

Theo Chalmers

Theo Chalmers is managing director of Verve Public Relations and chair of Urban Eden.



www.urbaneden.org www.vervepr.co.uk
e: t.chalmers@vervepr.co.uk
Tel: 01908 275271

A SOS to government over car park fiasco

I WAS ONE of the few allowed to speak before Milton Keynes Council's Development Control Committee in January on the application for a multi-storey car park next to thecentre:mk. I have written about this excrescence before. One is only allowed to address the DCC for a risible three minutes and interrupted at 30 seconds remaining, so you will stop on the dot.

That is not enough but I suppose I should be grateful. Others were refused a right to speak at all, even Milton Keynes Development Partnership, the council's wholly-owned landholder whose land is required for this scheme. They too oppose the car park plan.

I told the committee that thecentre:mk has picked the worst possible place in Central Milton Keynes to build a car park. It would be a permanent blight on the eastern Midsummer Boulevard with dangerous traffic problems at peak. The council's own transport officer voices fears of "a detrimental impact" on the highway network and states: "It has the potential to cause danger. For the reasons of inconvenience to users of the highway and the possible conditions of danger to those users that may result, I recommend that the planning application be refused."

Even the case officer who overruled him states: "...it will adversely affect the highways network." Not one, but two new sets of traffic signals are required in a botch attempt to reduce congestion along Marlborough Gate. Around 40 per cent of bus routes in Milton Keynes will be affected as they pass through Marlborough Gate, the only single carriageway gate not connected to a grid road in Central Milton Keynes and the absolutely worst possible place to build a multi-storey car park.

Interestingly the council's transport officer did not attend the DCC. I wonder who excused him knowing that his report was due to be debated and was

key. His technical review shows that he did not see the revised transport assessment from thecentre:mk's transport consultants Waterman as acceptable as there was evidence of inadequate and inappropriate results sufficient for him to question the answers he was given. An early statement based on the pre-revised traffic assessment indicated that at peak there was traffic running at 107.4pc (i.e. well over capacity) on the Marlborough Gate-Midsummer Boulevard junction. In other words, gridlock.

In 2012, Waterman stated in the Primark application that there was "no need for a MSCP as no new car parking was required and that there is sufficient car parking within 400 metres". They now state the exact opposite. It gets worse. The base figures used for the simulation trials were apparently for June 2013 or late January 2014, not the pre-Christmas retail peak. The expected Christmas uplift of about 40pc should have been advised to the DCC as relevant yet instead it was advised that 85-86pc capacity at quieter times was peak. Perhaps the case officer present, whose job was to advise the DCC, was confused?

The 'Passenger Transport' response in the case officer's report did mention a relevant peak: "The existing MSCP located on Saxon Gate already has a detrimental effect on the operation of

bus services during the busy pre-Christmas period, where buses are diverted to avoid cars queuing to enter the car park. This proposal has the potential to replicate the scenario at the other end of the shopping centre but the opportunities for diversion routes are more limited."

Surely committee members ought to have been made aware of that issue by the case officer. The Waterman representative mentioned an extra minute of delay per bus but the transport officer had not accepted that as a true reflection of what would really happen, though the officers present apparently agreed that was the case.

The case officer and the officer who stood in for the transport officer may have inadvertently misled the DCC. Comment by the case officer that the internal layout of the proposed car park was not relevant may also be wrong as internal queuing directly creates external queues on the highways. There was also some confusion over which planning policy actually took precedence.

A new Planning Peer Review - Improvement Plan authored by Anna Rose, the new service director planning and transport, says: "...the absence of trust or respect between councillors and officers across the council meant that the benefits of other good partnership initiatives were often lost." And yet despite

this DCC chair Cllr Andrew Geary criticised those objectors he claimed were critical of the officers.

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ing they were opposed to major aspects of the proposal including its traffic impacts on the regional centre, impacts on regional bus routes passing through the regional centre and its very poor architectural and urban design, they said they had been advised that a refusal would be rejected on appeal. This advice was not in the transport officer's report, neither was such advice given by the officers in the meeting and therefore, against their individual preference, half of the committee felt they had to approve the scheme by four votes to three, with one abstention.

Cllr Geary said he hoped it would not be built and that Hermes, co-owners of thecentre:mk, would sit down with planners, MKDP etc to thrash out a better plan. Sadly his policy of lying down and hoping developers would not then walk over him has already proved a failure elsewhere in the expansion areas.

I have to be careful about the following which is extremely time- and event-sensitive at time of writing. Certain 'influential parties' have now formally requested that Eric Pickles, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, calls in the decision and that it goes to Judicial Review. The grounds for such an appeal have to be national or perhaps, at a pinch, regional. They include:

- The planning officer's written report to the committee was misleading because it said National Planning Policy Framework policy overrides the council's statutory development plan and the emerging Central Milton Keynes Business Neighbourhood Plan, examined and cleared for referenda scheduled for May 7.

The weight to be attributed to the statutory development plan and the emerging business neighbourhood plan was wrongly treated as de minimis and the committee was wrongly advised both in writing and in the meeting (which was filmed);

- The correct reading of local planning policy that should have led to the application's refusal was provided to the planning officers in advance, and ignored, and to members before the meeting but they appeared to be unaware of it;

- Direct conflict with, and insufficient weight given to, the up-to-date statutory development plan;

- Direct conflict with, and insufficient weight given to, the emerging Central Milton Keynes Business Neighbourhood Plan, which is a Department for Communities and Local Government 'Frontrunner'. Here is a direct challenge to the status of an emerging pioneer plan in which there is national interest, which has passed five of the seven stages towards becoming part of the statutory development plan.

Let us hope that Mr Pickles responds positively. Cheerio.



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