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'Hub 2': let battle commence

Theo Chalmers



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OH NO... it's happening again. Just as our council appears to have come to its senses and stopped destroying our city, the danger in our midst that is the Homes & Communities Agency (formerly English Partnerships and the overseer of the now-disbanded Milton Keynes Partnership), appears to be trying to foist 'Hub 2' on us.

As I referred to last month, the site formerly dubbed West End One, upon which had been planned a tightly packed 'dormitory town' on a key site in our city, has been acquired by Barratt Homes. Urban Eden was instrumental in seeing off Places for People, developer of the site also known as b4.4. Now we need to tackle this latest attempt to foist on us architecture resembling that of former Soviet Republics.

To some extent Barratt's hands and feet are hog-tied. It is working to a restrictive brief from the HCA, which still has planning rights and owns significant chunks of Milton Keynes. This brief serves only the Treasury and completely ignores the needs of Milton Keynes and arguably our most important undeveloped central site.

Although negotiations are under way to pass rights to both the land and the planning to the council, it seems HCA is intent on one last act of vandalism as a valedictum. To review its plan (pictured) for yourself, visit <http://goo.gl/qJASi>.

Incidentally, Barratt Homes is

the company that developed Vizion, the site next to The Hub and opposite the new site. Review the new plans and you may conclude that little has been learned from the experiences of 1960s towerblocks with their windswept, crime-riddled semi-private/public spaces below.

Admittedly the building heights are less than those of the 1960s but it seems obvious to me, and long experience proves, that families with children do not generally wish to live in elevated apartments with their children playing out of sight below and their cars hidden from view.

If Barratt Homes wishes to appeal to affluent younger or retired couples/singles, they will need to make the buildings a good deal more inspirational than these tired, uninspiring blocks. Where is the imagination, the sense of fun, the flights of fancy, the desirability, the inspiration, the excitement?

Where is the "Ooo, look at that, how exciting!" Where's the new city centre that those walking up from the station will be inspired to explore? Where's our Las Ramblas, Via Veneto, SoHo (New York.) or funky 6th arrondissement?

This looks like a development designed by accountants. An 'it will do for now' tranche of unattractive housing, impractical business space and hotel space – the latter of which Milton Keynes *does* need apparently. The development crams as much as possible into what should be a stand-out city centre development. It appears to be designed solely to 'sweat the assets' before the HCA quits our city forever. I mean: do we really need another Hub?

As many agree, Milton Keynes is the best, most user-friendly,

best-designed city in the UK and deserves only the finest architecture and most imaginative developments. Hiring an 'artist', which Barratt Homes claims to be doing, to attempt to 'tart up' this disaster will not work either.

We all know you cannot polish a poo. Although I suppose you can roll it in glitter.

Despite being as kind to Barratt Homes as I can be, it must be said that they reveal some cynicism of their own with their use of photographs in the draft plans. These show some, but not all, very much better developments and landscaping. Additionally their phrases can only be described as having most likely issued from the mouths of certain mustelid mammals. For example: "This has informed the concept; a more varied character, but one which displays common threads through material, detail and scale which ensures a coherent family resemblance."

Coherent family resemblance? It does not resemble my family. Does it yours?

Apparently Barratt Homes conducted a very brief public consultation. But they have not consulted Urban Eden nor our hundreds of members. And I am willing to bet they have not consulted you either.

So the message from anyone who cares about our city to the unelected unrepresentative HCA must be: Please go... and go now... and take your ill-considered plans with you.

Cheerio.

■ Letter to the Editor

Investment is imperative to enhance centre

I READ with interest Theo's Chalmers column in last month's edition, in which he raised some interesting points relating to proposed future developments at thecentre:mk and I would like to clarify.

As an important community centre and business within Central Milton Keynes and the region, it is imperative that we continue to invest and enhance thecentre:mk to deliver a vibrant, dynamic and thriving environment in which our people can shop and dine.

We embarked on a public exhibition prior to any planning application with a number of public groups as well as the officers and members of Milton Keynes Council to discuss the proposed redevelopment of the Secklow Gate Bridge.

Far from being a charade, each and every issue that was raised in

City leaders are listening to the lobbyists

ONE of the ways in which Urban Eden lobbies is by requesting regular meetings with those who have real power. One such meeting occurred in January where seven Urban Eden members – all with credible expertise and connections in this city – sat down with 12 members of the Milton Keynes Council executive including Nick Frowick, assistant director, planning, economy and development, Neil Sainsbury, manager of urban design, landscape architecture and regeneration, and assistant director transport and highways, Alan Constanter. Also at the meeting were council leader Cllr Andrew Gony and Cabinet members Andrew Morris, who holds the growth and development brief, and John Bine, who is in charge of transport and highways.

The purpose was to discuss major issues facing Milton Keynes which, if tackled without proper consideration of all stakeholders, could negatively impact our quality of life. One of the plans by development to demolish the south side of Secklow Gate, which would mean closing a vital grid road, meaning the market is a new 'dead end' where no passer-by could traverse the small irregularity of the corner, the building of two massive new stores on the market's eastern side and lowering the height of the Midsummer Bookroad cartway, thus narrowing the safe road crossing under the road junction.

We have already had some joy with our lobbying. It was confirmed at the meeting that development's attempt to avoid an Environmental Impact Assessment for the

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rights to grant planning in the B4.4 area (opposite Sainsbury's) which was until recently controlled by developer Places for People and destined to be West End One. Our lobbying helped to see off this disaster. Sainsbury's which offered nothing to the city and served only commuters, have it seems Sainsbury's Barratt Homes has acquired the site and may be 'conceded' into a central high-density scheme by an HCA apparently concerned only to fatten the Exchequer.

It is truly in time for the HCA to leave Milton Keynes without further delay, save only to negotiate for the planning and environmental disasters that its short-sighted greed has foisted on us. For good, see no further than The Hub.

The good news is that the council is in serious negotiations, also involving the government housing minister Grant Shapps, to acquire the assets and obligations. The bad news is that negotiations are apparently very demanding and no resolution is yet in

those sessions and the 384 comment forms completed by members of the public have been reviewed by the project team consisting of planners, architects, transport and commercial experts.

The project on Secklow Gate Bridge will enable us to react to the needs of retailers who want best space, well configured stores with efficient floor space in the best trading locations. This investment will add to the economic viability of Central

Milton Keynes, ensuring it is still considered a prime retail centre in our region and the UK in the next 20 years.

One important point raised during those briefings was the need for a 24-hour access through the building. This is an item that our architects and designers are working on to create an enhanced public space which will provide a true heart to Central Milton Keynes.

Theo raises an important point relating to the vacant space with-

in the Food Centre - one which we at thecentre:mk all share and have been in discussion over a prolonged period to try to resolve with the occupier and lease holder Sainsbury's.

Unfortunately, the length of this lease does not make it readily available to us as owners and until such time as Sainsbury's chooses to resolve issues relating to the lease we are unable to consider a future tenant or redevelopment. Maybe the question that should be asked is why Sainsbury's wish to leave the store empty rather than, yet again, pointing the finger of blame at the owners of thecentre:mk whose wish is to provide a vibrant, viable and modern centre for the people of Milton Keynes.

ROBERT HALL

Centre director, thecentre:mk