



**Friends of
the Earth**

Briefing

Eco Towns

Sustainable solution or too good to be true?

In October 2007 the Government launched plans to encourage the development of 10 new 'Eco towns' across England totalling up to 200,000 new homes. This briefing sets out Friends of the Earth's view on Eco towns including aspects we support and a few concerns.

We welcome the Government's Eco towns concept which may genuinely advance sustainable living and we have engaged in discussions with the Government and others on the principles and practicalities. The Government's key criteria¹ for the Eco towns include:

- Use of brownfield land before green field, which is not completely excluded;
- Energy use in housing should be "carbon neutral";
- At least 3 in 10 (and up to half) of the homes should be "affordable";
- Mixed use developments not housing isolated from services and amenities;
- The towns should be used to deliver new technologies such as Combined Heat and Power, district heating and cooling, aquifer thermal energy, ground source heat pumps, passive heating, solar photovoltaics and wind energy;
- Being separate and distinct from existing settlements and with good public transport links to other settlements;
- Each town should exemplify at least one area of environmental sustainability;
- Appropriate use of land and mitigation of any impacts on wildlife / biodiversity.

¹ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/housing/pdf/ecotowns>

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Eco Towns – Sustainable solution or too good to be true?

In March the Government will announce a shortlist of 10 or so Eco towns from the 57 expressions of interest submitted by private developers and some local authorities to the Department for Communities and Local Government. The Government has stated:

“Once potential eco-towns have been selected their planning and development can be delivered through the operation of the spatial planning system, which may require the review of existing plans; review is an integral element of the operation of the planning system. Where necessary, the Government will commit resources to facilitate the operation of the planning process, so as to minimise delay. As set out in the Eco-towns Prospectus, there may be circumstances where use of the New Towns Act powers might be used.”²

Each ‘eco town’ should be judged on its own merits on a case by case basis. An ‘eco town’ which uses less energy, water and materials but is poorly located, for example, by being sited on top of a former wildlife haven or by causing lots of new road traffic, is unlikely to be a model of green development and living. There may be very good proposed ‘eco towns’ which still cause too much environmental damage. Others may be planned, located, designed and built in ways which are worthy of the term ‘eco town’ and which we will support. Some of our voluntary local groups are supporting eco town development in their area; others have shown concern about plans for their area.

Critically, although the Government has set some ‘key criteria’ and ‘essential requirements’ for Eco town proposals to meet, there are no clear and enforceable minimum standards against which developments will be judged. These minimum standards should be in the contracts especially if Eco Towns are built on public land.

We support real solutions

Friends of the Earth supports the Government’s ambition to tackle climate change, the most serious environmental threat we face, through better planning and design of homes and places to live and work. Along with transport, aviation, shipping and energy generation use of energy in homes is a major source of the UK’s rising climate emissions needing curbing.

We support the development of homes which meet people’s need for truly affordable homes to rent or buy. We also define affordable housing as homes which are affordable to run, for example, in terms of energy and water use. This means use of sustainable construction materials and building to high eco-standards to help people to lower their fuel and water bills and play their part in environmental action. It also means ensuring that housing is well located, is well served by local amenities and does not add to pressures on existing transport systems or other environmental pressures on the UK and wider environment. In short, the way new housing is built can help rather than hinder people to start living in sustainable ways and in truly sustainable communities.

Our recommendations for truly sustainable housing include:

- **All new housing should be built to the highest environmental standards.** This should be the norm for all developments not just for ‘Eco-town’ towns. The Government’s Code for Sustainable Homes³ is now mandatory so we expect to see better houses being built as a matter of course.
- **Deal with the low environmental standards of existing housing now.** New housing is a small percentage of the UK’s total housing stock. The main challenge is the quality of existing housing and how to make this far more energy efficient, better

² <http://www.communities.gov.uk/housing/housingsupply/growthareas/ecotowns/faqecotowns/>

³ http://www.planningportal.gov.uk/uploads/code_for_sust_homes.pdf

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served by local services, public transport, walking and cycling. Our 'Home Truths' report⁴ examines how to cut emissions from existing housing stock by 80% by 2050.

- **Affordability is not just about the cost of a house.** Truly affordable housing must also be economical for people to run and be close to jobs and quality amenities such as local schools, health services and open spaces to help reduce the need to travel.
- **Recognise the value of wild and natural green spaces in their own right and in tackling climate change.** Our wild spaces serve as carbon sinks, absorbing and offsetting carbon dioxide (CO₂), absorbing predicted rises in rainfall as our climate changes, and helping native wildlife to survive and adapt to climate change. Even the highest standards of new build cannot compensate for the large loss of green space which is likely under the Government's building plans. Some green spaces by being cleared can also release significant amounts of CO₂.
- **The term "carbon neutral" should include transport and the carbon emissions created by demolition, construction and the manufacture of materials.** If eco-towns claim to be truly carbon neutral these calculations must be made to ensure that the design of such settlements compensates for these emissions e.g. via the amount of renewable energy they can generate.
- **The Government should use the Eco-towns initiative to build knowledge, skills and experience.** Local councils, the construction industry and related professions have much to do to raise their game on building to high environmental standards and creating carbon zero development including retro-fitting existing towns.
- **Previously used land which is within/close to urban catchments is more likely to have the associated jobs, services and sustainable transport links.** This would help lead to truly 'sustainable communities' which the Government claims its housing plans are intended to create. If high quality developments are located close to existing settlements they can help improve the 'carbon footprints' of those settlements for example through the creation of local energy networks and district heating schemes. Development on brownfield sites in isolated areas e.g. former airfields and power stations, are likely to come with all the problems associated with development green field sites such as i.e. a lack of connectivity and the demand for related development and infrastructure such as new roads.
- And crucially, **be clear about the difference between general housing demand and genuine housing need.** The Government claims that simply building more houses will make them more affordable. Yet new homes comprise only a very small proportion of homes for sale at any one time and other factors have more influence on house prices, notably speculative investment, interest rates, mortgage lending policy and the proximity of quality local schools and other amenities.

By turning the land use planning system into a servant of the free market the Government is setting up a system where the volatile price of land will dictate when land is released for development. Not only will this remove local democratic accountability for planning it will lead to a new planning regime which could reinforce unsustainable planning and land use. This may suit the demands of the market and of many developers but this is not necessarily the same as serving the wider needs of society and our environment. After decades of leaving housing to market influences house prices are more unpredictable and out of reach than ever. The Government claims more of this will solve the housing crisis.

⁴ http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/reports/home_truths_summary.pdf

Areas of concern

Mainstream or experiment? Eco towns seem to be being proposed to test what can be achieved and eventually applied to mainstream housing. The Government should be adopting high standards for its main building programme now. Failure to do so will lock-in high carbon trends in housing which will have an impact for many decades.

Guaranteed standards and delivery? The Government has set general aims for ‘eco towns’ to meet but does not appear to have any firm standards or benchmarks against which to assess each ‘eco town’ proposal from developers. Without clear standards it is hard to know how ministers are assessing proposals and what the consequences will be if the proposed standards are not delivered.

Eco by name only? Putting ‘eco’ in front of the word ‘town’ does not make them so. We support high quality, genuinely affordable homes but most of the three million new homes the Government is imposing is neither ‘eco’ nor truly ‘affordable’. This and the way the Government is removing people’s rights to have a real say over key planning issues affecting their communities are important factors in the housing debate.

Sustainable communities or large housing growth?

A touch of green There is a danger that the Government is using ‘eco towns’ to give a green tinge to its programme for three million new homes by 2020 under the guise of its ‘Sustainable Communities Plan’. Much of this will be built to standards which are likely to be far lower than those for ‘eco towns’. Research by CABE, the Commission for Architecture & the Built Environment, found that homes being built now are of variable quality.⁵ This raises questions of how well developers and local councils are controlling the quality of building.

Wider development pressures New housing also usually brings pressure for ‘knock-on’ developments such as roads, retail parks and warehousing. The Government has not fully assessed the environmental effects of three million new houses and related developments such as the pressure on green spaces, water supplies and existing transport systems.

Imposing housing figures The Government continues to demand that regional authorities accept higher and higher housing figures. Regional and Local Plans are in the position to assess the impacts of new development and to guide its location.

Ultimately, ministers can impose any amount of housing they want on regional and local plans. Notably the Government’s Housing Planning & Delivery Grant for local authorities is geared to the delivery of housing numbers not housing quality.

East Midlands Regional Assembly chairman and leader of Leicestershire County Council, Councillor David Parsons, expressed concerns of many local decision-makers by saying:

*“We would have to tear up a perfectly good strategy because of this whim from the Government. Where new housing developments should go has been carefully planned by experts. This means there is also a prescribed route which developers should go through. Suddenly, this Government has decided to bypass this and make the choice themselves”.*⁶

⁵ <http://www.cabe.org.uk/default.aspx?contentitemid=183>

⁶ http://www.thisisleicestershire.co.uk/displayNode.jsp?nodeId=132384&command=displayContent&sourceNode=232710&home=yes&more_nodeId1=132393&contentPK=19452366

Genuine public involvement?

People are naturally concerned about the effect of so much new development they are facing whether it is branded 'eco' or otherwise. Friends of the Earth has consistently campaigned to protect people's right to take part in decisions about their area and any proposed development. The Government's current reforms to the planning system will make it harder for people to have a meaningful say about planning issues.

Any new developments should be subject to the normal planning process whereby local authorities and communities have a right to have their say on scale, size, location and local impacts – the Government has indicated the eco town process may be different and we would want reassurances that local views are properly considered within this process.

Behind reassurances about public involvement in decision making the Government is quietly removing the public's right to have a meaningful say in the planning, shape and look of their areas. The scale of the housing and development pressures and the removal of proper public participation in planning decisions are key issues which we think people and politicians should be concerned about when thinking about the housing debate.

Case studies

The following case studies have been chosen to illustrate the complexity of the Eco towns issue and to examine the potential benefits and / or impacts of some of the proposed sites.

Dunstable aerodrome, near Cranleigh, Surrey

Rutland Group proposes re-use of this former BAe airfield for 2,600 houses, community buildings, 2,000 jobs and local retail. The scheme includes:

- Environment / sustainability proposals ahead of those proposed for the Government's pilot Eco Towns at Northstowe, Cambridgeshire and Cranbrook, Devon
- Advanced thinking on transport including incentives not to use cars, a traffic free centre, a car club, quality bus services and an Ultra rapid personal transport system which will result in the development taking more traffic off the road than it generates
- Radically different proposals for energy and water use, construction materials and techniques, treatment of liquid and solid waste, restoration of biodiversity, support for local woodlands and potentially new markets for local food production.

Clifton Gate, Yorkshire⁷

Developers Hallam Land Management and Commercial Estates Group want to build 5,500 homes on green belt land immediately north of the A1237 outer ring road at Clifton Moor near York. Concerns from local people include:

- Severe infrastructure problems near the site likely to be worsened by development
- Congestion on the main roads feeding the site inadequately addressed by the plans
- The City of York Council was not consulted by developers or the Government
- Owners of part of the land have not been approached by the developers

New Kingston, South Nottinghamshire⁸

Banks Development is proposing 6000 new houses on 600 hectares of land in South Nottinghamshire countryside. Local people have expressed the following views:

- The site is on green belt land including historic parkland and prime agricultural land
- A similar planning proposal in the past was rejected by the local planning authority
- Possible new risks of flooding and likely rises in commuting and congestion

⁷ http://www.yorkpress.co.uk/news/yorknews/display.var.1983361.0.council_opposes_ecotown.php

⁸ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/derbyshire/7185095.stm>