Building a Greener Future: Towards Zero-Carbon Development

Response to the Government Consultation by the Green Party

Written for the Green Party by its Economics Speaker, Molly Scott Cato

Deadline for submissions: 8 March

1. *Introduction*

1. 1. The Green Party agrees with the target set by the government that all new-build homes should be carbon neutral within ten years. However, we feel that the zero-carbon target should be extended to all buildings by 2020, so that commercial premises and public buildings are also covered.

1. 2. We would suggest the development of an incentives package for local authorities to invest in green energy to encourage the development of the market and allow the technologies to benefit from economies of scale.

2. *Responsibility for Building Eco-homes*

2.1. The current plans by government suggest that the shift to low-carbon housing should be undertaken primarily by the construction industry. However, as illustrated in the figure, the majority of existing eco-homes were constructed by individuals or communities.

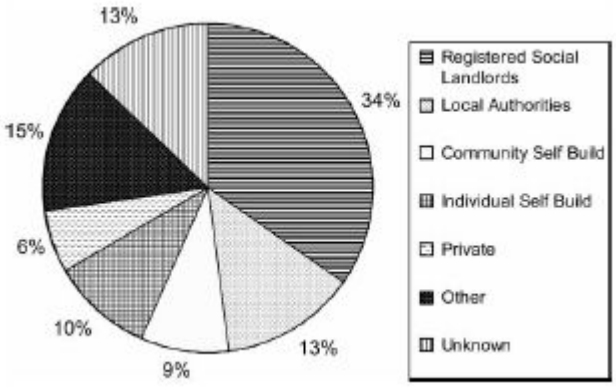

Figure 1. Initiators of UK low-energy housing developments, by housing sector
Source:Reproduced from Lovell, 2005.

2.2. Lovell (2005) raises questions about the ability of the construction industry to meet the target for sustainable homes, and these concerns are supported by research into the construction industry (Myers, 2005).

2.3. In view of this we would propose that the government learns from and supports what Lovell calls the 'sustainable housing advocacy coalition', represented by organizations such as the Centre for Alternative Technology in Machynlleth, rather than focusing so heavily on the construction industry, whose record in sustainable building and in the ability to change rapidly, has not been good.

2.4. There are also concerns about the 'commodification' of eco-building knowledge, much of which has been developed as a free good by those committed to sustainability (Lovell, 2004). To respect this work and to enable its rapid dissemination, the government should work to have all eco-building expertise excluded from international intellectual property laws.

3. *Carbon-Neutral Housing and Housing Need*

3.1. The policy contained in the document is 'sold' to some extent as a solution to the housing crisis as well as the need to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. However, building design can have only a small impact on the price of housing. Attention should also be paid to the nature of land ownership and the speculative market for housing and land.

3.2. To deal with the inflated house values caused by these issues we would propose the introduction of a Land Value Tax and the expansion of Community Land Trusts.

3.3. We would suggest that the government adjust the system of Inheritance Tax to provide incentives for large landholders to dispose of some of their land in the direction of community ownership following their death.

3.4. We propose financial support for self-build schemes for sustainable housing. These have three interlinked benefits: the provision of housing to those most in need; the creation of skills for those who may also be excluded from the labour-market; a rapid expansion of the sustainable construction skills needed to allow for the expansion the government plans.

4. *New Build or Renovation of Existing Stock?*

4.1. The Energy Conservation Bill, initiated by the Green Party has been a major contributor to the shift towards low-energy building. We would continue in this vein by emphasizing increasing the energy efficiency of existing homes as a priority.

4.2. While new build is always more glamorous and creates more media attention, most people do not live in new homes (for example, 97 per cent of London's housing was built before 1995: DCLG, 2006).

4.3. In addition, because of the progressive tightening-up of energy efficiency requirements in the building regulations over the years (Lambert, 2007), new homes are already massively more energy efficient than older homes.

5. *A Wider Focus than Just Buildings*

5.1. The consultation document suggests that 53% of domestic emissions result from space heating. However, recent research from the Carbon Trust (see the figure: 2006) indicates that when we take into account patterns of consumption in the household it is a much smaller percentage. This makes the point that lifestyles are of key importance in considering carbon impact.

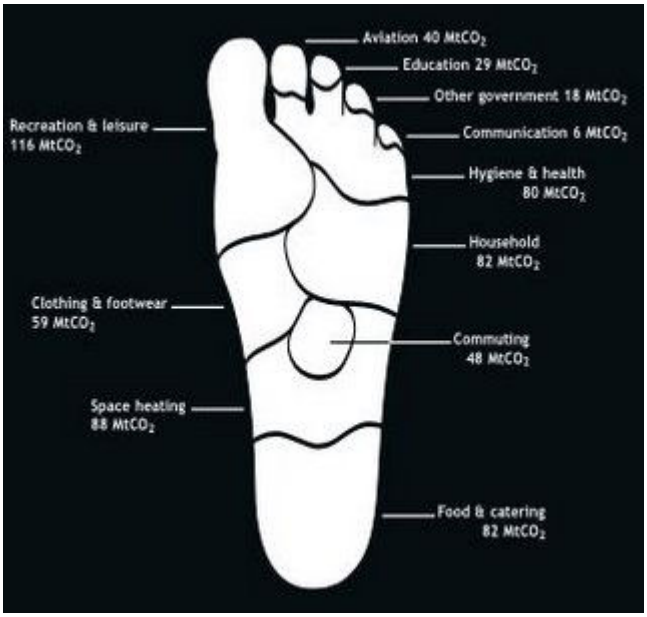

Figure 2. Contributions of different sectors to CO_2 emissions

5.2. To reduce the contribution of space heating to CO_2 emissions we would suggest the expansion of community heat-and-power systems like that at Llanwddyn in North Wales (see the box).

Case-study. Llanwddyn local biomass heating

Llanwddyn local biomass heating, the first community wood-heating project in Wales, is located in the small village of Abertridwyr, nr. Lake Vrynwy. The district heating scheme includes 30 out of 38 households on the estate as well as the community centre and school. The project has been coordinated jointly by Powys Energy Agency and Powys County Council, which jointly own the scheme, together with Severn Trent Water, the Forestry Commission and community representatives. It is thus a public sector project but with intense community involvement and significant economic benefits to the local economy. The system is powered by a 520kW wood-chip boiler. The wood fuel is sourced (60% minimum) within a 20 mile radius of Llanwddyn, encouraging local supply. This is chipped and stored around a quarter of a mile from the boiler itself. The contract to install and maintain the boiler is with Dulas Wood Energy Ltd. Funding has been received from EU Objective 2, Powys County Council Local Regeneration Fund, Energy Savings Trust Community Energy Programme, Severn Trent Water, National Assembly for Wales, Welsh Development Agency and the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme.

6. *Support for Low-Impact Living*

6.1. Planning should take account of the importance of creating communities where people work closer to home and there is less unnecessary transport of goods. This is what we call the bioregional economy (Cato, 2007).

6.2. We would applaud the steps taken by Pembrokeshire County Council in using its planning power to encourage low-impact development. Their planning guidance

'provides a context for permitting development in the countryside as an exception to normal planning policy . . . exemplars of sustainable living may be permitted . . . Proposals need to be tied to the land and provide sufficient livelihood for the occupants.' (Pembrokeshire County Council, 2006: 1).

6.3. We would propose relaxing planning controls for low-impact developments, following Pembrokeshire's guideline that 75% of basic household needs to be met 'by means of activities centred around the use of resources grown or reader or occurring naturally on the site.'

References

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