

E3M



# NORTHERN ROOTS AND OLDHAM ALCHEMY

Case Study: March 2019

***“Alchemy...gives you a canvas to let your imagination run wild. The mixture of different experiences and backgrounds: commissioners, social enterprises, social investors, lawyers – when you get that collective brain power together you come up with some really good results.”***

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Oldham Alchemy was convened for Oldham Council by E3M with the support of The Connect Fund.

Members of E3M's Social Enterprise Leaders Business Club and Bold Commissioners Group attended, with funders, social investors and E3M Partners.

E3M is an initiative of Social Business International Ltd. Company number 7007166.  
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# INTRODUCTION: Jonathan Bland, E3M

Northern Roots is a bold initiative being supported and enabled by Oldham Council.

Its ingredients: a currently underused 65-hectare site and a new brand centred on food growing and production. Together they will be a catalyst for community health and wellbeing, new leisure opportunities, skills development, employment, enterprise creation and service transformation.



An opportunity for everyone in Oldham to steer, co-operate and collaborate to bring ideas to life on a unique scale, Northern Roots can be a positive vehicle for social impact, improving the health, wellbeing and economic participation of Oldham residents.

At the heart of the project lies Snipe Clough, adjacent to Oldham's Alexandra Park. The majority of the site is owned by the council, which proposes to make it available to communities, partners and social investors to trial new ways of harnessing green assets to deliver sustainable social outcomes. Over the last two years Oldham Council has taken the project from initial concept to pilot phase with support from Salford University, Planit-ie and E3M.

E3M Alchemy events are catalysts for change. They involve insights and application from impactful, sustainable and mature social enterprises. They promote the reformation of community relationships and public institutions and the integration of local services, facilities, businesses and stakeholders.

We convened Oldham Alchemy to bring new perspectives on how everyone can do "our bit" to make Northern Roots succeed.

We sought to ensure Northern Roots reflects Oldham's ambition to be a productive and cooperative place with healthy, aspirational and sustainable communities.

We shared knowledge about the "art of the possible" with real, successful examples of innovation in social enterprise and service delivery from across the UK.

We interrogated ideas for large-scale social enterprises in the park, examining how these could contribute to building an inclusive economy and delivering co-operative services.

We examined the social impact and value these ideas could deliver, their financial sustainability and the investment or resources they would need.

And we explored how Northern Roots can enable Oldham to develop services which cost less and deliver better outcomes, stimulate local, inclusive, economic growth, and empower and engage local residents in solving problems.

Participants were diverse. Council representatives and a range of Oldham stakeholders worked intensively for 24 hours alongside:

- "Bold Commissioners," senior leaders in local authorities from across the country, all pushing the boundaries with new approaches to organising local services,
- members of the E3M Social Enterprise Leaders Business Club from some of the UK's most successful and innovative social enterprises that trade in public service markets,
- funders, social investors and the E3M Partners.

Several exciting and innovative ideas were considered during Oldham Alchemy, learning from the experiences of participants. Some of these ideas are bold, some radical. They may require courage and vision. All aspire to create transformative social enterprises and maximise the opportunity of Northern Roots for Oldham's people.

**Jonathan Bland, E3M**

# WHAT HAPPENED AT ALCHEMY?

Oldham Alchemy was a specially designed and facilitated event on 10 and 11 July 2018. It brought together 85 participants to consider how Northern Roots can stimulate local, inclusive, economic growth.

They included council staff from multiple departments, stakeholders from a wide ranges of Oldham organisations and communities, social entrepreneurs and representatives of interest groups.

Before these intensive 24 hours in July, stakeholders were also invited to workshops in London and Oldham in June to hear more about the opportunity Northern Roots offers and prepare for the full Alchemy event.

Over the course of Oldham Alchemy, participants:

- heard presentations about the opportunities Northern Roots offers – and potential challenges.
- met innovators who have led exemplary projects involving social enterprise and service delivery, all over the UK, who gave vignette descriptions of their work.
- explored business ideas within eight different cross-sector working groups, examining potential social enterprise ideas in support of five themes (Growing and Enterprise; Leisure and Events; Care and Wellbeing; Skills and the entire site).
- each working group developed one or more social enterprise idea, outlining its potential impact and the social value it would create, its customers and users, revenue streams, sustainability, value proposition, financing and resource needs in a business model canvas.
- enjoyed a working dinner hosted by Oldham social enterprise Age UK Oldham at George St Chapel.
- presented their ideas to all participants at a pitch session, with each pitch videoed.

In this report we summarise the exciting ideas developed at Oldham Alchemy. We examined new models for social enterprise development that can operate at scale and support local needs, improving services, creating local wealth and wellbeing, skills development, jobs and opportunities for communities.

There are a diverse, bold, ambitious, boundary-pushing but realistic set of proposals for co-operative, collaborative and sustainable service delivery by social enterprises in Northern Roots.



# LEISURE AND EVENTS

Two working groups examined opportunities on the site for leisure and activities, and to develop commercial revenue generating events. What kind of activities could be enabled on the site? How would they be paid for? What sort of businesses might be developed? And how can Oldham ensure a high quality and diverse range of leisure activities are sustainable on the site and that access, impact and value are not compromised by commercial objectives?

## BIGGEST ADVENTURE PARK IN THE COUNTRY

Table one proposed the “Biggest Adventure Park in the Country” to increase activity levels, physical and mental health and reduce social deprivation, childhood obesity and falls amongst Oldham’s elderly population. It would be designed and built by Oldham residents and provide many employment opportunities.

The park would have two main customer segments:

- the immediate population of Oldham and especially the two estates bordering Snipe Clough, with activities for all ages and abilities structured to be accessible and affordable to young people, families, the elderly and vulnerable groups.
- visitors coming to Oldham to participate in “destination activities” including mountain bike trails, sailing, windsurfing, a skate park, gardens, walking paths, a play zone, a landscaped amphitheatre for events and more.
- *“what’s really important is that our local communities are able to afford the offer, so that could be a discount scheme if you’re a local resident, but also it’s the free things on site to do, and how do we create those free activities...we spent quite a lot of time designing where those free activities might be, from nature trails through to heritage trails, through to how do we engage local people in some of those ideas.”*

Run as a community partnership, this social enterprise would offer event space and paid-for activities, using these and revenue from:

- an augmented reality app,
- advertising,
- cafés,
- Laser Quest or other commercial providers,
- corporate and themed events,
- an environmental challenge,

to create a sustainable income stream and to cross-subsidise activities and entry fees for Oldham residents.

The same working group created a business model canvas for this adventure park and for a further idea to create an **events space with trails**. This 750 sq metre, semi-permanent, modular covered events space would generate revenue from festivals and events, and create social value through:

- employment and training opportunities,
- subsidising community events,
- cross-community and social cohesion.

Its revenue would come from a diverse range of festivals and events.

# LEISURE AND EVENTS (2)

## INCLUSIVE ADVENTURE PARK BLENDING AUGMENTED REALITY WITH PHYSICAL ASSETS

The second Leisure and Events table created a business model canvas for the ***“best, and most inclusive, adventure park in the country.”***

It blends augmented reality (AR) with the unique physical location, *“Imagine Total Wipeout meets It’s a Knockout meets Ninja Warrior, but there’s some really interesting unique selling points here. We’re going to do this all digitally, so we’re going to mix an augmented reality system along with the exercise that you’ll do along the way in the trail.”*

Their idea mixes hi-tech digital devices with physical activity, and is designed to be inclusive to all ages and abilities. It will encourage participation through “gamification” and challenges, and apps designed for different segments of the population.

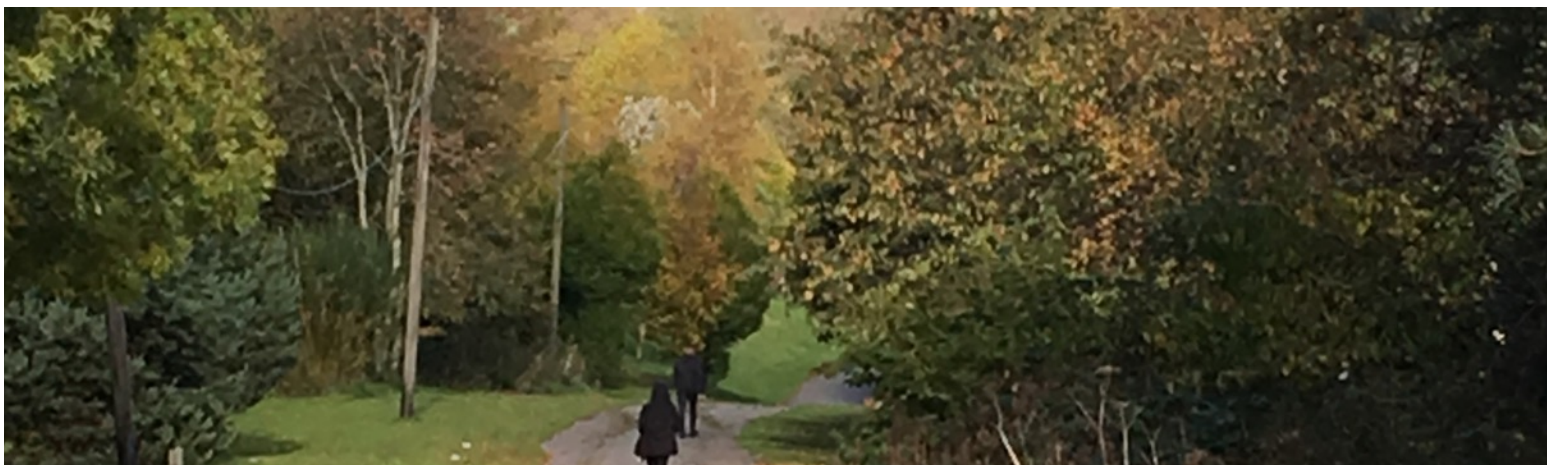
Bringing visitors from across the UK, the park would include renovated football pitches, gardens, a sculpture trail, graded walking trails, mountain biking trails, a nature pond, cafes and shops, aerial adventure walkways, and event space.

Some of these areas would be free to access to all, others would be operated commercially highly subsidised entrance for residents. Some access to activities could be “unlocked” by generating reward points within apps. Every element would be underpinned by social entrepreneurship and innovation.

Again, it creates jobs and training opportunities, improves physical and mental health and wellbeing, and can help to integrate isolated people and communities.

Its potential revenue streams include:

- payment for participation / access to (this part of) the site,
- payment for advertising in the augmented reality apps,
- optional additional payments within the apps to unlock bonus aspects,
- social prescribing and dividends,
- corporate visitors,
- educational use of the facilities,
- large scale events.



# CARE AND WELLBEING

Two working groups examined opportunities that can support the outcomes for improved population health and wellbeing. How could social prescribing and care farming be scaled up? What initiatives could be developed on the site to accelerate this?

Table one proposed an idea which “captures the very essence of our bit, your bit, everybody’s bit” –

## COMMUNITY LAND OWNERSHIP AT WARD OR POSTCODE LEVEL

Their plan would involve the transfer of 55 acres of the site to Ward ownership (through a Community Land Trust), which works out at 1 sqm per citizen. What the community then do is up to them – but community-owned enterprises, the therapeutic use of land and growing or grazing could all be encouraged.

The site would host a microfinance provider, credit union and back office business support (with a light-touch regulation and conflict resolution role).

Social Impact:

- to change the ecology of public service delivery.
- to create aspiration, to work together, to redefine how services are delivered through citizen devolution and co-operation and control.
- improvements in wellbeing and happiness, aspiration, engagement.
- big picture outcome indicators across mental health, obesity, diabetes, suicide, self-harm and other commonly used metrics.
- “inclusivity” in practice: offering agency and empowering true community-led decision making.
- to bring the Council’s mission as a “co-operative council” to life.

Revenue could be earned through:

- ward members’ devolved budgets.
- reduce cost per capita to Council and CCG.
- if the Council and CCG – and neighbouring authorities – wish to maximise social value within their supply chains, this will enable that.
- timebanking.
- local currency / barter system.
- anaerobic digester.
- hire of under-utilised council plant and equipment.
- social prescribing.
- participatory budgeting.

And this idea could be financed by:

- Social Investment Bonds.
- pension funds / coupon.
- community shares.
- community payback scheme - to clear the land.
- ward members’ devolved budgets + capital budgets.
- social investment into local businesses created, with shared value extraction.
- funders such as Big Lottery and Heritage Lottery and foundations eg Stoller Foundation.

***“We’re very taken with the application of the values of the cooperative council, and so we wanted to create citizen devolution through that cooperative movement. The risk is that nothing happens.”***

# CARE AND WELLBEING (2)

## AN EXCEPTIONAL WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE

The second care and wellbeing working group proposed an Exceptional Wilderness Experience to make Oldham a destination.

This idea encompasses pods, glamping, bushcraft and woodland activities, retreats, care farming and other activities in a “nature based health and wellbeing training facility” with a flexible, sustainable and eco-friendly infrastructure. It would have an anchor facility and be co-designed and community-run.

Why exceptional? This would be “...something that’s safe, safe for all generations and all communities, something that offers them tranquillity. Something that’s inclusive. Something that actually presents opportunities for ownership for the various communities and the various groups within Oldham. Something that actually promotes a sense of belonging.”

The potential social impacts are:

- to improve residents’ sense of belonging and create connections.
- to reduce isolation, exclusion and loneliness.
- improving community cohesion and community safety.
- to provide targeted interventions for vulnerable groups.

This working group described a number of interconnecting “Zones” including many social enterprises including leisure and event businesses, activities, cafes and restaurants.

Revenue and initial financing would be generated through:

- commercial sale of land, activities, and experiences in a social value framework,
- social prescribing / care and support,
- individual customers,
- schools,
- social investors and vetted developers,
- seed funding.





# SKILLS

Our skills working group considered how to use the site as a major source of training, skills and research. This might involve partnerships with academic and training institutions and even the RHS. What kind of businesses can be developed on the site to do this?

The working group proposed a Food and Drink Centre of Excellence. It would attract businesses and people to Oldham to learn, grow and share the world class resources developed in Northern Roots.

Multiple revenue streams include office rental income; the Apprenticeship levy; College / Adult training funding; Grant funding to deliver programmes; Government contracts (such as training ex-offenders); the sale of products and services created in the Centre of Excellence through Northern Roots outlet store and website; corporate sponsorship and investment in incubated businesses.

The centre of Excellence would raise aspirations and provide access to high quality training and skills development which cannot currently be accessed in the region. It would create social value through creating local employment opportunities, in increasing the size of the local workforce, generating and retaining wealth in Oldham, building skills and offering training to vulnerable groups, and improving health and wellbeing.

The development of skills around food production links with the growing and enterprise theme.

The table also stressed there are opportunities for quick and early wins. They considered it worthwhile to build on the excellent reputation that the staff team at Alexandra Park already have for horticulture. There could be potential to develop an outdoor classroom at Alexandra Park as a land-based College.

The group noted the potential for a “creative tension” between the commercial and leisure elements of the site, which need to attract money to Oldham, and the social value outputs which need to build community:

*“Particularly around creating sustainable skills and employment, rather than a project that might provide a lot of very good therapeutic support, we’ve got to think about creating real jobs and getting people into those jobs, and doing that really effectively. That creates a tension which we think needs a bit more work.”*

The potential impacts and outcomes include: increased investment in, and income from, land-based businesses and an increase in Oldham’s skills base and in jobs.

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***“Some really exciting opportunities for the Borough, from all kinds of perspectives.”***

***“The mixture of talks and table work was really helpful, providing food for thought; often leading to further thoughts and discussion.”***

***“The range of partners I’ve met has been so exciting.”***

***“Really found it useful to have a large number of people from outside Oldham from a range of backgrounds. Their insights and experiences have been invaluable.”***

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***“Northern Roots will put Oldham on the national and even global map as a pioneer of a new social, environmental and economic compact, at a time when the planet has never needed one more.”***

# GROWING AND ENTERPRISE

Through its parks and Growing Hubs, Oldham Community Power and projects such as Get Oldham Growing, the town has already become a beacon for community growing, local food production, horticulture skills and training, renewable energy, and urban biodiversity. Northern Roots is a unique opportunity to build on this experience and expertise, at an unprecedented scale.

One working group examined growing and enterprise, considering large scale production, the application of new technologies, of edible/non-edible produce that can be consumed locally or distributed across the region and beyond, and processed to give added value.

Their proposal includes the creation and development of a “whole site” social enterprise to hold the site – and own and manage the **Northern Roots** and **Made and Grown in Oldham** brands.

It will provide:

- incubation, mentoring and support services to social entrepreneurs who will rent areas and units,
- a route to market for community-owned social enterprises,
- access to developing technologies,
- brand development to develop the value of the **Northern Roots** and **Made and Grown in Oldham** brands.

Its impact:

- fair access to affordable, locally grown, high quality food,
- improved wellbeing and health,
- creating employment opportunities at or above national living wage – through a sustainable business model,
- increased access to quality open space,
- meaningful career paths for future – not old-fashioned horticulture,
- education,
- inclusion,
- create opportunities for socially disadvantaged groups to learn, build self-esteem and climb the employment ladder,
- tourism for the borough, combining food events with cultural events.

Its revenue streams could include:

- rental income and licence fees from occupiers with tapering scales to help incubate start-ups,
- membership fees for membership of Northern Roots,
- corporate and leisure events,
- returns on equity social investments in some businesses,
- sales from products online and in a retail shop,
- brand licencing fees,
- collaboration with University to unlock research funding.

# THE WHOLE SITE

Two working groups considered how to draw all the themes together across the whole of the site. How can the whole site work as an enterprise, what is the overarching model and what would be the operating principles to ensure maximum and continuing social value for Oldham? Are there business opportunities that can be done on a site-wide basis? How can other individual enterprises focused in different areas operate independently whilst being part of a wider delivery arrangement? What kind of new enterprise development and support services would need to be built into the development of the overall site?

## 1: A COMPLETE SYSTEM

Table one created a detailed model and business canvas for the entire site as a whole system. They proposed a physical hub within the site, enabling revenue streams through rentals, events, retail; an enterprise hub to incubate and support startup and developing (social) enterprises; a physical location for the operations of services which could be delivered for (and bought by) public sector partners; a meanwhile space to test and prove concepts; co-operative maker spaces and a variety of activities within the land and woodland. Revenue would also come from personal health budgets.

The group proposed a charitable trust should own the site with a subsidiary management company running it. They sought to understand how best to encourage and engage people from Oldham to sit on the trust.

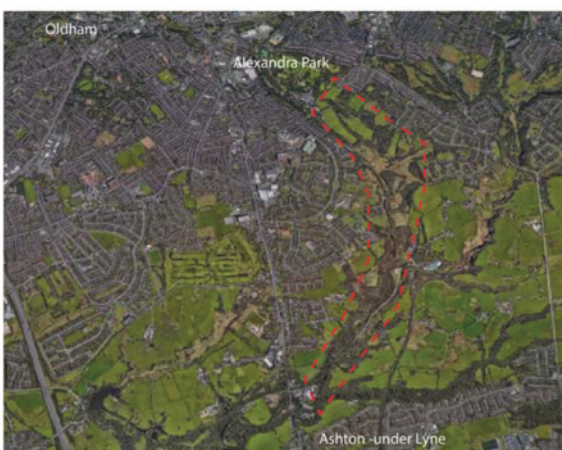
It's crucial to be highly specific about the social impacts and the benefits to Oldham, and to build confidence and capacity. Also of critical importance: protecting the Northern Roots brand through service and product quality.

Finance: the group considered early wins; getting onto the site now with real vision and drive is important. Meanwhile events, meanwhile uses and other early easy wins across multiple sectors could show the potential of the site to Oldham's entire community. Brand and media are key here, with online presence, social media activity and getting the media involved straight away.

Woodland thinning and management early on would open up the site for leisure and activity use. Relocating the existing sports pitches needs to be done early, it frees up parts of the site for events. Signage and wayfinding will be crucial too: "nobody knows the site is there," and if people don't know about it they won't use it.

This table renamed traditional community consultation as community conversation. The big question to put to Oldham – and to answer, as part of an accurate and engaging launch of the Northern Roots brand and vision, is "Why this, why now?"

Quality, community first, openness, transparency, culture, environment are all fundamental for the long-term sustainable success of Northern Roots.



Map showing Snipe Clough (outlined in red).



# THE WHOLE SITE (2)

## A SET OF GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND A GOVERNANCE AND BUSINESS MODEL

The second table began by **designing a set of principles** as a framework for everything that would happen on the whole site, to ensure a consistency with the vision to generate wealth and social value for Oldham.

Their top five principles are:

- that the site creates good local jobs, skills and training opportunities,
- that it is sustainable both financially and environmentally,
- that it meets local community needs and reduces inequalities,
- that it unites the borough and creates something that everyone can feel proud of,
- and that it's accessible and affordable for local people but it can also draw in people from GM and beyond, and it can put Oldham on the map for all the right reasons.

Taking these principles as their guide, this table then examined a governance and business model. They concluded that a charitable community benefit society (a bencom) could enable capital to be raised through a community share issue, which would also be a tool for engagement. They note the potential for match funding to double the amount of money generated by community shares, and how membership of a community benefit society enables stakeholder empowerment.

An asset transfer of the land from Oldham Council to this new entity could take place. This could also include adjacent housing and Heritage Centre sites bringing revenue-generating assets into the new bencom from the outset. Local authorities would need to invest in infrastructure work to open up access to the site.

The group was inspired by examples of eco-housing from the Netherlands; these could generate capital. Shared public spaces and public transport must be considered from the outset, and finance must not be a barrier to using the site.

The group suggested that for the elements of the site that will be chargeable to access, volunteering and time-banking, community credits could give people from Oldham the opportunity to access these. And a community dividend (or a return to community shareholders), perhaps also seeding some participatory budgets, could return money and power to the community.

Finally, this group asked how to broaden conversations about the site to include residents, community organisations and other stakeholders:

*“so we can move towards a scheme and a vision which isn't just really, really exciting and beneficial for people in Oldham, but it's genuinely co-designed with them as well, because if we don't do that, then we can never reach potential.”*

# PARTICIPANTS GENERATED SEVERAL FUNDAMENTAL IDEAS AT OLDHAM ALCHEMY

- **Northern Roots** has the potential to be a powerful brand, pulling together existing initiatives around food, growing and wellbeing in the borough, as well as the driver for the creation of a new agri-park on an underutilised site.
- Social value and impact should be the heart of the project, focusing on **real benefit to local residents**. It must be **accessible** and create **opportunities** including **skills development, employment, long-term sustainable enterprise to grow and anchor local wealth, community pride and togetherness, health and wellbeing**.
- Real, effective **community participation and engagement** must be central to the project.
- All entities involved should commit to a set of **guiding principles** and conditions (stemming from the social value objectives) to be able to operate under the Northern Roots Brand (on or off the site).
- There should be an overarching entity to develop and manage Northern Roots – integrating a series of separate businesses operating under the Northern Roots brand, and developing the site.
- Northern Roots should have a mix of **sustainable revenue streams** for the overarching entity and businesses on the site to ensure **long-term sustainable social enterprise** models of growth. There are a wide range of possible business activities that can take place across the themes explored.
- There is scope for a broad range of types of **investment** to support different elements of Northern Roots, alongside whatever Oldham Council puts into the project.
- There should be support for **new business growth**, based on developing a social enterprise eco-system – with appropriate guidance, fostering of mutual support and access to investment.
- A developmental, staged approach to developing Northern Roots can be adopted, starting with some quick wins with existing projects and **meanwhile use** of parts of the site, prior to development of the main site itself.
- **Commissioners** can use Northern Roots to develop new models of **cooperative services**, harnessing the potential of the businesses and activities under the Northern Roots brand.
- **These ideas have informed and assisted Oldham Council.**

Left to right: Jackie Wilson (Oldham MBC), Jonathan Bland (E3M and Social Business International), Cllr Sean Fielding, Cllr Abdul Jabbar, Dr Carolyn Wilkins OBE (Oldham MBC).



# NEXT STEPS

On 28 January 2019, Oldham's cabinet approved plans to begin development of Alexandra Park Eco Centre, and further develop the Northern Roots project, centred on the Snipe Clough site.

Funding was approved for an initial period of two years.

The inception phase will focus on community, stakeholder and investor engagement, delivery of early phase projects, and the legal constitution of the Northern Roots project company.

Priorities for the inception phase of the project include:

- Establishing the legal and licensing structure for the project company and subsidiaries,
- Transferring assets to the company,
- Conducting extensive consultation and engagement activities with local, regional and national stakeholders,
- Developing detailed business and investment cases for the different activities and areas on site, with a view to then securing funding and investment,
- Prepare planning applications for any proposed development on the site.

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