



Campaign to Protect  
Rural England



Please Reply to: Campaign for Better Transport  
12-18 Hoxton Street, London N1 6NG

Rt Hon Caroline Flint MP  
House of Commons  
Westminster  
London SW1A 0AA

*Sent by post and email*

16 May 2008

Dear Ms Flint

We are writing this open letter to you to express our support for many of the objectives of the eco-town programme, and our concern about the shortlist of locations.

Although each of us intends to respond to your consultation, we are writing to you now because we are concerned that promoters in shortlisted areas are being given the impression that land they own, or have an interest in, is now more likely to gain planning permission. We note that one has already submitted an application. This letter seeks reassurance on these and other points. It also requests that you seriously consider a similar initiative for **eco-quarters** within existing urban areas.

We believe the *Eco-Towns Transport Worksheet* is one of the best pieces of guidance ever to emerge from a British Government. We strongly support its objectives, and your statement that “we should be following the most ambitious European models, where only half of households rely on a car”. We believe you have correctly identified an issue key to the success or failure of eco-towns, both in terms of their transport objectives, and in the eyes of the general public. We want this programme to succeed, and some of us are involved in detailed work on its transport aspects.

However, one of the main criticisms of this initiative, from experts and a range of interests, not just environmental groups, is that schemes will become car dependent commuter towns. Is this claim justified? Those of us involved in the process so far believed the Transport Worksheet, together with other policies on employment and communities, could overcome this problem – that is, until we saw the shortlist of locations.

We would draw your attention to the recently published report *Lessons from Cambourne*<sup>1</sup>. Cambourne, described as a ‘proto eco-town’<sup>2</sup> and featured in *Eco-towns Greening the Future*, lies west of Cambridge. It has better than average bus services but no rail. This survey found 95% of households owned a car, 56% had two or more; 81% of the working population drove to work. The report’s author was “sceptical that eco-towns will achieve significantly lower levels of car use even if they have superior links to main centres.”<sup>2</sup> A similar pattern of car dependency has been found in Poundbury.<sup>3</sup>

Car dependence is not inevitable but this report does highlight a fundamental problem: car ownership exerts a strong influence on car use. If most adults moving to a new town believe they must own a car to live there, then policies to promote sustainable transport will be fatally weakened.

Although some are clearly worse than others, we are concerned that eco-towns at the shortlisted locations will promote car dependency because:

- Most are remote from larger conurbations, and none would easily allow for integration into existing public transport networks
- They are badly located with respect to rail – peripheral to some sites, distant from others

Evidence<sup>4</sup> suggests that many people who would consider living without a car require access to mainline rail for longer distance travel, so its absence, will weaken attempts to promote the other sustainable modes.

Already high fuel costs look set to follow a rising trend, while growing volatility in the industry could threaten future supplies worldwide. It makes no sense to design in car dependency from scratch. We urge you to ensure that all locations are subject to the following tests before making the final shortlist:

- Would they remain viable if the crude oil price reaches \$200 a barrel, which some analyses suggest it might?
- Are there other locations which might perform better under such circumstances?

Some of the proposals appear to be fragmented sprawling developments of the worst kind, for example Marston Vale. This is precisely the opposite of what is now accepted good practice, i.e. a compact urban form which reduces the need to travel and makes local shops, services and amenities viable and accessible by means other than the car.

When operated correctly, the planning system at regional and local levels starts with the question: 'where is the best place to build?' The eco-towns process appears to be operating 'the wrong way round'. To resolve the problem will require a return to these fundamental principles which underlie the planning system. In the meantime, we **ask you for a public reassurance that:**

1. As part of the sustainability appraisal shortlisted sites will be compared with more sustainable alternatives, such as redeveloping within or extensions to urban areas and re-use of existing buildings
2. Following consultation and sustainability appraisal, any or all shortlisted locations may be rejected if they fall short of key tests including on transport
3. The process will not override the powers of regional and local planning bodies to determine development locations through RSSs and LDFs
4. Promoters of schemes must not assume that by being shortlisted and referred to the Challenge Panel, that this means sites are now more likely to gain planning permission
5. The Government recognises the advantages of rail *at the centre* of new towns – which could mean moving railway lines, or siting eco-towns to make this possible.

An original objective of the eco-towns programme was to pilot more sustainable approaches which could be transferred elsewhere. Yet eco-town principles, especially those relating to transport and efficient use of land, are easier to implement in existing urban areas. The requirement for eco-towns to be "separate from existing towns" is unhelpful. We urge you to consider the role **eco quarters on larger redevelopment sites** could play in raising environmental standards in existing towns, as has been achieved at Vauban and as has in fact been suggested for the Thames Gateway.

Please note that we are making copies of this letter available to the press.

