

Concreting the countryside

Fact Sheet

Lesson 1: WHERE SHOULD ALL THE CONCRETE GO? Does Rackheath EcoTown provide the answers?

This lesson focuses on the proposal for an Eco Town at Rackheath, Norfolk.

Introductory briefing/Background

East Anglia should take an increased share of the housing and growth burden: Avoiding a Concrete Corridor.

In June 2008 The National Housing and Planning Advice Unit (NHPAU) advised the Government that between 2.96 and 3.48 million new homes may need to be built by 2020 in order for property to become more affordable. NHPAU believed that the greatest number of new homes would be needed in the South East. They suggested the following regional expansions by 2020:

- South East - between 486,200 and 622,500
- London - between 428,500 and 529,100
- East Anglia - up to 486,300
- The North East - between 87,800 and 97,300
- West Midlands - up to 283,700

The Government has previously set a target for three million new homes to be built by 2020.

These figures corresponded with earlier predictions of 478,000 for the East of England announced in 2005 that brought about outcries from the County Councils concerned. Hertfordshire and Essex were expected to take the brunt of this expansion with the M1, A1, M11 and A12 corridors absorbing most of the new housing. By 2006 the figures for the East of England had been revised upwards to 505,000 with 58,000 earmarked for Suffolk and 123,000 for Essex.

In January 2009 The East of England Regional assembly published revised estimates over and above those of June 2008. The East of England will have to accommodate an extra 508,000. Members of the assembly claim - "The impact of the development now proposed in the East of England and the lack of planned improvements to the transport infrastructure are likely to result in unacceptable conditions on the road and rail network towards the end of the plan period, seriously hindering the movement of people and goods and holding back the economic development of the region."

Three East Anglian towns are to be redefined as 'Key Centres' for housing growth – Colchester (20,000) Ipswich (15,400) and Bury St Edmunds (8,000)

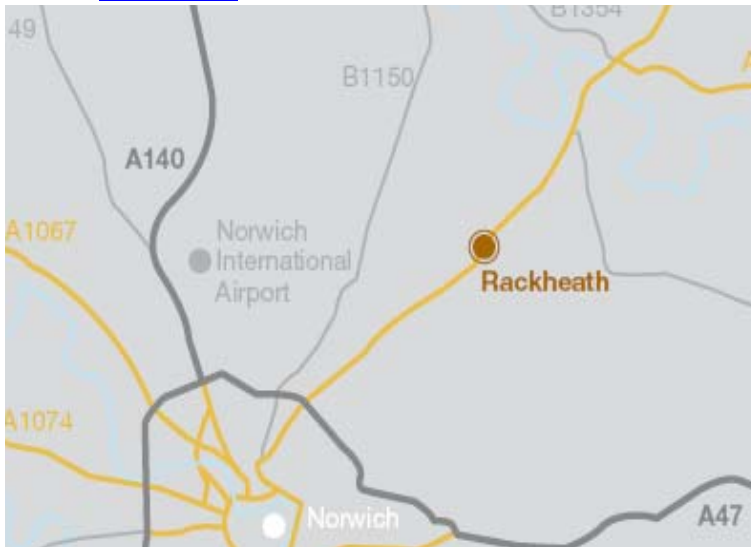
In addition to these proposals have been the announcements on two major schemes:

Eco Towns Initiative – with proposed sites in the East of England with Norfolk's Rackheath the most favoured location [see web page](#)

Growth Corridors – of which the Thames Gateway affects the Eastern region [see web page](#)

RACKHEATH ECO-TOWN? (Accompanied by Rackheath PowerPoint)

LOCATION



(Source <http://www.rackheatheco-community.com/>)

5 MILES FROM Norwich city centre with good road and rail links in place.
Close to Rackheath and Broadland Business parks, on the edge of Norwich, providing employment opportunities.
Close to UEA Climatic Research Centre and well placed to collaborate with the university meaning that Rackheath has a realistic opportunity to become a benchmark scheme for future residential Eco-Communities.
Also located in an area rich in natural building resources so reduces need for transporting aggregates
Natural heathlands can be fully restored to complement the development.
Next to a disused/derelict airfield.

The aim is produce a vibrant community that draws on Norfolk's heritage whilst meeting the standards of sustainable living. By reducing dependency on the car it will promote low carbon living and enable people to get around on foot, cycles and public transport. By making use of local materials the site will blend in with the surrounding landscape.

The needs of the area are being served because there is a definite housing shortage.

Reports from Shelter UK show:

- There is a housing shortage throughout the UK, including Norfolk. The government has earmarked 35,000 new homes for the Norwich area of which 6,000-10,000 are in the north east sector, which includes Rackheath.
- In March 2007, there were approximately 12,260 households on local housing waiting lists
- The number of affordable homes is nowhere near local need.
- House prices have risen far more quickly than earnings in Greater Norwich, in 2007, an average-priced home in Broadland District cost almost nine times average earnings. Although house prices are falling, mortgages are harder to secure and more expensive, and the situation has not improved.
- The proposed eco-community in Rackheath would provide around 3,400 homes, of which between 30 and 40 per cent (or 1,020–1,360 homes) would be affordable, including social rented homes and properties for low-cost home ownership.
- The number of households in Greater Norwich has been growing steadily, mainly due to an increase in life expectancy, people choosing to live alone, smaller family sizes, and in-migration.
- Greater Norwich has been declared a growth point by the Government, and the East of England Plan requires at least 37,500 homes from 2001–2021. Around 42,000 additional homes may be required or 2,100 new homes per year. 75% of these homes should be located centrally in the city plus the first ring of villages around it as well – this area includes Rackheath, therefore, the eco-community would help achieve this target.
- The Housing Market Assessment 2006/07 estimated that, of all new homes provided to meet growth over the next five years, approximately 43 per cent should be affordable.

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.