

Results have serious implications

Dr Michael Synnott, of the City Discovery Centre, assesses the importance of a proper education for children in the region's schools.



◆ Dr Michael Synnott

THE PUBLICATION of this year's schools league tables has been met with local disappointment. Just under 40 per cent of the city's secondary school students managed to achieve five A*-C GCSEs (including English and Maths). If we exclude the 'gold standard' of English and Maths, the five GCSE pass rate rises to 50pc.

This performance puts Milton Keynes on a par with places like Coventry (39.9pc) and Southampton (38pc), both at the gold standard. Importantly, our neighbouring education authorities all did better, most notably in Buckinghamshire where 60.5pc of the students taking the GCSE exams achieved five in the A*-C grades (including English and Maths). Bedfordshire achieved 47.1pc and Northamptonshire scored 42.3pc.

Nationally, educationalists have criticised the league tables because they lump all schools together in a single measure regardless of other socio-economic factors. Notwithstanding this, the performance of Milton Keynes schools in the league tables has serious implications for the future development of the local economy.

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'A poor performance at GCSE level points to future difficulties in the development of our workforce'

development of our workforce. Government advisors calculate that the majority of those that fail to get five A*-C grades at GCSE find progression into further education and skilled work very difficult - a worrying prognosis for the 50pc of Milton Keynes youngsters who failed to gain five GCSEs of any type last year.

Pronounced

As Lord Leitch has argued, by 2020, the number of unskilled people in work will have shrunk from 3.6 million to 600,000. Four in every ten jobs will require graduate qualifications and we will need a further 4.6 million people with high level skills. In the high-skill-based economy of Milton Keynes, these trends are certain to be even more pronounced.

Furthermore, the relatively poor performance of some local schools (indicated by poor GCSE performance) can

have more widespread economic effects. Researchers at the London School of Economics have explored the connection between the quality of local schooling and the values new arrivals place on neighbourhoods.

Significantly, a home within the catchment of a good school can command as much as 19pc in premium value whereas a poorly performing school can knock 6pc off local house prices.

It follows that things like GCSE results can play a potentially determining role in regeneration projects. Get the schools working and a good deal of the rest will follow.

So what can be done to improve student and school performance in Milton Keynes?

David Gamble is group director for school improvement and planning and in charge of Milton Keynes Council's initiatives to improve local GCSE per-

formance. He insists that the headline GCSE pass rate is not telling the full story.

"Of the ten secondary schools included in this year's results, five achieved pass rates well above national average score and five received a below national average score," he says. "Three schools were significantly below the national average.

Impacts

"The same differential can be seen in the improvement achieved by individual schools in pupil progress between ages 11 and 15 - the value added score. Although seven Milton Keynes schools scored below the national average for value added, three scored above.

"One school, Shenley Brook End, achieved one of the country's highest value added scores. Overall, eight schools improved on their 2006 score."

Lying behind David Gamble's statistical snapshot are the accumulated impacts of Milton Keynes settlement patterns since the 1960s. Originally, unskilled workers in search of council housing were encouraged to move from London's East End to Milton Keynes.

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We felt we'd made a contribution...

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

IT SEEMS that trying to stem the tide of new, inappropriate developments in Milton Keynes is becoming ever tougher after a slew of new plans have been submitted for consideration or are waiting in the wings, almost all of them deeply disturbing to anyone who cares about the city and running contra to the principles of the original much-loved masterplan.

It seems that Urban Eden has already learned one salutary lesson; on January 16, eight members of Urban Eden met with developer People for Places in a local hotel, at their invitation, for a half-day 'Design Workshop' session aimed at modifying the plans for their West End One development in ways that would not only improve the outcome for Milton Keynes, but would provide P4P with a legacy development in the heart of our city of which they, and we, could be proud.

This followed an earlier meeting I had had with Mary Parsons, their land and development director, major projects, who seemed genuinely interested in having Urban Eden involved, particularly with the design of the tower feature of the development.

So our team of urban warriors gathered full of hope and at the end of our meeting genuinely felt that we had contributed significantly to the project; potentially making the difference

'I believe West End One will offer very little beyond the opportunity for a really important social study.'

between it being a commercial and architectural success and the almost inevitable outcome otherwise; another 'shiny-slum'.

Despite our best suggestions, however, the plans are now in and sadly it's the same high-density, inward-facing, parking-space free, ill-thought-out disaster as before.

Possibilities

The tower itself is still almost entirely the same although they have thrown in a few "possible alternatives", none of which go any way to matching the possibilities discussed at our meeting.

So let's look at this scheme: it is to comprise 650 dwellings on just 2.96 hectares comprising approximately 1,270 bedrooms.

On the best interpretation of the plans, there will be only 504 car parking spaces, of which only 396 are allocated, 33 on street with 363 in basements. The other 108 spaces are on-street, unallocated.

However if we assume one adult per

bedroom, which I think is fair - even allowing for children, the actual total is likely to be very much higher - then there will be just a third of an allocated parking space per adult. Seven spaces are reserved for 'Car Club' use.

Of the 108 on street spaces; 15 are reserved for 'commercial' users because in addition to the 650 residences, there will be approx 2,700 sq metres of mixed retail and commercial use.

Under normal Milton Keynes Council rules, this would generate a requirement for roughly 50 plus car parking spaces in this Zone 1 location, not 15. Forgetting for a moment the new shoppers, drinkers, diners and commercial visitors, where exactly do the new employees park?

The remaining 86 unallocated spaces are proposed to be residents' permit parking. The reality is that there is no provision at all for visitors to the West End One development or its shops. Presumably, visitors will have to park across the boulevards in EP-owned, un-

adopted car parks that are already full to capacity at most times and are programmed to reduce in capacity.

Parking permits are likely to be in demand from households which already have an allocated car parking space. How could you stop them purchasing resident's permits? While many of the larger households will own two or more cars, their needs will further erode the parking opportunities for the 254 dwellings with no allocated car parking spaces.

Fall

If any more than 254 permits are sold, or if permits are sold to anyone other than the 254 apartments, the overall parking ratio for this group could fall significantly below the 34 per cent car parking spaces per dwelling.

If a household purchases a permit, they will expect to be able to park somewhere on the development, yet a few illegally parked or broken down cars and the odd delivery vehicle will cause chaos.

There is no off-carriageway provision for refuse and re-cycling lorries, nor for removal vans, service or delivery vehicles, nor even for emergency services, all of whom must inevitably

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