

An outcome I entirely expected

READERS of this column will know that I rarely write about myself. This month will be different. Why? Because of actions taken by Milton Keynes Council to prevent Urban Eden, the organisation I founded, having a voice on Milton Keynes Development Partnership, the body tasked with development of land recently sold by the Homes & Communities Agency to the council for £32 million.

When the council announced that four 'independent members' would be appointed, I applied. I knew that they would not want me - a lobbyist in support of the original master plan, backed by hundreds of members of Urban Eden - despite their promise to manage the appointment process in a way that is open and fair to all applicants and to make the appointment on merit. Yet I fully expected they would have the wit to grant me an interview, to be conciliatory and friendly, to let me oh-so-nearly-succeed, only for me to fail over some loosely interpreted reason easily defended by their Appointments Panel.

Silly me for crediting them with such nous. Instead, I did not get an interview. And when I asked why, I was stonewalled. Eventually I embarrassed them into sending me details of my scoring against the so-called Essential Criteria - criteria

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which were sufficiently vague and contradictory to allow literally any interpretation, or so they appeared to hope. I responded by pointing out that some of the criteria contained more than one criterion and so it is not clear which were scored; some evidence in my CV was disregarded; some comments seem contradictory to the evidence in the CV; some show that there should have been an exploratory interview at least to determine the factors in the CV that the panel regarded as unclear.

On one criterion, 'Knowledge and understanding of Milton Keynes and the strategic issues

to be addressed by MKDP', they awarded no score at all, saying "To be tested at interview". So this would be the interview they didn't offer me then, would it?

On another point they stated: "Some evidence, would need to be tested further"; on another "Would need to be evidenced further." Yet absolutely no effort was made to "test further" or "evidence further" on anything.

As further example of their desperate effort to avoid selecting someone who, like so many, supports the original masterplan for Milton Keynes, here are my submitted comments on their scoring for the criterion 'Evidence of significant credibility in the market with excellent interpersonal skills, a good eye for detail and an understanding of political influences inside and outside Milton Keynes'.

My scoring 'C' (the lowest score possible) is obviously perverse, as was the comment 'Insufficient evidence of credibility in the market at this level'. It is clear from my CV that I meet this criterion fully and I should have been scored an A. It is not possible to run a successful PR company without having 'significant credibility in the market with excellent interpersonal skills and a good eye for detail'.

Nor is it possible to have written arguably the most well-read column in Business MK for almost eight years, almost exclusively about the Milton Keynes growth debate, without demonstrating 'significant credibility in the market, a good eye for detail and an understanding of political influences inside and outside Milton Keynes'.

Nor would it be possible, in fairness, to conclude that my founding and chairing Urban Eden since 2007, a lobby group devoted to Milton Keynes issues, nor the very credible referees cited (David Lock and John Napleton), would not confer yet more 'significant credibility in the market, a good

eye for detail and an understanding of political influences inside and outside Milton Keynes'.

My CV mentioned my company had acted for English Partnerships and there is clearly no way I could have done so - and had the agreement successfully extended - if I had no 'understanding of political influences inside and outside Milton Keynes' at this level.

Council chief executive David's Hill's response to my reasonable request for answers? "I now consider this matter closed".

Although at the time of writing none of the independent members had been announced, serious concerns are emerging. Rumour has it that at least two are ex-English Partnerships, whose wholly-owned subsidiary Milton Keynes Partnership was responsible for much of the recent urban blight foisted on Milton Keynes. If so, then how can they be 'independent'?

Milton Keynes' growth is ill served when no alternative voice is heard to counteract the prevailing brief of the quango, which is clearly solely about profit. The role description alludes to linking its activities to the overall strategy of the council, but only once - and the rest of the wording and the purpose statements show that this is a nod to the strategy and not in any way an actual commitment. This worries me more than any other factor in this whole imbroglio.

Milton Keynes' citizens are not idiots and it will soon become evident whether this new, revived 'MKP' is being set up to perpetuate the much-hated and undemocratic body that powered the hugely unwelcome disposition of building land here. Flouting the wishes of its electorate by ignoring the majority's desire to see the original design of the city continued will result in serious conflict between the council and the people.

Cheerio.

A Day in the Life

ALISON BENTLEY Programme Manager
for Learners with Disabilities and Difficulties,
Milton Keynes College



It's about what people can do

"IT IS the best job in the world; I wouldn't change it for anything and I strongly believe that here at Milton Keynes College we're doing it right." So says Alison Bentley, Programme Manager at the College for Learners with Disabilities and Difficulties.

She says students who use wheelchairs, have Asperger's or Autism, Down's Syndrome or cerebral palsy are all integrated into the able-bodied community. "One thing which gives me great pleasure is to go down at lunchtime and see all the students integrated and socialising together." That integration goes further still with the department recently taking on two former students of the College's own Health & Social Care courses.

No two days are the same. Students may learn English, IT or Maths, take vocational courses in horticulture, media, drama or childcare or they could be learning how to plan for a shopping trip, going out and buying what they need and then cooking a meal for themselves in the College's own specially-adapted independent living flat.

They help to run a public coffee shop at the Bletchley campus. The College aims to get as many students as possible into paid or voluntary work.

Then there are the donkeys.

"We go to Duck End Farm in Akeley where students learn to look after the donkeys," says Alison. "It's good socially for them and for team-building but importantly they learn real skills in animal husbandry, grooming, feeding, mucking out and so on."

To run the course Alison and three colleagues had to pass an exam in donkey care. "It was nerve-racking but we got through it," she says.

In her spare time Alison likes to go on long walks with her three dogs or play golf - but she has to keep quiet about the latter. "The students say golf is for old people and take the mickey mercilessly."

"Education," Alison says, "is about helping everyone to reach their full potential and students with disabilities and difficulties are no exception. We want them to be the best they can be and seeing someone grow in confidence and capability as they do here is just priceless."

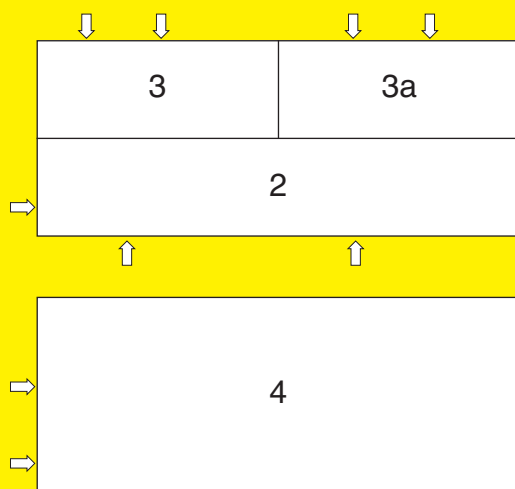
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