

Survey reveals voice of the people

ONE OF THE things I find particularly frustrating about being chair of Urban Eden - the movement to promote a sustainable extension of the original masterplan for Milton Keynes - is that those opposed are willing to trot out that the people have been consulted as justification for just about every outrage.

I recall council leader Isobel McCall being interviewed on local television, talking about the narrowing of the boulevards from 75 to 40 metres, the removal of all the parking and the chopping down of hundreds of trees and airily confiding that "the people have spoken".

How many had spoken, how loaded the questions were and how many were ignored, was - unsurprisingly - never disclosed.

My own experience of so-called consultation is that the public is insulted with questions such as 'Which shade of red brick would you prefer?', not vital issues such as 'Shall we extend the grid roads into the new areas?', that decision having already been made by that hungry-for-revenue-from-land-sales quango English Partnerships enforced by its undemocratic sub-committee Milton Keynes Partnership and waved through by a hung council sadly more concerned about an easy life than fighting hard for the people of Milton Keynes.

They may as well ask: 'Which would you prefer; to be hit with this brick or that we destroy the grid road system?'

For too long, mock consultations have suited everyone just fine; except our citizens.

But sometimes the fates are smiling and an apparently innocuous decision to set up a consultancy group, in this case the Citizen's Advisory Group on Transport, to consult about public transport has had a totally unexpected consequence and thrown the cat among the pigeons.

Define

Somehow, CAGoT managed to extract a budget from the council to appoint the nationally recognised survey company ICM to run a survey of public opinion on transport in the city. ICM was commissioned to ask a representative sample of the Milton Keynes public for their views on a variety of issues relating to the future of local transport.

The purpose was to help to define and outline a transport strategy for the next 20 years, a time during which population growth and associated development is expected to place major pressures on the transport structure.

In July, ICM interviewed a representative robust sample of 1,000 adults aged 18-plus across the Milton Keynes Council area, with interviews spread across the local wards in proportion to population. The results have been weighted to the profile of all resident adults and therefore the results of the survey are unimpeachable.

To put it in Urban Eden-speak: 'Now the people really have spoken.'

If you'd like to see the survey for yourself, visit www.mkweb.co.uk/localnews although I have great, enormous, boundless pleasure in presenting its key findings.

To the questions "I would like you to think about transport issues in Milton Keynes. When it comes to generally getting around, do you think it is very easy to do, quite easy, not very easy or not easy at all?" and "And how easy do you think it will be to get around Milton Keynes in 20 years time?":

- ◆ 72 per cent said easy or very easy now;
- ◆ 40pc said that would be the case in 20 years time;
- ◆ 46pc saying it would not be easy.

The people clearly know what is happening and they're not happy.

When asked about different methods of transport it became clear, in the words of the report: "Perhaps the most enlightening outcome, however, is the fact that even car commuters indicate a greater preference for bus investment (58pc) than they do for investment in roads (54pc).

"It is not unreasonable to assume that transport users would be most likely to support the option which they themselves currently use most often - but this assumption is self-evidently not proved to be true.

"Indeed every type of commuter (car,

bus, rail, bike and pedestrian) and every type of frequent transport user place investment in buses top of the list. We can think of few other commendations for investment in bus services than this - people putting aside their own (selfish) transport use for a single form that may be to the direct benefit of other people rather than themselves."

It's clear that the people of Milton Keynes recognise that our city was as much designed for public transport as for private; not something you'll ever hear acknowledged by Milton Keynes Council, English Partnerships nor Milton Keynes Partnership

Moving on to the really good stuff:

- ◆ 80pc versus 17pc thought it was a good idea for cars to use bus lanes outside peak hours;
- ◆ 73pc v 23pc thought it was a good idea to build an extra lane on single carriageways (as allowed for in the original master plan - most of the verges and even bridges are already extra wide);
- ◆ 88pc v 6pc agreed that the grid system gives Milton Keynes a unique identity;
- ◆ 87pc v 6pc, agreed that the grid system is fast and efficient;
- ◆ 84pc v 10pc agreed that the grid system should not be tampered with.

Are you listening John Lewis, Ann Limb, Isobel McCall?

I'm so happy. Cheerio.

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

THE EFFECTS of the nationwide credit crunch - seen in falling house prices and an increased cost of living - have inevitably had an impact on the job market and caused some concern locally.

Office of National Statistics figures show the level of unemployment in the UK rose by 12,000 to 1.62 million in the three months to May 2008.

Clearly Milton Keynes is not alone in coping with an upward trend of unemployment. However, we are confident that Milton Keynes is well placed to ride out the current economic storm and our level of business enquiries reinforces this belief.

Each month Invest Milton Keynes records the number of businesses that have relocated to or expanded within the city, together with the number of jobs that have been created or safeguarded.

Up to July, our new investment projects totalled 28 this year, creating 121 new jobs and safeguarding 519. This time last year we had achieved 29 successes so in the current challenging market we are keeping pace with what was a record year. A relatively high enquiry figure

City is showing its traditional resilience

Milton Keynes is displaying signs of being able to weather the economic downturn, according to Grant Seeley, director of inward investment at Milton Keynes Partnership.

for July put us up almost 22 per cent on enquiries against last year.

Historically, Milton Keynes has demonstrated its resilience during times of economic downturn and has been identified by Knight Frank as the fourth most recession-proof location in the UK. Furthermore, the pipeline of future investment in the city is very encouraging with businesses consolidating and planning for the eventual upturn.

Meanwhile, Milton Keynes has another welcome addition to boost the economic well-being and future prosperity of the area, as this month sees the opening of the exciting new University Centre for Milton

Keynes, which is being hailed as a crucial development in stopping the city suffering 'brain drain'.

The new UCMK building in Silbury Boulevard was provided by Milton Keynes Partnership at a cost of £7.3 million and the courses offered will be relevant to local business.

Pivotal

For example, there is a strong creative sector in Milton Keynes and the new University Centre will play a pivotal role in encouraging and developing new talent to drive that forward. UCMK will also offer high-end computer training, another growth sector that is

important to Milton Keynes. Together with Milton Keynes College and other partners UCMK will play a pivotal role in encouraging and developing the talents of young people in the city.

UCMK's wide range of courses will include art, design and media, business management and marketing, accountancy and finance, computing and information purchasing and supply and logistics. Other routes include teacher training, social science and psychology, counselling, nursing and sport.

Bringing first-class 21st-century higher education to the city can only benefit local businesses and support a thriving economy. Currently many of our young



◆ Grant Seeley

people go to university in other parts of the UK, then choose to settle there for work. This means we are losing our most talented young adults to other cities across Britain, which are benefiting from their education and expertise.

With the University Centre Milton Keynes, we are now in a position to nurture our own home-grown talent in a thriving urban centre which offers both students and graduates the lifestyle, leisure opportunities and career prospects they want. From great public transport to affordable homes Milton

Keynes offers everything young people are looking for.

The marketing team at Invest Milton Keynes has been working hard on our new autumn advertising and direct mail campaign which launches this month, along with our new-look website which has been developed in response to the customer research we conducted in May.

We're looking forward to the anticipated increase in enquiries resulting from both these exciting activities and the economic benefits we expect them to bring to Milton Keynes.