

---

**The Co-op Pennbury Eco Town Proposal**

**Impact on the Leicester South constituency and the city**

**Peter Soulsby**

**Member of Parliament for Leicester South**

**4 November 2008**

## Eco Town

On Thursday 30 October the City Council concluded that 'Pennbury' is 'a suitable site for an eco town'.

As the eco town would have a very considerable impact on Leicester and on my Constituency in particular, I have been looking very closely at the proposals

### The Documents

I have recently seen

- the Co-op's Eco Town Master Plan
- the Co-op's news release of 9 October announcing this Plan
- the Eco Town Transport Assessment
- the Council Report 'Leicestershire Eco Town Update' and
- the Council resolution of 30 October

I will discuss these in order.

The Eco Town Master Plan Document is particularly disappointing. It has been printed in a type-face that is far too small to be intelligible; has maps that are almost impossible to interpret and is produced with attractive but largely irrelevant 'aspirational' pictures.

When challenged about the usefulness of this document, the Co-op representatives responded to me that it was essentially a document for the DCLG. However their news release of 9 October was very different - announcing the Master Plan as something upon which the Co-op would 'seek views...from local people in a fresh round of consultation' and which would enable the Co-op to 'prove the viability of the proposed development' – claims which are ludicrous for a document which hides far more than it reveals.

The version of the Master Plan on the internet has many of the failings of that which is printed. Particularly, the maps are as difficult to understand in their dynamic version as they are on the printed page.

To be fair, since I challenged the Co-op about this they have provided me with A3 versions of both the text and the maps and it is from these that I have been able to clarify the concerns that follow. Unfortunately the readable A3 versions have not being made more generally available to the public – or, I understand, to City Councillors.

Amongst the additional papers now provided has been the 'Transport Assessment' which has been helpful in clarifying many of the Co-op's fundamental assumptions.

The Council Report on the eco town was remarkably brief for an issue as significant as this development. Most surprising is the apparently uncritical

acceptance by Council officers of many – though not all - of the Co-op's assumptions. I will discuss these more fully later but, to give one obvious example, in Section 4.16 the Council officers assert that 'parking would be restricted to half a space per house...' They do not question whether it is realistic to assume that such a figure could be achieved and enforced – or whether it is an appropriate basis for assessing the likely transportation impact of the Town. Most disturbing, the officers' report has no significant discussion about how the aspirations and promises of the eco town can be guaranteed on a site that will have a massive impact on the City but which is outside of its Council's planning jurisdiction. It is also unfortunate that, for the Council report, the officers reproduced only a single map from the Master Plan - one that is even less intelligible than the original version from which it was copied.

The Council Resolution reflects the officers' apparently uncritical enthusiasm. With the sole exception of the 30% affordable housing requirement the City Council 'conditions' are vague and mostly amount to little more than polite requests and hopes.

On Housing even the requirement for '30% affordable housing', says nothing about the crucial issues of the definition of such housing; the proportion that must be social housing for rent; the rights of the City Council and those on its waiting list or the stage in the development when this housing is to be provided. Lamely the resolution adds that the Council should 'ask' the Government to consider higher levels and should 'welcome' discussion on such housing in regeneration areas.

The section on Community Facilities has no 'conditions'. It merely asserts that there is 'adequate' community provision in the plans without questioning the deliverability of the promises. The section concludes, again rather lamely, that the Council should 'look forward to discussions'.

Similarly there are no 'conditions' in the section on the Environment - merely an acceptance of the plans without any reference to how the Co-op's promises will be guaranteed.

It is, however, the section on Transport in the resolution that is most inadequate. I will say more about this later. The uncritical welcome for the 'planned park and ride site in Oadby' is particularly odd since there should be a whole range of questions about how that site can be accessed from Pennbury; whether it is in the right location and whether it has any real relevance to the eco town.

It is perhaps the prospect of the tram that has seemed the most attractive element in the Co-op's package. Again I will say more about this later but there are serious questions about the credibility of the tram; the Co-op's commitment to it and their assertions about its practical and financial viability.

It is particularly disturbing to me, as MP for Leicester South, that there is no reference at all in the resolution to the likely substantial impact of the Eco

Town on the A6 London Road or on any of the routes to the M1. There are again no 'conditions' in this section.

The Regeneration section of the resolution includes the assertion that the various elements of Pennbury 'boost the regeneration of Leicester and surrounding areas'. Particularly ineffectual is the decision to 'ask' that Pennbury is developed so that it faces the City. Quite astonishing the only reference to employment in the whole resolution - such a fundamental issue in considering the impact of the scheme - is the observation that the 'models ... need to be refined'. Yet again there is no conditions attached to it.

Finally, the resolution makes reference to the Regional Spatial Strategy and concludes by asking for 'discussion' of joint governance and planning arrangements.

I will also discuss this later, however it is quite inadequate for the City Council to be merely 'asking' for influence over something that is going to have such a fundamental effect on the City's future well-being. The potential negative impact on the City is far greater than on any of the other local authority areas involved. The City Council should be insisting on having planning control as a prerequisite of any support for the scheme.

### **The issues and concerns**

Before returning to the issues and my major concerns about this scheme, I must stress that the concept of an 'eco town' is something of which I am very supportive. I am also convinced that the Co-op, with its unique ethos, is particularly well equipped to deliver the vision. However the site in question is being put forward by the Co-op because it happens to be one which, for historic reasons, they own and have understandably wanted to develop for many years. It is, however, not an area that has been identified for potential development in any of the local or regional plans. Its location on the eastern fringe of the City, close to but separated from Stonegate, Oadby and Evington, means that it is neither a 'stand alone' development nor one that is easily integrated with the City and its infrastructure.

In their description of the impact on the City, the Co-op have made a number of assumptions that are not credible –

- **that car ownership can be restricted to one car to two households.** Astonishingly the City Council officers appear to have accepted this fundamental assumption as being guaranteed. It is, of course, highly desirable that we reduce car usage to this sort of level, but I am not aware of any evidence from any comparable community anywhere in Europe where this has been achieved. While a very worthy aspiration, it is not credible to expect that perhaps three quarters of the cars owned by the residents will be sold before they move in to Pennbury! Similarly it is scarcely credible that, from day one, potential employers setting up in Pennbury would be prepared to do so without provision for a significant proportion of their workforce to

arrive by car and without vans and trucks being able to make deliveries.

- **that at least 60% of those who live in Pennbury will work in Pennbury.** Again this fundamental assumption seems to have been unchallenged by the council officers - yet is not credible in the short or medium term. Positioned on the edge of Leicester, residents are most unlikely to move to Pennbury because that is where that they expect to work. For example, if the provision of affordable housing is to make any impact on the housing waiting list in the City, a significant proportion of it will be taken by people who already have work (or whose families have work) elsewhere in Leicester. Similarly people who make a life-style choice to live in Pennbury could be a nurse at Glenfield, a teacher at Mowmacre or a manager in Wigston - and their partner may have a job somewhere else completely.
- **that it is possible to run a rapid transport scheme down the A6 corridor together with additional private cars simply by putting in a more sophisticated traffic-light scheme and some junction improvements.** Incredibly the City Council officers didn't mention the A6 London Road capacity in their report or discuss the inevitable loss of trees, gardens and the Mayfield Road roundabout. They seem to have asked none of the important questions.
- **that there is not going to be a major impact on roads and junctions between Pennbury and the M1.** Even a modest increase in cars in the Eco town area will place significant burdens on these routes and inevitably lead to further pressures for dual carriageways.
- **that it is going to be possible to isolate Pennbury from Evington and Stoneygate by cutting Gartree Road and Stoughton Lane.** The practical implications of severing these and other roads – which the Co-op assumes will be possible - is not discussed by the City Council.

## **A Tram Scheme**

The prospect of a tram for Leicester is something that officers and members have understandably found seductive. However previous studies of the potential in Leicester have been discouraging. The costs currently being suggested by the Co-op seem to be significantly understated. Despite the Co-op's assertions that 'work has already been undertaken' all that they are actually offering towards a tram is £1 million a year for 5 years to undertake a further study. At the very least it would be reasonable to expect that the previous work on the potential for rapid-transport schemes in Leicester and the economics of trams in comparable cities should be independently reviewed before much reliance is placed on the prospect or the claimed price tag. The plans provided by the Co-op for a potential tram route down London Road seem do little more than draw red lines on the existing road layout - with the exception of the destruction of the Mayfield Road roundabout and its replacement by traffic lights. Particularly incredible is the Co-op's assertion

that the trams can share the road space with cars and buses on London Road and be given sufficient room merely by introducing a sophisticated traffic light scheme. Interestingly, as I understand it, what the officers describe politely as 'hybrid vehicles' for the rapid transport scheme are actually seen by the Co-op as a 'bendy-buses'.

## **Strategic Issues**

Finally there are three major strategic issues that the officers of the City Council don't seem to have put in front of members –

1. the impact that 14,000 houses will have on housing development elsewhere in and around the City - particularly on areas of regeneration.
2. the impact investment in new jobs in the eco town will have on regeneration investment on 'brown-field' sites in the City
3. the complete inability of the City Council under existing arrangements to have any direct control over the development once permission is given. Under present planning mechanisms, it will be possible for the developers - probably with a very good economic pretext - to develop all or part of the site in ways that are very different from their stated intentions. It would be possible for changes in layout, phasing and components of Pennbury - potentially very damaging to the City – to be approved by the District and County Planning authorities while the City Council is reduced to being a spectator making ineffective representations.

## **Conclusion**

I regret that the City Council has approved a premature resolution that can be interpreted as support for the eco town until -

- there has been considerably more public exploration and debate of the issues I have discussed in this paper – particularly following the publication of the Strategic Assessment
- there is an assurance that, were it to be approved, the eco town development would be under the planning control of the City Council
- the City Council has commissioned external independent studies of the employment, housing investment and transportation impact of the Co-op's proposals and particularly the lure of the tram.