

A month is a long time in 'Apolitics'

Investment shows strong confidence in the city

WE ARE bombarded with endless reports of economic gloom but there are major investments which create a more positive outlook for the future prosperity of Milton Keynes writes Grant Seeley, director of inward investment at Invest Milton Keynes.

Network Rail has signed an agreement with Milton Keynes Partnership securing a site for the development of its new, state-of-the-art national centre in Milton Keynes. This is a fantastic coup for the city.

The new centre is planned for the site of the former National Hockey Stadium next to Milton Keynes Central station.

The centre will provide office space for a number of Network Rail's key national functions that are presently based at various locations across the country. This major investment in Milton Keynes is a real boost to business confidence.

Leading grocery outsourcing company Jenks is to move its entire operation to a purpose-built 320,000 sq ft warehouse and head office complex in Snelshall, west Milton Keynes.

The new facility will bring Jenks' portfolio of brands under one roof and will provide a central hub for its national distribution fleet.

All head office functions will also run out of Milton Keynes, bringing the site headcount to more than 200 by the time the site is fully up and running in January.

Domino's Pizza Group Ltd, has signed a building lease with MKP to create a purpose-built headquarters and production warehouse for the chain in West Ashland.



● Grant Seeley

Also, Milton Keynes' most prestigious office scheme - The Pinnacle - was 'topped out' in a ceremony which marked the securing of the final piece of structural steelwork to the landmark building on Midsummer Boulevard.

The 206,000 sq ft development represents a £67 million investment into Milton Keynes by developer Hampton Brook and its joint venture partner Aberdeen Property Investments.

Take up has been fast at The Pinnacle with two pre-lets already agreed - Denton Wilde Sapte (Legal Services) and Deloitte & Touche LLP will be expanding into The Pinnacle in 2009, together taking 50 per cent of the space.

The Pinnacle is the first office building in Milton Keynes city centre to achieve the BREEAM Excellent environmental award.

All of this investment is great news for the future of Milton Keynes and shows the confidence that major companies have in the city.

HAROLD Wilson famously said that a week is a long time in politics. Since Urban Eden is resolutely apolitical, I'd like to add this; a month is a long time in apolitics.

Since I last penned this column the council leader who wrote about 'hysteria' just above me in last month's issue has succumbed to some herself. She's responded to the pressure put upon her council administration by the overwhelming majority of the people of Milton Keynes - as evidenced in now two ICM surveys and two separate focus groups - and promised to renegotiate with the developers of the Western Expansion Area.

She plans to politely ask them to reconsider grid roads.

It goes without saying, of course, that she should have demanded this in the first place and the fact that her cabinet was ever prepared to sacrifice existing grid roads - the V4 Watling Street and H4 Danstead Way in particular - to her misguided vision of all stick, no carrot, does nothing to reassure an increasingly vocal constituency.

What sort of city will Milton Keynes be? Cllr McCall still is not saying. Despite her new-found zeal, she obviously doesn't think grid roads will work in the future and believes we need more traffic lights. But beyond that she fails to spell out her vision of what the future Milton Keynes will be.

Treasured

The peer review group of the expansion plans asked that same question. The Milton Keynes Economy and Learning Partnership, in the review of its long-term economic vision, says: "The partners need to define an overarching statement of what will make Milton Keynes distinctive and different to its competitors. Milton Keynes will work to build upon its distinctive urban form, business and social cultures to create a city - love it or hate it - that is confidently different to any other city in the UK."

We still don't know what this vision is other than the airy-fairy wish that it should be a nice place to work, live and play. But at least that's a start.

From Cllr McCall's arguments and the evidence seen so far, one can only conclude that she's been forced with extreme reluctance to begin the review of her treasured plans for a city where houses are built right up to roads, where traffic lights and pedestrian crossings abound at road junctions, where the large verdant verges with trees and shrubs cease to exist, where housing densities are so high

(Landmark, The Hub, Vizion for example) and parking spaces so few that residents cannot own cars and will therefore have no alternative but to use buses.

It doesn't sound like Milton Keynes at all and is not what our citizens want.

However, now that there is at last some light at the end of the tunnel, we must make the best of this bad job. While it is unlikely that the developer for the Western Expansion Area will willingly surrender its approved plans, it is nevertheless possible that we may still get our new grid roads and save some of those threatened.

Vision

According to Professor David Lock CBE, one of this country's most lauded town planners: "In the case of Fen Farm (south east of the city), the council introduced its demand for underpasses across the A421 (to connect to land not yet allocated for development) after planning permission had been granted for Fen Farm without underpasses included.

"They (the council) simply said they would not sign off the highways agreements unless this extra was agreed to. The underpasses were therefore agreed to, and are built.

"This was last year. I see no reason why the same things can't happen, exactly, on the western expansion across the V4. Can you?"

No David, I cannot. While nobody would wish a recession on this city, nevertheless it's an ill wind... Apart from the ideological volte face of our dear council leader, another benefit is that Milton Keynes Partnership now has very little to do, particularly with regard to selling land in central Milton Keynes and granting planning permissions for building in the expansion areas.

Now that its overbearing and undemocratic plans have been so roundly condemned by the people who live here, perhaps it might consider using its free time to come up with a Plan B: a vision of our city based fairly and squarely on the original master plan.

Failing that, perhaps it would be good enough to shut itself down and save the taxpayer the burden of supporting it. I, for one, would be happy to wave goodbye at any farewell party they care to organise.

In a gesture of seasonal goodwill, I take this opportunity to wish Milton Keynes Council, English Partnerships, Milton Keynes Partnership and, most importantly, you a relaxing and rewarding holiday season and a reviving New Year. Cheerio.

Theo Chalmers



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● Verve Public Relations has joined forces with video maker Colin Barrett of Simply DV to launch a new way to help local businesses get their message across.

An 'elevator pitch' is an overview of a product, service or project, delivered in the timespan of a lift ride and highlighting a company's ethics, people and offer. Companies record a short, professional film in high definition giving their 'elevator pitch'. The final edit can be placed on the company's website, on social media sites and can be sent as a link by e-mail to prospective clients.

The Elevator Pitches service includes client liaison, research, script writing, half-day video shoot in Milton Keynes, editing, compression for web and uploading to media servers.

Verve managing director Theo Chalmers said: "I met Colin when he filmed and edited a promotional film for Urban Eden, the lobby group I run. I was so impressed with the way he transformed my script and performance into a professional piece that I came up with the idea of Elevator Pitches for local companies."

Colin came to Milton Keynes in the late 1970s to work as a cameraman-editor with Channel 40, the city's community cable TV station. He has worked on projects for major companies including Kodak, Volkswagen and Alliance & Leicester and has been a new media projects manager at the Open University.

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Milton Keynes Economy and Learning Partnership

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