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Time for debate on our city's green estate

THE PUBLIC believes the green estate delivered by Milton Keynes Development Corporation to Milton Keynes Parks Trust some 21 years ago to be inalienable. The recorded words by those in authority were unequivocal. Also the trust's Memorandum and Articles specifically quote "to promote, manage and preserve in perpetuity the parks for the benefit of the public."

Recently I advised Urban Eden members to visit the Parks Trust website www.theparkstrust.com/development and click on 'Where are the potential development sites the Parks Trust has identified?'. "You will see the very many green lungs of our city that the Parks Trust has identified as land for disposal," I said. "You may conclude that the Parks Trust is simply concerned about servicing its £30 million debt recently secured against its assets. You may also conclude that this is the thin end of a very big wedge and plain wrong."

In fairness, Urban Eden does not object to the Trust redeveloping commercial sites such as the Suffolk Punch pub at Heelands. However, certain sites such as paddocks and grid road corridors must remain sacrosanct.

Parks Trust chief executive David Foster, has responded to my message to Urban Eden's membership. I quote extracts of his reply and offer my analysis of his comments:

David Foster "The website link you have sent to your members is nothing new; this information has been publicly available on our website since last year and is updated as appropriate."

TC This is true. But the people of Milton

Keynes were not alerted to this nor were they invited to comment.

DF "The sites were submitted to the council in January 2012, amount to less than one per cent of our total land and were selected following a careful review to see what bits of our land did not work particularly well as parkland or were of relatively low value as open space, for wildlife, or visually."

TC The Parks Trust remit is not just about parkland. It manages up to 5,000 acres of river valleys, woodlands, lakesides, parks and landscaped areas alongside the main roads - about 25pc of the new city area. So 1pc is 50 acres, worth more than £50 million for housing. Just 1pc seems so, so reasonable. But then, will it be 3pc next time, then 5pc...?

DF "We have been clear in all our statements that the sites are areas of land that we feel may have some potential for development and we are committed to working with Milton Keynes Council, parish councils and local communities to investigate what form of development, if any, may be appropriate."

TC If it is not up for disposal, why list it? I accept that significant change of use may be achieved without actual disposal but the end result is the same.

DF "It is untrue to say that the Trust is simply concerned about servicing its £30 million debt. The borrowings we have are secured against commercial property we have bought using the loan. The rent from the properties more than covers the interest on the loan. The loan is at a fixed interest rate and the rents are mostly subject to RPI increases."

TC To my mind, this indicates that the

Parks Trust does not need the money from the proposed land sales or developments. But Mr Foster adds: "There are a number of reasons we put the sites forward. For some sites the main reason is to help us achieve our goal of making the Trust financially sustainable."

To my mind, he is now saying that the Parks Trust does need the money.

DF "Our fund is not immune to global financial pressures and the forecast of what lump sum is needed to be invested to pay for future liabilities has increased significantly in recent years. In order to be financially robust... we estimate we need an asset base of around £120 million and we currently have £85 million."

"Milton Keynes needs a sound and secure Parks Trust - after all, we look after 25pc of the new city area and have to be totally self-financing. Raising more income from our day-to-day operations; gearing our commercial property portfolio; reviewing our green estate land so as to explore possibilities for development are three ways to make the Trust financially sustainable for the long term."

"In doing so we are acting responsibly and in the best long-term interests of the whole of Milton Keynes."

TC Again the suggestion that without disposing of precious trust land the Trust is not sustainable. It is the afore-mentioned wedge... and this is the thin end.

DF "Some sites are proposed so that we can improve the park amenities and attractions in that area..."

TC I do not recall improving attractions being part of the Parks Trust's remit. In July it acquired, for an undisclosed sum, the Whitecap Leisure businesses includ-

ing the wakeboarding venture at Willen Lake. These will now be run by the same Parks Trust that lost its shirt on an ill-fated meat retailing venture.

DF "...Others are proposed to bring into productive use an underused bit of land (that was never intended to be part of the parkland network) left over after the main development."

TC I do not like this idea of "left over" - what was left over and intended to be developed stayed with the development corporation and was acquired in January by Milton Keynes Council from the Homes & Communities Agency.

DF "We know the idea of development on some sites is not popular with people living nearby and that is why we wrote last year to all the parish councils to inform them of the sites we had identified in their area and offered to meet with them. Some of these discussions have resulted in sites being withdrawn."

TC The green estate is everyone's business. We all have a stake in it. Why not ask us, the people of Milton Keynes; its residents, visitors and workers?

DF "As for this being the thin end of the wedge, this is more scaremongering."

TC I am proud to be scaremongering if it wakes people up to the threat at our gate. Otherwise it will be a little bit here, a little bit there, and hey presto, everything except contiguous parkland will be gone.

DF "Our remit is to maintain the parks and landscapes in Milton Keynes for ever."

TC So do it.

DF "We have a presumption against development of our green estate."

TC So don't do it.

DF "We have pledged there will be no net loss of parkland."

TC If the people of Manhattan were told that Central Park was to be developed "but don't worry we've bought an equivalent parcel of land in Poughkeepsie", would they accept it? It is the equivalent of what is being suggested here.

DF "We have acquired more parkland each year and will continue to do so. Along the way we may want to develop a few carefully chosen sites over the next ten years to make the Trust financially viable..."


TC Once again, an indication that the Parks Trust is not viable without developing the very land it is supposed to protect. It is worrying because the figures with which they are playing are so big. Any mistake will be a very big mistake.

DF "...but this is all designed to make the Trust stronger and enable us to fulfil our mission."

TC I do not believe there is any investment safer than land. In its Trustees Report and Financial Statements for 2012/13, the Parks Trust states: "Another element of our strategy is to bring forward some limited development on a few areas of our green estate that we do not consider to be an integral part of the parks system or that are not highly valued by the public."

But how do they know that we, the public, don't highly value them?

The idea for a Parks Trust was and remains a brilliant one and I for one am not prepared to stand by while it breaks its bond of trust with the public. It is time for a properly constituted public debate. I trust the Parks Trust will take notice. Cheerio.



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