

DCLG Eco-Towns Progress Report (24 July 2008)

Ford, West Sussex

CAFE Comments

Description

Site

Since the publication of the Eco-Town Consultation Paper the greenfield/brownfield balance has changed; from 13% to 30%. This was at the behest of the developers, and with no independent verification. The reality on the ground does not support the developers' assertion, especially as most of the former Ford airfield reverted to full and permanent agricultural use in 1959. The key area which is claimed to be brownfield, the airfield curtilage, is now seamless with adjoining agricultural land; being used for growing key food crops. PPS3 does not support this deliberate exaggeration.

WS Structure Plan

The Progress Report gives the impression that the Ford location is specifically identified for strategic development in the West Sussex Structure Plan. This is incorrect. Rather the WS Structure Plan identifies the area of search in the transport corridor between the A27 to the north, the A259 to the south, the River Arun to the east and the Chichester/Arun district boundary to the west as a location for strategic development (see Structure Plan Policy LOC1,(b), (3), (ii) and para 81). This includes the Aldingbourne area directly to the north of Bognor Regis, which is the prime reason why the FEH proposals are being promoted. Additionally, the S of S' Final Draft SE Plan (RSS) does not define any specific areas of search in Arun District; concentrating instead on the need for extra housing, but without stating the locations. The area of search is now the whole District, with a strong emphasis on infill and strategic urban extensions.

Existing Rail Network

The existing rail network has many physical constraints restricting its ability to become a fast-link service, including 42 level crossings between Brighton and Portsmouth. Even the current improved service to London takes approximately 1hr 43mins. Thus, the simple fact of its existence does not necessarily confer significant advantage.

Proposed Benefits

Energy solutions

The statement that the developers' energy solutions will be linked to the "major recycling facility" on the site is seriously misleading. The single West Sussex Materials Recycling Facility (MRF) is being constructed at Ford, but this is a dry waste facility designed to recover paper, cardboard, plastic, metal and glass for further use. The waste is therefore neither suitable in type nor quantity, nor indeed is it available, to be high-jacked by the Ford eco-project as feedstock for the projected energy-from-waste proposal. The latter would instead require to be fed with biodegradable waste which would otherwise be landfilled, and this proposal would require such feedstock to be transported to Ford from the entire county, resulting in major road traffic and other negative implications. Additionally, West Sussex County Council have recently advised that Ford is not their preferred location of such a facility.

Regeneration

The statement that the project would assist the regeneration of the Sussex Coast is highly speculative and thus far is supported with no factual background data. Considerable investment is being made in support of mixed development in the adjacent towns of Littlehampton and Bognor Regis, and a similar development at Ford would create competition for funds, high value-added businesses and skilled jobs which, if successful, would be likely to attract investment away from the coastal towns and their fragile economies. The most likely outcome would be that Littlehampton and Bognor Regis would fail to attract such businesses, compounding current employment problems within the towns, continuing their downward spiral, and exacerbating socio-economic issues. At best, Ford could perhaps become the urban dormitory town feeding labour to the businesses in both towns, but this would lead to further congestion; with disproportionately increased outward traffic flows to jobs and facilities.

Housing

There is no doubt that Arun needs more housing generally and more affordable housing in particular. Also, it is unfortunate that, with a large housing waiting list, the historical building rate for affordable houses has been so low. However, the provision of some 2,000 affordable houses at Ford, though superficially attractive, would not solve the problem. The majority of those on the waiting list wish to be housed in and around Littlehampton and Bognor Regis, and would resist removal from their existing communities. The best location for affordable housing is not Ford; rather it is Littlehampton and Bognor Regis; as is already being planned by the District Council. Indeed, of the 4,000 families on the housing waiting list, only some 200 fall into the urgent Bands A and B. Indeed, Ford would be the least

suitable and most problematic location for such families, who already have well established links within their existing communities; with children at local schools, families with elderly parents needing care, and with local shops, support networks and medical facilities available within their current surroundings.

Railway station

Any relocation of Ford railway station would have disadvantages as well as advantages. The new station is planned to be at the very northern edge of the new town, and so may not be easily accessible to those who will live in the southern sector of the new town. Also, no account has been taken of the station's current users, who will continue to arrive and depart by car, especially if there is any question of the main nearby commuting station, Barnham, being downgraded due to Ford's upgrade. Additionally, whilst a new bridge over the railway, in place of the current level-crossing, may be an advantage, the developers have failed to acknowledge that, as an unintended consequence of this seemingly sensible proposal, all the traffic that uses Ford Road will in future need to transit right through the heart of the new town in order to travel between the A27 and the A259 and to cross the east-west railway line.

Initial Summary of Challenges and Constraints

Environment

Whilst development could take place on Flood Zone 1 ground today, there is a need to consider the possible position 25 to 50 years hence. SE England is most likely to be impacted by the long-term negative aspects of climate change and Ford is a generally low-lying area near the coast, susceptible to fluvial, tidal and surface water flooding; all of which could occur simultaneously. The region has been designated an "area of serious water stress" by DEFRA, and the UK Climate Impacts Programme scientists predict that saline intrusion into the River Arun aquifer is highly likely as time passes. Additionally, neither the Environment Agency nor the local water companies have taken future sea-level rise predictions into account. Ford is therefore not, as required in the Consultation Paper "future proof" and, as a consequence, it is a potential 'high risk' location for future residential development.

Transport

The national and local roads around Ford are already heavily congested and forecast to get worse, and the developer's proposals have a fundamental dependency on the provision of an A27 bypass at Arundel, which has very considerable local and regional support. However, the HA scheme for an Arundel bypass is not yet approved and it is unlikely that it could be operational before 2020. Despite this, the developers are proposing no measures to alleviate the impact of the Eco-Town on the extant and worsening road traffic congestion in

the Ford area, which will become even worse as time passes. In early versions of the FAVG vision statement the need for a new A27/A259 strategic link road was recognised in order to relieve not only existing congestion, but also the projected traffic increases from the new town, but this has now been removed from later versions. Whilst minimisation of the development's inherent road traffic activity is to be applauded, the considerable residual amount (both domestic and commercial), will simply add to the already overloaded surrounding road network especially if an waste-to-energy plant was to be factored into the equation.

Employment

The suggestion that significant employment opportunities could be created by the provision of a science and technology park on the 30-40 ha of employment land being provided in the new town is highly speculative. There is no proposal to build business units, but simply to make land available, the concept of a science park in this part of W Sussex owes more to aspiration than reality, and it takes no account whatsoever of current business views, as reflected by Sussex Enterprise, the West Sussex Economic Partnership and SEEDA, that high tech businesses strongly resist locating in this area particularly because of the road infrastructure deficit and the lack of an appropriate skill base.

Conservation

The developers describe Ford and its environs as being 'predominantly flat, featureless and with little landscape value' and it was even recently publicly and ill-advisedly described as "wasteland" by the FEH group. Whilst there are no over-riding national constraints which would seriously hamper development it is nevertheless of a high visual and agricultural quality deserving to be conserved for its own sake. It also acts as an essential 'green lung' along the already densely-developed south coast. The proposals are more likely to harm than improve the landscape quality of the Lower Arun Valley, and no proper consideration has been given to the sight lines to and from the South Downs (soon to be designated as a National Park), or to the southern setting of Arundel. To quote from the Inspector's Report concerning the current Arun District Local Plan, development at Ford "would represent a very significant incursion into the countryside around Ford and Yapton, and would be likely to have a considerable visual impact in the open and low lying landscape of the coastal plain". Loosing this natural open space would also dilute Arun District's potential to expand its tourism industry; restricting both coastal towns' ability to draw on a wider tourist base as part of their regeneration plans. Finally, a new Eco-Town in the vicinity of Ford would cause the coalescence of all three existing settlements (Ford, Yapton and Clymping), the permanent loss their individual local historical identities, and elimination of the key open spaces which link residents to the wider countryside.