

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

Referendum result delivers a fresh vision for city centre

IN THE FIRST of its kind anywhere in the UK, both registered voters and locally-based businesses across the whole of Milton Keynes had a vote in the referendum on the Central Milton Keynes - Business Neighbourhood Plan.

Central Milton Keynes was considered important enough to those in a wider area that, unlike in other neighbourhood plans, both residents and local businesses were given a vote by central government and the votes came from not only CMK but from that much wider area, too.

Even foreign companies trading here such as Santander or Red Bull were qualified to vote but only if their nominated representative was prepared firstly to fill out Milton Keynes Council's somewhat nosy (name, job title, date of birth, home address, nationality) 'Invitation to Register' and, secondly, if its directors were able to find out what the hell it was all about.

Strangely the council, which would have its future planning decisions in the area bordered by Milton Keynes Central railway station, the Grand Union Canal at Campbell Park, H5 Portway and H6 ChildsWay largely dictated by this people-led plan, did not bother to inform voters what was in it nor who was behind it. I wonder why.

In fact, the plan had been developed from early 2012 by what became known as the CMK Alliance, a group of largely unpaid volunteers based in part around members of Central Milton Keynes Town Council (the renamed old parish council), planning experts, stakeholders, lobby groups and social issues activists.

Its chairs were town council chair Dr Rebecca Kurth and, representing the business forum, John Lewis head of branch Paul Hunt. The group used a Wiki website which allowed anyone to make additions or suggestions, although

its main sections were assigned to be created by various groups or individuals. The results of the referendum were as follows:

RESIDENTS REFERENDUM

YES 89,801

NO 17,033

REJECTED PAPERS 6,454.

BUSINESS REFERENDUM

YES 356

NO 47

REJECTED PAPERS 1

All in all it was a pretty good result considering the almost total lack of publicity.

What this really means for Milton Keynes, however, goes much deeper. Milton Keynes Council will once again need to take note of the people's views. Certain compromises had to be made however, such as wider planning policies imposed by central government; the recent approval of thecentre:mk's new multi-storey car park and the Parks Trust's existing planning consent for a site within Campbell Park.

It could not ignore required housing numbers either, so could not rule out tall buildings, but it can hopefully make sure that they look good - unlike the:hub.

What it also does is to reserve two large sites for significant "game changing" developments - a university campus or a major employer, for example -



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and it will stop the rather poorly performing Milton Keynes Development Partnership frittering them away piecemeal in the meantime if they require some quick money in response to some well-founded and trenchant criticism.

With 120 acres of land for development between the railway station and the far end of Campbell Park, it was vital to have an overall vision and a joined-up plan. For the next 15 years the plan proposes to:

- Expand and improve the retail offer with more variety and flexibility;
- Build more offices and commercial premises to attract new jobs;
- Reserve key sites for major opportunities, such as a university or major new HQ;
- Complete almost 5,000 new homes;
- Improve the social, sporting and cultural life of Central Milton Keynes with new facilities.

If the Business Neighbourhood Plan had not been approved, we would have been stuck with the existing EDAA Plan with all that entails - the loss of Secklow Gate bridge, filling in the underpasses etc - until the council's equally contentious Plan MK, which will cover the whole of Milton Keynes, is completed.

Other neighbourhood plans are under way or already completed and they too have considerable local clout. In Central Milton Keynes we now have a YES to protect our grid roads and redways; a YES to protect our green open spaces and a YES to the wishes of local people as opposed to those made, perhaps to an altogether different agenda, by Milton Keynes Council.

The Business Neighbourhood Plan provides a fresh vision for Central Milton Keynes. It is not perfect but, yourself excepted, who or what is? Cheerio.

Sustainable growth must be our main priority

Milton Keynes Chamber of Commerce chief executive Paul Griffiths outlines his wish list for the new government, urging the Conservatives to create the right economic conditions in which businesses can flourish.



NOW the incoming government is taking shape, it is time to shift the emphasis back to reviving the economy. Achieving sustainable growth should be the main priority of any government.

Britain needs to stay competitive in a global economy and those in Whitehall need to intervene to create the right conditions for growth and enterprise.

The British Chambers of Commerce has written to the incoming Trade Minister and Secretaries of State for Education and Business, countersigned by all accredited Chambers of Commerce including Milton Keynes, asking them to support UK exporters and focus on the BCC's campaign to bridge the gap between business and education.

I have also written to the two re-elected Milton Keynes MPs Iain Stewart and Mark Lancaster to encourage them to continue to work closely with Milton Keynes Chamber to build stronger links with our members and lobby on their behalf. We are also recruiting for a policy executive to enhance the Chamber team and ensure the continued effective consultation, representation and communication of members' views in relation to policy issues which affect all aspects of business growth.

My personal wish is that the new Conservative government ensures we have measures in place to retain existing talent and develop the skills of the current workforce as well as train the next generation of workers. There are many employees who are working parents and initiatives which, for example, give working parents increased financial support to access childcare, allow more businesses to retain their skilled workforce. This in turn will help to drive economic growth.

Secondly, growing Britain's global trade potential by removing barriers to trade, building international networks and investing in our export skills base will enable more Milton Keynes businesses to fulfil their global ambitions.

Exports is an area where many Milton Keynes firms perform strongly - our latest Quarterly Economic Survey for Q1 of 2015

shows that 100 per cent of manufacturers export sales and 80pc of service sector export sales increased or stayed the same during the first three months of the year. The manufacturing figures are up by 22 points on the last quarter of 2014. However the government can do more to encourage potential exporters to take those first steps in trading overseas and reap the benefits from new markets and becoming a global brand.

Another action area for the government is to drive down business costs and taxes.

Britain has a business rates system which is no longer fit for purpose and instead hampers investment and growth. The main criticism is that it results in firms paying wildly different sums because their properties have different rateable values.

It is an issue which has been raised as a concern in our QES and my colleagues at the British Chambers of Commerce have set out a compelling case for reform. In March, the previous coalition government announced a wide-ranging review of the system in the Budget 2015. Let's hope the incoming Conservative government fulfils that pledge.

I would also urge the government to give businesses a greater say in local decision-making to boost the economies of our towns and cities. It will encourage local authorities to become more sensitive to business issues and costs and ensure local economic plans are genuinely designed to drive business growth.

Here are my final thoughts: securing progress is a marathon, not a sprint. It is essential for the government to adopt consistent pro-growth policies fit for the long-term to increase business confidence. Only then, can we encourage commercial growth and local prosperity.



Tel: 01908 547820
www.chambermk.co.uk

Read the plan at www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/planning-and-building/planning-policy/central-milton-keynes-neighbourhood-plan
Summaries are available at: www.cmktowncouncil.org/referendum-on-cmk-business-neighbourhood-plan.



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