

CENTER PARCS WOBURN FOREST

MILLBROOK, BEDFORDSHIRE, MK45 2HZ WWW.CENTERPARCS.CO.UK

CASE STUDY



THE BUSINESS

Center Parcs Woburn Forest provides short break holiday experiences on a year round basis in a 362 acre forest nestling close to the towns of Flitwick and Ampthill in rolling Central Bedfordshire countryside.

Employing more than 1,400 people in a variety of tourism industry roles, Center Parcs is a major provider of jobs in Bedfordshire and hugely significant contributor to the local economy.

Most of the venue's workforce live within 12-15 miles of the site, which lies close to junction 13 of the M1. Employees are predominately young with some 40% of the on-site team being aged younger than 24.

Center Parcs Woburn Forest opened to the public on June 6, 2014 following a process which spanned the ending of the old Mid Bedfordshire District Council and the creation of Central Bedfordshire Council.

The company's major investment totalled some £250 million and was largely due to the county's location in the country. A journey from London to Bedfordshire, and more specifically, Center Parcs, takes about one hour and puts the venue within a two hour travel time of some 17 million potential customers.

Martin Dalby, the Chief Executive Officer of Center Parcs UK said: "We knew our zone of search was a funnel shape bounded by the M40 and the A1 out of London. Then it was a matter of identifying sites and the criteria were quite demanding. We needed 350-400 acres and sandy soils, with good local roads and employees close by, which narrows it down.

"We had four or five potential sites and the most preferred worked out to be land owned by the Duke of Bedford."

They weren't necessarily looking for plots of land for sale in Bedfordshire and the arrangement they concluded was a long leasehold with the Duke of Bedford.

THE REQUIREMENTS

Following the conclusion of an agreement with the Duke of Bedford, Center Parcs approached the then Mid Bedfordshire District Council, with its administrative headquarters in Ampthill, and opened discussions with planners and local stakeholders, including the local MP.

"As a PLC we had to make sure that all the announcements were co-ordinated," said Martin Dalby. "We found the officials to understand our needs and to be interested and helpful, although they were concerned about the workload such a large application would impose.

"We worked with councillors and the planning department over their concerns and fears around noise, pollution and traffic before working on an application."

From challenging beginnings with former authorities, Mr Dalby now scores his company's relationship with Central Bedfordshire Council now sits at a high level eight or nine out of ten.

The planning application for Center Parcs Woburn Forest was approved by the Secretary of State in September 2007 on three grounds: more jobs in Bedfordshire; the positive effect on the environment and the fact that the new tourism venue would encourage people to visit Bedfordshire.

Liaison with the planning department apart, Center Parcs was able to effectively use its contacts with the local authority to help with its high profile recruitment campaign. Some 1,400 new Central Bedfordshire jobs were created and the council provided advice and help.

"We have a great relationship with the planning department. The officers are always willing to talk about the plans we have and to provide us with advice."

Be Central Bedfordshire



THE OUTCOMES

Following the granting of planning approval for the £250million investment on the Duke of Bedford's land, the plans had to be put on the shelf, after the credit crunch affected the amount of commercial capital available to Center Parcs.

The huge project was re-launched in 2011, construction work commenced and on June 6, 2014 the site opened to members of guests, on time and on budget.

"We have a great relationship with the planning department," said Martin. "The officers are always willing to talk about the plans we have and to provide us with advice."

"After initial concerns, the local community has accepted us in their midst and appreciate how good Center Parcs is for jobs, Bedfordshire in general and the local economy."

THE FUTURE

Having committed itself to long leasehold, Center Parcs is, as Martin says, "absolutely here in Central Bedfordshire for the long term."

In Center Parcs Sherwood Forest, the company is seeing sons and daughters of the opening workforce joining the team. Martin sees that as something which will happen in time at Woburn Forest as the venue continues to grow and to attract employees from established families in nearby Bedfordshire towns.

Like any successful business, Center Parcs has an eye on the future and has plans to develop more holiday lodges and facilities at the get-away-from-it-all village. That will inevitably mean the creation of more jobs.

"Our relationship with the planning department at Central Beds is always good, very positive," said Martin. "We keep in touch with the council and the local community and provide them with the opportunity to catch up on an at least annual basis."

Be Central Bedfordshire

For more information, contact the Be Central Bedfordshire team on 0300 300 8272 or via email info@becentralbedfordshire.co.uk

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