

eco-towns - top down or bottom up?



There have been some vicious political games being played around the Government's exciting idea for some experimental eco-towns to increase housing supply, raise design standards and encourage innovation. Among these, the protest that the process is 'undemocratic' is loudly made, and warrants examination.

The eco-towns programme was launched by a Government elected with a thumping great majority, which is a solid start. It was launched in pursuit of housing, the need for which is endorsed by the fiercely independent National Housing and Planning Advice Unit (NHPAU). The only statistically valid survey of public opinion about the eco-town initiative later showed – and this is powerful information – that 46 per cent of adults support eco-town development (9 per cent oppose) and 34 per cent said they would support the development of one within five miles of their home (15 per cent opposed).¹ The idea was later still formally endorsed by a coalition of interest groups, charities and professional organisations.²

The launch back in June 2007 invited comment on the whole eco-town idea, and made an open invitation to anyone to bring forward possible eco-town schemes. Most came from landowners and developers, as might be expected, but some came from local authorities. By processes (somewhat controversial, technically) later published and open for comment, the 57 incoming bids were reduced to 13. This list has changed a little by the late addition of sites put forward by some local authorities, and the withdrawal of some private sector sites. The shortlist has been subject to further consultation, and subject to further assessments of their content and viability as at Christmas 2008 (also controversial, and soon to be

published), all in the context of a draft Planning Policy Statement on Eco Towns on which there has been formal consultation (now extended to the end of March 2009 and maybe will be extended further).

When some objectors to a particular eco-town went to Court to argue that the process was flawed because there had been no consultation at the start, the Judge gave them very short shrift. He observed that there had been loads of consultation and, furthermore, that it wasn't over yet.³

So if the eco-town initiative by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) is without doubt democratic, perhaps the opponents are arguing that it is 'undemocratic' because it was not locally initiated?

In theory it is true that sometime in 2007, if not before, a blossoming local community, supercharged with creative and imaginative people fired by concern at the acute housing shortage and the need for urgent innovation to deal with climate change and social inclusion, could spontaneously have come up with the idea of an eco-town on a specific site in their locality. The idea might have been enthusiastically embraced by the landowner, the local council, and neighbouring residents. It could have been consulted upon as an option in a Core Strategy process, survived for inclusion at the submission stage, been

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defended by the council at public examination, and endorsed in the inspector's binding report. Then the landowner might be willing to prepare a planning application for it and, working with the council either formally or informally, see the thing through.

The trouble with this bottom-up democratic vision is that it hasn't happened. It could have, in theory, but it hasn't. Even the eco-towns proposed by local authorities have not been the spontaneous conception of local residents (and, incidentally, don't have a signed-up landowner or developer).

The fact is that in order to break the mould of large-scale comprehensively planned development, to accelerate speed of delivery, raise quality and spur innovation, it fell to the Government to take the lead. That is its democratic right and duty. The statutory plan-making system is not geared up to take such initiatives, and local democracy mostly sustains the *status quo* except at times of revolution.

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Now we must turn our attention to responding to the Draft PPS, which proposes to drive eco-towns back into the interminable plan-led system, and suggests they should be a separate class of development that could be designated at regional level. Don't waste the opportunity – make your views known while you have the chance!

● **David Lock CBE** is Chair of planning consultancy David Lock Associates, who submitted four eco-towns for clients, two of which were shortlisted by the Department for Communities and Local Government, and one of which (Marston Vale) was withdrawn on 6 February 2009. He is a Vice-President and Trustee of the TCPA, and Visiting Professor at the University of Reading. He was involved in the initial stages of the TCPA's research on criteria for eco-towns (*Eco-towns: Scoping Report*, available at www.tcpa.org.uk/downloads/20070727_TCPA_ecotowns.pdf). The views expressed here are personal.

Notes

- 1 YouGov survey *Eco-towns: The Case for Sustainable Affordable Housing Growth*, conducted by Andrew Irving Associates, released by Housing Minister Caroline Flint on 30 June 2008
- 2 BioRegional, Buglife – The Invertebrate Conservation Trust, Centre for Accessible Environments, Chartered Institute of Housing, Crisis, Energy Centre for Sustainable Communities, Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens, Help the Aged, Landscape Institute, National Housing Federation, National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners, NUS, Permaculture Association, RADAR, RIBA, Shelter, Social Enterprise London, Sustrans, TCPA, TUC, Waterwise, and Women's Design Service. Contact Fiona Mannion at TCPA. A notable dissenter – the RTPi – has campaigned against eco-towns because of the gripe that they haven't come through the statutory plan-making system, a wheeze that the writer calculates would take somewhere between 7 and 15 years and wholly misses the point about the urgency for more homes and higher design standards and the excitement that lies in innovation in the face of climate change, breakdown of social cohesion, the collapse of global capitalism etc.
- 3 For example, Mr Justice Walker said that the Housing Green Paper of July 2007 which defined eco-towns was said by the objectors to be 'not directed to local people. I do not accept this,' he said, 'it was directed to all... this was a staged process. It made sense for the consultation to take place on the principle before starting on the shortlisting process. If at stages after the Housing Green Paper consultation anyone made representations asserting good reason to depart from the principle, the Secretary of State was bound to have regard to this...'. With regard to 'key criteria and essential requirements', he said: 'These matters are all closely linked... and they were properly dealt with... They were open to change, and indeed the proposed number did change. In general, complaints about genuineness and about later events and documents fail...'. See www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/Admin/2009/B2.html