

## 4. Opportunities & Challenges

### Opportunity One

**To support the development of an internationally-recognised university**

- 4.1 The first steps are being taken to establish a university for Milton Keynes in CMK. The aspiration is for a new kind of university, with learning taking place throughout the city: students could be based for part of their courses in businesses and institutions.
- 4.2 Such a model for a university complements the Plan's approach to the city centre as being a 'smart city' with a flexible knowledge-based economy. But the university will need a home with some of the traditional facilities, such as lecture theatres, administrative offices, tutorial rooms and residential provision for students.
- 4.3 The Plan seeks to support this endeavour in several ways – by reserving 'strategic' sites within the city centre for its possible expansion; by highlighting the need for a wider leisure offer for young people, from small venues for live bands to new sports facilities; and by planning for more convenient and inexpensive transport options within the city – pedestrian and cycle routes, local buses and shuttles.

### Opportunity Two

**To transform the primary shopping area into the heart of Milton Keynes**

- A place to go and be in, to be anonymous or dress up for; to be able to watch the world go by; to see and be seen; a place to find out what is going on and to participate in events.<sup>7</sup>*
- 4.4 The city centre is often perceived as just a large shopping centre, offering multiple chain store brands and franchised restaurants, with activities concentrated inside private malls rather than outside public spaces. Residents and visitors seem to go to the centre for specific shopping needs or leisure purposes but not simply as the place 'to see and be seen,' the place to meet friends and colleagues, to simply enjoy and experience the heart of city life.

- 4.5 CMK is economically successful, and the CMKAP supports the adopted *Core Strategy's* goal of expanding it as a regional shopping centre. But the consumer dimension tends to dominate the civic and social dimensions of life in CMK. There is a need to create a stronger sense of place, a vital and exciting heart to the city.
- 4.6 In particular, there is an opportunity to transform the largely functional experience of the Primary Shopping Area into something that contributes to a deeper social and community sense of belonging in Milton Keynes. There is an opportunity to create an exceptional public space around and including Midsummer Boulevard north of the Point and west of Market Square, and for it to become a destination in its own right, with a diverse and varied offer for people of all ages and all purses. Part of this transformation includes diversifying the retail offer, to include smaller, independent shops, and to expand the number and breadth of cultural facilities. This will build on the success of the MK Theatre and tempt more visitors further along Midsummer to the MK Gallery, and the delights of Campbell Park beyond.

<sup>7</sup> *The Plan for Milton Keynes, 1970*

## Opportunity Three

### To leverage localism to help drive delivery of the Plan's aspirations

4.7 One of the problems in driving growth and prosperity in CMK is that no one person or agency has actively championed CMK consistently over an extended period of time. Various CMK boards and bodies have come and gone, each leaving a legacy of plans and 'lessons learnt.' English Partnerships, now the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA), has controlled most of the undeveloped land in CMK, and it has been the main driver of development over the past ten years, but this has often focussed on dwellings. Most of HCA's land-holdings in CMK were sold to MK Council and then transferred to the Council's wholly-owned subsidiary, Milton Keynes Development Partnership, at the beginning of 2013.

4.8 The Localism Act (2011) introduced a series of measures to promote a substantial and lasting shift in power away from central government and towards local people. One measure is Neighbourhood Planning which gives new rights and powers to local communities to have a greater say in planning decisions that affect them.

4.9 The preparation of the *CMK Business Neighbourhood Plan* has brought together an engaged and committed alliance of people representing local residents and businesses, in partnership with the Council. Localism provides an opportunity for the local community to more actively monitor and follow-up on the results of the Plan, for the benefit of businesses and residents alike.

## Challenge One

### To retain accessibility whilst transitioning to more sustainable modes of transport

4.10 Our biggest challenge is that CMK was designed as the centre for a city of 250,000 and Milton Keynes is now approaching this

population and is projected to reach 300,000 by the end of the plan period. So CMK is beginning to reach its originally planned capacity for car movements in and out of the city centre.

4.11 In addition, the adopted *Core Strategy* has set ambitious targets for future growth of CMK - to increase the number of jobs and visitors by 50% and more than double the number of dwellings during the plan period. This planned intensification of CMK increases the challenge of retaining CMK's accessibility by all modes of transport, including by car.

4.12 The long-term need to establish a significant shift from cars to more sustainable public transport is complicated by the distributed, low-density infrastructure of Milton Keynes as a city. Many workers are also commuting from outside the Borough to jobs in CMK, making public transport even less convenient for these workers.

4.13 Maintaining accessibility whilst transitioning to more sustainable modes of transport is the most important challenge for the *CMK Alliance Plan 2026*.

## Challenge Two

**To balance short-term development pressures with long-term economic growth potential**

*What we are doing is city building, not property development*

- 4.14 The second biggest challenge for the *CMKAP* is to balance short-term development pressures with the long-term growth potential of the city centre. This has become an even greater challenge now the remaining undeveloped land in CMK is owned by Milton Keynes Development Partnership. In an effort to recoup the Council's investment, there is a risk that 'any' development is considered better than none – that the bird in hand is better than two in the bush.
- 4.15 On the one hand, the *CMKAP* seeks to encourage development through a flexible mixed-use approach throughout most of the city centre. On the other hand, the Plan aims to reserve key sites of strategic importance and to protect CMK's unique infrastructure and public realm.

- 4.16 Two prime blocks are reserved by the Plan for proposals that have strategic value for the city – these represent some of the best undeveloped sites in the whole of the South-East, and offer exceptional opportunities for transforming the business and institutional make-up in the city. It will take courage to turn down good, but not great developments in the shorter-term, in anticipation of greater possibilities to come.
- 4.17 As well, CMK's infrastructure is at risk of short-term development pressure – for example, the rows of public parking lining the perimeters of CMK's Blocks. The temptation is great, both to developers and those preferring a traditional 'city street,' to build over the perimeter car parking and bring the 'building lines' forward, closer to the Boulevards and Gates. Yet this perimeter parking and the set-back building lines are part of the spaciousness of CMK which contributes to the quality of the place. This surface level parking can also be re-purposed in future for public benefit in other ways - for rows of cycle hire stands and electric cars for hire, for new public transport corridors, interchanges and stations, or for simply landscaped 'linear parks' for the enjoyment of workers, visitors and residents alike.

## Challenge Three

**To provide flexibility for development whilst protecting CMK's heritage**

- 4.18 The public domain of CMK is its greatest achievement, providing a framework in which the buildings and activities of the city centre might come and go over time, with only the best of these given long term protection as heritage assets.
- 4.19 But it is a public domain that surprisingly has proved in need of constant defence against destruction and degradation: neglect and poor quality maintenance, and the chipping away at its unusual features by officials and developers who have not learned to appreciate its purpose or understood its significance. It is its very difference from everywhere else in England - the fact that it is 'other' - that is both its strength and vulnerability.
- 4.20 During the past ten years, residents, landowners and developers have wasted much time and effort in conflict over policies and plans that sought to change CMK into something it isn't - a traditional city centre.

<sup>8</sup> David Lock, Town Planner, CMK Alliance Steering Group member

- 4.21 The third challenge for the *CMK Alliance Plan* is to protect CMK's distinctive identity and quality of place, whilst providing appropriate flexibility to future development opportunities.
- 4.22 As custodians of the public realm for future generations, we bear great responsibility for decisions that alter the fabric and structure of our amazing city centre or that allow public space to be sold into private ownership. The challenge is to dispel the misconception that economic growth and development are held back by protecting the public realm and infrastructure. With almost 50 hectares (120 acres) of undeveloped and under-developed land in CMK, the emphasis should shift to promoting CMK for its high quality, convenient living and working, with its distinctive urban design and with a strengthened retail, leisure and cultural offer worthy of its ambitions as a regional city centre.



*Striking architecture encourages prospective businesses to the area*