# REIMAGINING TOMORROW

In an era of high interest rates how are town centres pivoting to create areas where people want to live, work and play? **Alex Bell** reports


**Slough Ice Rink** **The Curve Library**

The Copthorne roundabout from the opening credits of BBC hit comedy classic *The Office* is long gone – and Slough has moved in stronger circles since.

In fact, this is likely an understatement, the Berkshire town's growth over the past decade has been supercharged.

The Centre for Cities Report for 2020 had Slough as home to the largest trading estate in Europe (600 businesses employing 20,000 people), number one for the number of global corporate headquarters in the UK and the not-to-be-sniffed-at highest GDP per worker in the UK at £100,000.

## Slough in the spotlight

What's been the catalyst? Three words essentially. Slough Urban Renewal (SUR), a partnership formed in 2013 between Slough Borough Council and Muse Developments, part of the Morgan Sindall Group.

Regeneration highlights include a £47m mixed-use development, providing 244 Marriott-branded guest rooms alongside 64 Novus Apartments, more than 4,000 sq ft of retail space and the UK's first double-decker Moxy and Residence Inn hotel – all on the former library site.

The Curve is Slough's newer library and cultural centre, also housing a café, Slough Museum, a performance venue, community learning spaces, computer suites, exhibition space and the register office, including a purpose-built wedding room.

There's a rebuilt Ice Arena with extras and The Centre – an £18m leisure facility boasting a swimming pool, learner pool, four-court sports hall, gym and exercise studios which opened in early 2019.

Arbour Park is a circa 2000-capacity stadium with 3G floodlit pitch and function rooms.

Joint venture partner Muse says £1bn in value has been added by SUR along with 244 hotel beds and 350 new homes.

"I've been living and breathing Slough for the best part of a decade," says Muse's Andy Howell.

"A lot has happened within the borough, but at the same time, it's suffered, not surprisingly, like the rest of the high street because of the downturn of economic conditions, cost of living and the use of the internet and online shopping.

"When I first started working on SUR I wanted to understand what success would look like. How would we measure whether we've been successful and been a catalyst for change? We decided that if other developers and investors came to the town and started doing things because of the difference that you've made that was it. And that's what's happened."

Among those investors are the owners of The Queensmere and Observatory Shopping Centre site – the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA), with British Land as their development manager.

## Not plain sailing

Slough borough is 12-and-a-half square miles, similar to many London boroughs and lies 20 miles west of central London.

In July 2021 Slough Borough Council declared bankruptcy having discovered a £100m gap in its finances.

"We've got ourselves in a slightly challenging space because like many local authorities Slough went into administration and had to issue a 114 notice," says Howell.

"Their ability to invest in the joint venture and the property partnership is somewhat stymied.

"We've had to pivot our strategy. We have the ability in this partnership to deliver development and achieve our objectives in a variety of different ways. One of them is that we can do direct development. So we can build hotels, we can get planning and we can build apartments, we can build houses and put in planning applications, which we are – things are still happening.

"However, the partnership works on the basis of it being 50/50 investment, 50/50 profit. So, we've looked at the developments that we were proposing to do directly and we're looking at doing them indirectly now."

Focusing on the value so far achieved in Slough, for its economy, its people, visitors and businesses, Howell adds: "The council took the strategic move to form a property partnership, rather than do everything piecemeal. We started off with three community projects, The Curve, the ice rink and the leisure centre. Off the back of the success we ended up doing three more leisure centres and six schools in addition to 250 affordable homes over 25 sites.

"At Muse we've got national partnerships, like English Cities Fund, we've got Waterside Places and local authority partnerships, which cover multiple sites or single-site development agreements.

"Could more local authorities do what SUR does? Of course they could. But it depends upon what advice they're getting in terms of how they want to form partnerships, how they want to do development and how much land they own, the demands and the needs."

**Booming Bracknell**

# BUCKING THE TREND BRACKNELL

Insider speaks to Bracknell Forest Council's Andrew Hunter, director of place, planning and regeneration

### Why are we seeing such a rise in urban renewal projects?

Residents want to live close to safe and modern facilities and near to public transport so they can access services quickly and without having to drive. They also benefit from the cultural buzz and leisure opportunities urban centres provide.

### Is it time for town centres to boom?

It's no secret that many town centres have suffered across the country following the pandemic and other recent global events. However, Bracknell really is bucking the trend with increasing footfall and more retailers joining the offer.

There is the opportunity for town centres to really boom but the vision needs to be more than shops – town centres can't just be a retail destination any more. While retail is incredibly important, and a staple of town centres and many high streets, in order to grow, mature and prosper they need to adapt and evolve in line with market trends and consumer expectations.

In Bracknell Forest, we have reimagined our town centre to include leisure and activities, arts and culture. We've invested in popular seasonal activities to draw crowds from our local population but from much further away too. This has helped us secure Bracknell town centre's reputation post-pandemic as a successful and popular retail and leisure destination of choice regionally. For example, our Bracknell Forest festivals, which saw several enormous trees giant sculptures take root in the town centre for several weeks in summer 2021 and 2022, drew crowds from miles away and also secured national media coverage and awards for innovation. It also linked the town centre into arts, culture and our natural heritage.

Likewise, hosting the borough's first Pride in the town centre in June 2023 gave the town an additional boost and unique selling point. It's rare for town centres to be pivotal culture destinations in their own right – often they rely on specific destinations like museums, galleries, music venues and theatres. However, in our mind, creating and marketing the town centre as a destination in its own right is essential and makes the difference between a boom town and a bust town.

### Is Bracknell becoming a blueprint for others to follow across the UK?

In terms of vision, Bracknell town centre could become a blueprint for others to follow as it carefully balances the needs of a modern and evolving destination. It showcases how a town centre can include retail, food and beverage, leisure, activities, events and culture as well as incorporating affordable homes.

We've been very careful to regenerate in stages and this has allowed us to review and adapt. If we'd developed the full scheme in one go several years ago, our plans would not have been as responsive and may have stalled.

### What can we expect to see regeneration wise in Bracknell during 2024?

There are lots of exciting milestones for Bracknell town centre's overall regeneration in 2024. Firstly, alongside our development partners at Bracknell Regeneration Partnership (BRP) we'll be bringing forward activities on the 'meanwhile space' area that used to house the former Bentalls department store.

Our vision for this is very much along the lines of community use – a space for everyone to enjoy in the interim while permanent plans are drawn up. We'll also see our joint venture partnership with Countryside Properties (the Cambium Partnership) reach significant milestones, with the 169-home Market Street residential build nearing completion. We are just completing masterplans for a large site to the south of the town centre near the railway station and the retail area, which will create a key new open space for the centre and 600 homes.

A second masterplan around the town library is also being developed, which will include housing, commercial uses and a hotel. We expect to see these sites being developed over the next ten years.