

Dr James Johnston
Clerk to the Public Petitions Committee
The Scottish Parliament
TG.01
Parliament Headquarters
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

9 March 2006

Dear James

Consideration of Petition PE907

Thank you for consulting the Royal Town Planning Institute regarding the issues raised in Petition PE903. We are pleased to respond to the Public Petition Committee's request for comments on this petition, which raises important questions concerning the role of planning policy and practice in the encouragement of ecovillages.

The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) is the UK body chartered to represent the planning profession and offers these comments from the point of view of a diverse and policy neutral professional body committed to supporting devolved government in Scotland. The Institute has 1900 members in Scotland working across all sectors of central government, local government, government agencies, the voluntary sector, private consultancy, the development industry and academia. Since devolution, the Institute has empowered its RTPI in Scotland Office, together with its Scottish Executive Committee, with the responsibility for working with government and public bodies generally for the improvement of the planning system in Scotland. This is in accordance with its charter obligation to work for the public interest.

The RTPI supports the general aims of ecovillages, as set out in the background information to the Petition, of achieving energy efficient and low-impact lifestyles. We also agree with the need to apply principles of ecological design, energy efficiency, social cohesion and sustainable development in the provision of new affordable housing in rural as well as in urban areas. However, we have reservations concerning the need for a Scottish Planning Policy specifically

addressing ecovillages and consider that progress on these issues will require actions across a number of areas.

The Institute considers that the concerns raised by this petition may need to be addressed through a number of policy areas relating to sustainable building design, small scale renewable energy generation, social housing policies and green travel plans. We note the current work to set national sustainability standards for new housing through the introduction of a Code for Sustainable Homes and a growing number of examples of best practice such as the Hockerton Housing Project in Nottinghamshire, which seeks to implement sustainable building design and to encourage other similar community projects. Such examples may provide models for future developments.

The Institute does not consider that it would be appropriate to produce a separate Scottish Planning Policy dedicated solely to ecovillages. SPPs are designed to provide overarching statements of Scottish Executive policy on nationally important land use and other planning matters, supported where appropriate by locational frameworks. As noted by the background material to the Petition, there are a number of existing SPPs that are relevant to the consideration of ecovillages.

SPP3: *Planning for Housing* remains the first point of reference on the general policy for housing and whilst ecovillages are not directly addressed or mentioned in this policy document, the SPP does advance policy in respect of small-scale rural housing developments. The overall message of SPP3 is that there is considerable scope for allowing more housing developments of a small-scale nature and that this should be expressed in development plans, either as part of general settlement policy or as a separate sub-set on rural housing policy. The SPP notes that one option is for development plans in areas with a known shortage of affordable housing to identify small-scale sites that are well integrated and close to services, perhaps as components of mixed-use sites. The SPP also refers to the work of the Forestry Commission Scotland in exploring the potential to sell land to registered social landlords for the purposes of building affordable social housing in rural areas and to promote the use of sustainably produced timber and timber products as part of the process.

The Institute considers that it may be more appropriate to consider the need for further guidance and information on best practice in relation to the provision of sustainable building design through building regulations and through updates to Planning Advice Notes such as PAN 74 on Affordable Housing and Pan 72 on Housing in the Countryside. Issues surrounding ecovillages, as discussed in the background papers to the Petition, embrace a wide array of public policy areas, including policies which lie outside the planning system in relation to building standards, housing policy, social housing, community land ownership and governance. This suggests that any support for ecovillages will need to embrace a wider policy arena than planning policy *per se* and involve a number of public

agencies such as Communities Scotland with regard to policies on social housing provision and the Forestry Commission in relation to land availability in rural areas. With regard to individual planning decisions it should be noted that whilst these are made with reference to the local plan they will be based on a number of material considerations and on the results of consultations with a wide range of bodies and community interests.

The Institute trusts that these comments are of assistance and has no objection to its comments being made available to the public in the usual way. Should you wish any clarification please do not hesitate to contact me at the RTPi Scotland, Edinburgh office: 57 Melville Street Edinburgh, EH3 7HL phone: 0131 226 1959, email: veronica.burbridge@rtpi.org.uk

Yours sincerely

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