

Concreting the Countryside

Q&A: Ecotowns [The Guardian](#), Thursday 3 April 2008 16.49 BST

The government has announced the 10 locations shortlisted to become Britain's first green communities. But the controversial plans have already sparked nationwide protests. Vikki Miller and Jessica Aldred take a look at what the developments will entail

- **What is an ecotown?**

Ecotowns will be entirely new settlements of between 5,000 and 15,000 low-carbon homes, designed to a strict set of environmental criteria. Most important, the whole town has to be carbon neutral. This means the amount of energy taken from the national grid to run the town is less than or equal to the amount put back through renewable power. The government has also said that each new place should have a "separate and distinct" identity with good links to surrounding towns and cities for jobs, transport and services. The government hopes that at least 30% of the homes will be affordable and a secondary school, shops, business space and leisure facilities are also required. Each town should also be an exemplar in at least one area of environmental sustainability.

Where are the ecotowns going to be?

The government has [announced 15 potential locations across England](#). The shortlist includes former Ministry of Defence land, disused airfields and former pits and industrial sites. Ministers have promised that no new homes will be built on protected green belt land.

When will they be built?

The 15 candidates will be whittled down after local consultation, with a final shortlist published later in 2009. The government wants to build five ecotowns by 2016 and up to 10 by 2020 as part of plans to build 3m homes over the next 12 years.

What will they look like?

No definite plans have been drawn up yet but expect to see some interesting new designs. Celebrated architect Sir Terry Farrell has expressed an interest in getting involved, as has designer Terence Conran. Homes will be south-facing to capture the heat from the sun and are likely to have photovoltaic panels on the roof for that extra ecoelectricity boost. There will also be plenty of green spaces, ample cycle lanes and fewer roads for cars. Expect to see a few small wind turbines as well, as a public display of the town's green-credentials.

Who will live in them?

Anyone. The affordable homes will attract those priced out of the property market, while an emphasis on larger houses will be popular with families with children. The new towns will also appeal to people across the spectrum keen to live a greener lifestyle, but who at present don't have the opportunity to do so.

Do we have any ecotowns in the UK already?

No, not yet. A handful of low carbon developments do exist, such as [BedZED](#) in south London, and others are in the pipeline, such as [Hanham Hall](#) ecovillage in Bristol, but nothing of this scale has been tried in the UK before. The concept is based on existing green towns in [Hammarby](#) in Stockholm, Sweden and [Vauban](#) in Freiburg, Germany.

Why is the government keen on this now?

The Government has set a target of building [3m new homes by 2020](#), so these new towns will go a small way towards fulfilling this ambitious aim. It has also been mooted by the health secretary, Alan Johnson, that ecotowns could help in the [battle against obesity](#). He wants to make them healthy ecotowns by designing in safe walking routes to schools and increasing the number of cycle lanes.

What has the reaction to ecotowns been like so far?

Residents in several of the towns and villages near proposed ecotowns are already [up in arms](#) against the plans. Many claim the new settlements will put too much pressure on existing roads and schools while others argue that the new towns will concrete over the countryside. A number of these protest groups have the backing of local (mostly Conservative) MPs and councils, as they are angry at being kept in the dark over the proposals. There are also fears that the government will allow ecotowns to bypass the usual planning routes, throwing local housing plans and strategies into disarray.