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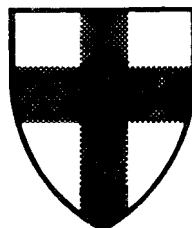
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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the paper is to set out the planning policy makers' response to the new circumstances affecting agriculture and the countryside. In the main, I shall be drawing on experience in South East England, since I speak as a member of the SERPLAN Rural Issues Group. SERPLAN is a regional planning organisation covering the South East of England, and was set up voluntarily by the County and District Councils and the London Boroughs. It is highly regarded by Central Government, and is quoted as a model to be followed in other parts of the country.

The Rural Issues Group was established in October, 1986 to advise SERPLAN on the important issues affecting agriculture, the countryside and the rural economy generally, and after a year of work a consultative draft document was published last December. It received widespread support, and has been adopted by SERPLAN in making its recommendations to the Secretary of State on the planning strategy for rural areas.

The terms of reference of this Conference are of course not restricted to the South East, but many of the basic principles involved in SERPLAN's work do provide important pointers towards a policy approach which might be adopted elsewhere. My aim is to draw out these principles of general interest.

The first part of the paper will set out briefly the main trends affecting the countryside, and the strategic planning objectives which have been put forward as the basis for policy making. I will then explore four basic principles which I believe are important in developing these policies and, finally, look at some examples of good practice already taking place which could be applied more widely.

NATIONAL TRENDS AND NATIONAL POLICIES

Economic Changes in the Countryside

The SERPLAN Rural Issues Group was established at a time of major changes affecting the nation's countryside. The farming industry itself is changing rapidly. Previous policies to increase output, although highly successful in economic terms, have had to be reviewed in the light of surpluses of beef, dairy products and cereals. Reductions in production are being sought by the Government, and farmers have been faced with new - and often very difficult - economic circumstances. This in turn has had detrimental spin-off effects on the rural economy as a whole, particularly in areas which are not close to alternative sources of employment.

Socio-Economic Trends

At the same time, important socio-economic trends have been emerging in terms of the increasing public interest in the countryside and its conservation.

Both residents of rural areas and indeed many town dwellers have become more aware of environmental issues, and, with improved mobility and more leisure time, there is increasing interest in the protection of the countryside and its use for various recreational pursuits.

The journalist Stephen Pile, in a recent television programme, took an amusing view of this increasing public interest :

"Strong men who have lived in Balham all their lives go quite misty-eyed at the thought of harming the precious English countryside. The truth is that we are all gripped by the myth of bygone rural England. Although Englishmen have been living in blocks of flats since 1742, and can't tell a Jersey cow from a bag of chips, we still hanker for the country life that is our birthright. We all buy country magazines aimed at city dwellers who hardly ever go there."

But this concern for the protection of the countryside is a very basic issue, and one which has a high profile in the political arena at the present time. The effects of rapid developments, particularly in the South East over the last 30 years, are becoming increasingly apparent, and there is strong public feeling that the current circumstances in agriculture should not lead to a perpetuation or even acceleration of this process of development, and the general suburbanisation of the countryside.

Indeed there are those who argue that the present circumstances present an opportunity to repair the environmental damage done by agriculture itself, during the previous 'push for production', in terms of loss of hedgerows and natural habitats, the destruction of soil structure and pollution caused by increased use of chemicals.

National Policy Response: Circular 16/87

At a national level, the Government is approaching the matter through reviews of both agricultural and planning policy. The former has been covered by previous speakers and, in essence, involves a gradual withdrawal of farming subsidies and price support, and encouragement of farmers to consider a whole range of alternative economic options.

The Government's planning policies for the countryside were contained in Circular 16/87 which emerged in draft form early last year and caused great consternation at the time, after which the final version appeared with certain amendments.

The Circular asks planning authorities to recognise that, increasingly, the productive value of agricultural land may not be the over-riding consideration. We will need therefore to make a balanced judgement between facilitating appropriate economic activities in rural areas while, at the same time, protecting the countryside for its own sake. It also reaffirms that many commercial and other activities can be carried on in rural areas without causing unacceptable disturbance, and that proposals for the re-use of redundant buildings should not be refused unless there are specific and over-riding planning objections.

REGIONAL ANALYSIS OF RURAL ISSUES

These national trends and policies provided the context for SERPLAN's work, the purpose of which was to provide a regional interpretation in the light of the particular circumstances of the South East.

From our investigations, it was clear that the region does have characteristic features which reflect some variation from the national picture. For example, the evidence presented highlighted the particular strengths of agriculture in the South East, with its considerable areas of high quality land and consequent flexibility of use; a reputation for good farm management; and the diverse business interests of farmers. These factors suggested that the South East may be better placed than elsewhere to weather changing circumstances.

Also, the relative prosperity of the region, and the proximity of villages and urban centres, means that there are likely to be fewer problems within the rural economy as a whole - i.e. encompassing not just farming, but the whole range of business interests.

Indeed, some of the major problems likely to arise in the region will be the result of the conflicting needs and demands in the countryside in the face of intense pressures for alternative uses, and the existence of widespread environmental constraints. An appropriate balance has to be struck between these economic and environmental factors.

THE STRATEGIC PLANNING OBJECTIVES

Having considered these overall trends and regional characteristics, SERPLAN identified the following, necessarily broad, objectives for the countryside, to be incorporated within regional planning guidance :-

1. To encourage suitable measures aimed at supporting the economic viability and social vitality of rural areas and maintaining the productive capability of the land;
2. To maintain and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and amenity of the countryside; and
3. To improve opportunities for access to and enjoyment of the countryside.

SERPLAN believes that, notwithstanding the change in agricultural circumstances, the overwhelming balance of advantage for the South East region lies in a reaffirmation of the basic philosophy of conserving the countryside. It is essential that options for the future are not foreclosed. Farming land is a resource which still needs to be carefully husbanded, and irreversible land-use change should be avoided or strictly limited. Such policies, strongly applied, will not only safeguard the countryside for future generations, but also will continue to assist in directing development pressures towards the inner cities and other strategic urban renewal areas.

At the same time, it is recognised that there is potential for fostering suitable economic growth in the countryside. The effect of changes to the agricultural economy may prove to be less drastic in this region than elsewhere, but such an assessment is not regarded with complacency.

Cutbacks will be felt at all levels of farming and the worst-hit areas will be those where farming practices are already marginal. There is scope therefore for economic initiatives to assist in supporting the economic and social vitality of rural areas, provided that proper planning ensures that new proposals are suitable within a rural setting in terms of their nature, scale and location. It is

also essential that such schemes are sensitively carried out. The present economic circumstances do not present an open door for the dispersal of urban uses into rural areas.

IMPLEMENTING REGIONAL STRATEGY : BASIC PRINCIPLES

These strategic objectives provide the basis for the policy makers' response to the current issues and problems of the countryside in the South East. The next stage will be for planning authorities to carry forward these objectives by developing their own local policies to guide the approach to be taken in particular areas. In this regard SERPLAN's investigations pointed to several important planning principles which should be followed in developing these policies. I shall focus upon four main points this morning, the relevance of which is certainly not restricted to the South East region.

Variations in Policy Response

First, it is important to recognise that the policy response may need to vary from one area to another. I have already stated that while the current changes affecting agriculture and the countryside are generated by national - and indeed international - trends, it was evident from the SERPLAN study that the South East region does have its particular characteristics which set it aside from, say, the dairying areas of the West Country or the hills of the North. Indeed there are distinct differences within the South East region itself, for example between those areas of differing agricultural quality or distance to metropolitan and urban influences, and the existence in some areas of particular environmental assets, which attract interest for recreation and tourism.

It is necessary to recognise these differences, and accept that there may need to be variations in the policy response adopted. For example, a policy document recently produced by Leominster District Council in Herefordshire recognised particular rural economic problems arising from changes in the agricultural industry and the lack of other existing employment opportunities. The approach has involved the promotion of new sources of rural employment, both on and off the farm, and also, in appropriate cases, allowing ancillary residential accommodation to support such enterprises.

Meanwhile, a more cautious approach is taken towards the conversion of redundant rural buildings in an area such as Surrey, where the rural economy is already diverse and buoyant, and strict Green Belt policies apply. There is no inconsistency in this. National Circular guidance must be interpreted in the light of circumstances in a particular area.

The Continuing Importance of Agriculture in the Future of the Countryside

My second point is that the increasing awareness of the problems of agriculture should not dilute the principle that much of the economic strength of rural areas must still relate to the farming industry, albeit that the nature of farm businesses, and indeed the nature of their products, are changing.

A major feature in the quest for alternative rural business opportunities should be the identification of those which can be developed on the farm in a manner which supports its viability without detriment to environmental considerations. Indeed, it is evident that many opportunities for diversification do involve practices which can be directly related to agriculture, ranging from value-added processing of agricultural products, activities such as bed and breakfast and self-catering accommodation, farm trails, farm shops, livery and a whole range of uses relating to field sports and other countryside recreation. It is encouraging to note that the Government's diversification grants are directed towards these types of activities.

I have already mentioned the increasing public enjoyment and interest in the countryside which, together with the growing appreciation of natural products, local products identified with the place which is visited, and also high-quality products, offer new and expanding markets for rural enterprise, particularly in certain areas.

Custodians of the Countryside

My third basic principle is the need to promote effective means of maintaining the countryside, both from an economic and environmental viewpoint.

The Role of Public Bodies, National Trust etc.

The countryside is in a wide variety of ownerships and many areas are managed by bodies such as the Forestry Commission, National Trust, County and District Councils and large private estate owners, and sometimes for non-agricultural purposes. In the context of current surpluses there would appear to be an increasing role for these bodies to take over additional land for alternative countryside uses, particularly outdoor recreation, and amenity. The acquisition of such land is likely to be of great public benefit.

There is also an increased role, potentially, for local authorities and other agencies in promoting public access to the countryside and in helping landowners to accommodate suitable recreational uses of their land, particularly in the urban fringe and areas of high amenity value. For example, the Lower Mole Countryside Project was established to achieve these objectives in North Surrey. It was 'pump primed' by the Countryside Commission, and is now funded by the relevant local authorities. The project has involved close liaison with farmers and landowners to enhance the appearance of an area of the Metropolitan fringe through schemes of tree and hedge planting, coppicing etc., and by managing and improving the rights of way network. Full time staff are employed, supported by a considerable volunteer workforce.

The Role of Farmers : Multipurpose Farm Plans

However this can only ever be part of the solution, and therefore it is also important to ensure that a suitable policy framework is provided whereby individual farmers and landowners continue to be the main custodians of our countryside, but in a manner which is responsive to current circumstances.

In this regard a crucial factor is the national financial framework within which farming operates, and in particular the need for an effective system of Government support for measures which achieve environmental improvements, along with reductions in production. The growing number of designated Environmentally Sensitive Areas is an important step forward, and SERPLAN believes that the principles should be applied on a wider front. Farm woodland schemes provide another ingredient which, if sensitively handled, could generate significant environmental gains.

It is also recognised that planners at the local level have a role to play in creating the right conditions. In this regard it is important that planners and farmers increase their mutual understanding of the problems that face us, and the potential ways of doing something about them.

Planners do recognise increasingly the need to be flexible in our response to the initiatives put forward with a view to supporting and enhancing the rural economy. But it is also important that farmers and/or entrepreneurs give planners sufficient information on the nature and implications of their proposals. It is necessary for us to be able to distinguish between proposals which are appropriate and even beneficial in the countryside, and which may form part of a co-ordinated plan to secure the viable future of a farm; from those other proposals which amount to little more than rural asset-stripping. It may well be that farmers and entrepreneurs, by placing their proposals within a properly planned context, could help to allay some of the concerns which are raised at the planning stage.

There is already some experience of preparing multi-purpose farm plans, and the Countryside Commission's countryside policy review panel suggested that they should be used more widely, and indeed should normally be a condition of grant aid and strategy advice for farmers and landowners. SERPLAN believes that this approach should also encompass the consideration of planning applications.

Later in this paper I shall illustrate these basic principles by showing some case examples, where farm diversification schemes have been progressed successfully through the planning system to implementation.

Other Possibilities : New Country Estates

There are, of course, those who suggest that there should be a new breed of custodian in the countryside. In this regard, a suggestion was made recently by the RICS, of "dedicating out" parcels of 50-100 acres of surplus arable land to create "oases" of wooded areas or parkland, complete with attractive country houses.

Obviously such radical possibilities raise fears that the countryside would be gradually suburbanised, particularly if practical implementation and controls were not carefully handled.

Another crucial issue would be how such a system could be geared to achieving effective reductions in agricultural production, in the major arable areas, as opposed to being yet another source of pressure on the leafy Home Counties; also whether mechanisms could be devised to ensure that the system really did facilitate sensitive countryside management and improvement. As yet the idea has not been thoroughly thought out.

Rural Housing Opportunities

My fourth principle, in developing policies for the countryside, concerns rural housing. While emphasis has been placed, rightly, on the need to find suitable ways of stimulating the rural economy, it is also necessary to ensure that those people who are expected to be employed in these new enterprises have access to suitable housing. The SERPLAN report concluded that this is presenting significant problems in the South East region, where house prices are high and both the public and private rented stock is decreasing.

These problems, which are apparent elsewhere in the country, are not likely to be resolved simply by releasing more land for private housing. Also such developments frequently generate significant environmental objections. More effective ways need to be found of providing housing which can be directed more towards those employed in the

rural economy. In this regard, the recent Government announcement of increased finance for rural housing associations is welcomed. However, further Government support is needed for initiatives such as those of the NAC Rural Trust; not just through more funds, but also enhanced planning powers which ensure that developments really do meet identified rural needs.

PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION

The four points outlined above indicate some basic directions which I believe should be taken in implementing a planning strategy for the countryside. There is a need for policy makers to address the specific problems and opportunities within particular areas, to seek an appropriate balance between economic and environmental considerations, and also to take account of evident community needs such as housing. They should also seek to secure a viable and environmentally sensitive system of countryside management, within which the agricultural industry will continue to play the predominant role. Long-term thinking and co-operation between landowners, farmers and planners is essential.

The issue which remains is how these ideals can be realised in practice. In the past there has been some mutual criticism between the parties involved. Planners have been accused of being negative and inflexible, while the planners themselves have expressed concern at the environmental effects of decisions and actions taken by farmers and landowners.

Pointers towards Good Practice

Some of the problems have arisen from the ad hoc manner in which planning proposals have come forward and this has tended to stimulate a cautious response. I have already suggested that the preparation of overall plans and information to support schemes for diversification are of great value in making sensitive planning judgements. Therefore, in concluding this paper I shall outline briefly some case examples where this co-ordinated approach has been adopted. It is evident that experience on big country estates can provide some useful pointers, since their large size and the variety of problems they face, often requires a co-ordinated overview to be taken.

An early example was the Lockinge Estate near Wantage in Oxfordshire. This has been the subject of a co-ordinated plan over the past 15 years, involving a range of alternative uses of farmland and estate buildings. The plan has provided a new impetus to the rural economy, new life for the buildings and infrastructure of the village, yet in a way which has been sensitive to environmental considerations.

Warnford, Hampshire

On a rather smaller scale, similar principles have been applied to a 1,500 acre estate farm near Winchester, Hampshire, encompassing the small village of Warnford. Here, the estate owner, Mr. Rex Chester, is operating a co-ordinated programme of diversification, which he has integrated with his plans for a large mixed and dairy farm. As a result, levels of employment within the estate, which had been sharply declining since the war, have been largely restored.

Some of the alternative enterprises would not raise many eyebrows in planning circles :-

- the trout farm down by the river,
- pony stables and a stud in the old coach house,
- the blacksmith in the traditional workshop; and
- some attractive farm buildings used as a farm shop and now to be converted into a field study centre.

But Mr. Chester has not restricted himself to traditional buildings. He has converted prefabricated buildings for use by garden machinery and car service engineers, and also a redundant piggery for use by a larch lap fencing manufacturer.

All these schemes have received planning permission from Winchester City Council, and the Council clearly made the judgement that an appropriate balance had been struck between economic and environmental factors. In this regard, some of the basic planning principles I outlined earlier are evident within the approach adopted:-

1. The Warnford schemes have been justified within the context of the rural economy of that particular area.
2. The nature and relatively small scale of the uses has been acceptable within the rural environment, even though some of the converted buildings are not of particular aesthetic value.
3. And above all, the proposals have been put forward as part of a justified and integrated farm plan. A plan which is promoting a strong economic future for a farm which is an important part of the local scene. A plan which has also brought about environmental improvements and the creation of open spaces and amenities in the village. In fact Mr. Chester has even taken steps to deal with the local housing issue in the manner I advocated earlier. He was the first

estate owner to link up with a national housing association to provide units for local workers.

As I have said, it is perhaps easier to adopt these principles of a co-ordinated over-view within the larger farms and estates. However, there is evidence of successful schemes being undertaken within smaller farms as well :-

The Urban Fringe, near Bromley, Kent

A good example may be found at a 500 acre farm within an urban fringe area at West Wickham, near Bromley. The main farming activity had been growing cereals, but financial realities, together with a high level of vandalism, led the farmer to look at possibilities for additional income. He has achieved this by converting his redundant dairy buildings for horse livery, which now accommodate 25 horses.

This scheme reflects a well organised plan, including the provision of communal facilities for livery, a well-screened jumps area, and a network of private bridledways around the farm. The latter not only absorbs some of the horse-riding activity in the area and lessens the pressure on the public bridledway network, but also the presence of the riders supplements the farmer's other measures for dealing with trespass and vandalism.

The crucial point in all this is that a viable future has been achieved for a large area of vulnerable countryside. The scheme was well prepared and the farmer made great efforts at the planning stage to demonstrate to the planning authority that the new activities could be accommodated satisfactorily in environmental and policy terms. The results are a far cry from the image of 'horsiculture', which all too often has despoiled the landscape of our urban fringe areas, and has generated understandable objections from local authorities.

Examples from Surrey

Another well-planned enterprise has been developed on a 150 acre farm near Redhill in Surrey. The principal elements are pick-your-own, glass house production and a breeding sow herd. Of particular interest is the way in which the farmer has responded, in this prosperous area, to trends in market demand and use of leisure time. The pick-your-own element is still central, but of increasing importance now are retail sales, including potted plants and hanging baskets etc., which extend the season and help cash flow. Recently a small teas and ices shop was opened. Provision is made for anglers, and the new nature trail gives public access to some remarkable scenery. On this farm a whole range of facilities has been provided (giving the ingredients for a good afternoon out for the family), through a scheme of countryside management which is both productive and environmentally sensitive.

A third case, from my own district of Mole Valley, again demonstrates a positive response by a farmer to the financial realities of his particular farm (this time comprising 84 acres, about half of which is owned). He has put forward, in co-operation with the Planning Authority, a progressive plan of diversification, involving conversion of redundant buildings to workshop uses, an expanding programme of farm visits for school children etc., a farm shop, and proposals for a fishing lake. As in the Redhill case these schemes have been sensitively planned, and have taken advantage of the particular attributes and characteristics of the farm, and also potential public demand for the "products" generated. Again, the farmer's case was persuasively argued at the planning stage.

CONCLUSION

In submitting SERPLAN's recommendations to the Secretary of State on a strategy for rural areas, the Right Hon. Lord Sandford emphasised the opportunities which are presented by the current changes taking place in the countryside.

"As agricultural production recedes in importance, and recreation takes on greater significance, the opportunity exists to conserve, improve and enhance the amenity value of the countryside for the enjoyment of all. To fulfil these opportunities in the South East means not only resisting unwanted development pressures, but also positive and co-ordinated action to support local communities, conserve wildlife, and provide for public enjoyment of the countryside."

I believe that the planning principles I have outlined provide the basis of a sound policy response to these new challenges. Furthermore, the specific examples I have shown demonstrate that, provided the right attitudes are taken by all concerned, these principles can be achieved in practice.

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