

The Fred Roche Foundation Response

To

Strategic Placemaking Scrutiny Committee 13 January 2021

Milton Keynes Strategy for 2050

Introduction

The Council embarked on a process to shape the future of MK in 2016 and the Fred Roche Foundation was instrumental in helping to set up the Futures Commission. The Strategy is about growing our city. Successful places need plans to cope with growth, the history of New Towns around the world has seen many places that have failed to build on their original success. MK is a dynamic place and must continue to create the appropriate framework for organic growth driven by and for its existing communities. Not growth for growths sake to meet national housing targets.

The power to create and save the places we live in is in our own hands

Milton Keynes has worked well for the last 50 years and particularly well in coping with the Covid-19 crisis, thanks to the planning principles and design laid down in the original plan for MK. If there is one single lesson to be learnt from the past year, it is that we need to return to the original planning principles and only grow the city in a sustainable way, low to medium density to housing, a mixed economy, large areas of green and blue space and to build neighbourhoods not housing ghettos around the edge of MK.

The Fred Roche Foundation responded to the first round of consultation which ended on 22 May and also to the changes required based on experiences from the Covid lockdowns. We are pleased that the Council has responded to the consultation and substantially amended the Draft Strategy and has now put in place a commendable framework which now enshrines a considerable amount of the guiding principles that were used to shape the first 50 years of our city's life.

We therefore welcome the opportunity to provide further thoughts on the strategy, particularly with regard to Urban Design, Placemaking and the creation of Sustainable Communities. In our first response we urged that any growth should be sustainable and be based on what is good about Milton Keynes. Through Covid it has become even more obvious that the 1979 Plan for Milton Keynes worked, therefore any planned new development should be based on these planning and urban design principles.

It is clear that the city we have been bequeathed from the original Plan for MK by Llewelyn Davies and largely implemented by MKDC has created a place where families and businesses want to invest. A city based on low to medium density housing, large areas of connected green and blue open space and a network of walking and cycling routes has demonstrated that the plan worked.

Milton Keynes was planned and built with future growth in mind, to be a sustainable community before we understood the principles that now define sustainability. It

was grounded in the spirit of a balanced lifestyle, employment close to home and providing nature on your doorstep.

We are pleased therefore to note that the benefits of working closely to the original master plan for MK have been recognised in the final version of the Strategy and that further expansion areas outside the original MKDC development boundary will include provision for and access to open spaces, water, woodlands and parks. We believe that this should also require developers to provide much higher levels of advance landscaping.

Placemaking

Our concerns however remain about the quality of urban design and placemaking that has been created in the current expansion areas, in particular, Newton Leys, Calverton, South West MK, Broughton and Atterbury and that which is emerging from the currently adopted SPD for the eastern expansion area.

What has emerged are simply large areas of housing, either not properly integrated within MK, or with poor connectivity, overwhelmingly dependant on cars and lacking in proper neighbourhoods with local facilities. The divergence from the planning principles of MK using 'grid roads' with separated cycling and walking routes to 'city-streets' has been a significant failure.

These new housing areas are characterised by poor quality standard house builders products poorly laid out with inadequate public realm and landscaping. Streets become narrow canyons with dwelling frontages too close to footways and roads with little defensible space and parked cars dominating the street scene.

Little attempt is made to retain utilise any existing hedgerows or trees or natural features and no advance planting is provided. There is little done to mitigate the impact of road noise and visual intrusion from taller buildings, see Eagle Farm along the A 421.

The growth areas have also seen another divergence from the neighbourhoods established in the existing city grids and that is the lack of integration of employment areas with the exception of Fen/Eagle Farm. The proposed future expansion areas must make adequate provision for employment uses to encourage working and cycling to work.

The overriding response has been that any planned growth of MK must be based on the same principles on which it was planned and built, low density well planned housing, extensive open space and landscaped public realm, a network of cycling and walking routes. In short any growth should be sustainable in areas where the grid road and bus and redway network can be connected. Growth should be sustainable and not drain investment from the existing urban areas of MK

Dispersed Employment Areas

Milton Keynes has been characterised by successfully integrating employment space into residential areas, one of the main reasons why a wide variety of businesses were attracted to MK offering a pleasant working environment.

The economy of Milton Keynes has been more resilient to economic cycles because it was planned to be based on a variety of sectors with a wide range of small and medium sized businesses, particularly in the emerging electronics and IT industries. The economy nationally is likely to shrink by between 10-15% from COVID, therefore it is even more important to recognise that by and large it has been the success of a very mixed employment base that has made MK successful with low reliance on a small number of large employers.

Much of the draft growth strategy is being driven by the need for more land to be provided for huge distribution and logistics centres. With the trend for more internet shopping there will still be a requirement, but the strategy also needs to give equal status to smaller industrial and warehouse space for SME's and start ups. The Development Corporation's advanced factory unit (AFU) programme formed the basis of the economic base of MK and the Council through MKDP could fulfil a similar role.

New start ups are higher in MK than many other parts of the UK and hopefully this local entrepreneurial activity will continue as the UK economy starts to pick up. However, the economic impacts of the Covid pandemic need to be set in the context of the major disruption to the UK economy being caused by Brexit and already acknowledged by the Bank of England and a wide range of economic forecasters.

Retail

The decline in conventional retailing as opposed to on-line shopping started before the pandemic which has only accelerated the long term trend of declining high streets and empty shop units. The significant change that Covid has brought about has been the acceleration of insolvencies amongst retailers and consequent loss of retail and leisure jobs. However on the plus side has been the increased use of local shops therefore there is an opportunity for neighbourhood shopping to benefit if small specialist local traders can be encouraged.

The biggest losers will be CentreMK and Intu (now in receivership). The large out of town supermarkets and shopping centres (Kingston, MK Stadium for example) should survive as they are already enjoying greater footfall than malls as they offer free parking and have more space inside and outside the retail outlets.

Home delivery of food has grown hugely as a result of the stay at home policy, if the supermarkets are resourcing to meet this demand and can provide the service at no cost to their bottom line, then as with internet shopping, food shopping through home delivery will grow. This is likely to mean that there is unlikely to be a requirement for more food retail space and some of the very big supermarkets may shrink space making more land available for new housing inside MK.

One of the winners of these trends has been the growth of delivery jobs and dedicated workspaces to handle the distribution and in the case of non food shopping a place to receive returns. So there will be increased demand for warehouse and storage space and the number of jobs in distribution and delivery.

In conclusion the strategy should encourage greater provision of local shopping and encouragement of small specialist shops through cheap space and business rate

support, especially in Town centres such as Bletchley, Newport Pagnell, Wolverton and Stony Stratford.

Commercial Development

There has been a period of forced working from home and there will be many types of jobs which can be carried out from home and for many people this will be their preferred choice of working. What is likely to happen post- COVID is that employers will offer flexibility for staff to work from home for part of the week and in the long term there will be a reduction in demand for conventional office space which will be reengineered for desk sharing.

It was estimated that pre-Covid up to 6m workers in the UK were working flexibly from home, this will increase post-Covid with consequential impact on the demand for office space.

As with retailing trends, there was already a move for office based staff to work more from home due to improved IT connectivity allowing them to enjoy a better work life balance and easing childcare/carer arrangements and costs. This trend will accelerate when both employers and employees can now see that it can work.

One of the long term consequences of the Covid period could be an acceleration of skilled professional workers moving out of London. This trend had started before Covid with destinations like Bristol and Birmingham being quoted, but with flexible working and a desire not to be in a large city due to the public transport problem, existing London workers may now choose to move their home to MK but stay working in London but only going in 1 or 2 days a week.

Full time working from home will not necessarily be the case for everyone due to the desire for many to have the social interaction that being in a work place has. For those who will spend more time working from home they will require space in the home to work, the home/work model of house types considered many years ago will need to be reconsidered. For a number of years the house types developed by housing associations have higher space standards than the national space standards and space in bedrooms for desks. Also it is good practice for family dwellings to have a room, either kitchen or dining room capable of being separated from the main living accommodation for children to study. These standards should be a requirement of all new homes

The proposed new housing expansion areas will also need more small retail and office support space to provide home workers easy access to shopping outlets, similar to what office based workers currently use on the way home, a small supermarket, a coffee shop etc. The current house builders model for housing developments with only a notional amount of commercial space needs to be changed to ensure that there is good shopping and small employment units serving large housing developments. The neighbourhood centres from the original Plan for MK with access by foot or bike to a local centre within 1km should be included in all new planning briefs for residential development.

Travel

The Strategy has attempted to reduce car based journeys by pushing for greater use of cycling and other micro mobility devices, walking and public transport. A considerable part of the Strategy is given over to the development of a Mass Transport Network, without clearly defining it and how it will be paid for. Over the coming 30 years technology changes may make this achievable, but in the short to medium term more emphasis should be made to continue to improve the existing bus system.

Considerably less space in the Strategy is given over to how the numbers of people cycling and walking can be increased. There is much more that can be done to extend the existing redway infrastructure per and promote its use through an extensive publicity campaign.

The Growth Strategy has dedicated less than half a page to cycling, walking and other alternative micro modes of transport but a whole section on a mass transit system. In any revisions to the Strategy can be made we urge that there are more concrete proposals to reduce car use and increase cycling and walking.

In summary people are now more interested in commuting by bike or on foot and working and shopping closer to home, this will continue in the future provided adequate for safe cycling and walking routes are provided and that car space is given over to provide this.

We will change the way we live, particularly around working more flexibly, shopping differently and will possibly base our leisure activities outdoors rather than in the conventional way in pubs, clubs, gyms, cinemas and theatres. The plans for MK growth need to understand how we are already well adapted for these changes and to ensure that the strategic planning halts the current poorly planned and poorly served new housing expansion areas. Future growth areas should have links to grid roads, good cycling and walking routes, 40% of land area given to public open space and high quality design and landscaping.

In summary placemaking should be at the heart of the creation of new neighbourhoods and should be based on:

- The design and planning established in Plan MK 1970 works, why change these principles
- Housing densities similar to those found in the established housing areas of MK
- Less reliance on flats which should not include 3/4 bed family units and ideally should be 3/4 storey without the need for lifts
- Housing should have adequate gardens or shared amenity space for flats and provision for allotments should be made
- It should be possible to walk to large areas of open space and water or countryside from all new housing areas. All new development areas need 40% of land to be open space.
- All new housing should ensure that homes include space to accommodate desks to allow adults and children to work from home, not just relying on the kitchen table.

- New neighbourhoods should have local facilities for shopping, health and other local services to allow residents to avoid the use of cars to access them
- City Streets have not worked, all new areas should be based on extending the grid road network
- Planning consents for future planned expansion areas should put greater emphasis on the developer providing more open space and landscaping through advanced planting and retention of all existing trees and hedgerows.
- More walking and cycling to improve health, this has always been a problem in MK, the provision for cars has always been good and this has meant that getting people out of the car and on to bikes is a struggle, the percentage of commuter trips (SITS) made by bike are still the same as in 1999
- Increase the amount of local outdoor leisure spaces, to encourage 'local tourism' with residents using facilities like around Willen Lake rather than travelling out of Milton Keynes to go to visitor attractions
- Outdoor Sports and Leisure facilities will now prove to be more desirable than going to the gym,
- The economy needs to be refocused with more opportunities to be provided for start ups and SME's who need flexible and cheap work space.
- As people will now shop closer to home we need more local shopping in the expansion areas and the existing centres can provide the space but new businesses need to be encouraged with rent and business rate support
- Grow the existing small but successful arts and culture base to ensure that local artists, actors and musicians can continue to flourish when live performance can restart.

MK has throughout the crises felt like being the right size at under 250,000, so to grow to 500,000 in less than 30 years will make the city less sustainable, therefore we were pleased to see this scaled back. We quote the Futures Commission and DLA Strategic Growth Study which could only find evidence for growth up to 400,000.

Long term MK will still need to grow despite the looming economic and social turmoil, therefore we still need a Growth Strategy, but it needs to ensure that the mistakes made in the current expansion areas are not repeated and the city needs to be more resilient and sustainable. We need a sensible population target that can be achieved without damaging the city by drawing investment away from the existing urban areas. More of the growth should be planned to take place inside the existing urban area. MK has successfully grown despite 4 major economic downturns and it will survive this one because the principles of the original Master Plan worked, we urge the Council not to continue to allow the major house builders to create unconnected communities in the edge of MK sucking investment from the rest of MK and adding to car commuting.

