

- In parallel with your announcement of the Eco Towns programme, and the submission of the Weston Otmoor bid, my Council has been progressing its Local Development Framework. It should be clear that the eco-towns programme has created serious problems for our LDF work (difficult process and planning strategy questions plus diversion of resources). Effectively my Council feels its scope for proper Local Planning Authority choice is being severely compromised. This applies even if, as it now appears is being suggested (Progress Report Paras 3.8/9), the Eco Town may be taken as counting towards SE Plan housing requirements.
- Clearly the relationship between promotion of any eco “proposal” and meeting housing requirements in the SE Plan through an LDF is a matter that needs clarification in light of the statement in the Progress Report (Para 3.8; “where the LDF has not made provision for an eco town and the plan is up to date, the LA may refuse the application on grounds that it has already provided for all the housing that is needed in a plan that has been found sound by the Planning Inspectorate”). There are clearly important timing and procedural issues here. This is a matter that we would like to discuss further with you and CLG/Government Office for the SE officials.
- Our LDF Core Strategy has to accommodate significant housing growth arising from SE Plan requirements. That will require 3 - 4 major urban extensions at Banbury and Bicester (our main urban areas). We are currently consulting on “Housing Options” (a paper that identifies the reasonable alternative locations for these urban extensions). I have provided a copy of our consultation paper to Henry and your consultants Scott Wilson.
- From our LDF work it is clear that Banbury is most heavily constrained in terms of development options. Bicester presents less in the way of fundamental constraints and there are therefore more choices about reasonable options for urban extensions. It is also of note that there are significant areas of MOD land ownership around Bicester. These areas cannot currently be taken as available for development, but there has been long running discussion about their future.
- As a result of our analysis of growth options for Bicester we have provided your consultants Scott Wilson with information (copy attached) that suggests that an alternative to Weston Otmoor, in the form of an accelerated growth trajectory for Bicester, should be subject to sustainability appraisal. The alternative is suggested as a pattern of growth incorporating a 5000 home “eco-community”, (with a mix of residential and employment uses well connected to the transport opportunities Bicester offers), on the western side of the town. Acceleration of the planned development of Bicester as a growth location would be an effective contribution to meeting sub regional housing pressures around Oxford. The development could be planned to meet all of the Eco Town standards you have set out in your Progress Report and would develop in parallel with, and contribute to, established plans to enhance the east west rail scheme. I would also anticipate opportunities to look at further enhancements of rail services to Oxford and improvements to J9 of the M40.
- It is also important to recognise that planning and implementation of this “eco-community” idea would require significant further work by Government and local councils in partnership. This would involve strong Government policy support that this land is only available for release for development that meets eco-town standards. We would need to work together on detailed survey work, creation of a site planning and design framework and development of infrastructure plans. In addition it will be essential, just as with the Eco Towns, that agreement is reached with the landowners on planning obligations capable of delivering the development to the required standard. We feel that the scale and form of an eco-community is such that it might be

possible to manage delivery through the normal planning application and agreement process. This might mean that a special delivery body would not be needed, albeit funding and Government agency resource support would be essential. I would wish to explore with you all available options in this respect, and am particularly interested in any special mechanisms that might be used by Government working with the local planning authority, to ensure a high level of land value capture and to control the quality of the development.

- It should also be stressed that the willingness of landowners to co operate in this approach to development cannot be guaranteed at this stage.
- In light of current economic conditions it is also necessary to assume that the speed at which a new scheme might be prepared and implemented will be slower than might ideally be the case. Doubtless this consideration also applies to the eco-towns. Indeed it may be a more severe effect due to the scale and momentum of development and the level of pump priming investment involved.

I am happy for this letter to be used in public as an explanation of my Council's position and approach to you on alternatives to Weston Otmoor.

However I must caveat all I say by adding that; whilst it is clear that from my statements above that CDC would favour the development of a Bicester "eco-community" over Weston Otmoor Eco Town, the Council remains unconvinced that Government has yet made a proper strategic planning case for locating additional housing growth in Cherwell District. All comments in this letter are therefore without prejudice to our overall view that any strategic planning decision about additional growth locations should be via the normal regional/development plan process.

I look forward to your response and hope you will be able to confirm that you will seriously consider this alternative as part of the Sustainability Appraisal for Eco-Towns.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these suggestions further in due course.

Yours sincerely



Councillor Barry Wood
Leader Cherwell District Council

Attachments:

1. CDC LDF Consultation Paper on Housing Options
2. CDC submission to Scott Wilson for Sustainability Appraisal

Copies to:

Henry Cleary DCLG
Cllr K Mitchell Leader Oxfordshire County Council