

County Council Scrutiny Review Panel on the Proposed Development of an Eco-Town: the views of the Leicestershire Branch of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) October 9th, 2008.



The proposed development patently cuts right across the established and democratic planning process, being characterised by 'policy push and opportunistic pull'. Any claimed altruistic benefits are subsidiary to this and financial gain would seem to be the primary driver.

The current scheme being offered resembles the original Sustainable Urban Extension submitted to the RSS. However, it is a distinct entity in that it is not a SUE, neither is it properly a standalone community. The reasons for rejecting the SUE proposed for the RSS must surely apply to the present scheme? That is, the areas signalling a priority need for regeneration, as defined in the Government's 'English Indices of Deprivation' (DCLG 2007) are diametrically opposite in location, being the western and northern parts of the City in the main. The proposal for a large development posing as an eco-town in countryside to the south east of the City hardly represents Smart Growth.

The principles of Smart Growth incorporate the preservation of open space, farmland, natural beauty and most critically, taking advantage of existing community assets and thus strengthening these communities. Providing new facilities, services and maintenance of infrastructure in a standalone community will most likely incur costs (i.e. Council Tax) far in excess of those incurred by development taking the form of SUEs. Imposing unnecessary costs on voters will not be a popular move. Thus, the three Es of sustainable development - environment, equity and economy - should be uppermost in peoples' minds.

Clearly, there is a gap between the long-term reality of this New Town project and the rhetoric expressed over the Summer months. If the Planning Bill becomes enacted to incorporate a Community Infrastructure Levy, only then will a clearer picture of what's on offer emerge. To be swayed early on by promises of trams, educational academies and other amenities would be a very short-sighted move.

This brings us to deliverability and here the long view must be taken. The present economic woes are highly unlikely to be a 'blip', given that the consensus opinion of oil industry experts is that Global Peak Oil effects will start to hit around 2012. The cost of winning oil and its subsequent refining determines the cost of just about everything we need. The trend in costs will be onwards and upwards - i.e. sustained upward dynamic equilibrium with ups and downs on the way, as we

have witnessed very recently. Long-term planning must by necessity bear in mind how growth will be affected by Peak Oil and the measures to be undertaken in order to control emissions as part of global 'Convergence and Contraction'.

It is therefore not difficult to envisage a likely scenario whereby a standalone community, originally planned for 12,000 to 15,000 new homes, grinds to a halt soon after the initial phase of construction and countryside devastation, leaving an incomplete development with a far from complete 'vibrant, distinctive community with a strong sense of place'. This is a compelling reason to abandon the notion of a standalone development and concentrate on urban regeneration and SUEs as *the* realistic alternative.

Peak Oil effects are already making their presence felt on supermarket shelves. The UK imports around 40% of its food requirement and obviously this situation cannot endure. Therefore Food Security will become a much bigger issue sooner than most people realise. To be profligate with agricultural land resources, as the developer proposes with the eco-town project, is extremely foolhardy. With Contraction and Convergence there will be a greater requirement for renewable energy resources and a considerable amount of the country's land will be given over to non-food cultivation (e.g. OSR, *Miscanthus* and short-rotation willow/poplar hybrids). This is another compelling argument to opt for SUEs and concentrate on developing the urban fringe adjacent to areas of deprivation. We owe it to our successors not to ignore the predictable Big Picture that the future presents. Productive agricultural land will become very precious and our children and their children will not thank us for squandering this finite resource. These issues aren't going to go away - they cannot be ignored. This particular eco-town proposal is a real LULU - a locally unwanted land use.

Transport is an issue fraught with what were originally seen as insurmountable difficulties by DCLG. Where are the economic drivers for such a huge development on the wrong side of town? The most likely outcome is that a new standalone settlement to the south-east of Leicester will induce private journeys across the City to the main north-south trunk and motorway routes. A new distributor road is unlikely to cope with peak flows and resulting delays will add costs to businesses. Economic growth typically derives from urban concentration. What this development proposes in terms of spatial distribution, employment and travel behaviour makes little, if any, sense. An important concept here is the Employment Self-containment Ratio. The applicant has produced documentation:

www.leicester.gov.uk/EasySite/lib/serveDocument.asp?doc=111725&pgid=106838

This paper is full of estimates and therefore remains little more than a wish-list. It acknowledges high levels of employment containment in established urban centres elsewhere in the county. However, an intuitive estimate, given the likely economic constraints over the coming decade or longer, is that the proposed development would in all probability become a dormitory town with little else to offer. That is, the Employment Self-containment Ratio would be probably 25% or less - should the eco-town ever be realised.

Given that the Secretary of State's Proposed RSS Changes give support to economic activity in association with East Midlands Airport, what types of employment opportunities are likely to be created? The most probable outcome would be more B8 Class use, resulting in storage, warehousing and distribution 'shed rash', scarring the landscape. Quality of employment is therefore likely to be low. A knowledge-based home working community evolving in this proposed standalone settlement seems to be a very high expectation.

There are many other issues about this proposal for a new town/eco-town with which CPRE has concerns. The reader is therefore directed to our CPRE Branch response to the DCLG consultation which commenced in April. This document can be found at:

<http://www.cpreleics.org/local-campaigns.shtml>

More recently, attempts have been made to validate the case for eco-towns based on affordability issues as an addition to meeting a perceived need for three million new homes over the next two decades or so. If all of the ecotowns (as originally shortlisted) were to be developed, they would only meet 3% of this need. Affordability is a problem requiring intervention from central government. Deliverability of affordable homes in the East Midlands has been lower than desired, presumably as a result of many plot sizes being below the threshold requirement.

There are many questions to be answered. For example, the financial viability of the proposed scheme. There is currently no development value for the land in question as it is outside planned growth. Will this mean extensive development of retail outlets on the site? If so, this could be an attractor for custom beyond the ecotown.

In 2007 there were 14,208 empty homes in Leicestershire, almost 50% of which were privately owned properties vacant for more than six months. It would appear that the Empty Dwelling Management Order, introduced as part of the 2004 Housing Act and brought into effect on April 6th 2006, isn't working. Why not? In 2005/6 there were 94,000 outstanding planning permissions in the East Midlands. This is the equivalent of six years' housing supply in the Region. Again, how can delivery of these permissions be speeded up?

Until these questions are adequately addressed it is patently wrong to exploit the countryside as a political stop-gap. In conclusion, the reader is referred to a National CPRE document, 'The Proximity Principle'

<http://www.cpre.org.uk/campaigns/housing-and-urban-policy/sustainable-communities/sustainable-communities-campaign-update>

...particularly the summary box on page 5.

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Graham Stocks,
Leicestershire CPRE Branch, PO Box 7986, LE12 8XT.