

Environment can benefit from economy's success

WHEN I first came to Milton Keynes we spoke of our green infrastructure and looked with pride on The Parks Trust maintaining a city-wide network of open spaces, parks and woodlands. Since then our vocabulary has widened. A blue infrastructure of lakes, rivers, swales and the canal has become increasingly important as our awareness of climate change develops.

For residents replying to the council's recent consultative document on the future growth of Milton Keynes, these green and blue infrastructures are hugely important to their quality of life. They provide opportunities for exercise, recreation and leisure.

To the scientist they contribute to capturing the city's carbon emissions and improving air quality as do the millions of trees already growing here. The council is committed to becoming carbon neutral by 2030 and carbon

Milton Keynes Mayor Cllr Sam Crooks argues that business and the council must work together to balance the borough's economic success with its environmental needs.



Cllr Sam Crooks

negative by 2050. Flooding is also an issue. In recent years more than 600 Milton Keynes residents have suffered localised flooding as our flood management system nears capacity.

A recent Sunday Times article highlighted Milton Keynes as a top place to do business with productivity levels over a quarter above the national average outside London. We are the 12th largest city economy in the United Kingdom, creating in recent years more than seven jobs per each new home compared with an

historic target of 1.5 jobs per new home.

But our very success is raising challenges. We are increasingly reliant on people commuting into the city to fill our unfilled vacancies, which adds to traffic congestion. The cost of renting privately, and of our house price to earnings ratio, have both exceeded national averages for the last

four years. Some of our estates count among the ten per cent most deprived in England and life expectancy across the city varies by as much as 7.5 years. One in five of our current jobs are in sectors that are likely to shrink on account of automation and similar trends.

The council believes that the city will need at least 120,000 new jobs by 2050 a significant number of which will be in the knowledge-based industries. We also calculate that we will need around two million square metres of additional employment floor space within the city or adjacent to it.

Some of that growth will be in Bletchley once it becomes the junction where the West Coast main line and the new East West railway will intersect. But there will also be a rise in employment locations throughout the expanded city. These yet-to-be-built communities will

include mixed-use centres and employment areas supplemented by small-scale business premises in new local centres. A mass transit network is planned which will create employment opportunities along its routes. Larger sites are also envisaged for major logistics operations.

How then do we harmonise our green and blue aspirations with the prerequisites of future economic success? I believe that business and the council must work together in integrating these elements. We should see development as an opportunity to improve the environment rather than just mitigating its impact. I want Milton Keynes to remain a great place to do business as well as becoming one of Britain's greenest cities.

■ The council's Strategy for 2050 is open for consultation until Friday April 17. Please download it at <https://www.mkfutures2050.com/>

Councils must work together on the Strategy for 2050 and regional planning must transcend the local level, says a planning expert: Page 13.

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Listen to the people at the heart of the strategy plan

SO WE ALREADY have Plan:MK, the new local plan for Milton Keynes, which was adopted by Milton Keynes Council last year and sets out the council's strategy for "meeting the borough's needs until 2031".

And, as observed previously, the council is already going to extraordinary lengths to ignore Plan:MK's promises and commitments to maintain and expand those vital aspects of Milton Keynes which we, its residents and visitors, as well as visiting city planners from around the world, find so user friendly and so far-sighted. These include our brilliant grid squares and grid road system, our separation of pedestrians and cyclists from road traffic on redways and not-at-grade road-crossings and the principles of a polycentric city.

You can, if you like, easily find the adopted version of Plan:MK, its updated Policies Maps, and associated adoption documents on Milton Keynes Council's website. But it seems creating, approving and publishing a plan which will then be totally ignored until 2031 is not a long-winded enough slap in the face for its long-suffering citizens.

The MK Futures 2050 Commission, a makeshift assemblage of 'experts' - some from outside Milton Keynes' borders, as well as some locals who are 'stakeholders' - was established by the council in 2016. It published its report with the rather Trumpesque title *Making A Great City Greater*, which included a recommendation to prepare a Strategy for 2050 that would take an even longer term view of the future of the city, up to 19 years beyond the remit of Plan:MK.

I have previously commented on the six "big projects" suggested by its initial report and argued that they were generally totally innocuous; a

sort of 'Grandma's apple pie' of a report. However it seems that things might now be getting more serious.

The MK Futures 2050 Commission has published its engagement draft of the Milton Keynes Strategy for 2050 which, it claims, "sets the way forward for the next era of making our great city greater".

More Trumpery, I see.

It claims that "People are at the heart of what this Strategy is trying to achieve. It is a strategy for everyone living in Milton Keynes today and all those that wish to live here in future. We'd love to hear views from a wide range of people about the draft Strategy for 2050."

It wants to hear from as many as possible and will be announcing events and opportunities to get involved on the website and on Twitter and Facebook.

As well as the web-based version at www.mkfutures2050.com/strategy-for-2050-engagement-page, they will also have copies of the draft Strategy

for 2050 in local libraries. You can email the commission at mkfutures@milton-keynes.com. It invites comments and feedback by April 17 - a ridiculously tight time frame. How on earth are they going to hear views "over the coming months" when they are only giving us such a short time to engage?

Surely such a plan of such enormity needs to give the public much longer to read all the documents and/or to attend the various presentations before forming their opinions. I am fascinated that there is no formal set of questions for this; just a vague request for comments. It is almost as

■ *In last month's column I wrongly stated that the 57-hectare South Caldecotte site was owned by Milton Keynes Development Partnership. In fact it is optioned by property company Hampton Brook, which in February failed to secure outline planning permission for an industrial estate there.*

if those in power have suddenly realised just how acutely dangerous it is to offer the public any kind of yes or no referendum.

Having read the draft of its Milton Keynes Strategy for 2050, I see that it has subtly changed its thinking from its earlier *Making A Great City Greater*. My feeling is that while it appears to support the principles and importance of grid roads, redways and the introduction of an efficient, fast, affordable mass transit system - things I have long advocated - it is all an easily dispersed puff of lovable, heavenly-scented steam disguising its real intentions.

The suggested mass transit system is nothing of the sort. It is just more buses. Only this time two of them are stuck together so they won't get lonely. In its messianic and ill thought out plan, it wishes to restrict cars from using new bus lanes even if the buses are an hour or more apart. It also, bizarrely, trumpets the planned Oxford-Cambridge Expressway which

was due to transit Milton Keynes, a project that I understand is already dead in the water.

Its other suggested changes include moves to expand Milton Keynes in ways that differ substantially from the original masterplan. It uses this mythical mass transit system to support non Milton Keynes-style housing expansion, forcing new high-density developments around bus stops with zero or near-zero car parking, does not promote the actual expansion of grid roads, redways and grid squares and punishes motorists relentlessly, attempting to force them out of cars onto buses and removes much existing city centre parking. And all this despite the meteoric rise of new zero pollution electric cars.

So let them know what you think. Perhaps we should all specifically ask for a clear referendum-style 'yes or no' questionnaire for its main elements. That would convert any vague and easily ignored inputs from the public into actionable instructions. Here are some I'd like to see:

- Should Milton Keynes double its population to over 500,000?
- Should expansion areas include proper grid roads, redways and not-at-grade crossings?
- Should all new homes have enough parking spaces with dedicated access to private recharging points for electric and hybrid vehicles?
- Should expansion areas include grid squares with shops and employment areas, maintaining the polycentric city?
- Should the number of parking spaces in Central Milton Keynes be increased in line with population increases?

How can they refuse this reasonable request? After all "People are at the heart of what this Strategy is trying to achieve". Cheerio.