

Briefing Note on Planning Issues that Impact on the Rural Economy

Submitted by the East of England Rural Forum

Background

This briefing originates from concerns expressed by the East of England Rural Forum (EERF) that the application of planning policy in rural areas is, in some cases, inconsistent and is unnecessarily impeding economic development and creating difficulties for rural businesses.

The EERF recognises that the rural economy has undergone huge changes over the last few decades. There has been both a substantial decline in the number working in agriculture and the virtual disappearance of traditional rural industries that largely serviced the primary sector. However, in recent years, there has been some growth in employment in rural areas driven both by lower site costs and the attractions of living and working in a rural environment. The EERF believes that, if rural areas are not solely to function as dormitories, further growth in new types of employment must be facilitated. Clearly, this needs to be controlled in order to ensure that rural areas retain their environmental quality and essential character. There must also be a sustainable balance between population and employment. The Planning process, including Local Development Frameworks, has an important role to play and the EERF recognises its value and the difficulty of balancing conflicting demands. Nevertheless, the EERF believes that the correct balance is not always achieved.

Points of Concern

1. Business Diversification

The region contains a huge number of redundant rural buildings, many located on farms. In many cases these provide an opportunity for re-use for business purposes without the need for new build. In other instances higher quality buildings occupying the same footprint would be desirable. Whilst the existing PPS7 generally supports such re-use, in practice, businesses in many areas find that planning permission is impossible to obtain. This is predominantly due to:

- a negative attitude on the part of development control staff rather than an imaginative approach to what might be permitted;
- inadequate understanding of the economic and operational realities of farming;
- the interpretation of PPS6 such that conversions of former agricultural buildings may only go ahead if the sequential test is applied and no suitable town sites are identified.
- over cautious Highway Authorities that do not appreciate that many alternative uses generate less heavy traffic than farming uses.

Requested Actions:

- a. Undertake a review of the local interpretation and implementation of PPS7;
- b. Depending upon outcome, issue enhanced guidance giving a range of examples of acceptable development;
- c. Consult with professional bodies in order to improve training so that Planning and Highway professionals have an enhanced understanding of rural issues and are able to engage constructively with farmers and other rural business people.
- d. Make it clear that the sequential approach as set out in PPS6 does not apply to small scale proposals in rural areas.

2. Migrant Workers

Agriculture is increasingly reliant on migrant workers to undertake essential farm tasks. This is especially true of harvesting, which may require long hours of work under difficult conditions. The decline in permanent farm employees and economic circumstances have resulted in the release of much former tied accommodation. Consequently, it is necessary to house migrant workers in temporary accommodation, usually caravans. However, a problem arises because, in order to comply with Health and Safety Legislation, permanent water and other services must be provided. This results in the classification of such accommodation as permanent for the purposes of planning legislation and planning permission can be very difficult to obtain.

Requested Action:

- a. Issue guidance to planning authorities to clarify how migrant work accommodation should be treated for planning purposes e.g. by restricting the periods of the year when the accommodation can be occupied.

Note: Kerrier District Council has developed a model policy.

3. Housing and Planning Delivery Grant

The current Planning Delivery Grant has rewarded local authorities for the speed with which applications are processed. However, this does not necessarily equate to good decision making. Applications in rural areas are often more complex than in urban areas because of the greater emphasis on environmental and aesthetic issues. This can result in refusals of planning permission because, in complex circumstances, it is safer to refuse than to permit.

Requested Action:

In order to improve decision making associated with rural applications, these should be made exempt from the provisions of the new Housing and Planning Delivery Grant.

Commentary and Evidence

A 2006 survey by the Federation of Small Businesses of its members in the East of England showed that just over 30% of them operated from premises in village centres or on farms.

That is almost certainly an underestimate of the true proportion of small businesses in rural areas regionally as another 23.8% said they were located in business parks and industrial estates some of which will almost certainly be in rural areas. (The sample size was 1747 across the Region, total employment 13769)

Rural businesses are an important part of all businesses in the East of England. However, businesses frequently find it difficult to locate or expand in rural areas because of restrictive planning policies or the way in which policies are interpreted. Undoubtedly, the high quality of the region's rural environment is an attraction to residents, visitors and people who work in rural areas and there is no wish to compromise this. Similarly, any growth in rural employment must be sustainable in the widest sense. Nevertheless, there is scope for planning authorities to be more flexible in their approach in order to facilitate new opportunities such as home working and bio-fuels and to improve the ratio between residents and jobs in rural areas and reduce commuting. People working in rural areas, in turn, help to support other services such as shops and public transport.

We have evidence that there are extensive numbers of redundant buildings across the region that could accommodate new employment without the need for new build. A survey undertaken in 2007 for the Haven Gateway area alone (Colchester, Tendring, Ipswich, Suffolk Coastal, Mid-Suffolk and Babergh) a recent study has identified over 900,000 sq ft of unused former agricultural buildings. The survey used a sample of over 1,000 farmers with redundant buildings who were sent questionnaires in order to determine availability and feasible commercial use for their redundant agricultural property.

These surveys provided primary evidence in relation to the number and type of redundant rural buildings available for possible change of use. It was found that:

- 1 41% of the buildings returned could be made available for non agricultural use within 0 – 6 months.
- 2 66% of the buildings are considered to have good highway access.
- 3 33% of buildings are considered to be in good condition.
- 4 The assessment of the most suitable primary use for these buildings for

31% as offices, with 32% for light industrial. ¹

Perhaps widening such an audit to cover all the Region would be a useful step forward?

Research in 2006 in Bedfordshire indicates that there is demand for rural business space, particularly offices and light industrial units and mainly for smaller units. Potential developments, including NIRAH and a new Center Parcs village would provide a major stimulus to the local tourism industry and demand for holiday accommodation. The research has identified that whilst there are still a significant number of farm buildings in Bedfordshire that would be capable of reuse for alternative uses.

The 2006 Norfolk Farm Study (based on the return of completed questionnaires from 340 farming businesses) included a section on the perceived barriers to diversification. Local Planning Policy was, by far, the most significant issue identified - although there was a substantial level of difference between the different districts in Norfolk, which reflected the local variation in policy and interpretation. The significance of location as a barrier to development was also highlighted in the survey. This encapsulates a raft of issues including access to customers, transport, support services and staff.

The same study also looked at proposed and existing diversification enterprises on Norfolk farms. The majority of options require the use of buildings; the most common choice for future development was commercial lettings (18% of farmers). Energy production also rated very highly.

Since 2004, a partnership between Norfolk County Council, a number of the District Councils and Norfolk Rural Business Advice Service (NRBAS) has been working on an EU Interreg funded rural project developing approaches to the re-use and conservation of redundant farm buildings. This work is about to be completed with the launch of an innovative new web-based toolkit designed to help a business through the stages of developing a new rural enterprise: see www.ruraladvice.co.uk.

The issue is not merely about the conversion of redundant buildings. There is a need to consider the diversification of the rural economy in general as the employment structure in rural areas is not that dissimilar to other parts of the economy/country, e.g. pre-eminence of services, distribution and very low proportion employed in agriculture and land based sectors. There is a need to provide local jobs and support services which have been disappearing in rural areas, e.g. shops, post offices, petrol stations, village halls, pubs etc. In some cases there will be opportunities to combine these services in the same premises to help ensure survival and greater viability. It was against this background that the Essex Rural Partnership, working with the Essex Planning Officers'

4 ¹ Redundant redundant buildings audit, Haven Gateway Partnership, 01/07.

Association (EPOA), established a Task Group to examine and report on these issues by the autumn of this year. This followed a presentation to the EPOA on issues arising from the Essex Rural Strategy. Some diversification ideas (e.g. to increase on farm butchery to supply farmers' markets direct) will require planning permission so a more proactive planning regime will be a factor in their success.

The Norfolk Rural Business Advice Service (NRBAS) specifically supports the diversification plans of farmers with advice and information on planning, finance etc. but is running on a shoestring. It was particularly successful in attracting significant funding from European programmes and DEFRA into the county.