



Eco Towns

Standard Note: SN/SC/4406

Last updated: 30 March 2011

Author: Christopher Barclay

Section: Science and Environment Section

-
- The Labour Government intended to increase the level of house building in an environmental manner. An important part of this policy was to have some eco towns to demonstrate how a town could have zero carbon emissions. Two closely related notes are: [Sustainable buildings and environmental standards: towards zero carbon development](#) (SN/SC4214), and [Microgeneration](#) (SN/SC/3825).
 - Early proposals were often criticised locally by those who saw them as a way of increasing housing targets, often already included in draft regional plans. Another criticism was that the proposals were apart from existing towns, so that residents might end up driving to work.
 - Eventually, in July 2009 the Labour Government approved four sites, one each in Oxfordshire, Cornwall, Greater Norwich and East Hampshire.
 - Several more possible eco towns were announced for consideration in December 2009.
 - The Coalition Government has reduced the budget for eco towns and will audit their programmes before any payment.
 - In November 2010 the Devon eco town Cranbrook gained planning consent.
 - The Planning Policy Statement associated with eco towns is expected to be dropped when the National Planning Policy Framework replaces existing planning guidance in March 2012.

This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as being up to date; the law or policies may have changed since it was last updated; and it should not be relied upon as legal or professional advice or as a substitute for it. A suitably qualified professional should be consulted if specific advice or information is required.

This information is provided subject to [our general terms and conditions](#) which are available online or may be provided on request in hard copy. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing with Members and their staff, but not with the general public.

Contents

1	Four Sites Approved, July 2009	2
2	Smaller eco towns, but more of them, December 2009	5
3	How policy had changed up to 2009	6
4	Coalition Government Policy	7
5	Devon eco town gains planning consent	7

1 **Four Sites Approved, July 2009**

On 16 July 2009 John Healey announced the sites of four eco towns and the Planning Policy Statement:

Eco-towns

Eco-towns respond to the demand to build more homes and to live in a more sustainable way. By radically rethinking how we design, plan and build our homes, we can create zero-carbon developments which combine affordable housing, environmental sensitivity, and outstanding quality. Eco-towns will pioneer genuinely sustainable living setting standards that will need to be followed more widely to deal with the challenge of climate change.

The new Eco-town Planning Policy Statement (PPS) that I am publishing today sets out the highest ever standards for green living, and linked to it I can announce the first four pioneer locations for England's Eco-towns. These are: Whitehill-Bordon, St. Austell (Clay Country), Rackheath (Norwich) and NW Bicester, all led or strongly supported by their local authorities who can see both the potential for their new eco town and the benefit for existing communities in regeneration, higher quality jobs and new green infrastructure. Each of these four locations has the capacity to link well into existing development—as well as the scale to function as a new settlement. None are self contained developments in the middle of the countryside.

These locations will receive continuing Government support including a share of a special £60 million growth fund to support local infrastructure.

Alongside the new Eco-towns PPS I am publishing a series of documents which demonstrate the detailed work and assessment on which my decisions today are based. These are:

- an update of the Sustainability Appraisal;
- a Sustainability Statement;
- an Impact Assessment;
- Summary of responses to the consultation on the draft PPS;
- a Location Decision Statement.

I am placing copies in the Library of the House.

However the PPS is a statement about potential. The decision on whether or not the eco-town schemes go ahead is for the local planning authority. Schemes can be considered in local plans and will be the subject of individual planning applications, and local consultation, which will be decided on their merits by the local authority.

In addition to the first four pioneering locations in the PPS we have said we want to see up to ten Eco-towns by 2020, so I am making the offer to work with and help fund a further six more local authorities in developing proposals through regional and local plans. We have offered additional support to two authorities where proposals were not sufficiently advanced to be included in the PPS—Uttlesford and Doncaster to enable them to take forward these locations through their local plans if this is the preferred option they choose to pursue. I have set aside £5 million to support these and other areas to carry out further assessment and technical work including potential future locations to come through plans in other regions.

The eco-towns concept—more sustainable living in new communities—has attracted real interest. When a whole community is planned at this scale (5,000 homes is broadly the size necessary to support a secondary school) there is an opportunity to completely rethink how transport, employment, retail and other services are provided as well as designing housing to exemplary standards. In practice this means features such as smart homes with remote control of heating and ventilation, real time information on available transport, state of the art provision for home-working, including high quality broadband.

The PPS I am publishing today sets out for the highest standards for green living ever set. Eco-town developments must be able to demonstrate essential features to achieve the highest levels of sustainability. Examples of the PPS standards include ensuring:

- zero-carbon status across all the town's buildings, including commercial and public buildings as well as homes—a significantly tougher threshold than any existing or agreed targets;

- 40 per cent. of the area within the town to be green space, at least half of which should be open to the public as parks or recreation areas;

- a minimum of one job per house can be reached by walking, cycling or public transport to reduce dependence on the car;

- all homes are located within ten minutes walk of frequent public transport and everyday neighbourhood services;

- smart, efficient, affordable homes taking their energy from the sun, wind and earth.

John Healey explained more about what Government aims for eco towns, adding:

Eco-towns are large developments which will require all parts of the public sector to work together, and close working relations between local and central Government. I therefore propose to invite each of the eco-town local authorities to look at how their LAA [Local Area Agreement] could provide a suitable framework for planning future service provision and delivery in and around the eco-town area, for example through a stronger focus on a lower tier local authority within the LAA arrangement or sub area locality agreement.

I propose to establish a formal relationship between local and central Government, in an arrangement based on the model of multi-area agreements (MAA), to negotiate the freedoms and flexibilities eco-town areas will need to realise their aspirations. I wish

also to offer certainty that central Government are willing to work closely with the local authority and local communities to make the most of their new eco town opportunities.

In addition I am asking the Homes and Communities Agency to provide support, expertise and advice to local partners and I expect the HCA's first step to be inclusion of the four eco-town locations in the first wave of single conversations between the agency and local authorities, with the agency assessing the detailed proposals as they come forward from the promoters in each location, and advising each location on funding, including growth funding. Providing there are proposals which represent good quality and value for money and are deliverable within a mixed community context, provision of affordable housing support in these locations will be presented by HCA as a regional priority in the allocation of resources from the National Affordable Housing Programme.

The eco-town locations I am announcing today all have existing communities close by or within the area and I want them to benefit from their new eco-towns. We will, therefore, be inviting existing communities in the first eco-town locations to participate in the "Green villages, towns and cities" challenge for communities announced in the DECC Low Carbon Transition Plan published yesterday. In total, 15 communities will be selected to participate as "test-hubs", with local residents, businesses, and the public sector playing a leading role.

The need to develop thriving and sustainable communities able to take a strong role in shaping their community is at the heart of the eco-town concept. To support community anchor organisations in taking a leading role in shaping the eco-town proposals, and subject to local proposals, Government will invite eco-town pilot projects to apply for support within the £70 million community builders fund for community organisations, including for the purchase of community assets.

We have been well served by the Eco-towns challenge panel of independent experts and we want to maintain the creative contribution that independent professionals can make through the CABE [Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment] design review process, CABE design support at local level, and the continuation of an independent advisory panel as the eco-town schemes are developed.

Despite the difficult current market conditions caused by the recession, I expect 10,000 homes built by 2016 of which 30 per cent. will be affordable. To start this process we will support early demonstrator buildings to test and develop from the new technologies needed, and so that local communities can help shape their further development. For the next two years I am providing £60 million start up funding from the growth fund for this work for the four locations identified today. This is additional to mainstream funding for services. We expect that the bulk of investment in these schemes will be from the private sector, but eco-towns will also benefit from similar levels of public investment to any comparable large housing scheme and this will include continued growth funding over the period of major development.

Planning

With the new PPS, eco-towns set the gold standard in development planning, but low carbon living means planning for all new development to cut carbon emissions.

Our climate change "Planning Policy Statement" (PPS) published in December 2007 has put climate change at the heart of what is expected from good planning and complemented our earlier PPS on renewable energy. Neither now fully reflects the scale of the challenge we face. But neither fully reflects the scale of the challenge we

now face in supporting the UK's transition to a low carbon country. We will therefore review and combine them, consulting in detail on proposals later this year.¹

Comment on the sites

Regeneration & Renewal provided the following information:

Eco town	China clay community	North-West Bicester	Rackheath	Whitehill-Bordon
Location	Nr St Austell, Cornwall	Oxfordshire	Greater Norwich	East Hampshire
Homes	5,100	5,000	3,400	5,500
Affordable	40-50%	30%	30-40%	40%

The magazine noted that the eco towns would provide much needed housing, but its overall contribution would be small – just 20,000 in total, one tenth of the initial aim for the eco-towns initiative.

Far from the stand-alone Greenfield settlements envisaged initially, three of the eco-towns are extensions to existing towns and the Cornish proposal is a series of smaller schemes adjoining villages and former industrial sites all within several miles of St Austell. (...) Nevertheless, the schemes seem set to survive political change. Three of the four are backed by their Conservative local authorities and the party has said it will endorse good schemes with local support.²

2 Smaller eco towns, but more of them, December 2009

On 1 December 2009, John Healey issued a Written Ministerial Statement on eco towns:

The Minister for Housing (John Healey): One of the key roles of local authorities in responding to climate change is to be innovative in how new development is planned. Today, I am announcing that we have had a very encouraging number of responses from local authorities who want to take forward major new development to the exemplar green standards which we set out in the Eco-towns PPS published in July of this year. This shows how the standards we set are influencing the thinking of local authorities across the country as they consider how to do new development. Possible second wave bids are still at an early stage and will be subject to further, widespread consultation on proposals, before public consultation and local planning approval.

The Eco-towns PPS sets the highest sustainability standards ever required for new development. One of the key components of the eco-towns concept is to exploit low carbon innovation at community scale with a minimum development over time of around 5,000 homes. It is the scope for a new community or communities to create the opportunity of large scale innovation in how jobs, schools and services are delivered in low carbon ways that will help us pilot new approaches in responding to climate change.

I am today announcing that we are taking forward nine expressions of interest from local authorities and city regions, covering 14 locations, for support for the further planning and feasibility work which will test whether potential development in these areas could meet the concepts and standards set out in the Eco-towns PPS. They comprise:

¹ HC Deb 16 July 2009 cc42-9WS

² "Eco-towns still face thorny questions", *Regeneration & Renewal*, 27 July 2009

(i) Existing schemes at Shoreham Harbour and Northstowe, where there is now an opportunity and desire to redesign elements of the project to see if it can meet even higher sustainability standards.

(ii) A total of five authorities and partnerships, covering 10 locations in Taunton (Monkton Heathfield and Corneystowe), Yeovil, Leeds City Region (Aire Valley, York North West, North Kirklees and Bradford-Shipley Canal Corridor), Coventry and Lincoln (Lincoln area and Gainsborough). In these locations the concepts are still at an early stage but development work under the Eco-towns PPS offers the possibility of creating an outstanding new community providing it is feasible and deliverable.

(iii) Cornwall, which is already taking forward one of the first eco-towns, and Sheffield city region (Dearne Valley, South Yorkshire) wish to use the eco-towns concept to carry out a broader survey of potential, test alternative options for development and then use the eco-town concept and standards to see if this can be successfully applied to their area.

The locations and places I am announcing today show how local authorities want to use the eco-town concept and standards in a variety of ways. Developing these projects will be a demanding process requiring good co-operation between central and local partners and the private sector. We will now be taking these proposals forward in more detailed discussion with each authority with a view to providing funding support for more detailed design and to test feasibility, drawing on the £5 million fund for studies which I announced in July. We will be working with partners across Government and the agencies to ensure that infrastructure, environment and sustainability issues are suitably addressed. In all cases these proposals are or are intended to become part of the local plan work being led by the authority and will be subject to the full local planning process.

I am also keen that this is not just planning work but that we can help communities see some of the potential by funding demonstrator low and zero-carbon exemplar schemes as we currently envisage in the first four eco-towns. To this end I am making available £5 million capital funding to enable authorities to show the type of development that will be possible and my Department will be issuing further advice on this in conjunction with the Homes and Communities Agency.³

On 8 February 2010, the Labour Government announced £60m for eco towns. The aim “introduce greener living not only for people who go on to live in the new eco-towns, but for the 65,000 people already living nearby.”⁴

3 How policy had changed up to 2009

Planning expert Sir Peter Hall stressed changes in eco towns:

The original shortlist, generated from competitive bids that came mainly from private developers, was widely criticised for being biased towards southern schemes that were too small and remote from big cities to be sustainable. Where were the jobs going to be, people asked, and how were residents going to get to them? It was unrealistic to assume that, in places this small, employment could be found locally. Lacking good public transport, these places would rapidly become car-dependent, the critics said.

The new sites, in contrast, are all local-authority led and heavily urban in location - many of them in the north. One or two, like Northstowe outside Cambridge or Monkton

³ HC Deb 1 December 2009 cc119-20WS

⁴ DCLG, [Healey: Over £60m to lay green foundations of eco-towns](#), 9 February 2010

Heathfield and Corneystrowe outside Yeovil, are not actually in a city but next door...Most are on brownfield sites right in the centres of cities like Lincoln and York or in run-down industrial belts....They will enjoy easy access by good public transport to urban jobs and services, right from day one.⁵

4 Coalition Government Policy

In July 2010 the Coalition Government announced it would audit eco-town projects before releasing any more cash to the planned schemes:

Earlier this month, Shapps wrote to all 15 councils promoting eco-towns in their area, telling them that the 2010/11 grants for the projects will be halved. But to get even the reduced amount, they would have to meet a number of government-set criteria, the letter said. Shapps wrote: 'Awards will be subject to achievement of milestones, and completion of a value-for-money and sustainability audit on projects.'

He added that he wanted to ensure that localism was a feature of the eco-towns, and asked councils to detail how communities were being engaged in their development.⁶

In March 2011, the magazine *Planning* said that further changes to the policy were likely:

The eco-towns supplement to Planning Policy Statement 1...set out the strict green standards that eco-town developments would have to meet. But under the coalition Government's new national planning policy framework, which will merge dozens of planning documents, including the current suite of PPSs, into one document, the eco-town PPS will effectively be scrapped. Developers and councils working on three of the four first wave projects told *Planning* that they are either adapting the plans for eco-towns in their areas to more closely fit their own goals rather than those of the soon-to-be-axed PPS or are examining whether to do so.⁷

5 Devon eco town gains planning consent

The *Planning Portal* reported:

Cranbrook, believed to be Devon's first free-standing settlement since the Middle Ages is now set to climb off the drawing board following the green light from East Devon District Council. The project is also the first of the last Government's "eco-town" projects to obtain planning consent.

Following the signing of a section 106 agreement, outline planning permission for the first 2,900 homes of the new community and up to 300 affordable housing units in the first phase, has now been issued by East Devon District Council to the New Community Partners, (Hallam Land Management, Redrow, Taylor Wimpey and Persimmon), The development consortium says construction work is on course to begin in the early part of next year.

Councillor Sara Randall-Johnson, leader of the local authority, said "The planning permission confirms that Cranbrook will include a low carbon district heating scheme, a dedicated bus route to and from Exeter, a multi-purpose building which will be home to the first library and community facilities until the town centre is built, two primary schools, a secondary school and a new railway station on the Exeter to Waterloo line."

⁵ "A U-turn prompted by Dutch masters", *Regeneration & Renewal*, 14 December 2009

⁶ "Eco-towns face audit to qualify for halved budgets", *Regeneration & Renewal*, 26 July 2010

⁷ "Policy axe set to bring eco-town revisions", *Planning*, 29 March 2011

She added: "All of these facilities will have a high-quality landscape setting to include a country park, public open space with play areas, a skateboard park and other recreational facilities."⁸

⁸ "Devon eco-town gains approval", *Planning Portal*, 5 November 2010