

Put growth to the vote

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I RECENTLY attended a public meeting organised by local group MK Forum entitled 'Who runs MK? Who makes the decisions?'. Its featured speakers were Milton Keynes Council leader Isobel McCall, its chief executive John Best and Professor Alan Cochrane of the Open University. Although it was a useful and well-attended event, I was surprised that no one from English Partnerships was there nor apparently had been invited, especially as I and many others consider them to wield most power in this city.

I found particularly striking that everyone was busy passing the buck. John Best protested that "It's not me", while Isobel McCall broadly said the same although she characterised the council's three-councillor-presence (one from each political party) among the ten voting members of Milton Keynes

Partnership as demonstrating that the council was "first amongst equals". I was forced to disagree.

Nevertheless there is little doubt that the council does have powers, particularly over planning consents in Central Milton Keynes and once again Cllr McCall was at pains to point out that her council had consulted with and listened to the public and 'it' had said that 'it' "didn't like walking over acres of car parking to get to the bars and restaurants".

This is something I've heard Mrs McCall say on several occasions, as though, if she says it often enough, like some occult invocation it will accumulate enough power to become meaningful. Sadly however, it won't:

◆ Exactly how many people said it? I think we should be told;

◆ Assuming this was the one statement she and her colleagues identified upon which to justify cutting down hundreds of trees, filling in underpasses and narrowing the boulevards from 75 metres to 40 metres, it still does not explain how she extrapolated all that from "I don't like walking over acres of car parking to get to the bars and restaurants";

◆ Why were the people who use the "acres of car parking" not consulted? Will she acknowledge the severe constraints of running a business in the city centre today when there is nowhere for staff to park and public transport does not suit the needs of, say, lawyers, accountants, and estate agents, all of whom have to visit clients?

It seems self-evident that if one already wants a particular outcome, one can massage the inputs from a feeble, unrepresentative consultation to justify almost anything.

This got me thinking. If you're so certain, Cllr McCall, that you are providing what the public in Milton Keynes wants, why not hold a referendum? I have an idea for one that will cost almost nothing.

On May 1, 17 seats on Milton Keynes Council - one third of the total - come up for election.

◆ Since writing this piece, John Best has confirmed his resignation from Milton Keynes Council as chief executive. Corporate director Kate Page is now interim chief executive.

May I take this opportunity to welcome her to her new post, however temporary, and humbly request that she takes this opportunity to use her powers to delay some of the more unpopular changes to Milton Keynes which were so heartily endorsed by her predecessor and look at ways of modifying them in line with the heartfelt protests of so many in Milton Keynes. Members of Urban Eden will be happy to make themselves available for consultation at her convenience.

Unlike many unitary authorities whose elected members in their entirety go before the electors every four years, our fine burghers elected to make themselves irremovable en masse by only having a third go before the voters at any time. This year there are two current Conservative, seven Labour, and eight Liberal Democrat seats up for grabs.

This is where it can get very interesting. The council could use the ballot papers, which they have to print in any event, to also ask the people who live in those 17 wards these six simple, unambiguous, fair and unbiased questions:

Should the grid roads be extended into the expansion areas?

YES/NO

Should public-domain trees be protected?

YES/NO

Should there be a continuation/expansion of the redways, underpasses and overpasses (i.e. the separation of motorised and non-motorised vehicles and pedestrians)?

YES/NO

Should the boulevards in Central Milton Keynes be narrowed from 75 metres to 40 metres and car parking cut accordingly?

YES/NO

Do you prefer roundabouts to traffic lights?

YES/NO

Should every new home have at least one dedicated parking space?

YES/NO

I challenge this council to put its policies where its mouth is and ask the people what they really want.

The only conclusion to be drawn from a refusal is that they know that they, English Partnerships and Milton Keynes Partnership acting in concert are forcing through an agenda that no one wants and which is indefensible.

I challenge them to rise to the occasion. If they refuse or ignore this request, I am certain the public will draw its own conclusions. Cheerio.

Strategy focuses on technology

IN A SEMINAR run by Sparc Technology Network recently, Oxford to Cambridge Arc executive director Nicholas Miles said: "With Oxford, Cambridge, Milton Keynes, the Open University, Cranfield and London, you have the largest life science cluster outside the USA. This is probably the best innovation region in Europe and one of the best in the world and the opportunities are absolutely huge."

What a fantastic accolade this is writes Grant Seeley, director of inward investment at Invest Milton Keynes and a real opportunity to determine the city's role within the arc. Milton Keynes is ideally placed to support technology-led businesses at the centre of the O2C Arc and is fast becoming a hotbed of innovative companies willing to take advantage of its excellent geographic location, bespoke commercial space, support services and open business culture.

Invest Milton Keynes is developing a strategy for attracting and growing technology businesses and is supporting two major events next month in conjunction with Cranfield School of Management.

The inaugural Cranfield Venture Day, a one-day conference and networking event for anyone interested in entrepreneurialism, takes place on May 15 and is hosted by Cranfield's Bettany Centre for Entrepreneurial Performance and Economics.

It includes keynote addresses by leading entrepreneurs, details of the latest research on performance, exhibits by new businesses, workshops on business start-ups, growth, finance and entrepreneurial strategy and contributions from business angels, venture capitalists and academics.

The Bright Sparc Awards take place on the eve of the Venture Day. They have been organised by the Sparc



◆ Grant Seeley

Technology Network and will recognise businesses and individuals excelling in their specialist technology field over the past year. There are six categories and you can nominate an individual, company or yourself.

◆ Invest Milton Keynes continues to work closely with Milton Keynes Enterprise Hub which provides start-up support for technology-led businesses.

Invest Milton Keynes is also supporting quantitative research within the city. The 2008 Employment Survey is being compiled by the Milton Keynes Economic Learning Partnership which has sent questionnaires to more than 8,000 public, private and voluntary businesses across the borough.

The results will be available in the next few months and will give a clear understanding of the borough's key business sectors and identify the focus upon which we will be able to formulate a future strategy for attracting new businesses.

Working with partners in the city and by helping to support the O2C arc objectives for the region, we aim to strengthen business and research links which will identify substantial business opportunities for the city, thus creating interest both nationally and internationally and bringing more investment into Milton Keynes.

To register for the Cranfield Venture Day, visit www.som.cranfield.ac.uk/som/groups/enterprise/entrep/venture For more information and an entry form for the Bright Sparc Awards, visit www.brightsparcawards.com. The closing date for entries is April 4.

Chamber of Commerce Milton Keynes and North Bucks



Milton Keynes & North Bucks Chamber of Commerce will be holding a series of VIP Corporate Hospitality events throughout 2008 in which you have the opportunity to promote your business and to entertain your clients and staff.

A Day At The Races - at Towcester Racecourse on Thursday 10 April, 2008.

PACKAGES AVAILABLE:

• **Race Sponsorship** - You name the race, race card advertising, TV & media publicity, promotional banners on the course, pre-race parade ring access, award ceremony, commemorative photos, plus hospitality package.
Cost £1500 + VAT

• **Hospitality** - Four course meal, afternoon tea, table for the afternoon, admission, race day programme, professional tipster to offer advice on the day's racing, private tote betting facility, private viewing balcony, private bar facility, 37" plasma TV screens for additional viewing of the racing.
Cost £695 + VAT for a table of 10
Cost £70 + VAT per person

Three Counties Clay Shoot Challenge, Riseley, Beds. - This is a team activity day and the perfect opportunity to reward staff or entertain clients at one of England's premier clay shooting venues. Teams of three will enjoy a full day's shooting with tuition and practice before a competition to establish the best county team on the day.

Your package includes tea/coffee throughout the day, full instruction, practice and competitions, a hot buffet lunch and the provision of all necessary equipment, clays, cartridges, ear defenders and eye protection.

Individual entry - £150 + VAT

Team entry - £420 + VAT (book by 30 April, £399 + VAT)

Sponsorship opportunities: Main Trophy sponsor £500 + VAT
- Sponsor a stand £100 + VAT

To book on either of the above events please contact Helen Horwood on 01908 259002 or email helen.horwood@mk-chamber.co.uk