

New Planning Opportunities For Low Impact Settlements



On 13th July 2006, eight years after the 'discovery' of roundhouses at Brithdir Mawr, West Wales and the ensuing planning controversy, Pembrokeshire County Council and Pembrokeshire National Park have adopted an innovative policy on Low Impact Development. This policy explicitly allows rural greenfield development under a number of conditions aimed to ensure developments remain low impact. As part of a Joint Unitary Development Plan (JUDP), Policy 52 'Low Impact Development Making A Positive Contribution' – represents an exciting new opportunity for people who wish to create a sustainable lifestyle. This is a major departure from existing planning guidelines. Since the Second World War Britain's planning regime has sought to prevent urban sprawl by strictly controlling rural development, and clustering new housing in particular, within existing towns and villages.

It is a risky venture for the planning authority and the conditions are tight. Development must be highly sustainable, using local, renewable, recycled and/or natural materials and built to high standards of eco-design, with the emphasis on 'low impact' including visual effects. Moreover, the proposal must offer positive environmental, social and/or economic contributions with public benefit. These could include services to the community, economic diversification for the area, opening paths for walkers and improved biodiversity. Many existing ecovillages and communities could fulfil these criteria. Furthermore,

residents must prove a need to be on the land. Thus residents' livelihoods will be 'tied directly to the land on which it is located' through, for example, agriculture, forestry or horticulture. These land-based activities will substantially meet house-



hold needs. What is particularly novel about these changes are the detailed and supportive guidelines in the associated Supplementary Planning Guidance which spell out in detail how the planners will apply Policy 52 in practice.

Lammas is a group proposing to create a low impact settlement in south west Wales. While those who had been under threat from demolition at Brithdir Mawr are likely to be the first applicants under this policy, Lammas also intends to make full use of this new opportunity. It is currently considering 70 hectares (175 acres) of south-facing land at Pont y Gafel farm, Glandwr, Pembrokeshire. The proposal is for 25 eco-smallholdings, to be developed in two stages, the first of which is just 12 plots. Each household would have at least

1.6 hectares (4 acres) – many of the plots are considerably larger – and track access from the road. In addition there are to be forestry plots, land for common grazing, a central communal area with a community building and a camping area. The residents would also be able to share (with the farm owner) use of an existing leat (water network) system and a hydro-turbine to provide energy.

The settlement is not an intentional community, but is based on a village model. One aim is to provide space for people to reduce their ecological footprints and put into practice 'one planet living' (to only consume a fair share of resources). Another is to have as few rules as possible, enabling individuals to take responsibility for their homes, land and livelihoods, but to do so in the company of others who share their values. Most of the restrictions

are directly tied to those imposed by the planning policy, though Lammas are also considering measures to ensure long term affordability, such as limiting resale values.

Much progress has been made since the projects' inception on 1st August 2005 and plans continue to evolve. Although it was necessary to develop a small core team to push forward the initial proposal, decision-making is gradually becoming more consensus-based to enable prospective residents to have greater say in the design. Moreover, Lammas is keen to encourage social diversity in every sense and to address the risk of excluding those older and less able-bodied.

The group has been very open and public about its intentions by holding public meetings and creating an informative well-designed website, but there has been significant opposition from surrounding communities. Objections have been raised to the scale of the proposal, potential visual impact, traffic implications and economic competition. Lammas responded

by dividing the proposal into two stages and removing the proposed hostel and visitors' centre, but there are some concerns from potential residents and supportive locals that the benefits of economies of scale have been lost. Despite these changes objections are growing. Some of the objections stem from the lack of involvement of local people and perceptions that the project will encourage more English immigration. Lammas has now developed a Welsh language policy and is building informal links with local communities.

Lammas are currently working hard to finalise their proposal, select which residents will move onto the land, and submit a planning application by February 2007. As so many attempts at sustainable living are still hindered by restrictive planning policies, prohibitive costs and the hard work of living off the land, Lammas are hopeful that these changes in policy and their proposal will act as a model and catalyst which will inspire similar projects nationwide.

For further information, see: www.lammas.org.uk To view the video blog: www.communitychannel.org. If you would like to support the project please register your interest via the website or join as a member. Any donations are also welcome.

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