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Conversation Piece:

## **Milton Keynes: the Social Blueprint - Banishing the New Town Blues?**

Roger Kitchen

At the first Board meeting of Milton Keynes Development Corporation on 15th June 1967, Lord Campbell, the Chairman, declared that

The new city must be made a place for people. We must try to offer them an environment as conducive as possible to good health, happiness, stimulation and satisfaction during their youth and working lives and contentment and care in their old age.<sup>1</sup>

The Board employed consultants to work with them to develop a detailed plan for the development of the city and the result was *The Plan for Milton Keynes*, published in 1970. What is remarkable about it is the emphasis it has on Social Development as an integral part of the planning process. In fact it states as much:

At the earliest stage of its task to prepare the proposals of the new city, the Corporation established its intentions to consider the social aspects of the Plan as fully as the physical.<sup>2</sup>

This emphasis was due in no small part to the character and interests of Lord Campbell, but in 1967 a report entitled *The Needs of New Communities*<sup>3</sup> had been published for the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, drawing on the experience of the early New Towns, and advising that social needs should be recognised and met if the New Towns were to be successful. The report highlighted the 'New Town blues' suffered

by young families leaving their family and kinship networks behind to start life in a completely alien environment.

The Social Development Programme outlined in the *Plan* consisted of 5 main elements:

- Arrivals Work
- Community Development
- Promotion of social facilities
- Recreation and leisure provision
- Identification and provision for special needs

I will concentrate in this paper on the first two.

If we go back to the *Plan*, it clearly states its commitment to assist newcomers to settle in and create communities:

In the early years particularly, many of the social and economic problems which the experience of other New Towns has demonstrated, will be apparent in Milton Keynes ... Many of these problems and difficulties can now be anticipated and met before their effects become intractable, but they will require as detailed and as positive an approach as the more tangible issues of, for example, health and education.<sup>4</sup>

People were moving to Milton Keynes in the early 70s because it offered decent

housing accommodation - 51% of early residents came from conditions of housing need. Most of those who came to MK from London under the New and Expanded Towns scheme in the 70s, had no idea where Milton Keynes was - it was just a place that offered a house.

I was no different. In 1971, as a callow youth of 25, I had a very pregnant wife, a mad dog, and hardly any savings. I had applied for and been offered two jobs - one in Tower Hamlets where there were 12,000 on the housing waiting list and the only place we could afford was a first floor maisonette in Hornsey, a long public transport journey away - and a job with Milton Keynes Development Corporation where I qualified for a rental house because I had got a job in the area.

Everybody who moved into a new house on a Development Corporation estate - be it rental or for sale - was visited by one of MKDC's Social Development Department's Arrivals Visitors. They visited every new resident within a few days of them moving in, and brought a pack with basic information - the location of the doctors, local facilities and so on, and a listening ear for people trying to find their bearings in what was often a fairly barren and muddy environment and something very far removed from the hustle and bustle of London.

The other person to be based locally on the new estates was the community worker, of which I was one - in fact I worked on the first MKDC estate at Galley Hill from May 1972 when the first new resident moved in.

My job, the Plan outlined, will be directed towards encouraging residents of the city to create their own community life and it requires that opportunities to do so are brought to the notice of the residents.<sup>5</sup>

It did not take a great deal of effort on my part to give this encouragement, as the new 'pioneers' (as they were known) were anxious to find opportunities to meet up with their new neighbours and make new friendships. Very soon there was a residents' association, playgroup, football club and OAP's group, all things that help build a spirit of community and offer opportunities to meet and get to know one another. It was important to foster a sense of leadership in the community and to recognise the efforts of everyone who took part.

In order to meet up though one needs a place to meet. There can also be a natural reluctance to meet, and socialise with, strangers, particularly in an alien, or new, environment. From day one of a new development the Development Corporation provided new residents with an indoor neutral meeting ground away from their own houses where they could meet people without any pressure.

These were not however, community centres in a formal sense, as we might think of them now. When I was a community worker back in 1972 on that first new estate we had a facility that served that purpose and was replicated on future estates - a Community House. In fact at Galley Hill it was a pair of three-bedroomed houses that were used in

those early days not only as an office for me and the Arrivals Worker and a Housing Officer but also as a venue for newcomers to meet one another. We quickly recruited local residents as volunteers to staff an information/help desk and make teas and coffees for visitors - this proved to be an invaluable help to nervous newcomers. Besides the activity groups we also had a community newspaper that was compiled with our help but written and put together by residents - in those days it was produced on a Gestetner machine, and stapled together and distributed to every household.

After a year or so as new facilities developed the houses reverted to their primary purpose.

The final and very important element in the help given to new arrivals was the availability of small grants of money. The Development Corporation had two funds that people could apply for - the Major Amenity Fund for larger capital projects and the Minor Amenity Fund for small grants. It was the latter that was most relevant to newcomers as it could provide the money to buy toys for a playgroup, kit for a football team and so on - necessary oil to lubricate and ease the making of community.

It is likely that this attention to the need of new residents and the encouragement and support given to the development of community had a great deal to do with the high level of satisfaction that residents expressed in the annual Household Surveys that the Corporation conducted.

This was 40 years ago. One would hope that the lessons learnt then would be informing today's practice. To some extent in Milton Keynes it has, although perhaps far less than would have been desirable. Nevertheless, in line with continuing growth and the recognition of the need to welcome and stabilise new communities, there are key examples of this legacy still visible.

When the Labour Government established the Children's Fund in 2001 and gave money to local authorities to improve services to prevent the negative effects of child poverty and reduce the risk of social exclusion, Milton Keynes Council was one of very few, if not the only, authority in the country to use some of that money to employ Community Development Workers - who they called Community Mobilisers - to work in areas of deprivation in the new city.<sup>6</sup>

In addition there has been a Community Mobiliser employed in the newly developing Eastern and Western Flank areas. This is thanks to funding from the 'roof tariff,' the modern alternative to Section 106 which imposes a levy of about £18,500 on every newly built dwelling that helps support the creation of new infrastructure - both physical and social - in the developing areas of Milton Keynes.

The role of the voluntary sector in that infrastructure has been recognised and besides the salary of the Community Mobiliser there is funding for voluntary sector organisations to develop new services in the new areas, as well as the

equivalent of the old Minor Amenity Fund, a pot of money for small grants to pay for equipment, materials and other associated costs in setting up and running community groups.

I have been working over the last couple of years with Community Action: MK, making filmed reports of the work of their Community Mobiliser in the Eastern and Western Flank areas.<sup>7</sup> In the Broughton area there has been one glaring omission in provision. For more than 3 years since the first resident moved in, there was not a neutral place to meet. The private developers have provided show houses, but no Community Houses. I believe that it made the job of the Community Mobiliser much more difficult and it slowed the development of a cohesive community. It should be possible to allocate a couple of houses or put in a large portakabin from day one, until a more permanent local meeting facility is in place.

So, to sum up very simply, the lessons from the Milton Keynes experience for those involved in the creation of new communities today is to ensure that 3 things are in place for new residents:

- **Information** - about local facilities, services and activities that enable newcomers to quickly find their feet and connect.
- **A neutral meeting ground** where newcomers who are strangers to each other can meet and have contact initially without committing themselves. This facility needs to

be in from day one and may only be a temporary arrangement before a more permanent purpose-built meeting facility is provided.

- **Encouragement** in at least two forms: firstly a community development presence to encourage and support people who might not be experienced in setting up and running activities. It need not be a dedicated Community Worker, it might be for example a church minister or a head teacher. Secondly, access to small grants to help pay the costs of starting up community activities.

What seems to be lacking in the development of many new communities today is that clear overall vision, such as Milton Keynes Development Corporation had. It cannot just be left to the developer, because the reality is that they normally have no particular commitment to an area beyond selling the houses they have erected as quickly and as profitably as they can. But why cannot social planning be as important a part of new masterplans as it was for one created more than 40 years ago?

For example, let's look at the prospectus for the Wolfson Economics Prize for 2014. It was challenging entrants to 'deliver a new Garden City which is visionary, economically viable, and popular...'<sup>8</sup>

Under 'Vision' it said:

entrants should provide ideas for improving the quality of urban

life through the architecture, civic design, public spaces, transport networks, and infrastructure of a new city. Entrants should inspire readers with the possibilities that a modern city could offer in terms of quality of life and cost of living. For example: the ability to lay down transport infrastructure before building allows built-in space for cycle lanes; services can be placed in easily accessible and expandable service corridors to dramatically reduce maintenance costs; and transport connectivity to other urban hubs can be hard wired into the design of the city, allowing the city to draw on and relieve pressure on other urban areas. Entrants should think radically and inspire the Judges.<sup>9</sup>

URBED,<sup>10</sup> the winners of the prize, were radical, and considered a social infrastructure, as well as a transport infrastructure in creating a new Garden City that would not just be popular with the planners, architects, and economists but also with those who live there, which is absolutely integral to the survival of a cohesive community – as well as to its physical and mental health.

In whose interest is it that a new area develops as a successful community? The people who are going to be its residents obviously – but we can see that developing a supportive society has positive impacts on budgets for health, social services and so on.

In the short term people will want to live in a place because they like the design and setting of a house, the local amenities, the park and the quality of the school and so on, but in the longer term the crucial reasons in deciding how much you want to live in a place are more influenced by your relationships with other people.

I mentioned earlier the visit from the Arrivals Visitor within days of someone moving in. During that first visit we used to ask them what they thought of their new houses – in this case in Galley Hill. While delighted with the interior accommodation they were less convinced by the exterior design and layout. In those days they were seen as very unusual – mono-pitched roofs, a light rather than a red brick and grouped rounded a courtyard rather than in a street formation. We went back to revisit them about 6 months later to see how they were settling in. Asked the same question about their houses you could guarantee that it would only be those who hadn't settled in, who for whatever reason had not made friends, or were still homesick – it was only they who still passed adverse comment on the design of the houses. For the others who had settled in, made new friends and got involved in community activities they'd either say they'd got used to the design and didn't really mind it now, or else they say, 'I don't really notice it.'

This illustrates the point that what is most valuable to people in the longer term is not what they have in their life, but who they have in their life. If people want to live in any new area because of who they have in

their life you will have a new community, not just a new estate.

*Roger Kitchen joined the Development Corporation's Social Development Department in 1971 as a community worker on the first new housing estates. In 1975 he came 'inside' the Social Development Department, specialising in Education and Youth Liaison helping in the establishment of Inter-Action, the Youth Information Service and the Urban Studies Centre (now the City Discovery Centre). In 1978 he became the co-Director and later Director of Inter-Action Milton Keynes. In 1992 he left to become General Manager of Living Archive Milton Keynes, an organisation he co-founded with Roy Nevitt in 1984.*

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1 MKDC, 1967.

2 MKCDC, 1970, Vol. 2, p. 118.

3 Ministry of Housing and Social Government, 1967.

4 MKCDC, 1970, Vol 2, p. 121.

5 MKCDC, 1970, Vol 2, p. 122.

6 For a qualitative evaluation study of this work see Drake, Deborah, 2013.

7 For an example of one of these films see: Engage, Involve, Empower: A look at new communities <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkmtgKOGrr4>

8 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-29056829>

9 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-29056829>

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