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£600m plan has developers drooling

RESIDENTS of Milton Keynes may be aware of a recent furore over nascent Site Allocation plans by Milton Keynes Council to build on every scrap of spare land in our city, plans that were rightly seen off at a council meeting on March 25 at which 50 councillors voted against it and none for it.

These plans, floated by a single councillor, were for some 130 designated sites: green reserves, play parks, village greens even Station Square to be built on, effectively a totalitarian 'city infill' and all flying in the face of the Milton Keynes Master Plan and Core Strategy agreed in 2013.

The agenda, it had seemed, was to top up our already massive existing building land stock, which is mostly in the Eastern and Western Expansion areas, and to ensure that the council has enough land for a five-year supply of alternate housing sites providing 1,750 homes per year.

Its instant and unanimous quashing indicated, as I had publicly predicted, that it was simply a 'finger in the wind' exercise and always doomed to fail.

But perhaps I was wrong. A recent story in one of our local papers had me thinking. Could the council now possibly be coming at the same agenda from a totally different direction? The story trumpeted a plan to spend £600 million on a facelift for "MK's most deprived estates" including Netherfield, Coffee Hall, Tinkers Bridge, North Bradville, Fullers Slade, The Lakes Estate and Beanhill. On the face of it, this seems

like a good thing. Although in their day some of these estates won design awards and were hugely popular, now they are showing their age and are decidedly less so.

Former councillor Kevin Wilson was the 'stalking horse' for this story as with misty eyes he appeared to once again be reliving his glory years and promising to deliver on his old commitments. Admittedly these would involve some demolitions and relocations but it would all be "people-led" so there was no need to panic. The thought of those happy tenants being listened to, oh-so-briefly removed from their homes and then to see their smiley faces as they are presented with exciting new homes... Even I nearly choked up.

But where, I wondered, was this fabled £600 million coming from? The article went on to explain that £70-75 million would be from "rent money" - the Housing Revenue Account for RegenerationMK. The balance would be from a "private developer partner".

Now, are we to assume that the unnamed "private developer partner" will just cough up over half a billion pounds in order to see tears of joy rolling down Kevin Wilson's face? Er no. The "private developer partner" is after building land. Lots of our precious green space land, to be precise.

I wanted to know more. So I rang the council and spoke to its media department. At first they denied all knowledge of this and suggested I talk with Alderman Wilson. Then they called

back and said that yes, actually, it is a council initiative and suggested I submit some questions. And so I asked:

- Is this adopted policy?
- How much land will be sold off to generate "up to half a billion pounds more"?
- What will happen to owners of houses on the target sites: will their properties be subject to Compulsory Purchase Orders?
- Have the 16,000-plus "affected residents" been informed?
- Please provide a full list of affected sites.

The council responded: "Following Cabinet decision in June 2012 where principles of regeneration were approved, we have been talking to our residents and other key partners."

Fair enough. At this point, I still have moist eyes. Well, moist-ish.

The reply continues. "It is too early to talk about the details of the regeneration programme highlighted in your questions as we are still in the process of creating a partnership with a private sector partner. Following the set-up of the partnership, and full review of the needs of the council's housing assets, the partnership will be in a position to develop a business plan setting out where it will start the process to deliver housing led regeneration. The 'what' - what land, what plan - will be developed in partnership with communities."

I have wiped my eyes dry now and I am faintly suspicious. So let me get this straight: they plan to appoint an exclu-

sive, privileged, private partner, then decide the council's needs and what land that partner will be allowed to plunder and how. What a ludicrously cosy deal.

The council statement goes on: "Since June 2012 we have been clear that any regeneration activity will be commercially framed but community led and will be much broader than just housing. It is also about making improvements to local environments, providing employment support and building strong, active and sustainable communities."

The statement outlines the key aims of the RegenerationMK Partnership:

- To deliver an effective repairs and maintenance service across 11,300 council properties;
- To undertake a long-term strategic approach to generate resources to drive social and economic regeneration. The process for appointing a partner was agreed by Cabinet in July 2013;
- To work with a partner to develop a regeneration programme for Milton Keynes, initially focusing on seven priority areas.

The statement ends: "A formal decision to appoint a partner will be considered by Cabinet on July 13. Full details will be published after this meeting and at the conclusion of legal processes."

I suspect Milton Keynes' coterie of 'usual suspect' property developers must be licking their slavering chops at this enticing prospect. Cheerio.

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7.45am-9am, stadiummk

£15 per place. Book now at
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