



THE CONTROVERSY OF ECO-TOWNS IN THE UK

Introduction

Eco-towns in the UK are intended to be 'a combined response to the challenges of climate change, the need for more sustainable living, and the need to increase housing supply' (Living a greener future, 2008 Government Publication). They are designed to be small new towns for the 21st Century, with sustainability standards significantly above equivalent levels in existing towns and cities. At a scale of between 5000 – 20,000 houses, they are not intended to be entirely self-sufficient and in most areas should be linked to existing major settlements with high quality public transport. However there may be situations where a small new settlement is viable in itself as in more rural areas, there is not only a need to respond to climate change, but also to provide new settlements to revitalise declining rural areas, and improve rural services.

This Factsheet will explore the Government's plans to develop around 10 eco-towns as the new towns of the future. The Government sees eco-towns as demonstrators and test beds to pilot new approaches to sustainable technologies and living. The main issues include the precise locations of the eco-towns which organisations such as CPRE regard as unsustainable, and also the fact that building up to 50,000 new homes of which up to 20,000 would be affordables in greenfield sites in established rural areas is bound to be controversial.

Eco-towns have been described by Simon Jenkins in the Guardian as 'the greatest try-on in the history of property speculation' as not surprisingly house builders want to build where it is easy and profitable and do not necessarily wish to specialise in 'affordables'. They have also been described as 'green ghettos' as there is concern that eco-town dwellers may be monitored for their level of green habits, and that it is very difficult not to rely on cars, for journeys to work, in the countryside. Some argue that maybe it is in the big cities that truly sustainable neighbourhoods (for example Vauban in Freiburg, Germany) should be built. A further concern is that if these eco-towns bypass the traditional planning system then some very controversial decisions will be 'waved through'.

Progress to Autumn 2008

A shortlist of 15 sites was drawn up from more than 50 bids from consortiums of property developers. As Fig. 1 shows none of these sites is found north of Leeds, while the majority are in SE England, and controversially nearly all are in Conservative constituencies. These sustainable objectives are very ambitious, some are concerned with the specific site and some with the wider area.

Fig. 1 The location of the 15 proposed eco-town sites.

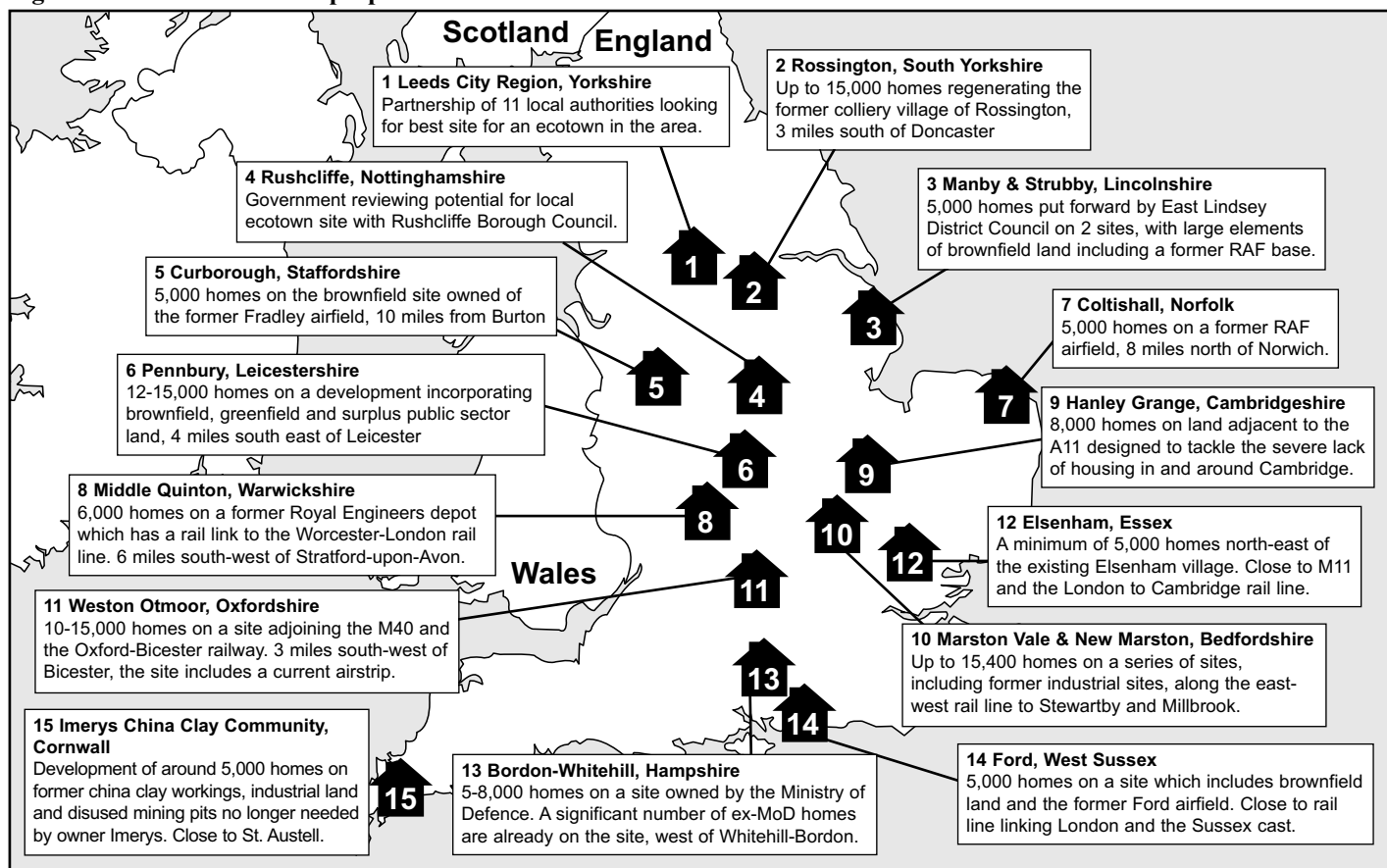
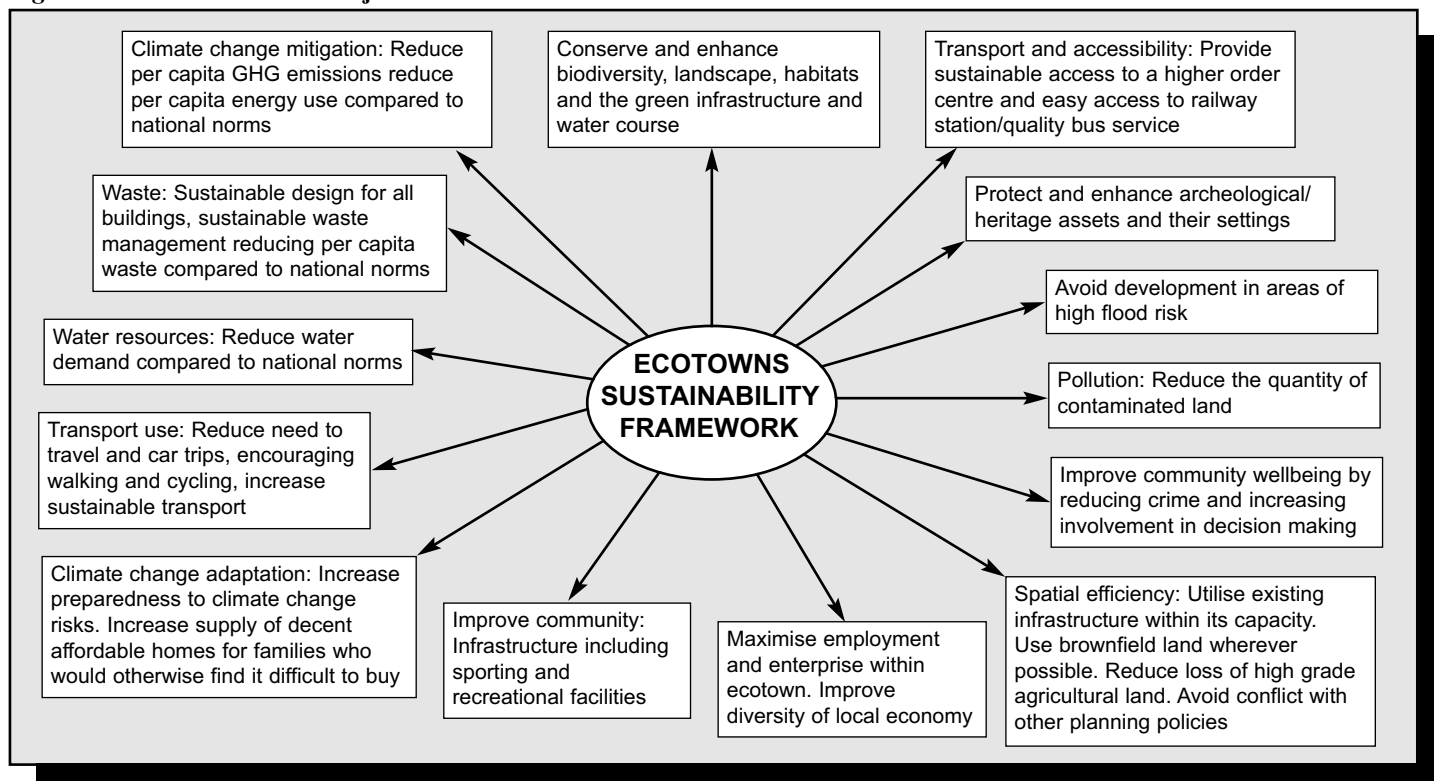


Fig. 2 shows the sustainable objectives all the shortlisted sites must strive towards.

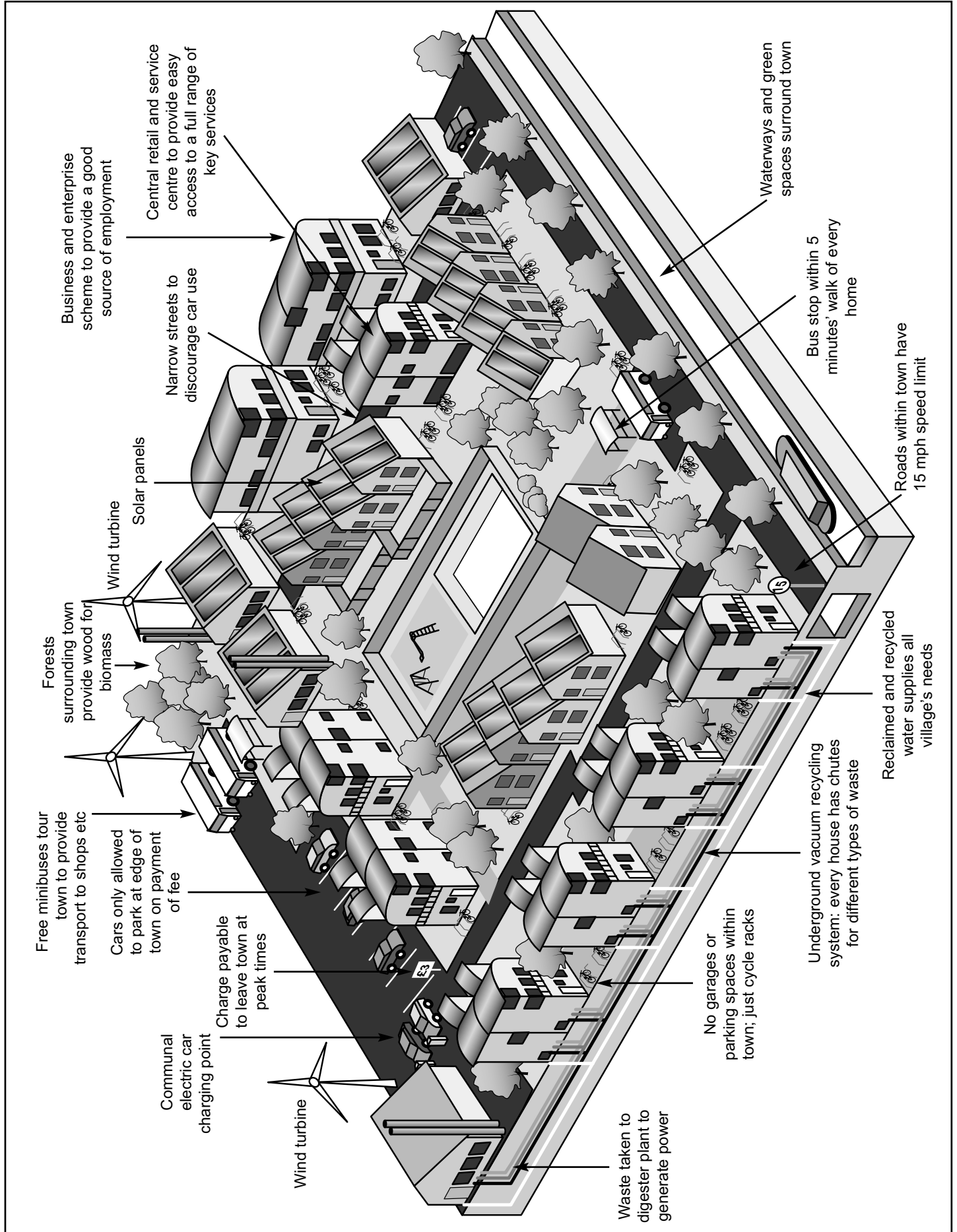


Many sustainability objectives are mutually supporting or compatible for example reducing resource use and mitigating climate change. Others however inherently conflict, in particular the contentious aim of building substantial quantities of decent, affordable homes, and the inevitable conflict between development (for example economic growth) and conservation (biodiversity and green infrastructure). This is clearly shown in the matrix Table 1. Fig. 3 (see page 3) shows how these eco-towns might look, with their various features of sustainability and innovative solutions to combating climate change.

Table 1 Compatibility of eco-towns sustainability objectives

Eco-towns SA Objective	Climate change mitigation	Consumption & production	Waste	Water resources	Climate change adaptation	Biodiversity & green infrastructure	Mobility & transport	Heritage assets	Flood risk	Environmental quality & pollution	Decent, affordable homes	Health & wellbeing	Crime & safety	Work & employment	Equalities	Social capital	Services, culture & leisure	Learning and skills	Economic growth	Enterprise & innovation	Regional businesses	
Climate change mitigation	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	O	N	PC	PC	PC	N	N	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC
Consumption and production	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	O	N	PC	PC	PC	N	N	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC
Waste	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	O	N	PC	PC	PC	N	N	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC
Water resources	PC	PC	N	PC	PC	PC	O	N	PC	PC	PC	N	N	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC
Climate change adaptation	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	O	N	PC	PC	PC	N	N	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC
Biodiversity & green infrastructure	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	O	N	PC	PC	PC	N	N	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC
Mobility and transport	O	O	PI	PI	O	PI	O	PI	PC	PC	PC	N	N	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC
Heritage assets	N	PC	PC	N	N	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC
Flood risk	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PI	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC
Environmental quality/pollution	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PI	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC
Decent affordable homes	PI	PI	PI	PI	PI	O	O	PI	PI	PI	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC
Health and wellbeing	N	N	PC	PC	N	PC	PC	N	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC
Crime and safety	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC
Work and employment	PI	PI	PI	PI	PI	O	PC	O	PI	PI	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC
Equalities	N	N	N	N	N	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC
Social capital	O	N	N	N	N	PC	PC	PC	N	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC
Services, culture and leisure	O	O	PI	PI	PI	PC	PC	PC	N	PC	N	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC
Learning and skills	N	N	N	N	N	N	PC	N	N	N	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC
Economic growth	PI	PI	PI	PI	PI	PI	PC	PC	PI	PI	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC
Enterprise and innovation	PI	PI	PI	PI	O	PI	PC	N	PC	O	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC
Regional businesses	PI	PI	PI	PI	PI	PI	PC	N	PC	PI	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC
Spatial efficiency	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	PC	O	PC	PC	O	PC	N	N	N	PI	PI	PI	PI

Fig. 3 A look into the future - features of an eco-town.



The key criteria for eco-towns

The following principles are set out in the Eco-towns Prospectus, July 2007:

- Eco-towns must be **new** settlements, separate and distinct from existing towns but well linked to them. They need to be **additional** to existing plans, with a minimum target of 5,000 homes.
- The development as a whole should reach zero carbon standards, and each town should be an exemplar of not only combating climate change but also in at least one other area of environmental sustainability such as energy or transport.
- Eco-town proposals should provide for a good range of facilities within the town – a secondary school, a medium retail centre, good quality business space and leisure facilities (to encourage self sufficiency).
- Affordable housing should make up between 30% and 50% of the total with a particular emphasis on large family homes (this is a very controversial feature for existing rich village dwellers).
- A management body which will help develop the town, provide support for people and businesses moving to the new community, and use simplified planning processes to support innovation.

Why are eco-towns so controversial?

There is an emotional feeling out there that eco-towns are really a back door way into building in the countryside and destroying rural villages. Many of the chosen sites have generated very sizeable protests, including Pennbury (Lincolnshire), Middle Quinton (near Stratford-on-Avon), New Marston/ Marston Vale in Bedfordshire and Weston Otmoor (Oxfordshire) where locals have described the site as ‘horrendous’ or a blot on the landscape. The **Tory party** realising that all but 2 of the sites were in conservative seats, have vowed to abandon all eco-towns where there is local opposition.

Of the professional bodies, the **Town and Country Planning Association** broadly welcomed the project, as it had the potential to deliver nearly 200,000 new houses to high environmental standards. The **Royal Town Planning Institute** however warned the government that the eco-towns could become soulless suburbia in the countryside unless they were well linked to existing settlements. The **Local Government Authority (LGA)** feared that if the eco-towns were built without regard to where the residents could get jobs and training they would be ‘eco-slums’ in the future. The **Empty Houses Agency** (a charity) pointed out that building new houses emits 4.5 times more carbon than habitating old ones and it already had nearly 300,000 long term home vacancies on its books!

By July 2008 three developers had pulled out of building eco-towns including those building the one in Marston Bedfordshire, Curborough Staffordshire, and Manby and Strubby East Lincolnshire.

One of the most substantial critiques of the eco-town plan has been submitted by the **Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE)**, on the very grounds that the chosen sites are unlikely to be truly sustainable and are falling short on their green credentials. *Table 2 (page 5)* summarises their major concerns for the remaining sites.

Fig. 4 An extract from a blog about the impact of eco-towns on the countryside.

Eco-towns will kill our countryside

The politicians in London have come up with a sinister plan designed to destroy England’s rural heritage once and for all: the eco-town. They are meant to be self-sustaining and carbon neutral, but in reality these poorly-sited developments will shatter the fragile communities which already exist, putting an intolerable burden on roads, resources and

Posted by a leading member of Crede, the Committee for Responsible Ecological Development Elsewhere

Comments

1	0835 today	Another blethering NIMBY protecting his turf. Next.
2	0841 today	This is one of those complex town v country issues, and as someone who lives in London, I don't care.
3	0849 today	People who live in the country are always complaining about the lack of affordable housing, but the minute somebody suggests building some, a load of down-shifting luvvies start forming committees.
4	0858 today	I am not a NIMBY. I just happen to care passionately about protecting the heritage of rural communities right near my house.
5	0907 today	These homes must be built somewhere, but I believe that many developers are passing off concrete commuter ghettos as "eco-towns" in order to circumvent planning restrictions. We have to judge each proposal on its merits, and the govt needs to stand up to the construction industry.
6	0911 today	It's not enough houses, and it won't stop global warming. When will people realise that there is no solution?
7	0913 today	I agree we need to do something about climate change, and we do need more affordable homes in this country. What we don't need is a lot of outsiders swarming into the village and taking over the pub quiz.

Table 2 The CPRE's concerns for the remaining proposed eco-town sites.

Eco-town	Site area in hectares	% Brownfield	% Greenfield	Level of opposition	Agricultural land	Flood risk	Other environmental	Existing planning R	Existing planning L	Transport issues	Proposed development
Borden Whitehill	291	25	75 low grade	Low	-	-	Some nearby heath lands SSSI	✓	✓	Current station needs to be restored	5-8000 homes. Ex-MOD homes already on site
Coltishall	285	84	16	Low	-	X	Sensitive catchment upstream from Broads	X	-	Poor links, lack of employment	5000 homes on former RAF site
Curborough	265	7	93	Medium	High grade land	X	Historic landscape environment	X	X	✓	5000 homes. Former Fradley Airfield
Ford	500	5	95	Medium – high	V high grade	X	Near National Park. Only gap in developed coast	X	X	✓	5000 homes on former Ford airfield
Hanley Grange	362	2	98	High	-	Down stream	High quality landscape, important aqua fen	X	X	✓	8000 homes already being built. More homes needed
Imerys China Clay	240	15	25	Low	-	?		✓	✓	Some development needed	5000+ homes on former China Clay workings. Poor image. Need for jobs
Marston	4334	32	68	Very high	Loss of good land	?	Loss of recreation space	X	X	Plan suggests sprawling on based settlement	15000+ homes - large scale development
Manby & Strubby	399	33	77	High, E Lindsey council withdrew bid	Medium grade	Sewage issues	Effect on local villages, remote area	X	X	Inaccessible, no railway	5000+ homes. Former RAF site
Middle Quinton	259	33	67	High	Medium	X sewage issues	Traffic congestion, historic villages, Cotswold AONBs	X	X	Isolated from public transport	6000+ homes
NE Elsenham	157	9	91	Medium	High landscape valley	?	Water scarce area, waste water issues, exceptional landscape	X	-	✓	5000 homes. NE of existing village
Pennbury	1669	4	96	High - poor consultation	High quality	?	Green wedge area, many villages	X	X	Increase road congestion	12-15000 homes on surplus public sector land
Rossington	400	31	69	Low	-	?		X	X	Poor road, rail access	15000+ homes. Former colliery village
Weston Otmoor	855	2	98	Very high	Medium quality	X	Greenbelt, impact on SSSI, historic villages	X	X	Already stretched	1000 – 15000 in an area of high demand

Key: X = Problem ✓ = OK

Conclusion

With the present credit crunch and threat of recession which has really 'hit' the construction industry, many of the building consortiums are losing interest, especially as the local opposition is so strong. The government has already scaled down the number of sites chosen to 'maybe only 5' (to be announced in November 2008).

Royalty have also entered the eco-towns debate. Prince Charles is planning to develop a Georgian style eco-town in Sherford near Plymouth for 12,000 people and an eco-village near Neath, having gained successful experience at Poundbury in Dorset which has received many favourable reviews. The Crown Estate which manages the Queen's property, has joined up with the MoD and Newton Nottingham LLP to develop an eco-town at Newton as an alternative to Rushcliffe. In both of these cases the developers have sought to involve the local community at all stages in planning sustainable initiatives which would really help them such as provision of high quality amenities and a genuine mix of housing and employment.

Internationally, Britain and China (Dongtan) are now seen as leaders of the eco-town concept. However is it workable, and can the controversies be managed?

Postscript

Still no decision. CPRE carry out further evaluation and only one site achieves an A grade for sustainability (a late choice in Norfolk) with only a handful on B grade! The latest suggestion is that 3-4 sites may be chosen as 'testbeds' (November, 2008).

Review Questions

- (1) Draw up a table to show the arguments for and against building eco-towns.
- (2) Study *Table 1* and explain how the sustainability objectives are not always compatible with each other.
- (3) Study *Fig. 3*. Comment on the innovative features of an eco-town. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of living in one. Would you like it?
- (4) Using *Fig. 1* and *Table 2*, explain which would be your top 3 choices of site for the new eco-towns and why. Which 3 choices would you reject straightaway and why?

Hint: Think about existing planning, nature of the site, transport, environmental considerations, strength of protest, etc.

Further research

- www.dclg.org 'Living a green future' Eco-towns Sustainability Appraisal Report
- www.cpre.org.uk Eco-towns: living a green future – A response
- Also Google any of the chosen sites such as Imerys or Weston Otmoor to get details of local plans and protest groups.

Acknowledgements

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