



Campaign to Protect
Rural England

A CPRE briefing

Squandering our Assets

Government planning policies could undermine the environmental quality and economic potential of the countryside

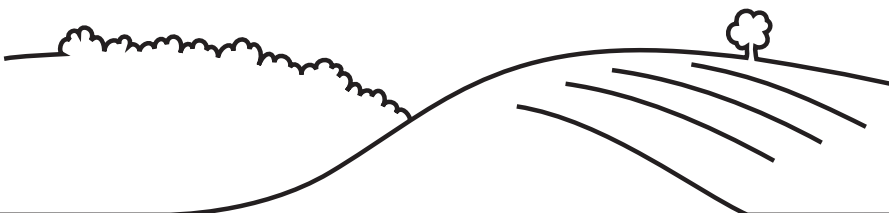
Proposed Government policy to encourage footloose economic development in rural areas could seriously damage the quality of the English countryside.

Recent research reinforces the view long held by CPRE that relaxing planning controls over diversification not related to agriculture, can lead to rural areas accommodating economic development which would be better located in towns¹.

In turn, many existing and successful rural businesses that have built their reputation

on the quality of their surroundings could be threatened.

Future initiatives of farmers and rural entrepreneurs who recognise the beauty of the countryside as a major economic asset and contribute to it, are likely to be severely compromised. This will damage the economic potential of the ordinary countryside, squandering the assets of rural England.



Current economic realities

The future for our countryside looks bleak under proposed new policies in draft Planning Policy Statement for the countryside (draft PPS7).

Rural economies are already as diverse as urban ones². Yet, in its consultation paper on draft PPS7 the Government appears to be aiming simply for further diversification, regardless of its connection to the countryside. These policies seek to:

- > 'make the most of new leisure and economic opportunities';
- > encourage 'a wide range of economic activity in rural areas';
- > 'support other countryside-based enterprises and activities which contribute to rural economies'; and
- > 'adopt positive policies...for strong, diverse economic activity in rural areas'³.

At the same time, draft PPS7 fails to recognise that the beauty, diversity and distinctiveness of the countryside are major national assets, providing economic stimulus in a range of ways – countryside tourism alone is worth some £12 billion a year. The economic contribution of farmed landscapes was clearly demonstrated by the foot and mouth outbreak of 2001. This was recognised by the report of the Policy Commission for the Future of Farming and Food (2002), and previously in the Rural White Paper, *Our Countryside, The Future*, in 2000.

Planning does not hold back diversification

Farm diversification is not new; it has been pursued throughout English farming history to supplement farm incomes. But it is clear that some diversification enterprises are

more beneficial to the countryside than others. Draft PPS7 proposes relaxing policies concerning which kinds of diversification are most appropriate in the countryside although there is little evidence that planning policy is holding back the efforts of rural businesses to diversify:

- > applications for farm diversification operations are approved at an average rate 88%⁴, similar to an 86% approval rate for all applications⁵;
- > an NFU study⁶ found that less than one in five farmers who had not diversified felt that planning was a constraint;
- > planning constraints were not among the top three reasons for farmers not attempting diversification⁶;
- > Countryside Agency research⁷ shows that rural economies are generally strong, with higher rates of self-employment and more businesses per head than urban England; and
- > VAT registered businesses in rural wards have actually experienced increased turnover in the last 5 years⁸.

Not more, but more discerning diversification

Instead of a mechanism to assist farm businesses, 'diversification' has become an aim in itself. But a Countryside Agency position statement⁹ warns against assuming that the relocation of footloose businesses to the countryside is beneficial. It challenges central and local government to adopt a more sophisticated approach to rural diversification, describing a 'one size fits all' diversification policy as 'hopelessly simplistic'. A national policy which ignores the diversity and complexity of rural economic experience will not target those rural areas which are experiencing deprivation.

1 *Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee Seventh Report – Rural White Paper, 2000*

2 *The Countryside Agency, Rural Economies, 2003*

3 *Draft Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 7 – Sustainable Development in Rural Areas, 2003;*

4 *DTLR. The Implementation of National Planning Policy Guidance (PPG7) in Relation to the Diversification of Farm Businesses, 2001*

5 *ODPM, Development Control Statistics, England, 2002/03*

6 *NFU, Farming Economy 1999: routes to prosperity for UK agriculture, 1999*

7 *Countryside Agency, Rural Economies, 2003*

8 *Figure quoted by Countryside Agency at Small Rural Business Conference on 11 February 2004*

9 *Countryside Agency, Planning for Sustainable Rural Economic Development: Part A, 2003*

Biting the hand that feeds us

At best, the proposed new policy will be ineffective in helping those rural economies in need of recovery from recent disasters. At worst, it will undermine farm businesses and the very factors that can make rural diversification successful: well planned and appropriate proposals that benefit from and maintain the features that make the countryside attractive.

Squandering our assets

Increasing traffic on rural roads

Unbridled rural diversification is likely to lead to more traffic and congestion on rural roads. Research for the Countryside Agency¹⁰ found that diversified farm enterprises generated extra traffic as employees commuted to work almost exclusively by car or van (96%), and their trips were longer than the national average (11.4 miles as opposed to 8.1 miles). Another survey (Bentley, 2003) of businesses occupying mostly former agricultural buildings, found 25% of entrepreneurs and 57% of staff lived in towns or cities. Increased and inappropriate diversification could lead to a surge in 'reverse commuting' from towns to rural workplaces. This will not help those people whose employment is threatened by a decline in agriculture.

No future for farming?

Rather than a long-term complementary relationship, diversification is often associated with breaking up farms, converted buildings being sold off as short-term asset stripping. This threatens both the rural environment and the structure of rural communities. Research for CPRE by Oxford Brookes University¹¹ suggests that farmers faced with a decision about how to use farm buildings

are more likely to opt for non land-based as opposed to land-based enterprises, if planning policy allows. Non-land based uses, such as conversion to office or storage space, generate the greatest short-term returns; and could well be more attractive than using a barn to, for example, process or retail local products derived from the land.

More buildings in open countryside

If farming continues alongside new diversified uses for farm buildings, this could result in increased need for a new generation of farm buildings. A study in South Somerset (1999)¹¹ revealed that while existing farm buildings were being converted to alternative uses, there was a continuing demand for new ones, resulting in a 15% overall gain. If these figures were replicated country wide, we would see a dramatic proliferation of new agricultural buildings in the countryside. Unlike the local distinctiveness of traditional barns, new farm buildings rarely contribute to the character of the countryside, nor do they always require planning permission.

Undermining urban regeneration

An unintended consequence of this planning policy could be to undermine urban regeneration. It is vital that PPS7 supports the implementation of Planning Policy Guidance Note 3 (*Housing*) in its drive to concentrate house building and other development on brownfield land in towns and cities. Otherwise, there could be pressure on owners of industrial space to relocate to rural locations with cheaper rent, ample parking and room for expansion. This will not achieve the urban mixed-use neighbourhoods and reduced commuting that PPG3 is aiming for.

10 Countryside Agency, An Investigation into the Treatment of Traffic and Transport Issues in the Determination of Planning Applications for Farm Diversification Proposals, University of West of England, Land Use Consultants and Kernon Countryside Consultants, 2002

11 CPRE, Undermining the Land Based Economy: The Effects of a Permissive Planning Policy on Farm Diversification. Dr Lucy Nichol, Oxford Brookes University, 2003

Planning the future

Economic activity and diversification are essential to the future of the countryside. But simply encouraging indiscriminate diversification will damage its beauty, diversity and attractiveness – and those many rural enterprises which depend on these qualities to flourish. Nor will it help those areas of rural England which are experiencing deprivation.

Planning policy has a vital role in ensuring a higher success rate for new rural businesses, avoiding suburbanising large areas of countryside, and enabling local communities to have a say in what development takes place. PPS7 should include policies that:

- > promote the positive use of planning to control rural diversification;
- > require all diversification projects that are likely to have an impact on landscape quality to protect, and enhance the countryside;
- > encourage business proposals that contribute to the quality of the landscape from which they benefit;
- > prioritise diversification linked with the land and the landscape;
- > influence the quality, location and design of proposed development;

- > match proposals with local needs to ensure wider community benefits of diversification;
- > assess the cumulative impacts of schemes, identifying oversupply of any one type; and
- > ensure that rural diversification does not result in development which may significantly damage rural character and tranquillity.

A Government commitment?

The Government has demonstrated commitment to the countryside and sustainable use of land in the Rural White Paper and its urban regeneration agenda. The Curry Commission set out a bold vision for the future of farming and food. The successful negotiations for funding new environmental stewardship schemes designed to reward farmers for enhancing our landscape assets are a step on the road towards this vision.

Indiscriminate and permissive farm diversification policies proposed in draft PPS7 could undermine the investment made in rural landscapes. CPRE urges changes to draft PPS7 to achieve real benefit for the countryside, its communities, businesses and visitors alike.

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