

Client: Oak Holdings plc  
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# From tiny acorns

■ **If Oak Holdings' £370m YES leisure project gets the green light, it could kick-start the huge Rotherham Renaissance.**

**Jonathan Brasse reports**

ALL THE PARTIES INVOLVED WITH OAK HOLDINGS' £370m, 3.2m sq ft (300,000 sq m), multi-use leisure complex in Rotherham claim such a project has never been seen before.

YES – the Yorkshire Entertainment Sensation – will complement the many region-boosting schemes that comprise Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council and Yorkshire Forward's £2bn Rotherham Renaissance programme.

But its conception has had problems. A trade-off over the inclusion of a cinema, theatre and bowling alley, between Rotherham Council and neighbouring authority Sheffield City Council last month, was deemed necessary because the latter felt its city centre attractions would be economically compromised.

Had Oak not removed these proposed attractions from the scheme's indoor entertainment component, its plans for the regeneration of the former Pithouse West colliery could have screeched to a halt. Oak is now poised to submit a revised planning application – the first was submitted in January – this month.

Sheffield City Council chief executive Sir Bob Kerslake insists: 'We were happy with the outdoor aspects. The issues were over the theatre, cinema and bowling alley. Our concerns were that they should be in the city centre rather than a country park. It is about suitable development and we are pleased this has been addressed in the revised proposals.'

Stephen Lewis, chief executive at Oak Holdings, says: 'Had Sheffield been a statutory objector, there would have been a lengthy inquiry. There was always the danger had it gone to a public inquiry, we would have asked whether it was worth it, pulled out and put our money elsewhere.'

If the revised application for the three-zone

project, which features conference, indoor entertainment and leisure, as well as extreme sports facilities, is successful, it will then make the trip south for a government review. If the scheme is not called in, work could begin on site next summer.

## NO PUBLIC FUNDING

In the meantime, a local leisure market with nothing to compare with the YES proposals will ponder the viability of such a hybrid union of themes evolving alongside the greenery of the 750 acre (300 ha) Rother Valley Park. With more than 750,000 visitors a year, it is South Yorkshire's second-most visited public attraction.

The YES project would involve about 1.2m sq ft (111,480 sq m) of gross leasable development. It will cost an estimated £270m and be split into three distinct territories to be integrated with more than 30,000 sq ft (2,790 sq m) of restaurants and bars. Although distinctively different, these areas will fit in aesthetically with the overall design. The funding of the scheme will be comparable with that of a shopping centre; anchor tenants need to be secured before Oak fills neighbouring voids with like-minded businesses.

Lewis confirms: '[The areas] will be run on a commercial base rent with a small turnover provision – no different from retail. Funding will be based on secured contracted income.' He adds that no funds will come from the public sector.

Oak obtained preliminary signatures from extreme sports operator Venture Extreme and target golf specialist Top Golf in January, while technology specialists Sony UK and Venue Solutions signed memorandums of understanding in June.

Rotherham Council chief executive Mike Cuff



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believes this underlines faith in the scheme. He says: 'They will all be committed if all the regulatory hurdles are completed.'

Dominic Berger, managing director at Venue Solutions, says: 'The YES project provides us with a unique project in which to showcase our technologies and services.'

Lewis says these memorandums of understanding form the basis for securing anchors at the scheme. He expects other tenants to emerge soon.

What Sony and the others intend to do with the indoor entertainment facility, however, remains ambiguous. Lewis toys with the notion of a Universal Studios-style theme and also suggests a parallel with France's Futuroscope – a technology-driven theme park near Poitiers. But he insists the term theme park is inappropriate. 'It is not a theme park – more of a Universal Studios experience,' he says.

#### **EXTREME VIEWS**

Lewis says of the extreme sports element: 'It will cater for professionals, but will also cater for the grandma who wants that last experience before she dies.'

He confirms that Oak is in talks with three hoteliers intent on securing a plot at the scheme. 'There are three names in the frame for two hotels,' he says. 'One is in for both, the others for one or the other.'

Last month, Lewis met prospective occupiers interested in taking either a 40,000 sq ft (3,715 sq m) four-star hotel or a 15,000 sq ft (1,395 sq m) three-star hotel. There will also be 10,000 sq ft (930 sq m) of conferencing space and a spa facility of 5,000-7,000 sq ft (465-650 sq m).

Entrance to the scheme will be free, and visitors will pay only for what they use. 'If you want to just wander around, you can,' says Cuff.

The YES project may have to contend with the possibility that three such distinctive themes will strip each other of integrity. If the success of one element detracts from the quality of another, Oak will face a difficult situation.

Cuff believes its location will guard against this. He says: 'There are 30 million-plus people living within a two-hour drive, which was a key issue for Oak to address in terms of easy access.' The site is also near Peel Holdings' Robin Hood airport in Doncaster.

But will ease of access cause unwarranted disruption for an area renowned for being a peaceful retreat? Cuff does not think so and confirms Rotherham Council is assessing options for easing predicted traffic increases. These include the construction of a railway station at neighbouring Swallownest.

Oak will also hope that Sheffield council's concerns over Oak's suggested leisure portfolio will be the last. Kerslake says: 'We will have a practical input. We will be consulted on the detailed application and when it is developed, we want to ensure it maximises opportunities to benefit Sheffield, as well as Rotherham.'

With Sheffield council acting as a consultative body only, with no practical input, it has the capability to raise further concerns. Some believe it may well do so. Roger Howarth, associate at NAI Fuller Peiser, says: 'Sheffield and Rotherham fall out over certain schemes and this was a case of Sheffield dragging its heels. But the YES project will attract more inward investment, so it will be good for the community.' The creation of 3,000 full-time positions and 2,000 construction jobs to build and facilitate the scheme, would make it hard to dismiss such local benefits.

Cuff says: 'This is something that will benefit the whole of the subregion. It isn't just an attraction for Rotherham, it is an attraction of national, and even international, stature.'

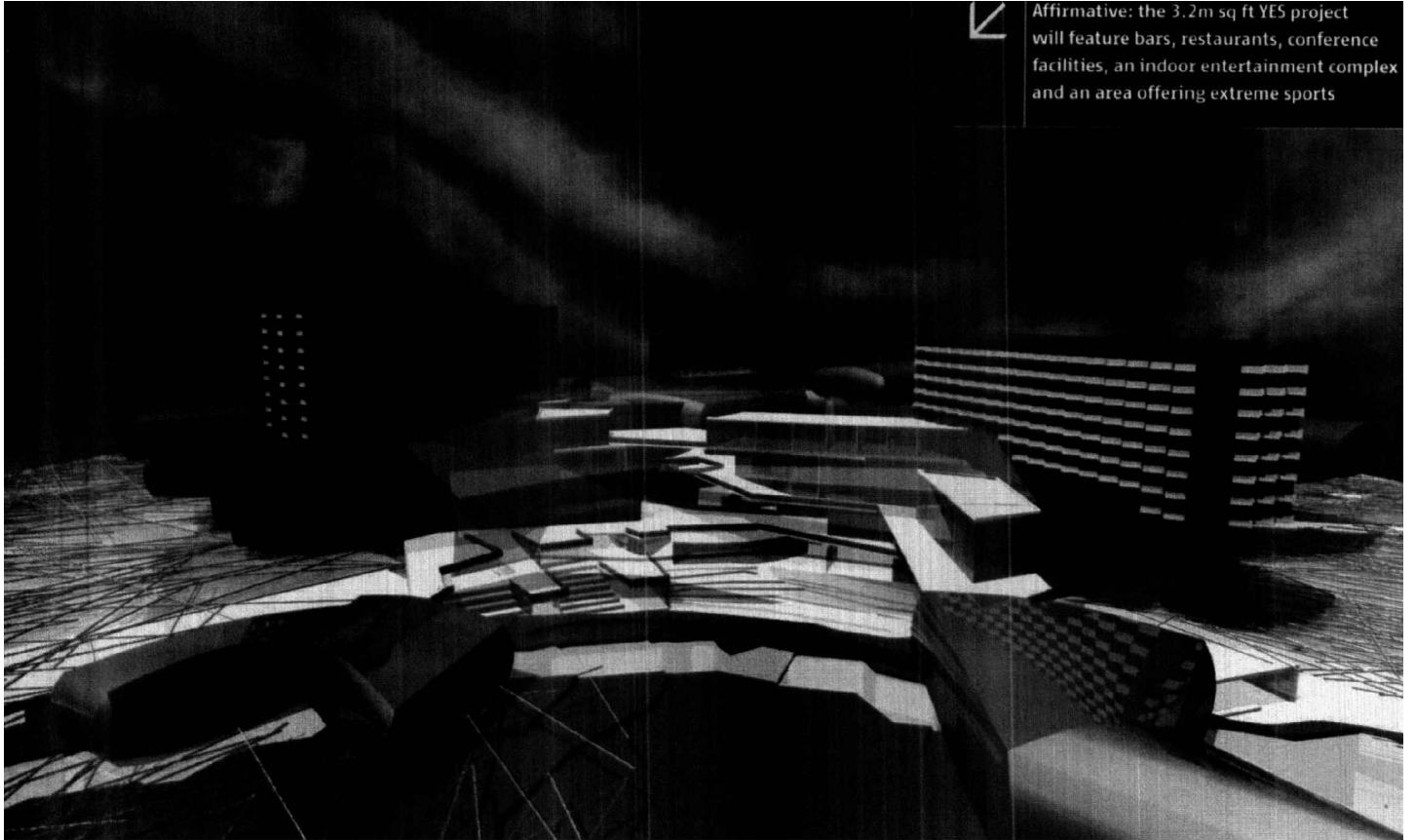
There is a way to go before the vision of Oak Holdings and Rotherham council becomes a reality. But with Sheffield council on side, the journey has been made easier. Ultimately, the success of the project will depend on how well each of its three market targets is tapped.

Oak is entering uncharted territory. If its idea doesn't work, its dream could become a nightmare. ■



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↙ Affirmative: the 3.2m sq ft YES project will feature bars, restaurants, conference facilities, an indoor entertainment complex and an area offering extreme sports