



Association of Retained Council Housing

Research briefing – Eco-towns



Introduction

This research briefing is intended to inform the reader about eco-towns, the context within which the idea has emerged and related issues. It will raise some questions to prompt discussion around the topic and encourage informed debate as the initiative develops and public opinion emerges. The recent report from the Eco-Towns Challenge Panel is also considered.

Eco-towns are a response to a number of major social, economic and environmental problems and as such they have had a high profile ever since the first announcement. The growing housing shortage, greater demand for and a decline in house building, increases in the cost of housing, concern about climate change and energy management, protection of the environment and demographic changes have all combined to focus attention on a solution to housing problems which addresses a range of concerns. The Government has put forward the idea of eco-towns as one way forward to provide the extra homes needed. Eco-towns will have a part to play but will have impacts on established communities and these impacts, as well as potential benefits, need to be understood by all concerned.

Appendix 1 provides brief details of each potential location for an eco-town.

“Like the post war generation we now need to set out a clear and radical programme to increase housing and to protect the environment as well”.
Yvette Cooper, Eco-towns Prospectus, July 2007.

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1. What is an eco-town?

The Government's thinking, as outlined in the Eco-towns Prospectus (DCLG, July 2007) is that eco-towns will be small new towns of between 5,000 and 20,000 homes. They will be zero carbon new settlements providing sustainable living using new approaches in design and architecture. The then Housing Minister Yvette Cooper said that "Homes need to be built in truly mixed communities with strong economic underpinnings to support jobs and sustainable growth" as an overall aim.

1.1 The key features will were noted as follows

- places with a separate and distinct identity but good links to surrounding towns and cities in terms of jobs, transport and services;
- the development as a whole to achieve zero carbon and to be an exemplar in at least one area of environment technology;
- a good range of facilities within the town including a secondary school, shopping, business space and leisure;
- between 30 and 50 per cent affordable housing with a good mix of tenures and size of homes in mixed communities; and
- a delivery organisation to manage the town and its development and provide support for people, businesses and community services.

The Prospectus highlights a number of topics to be addressed in all eco-towns

1.2 Environment

The Prospectus notes that the eco-towns should use the Code for Sustainable Homes and it specifically refers to incorporating

- renewable energy systems;
- approaches to planning that support low carbon living;
- actions to minimise carbon emissions from transport;
- high standards of water efficiency;
- environmentally sustainable approaches to managing waste, wastewater, drainage and flooding;
- green space and features to enhance biodiversity; and
- construction methods and materials with a low environmental impact and which generate minimum construction waste.

1.3 Design

The call for better design in the built environment has been made for a number of years and this issue is raised in the Prospectus, including

- a commitment to high standards of architecture and urban design across all buildings, streets, public realm, parks and open spaces;
- a high quality masterplan addressing issues of design at the large scale and consideration of the wider landscape and urban form; and
- masterplans and building specifications which are clear and adaptable, as they are to be delivered over a number of years, able to encourage continuous improvement and incorporate more sustainable patterns of living and working as they develop.

1.4 Transport

Transport must be a fundamental element both as basic infrastructure and as an area for the introduction of innovation to address carbon emissions. Actions include

- area-wide travel plans for each eco-town setting out targets and how it intends to achieve a significantly higher proportion of journeys on foot, by cycle and public transport than comparable sized settlements;
- high quality transport links;
- reductions in car dependency;
- design to minimise the need to travel by locating key public services together;
- traffic management including traffic control measures, priority for public transport and high occupancy vehicles; and
- research into impact on existing infrastructure.

1.5 Community

Suggestions to help build communities include

- community empowerment in the development and operation of the eco-town;
- community ownership of assets to encourage greater control by more people; and
- encouraging greater participation through formal volunteering and participation in cultural and recreational activities.

1.6 Employment

Sustainable settlements require employment and the Prospectus notes the following

- clear economic strategy relating business potential in the settlement to nearby towns and economic clusters;
- encouraging working from home via live-work units, local resource centres and ICT networks; and
- facilitation of local social, institutional and professional infrastructure for business networking.

1.7 Health

In order to promote a healthy lifestyle in the settlements, the Prospectus recommends

- promotion of healthy and sustainable environments via planning and design;
- offering choices for healthy living through 'Active Design' principles, community action and encouraging healthy behaviours; and
- close working with primary care trusts and other health trusts.

1.8 Land use

Suggestions linking land use to other policies addressing re-use of land and minimalisation of environmental impacts include

- wherever possible making use of brownfield and surplus public sector land;
- mitigation of impacts on biodiversity;
- imaginative proposals to create additional green infrastructure; and
- sustainable locations which relate well to the existing network of towns and villages.

1.9 Funding, management and planning

The issues of funding and management of eco-towns are also covered in the Prospectus. Government expects a large proportion of future investment in eco-towns

to be made by the private sector and the importance of partnership with the public sector and an effective delivery organisation is highlighted. The Government's New Growth Points Scheme is being extended to provide support for infrastructure, community facilities, initial studies and delivery capacity.

It is expected that a dedicated delivery body will plan, oversee and develop the major infrastructure needed to establish the town. This could be a local authority led body, a cross sectoral trust or a statutory body such as a new town development corporation. The arrangements in each case will depend upon local circumstances but there will be a need across all eco-towns to provide for the long term maintenance and endowment of community assets.

Planning is another issue needing clarification with Regional Spatial Strategies requiring review and the Government will be committing resources where appropriate to minimise delay and proceed proposals for eco-towns through the planning system. There may also be circumstances when it is more appropriate for powers under the New Towns Act 1981 to be used.

A Planning Policy Statement on Eco-Towns will be produced with a draft issued in July 2008.

2. The wider context

The arguments put forward to justify the idea of eco-towns have remained relevant since they were first discussed in 2007. However other issues have emerged to cloud the context within which they sit.

The gradual emergence of a number of issues led to housing rising up the political agenda over recent years. The housing shortage has developed as a result of higher demand from a growth in the number of households due to people living longer, marriage and relationship breakdown and immigration. Increases in house prices have contributed to expanded social housing waiting lists and the LGA has estimated that there could be 2 million households (5 million people) on council waiting lists within 2 years.

On the supply side the number of units built has declined dramatically since the 1960s. Prices have risen significantly over recent years and the cost of a home is beyond many of those attempting to become first time buyers. The skills gap in the construction industry has had an impact with many companies reporting problems recruiting qualified workers. The supply of affordable and social housing has also dropped significantly.

The climate change debate is prompting the emergence of innovative ideas and there is pressure for the industry to accept these as standard as the Government outlines the Code for Sustainable Development.

Government plans for 240,000 homes to be built each year (with a target of 3 million more homes by 2020) are ambitious and reflect the Government's appreciation of the scale of the problem. However estimates claim that the number of houses that will be completed this year will be between 100,000 and 130,000, reflecting a decline of between 25% and 40% on the previous year.

The main factor which has come to the fore since eco-towns were first considered is the downturn in the US and subsequently other developed economies. This has already had an impact on construction firms and a number of house building firms are moth balling housing sites, closing regional offices, laying off staff and looking to sell

units they can not find buyers for to housing associations. At a time when there is uncertainty in the economy, developers will be less likely to take on innovative ideas nor take financial risks.

3. Progress to date

Bids were received from 57 applicants following the original call for bids in summer 2007. Of these 57, DCLG included 15 in a shortlist in April 2008 and it expected to declare 10 as appropriate to be taken forward. These will be identified in autumn 2008.

3.1 Eco-Town Challenge Panel

An Eco-towns Challenge Panel has been established, made up of experts in transportation, waste management, environmental issues, housing, design, energy use and sustainability, to ensure the proposed sites meet the highest standards and create world-leading sustainable developments.

Having met with every eco-town promoter and local authority representatives for the majority of locations, the Challenge Panel has released a report on their first session.

The following is a series of general points raised by the panel for consideration by the promoters of eco-towns

- what will the town provide for teenagers?
- who will own the vision for the eco-town? Mechanisms for development control, standards, encouragement for high design quality, protection of quality over the long term, securing community involvement?
- show how a functional green infrastructure strategy provides for development and measurable reductions in the heat island effect, water management and flood/drought amelioration, increases biodiversity, fosters local food production and provides outdoor recreation and leisure spaces
- ensure the vision for how public services will be provided is acceptable to local agencies on whose support they are dependent
- how will residents of eco-towns be able to reduce their carbon and ecological footprint? Illustrate the carbon and ecological footprint of a resident of the town and principal components of carbon emissions and ecological footprint
- assess the viability of the town to become self-sufficient?
- examine ways of extending the variety of housing tenure and development methods
- show how lessons learnt will be identified and shared?
- what are the key milestones on a road map to 2020? How will this process achieve a step change in urban development standards?
- consider risk planning in particular examine the resilience of the strategy to oil prices of \$300 per barrel and the impact of climate change on the area
- set out how the transport strategy will reduce private fossil fuel based car travel

3.2 Challenge Panel first report

The report goes on to raise questions about each location some of which concern more strategic issues such as branding, long term vision, marketing, generating an entrepreneurial spirit and measures of success. More specifically there are comments relating to sourcing of local materials, links to local farms and food production and a strategy for dry recyclables.

The Challenge Panel have looked at the proposals in detail and highlighted some examples which are clearly opposed to some of the concepts of eco-towns. These include a comment that one development is dependant upon improvement to a motorway and another that a proposal should do without one car parking space per household and look instead towards a car-free development. They note that some of the proposals do not meet the criteria for an eco-town as they currently stand.

The panel will meet in July when eco-town promoters will have the chance to explain how they are responding to the panel's recommendations.

4 Issues for consideration

4.1 Eco-Towns Challenge Panel

The report from the Challenge Panel has set out a number of general and specific points. It appears that some of the promoters have failed to address some of the most fundamental criteria in their initial submissions. Some of the proposals have not provided adequate evidence of thought about self-sufficiency, water management, biodiversity, reductions in private car travel and sharing of good practice amongst other things. These are central elements of the original eco-towns idea, and it prompts the question of how developed the promoter's ideas are on some of the basic components of the proposed settlements.

Critics have made the case that a number of the schemes which have previously been put forward are based on applications made for housing developments which refused planning permission and have been re-hashed as eco-towns. Such a lack of consideration of some of the fundamental elements of eco-towns adds weight to the argument that some of the schemes are not fully addressing ecological issues. The report notes that some of the schemes do not appear to have met the minimal criteria and it comments that some appear no different than regular commercial housing developments. The ecological credential for all sites must be transparent to avoid the argument that developers are simply gaining planning permission via the back door and risking a loss of public confidence in the process.

The Housing Minister has reiterated the point that only those bids that reach the highest standards for sustainability will make it through to development. There is benefit in using an expert panel to guide the developers and ensure the original criteria are adhered to. However this panel has no statutory powers and it is hoped the minister will take their comments on board and ensure the settlements are exemplars. The same is true of timescales, it is crucial that the development and planning processes proceed as quickly as possible.

4.2 Local opposition

There has been high profile opposition to some of the schemes. The cases put forward by opponents of some of the schemes are sound with genuine cause for objection. However, it remains likely that some objectors will be acting from a position of self interest rather than looking at wider benefits. It has been argued that the established planning system is being bypassed to ensure eco-towns are built irrelevant of the level of local opposition. This is the kind of issue that gives backing to those arguing against eco-towns from a purely selfish position. Circumventing the planning system only provides this group with a further point for argument.

Local opposition to the site at Middle Quinton has applied for the government's eco-towns process to be the subject of a judicial review at the High Court, calling for a judge to rule that the Department for Communities and Local Government's process

for short-listing sites for eco-towns has been unlawful, and to quash the short-listing of this site for a proposed eco-town..

A Communities and Local Government spokesman said *'We don't believe there is any basis for a legal challenge. No decisions have been taken on which eco-towns will proceed, an intensive local consultation process is underway and any bids that do go forward will be subject to a sustainability assessment and the full local planning process. 'Given the clear and transparent process set-out and the fact we are still at this early stage, it's hard to understand what this group is trying to judicially review.'*

Leicestershire County Council is also considering a legal challenge against the proposed Pennbury site. Officials responsible for delivering the current plans in Cambridge to build 47,000 houses claim the planned eco-town at Hanley Grange would interfere with existing plans.

Rushcliffe Borough Council lobbied the Government to drop Kingston as a potential site. Evidence was put forward about its positioning close to an airport and soon to be 8-lane motorway and dualled A453, circumstances which clearly contradict the idea of an eco-town. The proposed location is also sited on valuable agricultural land and there was no suitable infrastructure that would support such a settlement.

The consultation document 'Eco-towns – living a greener future' provides an opportunity for consultation on all 15 potential sites and the final 10 sites will be announced in the autumn. However there have been recent comments suggesting DCLG officials are considering announcing more than 10 sites as able to progress based on the fact that local public opposition may mean planning permission is not gained.

High profile local opposition may provide political justification for dropping individual schemes and this may be a significant issue if there is a change in Government.

As the Government has invited bids direct from developers it has bypassed the normal route of incorporating large developments into the development plan and approval via a planning application. Clearly there is a danger in such an approach and it may alienate local people and planning officers. If eco-towns are to be a success, consultation must be comprehensive.

4.3 Housing provision v ecological innovation

The Prospectus notes that "During the last 30 years of the 20th century house-building rates have halved while the number of households grew by 30 per cent". This is the essence of the debate around eco-towns.

There is no doubt that there is a need for more housing and eco-towns are one of the proposals to increase supply in an environmentally friendly and innovative way. The implication is that issue around supply is as important as that around ecology. This is worth consideration because it is a pointer to whether the developments will take place and to their ecological credentials if they do.

The Government's plans are to build 3 million homes by 2020. There are 10 eco-towns planned and even if all are built at the upper limit of 20,000 homes they will amount to 200,000 homes – equivalent to less than 7% of the overall target. The first point to consider here is their primary role. As a contribution to the total number of homes needed, eco-towns will not be substantial. The importance for each of the families who will live in these developments is ofcourse fundamental but as a tool for addressing the overall problem they are insignificant. What this means is that the ecological

element of the initiative should have a much higher profile. As an exercise in providing examples of environmental sustainability they must be a success. If eco-towns are not built, the impact on housing numbers will be minor. However of far greater importance, an opportunity to show how new ways of building, living and working can address our environmental problems will be lost.

The justification for the concept of eco-towns in the Prospectus refers to the garden city and new town movements but these were reactions to the slum living conditions of the urban poor and then the need to house a growing inner city population and reduce densities. But not all attempts to address similar problems have involved building new settlements. The expanded towns programme that ran in concert with new towns, the move to high rise developments and the more recent focus on urban regeneration are examples of approaches which took place within, or added to, existing centres of population.

Clearly there have been success and failures in all the approaches noted above and a mix of tools remains necessary, but it is not the case that all initiatives must involve building a settlement from scratch to be effective.

4.4 Housing numbers

The Government has recently claimed that it is reviewing the likelihood of housing targets being met. If targets are not met this year, and a big shortfall is expected, then there may be a chance to catch up in future years. Some commentators are claiming that eco-towns are a concept much more likely to be a success in a time of boom rather than in a period of downturn. Currently about half of affordable housing is built in association with housing for private sale. As the total number of houses built falls so the number of affordable homes will follow suit with the decrease likely to be proportionally greater.

The misunderstanding about whether eco-town housing numbers would count towards existing targets has now been clarified. Local authorities with an eco-town will be able to count it towards higher future housing targets in line with the national figure of 240,000 homes per year by 2016.

4.5 Scale

The size of eco-towns has become one of the main points of criticism amongst those who argue against eco-towns. As they are to be built as small new towns of between 5,000 and 20,000 homes, there is concern that existing infrastructure will not be adequate to sustain the activity that will develop. The fact that they will be built as new settlements means it will not be a case of putting up houses but the associated infrastructure as well. Yet there is a feeling that they will not be big enough to generate adequate employment, leisure, sporting and community-based opportunities for the local population. This will simply lead to extra pressure on already stretched infrastructure as a result of journeys to the nearest town or city. The Prospectus points to a one of the key features of the sites being "good links to surrounding towns and cities in terms of jobs, transport and services". This contradicts an underlying requirement which is that eco-towns have a degree of self-sufficiency and result in a reduction in traffic to access services and employment in other areas.

Critics have argued that building in green areas for up to 15,000 homes will have to be car-based unless there is an excellent public transport network established. Otherwise the settlement is unlikely to be a community focussed on walking, a fact which is a prerequisite for a sustainable community.

4.6 Regional variations

The 2003 Sustainable Communities Plan aimed to tackle housing supply issues in the south east, low demand in other parts of the country and bring all housing up to Decent Homes standard by 2010. It recognised the different circumstances across the country and the need to address them in contrasting ways. The market renewal pathfinders are testimony to this with large scale demolitions being carried out in some northern areas. The initial guidance noted that Government was intending an eco-town for each region. However the shortlisted sites are clustered around the midlands and the south and some objectors are pointing to this as a contradiction to the original guidance and likely to result in further development pressure on those regions.

4.7 Innovation

One of the fundamental requirements of eco-towns is that they take an innovative approach. This means implementing radical solutions to issues which impact on the day to day lives of people. Government should be encouraging innovative thinking in areas of energy production and management, water and waste recycling and re-use, transport, building methods and materials, employment arrangements, social, cultural and leisure facilities to maximise interaction and participation, food production and self-sufficiency. Building a new settlement from scratch is a unique opportunity to become a world leader in sustainable development and it must be promoted as such.

4.8 Guidance

Although the Government has said it wishes each development as a whole to achieve zero carbon, the guidance provided so far is open to interpretation. At this early stage in the process, this may be acceptable but as the sites are confirmed and designs drawn up, the guidance must indicate more specific outcomes for each eco-town. If they are to be examples of best practice in environmental technology for future developments and the construction industry as a whole to follow, they can not be allowed to progress simply as new towns. Guidance must be clear and precise enough to ensure innovative approaches are fundamental to the developments.

4.9 Global economic downturn

The global economic downturn will undoubtedly impact further on the construction industry and on the financing of eco-towns. As a solution to the housing problem this is not a cheap option. The Government must be realistic and appreciate eco-towns may not be viable under current economic conditions, given the investment needed in high environmental standards, infrastructure requirements and research and development costs.

Furthermore the Government expects all new homes to meet level six of the Code for Sustainable Homes by 2016. However sources in the construction industry note that level 3 is becoming standard now and there will be a very steep learning curve to be overcome in the next 8 years if level 6 is to be reached. The global economic downturn will impact upon research and development and many in the industry feel that this is a step too far.

4.10 Impact on stock retaining councils

The impact on stock retaining councils will depend on local circumstances. The development of an eco-town will clearly have an impact on local supply and housing targets. From a council wide point of view there will be a need to provide statutory services and take a lead role in the development of the scheme.

Recent Government announcements have noted that local authorities should be leading the response to the housing supply problem. Government has not specified that they should be directly building homes but the Prospectus mentions that there should be a good mix of tenures and there appears no reason to rule out new council housing being built. Developers should liaise with the local council on the normal basis to ensure local demand is being met, for example, in terms of the type of affordable housing built.

As an exercise in innovation, stock retaining councils with a willingness to build their own council houses may benefit from keeping abreast of developments on the basis that there may be opportunities to get involved in new arrangements for delivering council homes.

Small scale council housing schemes are being built and are innovative in their approach to sustainability issues. If the opportunity arises these are the kind of developments which could be incorporated in to eco-towns. Browtowne Borough Council's Plumtree Way and Anderson Crescent schemes can act as good practice examples of what local authorities can do to add value to eco-towns.

5 Conclusions

Finding a solution to the housing supply problem which is sustainable, reduces carbon emissions, meets growing calls for attractive design and enables the development of mixed and cohesive communities, has become a vital task.

It is difficult to conceive of housing targets being met without new settlements being built on a more comprehensive basis in the long term. However current economic conditions appear to rule out eco-towns, as described in the Prospectus at least, being delivered prior to 2016.

Eco-towns are only one of a number of tools which can be used to meet housing targets and the focus should not be on eco-towns to the detriment of other approaches. However the lessons that are learnt from the innovative ideas that accompany the eco-town concept can be applied to eco-quarters or eco-extensions.

A common theme which has emerged from both critics and supporters of eco-towns is the need for Government to look at the existing housing stock if it is to make a sizeable reduction in carbon emissions, especially as 70% of today's homes will still be lived in in 2050. Investing in the existing housing stock is a far more effective use of resources in terms of ecological benefit and can not be ignored, however effective new build is in meeting targets for housing.

Eco-towns will not be a cheap option or provide an instant solution. The concept will need sustained commitment and investment over a long period for infrastructure and to build communities.

Appendix 1.- Shortlisted sites

Bordon, Hampshire - Between 5,000 and 8,000 homes on a location owned by the Ministry of Defence. A significant number of ex-MoD homes are already on the site, west of Whitehill-Bordon. The proposal could include 2,000 affordable houses in an area of very high affordability pressure.

Coltishall, Norfolk - Five thousand homes on a former RAF airfield, eight miles north of Norwich. The scheme could include 2,000 affordable homes in an area of very high affordability pressure.

Curborough, Staffordshire - Five thousand homes on the brownfield site of the former Fradley airfield, 10 miles from Burton. The proposal could include 2,000 affordable houses in an area of very high affordability pressure.

Elsenham, Essex - A minimum of 5,000 homes north-east of the existing Elsenham village. Close to the M11 and the London-to-Cambridge rail line. The scheme could include 1,800 affordable homes in an area of extreme affordability pressure.

Ford, West Sussex - Five thousand homes on a site which includes brownfield land and the former Ford airfield. Close to the rail line linking London and the Sussex coast. The scheme could include 1,500 affordable homes, in an area of very high affordability pressure.

Hanley Grange, Cambridgeshire - On land adjacent to the A11, 8,000 homes would be built, to improve the severe lack of housing in and around Cambridge. The scheme could include 3,000 affordable homes in an area of extreme affordability pressure.

Imerys, St Austell, Cornwall - A development of about 5,000 homes on former china clay workings, industrial land and disused mining pits no longer needed by owner Imerys. It is close to St Austell and could include 1,500 affordable homes, in an area of extreme affordability pressure.

Leeds City Region, Selby, West Yorkshire - Several eco-town proposals were submitted for locations within this area, principally between Leeds and Selby. The Leeds City Region Partnership has indicated support in principle for an eco-town within the sub-region. The partnership has proposed a further study to compare the best locations. The government has agreed to support this approach, on the basis that it will allow a further announcement to be made shortly of one or more sites for consultation.

Marston Vale and New Marston, Bedfordshire - Up to 15,400 homes on a series of sites, including former industrial sites, along the east-west rail line to Stewartby and Millbrook. The scheme could include 2,000 affordable homes in an area of high affordability pressure.

Middle Quinton, Warwickshire - Six thousand homes on a former Royal Engineers depot which has a rail link to the Worcester-London rail line. The site is six miles south-west of Stratford-upon-Avon. The proposal could include 2,000 affordable houses in an area of very high affordability pressure.

Pennbury, Leicestershire - Between 12,000 and 15,000 homes on a development incorporating brownfield, greenfield and surplus public sector land. Four miles south-east of Leicester. This proposal could include 4,000 new affordable houses in an area of high affordability pressure.

Rossington, SouthYorkshire - Up to 15,000 homes regenerating the former colliery village of Rossington, three miles south of Doncaster. The scheme could include 1,500 affordable homes, in an area of moderate affordability pressure.

Weston Otmoor, Oxfordshire - Between 10,000 and 15,000 homes on a site adjoining the M40 and the Oxford-Bicester railway. Three miles south-west of Bicester, the site includes a current airstrip. The scheme could include between 3,000 and 5,000 affordable homes, in an area of extreme affordability pressure.

Withdrawn proposals

Manby, Lincolnshire - Put forward by East Lindsey District Council, there would be 5,000 homes on two sites with large elements of brownfield land, including a former RAF base. The proposal met with massive local opposition to such an extent that the council withdrew it and is looking to concentrate on reducing flood risk and providing affordable homes for the area.

Rushcliffe, Nottinghamshire - An eco-town proposal was submitted for Kingston-on-Soar, to the south of Nottingham. In response to representations from Rushcliffe Borough Council, this site is not to be pursued. However, the Government is proposing to carry out a further review in partnership with the council to consider whether there is a suitable alternative location with the potential to be viable within the Rushcliffe local authority area.

Date: **30/06/08**