

From: The Chairman of the South East England Regional Assembly

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**COUNCILS AND
COMMUNITIES
IN PARTNERSHIP**

Mrs Caroline Flint MP
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Dear Minister

PROPOSALS FOR ECOTOWNS IN SOUTH EAST ENGLAND

I would like to offer my congratulations to you on your recent appointment and say that I look forward to working constructively with you on delivering sustainable economic growth in the region.

I am aware that a number of proposals for new Eco-towns have been submitted to you and that there will shortly be an announcement about which have been selected to go forward for consultation. I understand that there could be around half a dozen proposals in the South East to which serious consideration is being given, two of which are in my own county. Few of these have local authority support and you need to understand the concern councils feel about the process for moving these developer-led bids forward. I look forward to the consultation, because it will be the first time that the Regional Planning Body will have been formally invited to give its views on the proposals.

A great deal of time and effort has gone into preparing the draft South East Plan and the Local Development Frameworks. This has involved local authorities working with stakeholders to assess the need for new development and identify the infrastructure required to support it, taking into account the constraints that exist. The process authorities follow is open and transparent; it is one that is rooted in the need for democratic accountability. Experience shows that proposals that are put forward which are inconsistent with the regional and local planning framework are more likely to attract opposition and ultimately experience a delay in delivery.

It is, therefore, a matter of considerable concern that the bidding and selection process associated with Eco-towns has, to date, been independent of the spatial planning process. More worryingly, it is far from clear how the two will relate when the final list is announced. In particular, I am deeply concerned at the potential for Eco-town proposals being taken forward that are clearly inconsistent with the regional and local planning framework. In a plan-led system, this is clearly unsatisfactory.

I am aware that a number of the proposals that have been submitted to you were also put forward by their promoters for consideration as part of the recent Examination in Public of the draft South East Plan. Where this is the case I strongly urge you to use the Panel's report as an opportunity to consider the suitability of individual proposals and their consistency with the strategy set out in the South East Plan.

Where a proposal has not previously been the subject of independent examination, it would be more appropriate to test it as part of the impending review of the South East Plan. To announce a short-list of broad locations on the basis of a partial assessment of specific proposals, as I believe is proposed, would appear to be inconsistent with the commitment given by your predecessor that the proposals for Eco-towns will be tested through the planning system.

I want to emphasise the importance that this Assembly gives to delivery. In their report, the Panel congratulated us on the ground-breaking work we've done on implementation. I am committed to ensuring that we use the planning system in a positive way to deliver sustainable economic growth. Through our work on implementation at both the regional and local level we are, at long last, gaining the knowledge and experience that will allow us to achieve this ambition.

I understand that there has been an informal dialogue at official level on the Eco-towns submitted and I will ensure that the Assembly secretariat continues to provide guidance and advice as appropriate. The secretariat has an unrivalled knowledge of the South East Plan and an appreciation of the opportunities that exist across the region to deliver the step change in development that the Eco-towns concept encourages. I am keen to ensure that we realise the sustainable development principles underpinning the Eco-towns initiatives as a matter of course in all new development.

However, an informal dialogue cannot be a substitute for formal consultation with the Regional Assembly as the statutory Regional Planning Body. I must tell you that the process put in place by your predecessor is unclear and has generated a feeling among my colleagues that it is riding roughshod over the normal planning processes.

It would therefore be helpful if you would clarify the process that is to be followed with regard to the Eco-towns proposals at the earliest opportunity. I would also welcome the opportunity to meet with you and discuss broader issues relating to the delivery of growth in the region.

As ever

Keith R Mitchell

Cllr Keith Mitchell CBE
Chairman, South East England Regional Assembly