

DRAFT ECO-TOWNS PLANNING POLICY STATEMENT RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION

**A response by the Royal Town Planning Institute and the Chartered Institute of Housing
to the Department of Communities and Local Government consultation
30 April 2009**



RTPI

mediation of space · making of place

RTPI, 41 Botolph Lane, London EC3R 8DL,
A charity registered in England (262865) and Scotland (SC 037841)
Contact: [Rynd Smith](#), Director Policy and Partnerships
Web: www.rtpi.org.uk

Contact: [Rebecca Coates](#), England Policy Officer
Web: www.rtpi.org.uk

CIH, Octavia House, Westwood Way, Coventry CV4 8JP

Contact: [Abigail Davis](#), Head of Policy
Web: www.cih.org

Contact: [Jamie Ewing](#), Policy Officer
Web: www.cih.org

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1. Introduction

The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) is the leading professional body for spatial planners in the United Kingdom. It is a charity with the purpose to develop the art and science of town planning for the benefit of the public as a whole. It has over 22,000 members who serve in government, local government and as advisors in the private sector.

The Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) is the professional body for people involved in housing and communities. We are a registered charity and not-for-profit organisation. We have a diverse and growing membership of over 22,000 people – both in the public and private sectors – living and working in over 20 countries on five continents across the world. We exist to maximise the contribution that housing professionals make to the wellbeing of communities.

This document responds to the Department for Communities and Local Government consultation on the draft Planning Policy Statement (PPS) for Eco-Towns.

The response has been formed drawing together internal consultations and the results of meetings with members of the RTPI and the CIH, including formal debates within the via a Policy Network Forum convened through the RTPI-CIH Planning for Housing Network¹, the RTPI South West Region, and the representative body of the RTPI membership as a whole.

¹ 30th Jan 2009

2. Response in Principle

The RTPI and the CIH welcome the draft PPS and the publication of the evaluation material on the 15 short listed proposals as useful clarification of exactly what the Government is expecting to see in a new settlement proposal given the status of an 'eco-town'. At the same time, we have concerns about the process by which the CLG is seeking to drive the initiative forward which have not been entirely answered by this current consultation, especially the relationship between eco-towns and the emerging development plan context.

When the RTPI was consulted about the eco-towns programme and proposals in the spring and summer of 2008, members expressed a number of key concerns:

- Members were concerned that eco-towns of the scale proposed (particularly as suggested by a substantial volume of bids emerging at the smaller end of the anticipated size range) would find it difficult to become free-standing settlements. Without care in implementation, bids could significantly add to trip generation and carbon emissions as people access services and employment elsewhere.
- The relative cost-benefits of the substantial development of new infrastructures necessary to serve eco-towns, as against the augmentation of existing infrastructures to serve sustainable expansions to existing urban areas must be identified and considered.
- Where evidence suggests that eco-town servicing would offer low cost-benefits and environmental benefits when compared with other housing delivery models, on balance, an Eco Town should not proceed.
- The emergence of Eco Towns as a national initiative that was not supported by national level or development plan policy had led to a worrying disconnect between community aspirations, community support and housing delivery, making the programme a potential focus for conflict, where housing delivery should in fact be prioritising the achievement of community support and the reduction of conflict.
- This in turn suggested that Eco Town delivery must be focused through the development plan, to ensure strong community involvement, the efficient delivery of infrastructure and housing market certainty.

It is therefore reassuring to note that the draft PPS on Eco Towns undertakes two tasks:

- It seeks to set out the standards to guide Eco Towns emerging from the programme to date.
- However, more significantly, it frames means whereby Eco Towns can be brought forward via the development plan process.

Current market conditions and the outcome of the SEA processes undertaken in association with the development of this draft PPS suggest that only very limited volumes of housing will emerge from the programme in the short term. Again, this places a strong emphasis on:

- The delivery of appropriate new settlement proposals through the development plan system; and
- ongoing commitment to secure housing delivery through the expansion of existing settlements.

In July 2008, the RTPI made the following recommendations to CLG in its response to the then consultation:

Recommendations

Spatial sustainability

- Government should ensure that the locations of existing 'bid for' eco towns are truly spatially sustainable through sustainability appraisal: many might not be.
- Scope for new and better locations to come forward must be retained: a bid programme is not necessarily the best means of achieving this.
- The Eco Towns principles should be embodied in a PPS and applied to new residential development.
- Wider work on the greening of suburbs should be carried out as a high priority.

Post Draft PPS Response

- The RTPI is satisfied that a sustainability appraisal has been undertaken on the draft eco-towns PPS 'which focuses on the eco-towns concept and the principles and standards governing their delivery'². This has resulted in a more robust eco-towns concept and set of standards, in particular for site selection. In addition, the government's commitment to reduce carbon emissions through all housing and development is welcomed in addition to the standards set out in the eco-towns PPS.

The Plan-led System

- Deliver Eco Towns and Eco Quarters through the development plan system.

Post Draft PPS Response

- Fundamental to the democratic planning process is the integration of the eco-towns programme in the plan-led system to identify land for housing growth, infrastructure and community facilities. The RTPI and the CIH therefore welcome the emphasis provided in the draft on new Eco Towns coming forward through the development plan system. We request that the final PPS provides clarification around the relationship of the initial Eco Towns programme to the planning system, to ensure that these processes are delivered through the development plan process.

Housing need and market support

- Government should work through the new Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) to develop a new housing investment package that will stimulate the delivery of social and sub-market tenure housing within market tenure development.
- There could be value in public investment in assured shorthold sub market lease and shared equity models, enabling housing to be re-assigned to the private sector or sold to tenants/equity shareholders as economic conditions improve, rendering a return to the public purse.

² draft eco-towns PPS, 2008, Page 5.

Post Draft PPS Response

- The joint arrangements between the CLG and the HCA proposed in the draft PPS and more broadly already implemented are welcomed by the RTPI. This will ensure there is integration between planning and delivery of sustainable communities through the wider housing programme.

Performance based standards

The RTPI and the CIH are of the view that performance based standards would benefit both LPAs and the future proofing of the PPS given that both technology and practice is likely to change over the anticipated life of a PPS. We propose that the eco-towns PPS should divide the standards between 'objectives to be met' and 'means of implementation'. Under this model, the objectives should be met by a proposal, whilst providing the proponent and the LPA with flexibility about the means of implementation, so as long as they can demonstrate that objectives are met. This approach ensures that the applicant and the LPA focus on the performance to be achieved by the development, recognising that the techniques underpinning that performance are likely to change with time.

3. Response to Consultation Questions:

The following section provides the RTPI and CIH response to specific questions set out in the consultation document:

Question 1: Does the draft PPS provide sufficient guidance on the consideration of eco-towns through the plan making process?

In the remainder of this response, the RTPI and CIH refer to 'programme eco-towns' as eco-towns emerging from the bid process developed by the government's own eco-towns programme and 'future eco-towns' as eco-towns emerging outside the bid process developed by government, but to which the proposed PPS standards could apply.

The RTPI and CIH welcome the inclusion of a capacity for future eco-towns to emerge through the LDF process. However; we believe it is important for the CLG to outline the how the intended timing of programme eco-towns (site-specific proposals emerging from the current eco-towns programme) will fit within the progression of the relevant planning authority LDF. It will be important for planning authorities to understand whether the selected programme eco-town(s) are to be regarded as an exemplar or 'the norm' for future residential planning. The inclusion of future eco-towns, being considered through the development plan system is supported by the Institutes.

While the draft PPS pledges programme eco-towns will be subject to the normal planning application process, the RTPI and CIH are concerned that this process is not well enough defined to demonstrate how this will be achieved.

Where programme eco-town proposals are considered outside of the development plan process, the present ad-hoc approach is not supported by the Institutes and the professions are concerned that the top-down approach to the designation of the programme eco-towns, led by government, undermines the role of the planning system.

On the whole, the RTPI and CIH are concerned that the eco-towns programme and the wider PPS approach to future eco-towns still seeks to deliver new towns, insufficiently recognising that options to extend existing towns where infrastructure and services are available will often provide the greenest growth outcomes, whilst also addressing community views about the appropriateness of location and the need for new services and facilities. There are central issues here too around who provides the up-front infrastructure for eco-towns, given that this needs to be in place before a new town can function.

Turning to the current programme eco-towns proposals, the RTPI and CIH reiterate their view that, in current economic circumstances, many of these are likely to be delayed or not to come forward at all. Many of the proposed sites are greenfield sites in rural areas. Some of them are quite remote from other settlements. This raises questions over how far they adhere to the three necessary components of sustainability – social, economic and environmental.

The RTPI has proposed and again reiterates that the government needs to consider eco-quarters in cities and major towns and the greening of the suburbs, as well as eco-villages for our rural settlements, in addition to the current programme or future eco-towns. There should be pilots, to test the standards and locations prior to extending the measures across all new development.

These may include one or possibly two genuine new eco-towns, alongside urban villages; other urban extensions and brownfield regeneration initiatives; expanded rural market towns and larger villages, and smaller scale rural developments. These would come forward within the planning system. The RTPI and CIH are of the view that as they stand, the current eco-town proposals have too narrow a focus.

Question 2: Are the locational principles sufficiently clear & workable?

There was general agreement between members that the document does not set out clear locational principles and that no high-level principle had emerged, beyond that sites could in fact be proposed. This in turn leads to locational principles that read off as being expedient responses to the specific sites that emerged earlier in the programme's life. To some extent, the locational policy that is emerging now can be read as providing an ex post facto justification for locations that arose in the absence of clear guiding principles in policy.

In addition, it is not clear to what extent eco-towns are expected to be self-contained. While the draft PPS refers to eco-towns being 'separate and distinct, but well linked to higher order centres' (see section 2.1), it is unclear as to what constitutes such a centre. The Institutes caution that unless significant local employment opportunities are to be provided, the prospect of an eco-town being distinct and self-contained is remote.

Question 3: Do the overall standards proposed achieve a viable eco-towns concept?

The package of initially aspirational standards in the draft is certainly laudable in terms of seeking more sustainable urban development than that which has been achieved in the past. Few could argue with the principles behind these standards, in theory. However, it is impossible to assess at this stage whether or not they constitute a 'viable' basis for such new settlement development. Testing will surely be needed through experience in practice, including progress through the planning application and implementation systems.

The RTPI and CIH remains concerned that the size of the proposed eco-towns would lead to unsustainable land-use patterns – that is, where the population is too small to warrant significant investment in infrastructure, services and employment to support the local community. Relative to the overall housing numbers required over the next twenty years, the Institutes take the view that eco-towns are unlikely to make a significant difference to the housing shortage. For this reason, we believe that the general principles behind eco-towns should be incorporated across the whole range of both urban and rural planning.

Where individual eco towns do proceed, it will be important to ensure that their relationship with existing settlements, transport and economic activity is very clear, or alternatively, that provision is made for their additional growth to the scale necessary to support sustainable infrastructures and to attract new economic activity.

RTPI and CIH members have raised concerns that the environmental standards set out in the draft PPS may be obsolete by the time any such development would occur. Progress since the release of the eco towns consultation draft on zero carbon standards for dwellings and non domestic buildings point to a rapidly moving technical frontier and the need to ensure that a PPS does not 'fossilise' standards that in three or five years time will not represent the frontier of viable practice. This poses significant challenges and raises the legitimacy of static standards. The Institutes suggest that a range of standards be incorporated into the PPS, increasing environmental

measures as time passes. This could be in the form of flexible guidance in lieu of prescriptive standards.

The RTPI and CIH suggest that stipulations for zero carbon meant little to the general public and that widening awareness of zero carbon will be important within other professions if the government is looking to successfully implement its programme. One suggestion from our members is that if the private sector developed the measures in partnership with government on developing zero-carbon measures, the skills involved would be more widespread and consequently the whole process would be result in cost savings.

Eco-standards

Question 4.1 Do you consider that the standards provide a clear basis on which to make decisions on planning applications for eco-towns?

The issue about the proposed 'eco-town standards' is not whether they are, in principle, a sound aspiration for new settlement development, but rather whether they will be 'bought into' by the many decision-making bodies and individuals outside the planning system who will be involved in progressing each scheme. Different bodies still have very different agendas.

There is also the serious possibility that LPAs might accept reduced standards under pressure from eco-town developers, particularly given the current economic climate. As a crude 'template' against which to assess such an application the package appears reasonable.

Question 4.2 Do you consider that the cost of implementing the standards will undermine the viability of eco-towns?

There needs to be guidance set out for applicants and developers that provides a range of measures to reach the strict standards outlined in the PPS as many members views were that unless major public sector funding was allocated, economic considerations would threaten these high standards. It is inevitable that cost will mean that some standards will not be reached. The question for government and the community is how much of such a 'shortfall' is to be acceptable before the whole concept becomes 'non-viable' and at what stage in the approval process or even the implementation process might this have to be judged? Experience with schemes such the new settlement of Cranbrook in East Devon, suggests that front-loading of infrastructure costs will be a big issue for LPAs and developers.

Question 4.3 Are there any standards that you feel are missing? (that are not covered in other Government policy or guidance)

Bearing in mind what is said in the introduction of the consultation document about the overall context being provided by all of the other PPSs, the RTPI and CIH believe that the standards cover an appropriate range of sustainability considerations without reiterating other policy or guidance. The exception to this principle must be the lack of weight accorded to transport. It will be important to include transport and transport emissions as a major contributor to emissions analysis for the purposes of the definition of zero carbon development as set out in the draft PPS:

*The definition of zero carbon in eco-towns is that over a year the net carbon dioxide emissions from all energy use within the buildings on the development are zero or below.*³

By focusing on the buildings, the Institutes are concerned that the result will lead to eco-housing, served by eco social infrastructures rather than eco-towns per se. For the eco-towns concept to be credible there needs to be a meaningful zero carbon definition that includes transport assumptions, particularly about journeys to work, together with ongoing monitoring/corrective actions. This approach would provide some flexibility should initial assumptions not turn out to have been responded to by the emerging development and its social, economic and environmental characteristics.

Question 4.4 Are any of the standards not essential?

The RTPI and CIH are of the view that all of the proposed standards are considered essential at this stage, but ongoing monitoring should evaluate their relevance and enable them to be developed or changed.

Question 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 calculation of net emissions clearly in a way that avoids perverse incentives and loopholes? Is this standard the most cost effective way to do this?

As stated in earlier responses, the RTPI and CIH are convinced that transport and embodied energy should be taken into account when assessing carbon in development. We call for a more genuinely integrated definition of zero carbon for use in assessing eco towns proposals, which can also inform ongoing monitoring and management processes that will support the inhabitants' understanding whether they have achieved zero carbon lifestyles and the town in assessing whether it is a zero carbon settlement. Without such information, the managers and populations of eco-towns could not be expected to make the right decisions.

The overall zero carbon/net emissions requirements will involve complex calculations of which there is currently limited experience, including the use of proxy inputs and assumptions. Again, experience in practice will be required to properly answer this question. The emphasis at this stage should be on finding real and attractive incentives in order encourage everyone to buy into the eco development concept rather than being concerned about 'perverse incentives and loopholes'.

LPAs generally, and certainly those involved in assessing eco-town proposals, will need access to definitive advice and support which goes beyond what is in the draft PPS, such as that gradually being developed by the Centre for Sustainable Energy in Bristol. The HCA also has an important role in supporting energy efficient housing and the eco-towns programme.

A significant step-change was also noted between Code for Sustainable Homes level 4 and level 6 and we support this important proposal as an important and essential contribution to reducing carbon emissions in the built environment.

³ From draft PPS paragraph 4.3

Question 4.6 The climate change adaptation standard, alongside existing planning guidance, aims to ensure that eco-towns will be more future- proof. Is it sufficiently clear and workable?

Climate 'future proofing' is another laudable aspiration. What is set out is probably as clear as current practice experience allows. Is it the intention that eco-towns should be more future-proofed than 'normal' new developments? Surely such proofing should now be fundamental to all development if it is to be considered 'sustainable'? A handful of isolated 'future-proofed' eco-towns would serve little real purpose if society absorbs currently predictable and avoidable future costs in other 'non eco town' locations.

Question 4.7 Should the PPS be more prescriptive than set out in paragraph 4.9(e) in relation to energy efficiency? Do you agree that 70 per cent is an appropriate level of carbon mitigation through on-site means?

It is difficult to see how 4.9(e) could be more prescriptive at this time given the limited practice experience as yet to know whether or not 70% is an appropriate level for such things. Additionally, the Institutes again suggest that standards should apply to housing generally, not just to the new houses in eco-towns.

In addition, the Institutes are of the view that performance based standards would benefit both the LPA and the future proofing of the PPS given that both technology and practice is likely to rapidly change over the coming years. The RTPI and CIH propose that the eco-towns PPS should divide the standards between 'objectives to be met' and 'means of implementation'. In this scenario, the objectives should be met while providing the proponent and the LPA with flexibility about the means of implementation, so as long as they can demonstrate that objectives will be met.

Question 4.8 Is this employment standard sufficiently clear and workable?

The proposed 'standard' is clear enough as stated, but assessment of this in practice would be very difficult. For example, the government would need to decide what the minimum acceptable level of 'unsustainable commuter trips' is; what facilities to support job creation in eco-towns are required; and how will LPAs actually measure adherence to the standard of 'at least one employment opportunity per new dwelling easily reached by sustainable means'. This issue links to the concern that we have expressed about the incorporation of transport into the zero carbon definition, in question 4.5 above.

For eco-towns to be sustainable, they must be socially and economically diverse in terms of their population and employment characteristics by avoiding economic dependence on small number of employers/limited pool of skills in the population.

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

The principle of maximising the use of 'sustainable transport', as opposed to the private car, is supported however; there was general agreement amongst members that this standard was neither clear nor workable. The integration of eco-towns with the wider community could not be achieved without shared transport; this could be achieved in existing urban areas but not in new towns. Much is made in the draft of the requirement for 'travel plans' but the Institutes are concerned that such documents could not be produced in advance without knowing who the

transport providers, are going to be, as well as considering the location of employment and housing.

As highlighted in our response to question 4.5 above, we are convinced that transport and embodied energy should be taken into account when assessing carbon in development as a genuine integrated approach to zero carbon.

There is also the issue of habits being formed whilst waiting for access to sustainable transport to emerge: if people already owned cars by the time a public transport system was in place, then the likelihood of them using alternatives to private vehicles would be significantly reduced, in turn reducing the forward economic viability of public transport.

Question 4.10 The local services standard allows flexibility to reflect existing provision and the size of the development. Does it cover the essential services which will be needed in eco-towns?

The implementation of an eco towns programme will place a strong emphasis on the development of planning skills that have not been in strong demand since the end of the new towns programme. These skills will support the development of integrated social facility plans for new settlements. Strong public sector led mechanisms of the kind operated in the new towns are going to be needed if a good level of service is to be ensured at all stages of development across the wide range of local services (listed in paragraph 4.17 of the draft PPS).

Question 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?

While these aspirations are supported, many of which LPA's should already be working towards as the relevant standards are already incorporated in EU and UK law the RTPi and CIH are concerned about the deliverability. LPAs dealing with particular eco-town proposals (or any other new development), are going to be best able to judge whether, in their experience, these standards are deliverable. That being said, the density of green space could be maintained if designed in the right way, and as long as it is not subsequently built on.

Question 4.12 The water and flood risk standards aim to ensure that eco-town developments are planned so that they will minimise water use and flood risk, and raise quality. Are the standards proposed clear and deliverable?

The proposed standards are laudable and clearly set out. Again, the Institutes suggest that these standards should now be sought by all LPAs in any major new development. Particular LPAs will be best able to judge, in the particular local circumstances, whether the standards are deliverable and depending on the location, may need to be different depending on weather patterns. The Environment Agency will be a key source of information and support for LPAs in developing local initiatives. We suggest that these standards would need to be made more flexible over time to encompass new technology and changing rainfall/climate patterns.

Question 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?

Managing waste effectively is now vitally important for any community and, as such, the requirement for a 'sustainable waste and resources plan' appears sensible. The Institutes suggest that the government need to consider how much practical experience is currently available to produce such a plan and to enable a LPA to assess it. In addition, while there was a proposal for converting the waste from eco-towns into energy, they might actually need to import waste in order to make it viable, thus demonstrating that the scale of eco-towns was not being adequately planned for.

Question 4.14 The transition and development standard should ensure that initial residents will not live in un-serviced and isolated 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?

The RTPi and CIH are of the view that the important issue is that there is a mechanism in place to implement the eco-town master plan. This is what a LPA should always have in place for a significant new development or cluster of developments. Providing the required infrastructure and services and ensuring that they are in place and up and running as new housing is occupied has always been difficult to achieve. Resolving this difficulty suggests either a 'front end loaded' infrastructure and service investment model, which in turn tends to suggest the development of larger settlements than those emerging from the eco towns programme, or a model that builds on the infrastructure capacity of an existing settlement. This again emphasises the RTPi's previous comments made around the desirability of detached isolated eco-towns. There needs to be a much more varied mix of investment and it was suggested from our members that models of co-investment might be examined.

Question 4.15 The community and governance standards attempt to ensure that eco-towns will be successful communities, that residents will have a say in how the town is run and that standards are maintained. Is this standard clear and workable?

The RTPi and CIH believe that this section requires significantly more detail than is currently provided. It also poses a challenge around the local governance of existing towns and suburbs, where the measures proposed could have some applicability, but run counter to the tendency by local government to concentrate service delivery. The experience of LPAs connecting with communities about their possible changes or measures to improve their lives and places should not be under-estimated.

It is vital that there is an ongoing sustainable governance model for eco-towns, which enables them to integrate within existing local government service and maintenance programmes for which the residents will pay Council Tax and that are democratically accountable through local elections. There are likely to be differences in the levels of service provided in eco-towns when compared with existing communities. It will be important that ongoing discussions between eco-towns' managers and LPAs about the design (and costs) of services are do not reduce the high eco-standards. In due course, means of rolling out high eco standard services to the parts of a local authority area outside an eco-town governance framework may well need to be investigated.

Sustainability Appraisal, Habitats Regulations Assessment and Impact Assessment.

The Institutes are of the view that government has put too much emphasis on negative impacts rather than valuing positive outcomes in these assessments. We are in agreement with the conclusion that whilst the draft PSS broadly meets sustainability criteria, there are still important outstanding issues to be addressed.

The evaluation of each of the 15 shortlisted 'locations' appears to have been carried out in a systematic manner, though time and resources have affected the depth into which each of these has been able to go. In view of the very demanding 'green' criteria/standards that the Government now appears to be setting, it is probably not surprising that only one of the proposals, Rackheath (Norwich) falls within the top 'Band A , locations that are generally suitable for an eco-town', category.