

“Notes and Recommendations from Session 2 of the Eco-Town Challenge”

DCLG - 31 July 2008

The Challenge Panel’s Comments on the FAVG Ford Eco-Town Proposals

Ford - a CAFE Response

Local Impact

B.1. CAFE is pleased to note that the Panel recommends that the FAVG must now assess the impact on the surrounding area. The Panel refers to the regeneration of Bognor Regis and Littlehampton, and we agree that there is a need to recognize the threats that the Eco-Town represents.

B.2. CAFE agrees with the Panel that the employment strategy is a key aspect of the proposal if people are to be attracted to the Eco-Town; thereby possibly reducing the need for commuting. In our view, this aspect of the FAVG proposal is very weak, especially as the FAVG propose only to provide land for business purposes rather than to build a business park as an integral element of the development. Additionally, the FAVG’s reliance on labour from Ford Open Prison is neither a sound long-term option nor considers the indigenous local labour market and its need for long-term sustainability.

Travel and Transport

B.3. The Panel consider that the provision of an Arundel bypass would undermine the Eco-Town’s attempts to achieve carbon neutrality on the basis that it will encourage residents to commute. However, the Panel have failed to understand that the current congestion on all the local roads, especially on the A27, together with the absence of good road infrastructure, is already a major problem (which is forecast to get worse as time passes).

B.4. The Panel suggest that travel within the Ford Eco-Town, Bognor Regis and Littlehampton triangle should be seen as “internal”. This suggests that they perceive an unavoidable interplay between the development of the three towns and that, in fact, the Eco-Town cannot be freestanding. If this is correct, then a possible outcome could be that the Eco-Town will simply become a dormitory town, leading in due course to an urban sprawl linking Bognor and Littlehampton, and taking no account of the economic issues or the need for improved transport links.

B.5. The Panel note that the railway station is not well located in the Eco-Town, and that many people will have a long trip to reach it. It may not therefore be the

'ideal solution' that is postulated. Also, the developers' proposal takes no account of the needs of the current users of Ford and Barnham stations; the existing local commuters.

B.6. It seems possible that the Panel were unaware that all the north-south traffic between the A27 and the A259 would need to use the new road bridge in order to cross the railway line, and that this would have a strong adverse effect on the Eco-Town; not just from the external traffic flows, but from the internal ones as well.

B.7. Whilst the concept of providing a comprehensive set of cycle routes to local villages and towns is an attractive concept, the reality may not provide the implied advantages, especially in the winter time. Two of the local villages are, in essence, hamlets without any facilities, and the two coastal towns are too far away, via the already congested A259. This will make cycling a dangerous and relatively unproductive activity, other than for minimal leisure purposes, unless there is substantial investment on both the whole length of the road and especially at the major key (and already dangerous) road junctions.

Phasing

B.8. The Panel is quite right to note the problem of phasing, which is particularly worrying in relation to housing development, transport and education facilities. This is also important in relation to employment if the Eco-Town is not to become just a massive housing estate. It is clear that the Eco-Town will not be fully serviced from the onset, and it is also clear that the FAVG will not be building the employment facilities. This creates significant uncertainty relating to the proposed 4,000 jobs; the majority of which (if they ever materialise) are likely to be retail/manual rather than the highly publicised skill-based jobs. Moreover, such back-ended phasing will ensure a dependency on car-borne journeys, and will overstretch existing facilities; thus creating friction between newcomers and the existing communities. CAFÉ also has strong reservations on the emphasis of the initial development taking place furthest from any facilities, existing or proposed, and about the concept that the most remote greenfield land should be developed in advance of any building on the extant brownfield land.

Carbon Footprint

B.9. CAFÉ support any proposal which will reduce the carbon footprint. Thus, like the Panel, we look forward to seeing just how the developers propose to achieve this requirement. This is an important aspect which must be taken into account before any decisions are taken about the suitability of Ford as a site for an Eco-Town. Indeed, CAFÉ strongly believes that in rural locations car emissions must be part of the overall carbon zero equation in order to ensure real deliverability of the much-needed transport links.

Land Use

B.10. The Panel's observations and recommendations concerning land-use are very valid. We too are not impressed either by the proposal to develop on hundreds of acres of prime and highly-productive agricultural land or by the pretence that the disadvantages of this can be overcome by assuming that the residents of the Eco-Town will adopt a "good life" mentality embracing allotments, smallholdings, orchards and local vegetable stalls. This is one aspirational vision too far. It may look good in a glossy brochure, but is not a practical proposition in reality. CAFÉ would wish to see the full utilisation of the brownfield land in advance of any greenfield development.

Import of Waste

B.11. The Panel rightly raise concerns about the transport implications of the biogas facility on the wider road network if waste is to be imported to the energy centre. The latter activity is, it now seems, a highly speculative proposition which is unlikely to be possible; partly because of the transport implications. The whole waste/energy strategy needs review.

Impact on the Wider Community

B.12. In considering the Eco-Town's relationship with the local community the current pattern of local government has been ignored. All local communities in this part of W Sussex have their own unique Town and Parish Councils, and these are well supported by the Arun District Council. It seems as though the idea of a Community Trust is an urban concept which would be alien in the Ford area. Thus, the proposed concept and the links between the Eco-Town and the local communities need to be reconsidered.

Involvement of Arun Youth Council

B.13. We suspect that the FAVG's comments concerning their involvement with Arun Youth Council was an exaggeration, quite wrongly being used to support the development proposal. The facts of the matter are that the leader of the FEH group wrote to the Arun Youth Council with details of his Hub Concept in July 2007; well before any involvement in the Eco-Town programme (which only started for the FEH on 31 October 2007). In his reply in August 2007 the Chairman of the Youth Council simply advised Mr Hall that the Youth Council would consider the matter when reviewing the District Council's LDF-related papers at a later date.

Business Plan

B.14. We agree with the Panel that there is a need to press the FAVG for sight of their future business plan for the Eco-Town. It is not at all clear just how many

facilities and real estate assets will actually be “gifted” to the management Trust, and then, perhaps more importantly, how they will be maintained, managed and funded in perpetuity; especially if the Trust is to be vested with the responsibility for promoting the design and build element of both the affordable housing and the business premises.