

COUNTY COUNCIL - GARTREE NEWS ECO-TOWN PLAN NOT SELECTED

The Government published the eco-town Planning Policy Statement (PPS) on 16 July. This also included the locations for the first wave of eco-towns, and Pennbury, the Co-op's proposed 15,000 home new town, between Great Glen and Stoughton, was not included.

The four locations selected for eco-town status were: Whitehill-Bordon (East Hampshire), Rackheath, (Norfolk), North-West Bicester (Oxfordshire) and St Austell (Cornwall). The common factor, which played a major role in their selection, was that they all had some support from their local councils.

None of these four locations had high profile campaigns opposing them. Indeed two of these locations (Rackheath and NW Bicester) were not on the shortlist of 15 announced in April 2008, but were substitutes – Rackheath for Coltishall, where a new prison for sex offenders is awaiting planning permission; and NW Bicester for Weston-Otmoor which did not have local council support nor, like Pennbury, the potential to meet the sustainability and deliverability requirements for successful development as an eco-town at this time.

So does this mean the Leicestershire eco-town is dead and buried? Has the CASSET campaign won? The answer is – probably! I'll try to describe why the Co-op's eco-town is extremely unlikely to go ahead.

Although the Government has not included Pennbury in the first wave of eco-towns, they have proposed a second wave of up to 6 more sites – but these have to now go through the normal, local planning process, and may include new sites. In practical terms, it is highly unlikely that the Co-op's plans could progress, in their entirety, through the normal planning process without re-igniting public opposition, not least from planners at County Hall, who opposed the location due to massive problems with transport infrastructure and the consequent lack of employment prospects.

Two planning imperatives are currently underway at District and Regional levels. The Harborough District Council Core Spatial Strategy (CSS) consultation closed during the summer, with initial results expected this autumn/winter. Amongst a number of themes, the CSS proposed various options for locating new housing. The HDC target, proposed and agreed by the Region, up to 2031, means sites for some 3,700 new homes need to be identified

across the district. There is also a minimum level of 40 per year to be found in the Principal Urban Area (PUA) i.e. land closest to Leicester City and Oadby & Wigston. Much of this area is designated as Green Wedge, especially the land surrounding Stoughton. Nevertheless, one of the options suggested was to locate over 2,000 homes in that area!

However, even this large number, if accepted (highly unlikely considering the likely opposition) is much less than the 15,000 homes proposed for Pennbury, or the 5,000 homes defined by the Government as the minimum for an eco-town. The sites for additional housing developments are not likely to be confirmed until well into 2010.

The East Midlands Regional Assembly (EMRA) is also carrying out a consultation on where more housing developments should take place. This East Midlands Regional Plan: Partial Review - Options Consultation, closes on Tuesday 6 October. Information about the four options for housing development can be found on the EMRA website: www.emra.gov.uk. Option 4 would concentrate the majority of new development into a large new settlement. There is no indication of where such a settlement should be located, but the Co-op is being very pro-active in proposing their Stoughton Estate at every opportunity. Again, without support for this option or location from local councils, it is highly unlikely this option would progress, but I would encourage anyone who is concerned to visit the EMRA website, read the documents and respond to the consultation – which can be done online.

WARWICK ROAD RAILWAY BRIDGE

There is still no confirmed date for when the bridge parapet will be raised so that the pedestrian footpath can be opened. The current situation is unacceptable, and the impasse involves both the developer and Network Rail. A site meeting of all concerned parties is being arranged.

**Kevin Feltham (kfeltham@leics.gov.uk)
0116 2793232 (www.gartree.org.uk)**