

'Still the city of choice'

MILTON Keynes has seen record levels of inward investment in the past year despite the economic downturn.

Figures from inward investment agency Invest Milton Keynes reveal that 82 companies chose to relocate or expand in the city in 2008-09. These included 18 from overseas.

More than half of the successes were expanding companies already in Milton Keynes. Almost two-thirds were high-growth knowledge-based businesses.

A total 1,247 new jobs were created and a further 1,666 safeguarded. Enquiries for commercial premises rose by nearly ten per cent. IMK director of inward investment Grant Seeley said: "Despite the difficult economic climate, Milton Keynes is still the city of choice for businesses."

HIGHLIGHTS

- Network Rail's decision to build its new National Centre on the site of the National Hockey Stadium;
- The completion of the Pinnacle office development in the city centre;
- Domino's Pizza's new headquarters and production warehouse at West Ashland.

We mourn loss of public space

Theo Chalmers



Theo Chalmers is managing director of Verve Public Relations and chair of Urban Eden.
www.vervepr.co.uk
 e-mail: t.chalmers@vervepr.co.uk
 Tel: 01908 275271
www.urbaneden.org

describing the pyramids of the Giza Plateau in Egypt as "traffic bollards".

If permitted, this will mean removing most of the popular outdoor seating and public art and is a carbuncle on the face of an old friend (to paraphrase a certain prince). To show further contempt, its design is triangular and completely at odds with the design language of thecentre:mk itself.

Although there is, at time of writing, still hope for City Square, sadly we have already lost Queens Court to form a new and largely unwanted restaurant area. This was disgracefully waved through by planners under "delegated powers" despite the strict undertakings in the management agreement jointly signed by the council, Britel and English Heritage and likely opposition from interested parties such as 20th Century Society, Milton Keynes Forum, Urban Eden and Central Milton Keynes Town Council. Part of Middleton Hall has also been 'let go' by councillors under cover of noisy protests over the planned Tesco at Newport Pagnell. Both decisions fly fully in the face of firm commitments made only 11 years ago.

Most borough councillors believe that thecentre:mk should be listed. While council leader, Isobel McCall instructed chief planning officer David Hackforth - whose department is responsible for waving through applications under delegated powers - to write to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in support of the listing.

Extraordinarily, he's since said publicly that he didn't agree with this. Meanwhile, the DCMS seems to be taking a holiday from decision-making and centre manager PruPIM is making hay while the sun shines and taking every inch of public space they can snaffle.

DEAR READER, may I crave your indulgence for a minute's silence for the grievous loss of public spaces in central Milton Keynes? The reason for my formal mourning of this loss is because, slowly but surely, it's becoming increasingly evident that all public space is at threat.

Let's start with thecentre:mk. This unique building effectively constitutes Milton Keynes 'high street'. It also doubles as a regional shopping centre, was originally built and owned by Milton Keynes Development Corporation and had a number of carefully planned public spaces which were considered essential to its proper functioning and attractiveness.

When this public building was built, it might surprise many of you to know that it had no doors at the entrances to its covered walkways and, sadly, some citizens decided it would be fun to race Minis along its arcades at night. With the solution to this problem, admittedly undertaken by MKDC, the seeds were set for the litany of excuses, justifications and imperatives to further restrict, remove and cauterise public spaces.

First the doors and night-time closures were instigated. Then City Square was built on in 1993-4 to add Marks & Spencer at its western end and extend it again in 1997. The reason given for this was that unsavoury activities were apparently being indulged in the group of trees which stood there.

However, happily, we all still enjoyed public use of Middleton Hall and Queen's Court, with its hugely expensive granite fountains and pool (now sadly all smashed and removed) and its wealth of sculpture and art (ditto). A number of historically significant artefacts such as the plaque of the Queen's visit, the sundial and the steel circle and brass compass point bollards have also been destroyed, lost or 'stored'. Both areas were designated public spaces as was the small part of what was left of City Square outside M&S which continues to provide more public art and benches where office workers enjoy their lunchtime sandwiches al fresco.

Disregard of the understandings in the eventual sale agreement, as well as a blatant ignoring of the management agreement signed on August 27 1998 between English Heritage, Milton Keynes Council and new owners Britel Fund Trustees Ltd has meant that the threat to existing public spaces is now well advanced. The agreement acknowledges that thecentre:mk is worthy of grade two star listing, although this was never conferred due to vigorous lobbying at the highest level.

Planning permission has been applied for and referred for review to destroy what is left of City Square - a public space on the framework plan. They wish to build a 165 sq metres café with around 150 seats but no toilets within 500 metres. The plans describe this excrescence as a 'kiosk' - which is like

MP praises 'a wonderful development'

THE TRANSFORMATION of the former home of the Royal Train at Wolverton into 300 new homes, offices, shops and leisure facilities has won praise from a Milton Keynes MP.

Dr Phyllis Starkey is pictured on her tour of the ten-acre Wolverton Park site after which she praised the regeneration work done by developer Places for People.

She said: "This is a wonderful and architecturally interesting development. However it has come on stream just when mortgage finance and housing access is particularly tricky."

The site has more than 40,000 sq ft of commercial space housed within the beautiful historic buildings The Triangle and the Reading Room, where Queen Victoria waited while her Royal Train was prepared. There are a total 16 units to let ranging from 400 sq ft to 10,000 sq ft with varied planning consents for office, retail, leisure, café, bar, restaurant and health-related uses.

For further information on the commercial opportunities, contact Graham Young of Douglas Duff on (01908) 679900, or joint agents Patrick Punch on (01908) 423444.

Places for People has created a range of new financial products to help encourage a wide range of high apartments and houses. These include:

- 100 per cent mortgages with no deposit needed, one can be paid if the customer can afford to do so. There is a choice of competitive fixed and tracker repayment mortgages;
- An equity loan up to 30 per cent for those who cannot afford full home ownership. There is no interest to pay for the



first ten years, after which the tracker rate is charged at 2pc above the Bank of England base rate;

- A buy-back guarantee for the first three years to protect against individuals falling into negative equity. This is not an insurance-based product - Places for People will buy back the homes at the price customers originally paid should the purchaser experience negative equity.

Dr Starkey, who represents the Milton Keynes South West constituency, said: "It is encouraging people to rent first, with the option of buying subsequently so that it can maintain a truly mixed-tenure development while ensuring that the properties are occupied and homes are not standing empty. That is a good example of how a housing group is working to make sure places work and that housing is accessible and deliverable during the current economic climate."

For more information, telephone Knight Frank on (01908) 306262 or visit www.wolverton-park.co.uk

Councillors should hang their heads in shame. They should be protecting spaces used by the public, not signing them away willy nilly nor allowing their own officers to run rings around them.

Elsewhere in Milton Keynes, the grim guardian of our fate that calls itself Milton Keynes Partnership is contemplating more attacks on public spaces. Not content with narrowing the boulevards at the Hub/Vizion from 75 metres to 40 metres, MKP appears complicit in plans to do something similar further up Avebury Boulevard at Xscape.

It's important that people realise public space is ours and must be protected for future generations. Come on, council leader Sam Crooks: it's time to put your commitment where your mouth is and stop this land grab. Now.

Cheerio.



eeZy Cabs
 01908
218-218
 10% discount for all journeys over 30 miles
 5 to 16 Seats Mini Buses
 LOCAL AND LONG DISTANCE
 AIRPORT SPECIALIST



"Four, four, two..."

club Black executive boxes - an outstanding experience for you and your team...
 Only 3 boxes remaining on Boardroom level.

Premium packages at stadiummk call now 01908 622883 or email commercial@mkdons.com

