

Milton Keynes' 50th birthday celebrations

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Milton Keynes (MK) turned 50 on 23 January at a critical moment of cultural transition. In a world where cultural production and consumption are radically changing, it will be essential for MK to continue to demonstrate its spirit of innovation.

Increasingly, local culture, identity and quality of life are decisive success factors for cities in attracting and retaining talent and business. Our future depends both on our people and an ethos of experimentation and creativity – essentially our wider cultural offer. Like many people before me who've come to MK, I've been struck by the warmth of its welcome, its amazing team spirit and fierce pride in all that's been achieved.

It's no accident that MK has done well in building a unique and strong identity over the last 50 years. From the start, its founders understood the importance of a strong cultural sector and built this in to their plans, investing heavily and strategically in arts, sports, community development and participation, which has continued ever since. We are proud of our theatre, city orchestra and art gallery and our sport, festivals and events. This is a thriving place – the fastest growing city and economy in the UK, with MK being a founder member of the Fast Growth Cities group, a beautiful city with its trees, lakes, parks and waterways and a place where entrepreneurs and companies have consistently wanted to invest. Its grid roads, green spaces and network of cycle paths known as 'redways' make it unique. But we knew that as we emerged as a UK city and economy of increasing significance we had to explore our long term future, and so we established the independent MK Futures 2050 Commission.

The Commission's report *MK: Making a Great City Greater* recognised that the challenge ahead is different. One of the six projects outlined in its report – the creative and cultured city – acknowledges that the future culture of MK cannot be shaped as directly as before; it must build on what is there. MK's evolving culture, with its distinct strengths and opportunities, must be understood before it can be properly supported. So our birthday is a unique opportunity to reflect and build upon these unique characteristics. A lively and comprehensive programme of events has been devised. The focus is on grass roots activity, providing a catalyst for our cultural assets – history, arts, sport, technology and innovation.

City to city competition is increasing and those that succeed will have a vibrant cultural base – open, tolerant and creative places. I think our cultural vibrancy will increasingly be recognised by outsiders and our increasingly diverse community will benefit from a more spontaneous and inter-connected cultural offer. Our communities have a major role in supporting our city as it matures, grows and develops in this next phase. As the role of the public sector and local government in particular continues to change, I'm certain that strengthening our sense of community and empowering our citizens will bring the best route to future success.