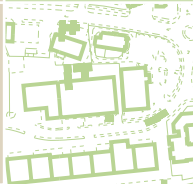


Uckfield

The Bell Lane Improvement Programme - an early Business Improvement District

This case study has been compiled by Wealden District Council to demonstrate how a genuine public/private partnership approach to local regeneration can work effectively to address an identified local need



Introduction

The Bell Lane improvement programme was born from an identified local need to support the economic regeneration of the Bell Lane area of Uckfield, a small rural market town in the Wealden District of East Sussex, which was devastated by the floods of October 2000.

Wealden is the largest district in the county of East Sussex, and covers an area of 323 square miles, 60% of which is made up of Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Bell Lane is a key access route through the Bellbrook Business Park and into Uckfield itself. Uckfield serves as a local employment centre providing a range of jobs for local people. The town is one of the larger settlements in the District, and in recent years has significantly grown in size, with a population now of around 13,680.

The Bellbrook Business Park is the largest and most economically successful business park in the Wealden District. Over 90 businesses are located on the Park ranging from retailers, manufacturers and printers to those involved with construction, food and drink and engineering. In terms of business size, these range from the majority employing between 1 and 49 employees to a few employing between 100 and 199 employees. For Uckfield, it is vital that the Bellbrook Business Park is maintained to a high quality to ensure that its location remains attractive to business.

Background

Bell Lane is a private road used by 3,500 vehicles each day. It has remained unadopted since it was originally constructed over 25 years ago by a developer who has long since gone bankrupt. With Bell Lane remaining a private road with legal ownership incapable of being determined, minimal maintenance and cleansing, the impacts of ever growing usage, combined with a changeable climate had exacerbated the deterioration of this key access route. For Uckfield, the poor condition of Bell Lane, and its resolution had been recognised as a long standing issue of concern for local employers, employees and visitors alike.

Over the years, different approaches have been taken by various individuals, groups and organisations in their attempt to finding a solution to the Bell Lane problem.





Adopting the Partnership Approach

In January 2001, the right group was formed, namely BLIG - the Bell Lane Improvement Group. BLIG was a partnership between:-

Trifast Plc

Crowson Fabrics Ltd

Edward Baden Ltd

Uckfield Town Council

Wealden District Council

East Sussex County Council

Uckfield Regeneration

Partnership (a constitution of members from the public, private and voluntary sectors, all who have an interest in the future regeneration of their community)

Aim of the Local Regeneration Project

BLIG's aim was to improve the overall environment of Bell Lane for the Uckfield community, and in the process promote a real sense of well-being. In particular focussing on the economic, social and environmental benefits the project would bring for the businesses, their employees and visitors alike. BLIG believed that improving this key route in and out of the park/town would support future growth in the local economy with helping businesses to prosper, and helping with the creation of a much safer working environment for all.

For employees and retail customers, Bell Lane was a no go area in the dark for those wishing to walk to/from the town centre. The safety issues created by the severe lack of lighting reduced visibility for employees walking home, especially in the winter months, and therefore impacting on town centre congestion by the need to drive to/from work. The creation of a much safer working environment for employers, employees and visitors by the introduction of street lighting through this project aimed to reduce the fear of crime and in addition, the crime rates. For those with disabilities wanting to access shops/services, the overall environment of Bell Lane and its condition made accessibility and usage near impossible. For businesses looking to locate to Bellbrook Business Park, the issue of Bell Lane was a deterrent to do so.

Steps to implementing a Local Regeneration Project the 'BLIG WAY'

Step 1: Creating the right project management team

To ensure success in the development and implementation of any local regeneration project, the right project management team needs to be identified. The team needs to be able to work well together, be proactive together, and essentially be able to fully embrace the aim of the project to ensure its implementation.

In 2001, the BLIG project team was formed, consisting of private and public sector partners, a mix identified as critical to the successful execution of the Bell Lane improvement project.

Step 2: Project assessment

The Bell Lane improvement project was an identified local need, and one that was subjected to a thorough assessment process to ascertain the scale of physical regeneration required, the cost implications of the project, and what would be required to ensure the aim of the improvement project could be satisfied.

In early 2002 site investigation works were carried out by the local Highways Authority, East Sussex County Council, and funded by BLIG. A survey report was prepared which indicated that £240k was needed to implement the project, bringing Bell Lane up to an adoptable standard.

The overall conclusion of the survey was that approximately 50% of the carriageway would need complete reconstruction, the remaining 50% requiring the removal and replacement of time-expired asphaltic surfacing.

Storm water drains were inspected by CCTV and were pressure jetted clear. Further investigation immediately prior to the works confirmed that very little additional work was required to the drainage system, other than the addition of a few more road side gullies to eliminate existing puddling at low spots.

Significant lengths of kerb line and footways were in need of reconstruction to achieve adoptable standards.

Step 3: Project funding

In this case, East Sussex County Council agreed to invest a one-off amount of £120k into the project on the condition that Uckfield businesses including the other BLIG partners contributed the other 50% (£120k).

BLIG partners contributions amounted to £155,000, plus in-kind contributions including, for example, employee, officer and councillor time given to project development meetings and visiting local businesses, and arranging project administration. The remaining amount of £85,000 was therefore sought from local Uckfield businesses.

How was this achieved? Initially, all Bellbrook Business Park businesses were invited to attend a special meeting to discuss the findings of the investigative survey report and the making of permanent structural improvements to Bell Lane. The need for financial contributions from businesses for this was highlighted at this stage.

In February 2002 a Bell Lane Improvement Programme Newsletter was produced and distributed. The role of BLIG was highlighted; improvement project costs were detailed, and an invitation to businesses for financial contributions promoted.

In June 2002 the BLIG partnership appointed a Project Manager to effectively manage the development process. The partnership actively undertook a series of company visits with the aim being to secure further financial contributions from the private sector. Both landlords and tenants were approached for such support.

Throughout September and October 2002 the fund-raising effort continued to target outstanding non-contributing businesses. The production and distribution of a second edition Bell Lane Improvement Programme Newsletter in November 2002 resulted in a number of businesses making contributions.

By January 2003 the fund-raising effort was recorded as being a success with over 95% of businesses on the Estate providing support towards the improvement project. It was at this point that East Sussex County Council confirmed their offer of one-off funding by contributing the other £120k to secure the implementation of the project.

Step 4: Project implementation

With the necessary funding secured, this vital local regeneration project was given the green light for development and implementation.

Before the first stage in the implementation process could commence it was important for the BLIG partners to consider the business profile of the Estate and ensure a balanced approach to project implementation. It was agreed that all businesses on the Park should be kept fully informed of work in progress to ensure any level of disruption to local trade was kept to a minimum.

The first stage was to have a Ground Radar Survey undertaken to

identify the depth and alignment of buried cables and pipes. This was carried out by Sumo Ltd. Businesses were duly informed of works.

In April 2003 a fixed price contract was negotiated with Colas Ltd on the basis of shared risk. The works including road reconstruction and resurfacing, new street lighting, kerbing, drainage and footway work. A tight seven week programme for the work was agreed.

In May 2003 letters were sent to all businesses, including landlords to inform them about a one day drop-in exhibition providing detailed information about the works timetable. This method of communication enabled the BLIG project team to effectively talk face to face with local business representatives answering questions, and providing reassurance to businesses as required, particularly concerning access arrangements during carriageway reconstruction.

Works commenced on the 19th May 2003 and in early July 2003 the improvement project was completed, with Bell Lane ready for formal adoption by East Sussex County Council.

At an early stage of planning, the greatest challenge presented by the project was that of ensuring access to all industrial and retail outlet frontages during the works. At this stage the advantages of full depth in-situ recycling for reconstruction of the failed sections of carriageway were identified. Briefly, these included a financial saving of at least £20,000 against conventional reconstruction, layer by layer, and perhaps even more significantly a saving in construction time. In the event the financial savings were realised and enabled a more comprehensive resurfacing of footways to be undertaken. Further, reconstruction was completed within 3 working days including two overnight sessions and caused very little disruption of accesses to the many business frontages. Conventional reconstruction was estimated at 10 working days, and would certainly have created considerably more disruption to frontagers.

Step 5: Project evaluation

In terms of evaluating such a physical regeneration project, it is important to know the activity, the activity measures and the output measures.

In this case, the activity was to provide an improved access road to an adoptable standard prepared for the local Highways Authority to take over all future highway maintenance.

The activity measures identified include - number of businesses assisted by the access road improvements; number of businesses using the regenerated Bell Lane, and the size of the area of environmental improvement. The output measures could include the increase in sales for assisted/affected businesses, and number of businesses using the improved infrastructure. To ascertain an increase in sales figure from assisted/affected businesses, a questionnaire survey could be carried out with the businesses.

BLIG is currently undertaking a full evaluation of the project of the project to ascertain both the activity and output measures.

The Next Steps

With the Bell Lane improvement project successfully completed the next steps for BLIG are:-

Formal adoption of Bell Lane by East Sussex County Council Highways later this year (2004) after the maintenance period has ended.

Establishing a Bellbrook Business Park Business Association

New Business Park signs

New Business Park site maps

Conclusion

It is hoped that this case study provides a good practice guide including useful information about how a local regeneration project was initiated, developed and implemented. It provides a useful reference for others looking to pursue the development of similar physical regeneration projects.

This local regeneration project operated effectively as a mini BID (Business Improvement District) carefully targeted, very specific, and one with a clearly identified business focus. This project clearly demonstrates that a genuine public/private partnership approach to local regeneration can work effectively to address an identified local need. The improvement project has been a key prosperity priority of the Local Strategic Partnership's Community Strategy for Wealden. The improvement of this key Business Park will enable the town to attract new businesses, as well as retaining existing businesses. It is a tangible result of community planning in action, and a good example of what can be achieved on a small scale in a small rural market town, without the need for legislation to support it!

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Parker Building Supplies
Pennells Carpets
Rix & Kay
RMC Readymix Home Counties
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Simpsons Uckfield

Soil Instruments
Somerfield Stores Ltd
South East Water Plc
Southern Continuous Forms Ltd
Southern Water
Summerthorne Estates Limited Pension Fund
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The Beacon Press
The Jemma Tools Group Ltd
The Print Factory/Wilson Press
Tressler Coachworks Ltd
Trifast Plc
Two Plus One Windscreens
Uckfield Town Council
UHV Design
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Wealden District Council
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