

Creating groundbreaking exemplars

The eco-towns get started on the ground this year with demonstrator and exemplar projects. The aim of the eco-developments is to lead the way in innovation, going beyond the achievements of projects like Freiburg and Hammarby. Sue Riddlestone, director of environmental organisation BioRegional and member of the TCPA eco-towns expert advisory group and eco-towns Challenge Panel, shares her experience of eco-village exemplars.

Eco-developments will be about so much more than green buildings. As the introduction to the eco-towns PPS states, the whole approach is one of creating a sustainable lifestyle which will ensure that residents and workers will be able to reduce their carbon footprint to a sustainable level. In other words, your task is no less than one of showing what our sustainable future looks like, with 80% reductions in CO₂ emissions, in a small town setting. The exemplars will have to make a serious attempt to go beyond what has been done before and rise to that difficult challenge, together with being a great place to live and work and, very importantly, making a profit. If the exemplars are that good then each eco-town will be off to a flying start and all the benefits will start to flow, if they are only “so-so” then interest and support could fizzle out. BioRegional has recently joined the Bicester delivery team and we are acutely aware of the challenges and opportunities you face. Sharing lessons learned from previous projects can only help and that’s why in March we welcomed the four eco-town teams down for a warts and all tour of Peabody’s BedZED eco-village, in which we are a partner. We were able to pass on lessons from this and subsequent sustainable communities including One Brighton.

Measuring impacts and creating sustainable lifestyles

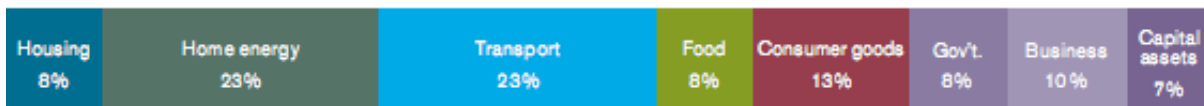


Fig 1. Breakdown of average UK resident's CO₂ emissions (11.87 tonnes/annum)

Ref: What makes an eco-town? BioRegional & CABI Sept 2008 PDF at www.bioregional.com

One of the key lessons we have learned is to approach the community from the perspective of the various types of people who are going to live and work there; and about what is going to make it easy for them to do the right thing and difficult to do the wrong thing in terms of reducing their carbon impacts (figure 1) and living a sustainable life. Then we can get creative and design a local community, economy and services to help achieve this. This process can be kick started with workshops involving the delivery team and key stakeholders, which also has the effect of helping those involved to develop a shared vision for the community.

Reducing the need to drive a car

At BedZED, having implemented our green transport plan, we managed to reduce fossil fuel car miles by between 50-65%. But this is on the outskirts of London with good public transport. An obvious issue for eco-towns is that personal transport impacts could be higher than the UK average due to their semi-

rural locations. So really thinking hard about why people need to travel in their daily lives and creating workable solutions to avoid the need to travel or to make it easy to use sustainable travel options at every life stage might be a way in which the eco-towns can really innovate in a world leading way. This will obviously be difficult with the small number of homes in the exemplars but in the March workshop delegates came up with lots of great ideas, for example thinking about how they could avoid using the car on the complicated multi-schools drop off and then on to work trip. If anyone would like the notes from the workshop please e-mail us.

Commercial viability

One question that always comes up is “How can we make eco-developments commercially viable?” BedZED did cost more than average but it pointed the way to how to get the best carbon savings for your buck. One key lesson was: reduce road space and car parking which reduces costs and with the land saved you can build more saleable buildings and generate more income. De-emphasising the car, making it quieter and safe for children to go out to play has also created a better quality of life for residents here at BedZED. Our associated property development company BioRegional Quintain, in a JV with Crest Nicholson, has built One Brighton - inner city apartments which will enable residents to reduce their impacts to a sustainable level within the normal range of build costs. This is a major breakthrough, we are starting to see how we really can make eco-developments mainstream.

Passing on the lessons learned

If you do a good job on your exemplar you can expect to receive a lot of visitors so it's important to plan for them. At the March workshop we passed on our experiences of offering guided tours and collecting monitoring data so that others can learn from the projects. CLG have asked BioRegional and UEA to work with stakeholders to draft a monitoring framework for the eco-developments so that there is some consistency and comparability. All of the successes and indeed the failures of the eco-developments will influence government policy and industry practice, so it is important work we are all engaged in here.

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