

Report of^[x1]: Head of City Development

To^[x2]: City Executive Board

Date^[x3]: 11 June 2008



Item No^[EM4]:

Title of Report ^[x5]: Weston Otmoor Eco-Town consultation



Summary and Recommendations



Purpose of report^[x6]: To propose the response the City Council should make to the Government consultation on the potential for an eco-town at ston Otmoor. 


Key decision^[x7]: No

Board Member^[x8]: Councillor Cook and Turner

Report Approved by:



Jeremy Thomas – Legal and Democratic Services
Sarah Fogden – Financial Services

 **Policy Framework:** More housing, better housing for all.



Recommendations^[x9]:

That the City Executive Board responds to the Government consultation by stating that:

1. The City Council warmly supports the eco-town proposal at Weston Otmoor, providing that:



The development includes the proposed investment in rail infrastructure, both the fast line to Oxford and the extra route from Oxford to London via Bicester, and

3. The extra housing at the eco-town is additional to and does not undermine the Government's support of the planned urban extension South of Grenoble Road, and
4. At least 35% of the houses should be affordable and available for rent with county-wide nomination rights.

BACKGROUND

1. The consultation on potential eco-towns was launched on 3 April. A shortlist of 15 proposals in England was announced that will be subject to further assessment, and on which views are sought. These 15 were drawn from 57 submissions, many of which failed as they did not meet one or more criteria set out in the prospectus¹ issued in July 2007 alongside the Housing Green Paper, or were considered undeliverable or not ambitious enough. The consultation extends until 30 June 2008.
2. Views are sought on:
 - The way the concept has been developed and the benefits eco-towns can offer.
 - How particular features or innovative approaches can be delivered.
 - The 15 proposals for eco-towns that are going forward for further assessment.
3. Three proposals in the South East are on the shortlist:
 - Bordon-Whitehill (East Hampshire DC) - up to 5,500 homes.
 - Ford (Arun DC) 5,000 houses plus a 30ha economic hub.
 - Weston Otmoor (Cherwell DC) 10-15,000 houses.

Eco-Town Process

4. An eco-towns Challenge Panel of experts in planning, climate change, energy and transport has been established to work with developers on their proposals. A new Planning Policy Statement (PPS) on eco-towns has also been announced and will be issued for consultation in July along with a sustainability appraisal of the proposals. The final list of eco-town proposals will be announced at the end of 2008 and published alongside the final PPS.
5. Any proposal will need a planning application to be considered by the local planning authority against development plan policies and other material considerations. However, the potential for proposals

to be brought forward through New Towns legislation is not ruled out entirely. Of course, most development plans (local and regional) have not considered or provided for these proposals.

6. Government sees the new PPS providing the framework in which decisions will be taken (especially where development plan is out of date or silent on the issue), and in which local development frameworks and review of Regional Spatial Strategies will be undertaken. The PPS could effectively supersede and override local and regional plan-making to date, for example where a location has not previously been considered, or where it has been considered and rejected as part of LDF or RSS preparation and testing.

Views of SEERA on Weston Otmoor

7. This proposal is not supported by the local authority. The Panel did not recommend any increase in the allocation for Cherwell District Council following the Examination in Public.
8. The priorities for the Central Oxfordshire sub regional strategy lie to the northern part of the sub region, with particular emphasis given on supporting the continued development of Bicester. The scale of the proposal and its proximity to Bicester is therefore likely to be inconsistent with the spatial strategy. Once again, there is a strong likelihood that the proposal would undermine our ability to deliver the agreed spatial and economic priorities for the sub-region. CLG has committed funds to examine the social and economic implications of the proposal on adjoining settlements.

Officer Comment

9. The process by which the eco-towns initiative has developed is a major concern for many being consulted. It is clear that the proposals are being taken forward outside of the main planning system. This means that the normal process of consultation and independent examination is being by-passed.
10. The proposed PPS on eco-towns will be the means that the Government will use to impose national policy. It contrasts sharply with the independent testing of the proposals contained in the draft South East Plan. There are some who are considering a legal challenge to the process. At the same time, the adoption of this process brings with it a helpful clarity, from the City's perspective, that the eco-town is *additional* to the numbers in the South East Plan for the Central Oxfordshire sub-region, and is therefore *additional* to the proposed urban extension South of Grenoble Road (see para. 15).
11. In the context of Oxford, the City Council sought to argue at the Examination into the South East Plan that the draft Plan had

woefully ignored the very substantial housing needs of the City. The eco-town consultation document refers to the Housing Green Paper identifying that housing numbers in some plans are not high enough and the need for partial reviews of RSSs to include numbers consistent with government aims for 240,000 new homes per annum by 2016. The housing proposed in eco-towns will count towards these more stretching targets, and hence are very likely to be in addition to the allocations in the draft South East Plan.

12. 15,000 houses at Weston Otmoor, within a 6 minute rail journey time from Oxford will make a substantial contribution to the housing needs of the City. In overall terms it is suggested that the eco-town proposal should be warmly supported.
13. However if the proposal is going to make such a contribution to the City's social and economic needs it is suggested that there are a few pre-requisites:
14. The development will need to include the proposed investment in rail infrastructure, both the fast line to Oxford and the extra route from Oxford to London via Bicester. The development consortium has sought to allay concerns that its proposals will increase congestion on the A34 by proposing to make a substantial contribution to investment in the East-West rail link from Oxford to Milton Keynes.
15. The extra housing at the eco-town is additional to and does not undermine the Government's support of the planned urban extension South of Grenoble Road. The urban extension is the best and most sustainable location to provide new housing to meet the City's needs and help in the much needed regeneration of Blackbird Leys and Greater Leys. The eco-town must not be viewed as an alternative.
16. At least 35% of the houses as the eco-town should be affordable with county-wide nomination rights. Indeed, it would be better if the level of affordable housing was at 50%, in line with Oxford City's Affordable Housing SPD, though given the substantial investment in infrastructure required for the eco-town, it is accepted that this may not be financially viable. For the new housing to make the necessary contribution to the City's needs it will be crucial that the City Council, along with other districts in Oxfordshire, has nomination rights to offer the housing to people on its housing waiting list. Within the affordable housing provided, we see some scope for shared ownership housing, but the main emphasis should be on social rented housing.
17. It is also important that the range of housing to be provided is not just for social rent and the private market but also intermediate and key worker housing.

Recommendations

1 That the City Executive Board responds to the Government consultation by stating that:

- The City Council warmly supports the eco-town proposal at Weston Otmoor, providing that:
 1. The development includes the proposed investment in rail infrastructure, both the fast line to Oxford and the extra route from Oxford to London via Bicester
 2. The extra housing at the eco-town is additional to and does not undermine the Government's support of the planned urban extension South of Grenoble Road, and
 3. At least 35% of the houses should be affordable and available for rent with county-wide nomination rights.

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Background papers_[x10]: None

