

MILTON KEYNES:

# MAKING A GREAT CITY GREATER

Commission Working Paper 1  
**What Makes a Great City?**

Milton Keynes Council

Milton Keynes Futures 2050 Commission



# What makes a great city?

M K F U T U R E S  
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## MK Futures 2050 Commission

*When I was younger and single and people asked me what was good about living in Milton Keynes, I used to say its closeness to London! When I became a working mother it was the facilities, including wonderful indoor and outdoor play areas for children, and a choice of nurseries and schools. Now I am a pensioner I consider myself blessed to be able to walk through wonderful parkland and be surrounded by wide tree-lined grid roads and boulevards*

Georgina Baidoun, local resident

### Overview

1. As a starting point for its work, MK Futures 2050 has asked “what makes a great city, how does Milton Keynes measure up and what does this teach us about the city’s future?” There are many published measures of city success but the Commission has sought to develop its own sense of what makes a great place with particular emphasis on understanding this through engagement with local people and organisations. It has looked at the features that successful cities have in common as well as those specific to Milton Keynes.

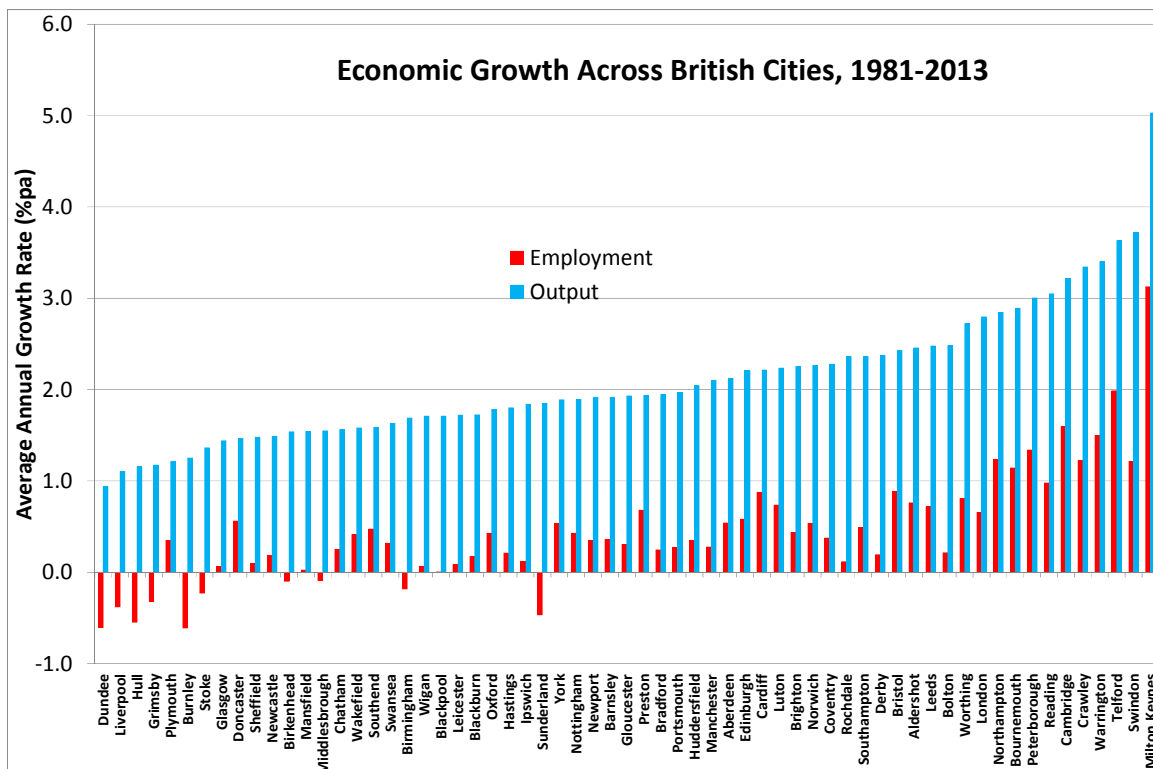


Figure 1. Economic Growth across British Cities, 1981 to 2013

2. The Commission is clear that any great city must be economically successful. Milton Keynes is a young city that has been one of the major success stories of the past 30 years. It has been the fastest growing UK city, both in terms of employment and output (GVA). Figure 1 ranks the major UK cities in order of (real) output growth over that period. Several new towns can be seen towards the high end of this spectrum, but it is clear to see that Milton Keynes has been, by some margin, the most successful of these.
  
3. But any great city must also be capable of succeeding over time and changing its dynamic in response to changing circumstances. Many of the factors that have served Milton Keynes well over its short lifetime will continue to be assets into the future, but the performance and success of any city is not guaranteed. Increased scale and growth may lead to challenges such as pollution, congestion, and upward pressure on house prices. These may impose limits not just to the growth of a city but also to its productivity and competitive advantages. And in some cases particular neighbourhoods, and even whole cities, can experience economic decline. The most celebrated contemporary example is probably Detroit, once the centre of the US motor industry.

Strengths	Weaknesses
Excellent geographic location and external transport links	Education and skills of resident population below national average
Affordable housing and office space	Unfashionable place to live
High quality road system with relatively low levels of congestion	Poor public transport coverage and low cycle commuting rates
High start-up rates reflect dynamic economy	No residential university
Opportunities	Risks
Well placed for significant growth in KIBS sector	Insufficient education and training would mean that Milton Keynes residents are unable to access high wage high skill jobs
Shift to high skilled occupations will provide higher levels of labour productivity and wage growth	Increasing dependency rate and mean age profile of residents
Increased connectivity to Oxford and Cambridge allows for greater knowledge sharing and innovation	Cycling and public transport infrastructure unable to cope with increased resident population levels

**Figure 2: SWOT Matrix for Milton Keynes Futures 2050, Cambridge Econometrics**

4. Complacency and failure to adapt to changing circumstances are perennial risks for any city. Those that succeed are typically good at understanding their history and context and using insights to manage future challenges and opportunities. Milton Keynes is doing well but cannot assume that historically successful strategies will continue to serve it well into the future.

*We need to continue to look forward and imagine and re-imagine the future with the notion of MK as a constant state of becoming. This is a counter to the view that once you've built the plan it is done, but that's not the case as the city is constantly changing and evolving – a creative process.*

Will Cousins, Chairman, David Lock Associates

5. An analysis by Cambridge Econometrics for MK Futures 2050 (Figure 2) shows the city's widely recognised strengths in geography, location and design that have helped it grow so successfully. But it also describes areas of risk and vulnerability that relate much more to "people" dimensions.
6. A great city must work for all the people that live there and use it. Measures of a city's success for people might include the extent to which it enables face-to-face, opportunity-spawning, interactions between its inhabitants. Or the extent to which it attracts and provides for a diverse range of people and talent.

*In great cities people want to be there for something shared and togetherness .... this comes from culture and bringing people together and improves wellbeing, purpose, sense of identity and happiness.*

Tara Williamson, MK Gallery

*My family grew up here. We need to make sure that children can afford to move back. There is a lot to do here. People have a passion for the place,*

Stuart Copeland, Local resident

### **Policy frameworks**

7. What do established local and national policy frameworks have to say about the characteristics of successful places?
8. Milton Keynes Development Corporation (MKDC) was established in January 1967 to provide the vision and execution of a "new city", Milton Keynes, that would be the modern interpretation of the Garden City movement concepts first expressed by Ebenezer Howard 60 years earlier. The aims that MKDC set out in "*The Plan for Milton Keynes*" implied that the designers would learn from the mistakes made in the earlier new towns and build a city that people would be proud to call their home. The goals of the Development Corporation's Masterplan for Milton Keynes (1970):
  - *Opportunity and Freedom of Choice*
  - *Easy Movement and Access and Good Communications*
  - *Balance and Variety*
  - *An Attractive City*
  - *Public Awareness and Participation*
  - *Efficient and Imaginative Use of Resources*

9. More recently the consultation on the Plan:MK topic papers between October and December 2014 led to a statement of themes and topics that draws on the Masterplan goals:

*In the longer term, Milton Keynes could become a place:*

- *That has grown and developed in a sustainable way that respects its original concepts whilst embracing innovation and change*
- *That provides quality of life through opportunity and choice for all (a place for everyone)*
- *That has succeeded in achieving easy movement and access for all*
- *That is recognised internationally as a prosperous and competitive economy benefiting from a wide ranging skill base*
- *That has taken advantage of growth and change to benefit the citizens of Milton Keynes and the surrounding area*
- *Where infrastructure needs have been met through the smart use of resources and technology*
- *With an international profile and reputation as an attractive and forward thinking, 'can do' place*
- *With a variety of people belonging to diverse communities across the urban and rural area*

10. Such broadly expressed high-level policy frameworks stand the test of time and can be widely supported since they are not specific about how they should be applied in practice. But they must be continually reinterpreted for contemporary and future circumstances. For example, delivering on the 1967 Masterplan goal of “Easy Movement, Access and Good Communications” remains relevant at the level of principle but requires very different approaches in today’s world of the internet, mobile communications and driverless cars.

11. As well as the “what”, a great city should understand the “how” of delivering its goals and ensure the approach can be resilient and adaptable, allowing the city to flex its approach with changing circumstances. The notion of a city that is adaptive and flexible was captured in the strapline for the MK Local Strategic Partnership’s 2004 Community Strategy: “The City that Thinks Differently, Embraces Evolution and Champions Change – a Handbook for Change”.

*Our city is used to a fast pace of change, perhaps more so than any other. In fact, some say that if Milton Keynes stopped changing and developing it would lose the very thing that makes it special.*

Milton Keynes Local Strategic Partnership, Community Strategy, 2004

12. Arup’s presentation to MK Futures 2050 on the qualities of a great city covered five key dimensions cover a combination of the “what” and the “how”:

- People
  - full employment
  - opportunities for jobs and training
- Place and Space
  - suitable and affordable working and living spaces
  - clean and green public realm
  - well connected, accessible places
  - vibrant city centres
- Economy
  - opportunities for business to grow
  - access to resources (human, financial, physical)
  - adaptable to change and innovation
- Culture
  - open and accepting
  - creative
- Government
  - democratic and locally accountable
  - responds to needs of local residents and businesses

13. A simpler analysis by Arup (Figure 3) suggests that the heart of a successful city is its ability to meet the needs of people, business and place - factors that operate in a complex and dynamic context of change in which different needs and strategies can often compete and clash.



**Figure 3: What makes a great city? Arup presentation to MK Futures 2050 Commission, November 2015**

14. Strategies to deliver against city goals must therefore consider the trade-offs that are necessary where goals are in conflict. Examples of this in the MK Futures 2050 discussions have included the city’s low density, grid-based design that has produced significant opportunities and benefits but is also the source of challenges, notably the difficulty of operating efficient public transport and the relatively high land requirement for development that reduces the available funding for essential infrastructure. Similarly, the high quality of much of the public realm and infrastructure has served the city well and is a source of identity and local pride but is expensive to build and maintain.
15. Arup’s presentation to MK Futures 2050 (figure 4) highlighted a wider range of potential local tensions. Such challenges are common across all cities, although the specifics but will vary with time and place. The point is to understand and quantify trade-offs, as far as is possible, in order that informed choices can be made.

Issue	Tension or challenge
Planning	Community collaboration vs NIMBY Greenbelt vs locations for growth
Development	Growth vs retaining character
Economy and skills	Improving local skills while attracting new talent
Infrastructure	Need vs ability to pay Car vs sustainable transport
Government	Local powers (e.g. MK Tariff)
Governance	Populism vs ‘What Works’

**Figure 4: Potential tensions and challenges inherent in the pursuit of city goals, Arup presentation to MK Futures 2050 Commission, November 2015**

### Public and stakeholder views

16. A wide range of issues were raised by stakeholders and the public during the Commission’s discussions and consultations about what makes a great city. Some 735 individuals contributed their views face-to-face and over 5,600 dialogues of conversation were captured via workshops, school activities, the dedicated MK Futures 2050 website and social media.
17. The public provided views on the generic elements of any great city. But they also gave their opinions on Milton Keynes specific dimensions and these are summarised in Figure 5.

**Figure 5: The public's view on the best of Milton Keynes and what could make it greater.**

**Maintaining the best of MK**

- Employment opportunities, services and amenities provided in line with growth - planning that is holistic and long term
- Public services keep pace with growth - hospital, GP and healthcare facilities - range and number of school choices
- Consider all communities equally - older towns need rejuvenating and more investment – housing in some areas in urgent need of attention
- Parks and open spaces. Within new development, MK should look after and retain its heritage – maintain green, spacious feel
- Improve Redways – and include in new development areas
- Cut foliage, improve and update landscaping and maintain trees
- Effective grid road network and easy parking

**What would make MK greater?**

- More individuality and soul in the city centre – independent shops, bars, restaurants and affordable music venues
- More varied and interesting architecture in MK
- Wider range of affordable community facilities - safe places for young people to socialise
- Amenities, shops and attractions beyond central MK
- A well respected campus university of excellent reputation
- Help, support and guidance for start-up businesses
- Improved bus services from outer areas – covering all areas and not just central routes - accessible for people with limited mobility within the estates
- More sustainable and innovative transport
- Infrastructure to stand the test of time - and provide sustainability of core services
- Housing that's affordable, built to last and not 'crammed together'

18. The public's views on the "best" of Milton Keynes reflect the new town heritage and origins of Milton Keynes in a strong emphasis on the built environment, landscape, transport and accessibility and the challenge of balancing the growth of housing, communities and jobs.

19. Comments on what would make Milton Keynes even greater have a much stronger emphasis on growing variety and individuality in the city's cultural offer and the related need for a strong university and business start-up support. Facilities, places and mobility that meet the needs of all parts of the city and its residents also feature.



## Summary framework: “What makes a great city?”

20. Annex A provides an overview of the range of views captured during the Commission’s discussions and engagement with the public and stakeholders. These have been summarised into the three categories summarised in the framework at Figure 6.

*Whilst physical infrastructure is important, the quality of those who lead us is also important, if not more so. This means that, if Milton Keynes is to expand, then it has to attract Big People. And the way to attract Big People is to have a Big Plan.*

Tim Skelton, Chair, MK Forum

21. This framework is generic in that it provides a benchmark against which to measure any city’s proposition. The “resilient and adaptable” cluster of attributes is arguably that which is most informed by the specifics of the Milton Keynes context with an emphasis on thinking big, innovation and planning for the long-term.

**Figure 6: Summary of the features of a great city**

### **A great city:**

#### **...is economically successful**

- Skilled workforce, especially graduate level
- Economic diversity and resilience, adapts to change
- Fertile place for investors and entrepreneurs
- Fosters specialist clusters (knowledge based industries)
- Vibrancy with independent shops and varied entertainment
- Strong visitor destination

#### **...is resilient and adaptable**

- Thinks big, values the past whilst embracing innovation and change
- Forward thinking – pioneering
- Grows and develops sustainably – through planned and organic growth
- Self-confident, proud and sense of identity
- Is responsive and builds support and participation
- Open and accepting, provides opportunity and freedom of choice for all

#### **...works for people**

- Beautiful places, busy and tranquil, including attractive parks and open green spaces
- Strong cultural offer
- A diverse population with shared experiences and opportunities for social interaction
- Safe places with low levels of poverty and deprivation
- A home for every household at reasonable cost to meet all needs
- Good health services and excellent education
- Invests in people and enables every young person to realise their potential
- Respects and enables older people to live fulfilling lives
- Easy, affordable and integrated movement for all

22. The Commission's challenge is to make proposals that will guide the city's development towards meeting these tests for any great city. Individual cities achieve the benchmarks through varying and distinctive means that define their identity as places. In the case of Milton Keynes, those means are most obviously the policies and development practices associated with its new town heritage – the core of the city's identity.
23. The Commission's proposals cannot therefore be generic as they must address the specific opportunities and constraints inherent in the context of Milton Keynes. They should be rooted in a respect for the individuality of the place and what has worked so well to date. But they must also be clear about the trade-offs and conflicts that require resolution if the city is to move forward from today's success to secure greatness over the longer-term.

**Annex: Summary of inputs to “What makes a great city?”**

Attribute	Policy perspectives*	Commission discussions	Feedback from engagement programme
<b>Economically successful</b>	<p>Opportunities for business to grow                      Access to resources (human, financial, physical)                      Adaptive to change and innovative                      Recognised internationally as prosperous and competitive economy - wide ranging skill base                      Full employment &amp; opportunities for jobs and training                      An attractive city                      Vibrant city centre</p>	<p>Fertile place for investors &amp; entrepreneurs                      Affordable and connected for business                      Right mix of homes and buildings to secure required skills                      Skilled workforce                      Undergraduates following careers locally                      Economic diversity                      Economic resilience – accommodates inward flows and indigenous growth and changes in world of work and industry                      Knowledge based industries (creative, research, consultancy, digital)                      Uses GVA to resolve deprivation – regenerates                      Strong reputation outside UK</p>	<p><b>Stakeholders</b>                      Clusters of key specialisms                      A big plan - attract new generation of talent                      A high quality undergraduate university                      Culture to attract and nurture talent</p> <p><b>Public</b>                      Diversity of employment - opportunities and support for small business set ups                      A place, a destination - landmark architecture                      National publicised events to bring in visitors                      More individuality and soul in the city centre                      Smaller more independent shops/boutiques                      Variety, buzz and energy - shops, clubs, restaurants, music venues - life doesn't stop at 11pm                      A well respected campus university of excellent reputation</p>
<b>Resilient and adaptable</b>	<p>Grows and develops in a sustainable way that respects its original concepts whilst embracing innovation and change                      Meets infrastructure needs through smart use of resources and technology                      Open and accepting culture                      Opportunity and freedom of choice                      Balance and variety                      Creative                      International profile and reputation as attractive, forward thinking &amp; 'can do'                      Democratic and locally accountable                      Responds to needs of residents &amp; businesses                      Public awareness and participation                      Growth and change benefit the citizens</p>	<p>Always renewing itself with vigour &amp; vitality                      Identity beneath the developments                      Role of city centre                      Enables everyone to journey to work and learn at a price they can afford                      Minimises adverse impacts on natural resources                      Attitude : Pioneering - “Can do” - “place that walks the talk”                      High quality – not just “adequate”                      Community involvement                      Builds social capital</p>	<p><b>Stakeholders</b>                      Big thinking and plans – as with the original plan for MK.                      Values the past in planning for the future                      Constant state of evolution – a creative process                      Consistent leadership – articulate vision – win support from local people – engages all communities                      Capable of growth and expansion – a masterplan for city and its region                      Not completely planned – can be organic and a bit messy                      Balances development with community needs                      Green credentials - sustainable - low carbon                      Reflects current character and landscape (green and low density in MK)                      Active role of public sector – with collaborative team approach across sectors                      Do more with less – apply finance more strategically across disciplines and sectors</p>

	<p>of Milton Keynes and surrounding area Efficient and imaginative use of resources</p>		<p>Creative funding/governance models Partners act as enablers not blockers <b>Public</b> Forward thinking, planning &amp; development. A future plan - ambition to keep driving forward - progression with growth &amp; vision Provision of employment opportunities, services and amenities in line with growth - planning that is holistic and long term Pioneering (1<sup>st</sup> in lots of social activities) modern in thinking and adaptable Strong community Culture, history, sense of identity - build on its character modern status Varied and interesting architecture Infrastructure to stand the test of time - and provides sustainability of core services Rejuvenate, nurture instead of demolishing</p>
<p><b>Works for people</b></p>	<p>Quality of life through opportunity and choice for all Variety of people belonging to diverse communities across the urban and rural area Suitable and affordable working and living space Clean and green public realm Well connected, accessible places Easy movement and access and good communications Easy movement and access for all</p>	<p>Enables every young person to realise their full potential - integrated education for all - lifelong learning Boosts educational attainment - strong education outcomes Welcomes diversity Respects and enables older people to live fulfilling lives A home of their own for every household at reasonable cost Attractive green space Beautiful places - both tranquil and busy Self-confident – proud and sense of identity</p>	<p><b>Stakeholders</b> Pursuit of happiness – community &amp; people are what count Promotes health, well-being and safety Knows how to invest in people Places for social interaction No social isolation - everything more accessible including digital inclusion All benefit – close gap between rich and poor Residents have passion for their city Provides shared experiences Freedom of movement - high quality public transport - sustainable transport infrastructure Integration of movement across city centre – a city that works for pedestrians Effective (grid) road network - grade separation - dedicated cycle routes (redways) - easy parking  <b>Public</b></p>

			<p>Provision of public services keeps pace with growth - hospital, GP and healthcare facilities - range and number of school choices</p> <p>Good health services, affordable housing, safe Housing that's affordable, built to last and not 'crammed together'</p> <p>Wider range of affordable and accessible community facilities - safe places for young people to socialise - social areas to bring people together</p> <p>Amenities, shops and attractions beyond central MK</p> <p>Excellent educational establishments, more apprenticeships and work place learning</p> <p>Diversity – lots to do for all ages and backgrounds, celebrate different cultures</p> <p>Cultural offer not just desirable - essential</p> <p>Consider all communities equally - older towns need rejuvenating and more investment – housing in some areas in urgent need of attention</p> <p>Quality - balance of city, town &amp; country life</p> <p>Within new development, MK should look after and retain its heritage – maintain green, spacious feel - access to parks and wildlife – maintain foliage, trees – improve and update landscaping</p> <p>Good transport systems and networks both local and national services - Oyster card - more car parking</p> <p>Improved bus services from outer areas – covering all areas and not just central routes - accessible for people with limited mobility within the estates</p> <p>Cheaper, greener and innovative transport</p> <p>Improve Redways – and include in new development areas</p> <p>The grid and roundabout systems</p> <p>Cycle paths, open places to walk</p>
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\*Arup framework, MK Master Plan goals and Plan MK Topic Papers consultation