

News release from The Co-operative Group

ECO-TOWN WILL BE A 'COMMUNITY FOR ALL REASONS'

The Co-operative Group sets out vision for housing, community and regeneration

The planned eco-town for Leicestershire will mark a step change in the way UK communities develop and function, providing jobs and homes to boost the local economy and facilities to benefit its neighbours.

The Co-operative Group and English Partnerships are putting forward a range of initiatives to ensure that the new community, proposed for its land south east of Leicester, will be a permanent asset for existing villages close by, the city and the wider region.

They are contained in two consultation papers, one on housing, the other on community and regeneration, which are being published on the organisation's eco-town website, www.ecotownforleicestershire.coop, this week.

Ruairidh Jackson, Head of Planning and Property Strategy for The Co-operative Group, explained: "As a democratic organisation already closely involved in many hundreds of communities across the country, we believe we are uniquely placed to create a successful, vibrant community that people will want to live and work in."

In its paper on housing, the Group makes it clear that there are a number of options in terms of how the community could be laid out within the existing farm estate, only 40 per cent of which will be required to develop the town.

Among the many initiatives the Group is proposing for the eco-town are:

*A plan to provide starter homes and flats, family homes, and homes suitable for elderly residents which will create a "**community for life**". This would provide homes for people at all stages of life and needs. Importantly, it would also provide the right mix of residential accommodation to ensure that elderly people who need care can stay with family and friends rather than having to be moved elsewhere.

*The establishment of a **Design and Development Panel** to ensure that the eco-town is developed in line with local requirements and aspirations. The panel will be made up of experts in areas such as housing, sustainable transport, landscaping and zero-carbon technology and supported with the involvement of local people.

***Active community engagement** – giving residents a close say in how the community is run, for example by giving people a share in the town's infrastructure, such as community heating & power systems, leisure facilities and open spaces.

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*Providing complementary **community facilities** in the town for culture, leisure and education so that people do not have to travel to meet the majority of their needs. These will also benefit people living close to the town while complementing and supporting the wider range of facilities available in Leicester.

*Playing an integral part in the **regeneration of Leicester**. By working closely with Leicester City Council and with help from its partner, English Partnerships, which owns a small part of the land designated as the intended site, the Group will work to ensure the community plays a key role in the city's own regeneration plans by providing affordable homes for people and new sustainable technology industries which complement the city's own specialisms.

*Setting up a **community fund** to foster the growth of special interest groups within the community. Last year the Co-operative Group donated over £7 million to local projects throughout the UK including grass roots sport, credit counselling and community health.

*Providing **quality and choice in energy efficient housing stock** – including a minimum of 4,000 “affordable” homes – to ensure the eco-town meets the challenges which face the county as more people live alone and seek their own homes and professional and skilled people wishing to work in the area seek good quality accommodation to meet their sustainable aspirations.

*If local communities want, there is the opportunity to protect surrounding villages with **green buffer zones** while, at the same time, relieving the pressure on these villages for incremental expansion. Our approach means that we can also look at options to integrate villages within the town or to keep them separate, depending on the people's views and the agreed best relationship between the new town and existing communities.

*Embedding **IT infrastructure** in the community from the outset to ensure that people can work effectively from home if their job affords them that choice. At the same time, this technology will be used to establish a **community intranet**, accessible exclusively to residents and users in the local area, helping to create a sense of community and providing instant information on community issues and events.

Ruairidh Jackson explained: “There are a number of places around the country where these ideas have been implemented on a one-off basis – the eco-town for Leicestershire will bring the best of these all together to create a community for the future.

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“In common with other counties throughout the UK, Leicestershire is facing a tough set of challenges in terms of housing provision with people living longer, more people living in single-person households and more young people finding it increasingly difficult to get on the housing ladder. There is also a recognised need for more large family homes locally and for flexible homes that match people’s changing requirements. We can be part of the solution to all of these housing needs.

“An eco-town on our site will be a community for all reasons – one which helps the county meets those challenges, boosts the city region economy and puts the county at the international forefront of sustainable development.

“A definitive plan for the community will only come once we have given local people the opportunity to input their views on these important issues. We will be coming back to them with that plan in good time before the Government’s second phase of consultation ends in October.”

Kitt McGrath, Project Manager for English Partnerships, the National Regeneration Agency, said: “English Partnerships have been pioneering sustainable communities throughout England since 1997, and we are pleased to work with the Co-operative Group to help bring forward this mixed community that will complement the existing housing in Leicestershire.”

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Notes to editors:

1. Further background on the Co-operative Group is available at www.co-operative.coop.
2. Other useful websites with information about sustainable communities include:
The Town and Country Planning Association
<http://www.tcpa.org.uk/>
The Academy for Sustainable Communities
<http://www.ascskills.org.uk/pages/home>
The Prince’s Foundation for the Built Environment
<http://www.princes-foundation.org/>
3. The Group is an acknowledged leader in sustainable development. Voted Britain’s most ethical brand in 2006, we have also received the Queen’s Award for Enterprise in Sustainable Development, the Renewable Energy Association’s Pioneer Award and Business Commitment to the Environment’s Peter Parker Award for Environmental Leadership.

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4. English Partnerships is the national regeneration agency, supporting high quality sustainable growth in England. A non-departmental public body, it is sponsored by the Communities and Local Government department (CLG). English Partnerships owns around 80 hectares of land to the south of Great Glen which is included in the proposals.
5. Midlands Co-operative Society, which operates stores in the Leicester area, is an independent Co-operative business, which is not involved in the eco-town proposal.

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