
DRAFT CONSULTATION ON NEW PLANNING POLICY STATEMENT 7 (PPS7) – SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREAS

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report seeks Members' views on the draft of new planning guidance from the Government in the form of a Planning Policy Statement. PPS7 is intended to replace Planning Policy Guidance Note 7 and to provide policy advice on sustainable development in rural areas. The closing date for a response to the consultation paper is 12 December 2003.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 At present, Planning Policy Guidance Notes (PPGs) set out the Government's national land use planning policies for England. However, the Planning Green Paper published in 2001 announced that the Government intended to review all its planning policy guidance and that over a period of time, all PPGs would be replaced by a more focused statement of policy in the form of Planning Policy Statements.
- 2.2 In reality, most of the policies included in the draft PPS7 reproduce or are based closely on the existing policies in PPG7. However, there are new policies proposed on the replacement of buildings in the countryside and on equine related activities. The policies dealing with tourism and leisure have been expanded. The specific policy exemption relating to the provision of large, high quality houses in the countryside is to be removed.
- 2.3 Much of the supporting text from PPG7 has been deleted to ensure that the new PPS concentrates on policy advice. The draft includes an annex providing policy criteria for new occupational dwellings in the countryside. This is based on the existing PPG7 annex, but has been revised to allow for occupations other than farming and forestry to be included.
- 2.4 A copy of the consultation paper has been placed in the Members' Library.

3 KEY POLICY ADVICE

Sustainable rural communities, rural businesses and services

- 3.1 The key messages in the draft guidance are:
- Local authorities should be supportive of small scale development in villages to maintain vitality and viability.

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- A wide range of economic activity should be supported in rural areas – suitable sites should be identified in development plans and there should be provision for new buildings as well as re-use of existing buildings.
 - There should be support for new community services and facilities - suitable sites should be identified in development plans.
 - There should be support for small scale facilities that meet community needs away from main service centres.
 - Planning authorities will be required to take a positive approach to planning proposals designed to improve viability, accessibility or community value of existing services such as village shops, post offices, petrol filling stations, village halls, etc.
 - Authorities must plan to meet housing requirements in rural areas.
 - There should be strict controls over new house building in the countryside away from established settlements.
 - Isolated new houses will require special justification in relation to farming, forestry or other activities where workers are essential for the effective and safe operation of rural-based enterprises.
 - Local authorities should be supportive of the re-use of existing buildings.
 - Design quality is important and authorities should take a positive approach to innovative, modern designs.

The Countryside

3.2 The key points from this section of the draft guidance are:

- Support for development that delivers diverse and sustainable enterprises.
- Protect specific features and site of landscape, wildlife and historic or architectural value.
- Even in remote areas, re-use of buildings will be preferable to leaving them underused, vacant or derelict.
- The conversion of non-residential buildings to dwellings will not normally be appropriate, but might be justified in certain circumstances – to meet local need, for example.
- Replacement of existing buildings for business purposes will be acceptable in some circumstances, for example, where an environmental improvement would result. If the original building was permitted development, the replacement would need to be acceptable in its own right.
- Local countryside designations are not considered to be necessary.

Agriculture, farm diversification, equine related activities and forestry

3.3 The key points are:

- Planning Authorities should adopt positive policies to help farms and farmers be competitive, adapt to changing markets and diversify.
- Well-conceived diversification schemes should be supported.
- Favourable consideration should be given to proposals for diversification in Green Belts where development preserves the openness.

- Diversification should not result in excessive expansion and encroachment of building development into the countryside.
- Development plans should include policies for supporting equine enterprises whilst maintaining environmental quality.

Tourism and Leisure

3.4 The key points are:

- Support should be given to sustainable rural tourism and leisure proposals
- Essential facilities for tourist visitors are essential for the development of the tourism industry.
- Conversion of existing rural buildings to provide hotel and other serviced accommodation should be allowed, subject to policies on the re-use of buildings.
- The requirement for static and holiday caravan parks should be carefully assessed against the impact on the environment and the demand
- Other forms of self catering accommodation should be supported where there is a demand.

4 DISCUSSION

- 4.1 The broad principles outlined in draft PPS7 do follow closely the guidance in PPG7. It is clear that the Government intends to maintain a policy framework that facilitates a broad range of development types in rural areas.
- 4.2 PPG7 advocates the re-use of existing buildings in rural areas whether they are redundant or not. However, PPS7 proposes that Local Authorities should also make provision for new buildings for industrial and business development. Development Plans will be expected to clarify the scale of such development and set out the criteria against which planning applications will be considered. This change must be of some concern given the Green Belt status of the rural areas in the majority of the Rochford District. Given that a clear statement is included with regard to farm diversification and the need to preserve the openness of the Green Belt, it is difficult to see how new industrial or business related buildings could actually comply with Green Belt policy.
- 4.3 There is a strong presence for equine related activities in the Rochford district and a flexible policy approach has been followed for proposals for equine related facilities. This change to the guidance really does little more than reflect the approach followed in Rochford, including assessing the requirement for new dwellings where a permanent presence is required on site to support an equine business.
- 4.4 In relation to the size of new dwellings for agriculture workers, etc., the size must be commensurate with the established functional requirement. It is the requirement of the enterprise, rather than those of the owner or occupier that

must be assessed and proposed dwellings of excessive size can be refused consent.

- 4.5 The draft PPS7 provides more support for the development of tourism and leisure related facilities. There is no doubt that suitable facilities can open up the countryside and provide enhanced opportunities for visits and activities. In principle, subject to the application of the Green Belt principles, new tourism and leisure related activities in rural areas should be supported.
- 4.6 The current Rochford Local Plan includes local countryside designations, for example, the coastal protection belt and the Roach Valley Conservation Zone and work is underway to prepare new countryside character studies. The draft PPS7 proposes that all existing local designations should be deleted and that instead development plans should include plans for the location and design of rural development throughout their area.
- 4.7 This is a fundamental change to the aim of protecting important local rural landscapes from development. Instead it seems the Government wants to open up all parts of the countryside to the possibility of new development, albeit within the framework of some limited controls. It is not considered that such a change is justified. For example, the long-term protection afforded the rural undeveloped coastline in the Rochford District has been important in maintaining the character of the more remote parts of the District. The removal of the protective designation does not provide a level of confidence that such areas can continue to be suitably protected in the future.
- 4.8 In conclusion, the broad policy principles included in the draft PPS7 are very similar to those included in PPG7 and as such can be supported. However, the deletion of local protective countryside designations is of significant concern.

5 RISK IMPLICATIONS

Strategic Risk

- 5.1 There is a risk that the removal of local countryside designations will reduce the effectiveness of the Local Authority to adequately protect the countryside from unacceptable development

6 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The draft PPS7 is intended to provide detailed policy guidance to Planning Authorities about the interrelated economic, social and environmental aspects of development in rural areas. It is expected that the principles in the final version of the PPS will be reflected in the Rochford Local Plan and its successor Local Development Framework.

7 RECOMMENDATION

7.1 It is proposed that the Committee RESOLVES

That, subject to comments from Members, this report forms the basis of the Council's response to the ODPM consultation paper on draft Planning Policy Statement 7 – Sustainable Development in Rural Areas.

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Background Papers: Draft Consultation Paper on new PPS7 – Sustainable development in Rural Areas - September 2003

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