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Planning Housing and Economy  
Cherwell District Council  
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**By email only**

8<sup>th</sup> July 2011

Dear Ms Barker,

**Re: Application (Amended Plans) by A2 Dominion Group/P3Eco (Bicester) Ltd.  
for development of exemplar phase of NW Bicester Eco Town  
(10/01780/HYBRID)**

Thank you for consulting the Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) on the above application. I would reiterate the Trust's position given in previous responses to this application that, in addition to the normal legislative and policy guidelines in relation to biodiversity, we would expect this eco-town development to meet the guidelines of the supplement to PPS1 on eco-towns with regard to biodiversity and green infrastructure, as well as following the eco-town worksheets on biodiversity and green infrastructure published by the TCPA, CLG and Natural England. With regard to the guidance available, I would submit the following comments.

**Summary**

Overall, the fundamental opinion of the Trust is still that the proposals for the exemplar phase with incorporation of the planned ecological mitigation are unlikely to result in significant adverse impacts on local wildlife. However, the biodiversity enhancements within the scheme design remain uninspiring and there is little to justify the scheme's billing as an exemplar of eco-town development. Whilst recent amendments and refinements to the scheme design have been made in response to concerns raised by the various biodiversity stakeholders (such as additional ponds, improved lighting schemes and altered bridge designs), these amendments are essentially incremental tweaks to a master plan largely fixed early in the design process rather than substantial improvements to biodiversity provision and green infrastructure based on provided feedback.

It is my opinion that the ecological mitigation measures described and the green infrastructure designed into the proposed scheme are likely to ensure that there will be no significant net loss of biodiversity within the zone of influence. However, I

consider that the level of prior and amended information submitted remains insufficient to satisfactorily demonstrate that the scheme will achieve the aim of a net gain in biodiversity, and therefore I am not confident that it fulfils the requirements of the supplement to PPS1. Although a draft Landscape and Ecology Conservation Management Plan for the exemplar phase has been submitted, it still fails to provide sufficient details and assurances of how funding for habitat management and ecological monitoring post construction will be secured and delivered. As a result it remains unclear whether the measures incorporated for biodiversity are either adequate, or could be fully realised.

### **Environmental Impact Assessment**

The issue of a systematic review of potential adverse hydrological, air quality and recreational impacts on Local Wildlife Sites (LWSs) was raised in previous BBOWT responses. The note of *Supporting Information re Biodiversity, 10/06/11* attempts to summarise the reasoning for discounting significant adverse impacts on LWSs. Whilst I can accept that significant adverse impacts on sites in the locality are probably unlikely as a result of the proposed application, the assessment only considers the effects of the exemplar site, and not the potential impacts of the subsequent phases of the eco-town. It is reasonable to assume that potential impacts on LWS and other valued ecological features would be of a different magnitude when considering 5000 rather than 400 new dwellings.

### **Demonstration of a net gain in biodiversity**

BBOWT continues to support the submission of a Biodiversity Strategy with the application, as required under policy ET 16.3 of the supplement to PPS1. However, policy ET 16.1 of the supplement to PPS1 makes it clear that 'Eco-towns should demonstrate a net gain in local biodiversity' and I am still not convinced that the proposed scheme in its present form could deliver this.

Despite the recent revisions to the scheme, it still appears that the retention of existing features including hedgerows and watercourses, with some buffering and limited habitat creation within corridors of open space, is intended to deliver a net biodiversity gain and satisfy the requirements of the PPS supplement. The eco-towns biodiversity worksheet emphasises the need to integrate biodiversity within the built environment to create a high degree of permeability for wildlife, and I am disappointed that consultation with, and feedback from, the biodiversity stakeholders has not resulted in a more innovative design of the built environment to incorporate provision for biodiversity. [I would refer to BBOWT's previous responses for detail on the Trust's concerns regarding the specific limitations of the proposed habitat creation / enhancement measures.]

I am concerned that the BREEAM ecology calculator has been used as a means by the applicant to demonstrate that a net gain in biodiversity has been achieved. I believe that it is a system of limited value, and it is certainly not a suitable tool to reliably establish net gain in developments with more than the smallest and most basic change of land use. Simple calculations have been made based on approximate current floral species present within the application site and species numbers from proposed planting schemes to demonstrate that there would be a by-area increase in floral diversity as a result of the proposed development. What is not considered is whether the species used would become established, whether the expected diversity of the habitats to be created can actually be maintained by appropriate maintenance, and whether viable populations of any species of conservation value would be supported as a result.

The draft Landscape and Ecology Conservation Management Plan makes some initial attempt to set measurable targets that can be monitored post-construction, but far more considered qualitative information is required regarding the expected value of the habitats to be created for biodiversity gain. It is my opinion that the habitat areas within the green infrastructure proposed will be too small and physically constrained to manage optimally for conservation purposes, and will be subject to too much human disturbance to be of real value for wildlife other than species that adapt readily to urban environments. For example, it is unlikely that farmland birds will return to nest in the retained hedgerows once they have become a network within a residential development. Furthermore, since a management body and mechanisms for funding management work have not yet been clearly defined within the draft Landscape and Ecology Conservation Management Plan, there is no certainty that the on-site enhancements proposed by the applicant can actually be delivered through implementation of the scheme.

#### **Improved overall biodiversity provision in future phases of the eco-town**

There has been some inference that any perceived or accepted inadequacies in terms of biodiversity provision within the proposed exemplar phase could or would be overcome by an improved vision for the eco-town as a whole, and I would make the following comments. As the first phase of the proposed eco-town is intended to be an exemplar of what can be achieved, any physical constraints or housing delivery targets should not justify excessive compromises in ecological planning. Furthermore, the application is for the exemplar phase only and consent would not guarantee delivery of future planned phases of the eco-town, and thus the exemplar phase should be judged as a stand-alone development, as indeed should the adequacy of the proposed biodiversity provision.

#### **Off-site contribution to net biodiversity gains**

Given the difficulties in agreeing the achievement of net biodiversity gain to the satisfaction of all stakeholders, I would recommend that the developer is required to contribute to appropriate off-site wildlife conservation work elsewhere in the locality in order to compensate for residual impacts (such as the displacement of farmland bird species) and to clearly demonstrate that a net biodiversity gain would result from implementation of the proposed development, in compliance with PPS9 and policy ET 16.1 of the supplement to PPS1.

Whilst impacts on Conservation Target Areas (CTAs) have been considered in the EIA, the real purpose of CTAs is in fact to identify areas of opportunity for biodiversity enhancements to help deliver the aims of the UK and local Biodiversity Action Plans (BAPs) through landscape scale conservation. Policy ET 16.3 of the supplement to PPS1 indicates that the Biodiversity Strategy should set out priority actions in line with Local Biodiversity Action Plans. In line with this policy, I would wish to see an exploration of opportunities for the proposed development to contribute towards RSPB / BBOWT conservation work within the Otmoor CTA downstream of the application site, to be included as a condition to any planning consent.

I hope that these comments are useful. Should you wish to discuss further any of the matters raised, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

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