

# Proposals are a betrayal of trust

OH DEAR, oh dear, oh dear. I had so wanted to avoid criticising an organisation whose founding ideals I strongly support. However, it seems that its trustees and chief executive have lost sight of its stated purpose and are suffering from a misguided desire to build a property empire and damn the consequences. They appear hell bent on a course of action which can only spell disaster for the green estate entrusted to it.

The organisation? Milton Keynes Parks Trust, established by Milton Keynes Development Corporation as a charity 20 years ago to own and manage in perpetuity the strategic open space in Milton Keynes.

MKDC's then-general manager Frank Henshaw said at the time: "It is our responsibility to ensure that the linear parks remain open and accessible to everyone and are not threatened by developers." An independent Parks Trust could not develop on the land without the permission of both Milton Keynes Borough Council and the Charity Commission, he added.

Parks Trust founding chairman John Duggan said: "By providing the trust with its own source of income, the corporation is ensuring that the threat of development, however veiled and unlikely, is lifted".

Sadly this is no longer true. Ways have been found around the

stated duty in the Trust's Memorandum and Articles "to promote, manage and preserve in perpetuity the parks for the benefit of the public" and chief executive David Foster has announced plans to build on more than 45 acres of paddocks and other green space across the city in order to "release funds for those areas and projects that are important to people".

The Parks Trust has registered the sites with Milton Keynes Council and has embarked on a charm offensive with the parish councils to smooth the passage of their proposals. I'm sorry, David, but these green spaces are the exact ones that are "important to people". Have you forgotten the trust's 'general presumption against development'?

The justification is a supposed need to grow the trust's asset base from £84 million to £120 million in order to provide the return on investment that it says it needs to sustain its activities. It may also be required to help to pay off the huge interest and insurance payments on the £30 million loan that the Trust, perhaps foolishly, secured against its assets as well as losses incurred in its recently failed meat-retailing venture.

Yet Mr Foster wrote only in January last year: "The trust's property portfolio has generated sufficient funds to pay for the maintenance of the green estate, to provide for the sinking funds and to increase the asset base".

So why are the trustees sleeping while this Rome burns?

He also admits that "Parks Trust paddocks are usually in high demand and there are currently no vacancies" so the "projects that are important to people" argument dies too. I appreciate that the trustees manage the commercial property portfolio alongside the green estate. However, they seem to be confusing the two and applying similar commercial criteria to the green estate as might properly be applied to the commercial estate. In fact their asset base is growing almost despite their efforts, swollen most recently by a £10 million endowment from the Homes & Communities Agency, thanks to its need to offload scraps of uncommercial land.

If the trustees' planned profligacy is allowed to proceed unchecked, how long before the entire green estate of parks, paddocks, woodlands, parkways, lakes and flood meadows is lost forever? Come on, trustees, please wake up before it is too late...

One reason why this might be happening is that a deal was worked out between the Parks Trust, Milton Keynes Council and the Homes & Communities Agency which gives them all a third of funds raised from selling off the green estate. It was originally donated freehold to the council with a simultaneous 999-year lease granted to the Parks Trust. The HCA has a claw back until 2042 so they need to strike now in order for all to share the booty.

It would appear that, like the Gyosei playing fields scandal in 2004 - where each of the three parties received a windfall of almost £1.7million after recovering all their costs - the Parks Trust will not stand in the way of the public agencies determining new developments. At the time Mr Foster claimed, in what is becoming a familiar litany: "We will only agree to dispose of the long lease on the playing fields if we receive an equal or larger area of land that has an equivalent or higher social and ecological value than the land being given up."

That is the moral equivalent of building on

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'That is the moral equivalent of building on Manhattan's Central Park while replacing it with a similar site in Long Island.'

Manhattan's Central Park while replacing it with a similar site on Long Island. If we follow this logic, Milton Keynes will soon suffer from high-density urban blight while our green spaces migrate ever outwards - the very antithesis of the trust's founding intentions.

Sadly the Charity Commission is no bulwark against the ravishment of our green assets. It seems to be waving -through the deals, checking only that the charity is getting proper value rather than questioning their propriety. So it looks like it is down to us; the people of Milton Keynes again. The trustees who can stop this disaster-in-waiting from happening are: Elizabeth Gifford, Jean Nicholas, Michael LeRoy, Alexander Boswell, Andrew Lawes, Norman Miles, Peter Geary, Ric Brackenbury, Helaine Whiteside, Christopher Shaw, Richard Forman, Kitty Martin, John Lewis, John Eaton and Keith Edginton.

If you know one or more of them, please have a quiet word - maybe you can help to save Milton Keynes before it is too late.

Thanks and cheerio.

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