

Ford Airfield Vision Group (FAVG) Final Submission Document

“Public Consultation for Ford Airfield Eco-Town” (30 June 2008)

A Critical Review

1. Introduction

1.1. The DCLG has clearly stated the importance of engaging with, consulting and listening to communities affected by the Eco-Town process and its associated development: ‘Engagement with the existing and new community is seen as a fundamental and ongoing part of the process of delivering a distinctive high quality eco-town’ (DCLG: “Eco-Towns- Living a Greener Future” – April 2008)

1.2. In support of this, the FAVG document “Public Consultation for Ford Airfield Eco-Town” (30 June 2008) claims that the Eco-Town’s proponents have adopted an open and accessible channel of communication at all local levels: county, district, town and parish councils, as well as the local communities and individuals. However, when considering this FAVG document and comparing it with tangible evidence, it becomes apparent that the document is highly skewed and misleading. It is also evident that there has been very little effective two-way engagement, especially with the immediate communities affected by the FAVG’s proposal: Ford, Clymping, Yapton, Walberton, Barnham and Arundel.

1.3. The FAVG insist that it has pursued an open and “informed dialogue” with these communities via meetings, newspaper advertisements, their website and three road shows, and claim to have established strong local support for the Eco-Town. This, unfortunately, is a parody of the true situation, and in contrast the approach has been singularly superficial without any genuine engagement with the community. The FAVG has failed to understand that effective communication is a two-way process, and whilst they have undoubtedly engaged in a large amount of transmission, there is very little evidence that any of their messages have been successfully received. Thus, as evidenced in the responses to the DCLG’s consultation paper, the FAVG has achieved only a minimal amount of support from across the whole local area.

1.4. The FAVG has relied heavily on its partnership with the 3 members of the FEH group as its local community barometer, an action which has proved to be exceptionally short-sighted. Firstly, the FEH have a direct interest in the Ford proposal so are unable to reflect true community opinions and, secondly, their background (one of them is the Chairman of Aldingbourne Parish Council), invariably raises antagonism and opposition on the basis that they are only involved in the Ford Eco-Town proposal because of their own obvious objective of precluding development in the village of Aldingbourne several miles to the west of Ford.

2. The FAVG Consultation Process

2.1. As set out in para 2.12 of the FAVG public consultation report, the process has had six main strands:

- a. Participation in Arun District Council's Ford Eco-Town Select Committee Inquiry.
- b. Meetings with Town and Parish Councils and other local representatives.
- c. A three day public consultation roadshow, comprising one day at each of Littlehampton, Bognor Regis and the Ford Airfield Car Boot Sale/Market.
- d. Online consultation via the project website.
- e. Dissemination of information through the local media.
- f. Involvement with utility companies and statutory consultees.

2.2. The content of para 2.13 of the FAVG report gives a good hint as to the approach taken to this far from simple subject of consultation, in that it exemplifies the way in which the FAVG appear to think that the mere dispatch of a brochure is a "completed" action. It is of course only the first stage, but even when the reaction is negative, the FAVG assume it to be a positive step without need of further consultation.

3. The Consultation in Detail

Arun District Council

3.1. Paras 3.1 to 3.5 of the FAVG report deal with the Ford Eco-Town Select Committee Inquiry initiated by Arun District Council. However, in para 3.3 the report sets out (very unprofessionally) to deride the actions and decisions of ADC, primarily because the FAVG did not welcome the Committee's decisions. There is no question but that the concept of having an Inquiry was an exceptionally good one, and that it gave everyone who wanted to an excellent opportunity to present and debate their case. The result was, as reported, that ADC decided that it did not support the proposal for an Eco-Town at Ford, but this is not (as is alleged) inconsistent with the Council's support of the Eco-Town principle. Rather, it reflects the fact that after hearing all the evidence, the Select Committee was convinced that the FAVG's proposal was neither suitable nor sustainable for the Ford area; a point that was subsequently strongly made in Arun District Council's consultation response to the DCLG.

Meetings With Local Councils and Other Representatives

3.2. In para 3.8 the FAVG report highlights meetings with Littlehampton Town Council, Bognor Regis Town Council, Arundel Town Council and Clymping Parish Council.

What it does not highlight is that as a result of each of these four meetings the Councils formally resolved to oppose an Eco-Town at Ford and then initiated a consultation response to the DCLG setting out the reasons for their strong opposition to the FAVG's proposals. Also, the reference to casual meetings with a representative of Ford Parish Council is highly misleading. The individual is in fact the Chairman of Ford Parish Council who, on all occasions, has stressed the total opposition of his Council to an Eco-Town at Ford. Again, the inference seems to be that the mere fact that a meeting has taken place, formal or informal, indicates support for the FAVG proposal when, in fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

3.3. Similarly, in respect of paras 3.9 and 3.10, the fact that such meetings took place is not disputed, indeed it is excellent that they did. However, it is quite wrong to draw any inference whatsoever that such actions provide evidence of either successful communication or support for the FAVG proposals.

Other Meetings

3.4. Para 3.11 lists a number of other occasions at which the FAVG met with various organisations and individuals, but without recording the outcomes. Two are particularly pertinent. The first on 19 May with Mr Dixon in Clymping who, contrary to the allegation, was representing only his Residents Association. The second on 21 May with the West Sussex SES Committee at which, contrary to the allegation, Mr Hall of the FEH group spoke for only 5 minutes, with no follow-up discussion. These are yet further examples of communication activity which was not as 'complete' as implied. Indeed, subsequent to the WSCC meeting, the County Council itself responded to DCLG in opposition to the FAVG proposal.

Public Engagement and Consultation

3.5. Para 3.12, in a tone typical of the whole of the FAVG's public consultation report, seeks to dismiss the importance of the well-supported campaign group – **C**ommunities **A**gainst **F**ord **E**co-Town (CAFÉ) - which had emerged after the local community became aware of the proposals for an Eco-Town at Ford from the DCLG's consultation paper "Eco-Towns: Living a Greener Future" which was published on 3 April 2008. Prior to that, and despite the fact that both the FAVG and the FEH proposals had been submitted to the DCLG on 31 October 2007, the local community had been largely ignorant of the proposals, and there is no evidence that the FAVG made any effective attempts to inform the community per se; albeit that some people and organisations may have been sent copies of the various brochures.

3.6. Indeed, the general public were not informed by the FAVG directly until the roll-out of their advertisements in the local press in June 2008. It was therefore perhaps no wonder that there was so much pressure and clamour for the formation of a community group; not just "by some of the local villagers from Ford Clymping and Yapton" - to use the report's dismissive words - but by a much wider and larger cross section of the whole local community.

3.7. The FAVG have at no time approached CAFÉ to request a meeting or even tried to engage in any form of dialogue with this key community group representing more than 10,000 residents and sharing views similar to those of the 14 local Town and Parish Councils and Civic Societies who have advised the DCLG of their strong opposition to the proposed Eco-Town at Ford. FAVG's disparaging description of CAFÉ is a quite unnecessary and unprofessional insult, which does nothing to inspire confidence in the FAVG's consultation motives and process. Rather, it clearly demonstrates their total misunderstanding of the strength and depth of the existing communities' opposition to an Eco-Town at Ford.

Public Engagement, Consultation and Media Engagement

3.8. Paras 3.13 to 3.18 set out the details of the FAVG's publicity campaign. There is no dispute about this whatsoever, it was professional and comprehensive, and it succeeded in conveying the message that an Eco-Town had been proposed for the Ford area. It was clearly the right approach for informing the wider community, but generally it only succeeded in strengthening the local community's opposition towards the FAVG proposals. The associated letters in the local press clearly demonstrated this in both tone and number. There were many local people prepared to write letters of protest, but interestingly almost all of the letters of support came from the 3 members of the FEH group - who have a vested interest in the proposals; being partners of the FAVG.

Public Consultation - Roadshow

3.9. The three day professional road show, details of which are set out in paras 3.19 to 3.23, was the FAVG's key focus of consultation and engagement with the local community. It was therefore extremely disappointing that FAVG sited their road shows away from the key Ford area and its communities.

3.10. The decision to site the road shows at Littlehampton, Bognor Regis and the Ford Airfield Market highlighted the FAVG's lack of understanding of Ford's existing community structure. Littlehampton and Bognor Regis have no current interface with the Ford area other than in the potential competition for similar business and retail investment, and the associated traffic congestion issues. It also highlights that the residents of both coastal towns have no direct link with or interest in Ford as a potential sister town or future residence. Also, Ford Airfield Market is an area market/car boot sale, as opposed to being a true local market, drawing on a catchment well beyond Ford and its environs. It is supported primarily by retailers who come from outside the immediate Ford catchment area by car and van.

3.11. It is clear therefore that the FAVG road shows were not geared towards the affected or interested existing communities, but towards those from further a-field with no direct involvement in or understanding of local issues. It is also perhaps significant that, despite all the heavy promotion, these road shows had exceptionally poor attendance; a total of only 500 people from the total population of the large towns of

Littlehampton and Bognor Regis and the Market's 1,000 or so visitors. Compare this with the 2,000 people who took part in a march at Yapton against the Eco-Town, and the 10,000 people who have signed a petition opposing it.

3.12. It could therefore be said that the FAVG's public consultation roadshow was a disappointment especially as, despite all the generally excellent advance publicity, so few people attended. Perhaps, as is most likely, this was a demonstration of the community's real opposition to the proposals. Indeed, one of the stated objectives of holding roadshows in Littlehampton and Bognor Regis was that these were two places "where issues of re-generation and homelessness are particularly relevant". It is interesting therefore that Littlehampton and Bognor Regis Town Councils, as well as Littlehampton and Bognor Regis Civic Societies were unanimous in rejecting the Eco-Town proposal in their various responses to the DCLG consultation paper.

4. Outcomes From The Consultation

Feedback from the Roadshow - Questionnaire

4.1. During the three roadshow events the FAVG invited people to complete a questionnaire on site or later via their website to help form a local opinion of their proposals for an Eco-Town at Ford. They received only 108 completed replies, thus forming a very inadequate baseline, and - quite incredibly - the information contained in these responses has been taken as the basis for the FAVG's deductions that their proposal has "strong support".

4.2. However, even if it was accepted that 108 responses were a statistically valid sample which were representative of the views of the community, most of the questions asked were of a more general nature rather than being directed specifically towards the Ford Eco-Town proposal.

4.3. In para 4.2, the FAVG claim that 41% of the 108 responses agreed that the Ford Airfield site was a more appropriate location for housing than a solely greenfield site. However, 46% disagreed. Then, compared with the 26% who agreed that an Eco-Town should be built at Ford, 50% disagreed. The final significant question asked people's overall impression of the proposed Eco-Town and, whilst 48% stated that it was a good idea (although 20% of this total had concerns), 38% said it was a bad idea and 14% were unsure. All-in-all, this is hardly a ringing endorsement from even this tiny and statistically unsound sample of local opinion.

Feedback from the Project Website

4.4. Para 4.3 states that the FAVG's website had received 391,557 "hits" since it was launched. However, "hits" do not mean individuals or local interested parties, nor do they indicate support for the project. Indeed, when analysing website effectiveness, the number of unique URL's are the key indicators of real interest, and the statement about the number of "hits" is therefore meaningless. Clearly, it is intended to imply that the

website has engaged a large and wide readership, thus 'proving' or at least implying that large-scale and effective consultation has taken place.

4.5. The key however lies in the response rate, and this has been abysmally low. Even the FAVG report confirms that only 32 email responses were received. 7 were supportive, 6 opposed the proposals, and the remainder were queries (12 from the same resident). Thus in contrast to earlier assertions this illustrates a total lack of effective two-way consultation and an inability to try alternative positive means of engaging with the community.

Analysis of the Consultation Responses

4.6. In paras 4.4 to 4.6 the FAVG seek to denigrate the opposition to their proposal and, despite all the negative messages to the contrary, they adduce, with hardly a shred of solid evidence that "the outcome of the consultation was very encouraging".

4.7. In para 4.7 they confirm quite rightly that there is a strong level of local support for the development of new 'energy efficient' housing, and especially that there is support from across the District for the provision of more affordable housing. This is a "given" for both Arun District Council and all local groups, but it has no direct bearing on the proposition to build either an Eco-Town or even just a new settlement at Ford. If asked, the majority support sympathetic infill and urban extensions as the best way of meeting local housing needs.

4.8. Then the FAVG draw a series of statistically invalid deductions. In para 4.8 it states that a significant number of people felt that Ford Airfield was a more suitable location than other sites in the District; "significant" in this case meaning less than 50 people and that was on the assumption that all development would be on brownfield land! Para 4.8 states that there was overwhelming support for new developments to be green and highly sustainable; "overwhelming" in this case meaning no more than 108 people! Then para 4.10 states that the FAVG were encouraged by the level of support for an Eco-Town at Ford Airfield; "encouraged" in this case by just some 50 people! Finally, although para 4.11 is somewhat confusing as it is difficult to discern the baseline data, it seems to be based on the views of no more than 54 people! In statistical terms the case is far from proved despite all the FAVG's optimistic assertions to the contrary.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Whilst the FAVG has clearly spent a great deal of money, time and effort on attempting to communicate the details of their proposal for an Eco-Town at Ford to the local community, it is apparent that they have concentrated too much on the transmission of information rather than in substantive discussions with those who would be affected by such a development. This even includes those who might embrace the concept of an Eco-Town at Ford; those on the housing waiting lists in Bognor Regis and Littlehampton. In general, the FAVG have merely carried out an 'arms-length' consultation exercise with the affected communities, by relying on their website, their advertisements and by a

roadshow located at three places somewhat distant from the key local stakeholders. In particular, they have failed to engage those on the housing waiting lists some of whom (in Littlehampton) have been quoted as saying that they regard the River Arun very much like the Berlin Wall, and that they wish to be re-housed in close proximity to their local communities and support networks.

5.2. FAVG's engagement with the community has been a superficial 'box ticking' exercise, with no genuine attempt to listen to or understand the concerns strongly expressed by the communities affected by the Ford Eco-Town proposal. In particular, the FAVG's heavy reliance on their poorly-attended roadshow and the handful (108) of responses does not show a genuine commitment to working with and consulting existing communities, which as acknowledged in their public consultation paper is a key component of a successful development proposal.

5.3. Contrary to the assertions in the FAVG's report "Public Consultation for Ford Airfield Eco-Town" (30 June 2008), the consultation process has not been a success. Rather it has been a disaster. It is apparent that the FAVG have simply gone through the motions of a communications exercise, and that they have failed to either impress or convince at any level locally. Finally, the pathetic attempt to 'prove' that there is a strong level of local support for the proposed Eco-Town at Ford as a result of receiving information from no more than 108 people is a complete travesty; indeed, it is a dishonest use of statistics. Conversely, it is not simply just a few people in a small local protest group who are opposed an Eco-Town at Ford, but rather it is the whole community, as was well evidenced from the responses to the DCLG's consultation paper. The County Council, the District Council, the Town Councils, the Parish Councils, the Civic Societies and thousands of ordinary local people are all opposed. In summary, there is overwhelming local opposition despite whatever optimistic assertions the FAVG might incorporate in their submissions to the DCLG.

5.4. Finally, the developers of the Ford Eco-Town scheme seek to substantially mislead the decision makers, through false and misleading claims and statistics. This cannot be allowed to go unchallenged.