

Case Study *Parkridge Development Land – community consultation for proposed eco-town*

Introduction

As the largest housing delivery vehicle since the new towns of the 1950s the government's proposed eco-towns were always going to be controversial. Weston Otmoor is no exception. Situated on the Oxford-Cambridge knowledge arc, and promising to ensure the long-awaited development of the Oxford-Milton Keynes East-West Rail Link, as well as rebuilding the heavily-congested M40/A34 junction, the proposed development has many potential benefits for the local area which were being drowned out by myths propagated by local campaign group, the Weston Front.

Objective

As part of the short-listing process, Parkridge was asked by the department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) to explain the latest version of the plans to the local community and to gather their views. Mistral was appointed to conduct this consultation in an impartial way. The objective was to gather as many local views as possible and to communicate the responses to both Parkridge and CLG.

Strategy

Mistral developed and wrote a strategy document for the project which was sent to CLG for approval, as well as being circulated to relevant local authorities for their information.

Mistral drew from its wealth of experience in managing complex community engagement projects, and combined it with industry best practice guidelines from sources including Planning Aid/RTPI and the TCPA.

Tactics included: mapping existing community and faith organisations; community relations manager function including telephone and email hotline; proactive and reactive press office; consultation website; stakeholder briefings; community newsletters to 35,000+ households; community roadshow (visiting 17 towns and villages in the area over three weeks); consulting with commuters coming into the area at local Park & Rides and train stations in the Oxford and Bicester area; and producing a consultation report.

Results

The consultation attracted significant attention with nearly 1500 people from the local area visiting the touring roadshows, and 634 of those completing the qualitative roadshow questionnaire. The quantitative postal questionnaire produced 2927 responses; over 100 people utilised the telephone hotline and email address. Proactive media relations undertaken by Mistral ensured the facts about Weston Otmoor and the consultation were communicated through local news channels. A comprehensive report was produced following the end of the consultation, and included details of activities undertaken as part of the project as well as considerable data analysis. The detail of the data allowed the developer to clearly see, and consider, the biggest concerns, suggestions and to gauge the overall feeling towards its proposals. The website has remained open after the consultation and provides an effective channel through which Parkridge can communicate post-consultation information on its proposals and the eco-town process.

