

## Government Consultation on Eco-towns

### Council, Item 13

Committee: Council

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Title: Government Consultation on Eco-towns

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Agenda Item

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Item for  
decision

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### Summary

The Government published its consultation document entitled “Eco-towns, Living a Greener Future” on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2008, giving up to 30<sup>th</sup> June for responses. The Consultation sets out a shortlist of 15 locations throughout England, including sites at North East Elsenham and Hanley Grange just outside the District in South Cambridgeshire, and it is the intention to select up to ten at the end of the process as locations with potential. It would then be for individual authorities to consider planning applications. The consultation also explains the principles of eco-towns and why they would be different. This report sets out the background to the consultation at this early stage.

With regard to **Elsenham** the document states: *“The 265 ha site is to the north east of the existing Elsenham village and railway station. A new settlement at this location is the preferred option in Uttlesford District Council’s core strategy (for around 3,000 homes) and is supported by studies on transport, environment, settlement. The eco-town proposal is for a minimum of 5,000 homes and possibly more in the longer term.*

*An eco-town proposal in this location would make good use of existing transport infrastructure (rail – London to Cambridge) and road links to M11 and provide additional housing in one of the most stressed housing markets in the region. The scheme would build on existing local eco initiatives, and comprehensive low carbon and renewable energy plans.*

*Housing Affordability Pressure – Extreme. The scheme would deliver 1,500 affordable housing units in comparison with current delivery of 90 annually in LA areas. Current households on waiting list – 3,954.”* NB The housing waiting list in Uttlesford stands at about 1,200.

With regard to **Hanley Grange** the document states: *“The site would accommodate 8,000 homes on 500ha land close to Cambridge high technology employment cluster, and nearby villages of Hinxton, Duxford.*

*An eco-town scheme in this location would respond to the severe homes/jobs imbalance in and around Cambridge and locate new development close to employment. Scope for good links with Science and engineering to drive environmental innovation and application to business.*

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*Housing Affordability Pressure – Extreme. The scheme would deliver 3,000 affordable housing units in comparison with current delivery of 240 and 150 annually in relevant LA areas. Current households on waiting list in S Cams – 4,661 and Cambridge City 5,214.*

The Council needs to find locations for some 4,200 new houses by 2024 and is still collating the responses from its consultation exercise on the preferred option of the draft Core Strategy. The preferred option is for a 3,000 dwelling settlement at Elsenham (with the remainder located elsewhere), and responses from the communities in the vicinity have been overwhelmingly opposed. The extent to which the consultation exercise so far has been overtaken by the Government announcement will be a significant consideration.

A note attached to the Government's press release states: "*The Housing Green Paper made it clear that the housing numbers in existing and in some cases emerging plans were not high enough to address the pressing problem of long term housing affordability. We are therefore aiming to complete a further set of Regional Spatial Strategy partial reviews by 2011 that will include housing numbers for local planning authorities that are consistent with our national aim to deliver 240,000 homes per year by 2016. We expect eco towns to contribute significantly to help to meet that target for additional housing and we want to assure local authorities which include an eco-town in their future housing plans that it will, of course, count towards their future housing targets, consistent with our national figure of 240,000 homes per year by 2016. Some authorities are already taking forward development plans which go a long way towards this level and in these areas an authority will be able to count an appropriate proportion of the eco-town towards its local plan target.*"

This will have implications for the delivery of housing targets and may assuage doubts that eco-towns are additional to existing housing targets. Further clarification is required. Officers are in urgent discussion with Go East and DCLG.

### Recommendations

That this report is discussed and noted and a further report be brought to the Environment Committee in June

### Background Papers

Eco-towns prospectus

Eco-towns, Living a greener future

Core strategy consultation documents

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**Impact**

Communication/Consultation	Consultation has recently been carried out
Community Safety	Designing out crime will need to be a significant consideration
Equalities	Equalities are part of sustainable development principles
Finance	Significant direct costs in responding to consultation depending on degree of opposition, and processing any planning application. There are indications that support in terms of funding and in kind may be available. Indirect financial implications are to ensure the development can fund the necessary social, amenity and physical infrastructure
Human Rights	None
Legal implications	Unsuccessful bidders may challenge the process. Ensuring the eco-towns process is compatible with the development plan timetable will be a challenge
Ward-specific impacts	Elsenham in particular but of importance to all wards
Workforce/Workplace	Considerable additional work for the planning service at a time of very high pressure

**Situation**

1. The Government is promoting Eco-towns as providing the opportunity for a major boost in affordable housing across the country whilst tackling climate change. It is Government’s view that building in existing towns and cities alone simply cannot provide enough new homes - more than 30 per cent of the overall new houses will be affordable housing.
2. Some of the shortlisted locations make significant use of previously developed brownfield land including former MoD land, military depots, disused airfields and former mining pits and industrial sites. Others do not and are Greenfield sites. With regard to Elsenham the Government advises that it addresses regional priorities such as a severe shortage of suitable housing
3. A panel of experts, who will work with developers to improve their plans, will

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be formed to ensure the final eco-towns incorporate the best and most innovative proposals for sustainable living. This will be formed of leading figures from the fields of climate change and sustainability, energy, planning, transport, and business.

4. 57 initial proposals were received from local authorities and developers across the country. The 42 proposals that have not been taken forward have been dismissed as being undeliverable or not ambitious enough to meet the high environmental and affordability standards set by Government. The 15 shortlisted locations are:
  - **Pennbury, Leicestershire:** 12-15,000 homes on a development incorporating brownfield, greenfield and surplus public sector land. Four miles south east of Leicester. This proposal could include 4,000 new affordable houses in an area of high affordability pressure.
  - **Manby and Strubby, Lincolnshire:** 5,000 homes put forward by East Lindsey District Council on two sites, with large elements of brownfield land including a former RAF base. The proposal complements the strategic plan for the phased relocation of communities on Lincolnshire coast because of high flood risk, and could include 1,500 affordable homes in an area of very high affordability pressure.
  - **Curborough, Staffordshire:** 5,000 homes on the brownfield site of the former Fradley airfield, ten miles from Burton. The proposal could include 2,000 affordable houses in an area of very high affordability pressure.
  - **Middle Quinton, Warwickshire:** 6,000 homes on a former Royal Engineers depot which has a rail link to the Worcester-London rail line. Six miles South West of Stratford upon Avon. The proposal could include 2,000 affordable houses in an area of very high affordability pressure.
  - **Bordon-Whitehill, Hampshire:** 5-8,000 homes on a site owned by the Ministry of Defence. A significant number of ex-MoD homes are already on the site, west of Whitehill-Bordon. The proposal could include 2,000 affordable houses in an area of very high affordability pressure.
  - **Weston Otmoor, Oxfordshire:** 10-15,000 homes on a site adjoining the M40 and the Oxford-Bicester railway. Three miles south west of Bicester, the site includes a current airstrip. The scheme could include between 3,000 and 5,000 affordable homes, in an area of extreme affordability pressure.
  - **Ford, West Sussex:** 5,000 homes on a site which includes brownfield land and the former Ford airfield. Close to rail line linking London and the Sussex coast. The scheme could include 1,500 affordable homes, in an area of very high affordability pressure.
  - **Imerys China Clay Community, Cornwall:** Development of around 5,000 homes on former china clay workings, industrial land and disused mining

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pits no longer needed by owner Imerys. Close to St Austell. The scheme could include 1,500 affordable homes, in an area of extreme affordability pressure.

- **Rossington, South Yorkshire:** Up to 15,000 homes regenerating the former colliery village of Rossington, three miles south of Doncaster. The scheme could include 1,500 affordable homes, in an area of moderate affordability pressure.
  - **Coltishall, Norfolk:** 5,000 homes on a former RAF airfield, eight miles north of Norwich. The scheme could include 2,000 affordable homes in an area of very high affordability pressure.
  - **Hanley Grange, Cambridgeshire:** 8,000 homes on land adjacent to the A11 designed to improve the severe lack of housing in and around Cambridge. The scheme could include 3,000 affordable homes in an area of extreme affordability pressure.
  - **Marston Vale and New Marston, Bedfordshire:** Up to 15,400 homes on a series of sites, including former industrial sites, along the east-west rail line to Stewartby and Millbrook. The scheme could include 2,000 affordable homes in an area of high affordability pressure.
  - **Elsenham, Essex:** A minimum of 5,000 homes north east of the existing Elsenham village. Close to M11 and the London to Cambridge rail line. The scheme could include 1,800 affordable homes in an area of extreme affordability pressure.
  - **Rushcliffe, Nottinghamshire:** An eco-town proposal was submitted for Kingston-on-Soar, to the south of Nottingham. In response to representations from Rushcliffe Borough Council, this site is not to be pursued. However, the Government is proposing to carry out a further review in partnership with RBC to consider whether there is a suitable alternative location with the potential to be viable within the Rushcliffe local authority area.
  - **Leeds City Region, Yorkshire:** A number of eco-town proposals were submitted for locations within the area of Leeds City Region partnership of 11 authorities and principally between Leeds and Selby. The Leeds City Region Partnership has indicated support in principle for an eco-town within the sub-region. The Partnership has proposed a further study to compare the best alternative locations across the Leeds City Region partnership area. The Government has agreed to support this approach, on the basis that it will allow a further announcement to be made shortly of one or more sites for consultation
5. The Government advises that his consultation is the first of four key stages in the eco-towns process.

**Stage One:** Three month consultation on preliminary views on eco-town

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benefits and these shortlisted locations.

**Stage Two:** Further consultation this summer on a Sustainability Appraisal, which provides a more detailed assessment of these locations, and a draft Planning Policy Statement. This is expected to run from July to October and there may be an interim announcement following the sustainability appraisal.

**Stage Three:** A decision on the final list of locations with the potential to be an eco-town and the publication of a final Planning Policy Statement, later this year. This is proposed to be at any time between November and February 2009.

**Stage Four:** Like any other proposed development, individual schemes in these locations will need to submit planning applications which will be decided on the merits of the proposal. It should be noted however that the Government envisages the submission of planning applications at any time after May/June this year.

6. The key criteria for eco-towns were set out in the *Eco-towns Prospectus* published in July last year:
  - (i) 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 5,000-10,000 homes;
  - (ii) The development as a whole should reach zero carbon standards, and each town should be an exemplar in at least one area of environmental sustainability;
  - (iii) Eco-town proposals should provide for a good range of facilities within the town - a secondary school, a medium scale retail centre, good quality business space and leisure facilities;
  - (iv) Affordable housing should make up between 30 and 50 per cent of the total through a wide range and distribution of tenures in mixed communities, with a particular emphasis on larger family homes;
  - (v) A management body which will help develop the town, provide support for people moving to the new community, for businesses and to co-ordinate delivery of services and manage facilities.
7. The Eco-towns Challenge will be a panel of experts to provide advice to bidders to help raise the level of environmental ambition in schemes. The panel will assess, challenge and advise schemes on their environmental proposals and their effectiveness.
8. **Effect on housing targets** There is considerable speculation over the extent to which eco-towns will contribute to the minimum housing targets set

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out in the Regional Spatial Strategy (East of England Plan). It would appear that an eco-town will contribute to the overall targets but that is subject to confirmation and a partial review of the housing element of the RSS which will commence almost immediately upon publication of the adopted plan anticipated in June 2008.

9. **Effect on the planning process** So far as overall process is concerned the eco-towns will be considered in the context of regional and local plans. The consultation document makes it clear that the statutory development plan remains the starting point for considering all applications, including those for eco-towns. Assistance will be offered to those local authorities where eco-towns are proposed to get local development frameworks into place. The RSS review will take the proposals into account and test the longer term issues such as size.
10. There may be circumstances in which the adoption of local plans which reflect the proposals for eco-towns may take some years but where a planning application is submitted in the meantime. The application will need to be considered in the light of the current development plan and any other material considerations. At present there is no policy context for the consideration of eco-settlements hence the Government will be preparing a Policy Statement on eco-towns so that this can form part of the framework for a decision, alongside other planning policy statements. Thus the Government Policy Statement will be an important factor in determining any planning application.
11. **The next steps** Much work remains to be done. The Government has assessed eco-town bids with the main infrastructure agencies involving DfT, DEFRA, EA, NE and HA to provide an initial assessment of strategic infrastructure impacts and benefits, focusing particularly on transport and environmental infrastructure. The Government also taken an initial view of delivery issues and potential benefits of individual bids, including benefits to local housing affordability.
12. The specific eco-town proposals and concepts will need further development. Scheme promoters need to demonstrate a robust costs base, further infrastructure assessment work is needed on the environment, transport, and community elements of each project. A satisfactory transport assessment will be needed for each scheme appropriate to the scale of the development and its impacts demonstrating how it can be linked into surrounding networks and how modal shift and reductions in travel can be achieved. More work will be needed on the Housing Market role of the scheme – its contribution to meeting housing pressures in the sub-regional area including Housing Market Assessment. There should be a draft outline business plan for the whole development, with cash flow, and clearly identified possible sources of interim finance.
13. Addressing these issues will need the input and investment of a large

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number of agencies and businesses – public, private, national, regional, and local. This is a substantial delivery challenge for which the scheme bids provide a starting base. The schemes submitted vary considerably – some smaller schemes are straightforward in concept, well prepared, and could be taken forward effectively by investors with local partners with relatively little input from Government and the infrastructure agencies. By contrast the largest proposals are of a scale comparable with some of the schemes in the post war new towns programme and will require a major delivery capacity.

14. There is scope for land values to contribute more to the cost of infrastructure than on a similar size urban site because existing land values are low. However there are also significant costs, even if the eco- town achieves a high level of self- containment in terms of transport and energy. The ability to deliver the proposed development is crucial and the Government expects to work closely with local authorities and other key partners to ensure that by the time potential schemes are finally identified later this year a clear delivery context for each location has been tested which has been robustly costed and assessed. The need for special local delivery mechanisms will vary according to the scheme. In all cases the Government will want to consult local authorities on the best approach to delivery with the aim of reaching a partnership agreement on the best way forward. In the great majority of cases the Government would not expect to use statutory mechanisms. However, a New Town Development Corporation could be an option in certain circumstances, for example where a statutory body could bring development forward more quickly.

### Risk Analysis

A comprehensive risk analysis will need to form part of the Council's assessment of the proposals. Initial thoughts are:

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Likelihood</b>	<b>Impact</b>	<b>Mitigating actions</b>
Development at Elsenham is additional to the 4,200 houses that the Council needs to accommodate	2	4	Land would need to be found for at least 9,200 houses. The proposals seem to indicate that eco-towns would be taken into account in addressing housing targets but further clarification is needed
Development at	2	2	Hanley Grange is not



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Hanley Grange will impact on the infrastructure in the north of the District			obviously compatible with the growth strategy in S Cambs DC's recently adopted Core Strategy
The Council does not have the staff to handle this, the G2 application, the Core Strategy and the high DC workload	4	4	Further assistance may be available from DCLG but there are no resources available for the Council to fund additional staff. Economies to meet the savings targets mean there is little capacity in the Planning Service without having an adverse effect on the delivery of other key priorities
The Government will impose a Development Corporation or similar body to implement the development outside the control of the Council	3	4	If the Government goes ahead with the proposal and the Council continues to oppose it then the imposition of implementation by a third party becomes more likely. The Council could lose out on key infrastructure requirements