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## A legacy of neglect, subsidy and stupidity

MILTON Keynes is 'The City of the Car'. Everyone knows that, right? But is it true?

Milton Keynes Development Corporation had fairly radical ideas on public transport and although subsequent leaders have sought to both demonise car users and downgrade our grid roads, we might have all been using a monorail, tram or underground railway as well as cars and buses if they had not proved themselves without vision or commitment.

Milton Keynes was never designed to be 'The City of the Car'. *The Plan for Milton Keynes Volume 2, March 1970, Ch.15 - Transport* includes the following:

- Freedom of choice between public and private methods of transport;
- A high quality public transport system from the beginning of the development [my emphasis] not only for those who need it but for those who might choose to use it instead of private transport;
- Provision for use of the car unrestrained by congestion;
- Flexibility in the transport system to allow for expansion and change [again, my emphasis];
- A safe and environmentally attractive transport system; one which minimises nuisance from noise and pollution,

In all of these the people of Milton Keynes have been betrayed in so many ways. Milton Keynes Partnership and its successor Milton Keynes Council have removed our choice between public and private methods of transport by denying us the right to even park outside our own property, building homes with narrow access and inadequate parking spaces. But that does not mean it has done anything to introduce or maintain a high quality public transport system.

This city was originally designed to take a tram, monorail, even an underground rail system. Most of the grid roads, built between 80 and 100 metres wide, had rapid transit reserves at the sides. Failing investment in a monorail, tram or underground rail system, Milton Keynes was designed to be flexible enough to take an express bus system running on the grid roads. That is why grids are a kilometre square, so no one would be more than 500 metres from a grid-side bus stop.

Today, buses have been forced under council and other pressures and millions of pounds of subsidies to enter the grids where they tortuously circumnavigate estate roads. Few use the buses because they are too slow to match the needs of any but the free-travelling retired and their failure breeds further failure. It is a lose-lose situation.

Part of the blame lies at the door of bus deregulation, the transfer of bus service operation from public bodies to private companies in the 1985 Transport Act. The Act required that operations were transferred to separate legal entities.

As of 2010 the big five operators Arriva, First, Go-Ahead, National Express and Stagecoach, controlled 70 per cent of the

market. With the sale of Arriva to Deutsche Bahn as well as Abellio, ComfortDelGro, Transdev and Veolia Transport owning operations, 24pc of operators were in foreign ownership.

So our bus chaos is determined by foreign companies motivated solely by profit. Excellent. Not. And almost unbelievably Milton Keynes Council is subsidising these profit-hungry operators to the tune of £2,339,227 in 2017/18 or almost a tenner per head of population.

It is not all gloom. For a long time Milton Keynes did quite well out of deregulation.

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MK Citybus and later MK Metro provided a wide-reaching, reliable low fares network with a mix of bigger, longer-distance routes and slower minor ones. Sadly, that changed when Arriva took over.

Arriva has consistently cut back its network since 2010 to a few select high-demand routes. Most of the rest of the network lies in the hands of the council's subsidised contract routes, resulting in hourly services run by a group of small Aylesbury-based independent companies.

The council's approach in dealing with this has entirely missed the point of having a deregulated system, or at least its few available advantages set among a sea of disadvantages. It seems to treat Arriva as the primary operator, even where other operators' routes outnumber theirs. Arriva has demonstrated an intention to scale back the Milton Keynes operation further with the latest cuts announced to routes 1 and 2.

The proper thing at this point might be to look for other operators who could come in commercially on those corridors. Instead Milton Keynes Council is pursuing its usual strategy of appealing to Arriva, directing lost passengers to Arriva and resorting to contracting at council taxpayers' expense whenever a route is lost.

If an operator knows that any commercial routes cut will be maintained at taxpayers' expense, you should not be surprised when more and more routes are cut.

There are two other major national operators in Milton Keynes; Stagecoach and Uno, both of whom run an arguably higher standard of service and have shown an interest in expanding here. In the case of the cuts to the 1 and 2 by Arriva, perhaps Uno will fill the gap by improving its competing C10 service. That would be a win-win.

Some of the commercial services in Milton Keynes stick to the grid roads - routes 1, 4, 5/6 and 8 for instance. The routes through the estates are generally council-

subsidised routes; the 33 picks up in Bradwell while the 5/6 go straight past on V6 Grafton Street. Route 12 winds through Kents Hill while the 8 whizzes past on V11 Tongwell Street. Mostly the arduous routes through estates are specified by council contracts and create indirect inconvenient services. And then they wonder where all the passengers have gone.

The 28 is the most ridiculous example, going from Westcroft to Bletchley via Shenley Wood, Shenley Church End, Crownhill, Central Milton Keynes and Oldbrook.

That Milton Keynes cannot support a good network due to its density or road layout is a tired cliché, ignoring that Milton Keynes suffers from the same Arriva business model they use in Aylesbury, Stafford and other non-polycentric towns. They cut their networks back to a core of routes then act surprised when nobody wants to buy their day/week tickets.

Other operators, like Stagecoach in Northampton and Bedford or GoAhead in Oxford and High Wycombe have built up impressive cross-town networks and enjoy solid passenger loadings as a result.

It is similar to the concept of loss-leading in retail - a few non-profitable routes help to sell the network at large to passengers. Arriva and Milton Keynes Council have never quite grasped the economics of that.

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