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Eco-towns, New Labour and sustainable residential development

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Abstract

The three-legged stool of sustainability is embodied within the eco-towns debate as a popularist and politically mobilised concept. This is most distinguishable when considered within a housing-orientated framework and which reveals significant economic, social and environmental risks to the eco-towns programme. This creates a complicated position for various actors, with ramifications which extend across the entire development industry. These are entirely surmountable through shrewd policy decisions at every level, although require continued enthusiasm from each professional, political and public participant if an effective mediation of our built environment is to be achieved. Predominantly this must be underpinned by a rational and critical decision process which builds upon stronger elements of the eco-towns programme and incorporates them within a wider policy perspective irrespective of the political gains that reside through emphasis elsewhere.

Keywords: Eco-towns, Sustainability, Housing policy, New Labour, England.

Introduction

Over the last two decades the sustainability concept has moved from the fringes of academic and policy debates and into mainstream culture. Individuals grow ever more aware of the excesses of modern society, governments increasingly aware of the need to be seen to react, and business is left to exploit the 'green gold' which exists at the centre of the debate. It is therefore unsurprising that the 'S' word has now become synonymous with the development industry and the mediation of our existing and future environments. Yet in an era when seemingly every new policy, product and service is prefixed 'eco-' it becomes ever more necessary to distinguish rhetoric from reality; communicating what critical analysis exists to professionals and the general public alike. Eco-towns potentially represent one of the most important contemporary manifestations of this need in English urban policy.

As the sustainability notion encroaches daily further into mainstream consciousness it adopts greater media significance; an important factor in an era denoted by the

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customisation of politics towards popularist policies (Mildlarsky, 1997: 323). Public Choice Theory understands such customisation through supposition that rational politicians lack incentive to fight influential lobbyists whereas hold incentive to garner support. Concurrently, perceived marginal value net of opportunity costs stimulates voter behaviour in spite of the inconsequentiality of their democratic participation. Awareness of this trend has led to accusations of urban planning as 'a trashcan for any buzzword doing the rounds', but this does not appear to have diminished political support for the eco-towns programme (Jenkins, 2008: 31). In March 2007 then Housing Minister Yvette Cooper announced the development of five new eco-towns in England, initially to be of 10,000 homes each. (DCLG, 2007a: Cracknell, 2007). Publication of the *Eco-towns Prospectus* in July expanded this figure to range between 5-20,000 homes, and September saw the number of proposed eco-towns doubled by Gordon Brown to ten (DCLG, 2007b; Milne, 2007). In March 2008 Birmingham City Council alone released plans to develop five eco-towns itself (Energy Saving Trust, 2008).

New Labour politics and the English eco-towns programme are thus inextricably bound in their fortunes; founded upon the triple-bottom line approach to urban development identified in *PPS1: Delivering Sustainable Development* (DCLG, 2005c; 2007). Focussing on the economic, environmental and social remits of planning policy, this 'three-legged stool' of sustainability was assessed in *The Eco-towns: Scoping Report* (2007), produced by the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) and their centrality emphasised by TCPA Chairman David Lock who noted that '[m]iss out any one of these three aspects, and the project will very likely fall over' (TCPA, 2007a: 1). The *Eco-towns Prospectus* (2007) requires eco-towns to meet several criteria to achieve these ends. They must have a distinct identity with well-linked transport infrastructure and a wide range of facilities serving the health and education needs of its inhabitants. Of these developments, 30-50% should be mixed tenure affordable housing and the process itself should be overseen by a delivery organisation, achieving zero carbon status, and demonstrating themselves as exemplars of sustainable living (DCLG, 2007b: 4). What remains for evaluation within this context is therefore not the sustainability of eco-towns *per se* so much as their political mobilisation, something henceforth expanded upon within a housing-oriented discussion which will follow the triple-bottom line approach, assessing deliverability against governmentally purported aims.

Eco-towns and the economy

Economic efficiency supposes, on the most basic level, that rational operatives equate the marginal benefit of consumption against the marginal cost, with supply equalling demand at the equilibrium. This perception of supply and demand is widely appreciated by both practitioner and layman and underpins crucial flaws in the eco-towns programme. Kate Barker's *Review of Housing Supply* highlighted the harmful effects of poor housing supply on the UK economy, noting how poor supply 'hinders labour market flexibility, constraining economic growth' (Barker, 2005: 1). It noted the 'increasingly unaffordable' nature of homes polarising our communities and restricting our aspirations (ibid: 1). Although there is little chance that the eco-town developments, producing a maximum of 200,000 additional homes, will make much genuine impact upon housing supply which requires three million additional homes by 2020 (CPRE, 2008:1). Moreover, the impact of low supply on the housing market at each level would doubtlessly reduce the opportunity for affordability gains at either a national, regional or local level. A government-driven delivery system could have the theoretical ability to instigate an affordability gain through the regulatory system. Affordability, a key

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criterion for eco-towns, is set to deliver between 30-50 per cent of the development (DCLG, 2007b: 13). Nonetheless, whilst being higher than national average, this is in line with many policies which already exist for Growth Areas and Growth Points making the eco-towns affordability contribution somewhat short of radical. In these macro-economic respects it seems unlikely that the eco-towns programme will deliver the 'huge opportunities for sustainability gains' claimed by the Housing and Growth Programmes Team at the Department for Communities and Local Government (Cleary, 2007:1).

Beyond the affordability discussion it is necessary to fit the issues of housing supply into the wider economy and Kate Barker's *Review of Land Use Planning* highlighted the positive role that a plan led system can have upon delivering economic growth (Barker, 2006). The *Unpopular Housing* Report supportively concluded that '[m]any of the causes of unpopular housing are linked to wider, regional and sub-regional economic and housing market changes' (DCLG, 2006c: 35). The correctional behaviour of government in resolving housing market failures may therefore be assumed justifiable on economic or equity grounds (ODPM, 2006a: 1). Housing Market Renewal (HMR) Pathfinders provide one such example of policies designed to address the 'considerable body of evidence' regarding the inter-connectivity of effects such as displacement (ODPM, 2006c: 6). This has led the government to resolve that '[t]he costs involved in correcting or managing badly designed development are much greater than getting it right in the first place'; making the economic benefits of a well-planned eco-town seem naturally preferable to haphazard sprawl of urban-fringe estates, a point reinforced by the Stern report on *The Economics of Climate Change* (Stern, 2007: 153). Their role as forms of exemplar urban development may consequently hold some benefits, upon the assumption that future failures will be reduced or removed. Indeed, new urban development will doubtlessly benefit from aspirational targets. Meanwhile programmes such as HMR Pathfinders enable the re-incorporation of unsuccessful current stock into the system, negate the environmental detriment of new provision and prevent the continued decline of that which already exists.

Local economic benefits from the development of eco-towns seem to be equally as problematic. Not in fact new towns, their scale would create niche developments equivalent to new settlements or smaller. Contemporary global examples, as at Dongtan (Peoples Republic of China), indicate self-containment of eco-development as under-pinning their sustainability claims. The UK plans take a different approach, commonly alluding to the Garden City concept of Ebenezer Howard, whose heirs profess that the proposed 'polycentric form of networked urban places of interaction is the ultimate realisation of Howards Social City' (TCPA, 2007b: 44). Moreover, the Town and Country Planning Association imply that considerations of self-containment need 'to be tempered by an understanding of the benefits of inter-operability' (TCPA, 2007d: 293). This is despite the fact that inter-operability of design is likely to encourage commuting between eco-towns and larger local and regional settlements both for work and shopping. The logical result is indicative of economic reliance upon other settlements. The TCPAs *Best Practice in Urban Extensions and New Settlements* emphasises that 'the further distant from the central major city, the greater probability of self-containment', but green credentials are undermined by out-commuting arising when communities fail to achieve critical mass (TCPA, 2007b: 45). This may not however be socially detrimental, and The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) have emphasised that '[g]rowth can be positive for existing communities, creating a critical mass of people to support more services' (CABE, 2007: 7). Current plans are not yet advanced enough to clearly demonstrate whether specific levels of economic provision will be sustainable, although significant opportunities exist for local economic empowerment. Land purchasing issues could be pursued in accordance with *Building on Strong Foundations* (2008). This document perceives

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asset management as needing to 'underpin, and contribute to, delivery of the local vision', and argues that transfer of assets to community management can be shown by both experience and the Quirk Report (2007) to work efficiently (DCLG, 2008a: 6: ibid, 19). The *Prospectus* appears to support such community management, indicating that 'community ownership of assets' may be an adopted approach (DCLG, 2007b: 16).

Whilst the intentions to achieve a step-change may exist, Smith stressed that 'the key challenge for governance is translating this' into common practice (Smith, 2004: 2). This challenge arises because green builders currently 'operate in a very different socio-technical context to mainstream volume house builders' (ibid: 2). Problems are exemplified through the associated economies of scale, such as at Beddington Zero Energy Development (BedZED), stimulating the *Calcutt Review* to emphasise that '[t]he zero carbon standard is not free' (DCLG, 2007e: 98). BedZED, for example, carried £5,000 premiums per unit compared to conventional equivalent dwellings and despite this only achieved carbon-neutrality to Code for Sustainable Homes Level 4 (The Peabody Trust, 2008: 1). The government will attempt to give some relief to these costs for developers by way of a 'time-limited relief' from Stamp Duty Land Tax (DCLG, 2007b: 11). Irrespective of these temporary benefits, New Labour's eco-aspirations will not arise without incentivisation of the building industry, inevitably at the cost of the planner. Such incentives may, for example, involve reductions in affordable housing or Code levels, section 106 trade-offs and a greater level of state investment in infrastructure and facilities. Moreover, such actions appear required in spite of the delivery schedule indicaticating eco-town completion at least four years after the 2016 Code for Sustainable Homes Level 6 standard is (theoretically) compulsorily implemented nationwide. Hence it seems fair to suggest that, assuming the building industry can meet this deadline, the supposed step-change will seem somewhat short of remarkable.

Eco-Towns and the Environment

Environmental considerations are central to notions of eco-development and one purpose of the English eco-towns will be to act as exemplar 'green developments' and prove the viability of sustainable living (DCLG, 2007f: 16). One crucial role of planning is perceived to be the impact it can have to 'help speed up the shift to renewable and low carbon forms of energy' (HMSO, 2007: 11). This is something that it is already doing. The Department for Communities and Local Government has stated clearly that the 'key goal is to achieve zero carbon new homes within a decade', and it has committed to this through the Code for Sustainable Homes (DCLG, 2006: 2). The Code requires that all homes built after 2016 will reach Level 6 and as such be of zero-carbon design (DCLG, 2007b: 27). Level 6 is however defined as being an 'aspirational standard based on zero carbon emissions for the dwelling and high performance across all environmental categories', therefore leaving doubts as to how the target may realistically be achieved (DCLG, 2007a: 18). The Code aims to increase overall environmental sustainability of design through the establishment of a framework of national standards within which the building industry can operate (DCLG, 2007d: 5). This policy not only drives engineering and planning considerations, but beyond this may be understood as responding to political need and social desire.

Environmental awareness is an increasingly powerful policy driver. Climate Change has been identified by the Urban Task Force as 'the greatest threat to our planet's future' (Urban Task Force, 2005: 12). In September 2007 Gordon Brown reiterated this, describing it as 'the most urgent challenge to humankind' (No. 10 Press Release, 2007). That said, it is a relatively new agenda, which prior to the year 2000 was largely not identified as a policy driver (ODPM, 2005). Eco-towns overtly show New Labour's

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government as addressing this threat, a threat which its own actions have identified and promoted. With environmental awareness embraced by the general public, property developers are equally keen to stress their environmental credentials. Mitigation of environmental impact does not however overcome the detrimental influence of mass housing provision planned for England prior to 2020, and the impact must not be underestimated. Barker has not been alone in noting that increased housing provision 'raises concerns' about the environment, and it is important to stress that eco-towns cannot address the fundamental impact of housing provision and urban development upon the landscape (Barker, 2005: 1). Infill projects and regeneration programmes do not present this challenge to our green space. Furthermore, the retro-fitting of exising stock avoids the energy consumption of new build housing.

Existing research on embodied energy lacks consensus, partly due to regional sourcing variation. The CO_2 values of Embodied Energy within virgin structural steel vary from between 24Mj/Kg in the UK (Hammond and Jones, 2006) to 59Mj/Kg in New Zealand (Buchanan & Honey, 1994). Similar variations are found in terms of Embodied Emissions and such discrepancies are even greater amongst sources of timber. Whilst eco-towns account for rising awareness of Embodied Energy impacts through the need for sustainable design there appears to have been little attention paid to the lifecycle of this energy. No reference has ostensibly been made to this issue and academic research has been limited. Research has shown, however, that material sourcing, selection, and waste handling at the end of building life are the most important stages of development whilst labour transport and construction/demolition processes are relatively insignificant. The implication of which is that locally sourced materials, labour and equipment should be sought (Vukotic, 2008). As such the energy values are much higher when providing new stock than upgrading that which already exists. Retro-fitting of existing redundant housing stock, if combined with investment in resolving the market failures that created the redundancy, may therefore be understood as more environmentally sustainable through their requirement of fewer materials. Environmental gains could consequently be maximised by reducing the required scale of new property provision. Moreover, the impact of a retro-fitting programme would inevitably result in a wider and more equitable impact than a restricted series of eco-towns.

Eco-Towns and Society

Barker's *Review of Housing Supply* lays the foundation to an understanding of the *Housing Green Paper* by emphasising how '[h]omes are more than shelter', intrinsic to the creation of communities (Barker, 2005: 1). This is essentially the same perception of housing supply as commented upon by TCPA Chief Executive Gideon Amos when espousing the opinion that '[w]e must ensure that real communities are created – not just soulless housing estates' (TCPA, 2007c). Calcutt's *Review* sagely noted that Code for Sustainable Homes Level 6 is 'not achievable by energy efficiency alone' (DCLG, 2007g: 89). Together they emphasise the ability of architecture and urban design to encourage and foster inclusivity. This will become increasingly important in an era of demographic change. Increased levels of divorce and, in particular, the UK's ageing population means that accommodation considerations 'must become a mainstream consideration in planning new communities' (DCLG, 2008b: 107).

Avoiding sprawl amid these demands for increased provision will inevitably raise density issues which must be addressed. To avoid the sprawl of previous decades, eco-towns will have to boast much higher densities in order to make the most of available efficiency gains. The results remain to be seen. The era of Corbusian high-rise is at an end. Even in areas of seeming revival, such as Manchester, problems of vacancy and

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inadequate service provision (amongst others) are already evident. More relevant to the debate is however the consideration that there may be detrimental effects emerging from the application of increased densities to English society, where such residential styles are non-traditional. Historically speaking, British flirtations with high density development have produced varied results. Unlike other nations attempting to develop eco-towns, living densities in the UK are generally much lower. Taking China or Japan as examples, mid-rise developments are commonplace and sought after, whereas that demand does not readily exist in the same form in England.

A Way Forward?

In almost every respect, national planning guidance seems most appropriately to emphasise brownfield infill urban development. Even in the light of the sustainability debate this emphasis appears entirely appropriate. Eco-towns should not lead us to lose focus on the need to provide live-work quarters that contribute to the improvement of existing housing stock and increasing standards of that yet to come. Only through emphasis upon both can truly sustainable communities be achieved, and a genuine housing step change stimulated. Housing demand in the UK is subject to such pressures that we must recognise the need for new development beyond our existing urban areas. New towns, settlements and urban extensions are inevitable to some degree and eco-towns hold the potential to pioneer these developments in a more successful manner than has historically been achieved. The pitfalls may be too numerous for a genuine step change, but conceptually they are nonetheless worthy.

The planning profession was born from housing issues. It has addressed the slums of Victorian Britain, aimed to provide 'Homes for Hero's' from each of the Twentieth Century's global conflicts and must seize the opportunity for reflection. Planning has always been political, and as Lang noted, '[p]lans are policies and policies, in a democracy at any rate, spell politics' (Lang, 1959: 168). With the rising Climate Change agenda at a global level, pioneered nationally by the New Labour regime, it is now more essential than ever that planning re-establishes certain central tenets. Howard's vision of development, mediating urban and rural conditions, was already being set in bricks and mortar when J.S.Nettlefold coined the term 'town planning' in 1905. Yet the resurgence of Garden City rhetoric more than a century later seems as fresh and relevant as ever before. Why then should perceptions of urban development, pivotal to the embryonic evolution of the discipline, now be heralded as a step change? Why should sustainability, a neat re-packaging and surmisal of existing objectives, trumpet eco-towns more than any other development?

It is with regret that one is forced to conclude planning to be a discipline left romantically yearning for that which its very essence prevents it from ever achieving. The notion of 'mediation of space' inevitably results in the concept of mediation being twisted to equate with compromise, invariably decreasing the influence of the planner to that of a wishful spectator. Eco-towns, for a short while at least, offer the planner a window of opportunity to achieve more. That window overlooks further opportunities to create sustainable economies, environments and communities. Without the immediate realisation of the challenges and immediate support from government for real change as opposed to popularist policies the planning profession risks its tenuous position. This is a position which disappointingly appears to be eroded daily and to the point whereby a century from now we may once again find ourselves ensnarled in our own rhetorical fantasies, still seeking a sustainable future, albeit hopefully not too late.

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