

Bracknell — lessons in new town centre regeneration

Article

Accepted Version

Nicholls, V. and Street, E. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8987-5916> (2024) Bracknell — lessons in new town centre regeneration. *Town and Country Planning*, 93 (1). pp. 44-49. ISSN 0040-9960 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/114427/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Published version at: <https://www.tcpa.org.uk/journals/>

Publisher: Town and Country Planning Association

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

2645 words excluding title, affiliations and references

Bracknell – lessons in New Town centre regeneration

Victor Nicholls and Emma Street

Department of Real Estate and Planning, Henley Business School, University of Reading, UK

1. Introduction

Bracknell, a town in south-east England's economically buoyant Thames Valley sub-region, is one of the United Kingdom's first wave of New Towns. It is the only British New Town centre to have been substantially regenerated.

This article draws on an ongoing research collaboration with the local authority (Bracknell Forest Council) and commercial landowner-developer partners. It summarises the key elements of the regeneration with a view to identifying (early) lessons for practitioners and others interested in planning and delivering the renewal of urban centres, particularly those in New Towns. Our research also highlights broader lessons for those involved in other complex urban development projects.

2. Project insights

In 2016, the authors began research on the regeneration of Bracknell town centre. The project benefited from the unique insights (and opportunities) resulting from one of the authors' roles as Assistant Chief Executive at Bracknell Forest Council, the local authority responsible for Bracknell town centre. He led the council's regeneration team over a 17-year period. This provided unrivalled access to project information and the key actors involved, ranging from politicians, leaders, investors, developers, and other professionals engaged in planning and delivering the project.

The research has generated two [free to download research reports](#) published in 2019 and 2022, on which this article draws.

3. Bracknell town centre

Bracknell is 30 miles (48km) west of London and is one of the original 'Mark One' New Towns created in the aftermath of World War Two. The Bracknell Forest local authority area, for which Bracknell town is the main urban centre, had a population of approximately 125,000 people in 2021 (ONS, 2021). The New Towns were designed to offer residents a good quality of life with an emphasis on extensive areas of green space and modern, spacious family housing, and access to local employment and community facilities. The UK's New Town programme was ambitious in both scale and scope. While its legacy is contested, the New Towns programme continues to be seen as an example of how plan and deliver communities to meet a range of societal and environmental challenges (Forsyth and Peiser, 2019).

Bracknell's New Town heritage presented particular regeneration challenges. For example, the town centre was built over a relatively short period rather than evolving organically over decades or even centuries. 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 including among Bracknell businesses and residents.

The physical structure of the town centre's buildings deteriorated at a uniform rate, presenting a substantial challenge for landowners and tenants. Retail units appropriate to the needs of 1950s/1960s society did not match the requirements of modern operators, and were also expensive to reconfigure, limiting the refurbishment and renovation options available.

Bracknell's road network reflected a post-war, 'engineering-led' approach to urban design. The town centre was contained within a ring road which constrained further growth and limited flexibility. The private car dominated, making pedestrian and cycle movements difficult and unattractive. The regeneration challenge associated with the town centre's public realm – much of which was declining at a uniform rate - was also significant.

4. Regeneration attempts

In the light of the issues set out above and compounded by stiff retail competition from surrounding towns, the local authority resolved to promote the idea of redeveloping Bracknell town centre. During the 1990s, these attempts were planned in collaboration with a single major town centre landowner. In 1999, these attempts came to an end, with major redevelopment proposals being rejected by central government.

However, one positive outcome of the process was clear government advice that the council should prepare a comprehensive masterplan, involving extensive engagement with surrounding towns, local interest groups, the regional assembly, potential occupiers, and residents. The new masterplan was adopted in 2002 and formed the basis for the subsequent regeneration story.

5. Key elements of the scheme

In September 2017, Bracknell town centre saw the opening of the first substantial phase of its regeneration. The scheme (branded "The Lexicon") redeveloped and renewed the majority of the town centre. It comprises 60 000 sqm of new retail space, an 11-screen cinema, and 12 new restaurants, arranged in a series of new streets and squares whilst retaining the essential form of the original New Town layout.

6. Development partners

The Lexicon was a joint project between Bracknell Forest Council and existing town centre landowners Legal and General and Schroders who pooled their assets to form the Bracknell Regeneration Partnership. The principal funding for the project came from Bracknell Regeneration Partnership who also provided the scheme's development manager.

7. Learning from success

In 2021, we interviewed many of the same actors still involved in the planning, management, and operation of the Lexicon. We wanted to test whether (and how) the regeneration had been assessed in terms of whether it had proven to be "a success". This felt especially relevant in the context of low market confidence in the retail sector and the ongoing effects of the COVID19 pandemic.

The rest of this article outlines some of the factors we see important to underpinning the delivery of the regenerated Bracknell town centre. These could be considered by urban practitioners involved in the planning and operation of major, complex (New Town) town centre regeneration projects.

8. Work with complexity

As a former New Town, only two major landowners owned the majority of land in the town centre. In theory, this should have made land-assembly less complex than in cases with multiple owners. However, historically, their ambitions had not always been aligned. The local authority acted as broker, helping the major landowners recognise their shared interests, resulting in the formation of the Bracknell Regeneration Partnership (BRP). The collaborative approach established between project partners was fundamental in planning, shaping and delivering the scheme, and helped to resolve many of the complexities involved in the construction of the scheme.

9. Risk and decisions

Projects of the scale, cost and complexity of The Lexicon feature a significant number of risks; managing these was essential to scheme delivery and was one of the most important aspects in the regeneration story over many years.

The scale of investment required to transform Bracknell town centre was substantial. The 2002 Masterplan contained an estimated £750m of development (at 2002 prices). The Lexicon scheme was valued at some £240m alone.

Partners developed a shared understanding of the key project milestones and drivers, providing the basis for decisions about risk. Risk management techniques were used (e.g. information-sharing, structured and informal communication practices, and the close-monitoring of project risk factors). However, some risks (such as those presented by the Global Financial Crisis, or changing views from development partners in response to market instability) simply could not be anticipated.

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

Risk management underpinned all stages of the regeneration and the ability of key actors to take bold decisions involved balancing risk against delivery.

10. Politics and power

Town centre regeneration became a shared objective for all political parties on the council. This endured over many years, meaning that the town centre never became a “political football”. Cross-party support was a major factor in ensuring the scheme eventually came to fruition.

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. This gave the project a prominent place in all aspects of the council’s business. It sent a clear message to external audiences, including local residents, that regeneration was fundamentally important. 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 addressing local political conflict or other competing local government issues.

The project also benefited from the council being a unitary authority, rather than part of two-tier local government. This hugely simplified problem-solving and delivery.

11. Developing a vision - a powerful tool

The masterplanning process was at the heart of the regeneration story.

Community engagement and realistic and open collaboration with landowners, investors, and partners was key. The masterplanning process was used to build consensus and lay the foundations to guide the overall approach to the project. The vision set out in the 2002 masterplan was an important vehicle in establishing the core principles that would eventually shape more detailed designs and plans for the town centre.

The masterplanning process involved extensive engagement. Later in the programme, the masterplan was used in dialogue with investors, businesses, potential tenants, and key decision makers in government. At many stages in the process, the masterplan was an important vehicle to reengage with local residents some of whom were deeply sceptical about regeneration, having seen previous attempts fail.

While the goal of delivering comprehensive regeneration remained consistent, the vision proved to be flexible enough to respond to fundamental challenges, many of which could not have been anticipated.

12. Placemaking and design

A fundamental question for the regeneration partners was: what should a Mark One post-war New Town be replaced with? In the case of the Lexicon, the masterplanning process explored many perspectives including those of potential tenants, operators, and of course, residents/future users of the town centre.

Debates centred on the economic weakness of the town centre, its role in eroding civic self-confidence, and its inability to meet the needs of 21st century retailing. There were only five listed buildings within the footprint of the regeneration scheme and while some concerns were voiced, for example about a post-war mural and the relocation of the band stand of the same era, few heritage-related issues were raised. Combined with the deteriorating physical fabric of the centre, the view was taken that only demolition and redevelopment would be capable of delivering a solution that could create a new social, cultural, and economic heart for Bracknell. It is worth pointing out that the master planning process, and the design and construction decisions that followed on from it, represented thinking from the early 2000s (and earlier). Whilst the masterplan did promote the use of renewable energy (securing EU funding to develop the concepts), agendas such as decarbonisation are now front and centre of regeneration practice and may well have led to different design decisions being taken.

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. What should be the scale, urban form, mix of uses, and look and feel of the scheme? As a former New Town, the process could not readily draw on historic or other reference points. One method was to organise focus groups (residents/businesses/potential occupiers etc) which helped to inform the choice of materials, and the look and feel of the buildings.

13. Partnerships and collaboration

Building and sustaining trust between project stakeholders was valuable, especially during times of project uncertainty and stress. The culture of partnership working across development partners was

one of the most important success factors in delivery; this has also been sustained during the current operational phase of the town centre. Many project partners were of the view that the strength of partnership-working in Bracknell was exceptional; a different, perhaps less effective, scheme may have resulted without this strong collaborative working culture.

Team members clearly took pride in the scheme, were committed to its success, and invested significantly in the design and delivery of the Lexicon. This was demonstrated at corporate level through a high-level culture of partnership-working and a sense that it was worth waiting to get things right. Centred on an agreed vision and outcomes, there was a clear role for the council to provide reassurance to investors, indicating that there was no risk from the local electoral cycle.

14. Team commitment and communication

The importance of the regeneration project was recognised by the council's Chief Executive, who created and championed the project team. This team worked together on the scheme for many years. This had parallels with the original New Town Development Corporations, which provided the structure and opportunity for professionals to develop their career (and build their family circumstances) over a sustained period of time.

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

15. Other learning points

As well as the more strategic points set out above, a range of other learning points emerged from our research. These covered a variety of issues and are summarised below:

Diversity of uses

- Plan for a diverse range of uses, providing a range of unit sizes and types; together with effective asset management, this will help to attract and retain a diverse mix of tenants.
- Provide new spaces with the potential to host cultural activities have potential to stimulating visits to town centres more generally. This is about creating a sense of "theatre", including accommodating elements such as street entertainment when planning for animated public spaces.
- Think about tipping the balance even further away from retail and towards other uses such as more community-focused uses such as library, health and social care spaces to underscore a diverse mix of town centre functions.
- Put more focus on independent or smaller retailers, e.g. competitive (including short term) leases and designing for 'pop-up' or temporary uses.

Communications

- Make more use of time-lapse cameras to communicate the progress of the scheme to stakeholders including local residents.
- Engage fully with social media as part of a comprehensive, shared communications strategy.
- Be proactive with scheme communications in order to manage expectations.

Expertise

- Make use of all the skills and depth of local knowledge in the local authority, e.g. bring on board highways and transport teams to feed into project planning / construction.
- Make sure all involved, especially at senior level, understand the challenges of transport solutions and costs. The time and cost involved in planning and delivering transport works was sometimes underestimated by more senior decision makers leading to unrealistic expectations.

Long term maintenance

- Think – and then think harder – about the long-term maintenance of the new public realm. Focus on the quality and durability of the materials and public art installations.

Town centre management

- Install monitoring equipment (to measure footfall, for example) during construction.
- Power, data, water, and lighting should be provided in key areas where the public will gather – this will provide more flexibility for the use of these spaces for animation and events.

Project review

- Provide opportunities to review progress including upon the completion of a scheme like this. This is typical in regeneration practice but the opportunity to do so was welcomed. For instance, respondents enjoyed reflecting on their role in the regeneration, drawing out learning points, and helping to inform future operations and designs.

16. Conclusions

Renewing the centre of any town is a challenging task. The socio-economic and environmental contexts which give shape to regeneration practice are always evolving and today the pace of change seems more rapid than ever. As a former New Town, the Bracknell case presented a particular set of issues and opportunities to stakeholders. Through our research, we have been able to establish a clear set of insights into the only UK New Town to have been substantially regenerated. Interviews conducted since 2016 have yielded a consistent series of lessons that we highlight in this article. Many New Towns worldwide are either now (or will be) in need of regeneration. Bracknell's regeneration may provide lessons for those tasked with transforming their town's fortunes.

References

Forsyth, A. and Peiser, R. (2019), The British New Towns: lessons for the world from the new-town experiment. *Town Planning Review*, Volume 3, Issue 90, pp239-246

Nicholls, V. and Street, E. (2019) *The Lexicon: making it happen*. Reading. Henley Business School, University of Reading.

Nicholls, V. and Street, E. (2022) *The Lexicon: understanding success*. Reading. Henley Business School, University of Reading.

Office of National Statistics. (2022) *Census 2021*(<https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censuspopulationchange/E06000036/> accessed 26/01/23).