

Introduction

The 'City of Dreaming Spires' is notorious for having a two-tiered planning committee structure which is particularly difficult to navigate, with vociferous campaign groups such as ROX (Rescue Oxford) and the Oxford Preservation Trust having considerable influence on political stakeholders at all levels.

When Oxford & Cherwell Valley College (OCVC) wanted to embark on an £86m campus redevelopment project, which involved the controversial disposal of 50% of both its Oxford City and Blackbird Leys sites for housing, it knew it would need political relations support. With a track record for lobbying in support of other schemes in the city, Drivers Jonas (OCVC's planning consultants) called in Mistral to assist.

Objective

Mistral embarked on a comprehensive stakeholder identification and engagement programme at all political levels with the objective of explaining the redevelopment project and mobilising support.

Strategy

Following a comprehensive local political and community audit, VIP receptions were organised and run by Mistral at both locations. The proposals were on display and members of the professional team were on-hand to explain the benefits of the redevelopment for the local area to the many local politicians and other stakeholders who attended.

In reaching political stakeholders in the area it was also important to engage with the local media which, until this project, had a rather disparaging view of OCVC owing to its merger with Rycotewood College in 2003 and resulting rationalisation programme. Mistral secured positive front page coverage in the Oxford Times, as well as favourable pieces in the Oxford Mail, BBC Radio Oxford, Fox FM, Thames Valley tonight.

Results

The most significant political relations result was gaining the active support of Andrew Smith MP, who being local to the area and passionate about education was keen to be involved. Both masterplan applications were successful and work has already begun on the city centre site.

