

Can Rural Britain Survive the Sustainability Agenda?

Much of what you are about to read will be construed in many planning and regeneration circles as heresy and my professional parentage will doubtless be called into question - if nothing else!

If one considers emerging planning policy under the new, all singing - all dancing Regional Spatial Strategy/Local Development Framework combo' you could be forgiven for believing that development in rural Britain is fundamentally unsustainable. The countryside might as well be defined as Green Belt.

The recently adopted North West Plan states that a change of use of an existing building in the countryside will only be considered 'exceptionally' (policy RDF2). We all know how the word 'exception' is applied in planning circles. In the recently adopted East of England Plan there is no specific policy concerning rural areas in general, even though the urban fringe and coastal areas merit discrete consideration. Yet the Plan recognises the high levels of deprivation that occur in many rural parts of the region. The Yorkshire and the Humber Plan waxes lyrical about issues of exclusion and deprivation within rural areas and the need to encourage rural employment diversity, and then proceeds to drive development into defined local service centres having regard to a 'transport orientated approach'.

This only satisfies the needs of a limited proportion of the rural population, forces up travel-to-work times and distances and is already engendering town cramming, necessitating the release of green-field land. As a result, the physical and social identities of market towns and traditional rural settlements will increasingly become subsumed within a quasi-urban doughnut of modern development. Nice!

Never mind the entreaties in PPS7 (Planning Policy Statement 7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas) to raise the quality of life and the environment in rural areas through the promotion of thriving, inclusive and sustainable rural communities; sustainable economic growth and diversification; and continued protection of the open countryside, if you propose development in the countryside outside of a settlement boundary there is a presumption against rather than for – however beneficial it may be to the rural community.

The, 'law of unintended consequences' has also been a feature of current policy. Unexpectedly in relation to rural development PPS6: Planning for Town Centres defined B1 office use in such a way that some authorities have taken this to mean that a B1 office use is only acceptable in a town centre location and requested sequential testing for change of use of a rural building to offices.

And what of the increasingly prevalent 'sustainability trap'; where a settlement does not exhibit sufficient sustainability credentials to allow sustainable development to occur, so that it can make the settlement more sustainable. In relation to one mixed development proposal I was told the settlement was not sustainable, yet it is in the top 20% of most deprived wards in England and really needs regenerative investment to keep it alive. So, have the authority washed their hands of the problem or are they simply applying narrow sustainability principles without assessing how projects might be used to kick start failing rural economies? Or is there some magic pot of money which even now is winging its way into such economies. I don't think so.

The problem lies in the often perverse interpretations of what constitutes 'sustainability'. More often than not it is simply about transport and little else. The

three pillars of sustainability – economic, social and environment – rarely coincide where rural policy thinking is concerned. Environment takes precedence to the virtual exclusion of the other two.

Otherwise sustainable rural development projects have been stymied for no greater reason than 'car use bad, bus use good'. A careful review of PPG13: Transport indicates that this is not what Government policy for rural areas says, but is increasingly how it is interpreted. It also ignores one of the tenets of sustainable development which is to encourage people to work closer to where they live.

Conversely though, increasing emphasis is being placed on encouraging the development of affordable rural housing and the use of exception sites (there's that word again). However, what is the point of supplying - admittedly much needed - affordable housing in the countryside if occupiers still have to travel into their nearest urban/service/key centre to work; a recipe for dormitory status if ever I saw one. If we really want to reduce rural out-migration (especially of the young), lessen commuting and help sustain the rural economy we need to create meaningful new work opportunities as well.

Rural shops, post offices and pubs require customers with cash in their pockets if they are to survive. Community facilities also need an active and adequate population to stay alive. Why bother with the local shop when the 'Massive-Metro-Mart' is so accessible on the long commute home. By sustaining a thriving rural workforce there is far more chance for local businesses to capture their spending power. Moreover, the rural workspace development itself will generate a raft of acolyte support services.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm passionate about sustaining our rural environment and ensuring that beneficial development opportunities are undertaken in the most appropriate way. Clearly, rural areas require careful planning. But I am not a great believer in the urban-centric approach that has been the mantra in rural planning policy for many years now. Equally I do not subscribe to the 'Royston Vasey' extremes of 'local schemes for local people' to the extent that it excludes anyone who hasn't lived in the village for 100 years or more. We seem to have this absurd notion that rural Britain should have stopped in time at some point in the mid-1950's. It was never thus.

The second rural proofing report prepared by the Commission for Rural Communities notes that, *"seven years ago the government made a clear and continuing commitment to rural proof its policies and programmes. This year, as with many of our previous monitoring reports, we have to report that we are disappointed in the overall performance of government departments in meeting this commitment"*. But maybe things are about to change. I note with interest the establishment of conferences later this year to re-energise rural proofing within policy formulation, clear evidence that the initiative has not been an unqualified success so far, but at least the issue is recognised and things are beginning to happen.

Draft PPS4: 'Planning for Sustainable Economic Development' published early in 2008, was a beacon of common sense and offers a refreshingly pragmatic, flexible and positive approach to planning the like of which has been sadly lacking of late. You may infer from this that I liked it – along with many other people it has to be said. Hopefully the delay in bringing the final document to publication does not presage significant changes in tone and text.

Similarly, the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill currently proceeding through Parliament seeks to accelerate local economic development by increasing community involvement and requires local authorities to make economic assessments of their area, both urban and rural. The Bill requires, "improved economic decision making at every level by bringing together economic and spatial planning in the regions, empowering local authorities to work together on economic development and ensuring that each local area has a strong understanding of their economy".

One interesting aspect of achieving this aim is the proposed amalgamation of the Regional Spatial Strategy with the Regional Economic Strategy into a Single Regional Strategy (SRS). Great idea, but I have this impending sense of doom that such integration will simply lead to further contortions in the world of forward planning, with more time spent policy naval-gazing without anyone actual able to get on with anything.

Let's not forget that all of this has to trickle down into the LDF, and we are still a long way off any cohesive (or any) local policy and development control documents for much of the country under the new framework.

If economic recovery is the Government's 'overriding priority' then let's make sure we're firing on all cylinders. That means ensuring that rural Britain is just as effective as its urban counterpart. Agriculture will continue to be a prime mover; the more so as we should doubtless strive for greater self sufficiency in the future. However, farming alone will not support the rural population to the extent it once did. Diversification of the economic base of rural areas is essential and much more achievable now as technology allows much greater workplace flexibility.

So, what to do?

We must engage in the policy making process at all levels and keep pressing for recognition of purposeful opportunities to support the rural economy and community.

There is no 'One Size Fits All' solution and spatial planning should properly embrace rural as well as urban areas – and especially their inter-relationships.

The sustainability trap should be avoided at all costs – nowhere should be off-limits. Equally rural Britain must be allowed to adapt in ways that support both the resident community and the environment, not pickled in aspic.

Policy must be sufficiently flexible to encourage rural growth and allow for new as well as old markets. The environment will only be maintained if there are sufficient financial resources at the local level to cause it to happen.

The future for rural Britain should be as a Living, Working and Playing environment. It can be done. It just takes a little imagination, a can-do attitude and a fresh approach to sustainability.

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