

Planning Policy Guidance 7: Countryside

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Key to Abbreviations

ALC	Agricultural Land Classification
AONB	Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
DOE	Department of the Environment
EC	European Community
ESA	Environmentally Sensitive Area
ISBN	International Standard Book Number
MAFF	Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
NSA	Nitrate Sensitive Area
PPG	Planning Policy Guidance note
RDA	Rural Development Area
SSSI	Site of Special Scientific Interest
WFA	Water Fringe Area

Summary

Planning Policy Guidance notes (PPGs) set out the Governments policies on different aspects of planning. Local planning authorities must take their contents into account in preparing their development plans. The guidance may also be material to decisions on individual planning applications and appeals.

This PPG provides guidance on land use planning in rural areas of England. Part 1 sets out the Governments general policy approach, and economic and environmental trends. Part 2 presents the planning framework, and planning policies for the countryside. Part 3 provides advice on different types of development. Part 4 gives guidance on planning policies in areas with special designations. The Annexes give fuller advice on particular aspects.

This revision replaces the 1992 version of PPG7, which for England is hereby cancelled. The main changes are to:

- take account of the White Paper Rural England, and of PPGs published since 1992;
- advise on achieving good quality development and respecting the character of the countryside;
- re-state and clarify policy on protecting the best agricultural land
- clarify policy on the re-use of rural buildings, allow greater discrimination in favour of re-use for business rather than residential purposes, and advise on incorporating a residential element within a scheme for business re-use;
- stress the importance of thoroughly checking the lawfulness of developments to be carried out under agricultural permitted development rights, and advise on the possible removal of new buildings erected under them but not used for agriculture;
- strengthen the agricultural dwellings concession to counter abuse; and
- advise on local countryside designations and on the planning implications of Rural Development Areas and European Union Objective 5(b) areas.

1. Countryside Policies and Trends

Introduction

1.1 The Government's policies for the countryside are set out in the White Paper Rural England: A Nation Committed to a Living Countryside. They are based on ensuring both rural prosperity and the protection and enhancement of the character of the countryside.

1.2 The White Paper stated six principles for the future of the countryside:

- the pursuit of sustainable development;
- shared responsibility for the countryside as a national asset, which serves people who live and work there as well as visitors;
- dialogue to help reconcile competing priorities;
- distinctiveness, approaching rural policies in a way which is flexible and responds to the character of the countryside;
- economic and social diversity; and
- sound information as the basis for effective policies.

Sustainable development

1.3 Sustainable development is the cornerstone of both the Government's rural policies and its planning policies. It means managing the countryside in ways that meet current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs. This entails accommodating necessary change in rural areas while maintaining and, where possible, enhancing the quality of the environment for local people and visitors. Wealth creation and environmental quality are increasingly interconnected. The appeal of the countryside is central to its economic prosperity, and healthy economic activity in rural areas facilitates investment to protect and improve the countryside. New development should respect, and where possible enhance, the environment in its location, scale and design.

1.4 Sustainable development includes integrating the Government's objectives to:

- meet the economic and social needs of people who live and work in rural areas, by promoting the efficiency and competitiveness of rural businesses, and encouraging further economic diversity to provide varied employment opportunities (especially in areas still heavily reliant on agriculture);
- maintain or enhance the character of the countryside and conserve its natural resources, including safeguarding the distinctiveness of its landscapes, its beauty, the diversity of its wildlife, the quality of rural towns and villages, its historic and archaeological interest, and best agricultural land;
- improve the viability of existing villages and market towns, reduce the need for increased car commuting to urban centres, and reverse the general decline in rural services, by promoting living communities, which have a reasonable mix of age, income and occupation and which offer a suitable scale of employment, affordable and market housing, community facilities and other opportunities; and

- recognise the interdependence of urban and rural policies.

1.5 This Planning Policy Guidance note gives guidance on how the Government's objectives for rural areas should be reflected in land use planning. It is for local authorities through their development plans to determine more specific policies that integrate these objectives in ways which reflect the different types of countryside and the economic and social circumstances found in their areas. Government Departments and statutory agencies also help safeguard the interests of rural areas (see Annex A).

Change in the countryside

1.6 Recent decades have seen considerable change in the countryside. Over a quarter of the population live in the most rural districts, and almost a quarter of employees work there. Many rural communities have altered, as facilities have become more centralised and car use has increased. The rural environment has come under increasing pressure. New enterprises and technologies have developed, while employment in agriculture, mining and quarrying have fallen steeply. As a result of these changes, employment patterns have become increasingly similar across the country aided by an improved road network and better telecommunications. Nevertheless, substantial economic and social diversity remains, and areas close to large towns have generally done better economically than more remote areas and experienced the pressures of growth more sharply.

1.7 Farming uses occupy around three quarters of the land surface of England. Food production and a competitive agricultural industry continue to be highly important, and provide a basis for many other economic activities in rural areas. Agriculture will remain the major user of rural land, and the use that most influences the physical appearance and character of the countryside. Environmental objectives are being integrated into agricultural policies. Farmers are increasingly diversifying into other activities to supplement their incomes. Landowners need the flexibility to consider a range of options for the economic use of their land, including non-food crops, planting more woodland, recreation and leisure enterprises, the management of land to provide environmental benefits, and the restoration of damaged landscapes and habitats.

1.8 Woodland occupies about 7.5% of the land area of England and is increasing. The Government would like to see woodland cover double over the next half century. Well planned and managed woodland will improve the appearance of the countryside, create new jobs, enrich wildlife habitats, open up new opportunities for recreation, and help improve air quality and carbon dioxide absorption.

1.9 Urban uses accounted for an estimated 10.6% of England's land area in 1991. These broadly mean land that has been built on and so include some land in the countryside and exclude green uses in towns. Projections suggest that the number of households could increase by 4.4 million between 1991 and 2016. The Housing White Paper *Our Future Homes* sets a target of building half of all new homes on re-used sites by 2005. On this basis, if the projections were fulfilled, the land area in urban uses would increase by 1.3% by 2016 (or 6,800 hectares a year). The Government wishes to see as many homes as are consistent with good quality development built on re-used sites and, at the date of publication of this PPG, is consulting on this issue.

2. Planning in the Countryside

The role of the planning system

2.1 The planning system guides the development and use of land in the public interest. It aims to reconcile the needs of development and conservation, and secure economy, efficiency and amenity in the use of land. By seeking to integrate the twin objectives of development and environmental protection, the planning system contributes to sustainable development.

2.2 Whilst much activity in the countryside is outside its scope, the planning system helps to integrate the development necessary to sustain economic and social activity in rural communities with protection of the countryside for the sake of its beauty, the diversity of its landscape and historic character, the wealth of its natural resources and its ecological, agricultural, recreational and archaeological value. It is also the principal means for regulating the rate at which land is transferred from agriculture, forestry and other rural uses to urban uses.

Planning policies for the countryside

2.3 The guiding principle in the countryside is that development should both benefit economic activity and maintain or enhance the environment (see paragraphs [2.8](#) and [2.9](#)). Rural areas can accommodate many forms of development without detriment, if the location and design of development is handled with sensitivity. New development should be sensitively related to existing settlement patterns and to historic, wildlife and landscape resources. Building in the open countryside, away from existing settlements or from areas allocated for development in development plans, should be strictly controlled. In areas statutorily designated for their landscape, wildlife or historic qualities, policies give greater priority to restraint.

The role of plans

2.4 Development plans are means by which development to sustain economic activity in rural areas can be promoted whilst protecting the countryside. Section 54A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 provides that development control decisions must be made in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise (see PPGs 1 and 12). Development plans should state the criteria to be used in assessing proposals for development in all areas of countryside, whether inside or outside nationally designated areas. They should consider how any acceptable development would best respect or enhance the character of the countryside.

2.5 The Government's *regional planning guidance* sets out regional policies, relevant to the preparation of development plans, and which are of a wider geographical basis than individual structure plans. The topics covered depend on the circumstances of each region. They normally include the natural environment and rural development. In some regions, the existence of National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty are major strategic factors.

2.6 *Structure plans* should state the overall development strategy for each county, indicating how conservation and development have been reconciled geographically. The general policies on new housing, conservation, the economy of rural areas, major development, and tourism will all impinge on the countryside.

2.7 *Local plans* should set out more detailed policies and proposals as a clear guide to development control decisions. Unitary development plans perform the functions of structure and local plans,

mainly in metropolitan districts, many of which include areas of countryside. All plans must include policies in respect of the conservation of the natural beauty and amenity of the land.

Development plan policies

Paragraph 2.8 was amended as below on 21 March 2001 - see [Answer to Parliamentary Question in the House of Commons, Vol 365, Col 254-255W](#) which clarified policy on diversification of farm businesses

2.8 When preparing their development plans and deciding planning applications, local planning authorities should take account of any statutory designation (see part 4 of this PPG) and then weigh the need to:

- encourage rural enterprise, including the diversification of farm businesses;
- protect landscape, wildlife and historic features;
- safeguard best and most versatile agricultural land (see paragraphs [2.17](#) and [2.18](#));
- have regard to the quality and versatility of land for use in forestry and other rural enterprises;
- protect other non-renewable resources;
- strengthen rural communities by encouraging new employment, facilitating an adequate supply of affordable and market housing and underpinning services and community facilities;
- achieve good quality development which respects the character of the countryside; and
- secure safe development by taking account, where appropriate, of the stability of the land (see [PPG14](#)).

2.9 Local planning authorities should take account of the advice in Planning for Rural Diversification: A Good Practice Guide on:

- assessing the economic and social needs of their areas;
- devising positive development plan policies for economic activity which respects the countryside; and
- taking a constructive approach to planning applications.

Rural Strategies, Village Appraisals And Local Agenda 21s

Some local planning authorities have prepared non-statutory Rural Strategies, in partnership with other bodies and local communities. Comprehensive strategies for responding to rural needs which integrate conservation with economic and social development should be taken into account in preparing development plans. The countryside agencies have published guidelines on rural strategies (see Annex J).

Village Appraisals and Local Agenda 21s may also inform development plans. Village Appraisals identify a local community's needs and priorities for the future. Local Agenda 21s seek to identify what sustainable development means at local level.

Villages and market towns

2.10 Development plans should help promote healthy rural communities where people can both live and work. The main focus of new development should be on existing towns and villages (including networks of small villages) and other areas allocated in development plans, where employment, housing (including affordable housing) and other facilities can be provided close together. This can help to promote sustainable development by strengthening villages and market towns, protecting the open countryside, sustaining local services and moving towards a better balance between employment and housing in rural communities, thereby reducing the need to travel (see PPG13 and PPG13: A Guide to Better Practice). Development plans should encourage employment opportunities suitable in scale to rural centres and should indicate the circumstances in which new development will be allowed within and adjacent to villages and country towns.

Achieving good quality development

2.11 New building in rural areas should contribute to a sense of local identity and regional diversity, and be of an appropriate design and scale for its location. Modern designs should have proper regard to the context for development, in relation to both the immediate setting and the defining characteristics of the wider local area, including local or regional building traditions or materials. Good design helps to maintain or enhance local distinctiveness, and can help to make new development more acceptable to local people. Account should be taken of feasibility and cost constraints when appraising development proposals. PPG1 provides general guidance about design issues in relation to new development.

2.12 The Countryside Commission has developed two techniques to promote good design in rural areas (see Annex J). Countryside Design Summaries are for local planning authorities to prepare. They can supplement the design policies in development plans and help encourage a more regionally and locally based approach to design and planning. They are neither prescriptive nor expensive to produce. Village Design Statements are prepared by local communities. They offer a framework for engaging local people in constructive debate about ensuring that new development in their area fits its surroundings and is in keeping with local character. They can help developers to understand local views and perceptions at the outset of the design and development process, and thus enable them to promote new buildings that are likely to gain local support rather than generate uninformed opposition. Village Design Statements provide a tool to help manage long-term change, not prevent it.

2.13 Should it be desirable to remove an existing building which does not accord with the principles of high quality development (see paragraph [2.11](#)) and the building is not in use, this might in certain circumstances be required in connection with a planning application. If the application would (if granted) result in intensification of the development, it would sometimes be lawful for the local planning authority to make planning permission conditional on the demolition of the existing building in order to avoid over-intensive development of the site. There would need to be clear land use planning reasons for imposing the condition in a particular case, and the building should be under the applicant's control. It may also be appropriate to attach a planning condition which seeks to improve the appearance of an existing building, which is under the applicant's control.

The character of the countryside

2.14 The Government's policy is that the countryside should be safeguarded for its own sake and non-renewable and natural resources should be afforded protection. Since the Second World War conservation efforts have concentrated on designating and protecting those areas of countryside

which are most important for landscape and wildlife. The priority now is to find new ways of enriching the quality of the whole countryside while accommodating appropriate development, in order to complement the protection which designations offer (see part 4 of this PPG).

The Character Of England

The Countryside Commission and English Nature have analysed the distinctive features of the whole English countryside in both landscape and nature conservation terms, and English Heritage have contributed their knowledge of the historic features of the landscape. This approach identifies the unique character of different areas of the countryside without making judgments about their relative worth. Such character is derived from the interaction of physical and ecological features (including geology, landform, soil and wildlife) with land use and other human activity such as farming patterns, settlement form and building design. The agencies have identified broad areas of cohesive character which can be described in terms of their landscape character, sense of place, local distinctiveness, characteristic wildlife and natural features, and nature of change. The agencies have published a national map and a set of summary statements (see Annex J). In 1997 the Countryside Commission will publish countryside character descriptions and English Nature will publish natural area profiles.

2.15 The character approach, outlined above, should help in accommodating necessary change without sacrificing local character. It can help ensure that development respects or enhances the distinctive character of the land and the built environment. It is descriptive, and not an additional layer of countryside protection or designation. It can provide a context for Countryside Design Summaries and Village Design Statements, and a consistent framework against which to set the finer-grain information which local authorities often hold from their own landscape and ecological assessments. These local assessments may guide change and inform the preparation of development plans. The Countryside Commission will be updating its published advice on landscape assessment techniques (see Annex J), and conducting research into the application of the character approach to planning. Local planning authorities may find the character approach helpful as they have occasion to review their local countryside designations.

Protecting the best agricultural land

2.16 In preparing development plans and considering planning applications, local planning authorities should take account of the quality of any agricultural land that would be lost through development proposals. Annex B explains the grading of agricultural land according to its quality, and gives detailed advice on development affecting it.

The previous paragraph 2.17 was withdrawn and substituted by the paragraph below on 21 March 2001- see [Answer to Parliamentary Question in the House of Commons, Vol 365, Col 254-255W](#) which clarified policy on protection of best and most versatile agricultural land in the light of the announcement in the Rural White Paper - Our Countryside the Future

2.17 Development of greenfield land, including the best and most versatile agricultural land (defined as land in grades 1, 2 and 3a of the Agricultural Land Classification), should not be permitted unless opportunities have been assessed for accommodating development on previously-developed sites and on land within the boundaries of existing urban areas (see [PPG3](#) in respect of housing development). Where development of agricultural land is unavoidable, local planning authorities should seek to use areas of poorer quality land in preference to that of a higher quality, except where other sustainability considerations suggest otherwise. These might include, for example, its importance for biodiversity, the quality and character of the landscape, its amenity value or heritage interest, accessibility to infrastructure, workforce and markets, and the protection

of natural resources, including soil quality. Some of these qualities may be recognised by a statutory wildlife, landscape, historic or archaeological designation, such as a National Park or Site of Special Scientific Interest.

*The previous paragraph 2.18 was withdrawn and substituted by the paragraph below on 21 March 2001 - see [Answer to Parliamentary Question in the House of Commons, Vol 365, Col 254-255W](#) which clarified policy on protection of best and most versatile agricultural land in the light of the announcement in the Rural White Paper - *Our Countryside the Future**

2.18 Local authorities planning to allow the development of greenfield land, where soil or agricultural quality is a consideration, should seek advice from MAFF and from other relevant bodies such as English Nature, the Countryside Agency, the Environment Agency or English Heritage, as appropriate. They may also be required to consult one or more of these agencies of any intention to allow development under the Town and Country Planning (General Development Procedure) Order 1995, and in respect of development plan proposals as described in [Annex C to PPG12](#). The decision whether to utilise BMV land for development is for each local planning authority, having carefully weighed the options in the light of competent advice.

2.19 Agricultural land in grades 3b, 4 and 5 is of moderate or poor quality and is less significant in terms of the national agricultural interest. In making the assessment set out in paragraph [2.8](#), little weight in agricultural terms should be given to the loss of this land, except in areas such as hills and uplands where particular agricultural practices themselves contribute in some special way to the quality of the environment or the local economy. The policies set out elsewhere in this PPG for protecting the countryside for environmental and other non-agricultural reasons apply equally to agricultural land, including land in lower grades.

2.20 Structure, local and unitary development plans should include policies for the protection of the best and most versatile agricultural land, and make clear the approach adopted to the protection of the different grades of agricultural land within the area. Regional Planning Guidance should address these issues where necessary. If undeveloped land needs to be developed, any adverse effects on the environment should be minimised. Once land is built on, the restoration of semi-natural and natural habitats and landscape features is rarely possible and usually expensive and archaeological and historic features cannot be replaced. Minerals Planning Guidance notes advise on minerals underlying agricultural land.

Environmental assessment

2.21 An environmental statement will need to accompany a planning application where proposed development is of a type listed in Schedule 1 to the Town and Country Planning (Assessment of Environmental Effects) Regulations 1988, as amended, or is of a type listed in Schedule 2 and is likely to have significant effects on the environment. For any given proposal, the more environmentally sensitive the location, the more likely it is that environmental effects will be significant and that an environmental statement will be required. Further guidance is in DOE Circulars 15/88, 7/94 and (for permitted development and environmental assessment) 3/95; in PPG9 for Sites of Special Scientific Interest; and in paragraph 4.6 for National Parks. The Forestry Authority can require environmental statements to be prepared for potentially damaging forestry operations.