



The Retail Planning Knowledge Base Briefing Paper 12

Retailing in Eco-towns

Anne Findlay and Leigh Sparks
Institute for Retail Studies
Faculty of Management
University of Stirling
STIRLING FK9 4LA, SCOTLAND
Tel: (01786) 467384
Fax: (01786) 465290
E-mail: Leigh.Sparks@stir.ac.uk
a.m.findlay@stir.ac.uk
Website www.irs.stir.ac.uk

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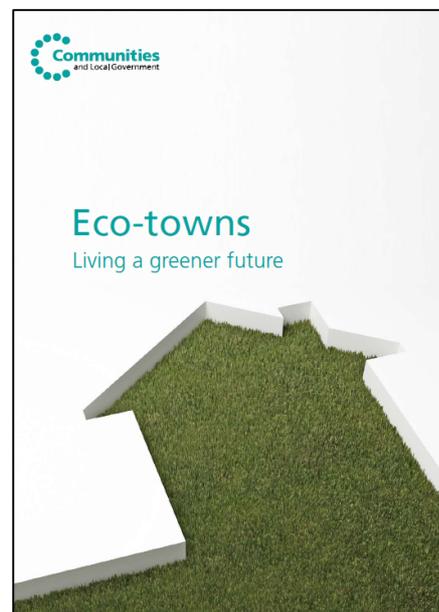
Retailing in Eco-towns

The Communities and Local Government Concept of Eco-towns

Background

The **Eco-towns: Prospectus** was launched in 2007. It set out the vision for eco-towns emphasising their positive contribution to climate change, sustainable living and housing supply. They were expected to deliver outcomes against the following criteria: zero carbon and environmental standards, sustainable transport, design quality, community involvement, employment, health and use of land.

In April 2008 **Eco-towns; Living a greener future** was published. This document set out the details for eco-town development. Selected sites were suggested. A subsequent document (**Eco-towns. Sustainability appraisal and habitat regulations. Assessment of the draft eco-towns planning policy statement** reported on responses to the initial eco-town proposals). A draft planning policy statement was also published in 2008.



Concept

Eco-towns will range from 5000 to 20000 households. None of the Communities and Local Government documents lay out any clear guidance on retailing though there are general comments:

‘Eco town proposals should provide for a good range of facilities within the town – a secondary school, a medium scale retail centre....’ (**Eco-towns: living a greener future**, p.9)

‘All homes should be within a 10-15 minute walk of core services such as local shops’ (**Eco-towns. Sustainability appraisal and habitat regulations**, p.96)

‘The Town Square Approach in which services and facilities are located together and designed including schools, shops and other key facilities...’ (**Eco-towns: living a greener future**, p.18)

These demonstrate that the retail component of eco-towns has perhaps not been thought out in detail. Indeed the responses from the consultation (**Eco-towns: Living a greener future. Summary of consultation responses**) highlighted the impracticality of providing all necessary services at a 10 minute walk from residential areas.

There is no mention of the retail forms envisaged e.g. large supermarkets, discount stores, retail warehouses, markets or local parades. If retailing followed existing patterns then the larger eco-towns (20,000 households) might expect to have several

supermarkets, discount retailers, a DIY retailer and possibly key high street retail chains, giving maybe 3-400 retail or service units. Even the medium sized centres could require retail spaces for a major food and discount retailer and around 200 retail or service units.

Other Possible Views of Retailing in Eco-towns

Of course there are alternative views of retailing in eco-towns. For example the Bioregional Development Group envisage that eco-towns will adopt an eco-friendly consumer approach. Their starting proposition is that

‘The target for sustainability in eco-towns should be a reduction of 50-55% in the impact of consumer goods’ (Bioregional Development Group, 2008, p.17).

They propose :

‘As a minimum eco-town developers should:

- set a new trend by designing an environment which favours quality of life, community and healthy activity over shopping as a leisure activity
- Market retail space to responsible retailers who commit to eco-town philosophy and who will work to provide sustainable retailing
- Work with tenants to include space for re-use and repair of consumer goods, swap shops and charity shops
- Foster and encourage local sustainable goods and services’

(Bioregional Development Group, 2008, p.17).

In addition they favour reducing food impact through local production and use of local foods with a reduction in waste through a reduction in weekly shopping. Walking daily for food supplies is their preferred shopping mode.

Indications are, however, that mainstream retailing is what is envisaged given for example the initial involvement of Tesco in one of the proposals (although this has now been withdrawn). Goodman et al. (2007) in ‘**Retail futures: scenarios for the future of UK retail and sustainable development**’ suggest a set of scenarios for more sustainable retailing. Of the four suggested scenarios the one which seems to come closest to that envisaged for eco-towns by the Communities and Local Government department is probably the ‘I’m in your hands’ scenario. This was a scenario for a less prosperous group in affordable housing. Here the ‘eco’ element is **provided** rather than the **responsibility** of the individual resident. Consumers take on trust the sustainability credentials of the retailer and the retailer’s way of selling goods. All businesses will however be required to meet exacting environmental standards to operate in eco-towns.

Research on Travel for Shopping and Retailer and Shopper Attitudes to Sustainability

Research reported by Guy in '**Planning for retail development**' (2007, pps 186-187) notes that:

- Local facilities will increase walking for top up convenience shopping but weekly main food shopping will remain car based.
- Theories of household travel behaviour show that nearest destinations are not always the chosen destination as they do not offer the preferred choice of goods or shopping environment
- Compact cities may reduce the need but not the desire for travel (Breheny, 1995).

European studies showed that eco-towns worked best where they are satellites of bigger conurbations and where public transport links to these conurbations were exceptionally good (PRP and Design for Homes). The larger eco-towns will be able to provide a range of retail facilities but even so they will not provide a full range of retailers. Transport links to other centres are therefore critical.

Many retail companies and shopping centre operators have made progress in making their businesses operationally more sustainable, realising that it is only a matter of time before further legislation will make this compulsory (IGD, 2008). They have therefore invested in greater energy efficiency, more sustainable buildings, improved handling of waste and more energy efficient logistics. Corporate responsibility has become increasingly important as a part of retailer identity (Jones et al, 2006). For some, however, operational efficiency in this regard does not overcome more fundamental questions over the mode of supply and the retail practices broadly, with only local small scale retailers seen as appropriate. The co-operative movement might have a role to play as a more acceptable retail organisation but one which can provide the necessary scale of retailing.

Whilst some 75% of consumers express concern over environmental issues this translates into a much smaller proportion who would be considered committed green consumers, a figure of less than 20%, although increasing (IGD, 2008). Ethical consumers often pay more for their goods. Such a scenario is not compatible with the targeted 50% of affordable housing.

Conclusions

- Communities and Local Government concepts of eco-towns do not envisage a change in attitude towards consumerism or an elite set of committed eco-residents.
- Retail provision will probably match other retail provision for the size and spending power of the community. Eco-towns are catering for those in affordable housing.
- Emphasis is on accessibility of retailing within the eco-town and on accessibility to other centres by public transport, particularly in the smaller eco-towns.
- It is unlikely that in an eco-town of 20000 households everyone would be able to walk in 10 minutes to a major supermarket.
- Retailing in eco-towns should seek to provide all convenience products required in the weekly shop in a format and price attractive to the residents. 5000 households is on the small side for an eco-town to attract the necessary retail investment to minimise outshopping.
- Retail operators are likely to be the ones to take on sustainability issues rather than the consumers in eco-towns.
- Communities and Local Government need to think more about what type of retail provision should be envisaged; planners need to think about how to connect eco-towns to the retail network in the area.

References

Bioregional Development Group and Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment

What makes an eco-town different?

Wallington: Bioregional Development Group, 2008, 32p. Available online at:

www.cabe.org.uk

See also: Bland, S. The eco-towns study, **Urban Design**, 109, 2009, 7.

This paper sets out the position of the Bioregional Development Group whose concerns are to deliver more sustainable outcomes. The report takes the position that an eco-town should be characterised by sustainable practices and an ethos of more sustainable living through more localised practices and lower consumption.

Breheny, M.

The compact city and transport energy consumption,

Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 20, 1995, 81-101.

This article examines the truth of assumptions about the relationship between centralisation of activities and energy consumption. It questions the idea that the compact city is the most environmentally sustainable, arguing that it only results in marginal gains in terms of energy consumption.

Community and Local Government

Eco-towns: living a greener future.

London: CLG, 2008, 57p.

Community and Local Government

Eco-towns: Prospectus.

London: CLG, 2007

Communities and Local Government

Eco-towns. Sustainability appraisal and habitat regulations. Assessment of the draft eco-towns planning policy statement.

London: CLG, Scott Wilson, 2008, 103p.

Communities and Local Government

Eco-towns: Living a greener future. Summary of consultation responses.

London: CLG, 2008, 69p.

Available online at: www.communities.gov.uk

Together these documents demonstrate government thinking on the eco-town concept and the development of these ideas. The selected sites are mapped and discussed in some detail. Key aims of eco-towns are set out with an emphasis on the environmental goals to be achieved and the housing needs to be met.

Goodman, J., Berry, T., Knowles, H. and Miller, P.

Retail futures: scenarios for the future of UK retail and sustainable development,

London: Forum for the Future, 2007, 64p.

Available online at: www.forumforthefuture.org.uk

A report from work by Forum for the Future on sustainable retail futures. The report begins with a schematic brief history of change in the retail sector and the timings of

concerns about sustainability. Retail scenarios which combine shopping scenarios, business scenarios, societal change and sustainable developments are outlined. These have been conceived along two intersecting axes – from prosperous to less prosperous and from doing things yourself to having things done for you. Questions such as whether the size of retail formats is contrary to sustainability and how sustainable consumption can be made available to all are asked.

Guy, C.

Planning for retail development: A critical view of the British experience,

London: Routledge, 2007, 292p. 0415354536 (Email Guy@cardiff.ac.uk)

Chapter 3 is entitled ‘Sustainability, shopping travel and retail policy’. It gives details of research on aspects of travel for shopping and specifically discusses travel in the compact city.

Harrison, A.

Forced conclusion,

Estates Gazette, 12/07/08, 110-111.

In planning terms the eco-town initiative has been ‘railroaded’ through the system. No consideration has been given as to whether they in fact present the most sustainable option to provide new housing. Funding issues and planning issues are likely to delay the eco-town initiative.

Institute of Grocery Distribution

Ethical shopping – are consumers turning green?

Watford: IGD, 2008. www.igd.com

This report investigates the size and structure of the ethical market situating green consumerism in the context of other ethical shopping patterns such as fair trade and organic products.

Institute of Grocery Distribution

Sustainability: Planning for the future.

Watford; IGD, 2008, 114p. www.igd.com

An industry perspective on why it is important for retail businesses to progress their green agendas. It also gives details of what retailers are doing to become more sustainable.

Jones, P., Comfort, D. and Hillier, D.

Net call for the major players,

Town and Country Planning, 75(6), 2006, 186-188. (Email: pjones@glos.ac.uk)

A review of the pressure group activities of groups opposed to supermarket dominance on range of issues. These include a range of issues such as the Friends of the Earth planning concerns and Corporate Watch’s ‘Tesco-isation’ concern over the ‘killing off’ of high streets. It is posited that these concerns represent a more fundamental tension between sustainability and consumerism.

PRP and Design for Homes

Beyond eco-towns: Applying the lessons from Europe – Report and conclusions.

London:PRP Architects, 2008. 978-0-8560622-0-8

This paper examines case studies of eco-towns in Europe (Germany, The Netherlands and Ireland). Connectivity, character, collaboration, community, climate proofing and cash flow are examined with a view to learning lessons for the UK. A key finding was that eco-towns which were satellites of existing well serviced and connected centres had the best chance of achieving their goals.

Websites

www.communities.gov.uk This is the Communities and Local Government website. All publications from this department can be accessed and downloaded from this site.

www.directgov.uk/en/campaigns/eco-towns This government web site is a shop window for the eco-town policy and allows users to engage with the eco-town debate.