

### Farming Today in a New Planning Era

It is not often that planning policy captures the national news headlines but this has occurred recently following the Government's proposal to simplify and streamline national guidance. Publication of its National Planning Policy Framework ("NPPF") has triggered a heated debate between business and conservation interests about the future direction of planning. The former support the draft because of its emphasis on economic growth and the need to remove barriers to housing and economic development. Conservationists are critical, maintaining that the framework weakens protections for the open countryside and historic character.

Conservationist claims imply that the countryside should be protected against change and preserved in aspic. They rightly point to long-standing protectionist policies: maintaining the open countryside, conserving the irreplaceable resource of good farmland, prevention of urban sprawl and safeguarding the historic character of rural communities. They misrepresent, however, policy intentions. It is not proposed to remove these protectionist policies. Nor do they make clear that it is and will remain established policy to encourage a healthy rural economy and society by promoting modest physical change.

The final guidance published in March has proved a master class in drafting. The amendments have been subtle but have assuaged critics from either side. Here the new policy allows sensible and sensitive development to take place in the countryside. More specifically a prosperous rural economy needs both affordable and open market housing and employment opportunities, including diversification into non-agricultural activities so that viability of farm enterprises is maintained. Conversion and re-use of appropriately located and suitably constructed existing rural buildings for economic development is encouraged. Nor is conversion for housing ruled out. Well-conceived farm diversification schemes for business purposes that contribute to sustainable development and help to sustain farms and are consistent in scale with their rural location are welcomed. Specific encouragement is accorded to equine enterprises and tourist and visitor facilities designed to promote recreation in and enjoyment of the countryside.

This supportive approach to farm diversification should not result in excessive expansion and encroachment of building development into the countryside. Development adjoining or closely related to towns and villages where infrastructure and services are concentrated is preferred. This does not however rule out farm diversification schemes elsewhere: most farmsteads are set in open countryside outside settlements. The usual planning considerations apply to any proposals: location, setting, layout, appropriate building materials and design, adequate highway access, availability of infrastructure, car parking provision. Favourable consideration of diversification proposals is not confined to the undesignated countryside: it applies also to designated land in Green Belts, national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty. Clearly particular attention will be given to planning details in these areas.

Physical evidence of the implementation of successful business and residential schemes in rural areas, whether related to farm diversification or not, is evident in the countryside, though not always well publicised.

A few recent planning appeal decisions illustrate some of the planning considerations at play. Redevelopment of vacant farm buildings for 13 homes in Berkshire was approved after the Inspector accepted that the proposed layout would not harm the area's character. The existing farmhouse would be retained with new buildings grouped around a central courtyard. Siting and massing of a tightly-knit group of buildings would reflect existing buildings and would not be seen as encroaching into the countryside. In Cornwall 11 affordable homes on farmland bordering a small housing estate were approved given a proven need. Owners of a beef raising business in Derbyshire secured permission for a building to accommodate 12,000 hens. An Inspector agreed that it was no larger than necessary and it was right to locate it away from other farm buildings in complying with regulations on production of free range eggs.

By contrast a farm diversification scheme for a free-range poultry unit was refused in West Yorkshire because its adverse landscape impact would not be mitigated by planting a hedge. Also in West Yorkshire change of use of four large farm buildings in the Green Belt to storage of cars and light goods vehicles was refused. The scale of activity was deemed unsuitable in a rural area and contrary to sustainable development principles. Unrestricted B8 use would allow large scale warehousing and distribution firms to occupy premises and generate substantial traffic movement.

At this difficult economic time economic growth and recovery are vital. The countryside is not isolated from the social and economic life of the country and has a part to play. The Government is most keen to stimulate this revival in both town and country. Now is a good time more than ever for landowners to review their land and buildings, especially any underused premises, to secure a productive alternative use. Planning authorities will be expected to take up a positive approach in their local development plans and determination of planning applications. If they do not, planning Inspectors will not hesitate to approve sustainable proposals at Planning Inquiries.