



FOUNDATION FOR DEMOCRACY
AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Eco-town proposals shows cracks between central government and local positions on sustainable development

Halina Ward, August 2009

Democracy finds it difficult to deliver robust and clear choices about whether to pursue 'net' sustainable development at local or at national level. The UK government's promotion of 'eco-towns' is a case in point.

Opposition to eco-towns is far more significant in sustainable development policy terms than simple nimbyism ('not in my back yard' thinking on the part of local people). It reflects different views on how to operationalise sustainable development - and who should have responsibility for what.

My recent visit to one community included in the shortlisted eco-town proposal near St Austell, Cornwall, illustrates this.

The idea of 'eco-towns' was adopted by the UK Government in 2007. They are **described** by the department of Communities and Local Government as "new towns which are exemplar green developments of a minimum of 5000 homes. They will be designed to meet the highest standards of sustainability, including low and zero carbon technologies and good public transport".

The eco-towns initiative has been justified in terms of policy goals including on climate change and provision of affordable housing. Housing Minister **John Healey said**, on announcement of a shortlist of four eco-towns on 16th July 2009, that: "The proposals can raise strong opinions, but climate change threatens us all.. With our commitment to the eco-towns we are taking steps to meet this challenge and help build more affordable housing".

Shortlisted developers (of which mining company Imerys in Cornwall is one) are eligible to bid for a share of £60 million in Government support for local infrastructure. Eco-town proposals are subject to the normal planning process, but they are also the subject of special central government guidance, in the form of a **Planning Policy Statement** on eco towns which annexes a list of the four shortlisted eco-towns and sets out the standards with which they are expected to comply.

This has to be taken into account by regional and local planning authorities when they set policies and make planning decisions. But whether the inclusion of an eco-town in the Annex makes a real difference to the outcome of planning processes in the face of stiff local opposition will remain to be seen.

By now means all local authorities have welcomed eco-town proposals. For example, Wychaven and Stratford-on-Avon District Councils have opposed a development at Middle Quinton which had been shortlisted in an initial list of fifteen. One [Stratford-on-Avon spokesman](#) said that “the district council is very unhappy to developments like this imposed on us by the government.” A local campaign group began a judicial review of the decision, arguing that the government’s consultation process was flawed.

In the case of another proposed eco-town, at Ford in West Sussex, the area had already been rejected a site for new housing by the local council before it became the proposed location for an eco-town.

Ten days after the announcement of the final shortlist of four eco-towns, I dropped in on a ‘Clay Futures Consultation’ in the Cornish village of Trewoon, two miles West of St Austell. The consultation was the last of a series of events held in six villages in Cornwall’s ‘Clay Country’ around St Austell, which is home to significant parts of the region’s clay mining and processing industry.

Trewoon is a community that has been heavily affected by mining. You need only walk down the main road to the drying plant to see the impact of china clay mining on the landscape, even without seeing the china clay pit itself.

The consultation was lovely: it was a warm Saturday, and in the village hall a series of stalls in the style of a village fete guided visitors around some of the most important questions facing their community, complete with hundreds of metres of bunting and The Eden Project’s distinctive interactive design approach.

This was consultation at its best: heartwarming, thought-provoking, respectful, serious and fun all at the same time; a collaboration between Cornwall Council and The Eden Project, among others; exhibits that could catch anyone’s imagination, young or old, and a visitors’ feedback book loaded with comments warm enough - and sufficiently full of hope that the views expressed would be taken seriously - to bring tears to the eyes. One of my favourite stalls was one that asked participants to compose ‘recipes for preserving children’.

Hanging over Trewoon’s community fete-styled turn in the [six-village consultation process](#) was the long shadow of a government decision to shortlist a St Austell Eco-Town proposal put forward by mining company Imerys. The inclusion of the St Austell Eco-Town in a

four-project shortlist had been **announced by Gordon Brown** just days earlier. St Austell is a nearby town.

The 'St Austell eco-town' proposal is actually a cluster of developments in six separate communities - all of them near St Austell, and all of them on land owned by Imerys and formerly connected with the now-contracting clay mining industry. Whilst local authorities back the proposal, it has attracted opposition among many local people in Trewoon, location of one of the proposed cluster of developments.

The population of Trewoon is about 1000 people. French-headquartered mining company Imerys used to employ about 2000 people at Trewoon's Blackpool Clay pit. But in November 2007, Imerys **made some 500 people redundant** in a planned move to wind down its operation in Trewoon at the same time as scaling up part of its operation in Brazil.

So, in sum, local people need jobs. The country as a whole needs more homes. The clean-up operation that is required as the pit closes down will need to be funded by the company. And Imerys has spare land that could be built on.

I spoke to one local resident who was angry that Imerys would make money out of the scheme, if successful. He had brought photos with him to show the extent of regular flooding on roads adjoining the development site after heavy rain. There was scepticism about the potential for the development to boost employment locally. And whilst some written comments at the fete welcomed the addition of a new local railway station on the Penzance-London line as part of the proposal, there were also many which indicated that better bus services were the major priority.

With little information on next steps available from Imerys itself at the Fete, the sense of frustration was palpable. Here at least, the proposal for an eco-town seemed (to this outsider) ill-conceived.

One insight is that Eco-towns need project proposers who are able to work right at the cutting edge of sustainable development. Doing so means demonstrating a commitment to addressing sustainable development as a social as much as an environmental issue. Environmental gimmicks, eco-houses, electric cars, a train station and the possibility of temporary construction work simply aren't enough.

Democracy and democratic decision-making processes at local level, and serving the needs of the existing community, also have to be part of the answer. So far, the people of Trewoon seem not to have been served well by what has been a largely top-down initiative. Local MP Matthew Taylor puts it clearly when **he says that**: "Growth of communities needs to be planned with the community, and choices made locally. The devil is in the detail, and that detail needs local involvement, not centralised dictat".

The proposal must now go through the ordinary planning process, at which point the local politics can only intensify. But the risk is that the eco-town's initial link to a top-down process driven by central government policy priorities could poison the local democratic process in sceptical communities. That in turn could make it more difficult for project proposers to address concerns. Imerys itself wasn't present at the Clay Futures consultation. But they would do well to reflect carefully on what emerges when the consultation partners publish their report of the process.