

Briefing 1341

Snakes and Ladders in Rural Planning - Is the NPPF good for Rural England?

Summary

The overarching requirement is that development must be supportive of economic growth, creating strong, vibrant and healthy communities and protective of the environment - both built and natural. Local policies will be variable depending upon the wishes of the local populous – or, at least, that element of them willing, able and interested enough to get engaged in the process. Rural England is a powerhouse of enterprise and opportunity which the Government would do well not to ignore, or inhibit through lack of proper guidance.

Editor's note

There has been a bewildering response to the publication of the new National Planning Policy Framework (see Briefing 1337) – anything from proclaiming it a NIMBY's charter to a licence to concrete over the countryside. So I asked my very good friend Ian Butter, a long time RuSource subscriber who runs a rural and urban planning consultancy what he thought. Here is the result.

Ian's website is www.ruralurbanplanning.co.uk

Here we go again - another day, another draft planning policy, another consultation response. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) is designed to give all those pesky Planning Policy Statements a No.1 haircut and replace them with a single, all singing, all dancing, policy statement. A sort of planning guidance note lite if you will. And, as you might expect though, rural planning policy is a little more complicated than that; more akin to a game of snakes and ladders.

After the disastrous change from PPG7 to PPS7 in the mid noughties – which gave local authorities the chance to block almost any rural development scheme on any pretext – the establishment of the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) and the Rural Advocate, together with arrival of the well received Taylor Report in 2008 and the re-written PPS4 (Economic Development) in 2010, began to turn the tide of understanding about the need for sound and positive planning for rural England. The pieces were moving fast up the board. Then the coalition did away with CRC, seemingly placed the Taylor Report on a higher shelf and began a wholesale reconstruction of 60 years of planning. The first slippery snake appeared. Encouraged by the Rural Coalition, the Government threw a solid five and indicated a statement on rural policy would be published during July. A ladder was in sight. But they haven't made their move yet and it's not clear if and when they will.

The draft NPPF (published last week) condenses rural policy mainly into one short paragraph. Section 81 notes:

Support the rural economy

81. Planning policies should support sustainable economic growth in rural areas by taking a positive approach to new development. Planning strategies should maintain a prosperous rural economy including policies to:

- *support the sustainable growth of rural businesses*

- *promote the development and diversification of agricultural businesses; and*
- *support sustainable rural tourism and leisure developments that benefit rural businesses, communities and visitors and which respect the character of the countryside. This should include supporting the provision and expansion of tourist and visitor facilities in appropriate locations where identified needs are not met by existing facilities in rural service centres.*

But I'm getting ahead of myself. The NPPF is designed to cut across all areas and provide a generic policy framework, such that specific market sectors need not be considered separately. The overarching requirement is that development must be sustainable; that is, supportive of economic growth, creating strong, vibrant and healthy communities and protective of the environment - both built and natural. I paraphrase of course.

The policies set out in this Framework will apply to the preparation of local and neighbourhood plans, and to the consideration of planning applications. There will be a presumption in favour of sustainable development, delivered through a positive planning system, with significant weight placed on the need to support economic development. Local policies will be variable depending upon the wishes of the local populous – or, at least, that element of them willing, able and interested enough to get engaged in the process; Localism in action.

Authorities will be required to develop planning policies and take decisions that make effective use of land, *“promote mixed use developments that create more vibrant places, and encourage multiple benefits from the use of land in urban and rural areas, recognising that some open land can perform many functions (such as for wildlife, recreation, flood risk mitigation, carbon storage, or food production”*.

This all looks jolly fair. A veritable feast of helpful ladders awaits us. So, where's the catch? If you listen to some of the more alarming reactions you would be forgiven for believing that all of rural England will almost instantaneously be concreted over. Clearly this is an unhelpful overreaction. But the lack of specific guidance over some rural issues is undoubtedly worrying to those who prefer a well defined existence. The word 'agriculture' appears only twice in the whole 58 page document.

The real snake in the grass is, in my view, the potential for uncertainty or even conflict between broadly based policy statements. Take a proposal for a rural retail outlet. A farm shop say. Paragraph 81 suggests clear support, but earlier statements in the NPPF require sequential testing in relation to retail and leisure proposals, with priority toward town centres for sustainability reasons. How will an appropriate distinction be made?

The much argued issue about travel by car in rural areas – which has to be considered separately from sustainable transport provision in urban areas - does not appear to have been reflected in the document. The draft NPPF makes a vaguer statement; *“..the Government recognises that different policies and measures will be required in different communities and opportunities to maximise sustainable transport solutions will vary from urban to rural areas”*. As there are very few if any sustainable transport solutions in rural England (and most are being cut back at the moment) will local authorities really appreciate the issues or take a safer, less flexible line, justified on the grounds of 'sustainability' alone?

I could go on. And I haven't even mentioned the dread word 'housing' yet.

Rural England is a powerhouse of enterprise and opportunity which the Government would do well not to ignore, or inhibit through lack of proper guidance. It will be our future as far as food and water security is concerned. Yet it also contains significant areas of social and economic deprivation.

This new planning agenda will not create open season for developers. Local and neighbourhood plans will see to that.

However, in order to function sustainably, future planning policy must ensure a living, working and playing environment for rural England. Its very sustainability lies in the hands of those who reside there and manage the land on behalf of others who like to resort to it and in the wider interests of nature conservation. However, the countryside cannot be left to become an open museum. Development has to occur, even for housing, in order to sustain a vibrant rural economy, facilitate infrastructure and sustain 'community'.

And for all you planners out there needing some focus for addressing future rural policy in this changing planning environment, you could do worse than to review the Taylor Report “Living Working Countryside”.

The future for rural England will lie in ensuring that when planning policies are up for consideration in local and neighbourhood plans, full and proper consultation responses are made, that draw on all the evidence from decades of playing the rural planning game. Failure to engage will simply ensure stagnation at best, a return to a preservationist stance at worse.

Ian Butter FRICS MRTPI, 1st August 2011

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