

The Rt Hon Caroline Flint MP
Minister for Housing and Planning
Department for Communities and Local
Government
Eland House Bressenden Place
London SW1E 5DU

Date: 14 May 2008
My ref: JS/JC
Your ref:

Dear Minister

'ECOTOWNS' - PENNBURY (STOUGHTON) LEICESTERSHIRE

Thank you for your letter of 2nd April.

The County Council's Cabinet has now considered the Pennbury (Stoughton) 'eco-town' proposal at its meetings on 8th April and 6th May. The reports to and resolutions of Cabinet are attached to this letter.

The issues arising concern costs, openness, transparency and the practicalities of considering a proposal about which no information of any substance is available.

Costs

The County Council (through officers) has already raised major concerns about the impact of the proposed Pennbury scheme, based upon evidence already collected as part of the Council's planning and transport responsibilities in relation to the Regional Plan process. Members are therefore concerned that the Government's continued support for the proposal may impose substantial and unnecessary costs on the County Council.

At a meeting with Henry Cleary on the 9th April, the concerns about costs were discussed and he indicated that Government would consider reasonable proposals. I hope the Government is able to ensure that either it or the bidder will meet the majority if not all the costs of investigating the proposals. I have written separately to Henry setting out the costs that are known so far.

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Openness and Transparency

The County Council is concerned that the information held by Government about the Pennbury proposal is not being made available to the local authorities, MPs and other interested parties. The Terms of Reference for the Technical Group (Appendix 1, Cabinet Report 6th May) with which your officials are familiar, indicate that as a condition of agreeing to take part in the technical assessment work, participants would make available existing studies, modelling work and background information which would be helpful in assessing the proposals.

The County Council will therefore be grateful for information on the following:

- (a) The Co-operative Group proposal.
- (b) The advice and supporting evidence given by the DfT/Highways Agency and DEFRA/Environment Agency in the initial assessment of the proposals prior to shortlisting.
- (c) The Government assessment of the proposal against its criteria for eco towns.

The Technical Group does not currently include a representative from CASCET, the community group formed to oppose the proposal, although it does include the Co-operative Group as advocate of the proposal. In your letter to the Leicester Mercury (2nd May) you promise that decisions will not be taken 'behind closed doors' and that the views of the local community are vital. I hope therefore that you are able to support the County Council's request for CASCET to be represented on the Technical Group.

The invitation to present to the 'eco challenge' group is appreciated. The invitation was, however, directed at officers and you may wish to consider the need for local authority members and MPs to be involved in this process.

Participation

The Co-operative Group has said that it intends to develop its proposal up to the end of October through public consultation and involvement. It will therefore be very difficult for the local authorities and indeed Government to assess fully the implications of the proposal before the end of the formal consultation period. The County Council therefore requests that the consultation period be extended for a further 6 months (i.e. until end April 2009) so that full assessments based on the final proposal can be completed, made available for public comment and for both to be considered by both local authorities and Government.

Housing Growth

Finally, you should be aware that the County Council has taken a positive approach to growth, in its own right as a Section 4/4 Authority and as part of the successful bid by the six upper tier local authorities in the Three Cities Sub Region to be a New Growth Point area. The County Council remains very willing to engage with the Department about the best options for growth in Leicestershire within the context of the review of the Regional Plan and building on the work undertaken so far, including the advice of the Regional Plan Examination Panel which recommended further consideration of the Leicester to Burton corridor.

I hope you are able to give these matters favourable consideration.

Yours sincerely

