

A RECENT edition of retail journal Retail Week had this headline: 'Retailers sales hit during worst June in nearly a decade', followed by an article explaining that consumers are choosing to spend on leisure rather than shopping.

In the same week, rival publication Retail Bulletin proclaimed: 'Consumer confidence climbs in June'. According to data released by market research agency GfK in its latest Consumer Confidence Barometer, consumer confidence rose by six points in the month to 7.0, its highest level in over 15 years.

Confused? You should be.

These two contradictory stories illustrate how little even the experts understand what is happening in retail and how this might affect, in Milton Keynes, thecentre:mk and its conjoined twin into Milton Keynes. Could it be that, despite the bullish noises emanating from into Milton Keynes with its grandiose plans to build new retail space, cinemas and restaurants and thecentre:mk's approved plans to build a massive parking carbuncle next to John Lewis, they are both already doomed?

In recent years retail has changed frighteningly fast. Internet shopping has claimed many stores. Tertiary retail sites are long dead, many even deserted by rates-exempt and rent-free charity shops as footfall descends to uneconomic levels. Now secondary retail sites are also dying, their demise driven mainly by high vehicle-fuel prices, onerous parking charges and heavy-handed penalties, click-and-collect and online delivery.

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# Bullish plans do not hide threat to city centre retail

I wrote in my previous column: "Milton Keynes' high street, rather uniquely, happens to be a regional shopping centre. Every regional shopping centre has free parking. Except ours." And, as parking fees climb ever upwards, do we really know the impact?

I spoke with James Waugh, departing centre director of thecentre:mk, and asked him if the recent increase in parking charges - the majority of spaces being owned by the council - had negatively affected footfall, a measure of shopper numbers. His response was that after the first week "people ceased to notice and footfall levels quickly returned to normal".

So is there any evidence that the writing is on the wall for retail in Central Milton Keynes? An informal survey by Urban Eden found that thecentre:mk has

around 200 units with 24 currently vacant: a vacancy rate of some 12 per cent. into Milton Keynes has 56 retail units, with seven vacant as I write - a vacancy rate of 12.5pc. These figures seem high when you consider both centres' bullish expansion plans, the almost empty Food Centre building, the largely empty The Point and even MK Gallery's rumoured abandonment of plans to build three arthouse film screens on its roof.

Has council greed for parking revenue killed them? Parking in Central Milton Keynes is complicated. There are 20,000 car parking spaces, 6,000 of which are adjacent to thecentre:mk which owns 1,100 of them. thecentre:mk, James Waugh explains, has not put up parking fees in its own controlled area either side of the John Lewis end which are still charged at £1.20 per hour with disabled

spaces free.

The 550-space Food Centre car park is free for two hours on weekdays and for three hours at weekends. The John Lewis car park, leased to NCP, charges £1.40 per hour but the disabled pay too. Milton Keynes Council now charges £2 per hour in the red-lined areas and 50p per hour in the much rarer purple-lined areas. The Theatre District car park tariff is 60p for up to four hours, £1.20 for four to eight hours and £2.40 for up to 16 hours. into Milton Keynes charges £2 for up to two hours with £1 per additional hour. Staying for over eight hours costs £15 and for 24 hours £25.

Thus each shopping centre is charging less than the council's peak parking bay rates, which are the commonest bays. Interestingly, though, footfall figures appear more secret than MI6 agents'

phone numbers. thecentre:mk's online Fact File quotes annual footfall of 27 million customers in its 2011 publication but that is actually the figure for 2007 and they have not revealed levels since.

I asked for newer figures. Instead Kevin Duffy, Mr Waugh's replacement as centre director, told me: "The quality, availability and price of car parking in city centres play a key role in their competitiveness. We believe a level playing field with out of town locations is key to ensuring Central Milton Keynes continues to thrive". How interesting.

I asked for footfall data at into Milton Keynes. They said: "We have not seen any direct impact on footfall here. We suspect this is because the prices in our own car park have not gone up so it is possible that more customers are parking here." They claim to be holding back the tide of ever more reluctant parkers. Empty units appear to challenge that.

In a final effort to analyse what all this means, a quote from Persian polymath and poet Omar Khayyám will suffice:

*The Moving Finger writes; and,  
having writ,  
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor  
Wit  
Shall lure it back to cancel half  
a Line,  
Nor all thy Tears wash out a  
Word of it."*

Is shopping in Central Milton Keynes doomed by a greedy council and its ever-spiralling parking charges? Sadly, empty shops suggest yes. Cheerio.

## Your confidence in your Chamber has contributed to our success

Chief executive Paul Griffiths *pictured* reflects on an 'incredible' first two years in the life of Milton Keynes Chamber of Commerce.

JULY 8 saw us celebrate the second anniversary of Milton Keynes Chamber of Commerce - and what an incredible two years we've had.

In 24 months we have supported 380 businesses through membership - nearly 15 per cent of the ever-growing Milton Keynes workforce.

We became an accredited Chamber within just 18 months because of our relationship with Northamptonshire Chamber of Commerce, giving our members valuable benefits of liaising with British Chambers of Commerce.

That relationship also helped Milton Keynes Chamber to achieve Investors in People Bronze status and give members valuable benefits of liaising with the British Chambers of Commerce.

In two years Milton Keynes Chamber has received 121 calls to our HR and legal support advice lines, helping firms

to tackle operational problems with instantly accessible expert knowledge.

More than 250 people have used our Chamber training courses, both scheduled and bespoke, 170 of which were in the last 12 months, and we have hosted 14 free 60 Minute Seminars, run exclusively for and delivered by Chamber members, enabling sharing of knowledge and best practice. These topical seminars are a fantastic opportunity to gain valuable business information, with time to network with fellow members.

We have helped 120 companies with documentation to export worldwide, aiding the shipping of goods with a total value of more than £34 million - which would not have been possible without the international trade service delivered by our sister Northamptonshire Chamber.



In December we launched inbusiness magazine to share member news and promote our training and events offer-

ing. We have been delighted with the input from our members. We have supported two deserving charities: MK Gallery and Brain Tumour Research.

Since May 2014 the Chamber has delivered SEMLEP's Velocity Growth Hub, supporting 240 local businesses, enabling £354,000 of investment into the Milton Keynes economy, and creating or safeguarding 147 jobs to date.

Links with local MPs and national government enabled 20 Milton Keynes Chamber members to join a round table discussion with Shadow Treasury spokesman Lord Adonis when he visited Milton Keynes last year ahead of publication of his paper Mending the Fractured Economy.

Since July 2013 Milton Keynes Chamber has run more than 50 events, including networking breakfasts, lunches and after hours. They have been attended by more than 2,000 people, nearly 1,500 in the past year alone. Many events are fully booked weeks in advance, often with an extensive waiting list. Members have also interacted with

contacts from further afield through our cross-border networking events with other accredited chambers of commerce. In February, the inaugural Milton Keynes Chamber Business Exhibition attracted over 300 visitors.

Local media relationships lead to amazing press opportunities for Chamber members such as Carey Pensions UK, which appeared on BBC Newsnight in January following a report which ranked Milton Keynes top in the country for jobs growth.

The Chamber has moved to bigger premises in the same building in Avebury Boulevard. We now have four staff based in the city centre, supported by 15 colleagues at Northamptonshire Chamber.

I would like to thank everyone who has supported Milton Keynes Chamber so far - your confidence in the Chamber has definitely contributed to our tremendous success to date. I am very proud of all that we have achieved. We are keen to continue to help local firms grow and thrive through the services and support we offer and look forward to engaging with even more businesses in the future.



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