

Introduction

Situated in the south east, Bicester has seen significant housing growth over the past few years but its town centre and associated facilities have not followed suit. Considerable investment in the out-of-town shopping outlet – Bicester Village – has also left the town centre looking tired and dated.

The local planning authority recognised it was essential to rejuvenate and grow Bicester's town centre to meet the needs and expectations of the town's growing population, and thus invited developers to respond to its development brief for the site.

A £70m joint scheme put together by Stockdale Land Limited and Sainsbury's Supermarkets Limited was selected by the council. The scheme included a new cinema and restaurant complex, new retail facilities (including a Sainsbury's supermarket), state-of-the-art civic building, new library and bus interchange, and is part of an ongoing strategy to enhance Bicester's leisure and retail offering.

Objectives

Prior to the submission of a detailed planning application, the objectives were to:

- Communicate the proposals to stakeholders
- Engage stakeholders in the consultation process to encourage feedback
- Build on support for the project through the planning process.

Strategy

Due to the range of stakeholders that needed to be engaged in the process, the project team embarked on an extensive communications programme.

Activities included: development, production and delivery of 9000+ newsletters to Bicester households; organising and running a three-day public exhibition and associated publicity; proactive media relations; running a community helpline to deal with day-to-day enquiries; writing a detailed Statement of Community Engagement; and facilitating a stakeholder feedback group involving councillors from all tiers of local government and other major stakeholders in the town.

In addition, a comprehensive programme of direct face-to-face communication with local retailers, property owners, elected members and business groups was undertaken.

Results

In total 1719 people attended the exhibition, 91 per cent of which were in favour of the proposals. The feedback questionnaire received a higher than expected response rate of 29 per cent. The consultation successfully engaged all stakeholders, and the media campaign resulted in features in the *Bicester Advertiser*, *Bicester Review*, *The Oxford Times* and the *Oxford Mail*.

The scheme has since received planning permission.

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