

# new communities – looking and learning from dutch experience

**Nicholas Falk** explains how a study tour of new communities in the Netherlands highlighted lessons that the Dutch approach to planning offers for new development in the UK



Photographs courtesy of URBED

## Above

Sustainable lakeside housing in Ecolonia, Alphen aan den Rijn

To help councillors leading local authorities with proposals for eco-towns, the TCPA and URBED (Urban and Economic Development) were commissioned by the Department for Communities and Local Government to organise a two-day study tour to leading Dutch examples of new settlements.

The tour aimed to show the councillors the Dutch approach to planning and to draw out lessons that could be applied in the UK.

The trip took advantage of previous research, set out in an accompanying briefing pack, as well as meetings with Dutch experts, practitioners and

politicians.<sup>1</sup> Trains and coaches were used to keep carbon emissions down and also to help a group of diverse people find common ground and reach conclusions. Eleven councillors from five different authorities took part.

### Why look to the Netherlands?

VINEX (the Dutch Ten-Year Housing Programme, 1996-2005) deserves to be paid more attention in the UK than it has been given, as it had very similar objectives to the Government's Sustainable Communities Plan. Both countries face similar challenges, including the loss of an empire, densely

increasing the overall housing stock by 7.6 per cent. Many of the new homes have been built in new suburbs, including some free-standing settlements. Although there has been criticism from Dutch architects, English visitors generally like the results, and indeed they have proved very popular. Government helped with seed capital to help in decontaminating land and providing access, but the schemes have had to be self-funding.

The underlying principles were explained in an introductory talk to the study tour group by Han Lorzing, Sector Head at the Netherlands Institute for Spatial Research in The Hague. VINEX sought to



**Above**

The study tour group visiting a self-build scheme in Almere

populated urban areas, a damp climate, and demographic change, and with it the need for more and better housing. The important difference is that the Dutch have succeeded in avoiding house price inflation and polarised communities by regularly building more and better homes than we do in the UK.

As with the English growth points, Dutch local authorities were invited to submit bids for inclusion in the VINEX programme. Some 90 schemes have been built, providing over 450,000 new homes and

create places that were relatively compact (over 30 dwellings per hectare), well-connected by public transport to jobs and services, and with at least 30 per cent of the housing being 'affordable'.

While the objectives were similar to those of the Sustainable Communities Plan, the process was very different. Local authorities played the leading role in both commissioning masterplans and providing infrastructure. There was a focus on 'branding' different neighbourhoods with distinct identities. Walking and cycling is favoured, and the

settlements are much greener than UK housing estates, with, for example, the retention of water run-off on site in open canals and streams that add to the attractions of living in a new neighbourhood.

There are also important cultural differences, as the Netherlands is much less class-conscious and a more equal society than the UK. According to the OECD, the Dutch have the happiest children and the UK some of the unhappiest. As in the other social democratic countries of Northern Europe such as Sweden, people are less individualistic and more considerate. It is common to live in rented housing in cities, and indeed 30 per cent of the population are eligible to live in social housing, which gives housing associations a strong role. There has also been a substantial devolution of powers and

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responsibilities to local authorities, and a greater tradition of regional planning to link transport investment and development.<sup>2</sup>

#### **What was learnt from the tour**

The tour visited sites in Amsterdam, Amersfoort, Almere, Alphen aan den Rijn, and Ypenberg:

- **Amsterdam and Borneo Island:** The tour started (after arriving via Eurostar from St Pancras) with a boat trip with an architectural expert to look at new housing schemes in Amsterdam. The group were particularly impressed by Borneo Island, where individual homes have been commissioned with an overall masterplan for the street. The group saw how 'Modern Methods of Construction' (MMC) were used to speed up the

building process. While concrete frames are widely used, there is an amazing variety of facades, so that every house looks different.

Dinner at a hotel that had previously been a prison brought home the way that the Dutch have made the most of their inheritance. Indeed, they have created much of the land on which new homes are built, which may have helped to build a spirit of partnership (the *polder* spirit) which is very different from the more confrontational British approach.



**Above**

The tour group were impressed with the great variety of housing, which offered something for everyone

- **Amersfoort:** The next day the tour group set off early to visit the 'greenest' of the Dutch towns, the historic city of Amersfoort, with its three new settlements of Vathorst, Nieuwland and Kattenbroek (the latter pre-dating the VINEX programme). The local authority started on land it owned, which gave it the confidence to go further, drawing on experts for advice on environmental issues. Thus a group of homes with solar roofs in Nieuwland acts as a 1 megawatt power station, delivering energy into the grid, and enabling the homes to get energy at a discount.

The most inspiring scheme is Vathorst (see Box 1). This will eventually comprise some 11,000 homes (of which 4,000 have been built so far), a shopping centre (under construction), and a major business park in a series of distinctive-looking districts. One neighbourhood looks like a traditional Dutch canal-side town, while another is more rural. The centre is traffic free, and a frequent bus runs round the rim. A large model in the impressive visitor centre shows how the whole new town fits together, and is a great way of giving people the confidence to move in.

Despite the aims of the masterplan, which included building a new station on the main

## Box 1 The Vathorst story

The new settlement of Vathorst is promoted as a *'world of difference: where town and countryside meet'*, to convey its appeal to a wide range of residents. It has been built through a process that offers lessons not just for eco-towns, but for major housing schemes anywhere.

The Municipality of Amersfoort believed that if there was to be growth, it should be on its own terms. But it did not want growth to cost the existing community anything. The alderman in charge (a paid councillor with executive responsibilities) convinced the community over the course of several years that growth would bring benefits – arguing, for example, that housing would otherwise be quite unaffordable for young families, or that a scheme might be imposed by the regional council.

A number of steps were taken over the four-to-five year period before building started in 2001. As a condition of the scheme going ahead, agreement was first reached with the Dutch Government on the size of the extension and the contribution it would make to reclaiming contaminated land and connecting the settlement to the two motorways it adjoined. Theme groups were set up to develop ideas, such as how people might live in the 21st century; a major idea has been to support cultural development, including the idea of people living and working from home.

A joint development company was set up between the council, as one shareholder, and a

consortium of five companies, as the other. The private investors included those who had bought land in the area, and also those who the Municipality wanted to involve because of the good work they had done previously. The Vathorst Development Company (OBV) was formed in 1998. There was a two-to-three year period in elaborating the scheme from masterplan to detailed design. Once agreements had been secured, building work proceeded rapidly: the first houses were started in 2001, with occupation in 2002. On average the programme has delivered 600-700 new homes a year, which is several times the current British rate.

OBV employs a staff of under 15, with a Chief Executive from the private sector and a Chairman appointed by the Municipality. It works through developers and housebuilders, most of whom are members of the company, and through two social housing companies. It is responsible for land acquisition, urban planning, engineering, commissioning infrastructure, and allocating sites. Eight different builders and some 50 different architects are involved, with no one architect designing more than 80 units, to ensure choice and variety. The Municipality allocates the social housing units, which account for 30 per cent of the total. Half of the social housing units are for sale at reduced prices, but with a proportion of the resale price to be repaid.

The company formally commissioned the masterplan with the Municipality's Indian

railway line early on, most of the households where both partners are working use separate cars to get to work and drop off the children at school. This has created a real congestion problem at times (in part because the site is bounded by two motorways).

Considerable stress is placed on building a sense of community. Amersfoort has pioneered the idea that there should be a complete balance of housing in neighbourhoods of 500 units to avoid the polarisation that had occurred in the past. The development company set up a foundation – 'Vario Mundi' – to promote cultural development and commission artists to create features and run events. The company also ensured no less than seven restaurants were developed early on, to help people get together.

Measures are also being taken to reduce energy consumption, and, for example, ground-source heat pumps are being used to help meet

the heating needs of a development of 700 homes.

The tour group were impressed by the way new canals were creating attractive living environments which matched the appeal of historic areas. They liked the great variety of housing, which offered something for everyone. They also praised the way cyclists have priority, and the way the public realm is so well cared for. Indeed, the design and layout encourages considerate behaviour. They feared that in the UK the infrastructure would not be built first, and that a stand-alone settlement like Vathorst would be unviable.

- **De Buitenkans, Almere:** In the afternoon the study tour visited the De Buitenkans part of the new town of Almere, built on reclaimed land, and twinned with Milton Keynes. Huge clusters of windmills have been built to tap renewable



**Above**

Sixty per cent of homes in the 'Lake' area have views of water

planner working alongside a notable Dutch urban designer. The masterplan is based on four separate districts in very different styles – for example, the area known as the Lake uses a modern version of canal-side housing, with 60 per cent of the homes having views of water, while another is designed to feel like living in the country.

On the basis of the business plan for development of infrastructure and disposals, the company borrowed 750 million euros from the Dutch municipal bank Bank Niermeenten

(BNG) (the largest financial body in the Netherlands after the state), at relatively low rates of interest (5 per cent) to be repaid over 15 years.

The borrowings are repaid out of the proceeds from land sales, and the company has built up a 'buffer' which allows it to act entrepreneurially – for example, it funded the railway company to open a station several years before the population justified it, and it underwrote an entrepreneur to open a restaurant.

energy. In the 'rainbow quarter' colour has been used to brighten up the town's image, and again water is being used to create more attractive places in which to live. However, with a three-yearly turnover of people – which is several times the national average – there is still a struggle to match the quality of life in older towns. And despite attracting major employers, many commute out to cities like Amsterdam to work.

The tour visited a site that had been provided for some 50 households to build their own homes, applying eco-principles. However, problems had been experienced with architects who were not familiar with the application of green technologies. People were attracted as much by the architecture and the sense of community as they were by the eco-features. Significantly, the development was co-ordinated by a housing association, which underpinned the development risks, and then sold the homes on

to individual households. The tour group liked this scheme because the homes were all individual, and because there was a strong community spirit, for example in landscaping the communal areas.

- **Ecolonia, Alphen aan den Rijn:** On the following day the tour visited Ecolonia, which is a pioneering attempt to test out ecological principles in a cluster of over 100 homes. It forms part of a neighbourhood of 600 homes in a settlement of several thousands. Research has been done on user satisfaction, which found that most people very much like living there and the fact that heating bills are so low (thanks largely to the bulky walls and high levels of insulation). Water consumption was 22 per cent below the Netherlands average as a result of water-saving measures. Building materials with low environmental impact were widely used, such as mineral wool instead of plastics, and red cedar

was used for facades to reduce the need for painting. However, many had changed their kitchens, and there were problems with the external paints that were used. The tour group were particularly enthusiastic about the way that the homes were grouped around a new lake, and they liked the shared surfaces, organised so that pedestrians and cyclists predominate, with schools a short walk away. Councillors from Doncaster liked the fact that the houses were detached and not terraced, as is common in most of the settlements we visited.

- **Ypenberg:** The last visit was to a completed new town, where again the local authority had led the development process, this time on a former

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airbase. After drawing up a masterplan, the town was divided into five different districts of around 2,000 homes each, with distinctive characters. Fifteen different developer architect teams were selected from five bids per site. The choice was based on quality not price, as it was thought that the better the quality, the greater the demand and hence the value. The high quality of infrastructure had been made possible by the public sector ploughing back the uplift in land values from changing the use of the land to housing.

The tour group were impressed by the size and quality of the detached homes that had been built early on, and which provided a high return that could be used in other parts of the site. However, not all had worked out, and older people are not moving into the central apartments as originally planned. But as people tend to move within the development, it is clearly successful.

### Lessons for the UK

Throughout the tour, the study group were continually discussing possible lessons. Study tours certainly prove their value in raising sights and changing attitudes. Two councillors from Cambridgeshire commented on the need to bring over their colleagues to show them what could be achieved in the planned new town of Northstowe.

This raises the wider issue of how to disseminate lessons more widely, for example through short films.<sup>3</sup>

Emerging lessons raised by members of the group included the following:

- Provide the infrastructure before people move in.
- Create an attractive (and natural) landscape that encourages people to walk and cycle for short trips, rather than depending on their cars.
- Offer plenty of choice, with a variety of densities, architectural styles, and themes for each neighbourhood.
- Spread the social housing around so that it is indistinguishable from private housing.
- Apply eco-features that add value, such as extensive drainage systems that encourage greenery and wildlife, and high levels of insulation.
- Invest in community development to equip people to live together co-operatively.
- Equip local authorities to play a proactive role leadership role, with sufficient capable staff to back them up (possibly through working in partnership with landowners and developers on agreed growth sites).

However, perhaps the most important lessons for the UK lie in the way Dutch municipalities are actively involved in procuring new development, and how land values are determined by what is planned, rather than the other way round.

● **Dr Nicholas Falk** is the founder director of URBED, and co-author of the new report, *Beyond Ecotowns*, and of previous reports on learning from Dutch cities and new towns. The views expressed here are personal.

### Notes

- 1 See, for example, the case study of Amersfoort on the Academy for Sustainable Communities website, at <http://showcase.ascskills.org.uk/CaseStudies/Amersfoort/Overview/Default.aspx>; and *Learning from Dutch Cities: Achieving Sustainable Urban Growth*, available from the URBED website at [www.urbed.co.uk](http://www.urbed.co.uk) (using the website's search facility)
- 2 See, for example, *Regeneration in European Cities: Making Connections*. URBED for Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2008. [www.urbed.co.uk](http://www.urbed.co.uk)
- 3 Design for Homes has produced a film on Hammarby Sjöstad in Stockholm available via [www.designforhomes.org/?act=fil](http://www.designforhomes.org/?act=fil)