

The Countryside—Where Are We Going?

By Richard Wakeford

I want to encourage you as practitioners to raise your eyes from the development site, or the development plan and have a look at where we might all be going. Is it where we want to go? What can we do about it? This is a difficult task at the best of times, but even more so in the countryside, where the popular, and the official, view is that the countryside of the past was better than the countryside of today.

Nostalgia rules OK?

Not far from here, at Long Wittenham, a group of modellers are recreating the countryside of the Vale of the White Horse in the 1930s, in incredible detail. Few visitors see anything but charm in the rural poverty so minutely represented.

There is a tremendous nostalgia in the popularity of Pop Larkin, James Herriot, and Heartbeat. And Brian Aldridge is a real rotter. These attitudes shape public policy.

Those views are not modern. Since this is a legal conference I can with confidence draw on the works of Scott L.J. He chaired the Committee that delivered the Scott report¹ of 1942, one of the major foundations of the post-war policy implemented by the Labour Government of the time. One theme was to protect both farmers and the countryside through the:

- 1947 Agriculture Act;
- 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, providing for comprehensive regulation of land use and development, except agriculture;
- 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, which put in place measures to manage the best countryside for recreation (National Parks), wildlife (Sites of Special Scientific Interest) and outstanding landscape (AONBs).

Scott's approach was that countryside was fine as it was, as long as it was protected from voracious developers. Development control would keep it from being spoilt. But Scott failed to predict progress in agriculture. Nor did he see how progress in transport would revolutionise global trade. What would Gary Sparrow's 1940s wife make of the contents of the supermarket of today? We think nothing of the transport needed to bring Peruvian asparagus to a plate near you, every day of the year. Better transport infrastructure, in the shape of motorways and trunk roads has made so much of the countryside accessible—allowing people to move in and smarten up all those old cottages in the Vale of the White Horse, while working in Oxford or Swindon. Better transport has also allowed services to be centralised—whether shops, hospitals, distribution depots or whatever. Bringing everywhere closer together has undermined local distinctiveness. Portland stone was once a luxury because few could afford the transport costs; now transport is so cheap that few can afford the cost of local building materials, when volume production makes bricks from Peterborough so cheap.

The effect of public attitudes reflected in Scott's report and so much else in society has been threefold.

- First, the view that agriculture is a benign protector of the countryside, which could be excluded from planning and development control, has left farmers free to increase

¹ Ministry of Works and Planning, *Report of the Committee on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas* (HMSO, London, 1942).

production and reduce costs and inefficiencies. These costs and inefficiencies are often associated with valued qualities in the countryside. The Common Agricultural Policy still promotes their destruction, as the ploughing of the South Downs for linseed recently demonstrated graphically. Where there has been a debate, it has been about the planning control of agricultural buildings and dwellings as if this was the only planning issue in securing a quality countryside for the future. Only in the latest version of PPG 7—The countryside—environmental quality and economic and social development does a more forward looking reference appear “The priority now is to find new ways of enriching the quality of the whole countryside whilst accommodating appropriate development” (paragraph 2.14).

- Secondly, the common attitude that any change is bad makes countryside issues much more complicated than they need to be. It has created a deep sense of frustration in the Rural Development Commission in its work to further the economic and social interests of rural areas. Fewer farms each employ fewer workers. There are fewer workers in the woods or in quarries. Only economic diversification can reduce the vulnerability of the countryside to such structural change.
- Finally, it wilfully ignores the living nature of the countryside. It has been shaped by human activity in the past, and human activity there today will shape its future. Controls alone cannot entice the countryside to evolve in a way that is realistic, rather than be set in aspic. The forces which have led to hedges and ancient woods being grubbed out to allow easier use of machinery have not run their course. And it is wrong to think that regulations alone can ensure that hedgerows are well managed rather than running into gaps. Ultimately, the best incentive to manage a hedgerow will be to have it used to keep in stock.

The challenge of sustainable development: business as usual?

Just as we are coming to understand the need to encourage good management, for example through agri-environment funds, a whole new agenda emerges. It turns out that globalisation has not run its course. New threats to our cosy vision of the countryside are emerging—threats that are much more difficult to influence than the economic drivers of post-war Britain. Here are some of the changes in prospect for the countryside if we carry on as now.

Climate change stemming from fossil fuel burning. The effects on England will not be as simple and welcome as sunnier summers. Research for the Countryside Commission² suggests a much more complicated and unwelcome picture. There could be far more frequent and damaging droughts in the east on some of our currently most efficient arable farming areas. There could be more “great storms” with their impacts on woodland. We might see sunflowers and vines grow successfully in the south, but we might also see upland habitats losing the species which need a colder climate. Most of these changes would impoverish the distinctive character of the English countryside as it is now.

Housing development. Even if the Government achieves its 60 per cent target of all housing development on recycled land that could still mean providing for over a million households on countryside sites—at the edge of town or in villages. In its evidence to the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Select Committee inquiry on housing, the Countryside Commission expressed its concern that if the development follows the current pattern, much of that new housing on what was once countryside will look much the same whether in Durham or Dorset.³ It is hard to find examples of

² Countryside Commission, *Climate change, acidification and ozone: Potential impact on the English countryside* (CCP 458, Countryside Commission, Cheltenham, 1995).

³ Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, *Housing: Minutes of Evidence Wednesday 13 May 1998* (TSO, London, 1998).

good quality urban development on the edge of towns. It is easy to say we could build better, but what do we mean? It is not simply design and layout. The volume house builders have achieved a great deal in cost-effective design. But there are few examples of the well-managed open space and cycleways which should feature in sustainable settlements. Many new homes still do not respect the character of the place, and clash with the traditional building materials. The result is to erode the character of the countryside rather than achieve the enrichment of the character of the countryside PPG 7 calls for.

How will we provide for affordable housing for people in villages, where they are outbid by the more affluent from towns? The current choice is an exceptions policy which allows development provided that the plan does not show that housing is allowed—a sort of anti-planning. Or a quota system which can only work on scales of development most unlikely to be appropriate in most villages.

Then there is **traffic growth**, some of it due to those self same people who have moved out of towns commuting back there to work and shop.⁴ Much of it is the result of continued concentration of production on fewer sites and greater reliance on daily distribution of supplies from central warehouses to those same out-of-town supermarkets. The result in the countryside is not so much increased air pollution—except for low level ozone blotting out distant views in a summer haze—but roads straightened, widened and suburbanised, and no longer safe for the cyclists who might have used them instead of a car to get to school or shops or work.

Urban footprint. Green Belts and restrictive planning policies make a good job of stopping urban sprawl. But development control cannot enforce good land management, and the holding of land in the hopes, however unrealistic, of development one day leads to the degradation of the countryside beyond the urban edge. Ironically, this is the countryside which is the most visible and which because of its proximity to towns, attracts the most recreation trips. We all deserve better. What would be better?

The challenge of sustainable development: some solutions for practitioners to consider

We are beginning to see how all these issues are connected—how they cannot be tackled individually. We are learning the concept of sustainable development. It is an inspirational concept. It has inspired a new approach to looking at what is happening to the countryside. It prompts us to ask if we can afford to carry on going the way we are headed, if business as usual is sustainable.

There is a challenge here for the new countryside agency being formed from the merger of the Countryside Commission and the Rural Development Commission. Can we turn the inspirational concept of sustainable development into an operational one, and apply it to shape the countryside of the future?

Concepts from finance may help. We can say that sustainable development is about increasing, year by year, the stock of capital we need to supply the income we need to live our lives. But, and here I part company with purist economists, we need several sorts of capital. We need to secure our environmental capital, that mix of soil, water, landscape, habitat, which gives us food and materials, a sense of identity, a place to refresh ourselves and a treasure house of history and meaning.⁵ We need to increase man-made capital—the physical infrastructure of roads, factories, farms and Internet connections. And, we need to increase social capital—housing, training, community and voluntary organisations, the health service.

Let me turn these concepts into *eight* tangible propositions:

⁴ Countryside Commission, *Trends in transport and the countryside: The Countryside Commission and transport policy in England* (CCP 382, Countryside Commission, Cheltenham, 1992).

⁵ CAG Consultants and Land Use Consultants, *What Matters and Why, Environmental Capital: a New Approach. Report to Countryside Commission, English Heritage, English Nature, and the Environment Agency* (Countryside Commission, Cheltenham, 1998).

A net environmental gain from all development. We must aim to hand to future generations a countryside which is richer in natural features and cultural meaning than the one we inherited. It may not be quite as extensive a countryside—because we do need homes and other development. But it should grow in quality to compensate for what is lost in quantity.

Local people, their elected representatives, and those who write development plans should all articulate the important features of their countryside, and set out what would be proportionate compensation for any loss. They might look for woodland planting and improved public access to countryside as part of development. This can deliver better quality countryside for the people in the new homes as well as for those in the original community who have lost the open space they value. The Commission's programme of Community Forests⁶ provides examples of how to create new countryside around some of our major cities. In accordance with our Greenways challenge, we might seek new routes for people on foot or bicycle, linking new development with shops and schools, and with accessible countryside in the other direction.⁷

Development plans should incorporate these objectives, up front, so that developers know what quality improvements they must guarantee—through section 106 agreements—in return for a consent to develop. Such agreements would be better, in my view, than taxes of the United States Impact Fee style—because they are tied to the specific circumstances of the site, and because they can be properly tested at local plan inquiry. If a development cannot afford such compensation, negotiated in the open way expected post-Nolan, that may signal not that planners, on behalf of the community, are being too greedy, but that the economic benefits of the development are outweighed by the wider impact on the community. The Countryside Commission's planning policy statement *Planning for countryside quality* develops this point further.⁸

Such an approach would be more positive towards development, and at the same time more powerful in its ability to retain the quality of the countryside than policies which seek to simply “protect” the countryside. No matter how rigorous, such policies lead to decisions which minimise the impact of development on the countryside. We are not looking to lose by a narrow margin on behalf of the countryside. We are looking for win wins.

Second proposition **create a vision.** Net gain for the environment needs to fit into an overall vision. I have suggested that Scott got it wrong in the 1940s. I have painted a challenging picture of the 2040s, if we go forward with business as usual. What do we want the world to be like for our children? And how will we plan the development they will rely on, if they are to live as comfortably as us? We need to make the vision realistic and affordable, or it will never happen. And we need to be ready to adapt to the technologies we choose to embrace.

Many planners seem to have forgotten what plans are for, and concentrate on development control without ever looking up to see where that is taking them. The challenge is to look 50 years ahead, and then work out how far you want to get in the first 10. We need plans that provide properly for economic and social development, and work out how it will all fit together. We need plans that planners can take to investors and inspire them, as we are encouraging those who have prepared Community Forest Plans to do.

We need to see more of the thinking that has led the Welsh Development Agency to produce *Landscapes Working for Wales*—an imaginative document which makes the link between a renewed

⁶ Countryside Commission, *Community Forests and the Town and Country Planning System* (CCP 518, Countryside Commission, Cheltenham, 1997).

⁷ Countryside Commission (forthcoming) *Greenways Handbook* (Countryside Commission, Cheltenham, 1998).

⁸ Countryside Commission, *Planning for countryside quality* (CCP 529, Countryside Commission, Cheltenham, 1998).

landscape, inward investment and quality of life for the workforce and the wider community.⁹ The new Regional Strategies are going to be linked to investment decisions far more tightly than structure and local plans have ever been, or have ever needed to be. And yet everything that Regional Development Agencies do will need to satisfy the principles of sustainable development—or so I heard Mr Meacher say.

Third proposition **sustainable Green Belts**. Green Belts are currently the only long-term planning policy we have, yet they do not fully match up to today's sustainable development agenda. We need to look at *three issues* to decide if Green Belts help or hinder sustainable development. They are: its *impact on the efficient use of resources* of land, minerals, energy, water, etc.; its ability to protect and enhance the local distinctiveness or *sense of place* of towns and their surrounding countryside; and finally, its ability to help us *think and plan long term*. After all, the key element of sustainable development is meeting our needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs.

On the *efficient use of resources*, the jury is still out, whether we look at the sustainable use of countryside resources, or of urban resources. Green Belts have certainly helped protect the *quantity* of countryside. Developers who would otherwise have built on the edge of cities have instead sought out infill plots which might otherwise have been left. Whether Green Belts have helped ensure that the countryside so protected is agriculturally *productive* is much more dubious, witness the concerns over the problems of farming in the urban fringe.

On *sense of place*, are we proud of Green Belt countryside, do we recognise its character and look after it? Few if any planning concepts are protected as fiercely by the public, but that is not the same thing. Green Belts have kept countryside open close to where millions live, by stemming urban sprawl. But, that countryside is not particularly accessible, nor always well managed.

The final issue is planning for the long term, which I have already touched on. Here, Green Belt policy almost scores. Green Belts are one of the few policies where the Government encourages local planning authorities to look *very long term*, beyond the 10 to 15 year horizon of a statutory plan.

As a policy, they have succeeded better even than land purchase. For a nation with a sense of ownership for its countryside. Green Belts are well known—so well known that most people think all open countryside is Green Belt—capital G, capital B. Yet overall, the policy is crude. It dates from the 1950s before we had the sophistication of the plan-led system or of section 106 agreements. It pays no regard to the need to manage land in a changing world, when all development is ruled out. As a result, much of our Green Belt is not quality countryside. And the national policy to protect this land above all other is putting real pressure on higher quality land—Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, for example.

We need to address these shortcomings of Green Belts. We also need to learn from the best features of Green Belt policy, and apply those to the land around all towns—to all those parts where the public already believe Green Belts are in place! The best features are the long-term nature, the looking forward for 30 years or more, and the prevention of urban sprawl. Now we have a planning system that is capable of such vision, the only *very long term* planning tool doesn't seem so critical.

We have to be ready to use strategic tools strategically. And at the point of strategic review, we have to be prepared to redraw the Green Belt if that is the most sustainable solution taking all considerations into account. In revising development plans, we believe local planning authorities should consider a sequential approach, as envisaged in the Government's *Planning for Communities of the Future*.¹⁰ First, have all other locations for the agreed demand for housing been exhausted—inside cities, on

⁹ Welsh Development Agency, *Landscapes Working for Wales* (Welsh Development Agency, Cardiff, 1995).

¹⁰ Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, *Planning for the Communities of the Future* (Cm. 3885, TSO, London, 1998).

brownfield sites, etc.; then would the release of Green Belt land be the most sustainable option in relation to the settlements in the area and employment and transport patterns. Finally, would the Green Belt still meet its purpose if the relevant land was developed (for example, is it the final space between two settlements?).

Fourthly **engage local communities**. The Countryside Commission's Village Design Statement programme is a good start.¹¹ Local people are identifying what is special about their place and how new development should be located and built. Provided these statements respect the principles of the local plan, as supplementary planning guidance, they can have a real impact on planning decisions—a real example of local ownership. But it is only a start. Local people are already extending them to a wider range of community issues, making them into true village appraisals which give local authorities, and prospective developers a clear idea of community ambitions for the future.

We are piloting a Heritage Lottery funded Local Heritage Initiative, in which people identify what is really special for them locally, and interpret it, or protect it, or provide access to it.¹² Such local schemes will do a lot to protect the diversity of England's countryside.

Fifthly **be ready to promote affordable housing**. I can almost guarantee that this issue will bubble up from a village appraisal. In many parts of the country, much of the housing development in villages is large executive style homes—of the four bedroom, three bathroom, two garage type. The more that is built, the less balanced is the community. If we want to secure the character and vitality of villages, we need a mix of development. People in villages are keen to have more modest starter homes for the young people growing up. When sites come up, planning authorities should be encouraged to say no, let's say no to four houses on this site; let's say yes to 10, giving the same development profit, by spreading the infrastructure costs. Sustainable development surely means that communities have the responsibility to house their children as they grow up.

Sixthly **create the right setting for towns**. Not every town has a Green Belt, but all towns should sit in well managed countryside. Development plans need restraint policies on urban growth *and* positive objectives for the countryside around towns. That countryside should be a place for urban people to enjoy, and yet one where a good living can be made from the land. Town and country are interdependent, and nowhere is this more so than in the countryside around towns. We are suggesting that every town and city should develop a Greenspace programme—acknowledging the importance of green spaces within the urban areas, not least in making cities better places to live, and securing better management and accessibility of the countryside outside.¹³

Seventhly **integrate transport and planning**. The new Integrated Transport White Paper¹⁴ emphasises integration time and time again, and rightly so. If the countryside is to adapt to a new attitude to the private car, then we need to rethink transport. Urban public transport solutions are too expensive and inflexible for rural areas. We need a mix of community and commercial public transport provision, coupled to traffic calming to restore villages and a network of country lanes more accessible to pedestrians and cyclists. We also need to think hard about what we build, where, to take full account of the impact of the transport choices the residents or workers will make over the lifetime of the building.

¹¹ Countryside Commission, *Village Design: Making Local Character Count in New Development* (CCP 501, Countryside Commission, Cheltenham, 1996); Countryside Commission, *Countryside Design Summaries: Achieving Quality in Countryside Design* (CCP 502, Countryside Commission, Cheltenham, 1996).

¹² Countryside Commission, supported by the Heritage Lottery fund, *Local Heritage Initiative* (Countryside Commission, London, 1998).

¹³ Countryside Commission (forthcoming), *Greenspace for the 21st century: Policies for the countryside in and around towns* (Countryside Commission, Cheltenham, 1998).

¹⁴ Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, *A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone. The Government's White Paper on the Future of Transport* (Cm. 3950, TSO, London, 1998).

Finally **integrate the countryside with other decisions**. Consider how promoting more sustainable activity in one sector impacts on another. Renewable energy is an excellent example. Is it sensible to lose almost all our last areas of remote and unspoilt countryside to generate less than 1 per cent of our electricity from wind?

Conclusion

The countryside is an attractive place to live, especially for those with the money and health to have their own transport. We cannot simply provide houses for all those who would like that environment without a return to the sort of 1930s style sprawl which was itself the justification for the planning system we have now. What are our choices?

Make urban living more attractive? Amen to that, but it's not the job of a Countryside Agency.

Bring the countryside to town in new development? Yes, that must be part of our job, in Community Forests and in raising the quality of town edge development.

Rethink what villages and small towns in the countryside are for, and put in place policies which foster that new vision. What are the circumstances which justify new workplaces in villages and country towns—a jobs and housing balance? The old structure of rural crafts and small towns supporting a labour intensive agriculture have gone. Is there a new rationale for keeping jobs in step with housing. Can we ensure that more than just a token few live close to their work in the new developments?

Finally:

1. recognise reality, rather than wish it away. The countryside will be the result of our collective decisions on what we want to eat, where we want to live, work and shop, and what we want to do with our leisure time;
2. be aware of the big picture, and challenge clients to think about it. Public opinion has a habit of translating into planning policy, be that Green Belts, brownfield development, or out of town shopping centres!