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Consultation on Draft Planning Policy Statement – Eco-towns

We are writing in response to your consultation on a draft Planning Policy Statement for Eco-towns. Environmental Protection UK has considered the consultation document and welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposals.

1. About Environmental Protection UK

Environmental Protection UK brings together organisations from across the public, private and voluntary sectors to promote a balanced and innovative approach to understanding and solving environmental problems, through policy development and education. We are a registered charity with over 110 years experience of environmental campaigning, public information provision, producing educational resources and policy formulation.

2. Our Conclusions on ‘Draft Planning Policy Statement – Eco-towns’

Environmental Protection UK welcomes this draft PPS as a great opportunity to set out robust criteria for developing a blueprint for sustainable living. It is encouraging to see high environmental standards set out for eco-towns in the draft PPS, which we hope will filter down in time to new build developments in existing towns and cities (‘Eco Quarters’). However, in its current draft, we are concerned at the absence of standards for local environmental quality. Without adequate planning for example, for protection from air quality and noise, the health and well-being of residents of these new communities could be compromised by unmanaged local impacts of carbon reduction measures.

Biomass

While biomass burning produces low carbon electricity and heat, it can impact on local air quality. The draft PPS acknowledges the need to meet European air quality standards, however, we do not feel that a ‘pollute to the maximum’ approach is appropriate for eco-towns. The PPS should demand that low emission strategies are implemented to keep emissions of air pollutants from activities related to eco-towns

to a minimum (please see our answer to question 4.3 for more detail). From a transport perspective, air quality impacts are not just felt within an eco-town, but beyond its boundaries as a consequence of vehicles moving to and from the new centre.

Transport

We also feel that the transport standard is insufficiently ambitious and focuses purely on infrastructure and travel planning arrangements, ignoring the need to decarbonise residual journeys. This standard should be bolstered by introducing a carbon standard for transport in eco-towns, sufficiently flexible to ensure that the diverse locations of the proposed eco-towns are served. The overall carbon standard for the eco-town should also be amended to ensure that the current discouragement to use onsite generation to power electric vehicles is removed (see our answer to question 4.5)

Noise

It is stated that all eco-towns must comply with national policies. We are disappointed therefore that no consideration is given to PPG24 on requirements for planning and noise. This is of particular concern, given the potential of some renewable technologies – for example, small wind turbines and air source heat pumps, and potentially larger neighbouring wind turbines, to cause adverse noise impact. Also, sound insulation standards for homes should be optimised. Regard must also be given to EU and wider recommendations and regulation. The Environmental Noise Directive aims to reduce noise exposure of populations and protect quiet areas. In planning of any new towns it is essential, therefore, that regard is given to potential noise impact both on residents and on existing areas of quiet. The development of new towns also presents an opportunity to aspire to meet the WHO Guidelines for Community Noise.

Construction

The zero carbon definition excludes embodied carbon from the construction process. We feel this is a missed opportunity to raise the standard of best practice for the construction industry. Consideration is given to the fate of any waste generated in paragraph 4.29 and paragraph 4.32 (h) calls for carbon emissions from construction to be limited, managed and monitored. Demolition and any necessary remedial works should be included in this statement to ensure the entire process adheres to these standards. This standard should also incorporate the reduction of other environmental impacts (i.e. not just carbon emissions) during the construction phase e.g. loss of soil function.

Planning for Cleaner, Quieter, Healthier Environments

Finally we feel the theme of health must be strengthened throughout the draft PPS. Whilst the document does raise the issue in paragraph 4.2, the provision of an urban environment that protects the health of residents and encourages practices that improve public health is an essential feature of any new town. The potential effects of climate change on global public health and well-being are the prime reasons for action on climate mitigation and adaptation, and therefore we must plan in parallel for the maintenance of healthy local environmental quality.

Recommendations

1. 'local environmental quality' standards should to be introduced to include:
 - Air quality: including a condition that eco-towns implement a low emission strategy.
 - Noise: including conditions for eco-towns to manage the aural environment for example – planning for healthy soundscapes, to minimise

noise impact from traffic/infrastructure on homes, gardens, schools, healthcare facilities; designated quiet areas such as parks, gardens, school grounds.

- Land: to ensure that sufficient land is available for growing edible produce in the near to long term.
 - Light: to ensure amenity lighting is appropriate, energy conservative and non intrusive.
2. That a transport carbon standard is introduced into the transport standard to ensure that residual trips are made by low carbon means, and to help eco-towns encourage the market for alternative fuelled/ low carbon transport.
 3. That the theme of environmental health is strengthened throughout the draft PPS.

3. Our Response to Selected Consultation Questions

Q 4.3 Are there any standards that you feel are missing (that are not covered in other government policy and guidance)

We suggest that a standard for local environmental quality be introduced to the draft PPS. Without this, the very measures that help achieve the eco-town's zero carbon status may impact adversely on the local environment and the health of residents, and the opportunity to make eco-towns exemplars for a healthy environment missed.

The standard should include:

- Air Quality – whilst air quality is covered in PPS23 the exemplar status of eco-towns means that further standards should be applied, and a 'pollute up to maximum approach' strongly avoided. Measures to improve air quality should improve a Low Emission Strategy¹, which can be linked to the transport standard.
- Noise – noise is covered in PPG24 (PPS 24 revision stalled during review of planning legislation). No regard is given to this in the current draft. Robust guidance is needed to protect new communities, as far as possible, from nuisance and unhealthy noise impacts. The recently published Children's Environment and Health Strategy² for the UK acknowledges that exposure to noise can impair learning, and this must be considered in the siting of schools. Guidance must also protect homes and schools from high levels of traffic and industrial noise (in line with the aims of the Environmental Noise Directive), provide for provision and protection of quiet areas and high standards of sound insulation. The development of new communities provides a unique opportunity to demonstrate the design of high quality soundscapes – which has to date been neglected in urban planning, and to aspire to the standards recommended in the WHO Guidelines for Community Noise.³

¹ The Low Emission Strategy group defines a Low Emission Strategy as 'a package of measures to help mitigate the transport impacts of development. Their primary aim is to accelerate the uptake of low emission fuels and technologies in and around a new development, thereby complementing other design and mitigation options, such as travel planning and the provision of public transport infrastructure'.

²Children's Environment and Health Strategy, Health Protection Agency
<http://www.hpa.org.uk/webw/HPAweb&Page&HPAwebAutoListName/Page/1204707136075>

³ <http://www.who.int/docstore/peh/noise/guidelines2.html>

- Light – work did commence towards an annex to PPS 23 to cover light but stalled pending review of planning legislation. The development of new communities is an opportunity to demonstrate that lighting for safety and amenity need not be energy hungry or intrusive. To ensure conservation of energy, minimisation of intrusion of light into surrounding countryside and prevention of light nuisance to residents, and optimum standards for lighting must be employed.
- Brownfield land – the preservation of greenfield land should be further enshrined in the policy statement to ensure sustainable and appropriate development. Furthermore, while land contamination is covered in PPS23, which encourages a sustainable approach to land remediation, no comprehensive guidance exists. The zero-carbon definition excludes embodied carbon from the construction process and so provides little incentive to ensure that any necessary remediation considers its carbon impact. The development of eco-towns presents a unique opportunity to highlight how best practice in the regeneration of brownfield land can lead to significant carbon savings and economic savings through the reuse of materials.
- Soil – 13 million tonnes of carbon are thought to be lost from the UK's soil per annum. Soil sealing contributes to this process, however the policy statements stipulate no requirements for this to be mitigated or for any carbon loss to be offset. We commend the target for 42% of the total area of eco-towns to be allocated to green space however we believe there is a clear opportunity for the policy statements to secure the protection of soil functions through, for example, advocating use of permeable materials and ensuring that certain types of soil are preserved, e.g. that with high organic carbon content. We realise that the zero-carbon definition does not include embodied carbon however we question whether the loss of carbon through soil sealing should be included in this definition and believe that the policy statements should take the opportunity to highlight the necessity of protecting this valuable resource and ensure soil functions are adequately protected, protection that does not sufficiently exist in other planning statements or guidance.

Q 4.5 The zero carbon standard attempts to ensure that carbon emissions related to the built environment in eco-towns are zero or below. Have we specified the calculations of net emissions clearly in a way that avoids perverse incentives and loopholes. Is this standard the most cost effective way to do this?

There is currently a perverse incentive to discourage alternatively fuelled vehicles, and in particular electric vehicles:

- As the zero carbon standard applies to all electricity supplied in the eco-town any use of electric vehicles (which will mean a higher electricity demand) raises the zero carbon 'hurdle' for developers.
- If a developer plans to use a locally produced biofuel (for example biomethane from anaerobic digestion) the carbon standard will strongly encourage them to use this to provide space heating and electricity, even if the potential carbon saving for using the fuel in transport applications is greater.

We suggest that the solution to this is to introduce a carbon standard for transport, together with a mechanism to allow carbon savings to be internally traded between the building carbon standard and transport carbon standard. Whilst this adds an extra layer of complexity it would seem perverse to stipulate best practice carbon standards for housing, and no direct standard at all for transport emissions.

As provision of zero carbon transport is unfeasible using current technology, the carbon standard should be set as a percentage of the current average (per km) trip emissions rate. It could also be set on a rising basis to reflect the fact that low carbon transport technology is likely to improve over coming years.

Q 4.9 The transport standard attempts to support people's desire for mobility whilst enabling low carbon living. Is it sufficiently clear and workable?

As described above, we feel that the transport standard is insufficiently ambitious and focuses purely on infrastructure and travel planning arrangements, ignoring the need to decarbonise residual journeys. Whilst the former factors are very important, it would be great shame if the eco-towns did not help to encourage low carbon/ alternatively fuelled vehicles. We believe the solution to this to be a carbon standard for transport, as outlined in our answer to question 4.5.

Q 4.11 The standards proposed on green infrastructure and biodiversity aim to ensure that development is undertaken in such a way that it protects and enhances the best features of local landscapes for the benefit of both people and wildlife. Are these standards reasonable and deliverable?

Paragraph 4.20 on biodiversity states that '*Planning permission may not be granted for eco-town proposals which are likely to: a) have a significant adverse effect on internationally designated nature conservation sites or Sites of Special Scientific Interest; or b) result in a new loss of biodiversity from the local area*'. Given the importance of protecting biodiversity and the exemplar standards to which these developments aspire, the language should be strengthened to state '*Planning permission **will not be granted...***' or at the very least '*Planning permission **should not be granted...***'.

These standards should include the aural environment – ensuring noise is managed for minimum intrusion and the preservation of tranquillity.

The standards should also include lighting – to ensure light does not intrude into landscapes.

Q 4.13 The waste standard aims to ensure that eco-towns manage their waste effectively, from their construction onwards. Is the proposed waste standard a clear and workable way of doing this?

We support the effective management of waste. The standard needs to ensure a provision that waste management is undertaken within operating practices that minimise intrusive noise, dust and odour impacts on the community. Furthermore the standard references to avoidance of landfill where possible for construction, demolition and excavation processes provide an opportunity to ensure appropriate guidance is made available for this process and as well as scope to raise the standards of construction, demolition, excavation and remediation processes by embedding best practice in development criteria for eco-towns. With the increases in landfill tax and removal of the landfill tax exemption for waste from contaminated land, there are clear financial incentives, however no comprehensive guidance.

Q 4.14 The transition and development standard should ensure that initial residents will not live in unserviced and isolating building sites. Does it get the balance right between supporting initial residents and enabling developers the flexibility they need to build and grow the town?

In this section no specific protection is given to initial residents from the impacts of ongoing development work. We would like to add:

Planning applications should set out:

Detail of working practices that will minimise the impacts of noise, dust, odour and any other nuisance caused during development/construction.

4. Contact Us

If you would like to engage with us further to develop any of the suggestions we have raised in this response, or require any further information on the views expressed, please contact:

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