



## The redevelopment of the Westgate Shopping Centre, Oxford: a brief

### Location

- The Westgate Centre is located in the heart of Oxford city centre.
- Although the Westgate Centre itself is not within the Central Conservation Area, it is surrounded by it on all sides.
- The Centre's relationship to both the city centre and the historic Central Conservation Area is an important factor to take into account in any redevelopment proposal.

### History

- The Westgate shopping centre was completed and opened in the early 1970s, and is now owned by a pension company. It represented the first major indoor shopping centre in Oxford. The development provided accommodation for a major department store and 36 shops, together with a linked multi-storey car park facing on to Thames Street and an open-surface car park.
- A planning application to redevelop the site was submitted in the mid-1980s by development company Arrowcroft but, due to changes in the economic climate, was withdrawn by the applicant prior to being formally considered by the Council. The timing of new development proposals is crucial to their success and often in the case of major schemes the retail market conditions may change.
- In May 2000 a second application for the refurbishment and redevelopment of this site was submitted by the Westgate Partnership, a joint venture set up between Capital Shopping Centres and LaSalle Investment. The scheme proposed more than doubling the size of the retail floor space at Westgate and introduced a number of new land uses such as residential flats, restaurants, bus hub, playgroup facilities and studio workshops. Replacement public parking was proposed at the same level of 1,250 spaces but underground. The development included three key elements:
  - an internal and external refurbishment of the existing Westgate Shopping centre from Bonn Square to Old Greyfriars Street
  - the demolition of C&A and the bridge over Old Greyfriars Street and their replacement by a glass-roofed bus hub at the centre of the development
  - the demolition of the multi-storey car park and removal of the surface car park and their replacement by an extended shopping area stretching to Thames Street with residential accommodation over, and replacement parking underground.
- The City Council supported the scheme and decided to grant planning permission. Since it was a major development proposal this application was referred to Central Government and in particular the Secretary of State for the Environment and the Regions (John Prescott). Given the scale of the development and objections to the scheme he decided to call a public inquiry. This allows a rigorous assessment to be made of the proposal in a public forum, and offers the opportunity for the case to be presented in support, from the Westgate Partnership and the City Council, and those from those opposing the scheme.
- An independent Inspector was appointed by the Secretary of State for the Environment and Regions (John Prescott) to assess the scheme. At the Public Inquiry there appeared to be a general agreement in support of the principal of the redevelopment of Westgate. The main objections raised were in relation to the design and mass of the new buildings.



- The Inspector considered the proposal to be acceptable in principal subject to concerns over the external treatment of the scheme. However, the Secretary of State did not accept the recommendation made by the Planning Inspector, and overturned that decision. The Secretary of State took the view that the proposal was poorly designed, too large and bulky and would obscure important views into the city.

## The need for change

- There is a need in Oxford to improve both the quality and the amount of additional retail provision, to maintain its position as an important retail centre.
- In architectural terms the Westgate centre is a product of its time and is in need of major refurbishment and/or redevelopment.
- The external appearance of the existing buildings does appear very outdated and visually detracts from the street scene.
- The shopping arcade itself, although recently refurbished, is still in need of significant improvement.
- The existing buildings, particularly the multi-storey car park, visually detract from the appearance of the area and are desperately in need of redevelopment.
- The present development does not properly relate to adjacent buildings.

## Vision

- To produce a new development that in urban design terms improves the relationship of this site to the city centre. The siting, massing and design of the proposed development needs to relate properly to the surrounding area, and should be of a high design standard. It can be contemporary and make an architectural statement.
- The new development should represent a significant improvement to the architectural appearance of the area, and enhance its setting in relation to the Conservation Area. It should improve the accessibility of this site to the City centre by all forms of transport, including greater pedestrian access.
- The development should comprise principally additional retail accommodation, but could include other complementary uses such as residential, food and drink, employment (offices).
- The new building should include a shopping mall which provides an attractive area to shop in.
- It should positively improve the appearance of the area and respect the important views into the city centre.
- The new proposal should make the best and most efficient use of the site given its important city centre location. Urban land is a valuable and scarce resource and therefore must be used to its maximum potential.

## Presentation

The presentation of the scheme should include the following:

- a site analysis
- a clear statement of your vision or design concept
- a visual presentation of your proposal to include 3D drawings
- a timetable and fee.