

NOTE OF A PUBLIC MEETING HELD BY THE COUNTY COUNCIL ON 12 JUNE 2008 AT THE COPLOW CENTRE IN BILLESDON TO DISCUSS THE PENNBURY PROPOSALS

Chairing the meeting – David Parsons (Leader of the County Council)

Speaking on behalf of the Co-op – Graham Ramsbottom (Head of Land Development and Ventures for the Co-operative Estates)

Speaking on behalf of CASCET – Dr Kevin Feltham (Chairman of CASCET)

Also speaking – Edward Garnier MP

Attendance – in excess of 300 people

David Parsons (DP) opened the meeting and set out the County Council's views on Pennbury including the process that is being followed, the Pennbury location and the further work which is needed to ensure that the proposals are properly assessed.

Graham Ramsbottom (GR) outlined the Co-op's proposals for Pennbury including the homes to be provided, jobs, transport, support services and environmental considerations. He referred to technical studies being commissioned and options for the form the development could take. He stressed that the plans were still at an early stage and encouraged everyone to visit the Co-op's exhibition to find out more and make comments on the scheme.

Dr Kevin Feltham (KF) explained who CASCET are and outlined the concerns they have about Pennbury including concerns about its scale and size, transport and environmental concerns and concerns about the process. He referred to the concerns of EMRA, the results of the recent parish poll and the concerns raised by prominent figures and experts. CASCET supported eco-towns and affordable housing but Pennbury was the wrong location and was not sustainable.

Edward Garnier (EG) thanked GR for attending the meeting and commented on the important role that English Partnerships have in the process. All future development should be eco friendly but is this an appropriate site and the right site? It could damage the City and County. EG had asked the Minister for Housing and Planning to explain what she planned to do but as yet had had no response. There had been a lack of democratic input into the process and an information vacuum.

A question and answer session followed with three questions being taken at a time:

Questions/comments

- What is the financial gain to the Co-op?

- Concerns about trust in the Co-op. Does the Co-op care about the existing villages and the impact Pennbury will have on locals?
- The Co-op state that ownership lies with them and English Partnerships – this is not true as there are some ten houses not in their ownership. Does this mean the Co-op is lying, that they have made a blunder or that they have secret plans? In any event, can the Co-op be trusted?
- What about the costings? Does it stack up financially? Has a feasibility study been carried out and if so, is it available? What will the Co-op make from Pennbury? Infrastructure costs of £850 million have been mentioned – is that figure accurate? If it doesn't work out financially, will the Co-op want to expand further?

Answers – GR

- 14,000 jobs would be provided with two thirds for Pennbury residents.
- The scheme will have to carry the infrastructure costs but these are not yet known and can only be worked out once things like the transport study have been completed. All this will need to be looked at later.
- GR thought the ownership records were correct but apologised if there are any mistakes.
- GR did not know where the figure of £850 million came from.
- On the matter of trust, the Co-op was committed to 6 days of consultation - more than any of the other eco-towns.

Answers – KF

- The £850 million figure related to the County Council's initial transport costs including a link to the M1 motorway.

Answers – EG

- Given that unemployment locally is 1%, new jobs are not needed locally. It would be better if the jobs were provided somewhere else.

Questions/comments

- Are there political and economic links between the Co-op and the Government? Is the Co-op not worried that the RSS showed no need for Pennbury, that Pennbury would require a change in policy, that so many people are opposed to Pennbury and that the impact on transport would be enormous.
- Two recent parish polls had shown a vast majority to be against Pennbury. Why persist in view of this overwhelming opposition? Were there financial or political reasons here?
- Have the Co-op consulted its members on the proposals?

Answers – KF

- Consultation is based on a Government led process but the local consultation is crucial.
- Concerned that the Co-op questionnaire is biased after the first question.

Answers – GR

- Acknowledges that the Co-op will need to provide support facilities.

- Queries whether all the other new housing areas planned in the RSS will have all the necessary support facilities.
- While unemployment may be low locally, figures in Leicester are much higher and Pennbury is close to the City.
- An early review of the RSS has been asked for looking in particular at housing numbers and transport.
- While the feedback to date has shown overwhelming opposition, there are a number of people still undecided and a number in favour.
- Pennbury had been discussed at the Co-op AGM and received unanimous support.
- In response to the financial or political question, GR stated that Pennbury fits with the Co-op's business to respond to climate change, provide affordable housing and create sustainable communities. It will be a better form of development.

Questions/comments

- How did the area get onto the shortlist in the first place? The key civil servant involved had not visited the site before shortlisting. When he did visit, he commented on the proximity to the City and the quality of the local landscape. The need for local knowledge is why there are local planning authorities. Councils need to pass resolutions on Pennbury by 30 June. If they all oppose Pennbury, will the Co-op withdraw their bid and come back with new proposals submitted via the proper planning process?
- Why had the three houses built at Byways not been eco homes? A letter had been written to the Minister for Housing and Planning about it but no reply had been received.
- Why had the Co-op vetoed CASCET from joining the Eco-town Joint Technical Working Group?

Answers – GR

- Pennbury had been shortlisted because of the quality of the bid
- Proximity to Leicester can bring benefits but Pennbury will still be a separate community with a separate identity.
- The 30 June deadline relates primarily to comments about eco-towns in general.
- GR was aware of the three houses at the Byways – it is easier to create sustainability when there are larger numbers of houses involved.
- Others had objected to CASCET becoming members of the Joint Technical Group – it was not just the Co-op.

Answers – EG

- Barratts have built an eco house but it was very expensive.
- They believe the optimum size for a sustainable community would be 200 houses.

Questions/comments

- Recent press coverage stated that the Co-op could be developing an academy in Leicester with the possibility of shared facilities. How would this be compatible with Pennbury being a self contained community?

- The Co-op's consultation paper states that 85% of journeys will go to destinations in Pennbury or Leicester and that 70% of the working population will secure employment in Leicester. This means extra pressure on London Road. The paper also states that without an eco-town there would be no plans for improving public transport. However, if there was no Pennbury, there would be no problem. Leave the area alone.
- If there is wholesale opposition to Pennbury, will the Co-op withdraw their plans?

Answers – KF

- The Government does not support academies in counties.
- Transport is a major issue with the A6 and A 47 already at capacity and difficult to improve further.
- The Co-op has rejected a link to the M1 motorway although they would complete the Eastern District Distributor Road.

Answers – GR

- The Co-op is already involved with 13 schools across the country including 6 academies in Manchester. There would be a sustainable technology academy in Pennbury which would bring many benefits.
- There are already transport problems in the area but no money to deal with them. The eco-town can help to solve these problems. The Co-op is currently working with the County Council and others to look into these matters.
- In response to the question about withdrawing the scheme, GR said it would be necessary to look at all views and consider the wider needs of the County.

Questions/comments

- Why does the Co-op know better than the County Council, the RSS and EMRA?
- A former City Planning Officer had said that Pennbury can do nothing to assist the regeneration of Leicester. This matter will need to be addressed. Lord Rogers was against eco-towns and the adverse impact they would have on regeneration. Back off if you want to help Leicester.
- Which hospitals would the people of Pennbury use?
- The Co-op has commented on having a blank canvas but countryside would be replaced with concrete.
- Concerns about the Co-op's management of its estate and in particular the village hall at Little Stretton which had not been properly maintained and was in a state of complete disrepair.
- Comments about more direct cycle routes but that's not what people want.

Answers – KF

- The Pennbury area acts as the lungs for the City.
- Something must be done about the village hall.

Answers – GR

- GR stated that the village hall position is unacceptable and apologised on behalf of the Co-op.

- Health provision – the Co-op will consult with relevant bodies to find out what health care facilities should be provided.
- If people want bendy cycle ways, they can be provided.
- Need to consider how the eco-town can bring wider benefits to the area.
- Regeneration concerns – English Partnerships are part of the Pennbury bid but also closely involved in supporting the regeneration of Leicester. They would not want to do anything that harmed the regeneration of the City.

Summary – EG

There is an issue of reputation (what others think of you) against self esteem (what you think of yourself) – the Co-op need to address this. There has been a lot of misinformation – details of the proposals need to be made clear.

Summary – KF

The Pennbury location has already been rejected – why should this be changed? Pennbury would have no links to the M1 so already congested roads will become worse. An active airfield would be lost – how can the Co-op get round this? There is still a lack of detail about the proposals and concerns about the process although this is not down to the Co-op. The Co-op should withdraw its proposals and put any alternatives through the LDF process.

Summary – GR

GR asked everyone to attend the Co-op exhibition to find out more about Pennbury. The Co-op is aware of its reputation and will want to ensure everything is done properly.

Conclusion

DP closed the meeting by thanking everyone and reminding them to send in their comments. An informal vote was taken – no one voted in favour of Pennbury. The vote against was unanimous.