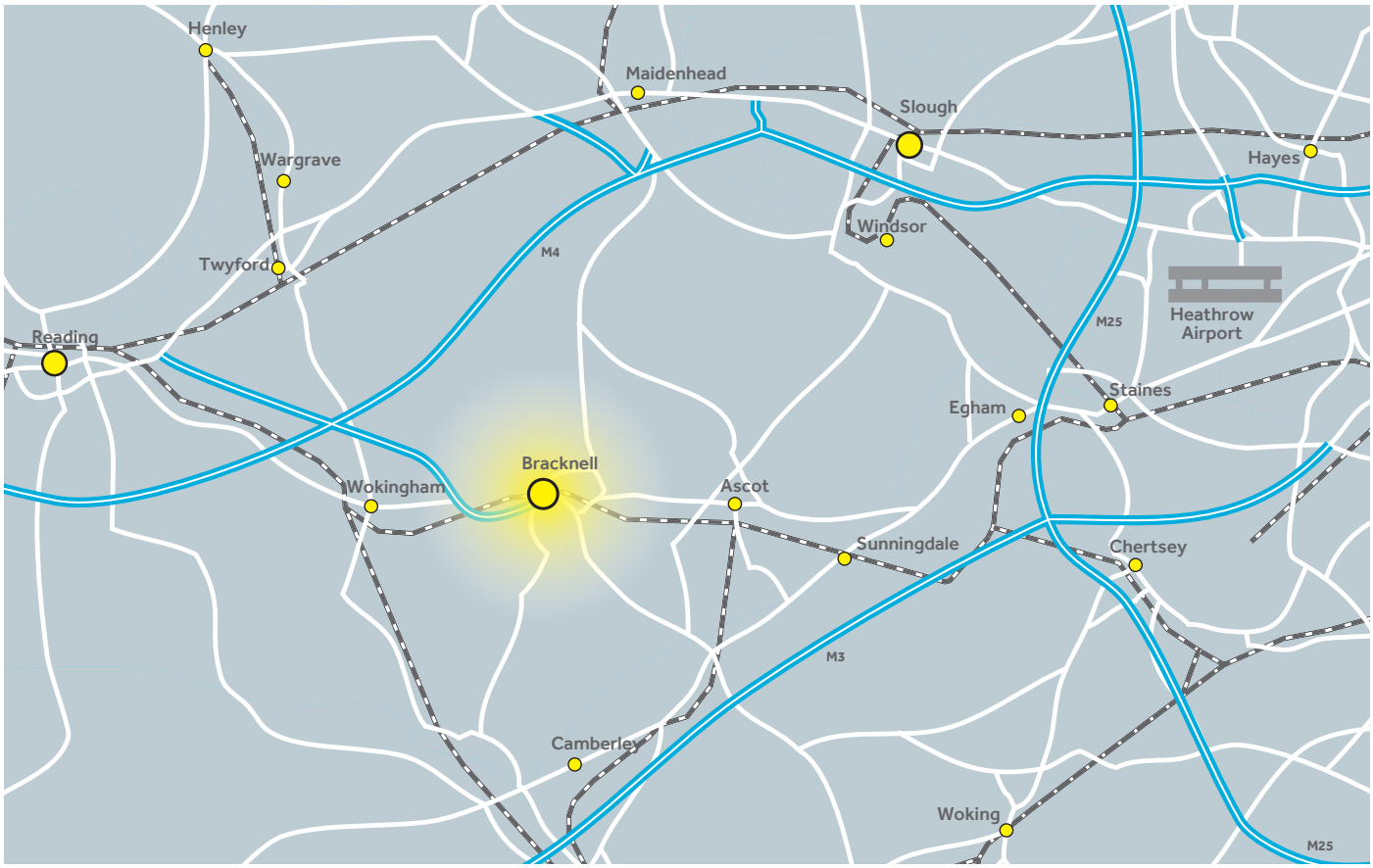
1 The population of Bracknell Forest Borough is 119,447 (BFC, 2017).

Top Braccan Walk **Bottom** The Avenue



Bracknell and environs

4,200 tonnes
of steel were used to build The Lexicon

600 workers built The Lexicon

2.4 km of hoarding surrounded the construction site

£240m
Total build cost

16m
Visitors in first year of opening

1,000,000 sq. ft.
of shopping and leisure under one ownership

AWARDS WON

REVO 2017 Re:new Award (December 2017)

REVO 2017 Best of the Best Award (December 2017)

2018 iESE Transformation Gold Award, Community Regeneration Category (March 2018)

2018 iESE Transformation Best of the Best Award (March 2018)

Thames Valley Property Awards 2018 – Development of the Year (May 2018)

REVO Purple Apple Marketing Awards 2018 – Strategic Marketing 'Winning Back Local Hearts and Minds' (May 2018)

RICS Awards South East – Regeneration Category (May 2019)

INTRODUCTION

The regeneration of Bracknell's town centre, culminating in the opening of The Lexicon, was more than 20 years in the making. The development has been seen as a successful example of urban transformation, but how did it happen? And what lessons can be learned?

This report tells the story of the town centre's regeneration, largely from the perspective of the local authority, setting out the main factors involved in successfully delivering the scheme. While some of these are specific to the scheme, others are more general and could hold valuable lessons for stakeholders looking to deliver regeneration in their areas. This includes those in other New Towns with town centres that are in decline and in need of regeneration.

A WORD ON THE NEW TOWNS

Bracknell was one of the original 'Mark One' New Towns created in the aftermath of World War Two to rehouse populations from existing urban centres including London. Delivered under the 1946 New Towns Act, the programme was extended into two further phases, resulting in 27 designated New Town settlements across the UK plus several 'expanded' (i.e. existing) towns.

New Towns were designed to offer residents a good quality of life with an emphasis on self-sufficiency including the provision of local employment opportunities. Typically, they featured extensive areas of green space and modern, spacious family housing and community facilities. While the success of the New Town model continues to be debated, the programme is nonetheless seen as one of the world's most ambitious town planning experiments. Today, around 2.8 million people live in the UK's New Towns[1].

Top left Broadway, 2013
Bottom left Eagle Lane, 2019
Below The Avenue. 2019

BRACKNELL'S REGENERATION: THE CHALLENGE

On 17 June 1949, the Minister of Town and Country Planning made an order designating as the site of a proposed New Town, "an area of land comprising approximately 1850 acres situated in the Rural District of Easthampstead in the administrative County of Berks". Accordingly, Bracknell 'New Town' came into being. The Development Corporation, charged with delivering Bracknell New Town, adopted the following motto, 'Home: Industry: Leisure'[2].

Bracknell's status as one of the Mark One New Towns presented particular contemporary regeneration challenges. The town centre was a planned development constructed, for the most part, over a relatively short period rather than one that evolved organically over decades. The architecture was heavily influenced by post-war trends based on Modern Movement principles, an architectural style that fell out of fashion in subsequent decades.

Perhaps more importantly, the physical structure of the buildings deteriorated at a uniform rate, presenting a substantial challenge for landowners and tenants. Retail units that were appropriate for the 1950s and 1960s were not able to meet the needs of modern operators. Buildings were expensive to reconfigure, limiting the options to refurbish and renovate.

Bracknell's road network also reflected the post-war 'engineering-led' approach to urban design. The town centre was contained within a ring road known as 'The Ring' which acted as a collar constraining further growth and limiting flexibility. This created an environment in which the private car dominated, making pedestrian movements difficult and unattractive. In short, the regeneration challenge associated with the town centre's public realm was significant.

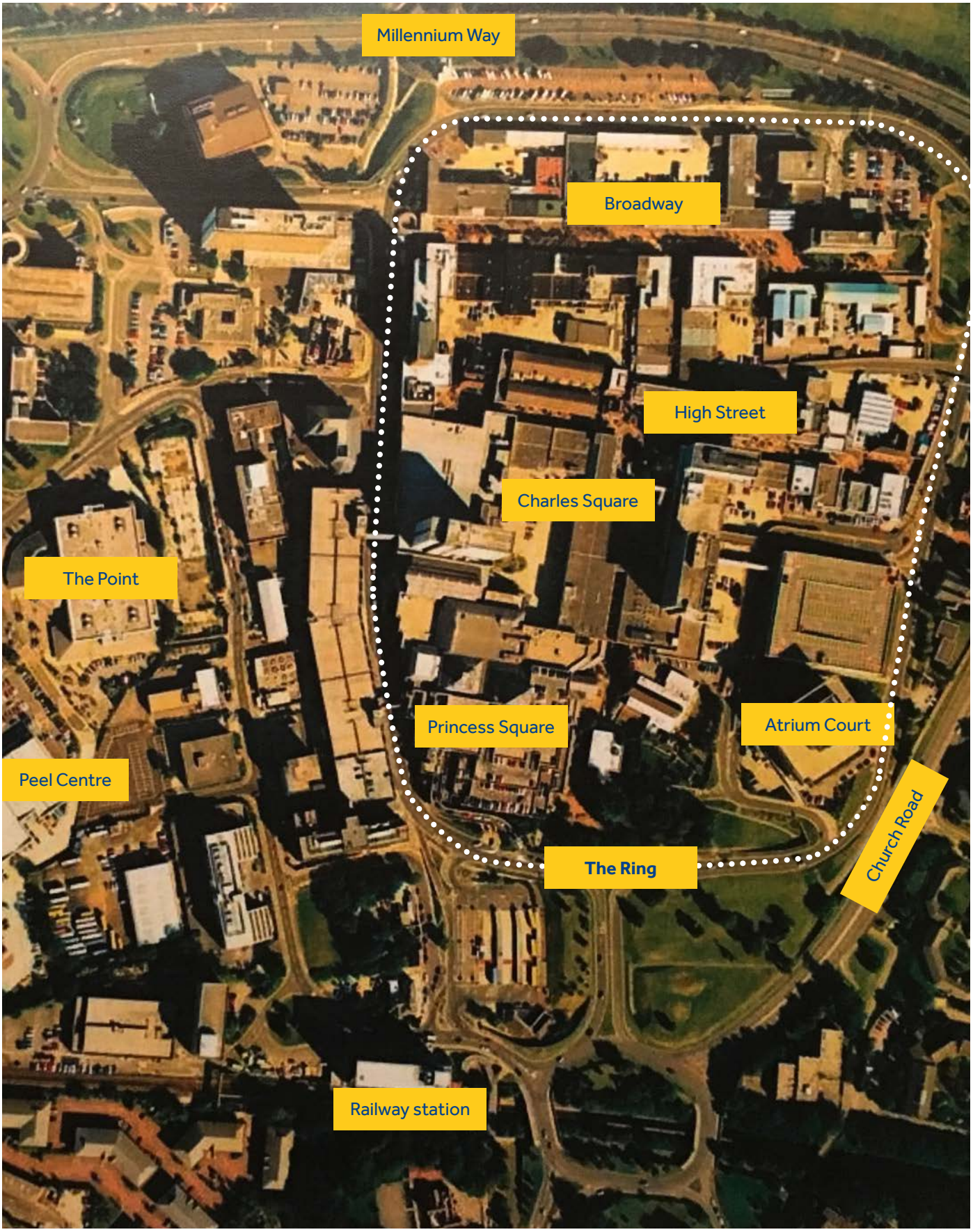
Until 2011, when a new Waitrose foodstore opened, the most recent town centre retail developments were completed in the 1980s. The Princess Square indoor mall-style shopping centre was completed in 1982. In 1986 a retail and leisure park including multi-screen cinema – now known as the Peel Centre – was added at Skimped Hill. In 1987 '100 Square' (now known as Atrium Court) was completed. This substantial office building was completed on the final site allocated for development within The Ring.

In the subsequent decade, several neighbouring town centres underwent major redevelopments providing competition for Bracknell. Camberley saw development at Main Square in the late 1980s while 'The Peacocks' in Woking opened in 1992. Other developments in Staines and Kingston added to the pressure on Bracknell, culminating in the opening of 'The Oracle', a major waterfront retail and leisure scheme in Reading town centre, in 1999.

In parallel, major regional and out-of-town shopping centres opened in the period including 'The Meadows' (also in Camberley) in 1988.

Ironically, while Bracknell's access to the strategic road and motorway network has given the town significant economic and locational advantages, it meant that potential shoppers were able to leave the town easily and visit surrounding centres. This was compounded by one of the highest rates of two+ car ownership households in the UK[3]. By 2001 80% of available comparison expenditure in the Bracknell retail catchment area was being lost to surrounding centres[4].

Left Broadway, 2013
Below Bracknell Town Centre, 2001



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BRACKNELL'S REGENERATION: THE OPPORTUNITY

While the town centre was struggling, the wider borough of Bracknell Forest was growing in strength as a business location, particularly for international firms in the knowledge sector who were attracted by Bracknell's excellent connections via road, rail and air, the presence of other technology firms, and the availability of skilled workers. The wider buoyancy of the Thames Valley Berkshire region, which developed substantially through the 1980s and 1990s, also played an important part in Bracknell's attractiveness to business.

By the 1990s, Bracknell Forest borough was dominated by firms associated with the 'knowledge economy', a trend that continued into the 2000s and beyond. Firms were overwhelmingly from international tech companies, including HP, Panasonic, Dell, 3M, General Electric, Fujitsu, Honeywell, Boeringher Ingelheim, Vodaphone and Honda. The town became the headquarters for Waitrose and, more recently, the HR and finance hub for the John Lewis Partnership. Today, Bracknell Forest borough has one of the highest proportion of foreign-owned companies of any English local authority while the Thames Valley Berkshire region is the most successful sub region outside London measured in term of GVA[5].

The town's residential population has also grown with major urban extensions to the north (Whitegrove in the 1990s) and the west (Jennetts Park – 2000s) adding 5500 dwellings. The majority of Bracknell Forest residents earn above-average incomes, levels of economic activity including productivity are high and unemployment rates low. The borough also has a younger than average population profile[6].

In 2010, market research carried out for the Bracknell Regeneration Partnership concluded that within the catchment area there were around 1 million shoppers. The study showed that 97% of households in Bracknell Forest earned above the UK average while 71% were either 'wealthy' or 'comfortably off'. Forecasts of available retail expenditure, together with the mismatch between the catchment potential and the existing town centre's offer, meant that Bracknell had a significant commercial opportunity for renewal.

Importantly, there was also an issue of how the town was perceived and of broader civic self-confidence. In common with other New Towns that suffer from an 'image problem', there was a perception that Bracknell was less aspirational than other parts of Berkshire such as nearby Wokingham or Windsor. For example, the extension to the town to the north delivered in the 1990s was marketed as 'Warfield' in preference to 'Bracknell'. Prior to regeneration, the town centre was often referred to as a 'concrete jungle' and Bracknell was voted the fourth ugliest English town in a 2013 'Crap Towns' poll behind Hemel Hempstead, Luton and Slough[7].

Locally, residents and businesses were clear about their desire for a town centre that would become their destination of choice and foster pride in their town. This was reflected in the borough council's priority established in 1997, to create a 'Town fit for the 21st Century'.

While Bracknell's car-centric design posed some challenges for the wholesale redevelopment of the town centre, the post-war approach to transport and infrastructure planning also presented opportunities. Like many New Towns, Bracknell is exceptionally well provided-for in terms of green infrastructure, footpaths and cycleways. 20% of Bracknell Forest Borough is designated as being of national nature conservation importance, while 20% of the borough is woodland and forest[8]. This has resulted in a town dominated by trees, landscape and open space.

Bracknell is also compact and was planned as a series of walkable neighbourhoods. Each neighbourhood was intended to accommodate some 10,000 residents, around a local centre no more than five minutes' walk away including a school, community centre, job opportunities and sometimes a pub or church. Footpaths and segregated cycleways were incorporated from the outset, resulting in a town offering good alternatives to the private car.

As a former New Town, Bracknell town centre was in a small number of land ownerships. The Bracknell Development Corporation set up to deliver the New Town was wound up in 1982. Like other New Town Development Corporations, its legacy assets were held by national agencies, first the Commission for the New Towns and subsequently English Partnerships and its successor bodies. The Commission for the New Towns disposed of the majority of its town centre assets to two entities, the Coal Industry Nominees (subsequently Legal and General Investment Management Ltd) and to Allied London (subsequently Schroders Asset Management Ltd).

In summary, the regeneration opportunity in Bracknell was significant. The town was characterised by a thriving economy focused on the buoyant knowledge sector, above-average levels of residential income, and a strategically attractive location on the transport network.

Broadway, 2013

PREVIOUS REGENERATION ATTEMPTS

By the early 1990s the need for, and opportunity presented by, the renewal of the town centre was well-established. At that time, the council branded this as 'redevelopment' rather than 'regeneration'. It focused on promoting additional development schemes to augment the existing centre rather than promoting larger scale transformation. However, these proposals made little progress as the UK experienced recession in the early 1990s.

In 1995, the council embraced the concept of a much more significant regeneration scheme, publishing an urban design framework for the town centre as a basis for future development. It began to seek development partners to regenerate the town centre. Discussions with the two key landowners concluded with one, Legal and General, being selected as developer-partner.

A partnership agreement was put in place and Legal and General devised a retail-led proposal comprising some 1million sq ft of new retail development. The proposal was based on their land holdings at the northern end of the town centre. Allied London were concerned that this scheme would prejudice their land at the southern part of the town centre. Consequently, Allied London devised a competing scheme of similar scale.

Both proposals were formalised as applications for outline planning permission and both attracted substantial opposition from surrounding local authorities, the regional assembly and the competing land owners. Traffic and retail impact, urban design, and planning policy issues were raised in objection to the proposals.

These objections presented very real challenges to the progress of the planning applications. For example, concerns about traffic and transport centred on the scheme's reliance primarily on the private car rather than encouraging public transport as the principal mode of travel to the town centre. This was particularly problematic given the prevailing national and regional policy environment which promoted reduced car use as one of the key ways to achieve more sustainable development.

The retail impact objections centred on potential loss of trade in surrounding town centres, especially Wokingham, Reading and Camberley. Urban design objections claimed that the proposals would be out of keeping with the scale and character of the town centre. And substantial planning policy objections related to the view that the Bracknell proposals would elevate the town unacceptably in the adopted retail hierarchy (set out in the Berkshire Structure Plan). There were also concerns that the redevelopment would be out of keeping with existing and potential local plan policies, and that it would prejudice the emerging structure plan and regional policy guidance.

Both proposals were called in by the Secretary of State, John Prescott, and considered at a conjoined Local Plan/s78 inquiry lasting three months during early 1999 which considered the objections in detail. The Inspector concluded (a view that was confirmed by the Secretary of State) that the proposals should be rejected.

The Inspector's Report recommended that the council should adopt a wholly new approach to the redevelopment of the town centre. A comprehensive masterplan should be devised, as part of a process to ensure that future proposals would be embedded within the regional, strategic and local planning policy framework.

Broadway, 2013

A NEW APPROACH

On receipt of the Inspector's report in late 1999, Bracknell Forest Council started to look afresh at its approach to regeneration. A new interdisciplinary officer team was assembled in contrast to the previous property-led approach. The council also adopted a much more corporate approach politically.

A new Bracknell Town Centre Regeneration Committee was established which took the innovative step of inviting the leader of the council's opposition group to be a co-opted member. This cross-party approach helped create a spirit of collaboration that, as later sections of this report show, was instrumental in the eventual delivery of The Lexicon.

An initial support budget of £500,000 was allocated to the projects, supplemented by £50,000 from the (South) East England Development Agency that was earmarked for masterplanning costs. External advice was sought from CBRE (viability and valuation), WSP (transport), Colliers (retail capacity and impact) and Tamesis (specialist property Public Relations). This work was tied together by masterplanners, EDAW.

A major programme of community engagement was undertaken. It was underpinned by an analysis of stakeholders focused on the initial objective of securing outline planning permission without the application being called-in again by the Secretary of State.

This marked the start of the council taking a much more inclusive approach to the regeneration project, including recognition of the importance of partnership working and collaboration. This included the landowners but also other local authorities and key agencies at a regional level. Significantly, the council decided to work with *both* the major landowners in the town centre, rather than continuing its development relationship with Legal and General alone.

The masterplanning process was markedly different from the previous attempts to redevelop the town centre. Many of the key features are explained in more detail in subsequent sections of this report, but it is worth highlighting that the project was treated as a council-wide, rather than departmental, priority. Wide-ranging and extensive engagement with the community and previous objectors including other local authorities underpinned the approach. The masterplan team also sought examples of best practice in masterplanning and regeneration to inform the work at Bracknell.

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Bracknell Town Centre Masterplan 2002

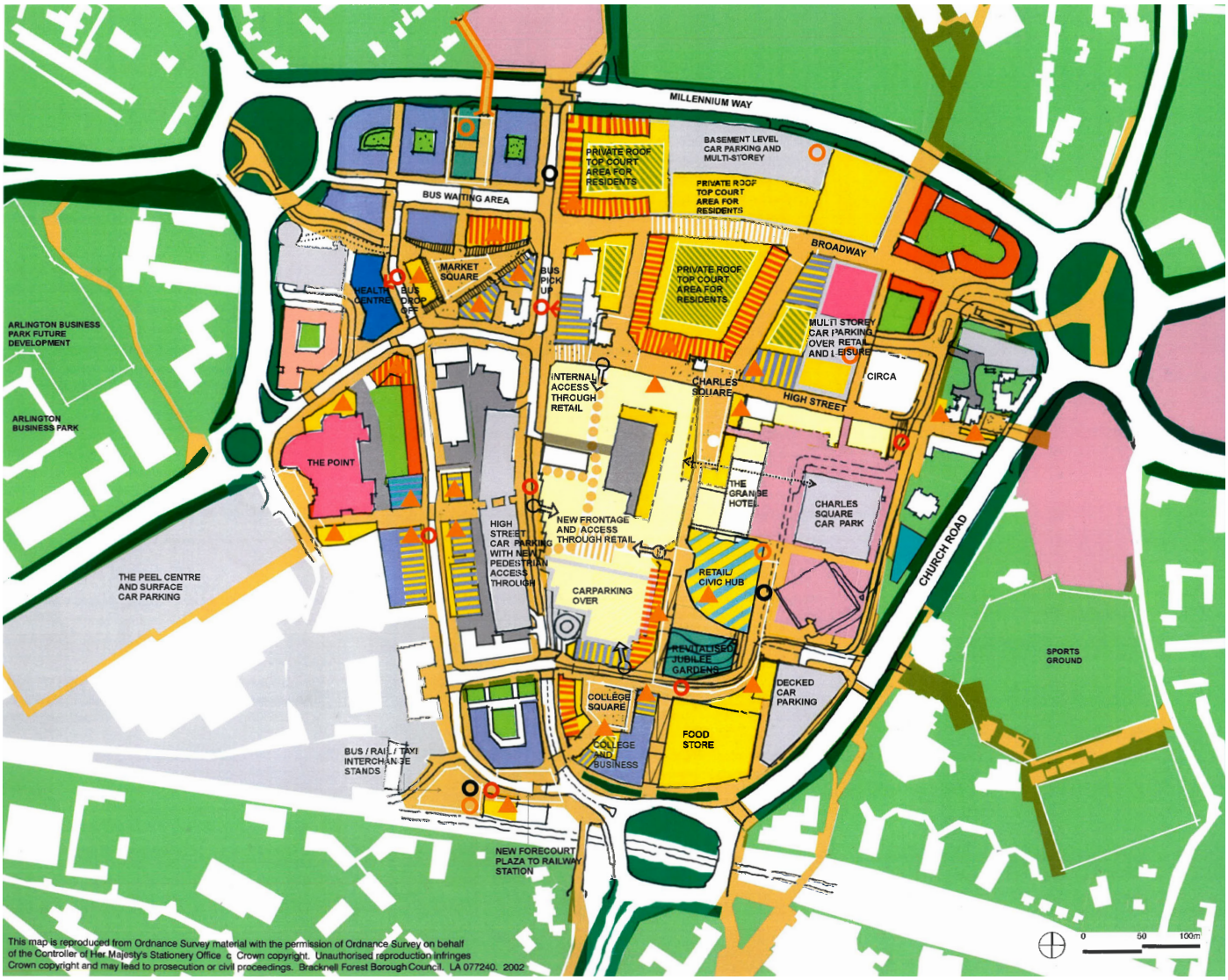
In 2002 the council approved a new town centre masterplan, securing unanimous consent from all councillors.

The masterplan proposed development around the existing street pattern, retaining the north-south/east-west axes of the New Town centre. The scheme was mixed-use, built over two and three levels, anchored by two department stores. Some 600,000 sqft of new retail development was to be complemented by 600 residential units and 600,000 sqft of new business floorspace. The masterplan proposed the redevelopment of the existing civic quarter, requiring the replacement of the borough council offices, library, magistrates court and police station. Transport was radically reviewed to propose the creation of a new bus hub including a series of 'super stops' in the north west of the plan area.

The council then began translating this masterplan into a new, comprehensive outline planning application. It is significant that the borough council took this forward. The council's view was that the regeneration was of such urgent need that work needed to press on speedily to secure planning permission and help to restore credibility and confidence in the town centre.

The approach also helped to encourage the two landowners to see the advantage of them taking on the planning application process, so that they could shape the scheme to best meet their objectives. The external consultants used previously were retained by the council to develop the new application.

In parallel, discussions continued with the two major landowners. These two workstreams resulted in two major agreements: first, Schroders and Legal and General



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formed a joint venture called the Bracknell Regeneration Partnership (BRP). Second, on 8 April 2003, BRP concluded an agreement with Bracknell Forest Council, giving the two landowners exclusive negotiating rights for the delivery of regeneration broadly in accordance with the adopted masterplan.

This agreement led to the council ceasing work on developing an outline planning application. BRP instead engaged their professional team, led by developers Stanhope (in a project coordination role), who engaged the Richard Rogers Partnership (RRP – later Rogers Stirk Harbour) to devise a scheme that would comply with the masterplan principles.

Working closely with the council, Stanhope and RRP developed a proposal focused on a major new covered street which opened into a striking civic space overlooked by five storeys of development. The scheme retained the orientation and principles of the masterplan but translated these concepts into a comprehensive, modern proposal with two levels of retail, two of leisure/food and beverage, and a residential level capping the development. The scheme took the working title of 'The Eye' and formed the basis of work commissioned by BRP to prepare and submit a new outline planning application.

Heads of terms for a new development agreement were agreed between the council and BRP in 2004, and in November of that year, BRP submitted its outline planning application. In parallel, work continued to translate the heads of terms into a comprehensive land and development agreement between the borough council and BRP. In early 2006, the outline planning application secured council approval (subject to completion of a s106 agreement) and in 2007, the development agreement was concluded.

© Bracknell Forest Council

In February 2008, a Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) inquiry was held to consider the land assembly for the site. In October 2008, the CPO was confirmed. However, this coincided with the start of the Global Financial Crisis (or GFC).

Left 2002 Masterplan – land uses

Right 2002 Masterplan – layout

GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS

The GFC had a transformational impact on major retail-led regeneration schemes. Together, Bracknell Forest Council and Stanhope reviewed 33 town centre regeneration proposals focused on retail across the country. By the middle of 2009, all bar three had been abandoned. These were Cardiff (St David's Phase II), Newbury (Parkway) and Bracknell. Bracknell's solid demographics and economic context helped to keep the idea of regeneration attractive from BRP's commercial perspective. However, the unprecedented economic conditions dictated a review of the scheme to improve its viability, and to strengthen the prospects for its delivery.

By this time, the architectural team had been changed from Rogers Stirk Harbour to BDP (working with Chapman Taylor and Gillespies, landscape architects). BRP reviewed the proposals with the council and the resulting scheme dispensed with some of the architectural ambitions of The Eye. Instead, the layout of the scheme was revised to a form much closer to the 2002 masterplan framework. A pattern of open streets, with some cover, together with a lower profile development was proposed. The idea of going beyond a single storey structure was abandoned making the scheme much simpler to deliver, while the regeneration was designed to be phased rather than focusing on the delivery of the entire scheme in a single development. This helped viability considerably.

The new phases of the scheme meant that the existing civic quarter could be retained whilst new development could be delivered to the west. By contrast, the original Rogers scheme (and 2002 Masterplan) envisaged the civic quarter being redeveloped as part of a single, comprehensive regeneration phase. This would have required replacement council offices, a library, magistrates court and police station to be designed and delivered, and the existing occupants relocated, before construction could have commenced on the new retail scheme. This change alone reduced scheme costs by some £40m.

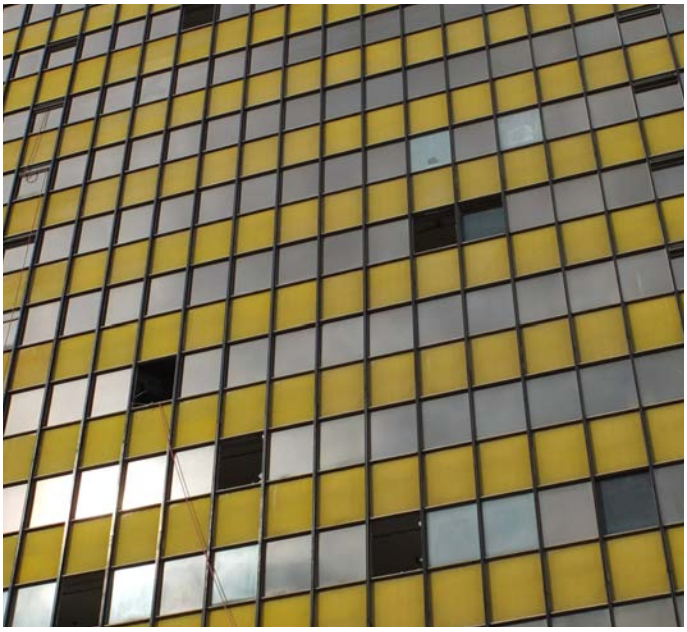
The revised scheme masterplan was endorsed by the council's regeneration committee and then approved as a modification to the extant outline planning permission. This formed the basis of a variation to the land and development agreement in 2010.

The first phase of the regeneration was delivered in November 2011 with the opening of a new Waitrose foodstore in the north western part of the town centre. This was a significant landmark for the town's regeneration. It provided confidence to residents that the regeneration was going to happen. The building was occupied by the biggest private sector employer in the town and the development helped to change the attitude of the investors, setting the tone that regeneration would, as one project stakeholder put it, "underpromise but overdeliver".

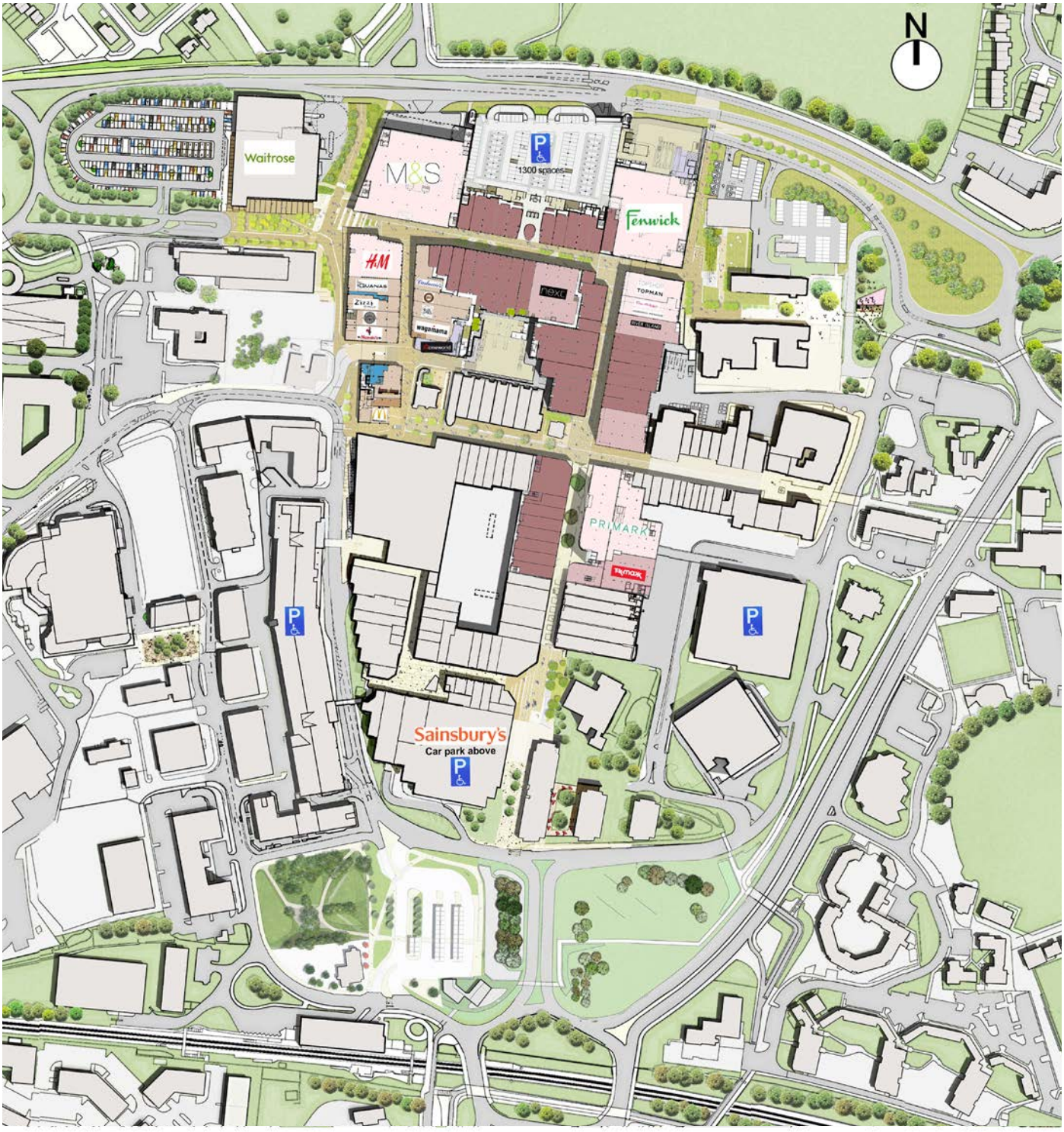
The Waitrose brand set an important benchmark for the quality of future development. The store traded successfully and won the Revo (formerly the British Council for Shopping Centres) sustainability award in 2012 for its use of wood-chip biomass energy centre and BREEAM-excellent rated environmental measures.

Across the rest of the town centre, the CPO was implemented and land assembly commenced in earnest.

However, the development agreement contained a number of 'conditions precedent' which needed to be satisfied before development could begin. These related to issues of scheme viability, planning permissions being secured, and land assembly. Key retail tenants that BRP and the council hoped would be attracted to the renewed town centre were still to be formally committed to the scheme. The outline planning permission needed to be implemented within three years of the decision, in order to comply with the conditions of the consent and therefore, time was of the essence. However, not all the conditions precedent had been satisfied and the council was therefore faced with a stark decision.



Winchester House, 2014



© BDP

Masterplan, 2009

CONSTRUCTION AND OPENING

The council needed to decide whether it was prepared to permit the town centre to be demolished prior to the satisfaction of the development agreement 'conditions precedent'. This was unusual. Normally demolition would only be permitted once a development agreement had been fully satisfied.

Early in the regeneration process, the council had established two informal 'tests' in order to guide decision-making. The first asked, "if we take this action, is regeneration more or less likely to happen?" The second asked, "if we take this action and regeneration doesn't happen, are we in a better or worse situation than we are now?" The council concluded that the answer to both tests was "yes" and the decision was taken to go ahead with demolition. This began with 'soft strip out' in July 2013, followed by the physical demolition of buildings in September of that year.

It was clear that over the five years since the Global Financial Crisis began, economic conditions had become a significant challenge to delivering such a substantial development. In October 2013, prompted by the worsening retail market, Legal and General decided to review their options and look at whether to dispose of their assets in BRP. As a result, Legal and General sought a purchaser over the subsequent six months. A review of the financial viability of the scheme began.

During 2014, as a response to Legal and General's concerns about the viability of the scheme, the council assembled a package valued at £12.4m which included bringing forward public realm works and taking on a 40-year lease for the new shoppers car park. A substantial programme of highway works already identified for the wider benefit of the borough was also brought forward. Overall, this package made a significant difference to scheme viability. In addition, the council committed to a series of other landscaping and highway works which transformed the urban environment to the east and west of the town centre, again to benefit visitors to the town centre as a whole.

The development agreement finally went 'unconditional' on 31 January 2015 and the development broke ground on 27 February 2015, delivered by the principal construction contractor Mace with Gardiner and Theobald as project manager.

The Marks & Spencer store opened in advance of the main scheme in July 2017 to enable systems and the car park to be tested. The Lexicon opened on 7 September 2017. During its first year, the scheme secured the Development of the Year at the Revo industry awards. Bracknell reached 33 in the retail rankings (up from 255) and the number of visitors increased from between 4–5m in 2013 to over 16m by September 2018[9]. By January 2019 Bracknell had risen to 29 in the retail rankings.

Demolition in progress

LESSONS FROM THE LEXICON

Achieving regeneration in Bracknell involved addressing a broad range of issues including design, legal, financial, political, planning, technical, regulatory, procedural and commercial matters. These issues were overlaid with less tangible factors such as negative perceptions and civic self-confidence. The following sections of this report outline some of the main factors involved in delivering the project, including lessons for those looking to undertake regeneration.

FACTOR 1:
WORK WITH COMPLEXITY

Like many urban centres, Bracknell's c40 hectares of town centre falls under the ownership of different bodies. In Bracknell's case, two major landowners, Legal and General, and what would become Schroders, owned the majority of the town centre. However, historically, their ambitions for the development of these land parcels had not always been aligned. After the Secretary of State refused the two rival planning proposals in 1999 it became clear that a new approach was needed to bring the landowners' aspirations together.

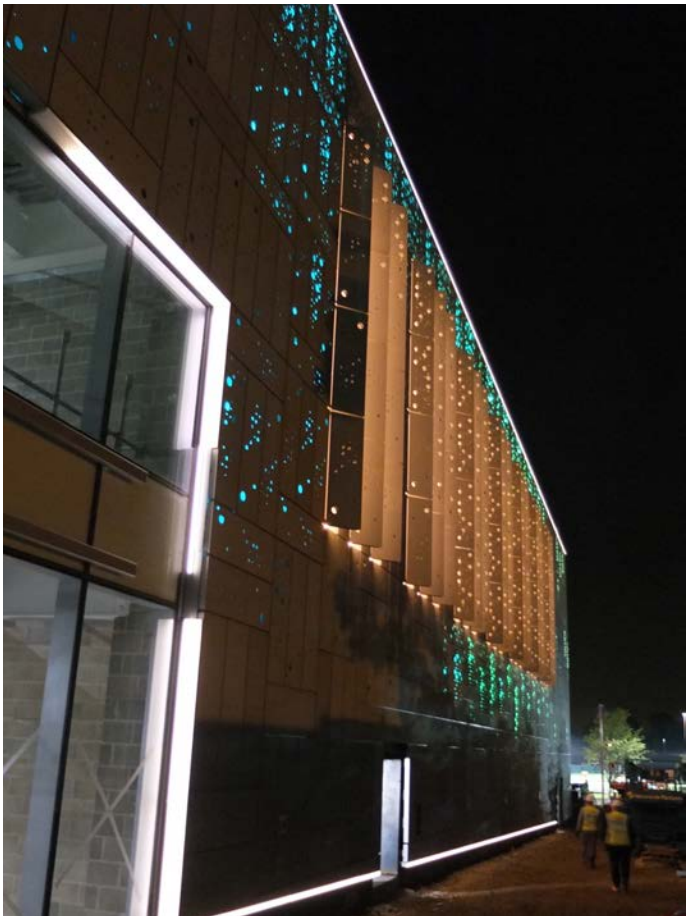
Bracknell Forest Council played a key 'brokerage' role in helping the two major landowners recognise their shared interests. The formation of the Bracknell Regeneration Partnership joint venture in 2003 was critical in resolving some of the complexities presented by there being two major landowners and helping to move the regeneration forward. As one interviewee commented, the council's approach was about being, "reconciliatory and trying to bring them together".

Another concurred that the council's role in establishing and maintaining the partnership was key:

"Even if the council isn't a land owner, just to get them involved in getting the teams working together, right from the start [is key] ... I think the partnership approach ... has really made the difference here."

The collaborative approach established between project partners also helped to resolve some of complexities associated with the construction of the scheme. One example is that parts of the existing town centre needed to remain open and operational while The Lexicon was built. This required careful management, particularly between the construction firms (Mace and Knight Harwood), project managers (Gardiner and Theobald) and the council including its highways, housing and planning teams. As an interviewee commented:

"the challenge of trying to keep small parts of the town centre alive while most of it was closed ... is unusual ... I think that seemed to be fairly successfully done, people have [also] been relocated [and] we've had to think about where they could go, and that's [also] unusual."



Fenwick lighting system being tested

Cineworld block under construction

From the start of the construction programme, structured meetings took place with representation from key project teams including at senior corporate level. These meetings intensified as the complexity of delivering the project ramped up. As well as providing a forum to 'trouble-shoot' various issues, the meetings enabled relationships to build up and helped established trust between project players. This was an essential factor in "oiling the wheels" of the project and, ultimately, of managing the challenges of delivering such a large project. As an interviewee commented:

"... for me the biggest learning curve is [to] work on those relationships, make sure that you can communicate with people ... project management really is key. If something slips ... or if something is done in isolation, it can have a massive effect. And it's having that overarching bigger picture".

Internally, the council produced a dedicated newsletter which updated its staff across departments on regeneration progress. Communicating regularly with stakeholders beyond the core project team was also vital to get across both particular project details or messages as well maintaining a sense of what the 'bigger picture' was externally.

For example, during construction there were regular meetings with town centre residents to manage the impact of building works on them. Real estate agent awaydays and exhibitions alongside numerous other stakeholder events and visits to businesses also took place, with the aim of communicating project progress and building support for the scheme.

FACTOR 2: ACKNOWLEDGE AND MANAGE RISK

Projects of the scale, cost and complexity of The Lexicon feature a significant number of risks; considering and managing these was essential to the smooth running of the regeneration scheme.

The scale of investment required to transform Bracknell town centre was substantial. The 2002 masterplan contained an estimated £750m of development. The Lexicon scheme was valued at some £240m alone. This figure excludes the sums contributed by the council during the life of the project which exceeded tens of millions.

It was critical that partners had a shared understanding of the key project milestones and drivers, enabling frequent judgements to be reached over where it would be appropriate to take risks.

Established professional risk management techniques such as timely information-sharing, effective communication practices and the close monitoring of specific project risk factors such as those relating to budget over-runs were employed. The council has a well-established performance management framework that provides frequent and regular updates to councillors on work progress. This openness underpinned relations between council officers and elected members and helped to streamline the council's work on the project.

However, some risks such as those presented by the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) simply could not be anticipated. Communications that the scheme would be completed by 2007 built-up public and industry expectations which were then unravelled by the GFC. Conversely, the risks associated with the regeneration were not communicated. Being clearer about the complexities and timescales involved in regeneration at such a scale may have helped to align expectations.

Earlier sections of this guide outline the impact of the GFC on the scheme, the decision by Legal and General to dispose of its assets, and the package devised by the council to address the issue. Partners worked creatively and collaboratively which resulted in BRP being satisfied that the scheme would meet the viability test. Legal and General decided not to dispose of their assets and to proceed with the development. This was a significant issue for the project and brought together several factors such as clear objectives, political clarity, shared understanding of partners' objectives, flexibility, trust and perseverance, that, together, helped make The Lexicon happen.

The council, using the 'two tests' detailed previously, also took the decision to press ahead with the planned demolition of a large area of the town centre using its Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) powers. This effectively forced the momentum of the project onwards when there was considerable uncertainty not only about the prospects of the Bracknell regeneration but across the real estate development industry globally.

Taken together, the council's package of works and finance and the decision to demolish the town centre shored up the viability of the regeneration and helped to keep the project alive when equivalent regeneration schemes across the UK were being shelved. As an interviewee commented:

"I think it was a really brave decision by [the council] to say OK ... 'we'll just let you demolish two thirds of the town centre'... that's a big, big decision for them to make ... and to have the political will to carry that through I think was really brave of them to take that bull by the horns and say, 'we're not going to effectively have much of a town centre for two, two and a half years whilst this thing gets demolished and rebuilt'. I think a lot of local authorities ... would pause at making a decision like that but ... they waited for it long enough and I think said, 'well look, if that is what it takes to unlock it then fine, let's go down that route'".

Deciding to press ahead with the demolition of the town centre in 2014 also made a visible statement to counter

Demolition, 2014

a commonly-held view that the scheme would "never happen". This perception held until the development agreement became unconditional in January 2015, presenting professional risk for key individuals.

From the perspective of the investors, securing formal commitment to the scheme from the two anchor tenants (Marks and Spencer and Fenwick) was a significant element in managing commercial risk. The anchors helped boost confidence in the scheme from other potential occupiers and were important in building momentum for delivery.

In summary, the management of risk underpinned all stages of the regeneration. It was critical that the key players in the development were able to manage risk and, at times, take bold decisions that balanced risk with delivery. This entailed creating a culture of working in which risks were assessed, and decisions made, on the probability of the overall goals of the regeneration being achieved.

A 'council officer culture' was established that empowered judgement calls at the appropriate level, without requiring frequent approvals from more senior officers:

"the culture that I've tried to encourage [in] my team, is to think ... about how you can get it done ... and within reason, ask for forgiveness rather than ask for permission."

Examples ranged from the choice of colours for the painting of the underpass porticos and the details and implementation of footpath design on the ground. There was a clear sense that the council team wanted to support delivery of the project, reflecting the political priorities of the borough.

FACTOR 3: BUILD POLITICAL CONSENSUS AND A COMMITTED TEAM

The fact that the political priority given to the regeneration was cross-party was a major factor in the scheme's eventual success. First, consensus about the need for regeneration had to be established. Once in place, this provided a stable foundation that enabled the council to act boldly, perhaps even a little unconventionally at times.

Both main political parties in the borough recognised the challenges associated with maintaining the existing town centre and the opportunities wholescale redevelopment offered. Indeed, the efforts to redevelop the town in the 1990s were devised under a Labour administration and then taken forward by the Conservatives who gained control of Bracknell Forest Borough Council in 1997.

The council made the creation of, "a town fit for the 21st century" its top corporate priority. This was sustained over nearly two decades and through a series of local elections.

First, this gave the project an authority in the council's business. It sent a clear message to external audiences (the community, development industry and investors, surrounding councils, economic development agencies and national government) that regeneration was of fundamental importance. Second, it meant that the officer and developer teams could focus on the complex challenges of delivering regeneration without needing to divert time and resource to resolving local political conflict. Third, it was also valuable for officers in determining work planning at a time when local government resources were under increasing and substantial pressure.

A key feature of the project was the continued support (and patience) of councillors. They allowed officers (and development partners) to focus on delivery and to solve problems, without becoming involved in devising technical solutions. This was achieved by the Leader of the Council chairing the Regeneration Committee, which included the lead councillors on regeneration and economic development, planning and transport, culture and public protection, environment, and children and young people. Further weight was given to the issue of regeneration through the creation of a new portfolio (Regeneration and Economic Development) in 2011. The portfolio holder chaired the Regeneration Committee from then on.

Bracknell Forest Council Mayor Cllr Andrew Blatchford and Chief Executive Timothy Wheadon signing the unconditional development agreement with BRP

Having a comprehensive range of senior councillors meant that there was continued close understanding of progress and of the key issues being dealt with. Day-to-day links were well-established through regular liaison between officers and the Executive Member for Regeneration and Economic Development. Mutual trust and strong communication were key elements of ensuring that there were close links between members and the project.

The project also benefited from Bracknell Forest Council being a unitary authority, rather than part of two-tier local government. It simplified problem-solving and delivery. For example, the council was able to accelerate a package of highway works already planned for the borough (with town-wide benefits) but that also had the benefit of improving the scheme's viability at the peak of the GFC. It would have been significantly more challenging to agree the principle, resolve the specification, apportion costs and document the legal agreement for these works had it been necessary to include a county council (as highway authority).

The regeneration period also saw the introduction of the Leader and Executive model of local governance (following the Local Government Act 2000) and the appointment of a new Chief Executive in 2003. A new Chief Executive's Office was established, reporting directly to him. One third of this unit was a team dedicated to delivering the regeneration scheme.

This team was led by a senior officer who left his role as the council's Head of Planning and Transport Policy to focus solely on delivery of the town centre regeneration. This role became the council's Assistant Chief Executive and was able to operate with the direct authority of the Chief Executive. This close and effective relationship helped emphasise the key corporate importance of the regeneration project. It meant that there was sufficient space for the project to be worked on, without the disparate range of other service pressures that local authorities need to address.

As an interviewee noted, this was key to the overall success of the scheme:

"The lessons learnt were probably the fact that the Chief Exec and the team have got to have a complete attitude of can do, 'we will make this happen'. They don't panic and think, 'not our problem someone else will step in', they fully appreciate the significance to the local GDP ... I think the direction of the Chief Exec and the Leader of the council in making sure there was full political support to make sure of delivery was probably more so than [in] some other public sector [organisations]."

The new management structure also included the creation of overview and scrutiny processes at the council. The Overview and Scrutiny Commission took a light touch approach to the regeneration programme, in recognition of the difficulties involved in such a complex project. Key elements of the project were scrutinised (including a dedicated session of the Environment Commission to consider the draft masterplan), but a valuable, supportive

approach was adopted that focused on the strategic rather than fine detail.

The cross-party collaborative approach was translated into an invitation to the leader of the opposition Labour group to become a co-opted member of the Bracknell Town Centre Regeneration Committee ensuring that both of the main political parties were at the heart of decision-making on the scheme.

Importantly, the project was very clearly a corporate priority where the vast bulk of expertise and capacity was drawn from (and owned by) officers from a range of disciplines in service departments across the council.

This approach had further benefits. Projects of such scale and importance to local communities as well as the regional economy are uncommon in the UK. Bracknell's regeneration provided the opportunity for sustained career development and great professional satisfaction for the large number of officers who had the opportunity to work on the project. This included a series of technical officer groups overseen by a Regeneration Project Board, chaired by the Chief Executive. This board was tightly focused. Reporting was through short, sharp project update reports and performance was managed 'by exception', reflecting a culture in which officers were empowered to make decisions themselves.

It is worth reflecting on the parallels between this approach and the way in which the original New Towns were delivered. The New Town Development Corporations provided the structure and opportunity for professionals to develop their career (and build their family circumstances) over a sustained period. Expertise increased and commitment to the local area grew.

From the developer/landowner side, the project attracted and retained high-calibre professionals at operational and board level. The shared project understanding and memory was valuable and the personal and professional commitment built over a long period should not be underestimated as a driver for the project.

FACTOR 4: CREATE A CLEAR VISION

An environment of local political stability and a committed, stable and highly-skilled project team helped in the development of a clear and consistent vision of what regeneration needed to achieve. Ultimately the goal was to create a modern, lively and well-functioning town centre of which local people could be proud. Making this a reality became the council's top corporate priority. As an interviewee commented:

"...I think this council is a little bit unusual in some respects ... for some years, our number one priority as a council [has been] the regeneration of the town centre".

While the ultimate goal of delivering comprehensive regeneration remained consistent, the detail of the vision needed to be flexible enough to respond to various challenges. Some of these were anticipated while others were not. Indeed, *having a consistent vision and clear set of deliverables* became even more important when the project encountered difficulties.

The 2002 Masterplan was an important vehicle in establishing the core principles that would eventually shape more detailed design plans for the town centre.

The masterplanning process involved a wide range of individuals and organisations. Over 200 different actors were consulted, ranging from national and regional government to landowners, surrounding councils, community organisations, businesses and individuals. The degree of engagement varied.

The masterplan was being prepared at the same time as the borough council was working with the other five Berkshire unitary authorities on the first joint structure plan for Berkshire, following the abolition of the county council in 1998. This provided the opportunity for effective communication about the plans for Bracknell, and two-way consultation and engagement about the scheme.

The council also invited (now defunct) regional bodies such as the Government Office for the South East and the South East England Regional Assembly to comment on the draft brief.

The aim was to comply with planning policy but also foster a spirit of openness and trust with stakeholders. While each of these bodies had the potential to impede the regeneration, the clearly defined objectives of the masterplan eventually garnered widespread support and, once adopted, it became a valuable tool for rebuilding consensus and confidence in Bracknell.

One interviewee described the council's production of the masterplan in conformity with other planning policies as:

"getting their ducks in a row. I think if you're clear that you're going to do a big development and where it's going to happen, [you then] need to ensure your local plan supports that [and] you've got good support from your local stakeholders and local authorities. Once you've got that in place, [you then] take the lead in terms of developing what your vision is for the development and setting that out clearly in some form of document, whether that's a vision document or Masterplan."

The published masterplan was used to engage with investors, potential tenants, key decision-makers in national and regional government, and local businesses. It also acted as an important vehicle to re-engage with local residents some of whom, having seen previous attempts fail, were sceptical that the regeneration would happen.

FACTOR 5:
DESIGN AND PLAN A 21ST-CENTURY TOWN CENTRE

Once a broad vision for the comprehensive regeneration of the town centre had been established, more detailed planning and design-related questions needed to be addressed. How should one of the first generation New Towns be redeveloped? What should be the scale, urban form, mix of uses and look and feel of the scheme?

The focus for the council (and land owners) was the economic weakness of the town centre, its role in eroding civic self-confidence, and its inflexibility in being able to change to meet the needs of 21st century retailing. Combined with the obsolescence and deteriorating physical fabric of the New Town centre, it became clear that only demolition and redevelopment would be capable of delivering a competitive solution that could create a new social, cultural and economic heart to restore civic pride.

The masterplanning process explored (and helped shape) the key elements of the new 'place' to be created. It set out the urban form, scale of uses, components and mix, access and transport framework and the overall look and feel of the new town centre.

Unlike many other regeneration projects, this process did not have many historic or other reference points, and, overall, conservation and heritage issues played a relatively marginal role. There are only five buildings of special architectural or historic interest in Bracknell town centre. The vast bulk of New Town buildings were in poor physical condition and unsuited to modern needs.

© BRP

The green wall to the Avenue Car Park

However, the masterplan did retain the existing cruciform street pattern of the New Town centre. It proposed a series of open and (semi) covered streets rather than the then-fashionable covered shopping mall approach. In order to try to avoid future generations needing such a comprehensive redevelopment, the masterplan deliberately envisaged a series of development blocks, each of which could be replaced as they became obsolete.

Attempts were made to 'future proof' the town centre for 'smart city' initiatives. Ducting was laid throughout the town centre (as new public realm was laid) and this was provided with high speed fibre to provide future potential.

Interviewees highlighted instances of innovative practice, including within council departments. This example refers to conduct in the highway team:

"I think we've been quite innovative on occasions, I know that [with a] council, the word 'innovation' doesn't necessarily spring to mind immediately but ... I would say the council's provided ... a large portion of that innovation, which I think is particularly pleasing to me because we're dealing with the private sector and... it's ... reassuring for me to see that we're doing things just as well as the private sector... if not better".

The design for a new town centre also had to embrace non-material aspects, namely how Bracknell was perceived by its residents as well as externally, for example, by businesses and potential visitors. Trying to overturn Bracknell's reputation as a 'concrete jungle' involved attracting more aspirational brands to the retail offer.

One example in practice was the north western foodstore site which in 2011 began trading as a flagship Waitrose store. There was considerable interest in the site from a range of potential retailers but the council and BRP were committed to a high quality occupier (such as Waitrose or Marks and Spencer) to send a signal about the ambition and transformation sought by the regeneration project.

Place-branding – which considered how Bracknell town centre was currently perceived and how the new scheme could support an improved image amongst existing and future town centre users – was a core element of establishing a guiding vision for the regeneration.

BRP engaged with focus groups and others to ensure that the architecture and overall 'look and feel' of the town centre would appeal to residents and shoppers in the catchment. This work revealed a real pride in the borough's sylvan nature with forest and generous green spaces given over to leisure and nature conservation; it also showed a clear rejection of (existing) Modern elements, too. As a result, the architectural language exploited softer materials, such as timber, brick and natural stone, to yield a more nature-inspired character. Quality of materials became an issue and granite was employed to pave the entire public realm across the town centre.

Throughout the detailed design process, the council's planning team was willing to explore flexible solutions to the challenges encountered through the project. As an interviewee commented: "I think that the way that the planning function here tries to work is enabling." Rather than adopting a strict approach to the implementation of the masterplan and the adopted Local Plan, the team instead recognised the overall objective of the policy framework (i.e. to deliver a regenerated town centre) and worked creatively to support the project:

"We want to get it done, we want it to be good. If we need to be flexible, we'll be flexible where we need to. Where we can and where we can't be flexible, we'll be clear about why we can't."

Indeed, as another interviewee commented, the council's role more broadly conceived of was fluid over the lifetime of the project, characterised by an agile, innovative approach:

"The council role, I think it's fluctuated at different stages. So, at the beginning we were more like the planning authority, [setting out] 'this is what's needed for the borough'. Then, as the scheme began to develop, I think ... we were the ones who held the vision for ... the town."

FACTOR 6:
SELL THE SCHEME

In terms of the delivery of The Lexicon, a key 'moment' highlighted by several project actors was when, in January 2015, the development agreement – essentially a contract setting out the terms of the relationship between project actors – went 'unconditional'. As an interviewee commented:

"The biggest single milestone for me is something that most residents won't understand, which was the signing and execution of the development agreement and when that went unconditional. That was a huge day, that was happy dances around the office at 2 o'clock in the morning ... 'this is going to happen, this is now, this is real'."

With the agreement in place, the next stage of 'selling' the scheme could begin, and BRP began to actively promote the development to potential tenants. The council was also involved in many of these sessions, either speaking to individual prospective tenants or as part of larger 'agents' days' designed to raise awareness of the scheme amongst those representing potential occupiers.

© BRP

Eagle Lane

As this interviewee reflected, a clear, guiding vision was also critical:

"Everyone needs to buy into what you're trying to achieve, and where it becomes difficult is when that gets side-tracked...where people forget what we're trying to achieve. Shared vision, take the politics out of it, and trust [people] as much as possible ... and that's about a certain way of working."

As well as working on a joint communications strategy, thoughts began to move towards the launch of the scheme. Improvements to infrastructure and landscaping on the fringes of The Lexicon scheme, such as the redeveloped bus station, were undertaken in order to create a more pleasant entry point. As an interviewee commented:

"[BFC] will've spent about £100,000 just on tidying up underpasses and so on, that are outside the scheme per se, but they just help the approach to the development".

These works helped to create a sense of cohesion between the regenerated parts of the town centre and those that have yet to be redeveloped. As an interviewee reflected, retaining elements of the existing New Town street pattern also aided design coherence:

" [We] kept a lot of the characteristics of it, the long streets, the horizontal buildings, so that it would ... reflect ... that it was still Bracknell ... the idea was that it was improving Bracknell, instead of just putting something in to get the shoppers in.... [The Lexicon] maintains a lot of the New Town architecture and principles, and I think that's quite important."

Finally, investing council budget was also a way to demonstrate commitment to the regeneration and continue to build public and industry confidence in The Lexicon.

© Revo

Revo Award certificate

FACTOR 7:
MAKE (REALISTIC) PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

The Lexicon can be thought of as one (big) part of a bigger regeneration puzzle. The story told in this report shows that compromises had to be made in delivering the scheme. Plans were scaled back. Deliverables were phased. But the more flexible form the development eventually took also arguably presents new opportunities.

In February 2019, £4.5million of funding was committed by Bracknell Forest Council's Executive for 'The Deck', a 19,000 sq ft of retail and restaurants on the site of the former Bentalls store. This phase of development will connect The Lexicon with the Princess Square mall which will also undergo refurbishment.

As an interviewee commented:

"...this is becoming a town that we're going to be investing in for a long time. So this [The Lexicon] is phase two, there's ... phase three, four and five to come behind that, so there's a lot of other stuff to come, all of it clearly will be driven by market conditions and all the rest of it, but you can see that this town is only going to get better over the medium term."

Opportunities being explored include residential development, with additional housing (potentially) being located both outside and inside the town centre, including the former Winchester House office block (p.16), now apartments. As an interviewee reflected, this is within a context of growth in the wider region that is likely to prompt further change in Bracknell:

"this is a town that's growing, we're about the third fastest growing borough in Berkshire over the next 15 years. There's huge amounts of housing development coming."

Of course, Bracknell is far from unique in experiencing the opportunities and challenges associated with growth. Many towns and cities, including other post-war New Towns have increasingly urgent regeneration needs, some of which stem from the misalignment, as seen in Bracknell's case, of the needs of modern-day residents and businesses and the existing built environment. As this interviewee commented:

"It [the regeneration] should bring a lot to the town really, and from our perspective we can see that Bracknell isn't going to be the only place like this, if you look around there's lots of towns like Bracknell that were built after the war."

CONCLUSIONS

Much has been said about the challenges facing the UK's town centres in recent years. Rapidly evolving consumer preferences and new technologies are among a number of factors changing the way we use high streets. The rise of the so-called 'experience economy' which emphasizes social activities such as eating and drinking, visiting the cinema or music venues, or simply 'experiencing' a place together with friends, has prompted more focused thinking on how to increase dwell time and extend 'the offer' within town centres.

Growing awareness of issues such as accessibility, the role that urban environments can play in promoting better health outcomes and in encouraging more sustainable ways of living are also affecting change in the way in which we plan, manage and use urban centres. What this means is that even newly regenerated town centres like Bracknell will need to be flexible in the way they respond to wider social, cultural, environmental and economic shifts; highlighting the ongoing nature of regeneration practice.

© BRP

Bond Square

THE LEXICON: HOW DID IT HAPPEN?

It is a challenge to summarise a project of this scale and complexity. Hundreds of people were involved in the regeneration over at least a twenty-year period. However, there was consistency in terms of the responses from interviewees which can be outlined as:

Having a vision and working together to deliver it

Community engagement and realistic and open collaboration with landowners, investors and partners in which clearly-defined objectives are established is key. The masterplanning process was used to build consensus and lay the foundations to guide the overall approach to the project.

Placemaking and design

A flexible urban form, delivered in phases, enabled the project to weather viability problems including the Global Financial Crisis. Working with residents and others in the catchment helped to shape the architectural vocabulary.

Politics and power

The project benefited from being in a unitary council area rather than having to navigate a 'two-tier' setting. The regeneration benefitted from being awarded sustained and committed political priority status. Consensus between the political groups over the masterplan meant that regeneration plans did not become a 'political football'.

Organisation and leadership

A committed and engaged Chief Executive with an empowered team with the skills, resources and space to focus on delivery was key. Corporate ownership of the project and an organisational structure that gave the authority of the Chief Executive to the project was also important.

Relationships, partnerships and people

Building trust was especially valuable during times of project stress. As was having the right people who were both positive and creative. Formal and informal partnerships meant problems were solved quickly, while a shared focus on and understanding of the key milestones to be met to deliver the project was critical.

Risk

Management of sometimes considerable risk through strong and committed political support was fundamental. Trust and partnerships oiled the wheels here too. Adopting the 'two tests' to major risks was also a key factor.

Viability

Issues of viability became the biggest challenge to the project. Yet they were overcome through creativity and substantial investment including from the local authority.

Communications and perceptions

A shared approach to project communications was invaluable. Engagement with residents in particular was vital although liasing with other stakeholders such as other local authorities was also important.

Planning issues

The planning process rebuilt confidence and helped develop a consensus for a set of shared objectives. An engaged, positive planning team which adopted a flexible approach to finding creative solutions to the project challenges was key.

A published vision

An agreed vision that set out the preferred future, based on local priorities, plenty of engagement and commercial good sense was vitally important. Realism was also key; there needs to be a shared sense of the art of the possible. Communication was also critical; keeping the community and other stakeholders informed of progress is essential. Flexibility should be built in as far as possible so that the project can respond, especially at times of crisis.

Top Public art by Kerry Lemon

Top right The Bracknell Proms, July 2018

Bottom right Demolition in progress, March 2014

LES MISÉRABLES

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ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This report has been produced by researchers based in Real Estate and Planning, part of the Henley Business School at the University of Reading. The Department has had a link with Bracknell Forest Council and investors and developers in the town for several years. The Council's lead officer for The Lexicon project is now a Visiting Fellow at the University. This combination presented a unique opportunity to record and analyse the town's regeneration journey.

The report draws on first-hand accounts of the regeneration provided by key players involved in the project past and present, including members of the Bracknell Regeneration Partnership (Legal and General and Schroders) and their professional team of advisors and contractors. The report also draws on existing records and notes published throughout the lifetime of the regeneration project.

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The research project has also benefitted from the inputs of the following student researchers since 2016: Laura Eimermann, Allyson Tindall and Cornelia Agyenim-Boateng.

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