

Creating a new 'urban Eden' in central Milton Keynes

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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THEO... you said in your article in the March 2008 edition that you felt you had made a contribution to West End One but were proved wrong. Actually you made a most valuable one.

When we consulted with the community, the strongest feedback, for or against, was for the landscaped glass tower. While

many supported it and welcomed a dramatic addition to the city's skyline, some felt it was not quite the right landmark for this thriving, energetic, ever-changing city.

So we listened and went back to the drawing board. That is why we asked you to work with us at our workshop: to challenge not only the design but also us as developer.

We know that true 'place-making' is about understanding the very DNA of a place. There's no better way to do that than by working with, and listening to, the people who work, live - and

love - Milton Keynes.

You've added immense value to the West End One proposals. You may not have seen the results yet but we will be going public with them very soon and we believe they will demonstrate the value you have added in creating the landmark we all want.

We are creating a new neighbourhood right in the heart of Milton Keynes. This will not only provide new homes but also rooftop gardens and terraces, shops and restaurants, all adjacent to a new public square and state of the art school.

The intention is to create a

mixed community of people from different walks of life who share a common vision for city living in Milton Keynes. As for the image you paint of us in raincoats 'secretly' pressing sales leaflets into sweaty hands on the streets of Soho to attract them to a seedy scheme where 'perverts' lurk in the darkness... nothing could be further from the truth.

Yes, we want to attract new people - what is wrong with people moving to an area, spending their income in local shops, sending their children to local schools? Milton Keynes has always capitalised on its proxim-

ity to the capital and attracted people who wanted a different but equally convenient way of life.

We will also encourage sustainable lifestyles, not only in terms of energy use but also in helping people move from their dependency on the car. We have worked with English Partnerships to develop a sustainable transport strategy. This will ensure spaces reflect actual car use and will be investing in a car club.

All this will not result in the shiny slum you evoke. Places for People is in West End One for the

long term. That is one of the main reasons that English Partnerships selected us as its partner. We will own the commercial development and the affordable housing. We will be providing 24-7 management across the whole development. We will therefore do everything to protect our investment as well as that made by our customers when they purchase their new home.

We have a golden opportunity here to create a real place for people; the destination in the heart of Milton Keynes - a true 'Urban Eden'. Will you work with us to achieve it?

V4 plans have created a firestorm

IT SEEMS that public protests over the Western Expansion Area are at last beginning to cause Milton Keynes Council to take a breath before charging ahead with plans the people don't want.

The battle to extend the grid system into the expansion areas is far from won but certainly the utter mess of endless traffic lights and unlinked roads that the council intended to make of the V4 looks likely to be at least partially avoided.

This scenario has many participants who, working together, have created a firestorm of protest.

As you can imagine, as chair of Urban Eden - the lobby group determined to maintain the best of Milton Keynes' original master plan - I find myself heavily involved in this firestorm: helping to encourage considered and justified protest, to spread the news on the efforts of those involved, to publicise the outrage many feel and to create more pressure on the council to modify their actions.

One of those involved is optometrist and Urban Eden member Lesley Arkin. She wrote to Cllr Chris Williams, the man responsible for transport, after attending the MK West exhibition in Stony Stratford.

"I was very disappointed with the fact that the public was invited to choose between two unacceptable options [Editor: bridges or pelican crossings]. The right option is to build underpasses.

"The exhibition was simply a public relations exercise for Milton Keynes Council to give the impression that they 'consult the public'. The comment forms asked for a tick of one out of two boxes. There was no space for any comment.

"The advantages and disadvantages of pedestrian crossings to footbridges were so biased that it is obvious that the public was being encouraged to vote for pedestrian crossings."

Kevin Whiteside [the council's chief highways and transportation engineer] said that there was no room for underpasses but when it was suggested that there were places at H2, at H3 and in

Kiln Farm where the cycle path is perpendicular to the road, he said he did not have this information.

"What is the point of having a consultation when we are presented with a fait accompli that, supposedly, underpasses are not possible? I'm sure that if the public had been consulted at the time these decisions were made, underpasses would have been the preferred option."

Bradwell Abbey Parish Council chairman John Hawthorn also wrote to Mr Whiteside. "I read with interest your assertion that there is a desire to know the feelings of residents adjoining the WEA. Consultations with Bradwell Abbey Parish Council began late in 2004. It soon became obvious that there was little concern over local opinion, nor logic over the design.

"We know that without grid roads in the new area air pollution will be greater than necessary, productivity will be impaired and more pedestrians will be killed or injured every year.

"After three years I would have hoped that the message had gone home or a reason would be given. None has been forthcoming."

All good stuff, I'm sure you will agree. Now enter a real heavyweight. Professor David Lock CBE is one of Britain's most illustrious town planners. He wrote to David Hackforth, head of planning and transport at the council saying: "I am appalled that, like Kevin Whiteside, you are trying to hide behind a sentence at paragraph 3.6.23 of the WEA Development Framework as your justification for departing from the established and highly successful approach to crossing grid roads throughout Milton Keynes (which is gentle grade separation under or over, according to landform).

"It is silly to think that such a fundamental planning principle affecting the residents of 6,500 homes and all neighbouring communities could be altered by a sentence in a Supplementary Planning Document without either elected members or the public having it drawn to

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their attention, and without any assessment, safety audit or anything else.

"Please read the sentence again because it does not give you the cover you think you have got: 'Crossings of the grid road network would be facilitated by signalised at grade crossings...'

"This does not say that crossings must be at grade as a matter of policy, or will be, or should be. In plain English the sentence is taken by the reader to be a passing remark or point for discussion that they could be. This is because 'to facilitate' means 'to make easier' and the point is obviously a controversial and untested judgement."

David asks for evidence that Halcrow [authors of the WEA Development Framework] reviewed the original 1969 design decision; reviewed pedestrian

STOP PRESS: Following the calling in of the decision regarding footbridges by John Hawthorn and Cllr David Hopkins, the executive scrutiny panel was expected to be told at its meeting last month that the council was to appoint an outside surveyor to review the V4 and the possibility of underpasses. If shown to be valid, this could go back for further public consultation.

accidents on grid roads since; consulted the police, the road safety lobby, the community safety partnership and the parish councils; subjected it to risk assessment; explained it to the public.

"If you are right, why were underpasses required on the new A421 roundabout at Fen Farm when there is not even an Area Development Framework for the land on the other side of the road? You can see the new underpasses, built in the last few months, for yourself.

"On-going research by one of the many people outraged at what you are doing suggests that at one time the idea was to downgrade the V4 from grid road and that the idea that was abandoned because it was believed that the public would not accept houses close to what would still be a busy road. Perhaps your at-grade crossing sentence is a hangover from those days. We shall find out sooner or later.

David went on to say that the current report on the consultation says that most people want bridges, these could be pursued and the £3 million extra cost obtained from the two developers (one of which is the council).

"My point is that if you had offered the choice of underpasses, maybe most people would have chosen those, and the costs could be obtained from the developers. It was the way the choice was deleted from the consultation, by hiding the truth, which is the focus of my complaint."

He concludes: "Your council has enthusiastically engaged in the wholesale destruction of trees ('landscape adjustment' as your Leader calls it) in Central Milton Keynes and in many grid road situations; and in the destruction of existing infrastructure (the car parks and planting beds, the granite-faced underpasses, the athletics field by the Gyosei school site), and to pretend that adjusting some planting and reshaping a roadway to allow the whole Western Expansion Area properly and equally to connect to the rest of Milton Keynes is an insurmountable obstacle is, frankly, risible.

"Please conduct a reality check and help us all fix this problem, instead of making it worse."

Having sought permission, I copied this correspondence to every councillor, both local MPs and the local media. Dr. Phyllis Starkey, MP for Milton Keynes South West wrote back suggesting that David Lock's "next recourse would be to the Local Government Ombudsman, should he believe that maladministration has occurred."

I note that Cllr David Hopkins is already involved and I imagine that he will also be taking action within the council to ensure that the proper planning processes are followed.

In the meantime Cllr Chris Williams somewhat foolhardily said that David Lock should "put up or shut up" and that despite his opinion - Lock has inspected the site personally - there was "totally insufficient room" to build underpasses.

Almost unbelievably, Kevin Whiteside wrote to another complainant saying: "...it seems that it was only as the detailed plans emerged that the meaning of the approved policies began to be understood by the local community. Particularly the fact there would be six sets of traffic signals."

Personally I'm really enjoying this and can but hope that enough cages have now been rattled to make a real difference.

Cheerio.