

Eco-towns: reconciling environment and development?



Neil Sinden is policy director, CPRE

Neil Sinden reminds us that 60 years ago Aneurin Bevan said: "In the next year or so we will be judged by the number of houses we have put up. But in ten years we will be judged by the quality of those homes". These words resonate more strongly now than ever before.

The Government's eco-towns initiative has stimulated a frenzy of activity by hopeful developers around the country. It appears that 57 bids had been received for eco-town status by the end of October, the deadline set for submissions following the publication of by DCLG of its Eco-towns Prospectus. The Prime Minister subsequently announced that the original plans for five eco-towns would now be doubled to ten, with at least one in every region. So successful has the initiative been in stimulating interest, Ministers are now talking of eco-villages, eco-regions and even eco-quarters.

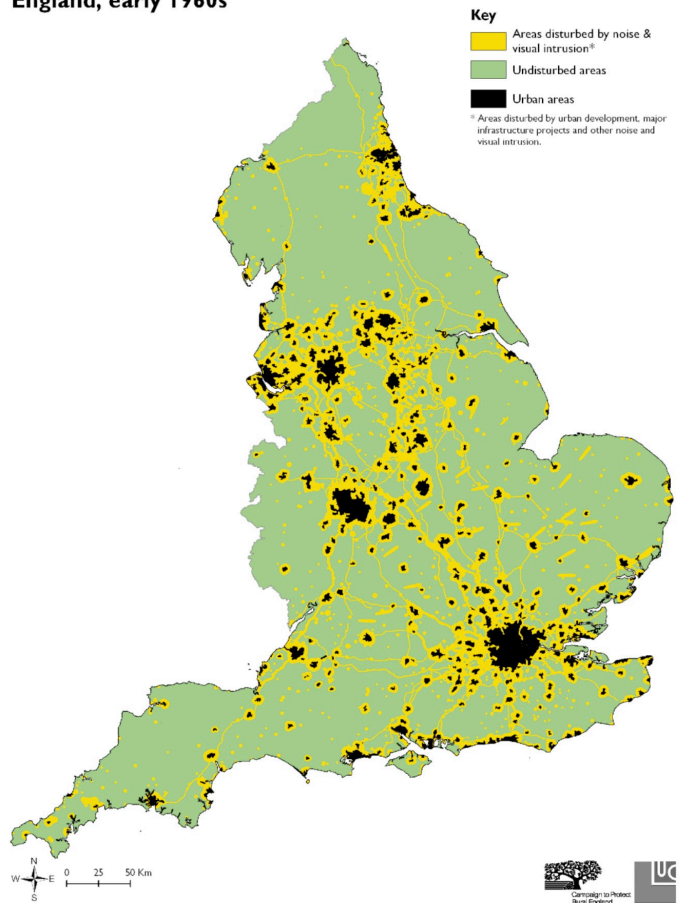
All together, the ten eco-towns are expected to provide up to 200,000 homes. They are a small but integral part of the Government's aspiration to deliver 3m new homes by 2020. While the details of the selection process are obscure, an announcement of those bids that are likely to proceed is expected in February. The Prospectus set out broad criteria which are being used to judge the proposals. It states that eco-towns should be new settlements 'separate and distinct from existing towns but well linked to them', and that they should be additional to existing plans, with 30-50 per cent of the housing being affordable. Other considerations include: how far they meet zero-carbon and other environmental standards; design quality and community involvement – to be secured, in part, through a 'ideas competition' announced by the Housing Minister, Yvette Cooper, in October involving local people and citizens' juries; and the use of brown-field land.

While CPRE welcomes the focus on the environmental implications of housing growth, before getting too carried away with all this talk of eco-this and eco-that, it's worth pausing to consider the wider context. First, the challenge posed by climate change is immense. It is now increasingly clear that, to keep the impacts of climate change within manageable

parameters, we will need to achieve an 80 per cent reduction in carbon emissions (on 1990 levels) by 2050. The Government's Climate Change Bill is a big step forward but we haven't even begun to address its implications of for land use and lifestyles.

The Government's commitment to ensuring all new homes are zero-

Intrusion Map: England, early 1960s



Neil Sinden has been Policy Director of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) since April 2002. He was a member of the Government's Affordable Rural Housing Commission and previously Head of Policy and Research at the urban regeneration charity ROOM where he managed the Government-funded Positive Planning Project. He has also worked for the arts and environment charity Common Ground, with whom he organised the first national Apple Day in 1990. Neil is a keen cyclist and lives with his partner and 3 children in east London.

For full information see the report available at www.cpre.org.uk
Original copyright CPRE and Countryside Commission, 1995.
Reproduced from Ordnance Survey information with the permission of The Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. Crown Copyright. Land Use Consultants. Licence Number 100019265 August, 2007

carbon by 2016 is also welcome. Retrofitting existing stock will also be important, with 27 per cent of the UK's total CO2 emissions currently coming from the domestic housing sector. The new Energy Performance Certificates can play a valuable role in this regard. We must also look at how we can reduce the carbon footprint of existing settlements. Key to this will be a focus on reducing car use and increasing accessibility to essential facilities by other transport modes, rather than continuing to promote mobility for the sake of it.

There is also an important

environmental agenda beyond the issue of climate change – serious though this is. CPRE has spearheaded campaigns to promote the more qualitative aspects of the environmental agenda, what some have described as the 'soft currency' issues, including rural tranquillity, landscape character, urban intrusion, and local distinctiveness. All these things make a vital contribution to the quality of life and of our surroundings.

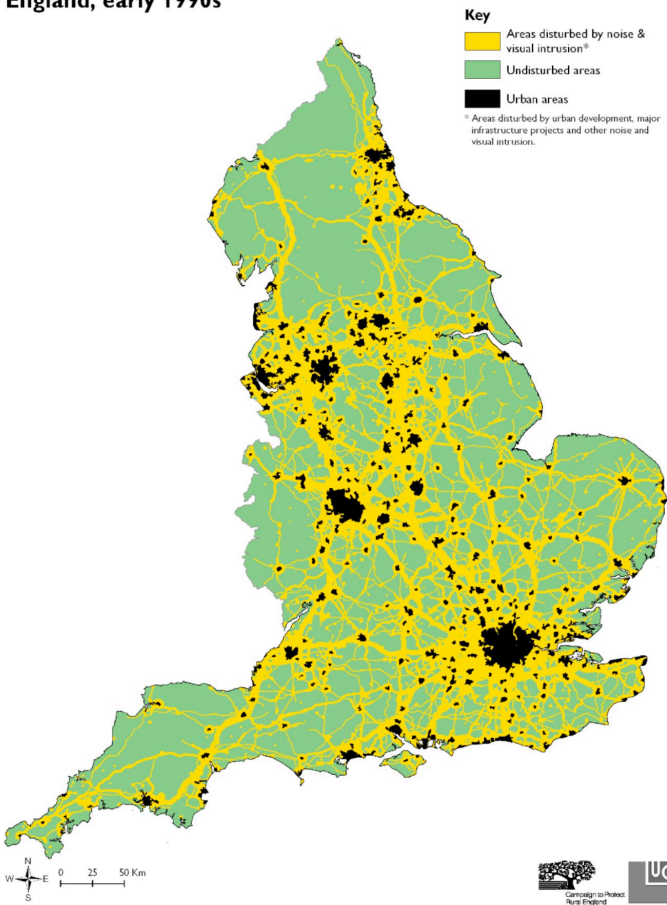
CPRE's pioneering work on tranquillity – one of the things people say they most value about the countryside, the sense of peace and

quiet and the opportunity to 'get away from it all' – is of particular note. Detailed maps for the whole of England produced in 2006 reveal how a range of landscape features contribute or detract from a sense of tranquillity. This research has added greatly to our understanding of how people experience the countryside. We now need to develop and apply the tranquillity mapping methodology to help guide new development, including the eco-towns.

We have also recently examined the extent of urban and suburban intrusion across the country. CPRE's

'intrusion maps' published in September last year show (below) the expansion of urban areas, the growth of the road network and the increase in traffic levels, and the resulting visual and noise disturbance that has extended across the face of England over the last 40 years or so. It is estimated that just over 50 per cent of the country is disturbed by the sight and sound of nearby roads, urban areas and other major infrastructure – more than double the extent of urban intrusion in the early 1960s. If we're not careful much of the remaining half of the country

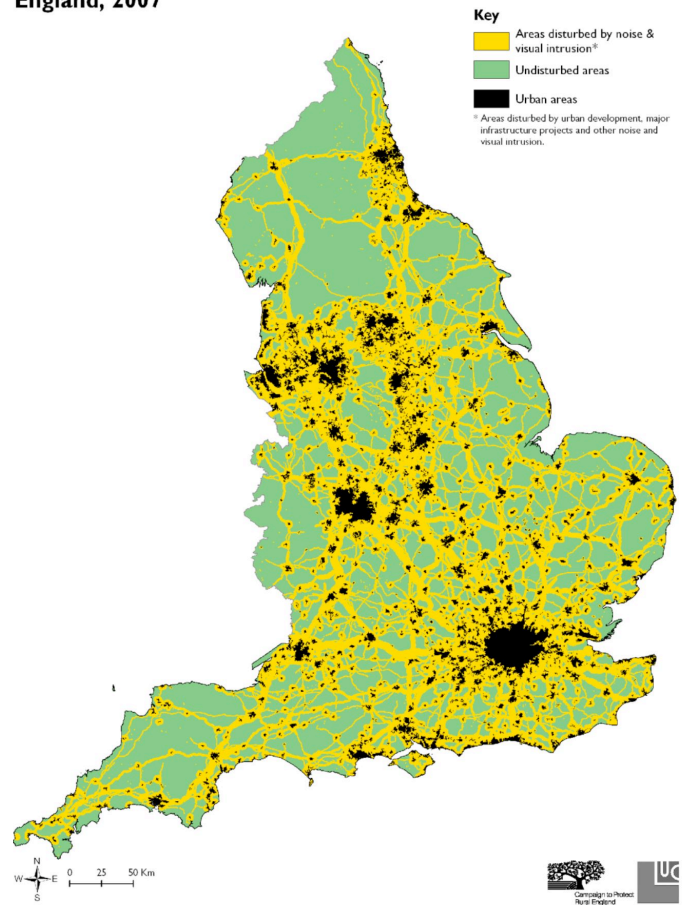
**Intrusion Map:
England, early 1990s**



For full information see the report available at www.cpre.org.uk
Original copyright CPRE and Countryside Commission, 1995.
Reproduced from Ordnance Survey information with the permission of The Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. Crown Copyright, Land Use Consultants, Licence Number 100019265 August 2007

Campaign to Protect Rural England
Produced on behalf of CPRE by Land Use Consultants

**Intrusion Map:
England, 2007**



This map is based on data from 2001 to mid-2007.
For full information see the report available at www.cpre.org.uk
Original copyright CPRE and Countryside Commission, 1995.
Reproduced from Ordnance Survey information with the permission of The Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. Crown Copyright, Land Use Consultants, Licence Number 100019265 August 2007

Campaign to Protect Rural England
Produced on behalf of CPRE by Land Use Consultants

could be blighted by the end of the century. The implications of these changes in the character of the country are important when considering the role and location of new eco-towns.

So the environmental pressures we face are considerable and extend beyond the immediate challenge of climate change. We also face great challenges in meeting our housing needs. CPRE recognises the need to increase housing supply and we particularly welcome the Government's recent decision to boost investment in social housing. We must pursue a needs-based, planned approach to housing supply, based on a critical assessment of demographic information, rather than on spurious economic modelling. This plan-led approach must look at the best strategic options for housing delivery which first considers the potential for urban and suburban renaissance – including in the market renewal areas and then, if necessary, the option of sustainable urban extensions.

CPRE has congratulated the Government on its achievements in securing more than 70 per cent of new housing on brownfield land consistently for the past seven years – against its original target of at least 60 per cent by 2008. But there is so much more to do to extend the urban renaissance. The National Land Use Database records enough previously developed land to accommo-

date more than one million homes.

Research for CPRE published this year showed that great capacity also exists from smaller brownfield sites below one hectare – not counted in the NLUD – and windfall sites which are responsible for up to 90 per cent of housing in some areas. London has enough small sites close to town centres to accommodate 60,000 new homes. Only after the options of urban renewal and, where necessary urban extensions, have been thoroughly explored should consideration be given to freestanding new eco-towns. These should be very much the option of last resort and may not be justified in every region.

So what kind of criteria would CPRE want to be applied to the development of the eco-towns where there is a proven need for them? First and foremost, their location will be critical, particularly with respect to existing settlements. There is no reason why they have to be freestanding new settlements unconnected from existing ones. And while they should use brownfield land, it should be recognised that not all brownfield sites are in suitable locations for development.

Second, it is also important that these settlements are exemplars of mixed use development – linking employment and housing, for example, in new ways taking account of the radical changes in working patterns we are likely to see over coming years. We also need radical

London has enough small sites close to town centres to accommodate 60,000 new homes.



THE ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGE

Climate Change Bill - 80% target by 2050
 zero-carbon homes and retrofitting
 reducing footprint of existing settlements
 reducing car travel and increasing accessibility
 beyond carbon – tranquillity, urban intrusion,
 local distinctiveness and quality of life

HOUSING THE NATION

Housing Green Paper – step change in supply
 investment in affordable housing
 needs-based approach, not market-driven
 urban and suburban renaissance
 urban extensions – Green Belt boundaries
 new settlements as last resort

improvements in the quality of housing design, and should question traditional approaches to density, making sure we avoid the mono-tecture, type and size of housing of the past, embracing co-housing and lifetime homes. At least 50 per cent of housing in eco-towns should be genuinely affordable. As exemplars, eco-towns must adopt cutting edge environmental standards in the design of buildings and neighbourhoods – contributing to targets for carbon reduction, achieving high levels of waste recycling, and minimising demand for water, energy and primary aggregates.

Eco-towns should embrace alternatives to the car-based models of development. They should include car-free neighbourhoods, where walking and cycling are planned for as the primary, even the exclusive means of getting around. The eco-town initiative should learn from John Prescott's five 'millennium villages', although it is not clear these have achieved a significant cut in car use. Using previously developed land

adjacent to or within existing settlements will help discourage car dependency.

Careful thought needs to be given to the green space around and between buildings. There is likely to be a strong case for the designation of new areas of Green Belt to manage and contain development. This could provide the potential for local food production, and protect and enhance existing landscape features, creating local distinctiveness and a sense of place. Eco-towns should also provide mechanisms for community involvement in the long term management of the public realm to stimulate a sense of belonging.

The success of the eco-towns initiative will depend to a great extent on public involvement both in securing a consensus on the need for them, and in their layout and design. While the involvement of citizens' juries in assessing proposals is welcome, it would be a huge mistake to attempt to design a town from scratch on a drawing board with no

URBAN RENAISSANCE - WORK IN PROGRESS

brownfield reuse – untapped potential
 design and density – limited progress
 millennium villages – what can we learn
 low carbon villages – ARHC report
 spatial efficiency - linking transport and land use

CRITERIA FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

location, location, location
 linking employment and housing- mixed use
 tackling transport – car-free, walking and cycling
 higher density, mixed housing, flexible design
 green infrastructure, local foods and Green Belt
 sense of place and belonging
 long term management of public realm

THE PLANNING PROCESS AND SEA

effective strategic planning – need for housing
 public involvement and consensus
 SEA of alternative options – concentration,
 sustainable urban extensions
 the case for freestanding new settlements
 environmental capacity – tranquillity etc
 focus on quality as much as quantity

ENGAGING LOCAL COMMUNITIES

a bottom-up approach
 planning for real/enquiry by design
 – Northampton/Basildon
 planning and public consensus
 faith in the plan-led process
 the local planning policy gap

local knowledge. And using citizens' juries is no substitute for consulting local communities on the need for, location and design of eco-towns through the established planning process. There is growing disquiet about the Government's wider planning reforms which actually reduce opportunities for effective community involvement. We must regain the public confidence in planning that is so essential to the delivery of sustainable development.

Plans for eco-towns will fail unless they are well integrated with existing settlements and agreed with, not imposed on, local communities. The proposals should be assessed through the established planning process, ensuring that evidence of need is fully tested, the views of local communities are considered, and proper consideration is given to the environmental consequences.

On the eve of the last great housebuilding boom over 60 years

ago, Aneurin Bevan, said: 'We must not only build quickly, we must build well. In the next year or so we will be judged by the number of houses we have put up. But in ten years we will be judged by the quality of those

homes'. These words resonate more strongly now than ever before. Today's Ministers and their advisors should bear them in mind as they drive forward the eco-towns initiative.



Campaign to Protect Rural England

