

LAND USE PLANNING IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

Profound changes to planning policy and the planning system are in prospect. A Planning Bill is anticipated for 2004. Consultation on Policy Statements for the countryside are imminent and, dependent upon the outcome of referenda, regional government may well be established in England with significant powers to influence planning decisions and the land and business scene which depends upon it. The planning system has been a perennial source of complaint among land managers, which is important because rapid and fundamental changes are taking place in the countryside with yet more to come, and the opportunity for better policy effect for social, economic and environmental needs has rarely been better. Will the new system catalyse and facilitate this process?

What, realistically, are the prospects ?

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Introduction.

Planning policy and the planning system have been complained about for many years. In the countryside, they have the unenviable reputation of satisfying neither the interests of those who would use it to facilitate change and progress, nor of those who seek protection from changes perceived as adverse. In contrast professional planners point out that most planning applications, around 90%, succeed. Such a polarity of views might indicate a system broadly in balance. However the perception that planning is an obstacle to be overcome rather than a means of facilitating development is so firmly rooted as to constitute its own policy reality. This reality forms the background against which views of the forthcoming policy changes are formulated.

Planning issues are assuming greater importance. The drive for more housing nationally, for better infrastructure, and transport systems, for improvements to the built environment, for greater control of waste disposal and mineral extraction add to, and in some ways conflict with, society's expectations of wider amenity use of land, and investment in higher quality landscape, biodiversity and habitat. These pressures coincide with a range of policy and market imperatives faced by farmers and land managers. The CAP is now moving towards an increasingly internationally competitive and less protected agriculture. Traditional assumptions about food production as the primary use of most land in the countryside are no longer unchallenged. This demands greater flexibility by land-based businesses, rapid moves to achieve economies of scale, and changed patterns of investment in land, buildings, equipment and labour. All of these demands raise planning issues.

Government has sought to respond to these tensions, and profound changes to planning policy and the planning system are now in prospect. A Planning Bill scheduled for 2003 is now anticipated early in 2004. Consultation on Planning Policy Statement Number 7, for the countryside, is also imminent. Dependent upon the outcome of referenda, regional government may well be established in England with significant power to influence planning decisions and the land and businesses affected, and indeed some powers already exist for government offices in the regions.

An outline of what is in prospect is at Annex A to this Briefing.

Why did RURAL convene this seminar?

The stimulus to this event arose from a combination of factors:

- Society faces challenges stemming from housing and infrastructure pressure. These require substantial changes in land use. Policy has to arbitrate amongst the competing demands. Government is seeking to respond to perceived limitations of the existing planning system and, partly in response, to devolve administration to regional authorities. This is embodied in the planned revisions to legislation and other policy instruments.
- DEFRA has been developing the organisation and methods to enable it to deliver the Sustainable Development Strategy. This involves changes in policy across the spectrum of

land use, agriculture and the existing rural development. This forms the basis for many newly emerging schemes and rural initiatives.

- Farmers and land owners will have to respond to the impact of the reform of the CAP. This will expose them, and the whole food chain, to increased international competition. It will also demand adherence to more stringent regulations designed to protect the environment and safeguard animal welfare. The planning system has long been regarded as a serious inhibition when managing change of the order now in prospect.

The Challenge for Government.

Among the first challenges has been one of organisation, in that the planning policy lead which formerly rested with the Department of Environment Transport and Regions is now with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, however, as is noted below in more detail, most of the policy lead on matters connected with managed land in rural areas is with DEFRA. Immediately, therefore an issue of 'joining-up' of policy is apparent.

As society develops and economic fortunes have improved, so demand for resources has increased, leading to growing pressure on land. Governments have responded with a series of planning initiatives - most noticeably for more housing, for more roads and infrastructure and for land for commercial development. It has sought the redevelopment of brown-field sites as well as the more intensive use of 'green sites' to minimise the amount of land that is urbanised. Despite this, current demands for more housing and improved infrastructure raise the possibility of a rate of change in land use not seen for the past half century. Most of this land must come from the largest land-using sector, agriculture.

Given that this process needs to be managed with sensitivity it is unsurprising that government should seek at the same time to deflect criticism of the planning system by devolving responsibility for execution to regional and local authorities. So regions have found themselves responsible for designing their solutions to accommodating an increased number houses and their infrastructure. Much of the anxiety centred around this area of policy stems from urban communities. Enlargement of existing towns and villages adds to pressure on existing resources, it can spoil local environments it may undermine the cordon sanitaire provided by green belts etc. Government preference is clearly for much more to be decided at regional level, and this sentiment coincides with moves to test in referenda the public mood for regional government in England.

A further dimension for government is the set of demands that society is now registering for land use more generally. Environmental, leisure and other priorities have assumed greater importance. In particular the provision of land for landscape, biodiversity and habitat has become a substantial political objective. The UK public no longer sees home food production as the overriding purpose for land.

The sustainable development agenda.

Whilst all government departments have responsibilities under government's sustainable development agenda, the task before DEFRA is very large since that Department 'owns' most of the functions which are land based. Since, almost by definition, development means change, this

also means that the process of change must be harmonised with the range of policies for which the Department is responsible. Most notably, this means environmental and agriculture since these account for most of the land surface in question.

Concurrently with the agenda for sustainable development DEFRA is establishing policies for what we now know as “rural development” - a range of instruments to complement and harmonise rural business, agricultural policy, and environmental policy. In this setting, land use is an inescapable policy issue. Added to this are demands which originate mainly in urban areas for land use such as waste management, mineral extraction, and flood defence.

DEFRA's planning role is therefore large, since most of the land surface is farmed or afforested and therefore owned or managed by businesses which are of its direct policy concern, whilst, under its rural affairs brief, the department has to deal with many socio-economic issues.

Planning and rural land management.

Farming has enjoyed a greater degree of freedom in relation to land use than other industries. In particular there are no constraints on the types of crops grown and farmers have been able to construct most farm buildings with little reference to formal planning procedures. However, the perception remains that planning is a serious obstacle to development, particularly as farmers need to diversify the use of their assets in response to the changing markets in which they operate.

The basis of this perception is experience. The evidence is largely anecdotal since the published statistics do not enable its validity to be tested. We know that a large proportion of planning applications succeed, but we do not know how many of these refer to relatively trivial adjustments to domestic and small-scale industrial activity as opposed to significant rural development proposals. Still more we do not know how many potential developments are not taken forward because of the costs and delays involved and the perceived risk that planning decisions will be so delayed or made subject to such stringent conditions that the project ceases to be economically viable.

The seminar heard of two examples of how the planning system impeded rural development. In the first, an estate, faced with the need to rationalise its farming operations sought to adapt and change the use of farm buildings such that new commercial activity would be attracted to its village area. This in turn would arrest a decline in the local rural community and safeguard the viability of the village school and other social amenities, as well as providing a mix of employment opportunities beyond the scope of agriculture. The project was only achieved after what was described as “years of endless fights” and substantial needless costs entailed in resolving conflict and appeals. The project having proven successful, an attempt to repeat it in a neighbouring setting is being similarly resisted.

The second example, again responding to the need for farm business rationalisation, to secure valuable landscape for the future, and to restructure to cope with the more competitive agriculture under the reformed CAP, seeks to redevelop a redundant farm buildings complex with the aid of third party developer expertise. The vision is for development of affordable or retirement homes complemented by a care home to fill a need which is keenly felt in the local community, and which would ease pressure on existing housing stock. This application has been refused and will now enter the appeal process.

The planning system attracts criticism because it is shown not to be context sensitive when land-based businesses are seeking to respond in innovative ways to market or other pressures whilst at the same time securing wider rural objectives. Local planning staffs and elected representatives are said to lack any wider view of the significance of a given application beyond its immediate specifics. The system is seen as negative and controlling when the need is to anticipate political, social and economic change and to optimise land use for future as well as present generations.

In particular, local authorities are described as bereft of economic expertise and an understanding of the functioning of labour market and community inter-dependencies. Elected representatives are singled out for criticisms of lack of vision and an inability to resist small but vociferous pressure groups.

This matters because it is just these applications, a numerical minority that are novel or difficult, that represent an autonomous and entrepreneurial response to the need to change. The failure of these applications reflects disproportionately on the dynamism of the system as a whole at a point when renewed dynamism is urgently required. This is a cause for concern.

The pattern of employment in rural areas has changed substantially since the post war years. The share of agriculture, food production and other primary industries has declined substantially whilst service industries have grown. By 1996 only 4% of rural employment was in agriculture with a further 3% in food and beverages. In contrast service industries, including catering, hotels and public administration, made up 71%. During the 1990's a further substantial decline took place in agricultural employment. Between 1991-1993 and 2002 total employment fell by some 14%, however hired employment declined by 27% and full time regular employment by 33%. These changes raise significant issues for rural communities.

Not only is the balance between traditional forms of employment and lifestyle changing as new better jobs bring into rural communities former town dwellers, but for displaced farm workers, or farm workers whose jobs have become occasional rather than regular, there are few opportunities, in the formal economy. They tend to become marginalised unless new jobs are created within the rural community. These will not be in agriculture even if they can be situated on farms and employ some redundant farm resources. At this point the formal planning system becomes involved and can facilitate or obstruct the process of village regeneration.

The process of economic regeneration highlights another but no less significant feature of the rapid rate of change taking place in the countryside. Traditional farming practices, which were relatively labour intensive, contributed to the development and maintenance of many environmentally valued features of the landscape. The economic pressures which demand that farm labour becomes more productive in terms of marketable produce, do not themselves generate resources to sustain this element of traditional environmental stewardship. Agricultural policy has sought to recognise this through the introduction of a variety of environmental schemes and this process is likely to be taken further as a result of the implementation of the Curry Commission's recommendations and the greater emphasis given to Pillar II supports under the reformed CAP.

Many informed commentators believe that however effectively the rural development agenda is run, the existing public goods of landscape, biodiversity and habitat cannot be procured at the desired quality by subsidy payments alone. On the scale needed they would be both politically and financially unsustainable. It therefore makes sense to continue to exploit land managers' goodwill and produce as much of these environmental goods as possible as by-products of other enterprises

- as is largely the case now. However, it is argued, this needs more people to remain on and near the land - both as part of enterprise activity and as part of rural development policy – than a competitive agriculture can support. In the absence of other income streams the environmental public goods are unlikely to be supplied. Thus planning, which can foster or frustrate alternative new enterprise, plays a critical role.

Finally, the impact of planning on rural enterprise matters because the livelihoods of large numbers of people are, at risk, and could benefit from positive planning policies. Although agriculture is indeed now a small industry, perhaps less than 2% of GDP, more than half a million people are involved. Its role in rural areas has to take account of up and downstream businesses, some of which depend directly on domestic farming. The situation differs considerably between rural areas. Overall the rural population is growing, rural incomes compare well with average incomes and rural unemployment is not worse than the national level. However, there is deprivation in rural areas and in some remote regions the trend at present is towards depopulation. In these regions there are likely to be few employment opportunities for young people, difficulty in finding training or in selling acquired skills. This hastens the drift to urban centres and leaves a residue of isolated, often old and sometimes poor people in decaying rural villages.

Expert commentators believe that planning, used pro-actively, could reverse that trend; it could reinforce rural communities; it could aid diversification away from agriculture; it could aid by indirect means the viability of threatened rural businesses; it could contribute to the achievement of environmental and sustainable development objectives; and it could ease some suburban population pressures.

With this background in mind this RURAL seminar sought to look at the prospects under the anticipated and radically reformed planning regime.

The shape of things to come.

Briefly, the reforms envisage:

- A **Planning Bill** in 2004.
- Streamlining of appeals and enquiries.
- Planning Policy Statements (PPS) to replace existing guidance (PPGs).
- A simplified planning structure, and new **Regional Spatial Strategies**.
- Local Development Frameworks - target date 2006.
- Improvement of planning skills.
- Reform of the **compulsory purchase and compensation** system.

Within these main planks, the intention is that this policy should embrace Sustainable Development strategy across all government departments; that Spatial Strategies should take a holistic approach, not just be concerned with isolated tracts of land, and that regions should

develop their own strategies. A variety of measures are designed to improve opportunities to influence planning at local level, including Parish Plans. PPSs - formerly PPGs - should be clearer, shorter and sharper. PPS1, the 'over-arching' strategic document in the series will concentrate on sustainable development, spatial planning and public engagement. PPS7, on the Countryside, is among the first to be reviewed and consultation on this is expected in the Autumn of 2003. Current policy which aims to conserve our 'Best and Most Versatile Soils' is to be reviewed, perhaps with the aim of seeing the value of soils reflected in strategies in other ways.

Also relevant is the Review of the delivery rural policy which is being conducted for government by Lord Haskins, and which is anticipated in the Autumn. An interim statement of the principles the report will reflect includes:

- Better accountability, including closer association between the deliverers and those delivered to.
- Readiness for policy change.
- Devolved administration.
- Customer focus.
- Simplicity, and better economic, social and environmental co-ordination.
- Value for money.

From the forgoing points the broad thrust is immediately apparent. Government intends to change the planning culture to improve the operation of the planning system; to improve performance of authorities and planners and respond to demand by easing development constraints and securing public involvement. For the countryside, debate of the likely future impact of such a programme will be shaped by what is already being experienced, and the personal assessments of land managers and professional practitioners who see clear gaps between what exists and what is wanted.

The key points that emerged during the seminar included:

- Delivery of the new planning system.
- Regional issues.
- The impact on the future of agriculture.
- The contents of the new Policy Statements.
- The nature and extent of the changes needed to develop sustainable communities.
- The impact of exogenous, urban and international issues that affect the countryside.

Delivery.

Doubts exist about the ability of the system to change rapidly. Regional planning for example has

few practitioners, and the jury is still out about what cabinet style local government can deliver. Some go so far as to doubt whether the system can be “reformed”, given, for example, the lowest level of house-building since 1927, the lack of outline planning which has depressed development, and the fact that much current building is rushed, poorly conceived in terms of living space and integration with transport or car parking - and is already being described as the slums of tomorrow.

There is a conviction that time is needed to get the processes right, to allow for real public engagement, to secure a harmonisation of views among “country people and those who live in the country” and to address the wider issues which affect strategic planning decisions. The existing system is not working well. In East Anglia and Kent, for example, large-scale development is already proposed without the assurance that strategic water resource provision and allocation is satisfactorily resolved. Given that there is possibly only one suitable reservoir site each in Kent and East Anglia and such projects take up to twenty years from conception to commissioning the fact that planning for neither has commenced does not speak well for planning delivery.

Delivery in the new era will demand a new range of skills. Government has identified this, but they are not likely to be available quickly. The gaps will have to be filled by existing staff. (“Are we going to just re-spray the ones we have?”). The ability of planning departments at any level in either the existing or the envisaged system to be able to incorporate sound economic thinking is doubted. This issue is already of considerable importance in local planning. It is widely regarded as a key impediment and will be of increased importance in a regional setting. Economic development officers, where they are employed by local authorities have often been recruited from among the planning staffs, thus further depleting an already under-resourced group. In recent years many authorities have devolved functions, such as economic development, transport and environmental policy from planning departments resulting in fragmentary local policy making. Allied to each of these issues is budgetary pressure on local councils.

Some commentators are not encouraged by the lack of clarity in the sustainable development strategy, and herein lies a dilemma. Ideally, a concise definition of the requirements would exist, against which strategy could be set out. In fact such a definition is likely to be impossible and this can lead to “lazy” thinking and confusion that is bound to impede delivery. On the other hand, it is argued, precise definitions work too prescriptively. What is needed is to identify what is clearly not sustainable (eg. mining peat) and act to inhibit it or to identify measures to promote activity which is clearly sustainable. Thus, for example, if existing policy is acting, ‘against employment in the countryside’, as some argue, measures are needed to reverse that trend. Measures that meet all sustainable development criteria are very rare, and clearly some form of prioritising - not presently apparent - is necessary.

Historically planning in the countryside has been run on town planning lines. It is widely held that rural communities have been failed by this system and a culture change is required. The new regime provides an opportunity to correct this. Two areas of concern illuminate this point. Urban deprivation is well documented, but, it is believed that rural deprivation exists to a greater extent than is popularly imagined. Substantial pockets of resistant poverty exist within affluent rural areas. The South East, South West, Southern and Eastern England, the Midlands and the North East and West all exhibit the phenomena of generally economically vibrant conurbations with a hinterland of much poorer rural communities. Prominent among the causes of this is the sheer ‘rurality’ of the locations. Remoteness (which can occur even over short distances) lack of services, and the demographic characteristics of the population combine with the decline of traditional job opportunities to establish a downward spiral. The size of the problem for those who

would deliver a solution is substantial. A decade ago the NCVO Rural Unit reported that approaching 23% of the population live in rural areas - of whom many are not deprived - but at that time 60% of women did not have a driving licence; 72% of the elderly did not own their own transport and 25% of rural households fell below the poverty line. Difficulties of this type still persist.

In delivering more sustainable development a change of attitude towards agriculture is needed. Historically, the countryside has been synonymous with farming and food production. That could be changed - we already see agriculture as a source of energy and industrial crops, water resources and waste 'processing' - so that the range and scope of economic activity in rural areas is enlarged and a new vigorous cycle could be established. Food production has to be seen as one activity in the countryside rather than *the* activity and this would act as catalyst for wider good. In order to achieve this, other measures are needed.

Villages and small country towns need to be allowed to grow, which means land for housing and for businesses and work places in the vicinity. Regional and spatial strategies, local and parish plans could all address this issue, paying attention to local conditions and needs. The result could be a mix of economic opportunities, the absorption of labour that is being shed from agriculture and its service industries, a reversal of the current trend of depopulating more remote areas and the sustaining of some rural communities and the services they both need and can generate. To deliver this vision, however requires a revolution in the approach to planning and the skills of planners to look forward and facilitate entrepreneurial change - which should be the real function of planning - rather than the application of the controls of the past.

This last point identifies perhaps potentially one the most powerful delivery tools; attitude. Historically, planning has been a change-resistant activity, and hence its controlling remit. An opportunity now emerges to engage the population in real dialogue about how their community should look in "*n*" years' time, to integrate social economic and environmental aspirations and to plan positively and optimistically for those objectives, to create "countryside capital" and build capacity for the future. This would entail a major culture shift and might take a long time.

How long it takes will depend on leadership. This is seen as perhaps the single most determinant of the quality of delivery and to need attention. In recent years the leadership role of senior planners has been reduced, their role has become politicised, and their departments have become referees of minor planning disputes or overseers of much that is routine. The new era requires a much more positive style of leadership to assure the exploitation of the potential it offers. The prospects for this were not encouraging according to the experts assembled for this event. There is also a leadership issue relating to the quality and culture of elected representatives. Too often they see their role as defending a narrow, often party, set of interests rather than taking a wider leadership role for the betterment of their communities. Leadership remains a significant concern and reappears below in the regional context

Regional Issues.

It is clear that government cannot tolerate three levels of planning activity: regional, county and local. There is an expectation that the county planning role will wither in favour of more strategic activity at regional level and new measures to promote locally derived strategies; Local Development Frameworks and Parish Plans for example.

There are, unsurprisingly, reservations about this. Setting aside that our culture has been change-resistant and that there will undoubtedly be strong attachment to existing methods there are nevertheless real concerns about the adequacy of the regional view to achieve a satisfactory focus and resolution of the issues at the rural level. This needs to identify very different characteristics and needs from the urban territory of any region and recognise considerable differences across even a small region. These reservations again point to issues about skills, the availability of cross discipline capability and the expertise which regional chambers or assemblies will need. The need to integrate not just the sustainable development demands, but also those of neighbouring regions where interests may overlap or be in conflict, demonstrates the complexities that will have to be reconciled.

An alternative view of the proposals is that they do not devolve real authority. County councils will lose much of their power to influence events in their area and, notwithstanding the notion of local development frameworks there is fear that regional views will prevail. Repeatedly this seminar returned to the theme that what is badly needed is local flexibility, local sensitivity, and local solutions to local problems. The dominance of the conurbations and urban thinking at regional level, which is thought to be almost inevitable, is a source of real concern.

A parallel view is sceptical about the ability of regions to provide real leadership to communities inside present counties and districts. Whereas county planners can be expected and often do have a significantly detailed knowledge to enlighten decision taking, regional remoteness and the inevitable balancing of interests across a large area including numerically greater urban interests suggests that "balanced leadership and good government" is less likely.

Experience of existing structure plans is not encouraging. Plans for areas as far apart as Durham and Essex read almost identically - yet have very different problems requiring very different solutions. Might a set of similarly 'formulated' regional plans be expected to be more successful?

A major issue for rural areas is investment, and it is by no means certain that a regionally based system can secure the confidence of investors who might be considering enterprise in rural settings.

Local communities are generally aware of the need to create opportunities for investors even if the level of resources available for economic development within authorities is weak. Doubts were expressed about the ability of regional planning to tie together such complementary demands as new work places, affordable housing and community services that make up a full package. A key test of the new arrangements will be their capacity to foster serious investment in rural areas.

These reservations contrast with the government's view that the new regime should not be seen as centralising, and that it will be "front loaded", ie it will demand the early and open involvement of people in planning proposals. This might, for example, give cause for some optimism about achieving high priorities such as jobs for young people and affordable housing. This appears to cater for local needs. Can it also secure for government the delivery of its sustainable development strategy?

Planning Issues around Agriculture.

The current and rapidly accelerating process of restructuring agriculture raises a number of specific development issues that stem from the planning freedoms it has enjoyed. The public will tolerate unsightly or apparently inappropriate farming or industrial structures in the countryside as waning. Many traditional sets of farm buildings have already been made redundant and

successfully redeveloped for housing - although few in the affordable housing category and very few indeed in a manner which has produced a commensurate benefit in terms of new work places. ("People come here to live, not to work!")

Land managers who are urgently seeking to re-balance their businesses by diversification and/or redevelopment in the light of agricultural changes face the sort of difficulties illustrated by the examples in the opening of this Briefing. It was suggested that one contribution to resolving the planning impasses that often arise or improvement of the quality of applications could be the use of a statutory consultee such as the Countryside Agency which could add expertise and impartiality not available to planning departments, speak from a trans-authority perspective, and bring 'countryside capital' expertise to bear.

The agriculture of the future will need to develop its infrastructure to accommodate its businesses in a more competitive era. These will include, for example, larger machinery sheds or garages, larger grain stores, larger and more concentrated livestock units, food processing installations, installations for diversified businesses, perhaps waste handling plants, almost certainly fewer but larger installations across much of farming. These new and potentially more intrusive developments will be needed if farmers are to compete and may conflict with planning ideals, particularly those related to environmental objectives.

A balance will have to be struck but some trade-offs might be possible. For example some existing agricultural sites might be treated as brown land. 'Space-for-space' agreements could permit redundant farm buildings to be used for industrial purposes, possibly within an adjacent village rather than on the farm itself. This could be the means of job creation in an otherwise derelict scene. The object for farmers is to secure the viability of businesses, but it is worth bearing in mind that, whereas the economic spin-off for the wider community may be further up and downstream, the social and environmental spin-off is immediate and local. Such ideas merit serious thought, and the new planning regime presents an opportunity to alter the status quo.

Planning Policy Statements.

The current Planning Policy Guidance notes are to be superseded by Planning Policy Statements. PPS 7 on the countryside is due out for consultation in Autumn 2003. Opinion of the changes proposed were mixed. On the one hand few see any difficulty with the existing PPG 7, indeed some surprise was expressed that such importance is attached to its early revision when other land use and countryside policy questions remain pressing and without progress- notably bio-fuels and energy crops. Others were deeply sceptical of the aspiration to make the new documents "clearer shorter and sharper" and yet carry weight across the widely different regions to which they are to apply. The clear message from this debate is that what is wanted is something that can be applied intra-region and sub-regionally, and, if anything needs to be added to PPG/PPS 7, it is a capacity to address priorities, to relate to other policy programmes, and to enable coherent decision taking at sub-region or local level.

Priorities and Policy

The variable quality of planning departments and in particular the lack of economic development skills available to most local authorities was a continuous thread in the debate. The view is that this function is generally under resourced both in quality and quantity, and that planning functions

need to be reinforced by reversing the decline caused by splitting-off functions which have become special 'interests' such as economic development, conservation/environment, transport and others.

It is more likely with a re-united system that local communities will be appropriately served by the positive planning initiatives needed to change the essentially re-active mode of most planning departments.

A prime need is to explore the options for say 15 years' ahead and to establish decision processes that will enable communities to make informed, appropriate and sometimes hard choices. This is a challenge for all democratic institutions and for officials at all levels. It is made almost impossible when people's 'wants' are translated in to 'democratic choices' in ignorance of the available opportunities, the systems required to deliver, and the costs and benefits that might result. Too often, the vision is dominated by single interest groups so that balanced democratic debate becomes unattainable. This process badly needs new catalysts to assist thinking and raise the quality of the debate.

In the case of agriculture at least two complementary factors are in play. The world situation has changed dramatically over the last quarter century so there is much less pressure to produce food at home. Policy must reflect this, but it has created an impression that agricultural production is almost completely without importance. This obscures the reality that agriculture is the means by which we translate a large part of our natural resource endowment into valued outputs, of which food constitutes the major element. The issue is not how to dump agriculture but how to use it in the changed global situation, bearing in mind the possibility that in due course this may change.

Farmers feel impotent in dealing with the policy consequences. Although some farmers are recognising new opportunities and taking positive steps to ensure the growth of their businesses, many lack motivation at a time when businesses need to be at their sharpest and innovative best in order to re-shape, diversify and devise new opportunities. At the best of times the average farmer is likely to find it difficult to cope with the constraints of the planning system. Most are simply not resourced to cope with the system envisaged, especially given that the necessary innovative solutions may well be pushing at the boundaries of what has hitherto been perceived as normal or acceptable. In this situation some form of advisory activity that assists farmers to navigate their changing situation is thought to be essential. This could perhaps overcome the culture of 'blanket refusal' which has prevailed, in favour of disseminating information about successful schemes and best practice.

The issue of quality ran through much of this debate, albeit often in the form of pointed questions. What constitutes "good" rural development? Large car manufacturing plants, for example, are almost certainly not a good answer, but new technology in modestly sized enterprises are - so can regions selectively catalyse these results? How might success stories, such as Grimethorpe and Eden, be replicated? What is good housing - how is it possible to make sure that the new housing stock to be constructed will be of lasting and high quality? What about environmental quality - housing density and amenity space as well as landscape biodiversity and habitat? How can a culture of 'appropriate' development be created, eg larger blocks for small and market towns, and small blocks of units to allow regular but modest growth of villages, perhaps by three or four-unit terraces and with work places to match? What about commercial pressure to intensify some farming practices - competitive almost certainly means local mono-culture and selective exploitation of soil type such as intensive horticulture. Some land owners, the National Trust for example, are able to take steps to address these issues, but similar options are not open to all. What defines 'quality use' of land removed from traditional use in future land-take? Is flood

defence a higher quality use than housing in some places? How does the system recognise and cope with adverse consequences. For example, a projected development at Stanstead in Essex will intensify East Anglia's already difficult water supply problems. How will these be overcome and what are the consequences for other areas? These and other questions illustrate that expert commentators believe that the present planning system is insufficiently responsive to the issues or fast enough to cope with issues that are already urgent - the need to expand many villages for example - nor were they optimistic that the new system would overcome these failures.

The review of Best and Most Versatile Soils is regarded with mixed reaction. One view is that since government clearly no longer regards agriculture as a strategic activity and the public mood has swung away from food security towards other demands, the inevitable result is that the conservation of the best soil assets will fall in priority. However such thinking is regarded as very short term. There is no guarantee that current international food market trends will continue in perpetuity. A nation which chooses not to retain its best land against future need has to weigh these risks or be guilty of policy failure. A more positive purpose for the review would be to identify land which cannot sustainably remain in production and might therefore be released for other purposes.

Development and re-development around existing habitations is at best piecemeal, and often attended by local conflict. This is an area of particular concern which is not receiving policy attention at present but which could benefit from proper strategic planning under the new regime. What is needed is positive planning input to secure the greatest benefit for the most people - but this requires long term and sensitive thinking. Similar but small-scale approaches are required for smaller settlements and villages, as has been noted above.

An obstacle to such thinking is the prevalence of precautionary thinking that now pervades policy development. Just as in agriculture, where policy moves are being made towards the disciplines of markets, so the use of land for public good purposes could similarly be prioritised by obliging or allowing communities to express their views and compete for the resources. To this theme one can add the notion of "public revenues to support the delivery public goods" - something that is not happening under the CAP.

The management of land is regarded as a high priority for land based businesses, however it is also important if the public wish for sustainable development is to be achieved. Britain's most precious landscapes are, in most cases, managed landscapes. Much is in need of improvement. All of it requires the presence of people with the necessary balance of skills and motivation to integrate social, economic and environmental requirements. Local development frameworks need to recognise this need to manage the land and that the traditional economic basis which has supported such activities has largely disappeared. There are therefore new questions about who will manage it.

The future structure of agriculture, unsurprisingly, runs throughout this topic and several references to it have already been made. A number of pointers affect the future strategies for land: fewer, larger arable enterprises - but retaining virtually all suitable land in production; larger livestock units - but perhaps a less pronounced trend in upland areas; possibly more production becoming irrigation dependent; the trend to "full-throttle" production may well be incompatible with the environmental agenda; who will pay for the production of 'green goods'? In the outlook period it will be necessary to respond to the impact of trading with Eastern Europe, and under the free movement of labour rules of the EU, the inflow of farming skills from the new member

countries. This is of central importance for horticulture, a sector which already faces keen international competition and has infrastructure and housing problems.

Those enterprises that survive will need increasingly higher skilled and professional management. These skills will form the basis for the development of the productivity of land based resources and determine the extent to which modernised agriculture can out-do its competitors by differentiation, moving up the food chain and other means - including retaining the ability to buy and sell land in the way it deals with all other inputs.

One of the most used words in this seminar about new planning systems has been “flexibility”, coupled with a sense of “urgency”. Planners need flexible tools to deal with conflicting and greatly varying demand; land managers need flexibility to re-balance their businesses, often at very short notice; policy custodians need the flexibility to respond to new political and public imperatives; all these groups need flexibility of response to cope with the sheer pace, variety and growth of demand and to secure the “best fit” in achieving solutions for local and wider communities. It is in the local setting that changes have to be given effect and where, repeatedly, the importance of retaining and allowing flexibility to facilitate local and individual need was stressed. The issues are urgent and there is a real concern that moves to regional design will impede essential flexibility - unless substantive measures are put in place to secure it in the sub-regional and local arrangements. That means pushing real power downwards and ensuring that those who exercise it have the necessary skills and sense of urgency to deliver. It has yet to be seen whether the Bill will do this.

In closing.....

This debate was held and this policy development is taking place at time when everyone in the spheres of interest feels the need to do something new and different. The Land Use scene is being transformed partly by the restructuring of agriculture but also by other factors such as leisure and environmental aspirations. Our social framework is being transformed. There is a “churn” going on in society which is showing all sorts of economic and other tensions, and our political language has become dominated by slogans - of which “development” is one - which have widely different interpretations. Planning has become a process identified with “stopping” things, rather than “enabling” and it has produced an unknown or immeasurable area of discouragement.

What we now look forward to is a new regime in which government has sought to answer many of the criticisms implicit in this briefing. The arrangements at first sight may look cumbersome and bureaucratic. They also present an opportunity for revitalising a poorly regarded but essential process. Whether they work in that manner will depend on the quality of leadership at every level, complemented by the improved skills, professionalism, enlightenment, courage, flexibility and sense of urgency of those who operate the system and those who have to operate within it, which have been identified in this seminar.

Much of the tone of this seminar has been critical and negative – not unlike the planning system itself. However, it is important to recognise that some important developments have taken place in the countryside. Many of these stem from individuals who have confronted and overcome planning difficulties. Some have been facilitated by the work of organisations such as the National Trust and the Countryside Commission. Part of the message of this seminar was that as more rural areas come to grips with the problems of agricultural change and urban expansion, this experience suggests that positive outcomes are attainable and that positive planning can make a positive contribution to their attainment. Policy is adapting, in part to attempt to facilitate that. The test of

the new arrangements will be that they do successfully facilitate this process at a critical time in the life of many rural areas, and at the necessary pace.

Addendum.

Seminar participants were invited at the end of the debate to state in under one minute their most significant point or points from this debate. The following is a synopsis of those points.

1.1. The perception of planning as an activity which is remote, bureaucratic and restrictive is wrong. 1.2. Opportunities exist with the advent of Parish Plans and other devices to secure the engagement of people with the process. 1.3. Policy should allow community based initiatives and this should be welcomed by planners.

2. The pace of change is hotting-up and in this situation rural and agricultural diversification is of even greater importance; planning should facilitate this. 2.2. Policy across the whole range of planning interests needs to be got right, and that it afford flexibility. 2.3. It is extremely important that policy be got right at Regional level in order properly to integrate spatial, economic, environmental and social factors.

3. Farmers can be very flexible, so planning policy needs to facilitate much more imaginative land use schemes, eg those involving water and flood defences (we might even farm water buffalo!).

4. We need to build bridges between communities and local authorities in order to exploit opportunities. This becomes increasingly important in a future with an increasingly fragmented agriculture, and these groups need to knit together in their mutual self-interest.

5. PPS7 guidance needs recognise the need for a high degree of LOCAL flexibility. 5.2. The design, rate and scale of development for villages should allow modest incremental development - which probably requires new forms of planning permissions for villages.

6.1. Clear messages have come through about flexibility, BMV land and about the style needed for PPS 7. 6.2. It is noted that other subjects such as waste management and minerals extraction were not addressed.

7.1 What will planners at the various levels in the new system actually do? Perhaps one of their activities should be horizon scanning. 7.2. Means need to be found of gathering evidence to provide the necessary vision, and we needs methods of evaluation which will gain acceptance in the community

8.1. The key for villages is "little and often" development of both work places and housing - and that these should come from local and private providers. 8.2. Planning needs to be planning - not development control.

9.1. The affordable housing issue needs to be addressed by local authorities. One way to improve the current situation would be to allow enlargement of the current stock of on-farm houses, but for the open and rental market, by allowing small scale additions - ones and twos in existing localities.

9.2. The Wheels to Work and rural housing schemes operated by the Countryside Agency seem to show that the Agency is not good at working with other agencies.

10.1. We need badly to join up planning guidance. 10.2. PPS 7 needs to recognise that new agricultural buildings are going to be required. This needs especially to be recognised in Spatial strategies, and it thus becomes important to engage all the stakeholders.

11.1. The drivers appear to be based on false assumptions about the planning system, resulting in over-simplification and reduction in quality of outcomes. 11.2. A more sensitive system is needed, with a changed culture and a changed process of engagement with others. 11.3. We could learn from Europe where endogenous development, in which the inherent local character of the area is recognised, prevails very widely. The planning system should have a role to exploit such opportunities.

12.1. Energy crops was a further unaddressed issue - and this could have profound implications for the countryside. 12.2. We need to create a positive planning culture to replace the existing one of planning controls. 12.3. We need more countryside planning - not town planning in the countryside. 12.4. Farmers and land managers must be allowed flexibility.

13.1. Generalisations are too easy. 13.2. There is need in the system for the "animateur"; people are needed in the catalyst role to make the system work.

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**Extract from a paper kindly provided by Sustainable Land Use Division,
Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.**

Introduction

The land use planning system in England is undergoing radical reform. The Government's aim is to develop "a more positive approach to planning for the right development in the right place". Some of these changes are being delivered through the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill which is expected to receive Royal Assent by Spring 2004; others are being delivered through secondary legislation, reforms of the planning guidance and planning structure, and also by substantial investment in planning skills and resources.

At the same time, the regional governance of England is being developed, with Regional Assemblies a possibility in some areas early in the next Parliament. Government Offices and Regional Development Agencies already have powerful policy levers at their disposal. The introduction of new Regional Spatial Strategies will amplify the importance of regional decision making, and have a significant impact on delivering sustainable development in the countryside as well as in urban areas. There should be a step-change in better integration of key economic, environmental and community policies.

Defra is actively seeking to influence these changes through close involvement in their development and through "rural proofing". All major new policies across Government are assessed for their rural impact. New Regional structures might also "rural proof" their policies.

It is important that these new institutions and systems properly reflect the interests and concerns of rural communities. This seminar provides an excellent opportunity to seek your views on how to further the rural interest in these changes.

Changes in the planning system

It might be helpful to summarise the latest position on the reform of the planning system. The main points are as follows:

- **Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill** expected to get Royal Assent by Spring 2004.
- Streamlining of central government handling of appeals and major enquiries
- Introduction of planning policy statements in hand through review of existing Planning Policy Guidance. **Planning Policy Statement 7 on the Countryside** (PPS 7) will be circulated for public consultation shortly.

- A simplified planning structure. New **Regional Spatial Strategies** (RSSs) will relate closely to other regional strategies including economic strategies, cultural strategies, and the new regional housing strategies to provide a comprehensive high-level framework. Importantly, too, the RSSs will also set out regional transport strategies;
- **Local Development Frameworks** will replace the existing structure, unitary development and local plans.
- Substantial investment in **improving planning professional skills** across institutions; and
- Reform of the **compulsory purchase and compensation system** to make the assembly of land for major projects simpler, fairer and quicker.

Regional Spatial Strategies

In regions where elected assemblies are established the assemblies will take over responsibilities for regional planning. In the meantime Regional Chambers will have responsibility for producing the draft regional strategies, to be approved by the Secretary of State.

Regional Spatial Strategies will provide the framework within which Local Development Frameworks and Local Transport Plans will be developed. They should:

- Reflect regional **diversity**
- Identify regional **needs**
- Integrate with **other regional strategies**, e.g. economic and housing.

County Councils will continue their current role in relation to minerals and waste planning, and in preparing Local Transport Plans, and contribute more widely to the planning system. In particular they will act as agents of the regional planning bodies in providing expert advice on any **sub-regional strategies**.

Local Development Frameworks

Local Development Frameworks will replace existing structure/local plans and unitary development plans. Unitary or local planning authorities will be responsible for their preparation. Districts can choose to produce a joint Framework with another District or with a county council, if this would be more efficient.

Instead of the current system of a single document plan, the Framework will comprise a “folder” of documents consisting of:

- **A core strategy:** core policies and the vision for the area including outline locations;

- **Proposals with maps:** site specific policies and proposals; existing and revised designations for land; sites for particular development or land uses; areas to which specific policies apply.
- **Area action plans for key areas of change or conservation:** detailed site specific policies, proposals or guidance for areas of change or conservation.

This Folder approach will allow flexibility in preparation and subsequent updating. Local authorities will need to prepare a three year timetable for the initial production.

The core strategy will contain a **Statement of Community Involvement** ODPM is researching guidance on this. In addition changes will be made to the way in which the Framework is adopted, with the aim of getting better engagement at an early stage. Frameworks will be subject to testing by an independent Inspector or Panel, which will consider the soundness of the plan as a whole not just specific objections.

Regional Government

The Deputy Prime Minister announced in June that three regions, the North West, the North East, Yorkshire and Humberside would have **referenda on elected Regional Assemblies** in the autumn of 2004. All of these areas have significant rural populations and areas. Elected Assemblies, if established, will be expected to rural-proof their strategies. If Regional assemblies are decided upon then the structure of local government in the regions concerned will be reformed to provide for just one tier of principal local authority.

Rural local authorities have taken advantage of other changes in local government to promote rural interests. The introduction of "**freedoms and flexibilities**" for exceptionally performing authorities enables them to tailor their service provision more effectively for rural dispersed communities. **Local Public Service Agreements** introduces the possibility to set specific standards for rural services.

Parish Councils

Parish Councils is the most local tier of government directly linked to the local community. QUALITY Town and Parish Councils can play an enhanced role in engaging the community in many issues. Parish plans are a potentially very useful statement of the needs and wishes of the community. However, Parish Councils are only consultees in the planning process.

RURAL plans to continue to programme events which capture this WAY AHEAD theme with the aim of promoting constructive input to the policy overlay beneath which farming food and countryside practitioners function.

Do you have views on these issues or indeed on other issues to which RURAL should turn its attention?

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