

A forum discussing plans for Midsummer Boulevard has come up with a set of options for more detailed review. But not everyone is happy.

## Feedback has delivered a step towards more clarity for developers

PLANS to revitalise part of Central Milton Keynes are set to move to the next stage after a workshop to discuss the future of a main thoroughfare.

More than 80 delegates representing Milton Keynes Council, town and parish councils, the business community, lobby groups and the public, had their say on the vision for Midsummer Boulevard between the Midsummer Place shopping centre and Campbell Park.

The three-day workshop, organised by the council and Central Milton Keynes Town Council, aimed to come

up with ideas to make the one-kilometre stretch more appealing and to improve links between central facilities and attractions.

Council officials, working with Central Milton Keynes Town Council, will analyse the results of the forum. Ideas to emerge include:

- Relocating buses from Lower Ninth Street and Midsummer Boulevard East to a new Passenger Transport Hub next to Secklow Gate.
- Making Midsummer Boulevard more pedestrian-friendly.
- Adding new multi-storey car

parks.

- Improvements to Market Square
- Safe shortcuts through the shopping area for pedestrians and cyclists.
- New public spaces to host activities and events.
- Plans to introduce a new tram or futuristic transport link from Milton Keynes Central railway station to Campbell Park and beyond.

Town council chair Dr Rebecca Kurth *pictured* said: "We feel confident that this is a significant step towards giving developers more clarity on

what people want and creating a more inclusive, vibrant and attractive city centre."

Milton Keynes Council and the town council have begun work on assessing the options in more detail with a view to including them in future planning documents.

Milton Keynes Council chief executive David Hill said the options would be analysed with any draft plans going to full formal consultation.

He added: "We also looked broadly

at how well-targeted investment could really enhance the appeal of the whole area."

Council deputy leader Cllr David Hopkins *pictured*, the cabinet member responsible for strategic planning, said: "This workshop has given us some very firm foundations from which we can explore ways to modernise and revitalise a significant part of our city centre."



## When 'maintain transit route' actually means 'full pedestrianisation'

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URBAN Eden, the organisation I founded, was invited by Milton Keynes Council and Central Milton Keynes Town Council to take part in the important design workshop to "develop guidelines and visions" for Midsummer Boulevard East.

The three-day event was attended by a prestigious elite. Among the 80-plus delegates was council leader Cllr Andrew Geary, chief executive David Hill and new temporary planning head David Hackforth.

Landlords Hermes, Henderson, Australian Super, Hammersons, Theatre District Management and Intu - which own and run the shopping buildings and Theatre District - sent delegates as did bus companies Stagecoach and Arriva and Milton Keynes Development Partnership, which now controls all council-owned development land.

Also around the table were the National Market Traders Federation and other groups including Milton Keynes Parks Trust, Milton Keynes City Centre Management and MK Forum.

In addition to inputs from delegates, there had been two public exhibitions. The public's thoughts on Midsummer Boulevard East coincided strongly with my own but, given that the hundreds of members of Urban Eden are members of the public, perhaps I should not have been surprised.

Upon arrival, we were allocated to tables of ten participants. I was split off from my fellow Urban Eden delegate. Not immediately obvious to us was that there was a select band of people who had been appointed to be members of the 'technical team', comprising mostly experienced planners, town planners etc. After the sessions they assimilated and integrated the inputs into a more usable form.

I have not been able, despite requesting it twice, to either get a full list of the members of this 'technical team' nor a copy of their exact brief or methodology.

For instance what inputs would they integrate; what would they ignore; how would they choose?

On the first day we worked with large plans of Central Milton Keynes overlaid with tracing paper on which we could write, post notes, even use wooden blocks to illustrate suggestions or aspirations.

Wandering inquisitively from table to table, I was struck how quickly one unexpected element had appeared: demolition of one or both ramps from Midsummer Boulevard East up to Secklow Gate Bridge. Some parties had decided to demolish transport links over the Gate. I could not find a single reference to this from the public consultation.

After lunch, we did a 'walkabout' and it was obvious that removing the ramps would mean nothing taller than a cyclist could transit Midsummer Boulevard East under Secklow Gate Bridge. It is too low for even a single-decker bus.

It seemed ironic, after Urban Edenites fought to save Secklow Gate Bridge from demolition, that it was now being promoted as a way to forever divide Midsummer Boulevard East.

*If I owned Midsummer Place, I would be desperate to have shoppers alighting in my centre*

We now have electric buses and instead of a 11-minute detour via Saxon Gate, Avebury Boulevard and Lower Ninth Street, they should be running through the 20-metre wide protected transport corridor in Midsummer Place which Urban Eden fought so hard to preserve at the council's development control committee last year.

If I owned Midsummer Place, I would be desperate to have shoppers coming from the station alighting inside my centre. But it seems that both the owners Intu and our Luddite council are somehow scared to instigate something that was decreed when Midsummer Boulevard was first cut in half.

Back to the workshop. Possibly the 'technical team' made certain assumptions based on submissions and incorporated some wishful thinking into the documents requiring a final vote. Among the points to be voted for on the final day was this exact wording: "Maintain transit route". It was only by my questioning of the 'technical team' expert on my table that I learned that this meant 'full pedestrianisation'. When pressed, he implied there would be no reason therefore to keep the ramps west and east of Secklow Gate.

I urgently and publicly pointed this out to the facilitator Dr Jon Cooper, of Oxford Brookes University. Sadly he insisted on completing the vote before I stood up again to request clarification.

A dominant member of the 'technical team' confirmed that the intention was for 'full pedestrianisation' of Midsummer Boulevard East. When pressed he confirmed that some non-polluting form of future transport might be included but only "when it is invented".

Alan Francis from MK Bus Users Group reminded him that trams had existed for over 100 years.

I am delighted to have been instrumental in exposing this sleight of mind, whether caused by omission or commission. Interestingly when I wrote: "Do not narrow the building lines" (or similar) on the plans, they came back to our table with a thick black line through them. Everyone on my table denied striking this out.

I know that if I had not firstly discovered and secondly single-handedly exposed this 'full pedestrianisation' intention, it would have eventually been enacted as "having been approved by everyone there".

Phew, a bullet dodged.

Apparently a follow-up meeting is being planned. Given that more than one delegate has verbally attacked me, it will be fascinating to see whether Urban Eden is invited.

I feel that the organisers are damned if they do, and doomed if they don't.

Cheerio.



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