

Leader gives us cause for hope

AS THIS is my 50th column in this magazine, I'd like to spread a little happiness. But first I must set the scene.

Milton Keynes Council, the Homes & Communities Agency (formerly English Partnerships) and its 'mini-me' Milton Keynes Partnership have collectively done what they can over the last few years to destroy the Milton Keynes we know and love. However, there has recently been a change of leadership at the council - and whenever there is change, there is hope.

The Liberal Democrats have replaced their leader Isobel McCall and, at an event in the University Centre Milton Keynes recently, I urged her successor Sam Crooks to seize the opportunity to transform the council's policies so that his party is not swept away in the next elections. Seats are only up for election a third at a time - otherwise, I suggested, they would already be long out of power.

He invited an Urban Eden delegation to a meeting to discuss the expansion of the city, trees, transport, parking, housing and other issues of vital interest to us all. I assembled a willing posse of Urban Eden members, including revered town planner Ken Baker (leader of Central Milton Keynes town council); local traf-

fic campaigner Ian Michie; Brian Salter, chartered forester and the original chief executive of Milton Keynes Parks Trust; John Napleton, former director of Milton Keynes Development Corporation.

Generously Sam dedicated the best part of a morning to us - and started by shocking us all. Twice.

First, straight off the bat, he said that he was determined to scrap the two council-generated plans for Station Square and go with Ken Baker's much-praised alternative 'gateway' scheme. Then he announced his intention to commission a new master plan for Milton Keynes, reapplying the principles of its predecessor in a modern context and incorporating the issues of reduced expansion rates due to the recession.

Results already: we'd only been in there five minutes.

We debated our Tram-K public transport system and other alternative transport mechanisms as well as using the grids rather than the estates for public transport, as had been originally envisaged. We raised the problem of poor-quality bus routes, particularly in the western area with raised paved areas crossing bus routes making for very poor-quality bus journeys.

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We discussed un-adopted and dangerous traffic lights, some of which have been out of order since October 2008. One of our key concerns to which Sam

responded favourably was the bid to persuade Western Expansion Area developer Gallagher's to go back to a grid road system. The council was trying to use what leverage it had, including land ownership, to help change Gallagher's mind, Sam told us.

We then came to the bungled attempts to subsume Central Milton Keynes Town Council into Campbell Park Parish Council. Sam agreed that the methods used by the other parish were not acceptable.

We then discussed the herbicide committed on some of our roundabouts recently where trees were massacred and the reasons subsequently given seemed facile at best. On the South Saxon roundabout, for instance, council officer Pele Bhamber appears to have used safety issues as a catch-all excuse. The roundabout is raised and the improved visibility used by him as justification was somewhat imaginative.

Sam mentioned that the council had more flexibility for expenditure on capital items than for revenue items (yes please to a tram, then) and that they will be subject to significant 12 per cent cut in the next three years. Discussion then centred on the original master plan

which was seen to work well and the outputs of the CAGOT Focus Group on Roads and both ICM polls.

Sam mentioned that Milton Keynes Partnership were effectively passing over to the council the management of the planning element currently covered by MKP. He indicated that City Streets were off the agenda for the future as they do not seem to work. Yet another result! We also discussed the issue of Redways crossing in front of premises on the City Streets creating a significant safety hazard. By this point we felt that we pushing against an open door.

Our final topic was about signage into Central Milton Keynes and the new designation of City Core. Sam accepted that the core was too limiting and that it should be much larger. Job done.

Now I don't know if any one of our small verbal victories will be translated into action but we can but hope that they are. Meanwhile I am content that our meeting went as well as could be expected and that we obtained concessions, agreement and commitment on virtually every point we raised.

A case of 'wham, bam, thank you Sam...'
 Cheerio.

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 WAVENDON MILTON KEYNES



Leon Roach was appointed as an independent member of Milton Keynes Partnership Committee in October. The recruitment process brought forward a strong field of candidates and, from these, Leon was selected to help MKPC take forward its community engagement strategy. He talks about what attracted him to Milton Keynes and explains his role within MKPC.

Planning for the upturn is city's biggest challenge

MY MOVE to Milton Keynes was, as for many residents, driven by family, work opportunities and the need for an environment befitting of me being in mid-life. Milton Keynes continues to benefit from its central location and its growth predictions indicate its desirability as a place to live and work.

A principal consideration for relocating from North London in 2001 was the quality of schooling our children would receive. My 13-year-old son attends the local school and my ten-year-old daughter, who has cerebral palsy, attends the exemplary Slated Row school for children with mild to moderate learning difficulties. That the school has recently received Ofsted's mark of excellence bodes well for her and other pupils' future development.

I work as a freelance trainer and developer. Specialising in social care, specifically of children and families, affords me opportunities to develop the capacity of staff providing services for those on the margins of society. It pleases me greatly to be the MKPC independent member - I am profoundly wedded to the view that what defines civic society is how we treat those on the margins.

I have worked in social care for the past 23 years, which has involved my providing services for the homeless, writing handbooks for young unemployed people, providing staff training, lecturing and, most recently, managing an educational facility for excluded children in South London.

My role at MKPC is an advisory and consultative one on issues relating to young peo-



● Leon Roach

ple. I have met the local youth cabinet and was very impressed by their 'on-line' electoral system. I believe that Milton Keynes' youthful population presents both MKP and the council with specific challenges. Planning for Milton Keynes' population growth must reflect a transparent commitment towards young people.

Being the independent member on MKPC has been a steep learning curve for me. Trying to engage with the details of local planning processes, coupled with helping to raise the local profile of the partnership, is as exciting as it is occasionally daunting.

The recession and global downturn has had a noticeable effect upon Milton Keynes. The character and fortitude of our city is such that it is recognised that the planning for the upturn is perhaps our greatest and most pressing task. We all have a personal contribution to make to its on-going success.

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