



CABINET – 20 JUNE 2008

SUMMARY OF RESPONSES RECEIVED IN RELATION TO THE PENNBURY 'ECO-TOWN' PROPOSAL CONSULTATION EXERCISE

SUPPLEMENTARY REPORT OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Purposes of Report

1. To inform the Cabinet of the emerging responses to the County Council's consultation on the Pennbury 'Eco-town'.

Recommendations

2. That the Cabinet acknowledges the depth of feeling provoked by the Pennbury 'Eco-town' proposal and includes the views expressed by respondents in its response to the Government's consultation on "Eco-towns – living a greener future".

Summary

3. The Pennbury 'Eco-town' proposal has provoked an unprecedented level of public reaction for a development proposal in Leicestershire. Responses are still being received, but as of 19 June some 130 individual responses have been received. Only one response so far supports the scheme, and many cite multiple reasons why the proposal is objectionable.

Report

4. A number of respondents supported the theoretical principles of 'Eco-towns' but were almost unanimously opposed to the choice of location in Leicestershire.
5. Objections to the proposal can be grouped as follows:
 - (a) The Macro Economic

Many respondents question the advisability and prudence of delivering physical growth on this scale and in this manner at a time of international financial hardship. The credit crunch, oil price rises and the fragile condition of the national housing market means that there are significant question marks over just who will finance the project, whether there is enough

capacity within the construction industry to deliver results on the ground and what sort of market will exist for those homes which are eventually built. Many feel that the project may actually exacerbate current problems about sustainable levels of immigration. People feel that there is a real danger that the proposal will fail in its main ambitions; of addressing local housing shortage. It risks exacerbating this problem by attracting London commuters with further inflationary pressure on local house prices. On a philosophical level some argued that successful communities must be allowed to evolve organically, building on this scale in the timescale proposed would be a recipe for social, economic and environmental dislocation.

(b) Sustainability

Many respondents pointed to the paradox of new housing constructed to high (and therefore expensive) environmental standards whilst at the same time being “affordable”. Others were sceptical about the general sustainable development credentials of the Pennbury proposals and were unconvinced that a future Sustainability Appraisal would provide an objective assessment. Many pointed to the results of the provisional assessments carried out by DCLG which had identified in particular, serious misgivings about the ability of the Pennbury proposals to meet the second of the Government’s Key Criteria (as set out in “Eco-towns – living a greener future”) namely:

“The development as a whole should reach zero carbon standards, and each town should be an exemplar in at least one other area of environmental sustainability”.

The fact that proposals for similar large scale stand alone developments have surfaced periodically over the last 30 years in relation to the Co-op’s land holding in this area and been rejected, led many to the view that this latest as a cynical, opportunistic venture, on to which a spurious gloss of sustainability has been hastily foisted.

(c) Planning Policy

Objectors felt very clearly that the proposal ran counter to extant planning policy and many raised concerns about the damage that the 'Eco-town' concept was doing to principles of sound planning and democratic accountability.

“Eco-towns – living a greener future” can be afforded little weight at the present time and the promised national planning policy statement has yet to emerge even in draft form. People felt that the proposals were contrary to the sequential approach to selecting land for development as set out in Policy 2 of the emerging Regional Plan where sites such as Pennbury are held to be the least favourable locations and where many of the identified criteria for assessment cannot be met.

At the sub-regional level the saved Structure Plan Policies (Housing Policies 1 & 3) show a total of 7550 new homes needed in Harborough between 1996 and 2016 50% of which should be provided on brownfield sites. The

Pennbury scheme proposes up to 15,000 new homes with 4,000 - 5,000 being affordable, but doesn't indicate the proportion proposed for brownfield. At the local level the Harborough District Local Plan policy EM/9 specifically prohibits development not associated with the airfield. EM/10 countenances the use of existing redundant buildings for employment purposes but with restrictive clauses about access, road capacity and retailing. Other parts of the site would be subject to green wedge development restrictions (EV/2) or policy EV/4 which protects areas of particularly attractive countryside from development which would affect the character and appearance of the landscape and countryside. Finally the Stepping Stones Management Project (2005) calls for the distinctive characteristics of existing settlements to be retained and not diluted by modern development on their fringes.

(d) Transparency, Probity and Credibility

Many objectors felt unable to comment fully because the proposals were vague, difficult to read and inconsistent. One respondent listed 60 detailed questions which he had been unable to receive answers despite attending the Parklands Road show. Some also complained of the short period allowed for consultation. A number questioned the track record of the Cooperative society in its stewardship of the estate over the last 25 years. They pointed to the introduction of monoculture, the grubbing out of established hedgerows and the lack of maintenance of buildings and facilities as evidence that the proposer's claim of environmental concern was bogus.

Others pointed to what they saw as insurmountable conflicts of interest between the government as planning arbiter and the government's interest as de facto land owners in the guise of English Partnerships. They raised further concerns about the relationship between the Co-operative movement and the Labour Party both in terms of sponsorship of MPs and more directly through donations and levels of indebtedness. They also felt deeply suspicious that long standing due process in relation to making planning decisions was being circumvented. Concern was also expressed at the Co-op's lack of experience in project management of this kind; *"like allowing a private from the territorial army to plan the D Day landings"*. Others pointed to the dilemma of residents currently occupying Co-op properties in the area who would be compromised potentially by any expression of opposition. *"I'm ashamed that a movement with the Co-op's history should descend to these depths of hypocrisy."*

(e) Transport Issues

On transport there are seen to be many major concerns. There is a very real lack of confidence about the abilities of relevant agencies to deliver the range and extent of new infrastructure requirements, a problem which many believe betrays a fundamental flaw with the Pennbury concept. Is it to be, in essence, a dormitory town tied closely to Leicester through expensive and intensive public transport links? Or is it to be a stand alone fully self contained community (or communities) offering a focus to a wider natural hinterland. If the latter, many believe that the smaller communities will never achieve the critical mass to be self contained in terms of homes, jobs,

schools, etc. There would appear to be a substantial difference between what the promoters have advised needs to be provided and the transport measures objectors feel would be needed to ensure sustainable development. Many felt the transport problems insurmountable both for practical reasons (e.g. identifying and securing a fixed rail route into Leicester) or because of the fractured nature of the management of public transport, but amongst specific requirements mentioned on this subject were:

- A new link to the M1
- Completion of the Eastern District Distributor Road
- Measures to reduce traffic on the A6
- Measures to reduce traffic on the A47
- A new orbital link from the A6 to the A47
- A fixed link (tram or LRT) from Pennbury to Leicester with link to Oadby
- Major investments in station improvements in Leicester and Blaby
- Major investments in new Park and Ride schemes.
- Capacity increases necessary on the Midland Main Line

Irrespective of any remedial measures most felt that the increase in the volume of traffic would severely damage existing communities; damaging health and increasing pollution. Some put the total cost of necessary works in excess of a billion pounds. A figure they believe would make the scheme uneconomic.

(f) Environmental Issues

Issues raised ranged from the loss of large tracts of high quality agricultural land and the damage this would do to food production, to the creation of urban sprawl and the loss of key ecological habitats for certain endangered species. Many felt that the sheer scale of the proposal would make integration of existing settlements impossible and lead to the coalescence of villages. Others felt that the site was predominantly greenfield with a comparatively small brownfield element – at odds with other aspects of national planning policy. Some cited the high landscape value of much of the area in question and felt large scale development would inevitably lead to a loss of quality and to a loss of the peace and tranquillity associated with life in the countryside. Surface water run off into the River Sence will increase flood risk in Great Glen and the surrounding area. Many felt that the level of congestion, pollution and disturbance during construction would be intolerable. Concern was also raised specifically about the possible impact of wind farms and poly-tunnels on the landscape.

(g) Housing Issues

There was a feeling that insufficient work has been done to explore alternate strategies for addressing housing shortage. Many pointed to unsold homes in new developments in Leicester and Kibworth along with other as yet unimplemented consents as evidence of over supply. Some felt that the design of the 'Eco- town' would disadvantage disabled people and the elderly, creating an unbalanced society.

(h) Employment Issues

Given the historically low levels of unemployment there was concern about just where new residents would find work. There was also strong doubt about the ability of the 'Eco-town' to attract inward investment, both because of its inherent disadvantage in transport linkage terms, but also because of the Eco construction premium, which respondents felt that business would be unwilling to pay. Even were these misgivings to be overcome, the Co-op's view that 60% of the new jobs created would go to new town residents was simplistic and unrealistic. No mechanism exists to tie job and home occupancy together and if it did it would put participating companies at a significant commercial disadvantage, threatening their viability.

(i) Resources

Local services in relation to health, education, burial, culture and community are already overstretched, people had little confidence that extra provision could be made in a timely way. Waste disposal (especially sewage) capacity was also raised as a key inhibitor to development on the scale proposed. The capacity of the river Sence to provide the necessary dilution was especially worrying. There were also concerns about the energy requirements of the new town even if constructed to high efficiency standards. There are no existing shopping, recreation, or leisure facilities to serve new residents, provision would put a further strain on the economics of the project.

(j) Regeneration Impact

In the short term, one important consequence of the 'Eco-town' feared by respondents, is the detrimental impact on Leicester's regeneration programme. Efforts by the Leicester Regeneration Company to secure the redevelopment of areas such as the Waterside and Abbey Meadows could be fatally damaged. The proposal also threatens the success of Ashton Green, which the City Council sees as its own exemplar scheme in terms of sustainable development. With two thirds of the proposed housing at Pennbury being non affordable, the 'Eco-town' could attract prosperous families out of the city. People fear that this will exacerbate the problems associated with City Flight, leading to more pressure on County schools, longer/more frequent commuting to neighbouring towns and cities with attendant rises in the levels of pollution. Similar diversion of resources from Market Harborough was also cited. Others, concerned about the levels of social housing, felt that the proposal represented a crude attempt at social engineering.

(k) Carbon Neutrality and Climate Change

There was widespread concern that insufficient detail in the scheme as currently envisaged prevented any serious attempt to judge these key determinants of 'Eco-town' credentials. But people were generally angry at the projected level of car ownership and felt that Co-op claims of restricting use and channelling people onto public transport were delusional.

(l) Special Interests

Many individuals raised issues of special interest. For example the Leicester Airport and the Stoughton Karting centre provide unique recreational opportunities within the area which could be lost or curtailed by new development. Others felt that the proposal was suspiciously silent in relation to the needs of ethnic minorities who are likely to form a substantial target audience for future housing. How would cultural and religious needs be catered for in the proposal? Archeologically sensitive areas and a scheduled ancient monument would need to be identified and protected and some were concerned that public footpaths and bridleways would be lost. The future role of Market Harborough itself would be questionable if a new town of the projected size of Pennbury was to be built within the District Council's borders.

(m) Parish Polls

Two Parish Polls were conducted during June under the direction of Sue Smith Returning Officer. They asked the following question:
"Are you in favour of the proposals for an EcoTown on land owned by Cooperative Estates, part of the Co-operative Group, and English Partnerships in the Stoughton Area"?

Thurnby and Bushby (June 5th 2008) 888 votes (33.27% turnout).
Yes 11 (1.2%). No 877 (98.8%)

Scraptoft (June 11th2008) 269 votes (% turnout not known)
Yes 3 (1.12%). No 266 (98.88%)

(n) Points raised in favour of the Pennbury proposal:

1 response was received in support of the proposal citing the following reasons:

1 Strategic Planning

Development east of Leicester would serve to balance growth on the western side and could be made to fit green wedge requirements. It would give Leicester/Leics a unique selling point and a long sought advantage over Nottingham/Notts.

2 Housing

The lack of affordable homes is preventing the low waged, especially young people from living locally. It would complement inner city regeneration providing choice, especially in the family housing sector.

3 Environmental

Suitably designed the proposal could lead to more sustainable lifestyles than would be possible by the alternative “so called” sustainable urban extensions.

4 Employment and Economy

The scheme stands a good chance of success because of the philanthropic heritage of the Co-op and the track record of delivery from English Partnerships.

If approved, however the housing and jobs proposed should count towards the City and County’s RSS requirements.