

**DRAFT PPS 7 – SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREAS  
(Report by Head of Planning Services)**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 This report informs Cabinet of a draft revision of government planning advice on development in rural areas, and recommends a response on behalf of the Council.

**2. BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 The Government's planning policies are at present set out in a series of Planning Policy Guidance Notes (PPGs), which are revised from time to time. These are to be replaced progressively by a new series of 'Planning Policy Statements' (PPSs), which are intended to be more concise and focused documents. Like their predecessors, PPSs will be strong 'material considerations' that local planning authorities and others are expected to take into account when preparing plan policies and considering individual planning applications.
- 2.2 The first draft PPS to be issued for consultation is PPS 7, which deals with policies for rural areas. When finalised it will replace PPG 7 (*The Countryside - Environmental Quality and Economic and Social Development*), as well as PPG 21 on Tourism. Comments on the draft PPS need to be submitted by 12 December.

**3. ASSESSMENT OF THE REVISED GUIDANCE**

- 3.1 A summary of the key messages and implications emerging from the draft PPS is set out in Appendix A to this report. The appendix also indicates suggested responses to the draft PPS for submission to the Government.
- 3.2 Much of the guidance contained in the draft is uncontentious, and references to the role of planning in helping to retain village facilities deserve particular support. However, certain aspects of the guidance require clarification, particularly in relation to the limited circumstances in which housing in the open countryside may be acceptable, and the scale of business development that may be appropriate in rural locations. It is important that policies to ensure the effective re-use of rural buildings, and to assist farm diversification and the health of rural economies, do not undermine wider objectives to promote sustainable patterns of development.

**4. RECOMMENDATION**

- 4.1 Cabinet is recommended to approve the comments set out in Appendix A of this report as the Council's response to the proposed PPS 7 on Sustainable Development in Rural Areas.

**Background Papers:**

ODPM (1993) Draft PPS 7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas

DoE (1997) PPG 7: The Countryside – Environmental Quality and Economic and Social Development

DETR (2001) Amendments to PPG 7 concerning Farm Diversification and Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land

HDC (2001) Retention of Shops, Post Offices and Public Houses in Villages (Supplementary Planning Guidance)

HDC (2003) Re-Use and Redevelopment of Farm Buildings and Outbuildings (Supplementary Planning Guidance)

HDC (2003) Huntingdonshire Design Guide (Draft Supplementary Planning Guidance)

HDC (2003) Huntingdonshire Landscape & Townscape Assessment (Draft Supplementary Planning Guidance)

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## **APPENDIX A SUMMARY OF KEY ISSUES AND RESPONSES**

This appendix summarises the key issues arising from the draft PPS 7. Responses to be made on behalf of the Council are set out in bold italics at appropriate points. Note that these responses are limited to issues where a particular expression of support is appropriate, or where there is a strong need for clarification / additional guidance.

### **A Location of development**

- A1 As its title suggests, the PPS puts 'sustainable development' at the heart of government policy for rural areas. It makes clear that this means concentrating most new development at towns and cities, but at the same time catering for the needs that arise within rural communities.
- A2 It advises that catering for these rural needs is best done by focusing development in or near to 'local service centres', where employment, housing, services and other facilities can be provided close together. It suggests that a local service centre could comprise a country town, a single large village or a group of villages, depending upon the geography of the area.
- A3 Away from such places, the advice is that limited development to meet specific local needs for housing and other uses should be allowed in other villages. This advice is broadly consistent with the approach taken in the new Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Structure Plan, as well as the settlement strategy in the Huntingdonshire Local Plan Alteration (although the latter will need to be revisited in the context of preparing a new Local Plan for the district).

### **B Housing in the open countryside**

- B1 The draft PPS repeats previous advice that housing in the open countryside, away from 'established settlements', should be strictly controlled. A previous reference (in PPG 7) to the possible acceptability of 'infilling' or minor extensions to groups of houses in the countryside has been removed. So too has the 'exception' that allowed an isolated new house to be built in the countryside if it were considered 'truly outstanding' in architectural and landscape terms; this had proved problematic to apply in practice, having prompted many speculative applications that were not of the required quality, yet which were complex and time-consuming proposals for authorities to assess.
- B2 A subtle but significant change has been the widening of another 'exceptions' provision, whereby isolated dwellings for agricultural and forestry workers could be allowed if essential for the operation of those enterprises. This provision is now extended to 'other rural-based enterprises'. Any such proposals will need to be supported by clear evidence of need, but there is concern that the draft PPS offers no guidance on the types of use that may qualify for this exception. Such guidance would assist in preventing inappropriate speculative applications.

***Response: the PPS should give further guidance on the types of 'rural-based enterprises' that may generate the need for business-related dwellings in the open countryside***

## **C Agricultural, business & tourism development**

C1 Revisions to the existing PPG 7, in March 2001, gave encouragement to farm diversification schemes, and this draft PPS gives further support. Local planning authorities are advised to adopt positive planning policies towards diversification, and to support well-conceived projects put forward by farmers. The PPS does, however, acknowledge that proposals should be consistent in scale with their rural location and not result in excessive expansion of built development in the countryside.

C2 Unfortunately the draft does not offer advice on what types of activity may legitimately be regarded as 'diversification', whether in terms of the types of use involved or the degree of connection to the farming operation. This Council's SPG on the re-use and redevelopment of farm buildings and outbuildings makes clear that diversification schemes should make an ongoing contribution to the farm business as a whole (rather than, for example, merely involving land disposal for development by others). Similar advice in the PPS would be welcome clarification.

***Response: the PPS should make clear that farm diversification schemes should make an ongoing contribution to the farm business as a whole***

C3 The draft PPS also offers general support to business and tourism development in rural areas, although it makes clear that proposals should be guided by suitable policies in the development plan. New tourist and visitor facilities (including accommodation) should in general be directed towards existing towns and villages, although existing rural buildings may be used for these purposes as well.

## **D Re-use or redevelopment of existing buildings**

D1 The draft PPS supports the re-use of existing buildings in the countryside for business, tourism, educational or similar purposes, but subject to important caveats - these include the need to preserve the character of buildings of historic or architectural importance, and to prevent large-scale development that would prejudice attempts to promote sustainable patterns of development. The redevelopment of buildings for such purposes is also deemed to be acceptable, but subject to similar controls.

D2 This Council's SPG on the re-use and redevelopment of farm buildings and outbuildings already provides a local policy framework which is compatible with these objectives. The PPS could, however, offer greater clarity on the scale of development (whether through conversion or redevelopment) that might trigger concerns about 'unsustainability'. This is especially pertinent in a predominantly arable area such as Huntingdonshire, where there are substantial modern farm buildings which could be converted.

***Response: further guidance on how the appropriate scale of re-use/redevelopment proposals in the open countryside may be assessed against sustainability objectives is needed (either in the PPS itself or in accompanying guidance material)***

- D3 The draft takes a more flexible approach than its predecessor to the re-use of buildings in the countryside for houses. Such conversions are deemed inappropriate in locations remote from settlements and services, but elsewhere residential conversions are encouraged in certain circumstances, including meeting an identified housing need or enabling dependants to live with carers. Previously, PPG 7 made clear that local authorities could adopt policies giving preference to a business re-use, prior to any residential proposals being considered. This is a significant change, and would benefit from clearer guidance on what constitutes an 'identified housing need'. It should relate specifically to locally-generated housing requirements (such as those for affordable properties) rather than the general 'need' for housing across an authority as a whole.

***Response: the PPS needs to clarify the circumstances in which the conversion of non-residential buildings to dwellings in the countryside may be appropriate; in particular, what constitutes an 'identified housing need' and in what situations it would "otherwise provide the most sustainable option" (para. 19)***

## **E Rural services**

- E1 Draft PPS7 gives explicit support to both the provision of new community facilities and the retention of existing ones to maintain the vitality of village life. It advocates the approach adopted already by this authority in having policies for the retention of the last shop, post office or public house in a village. Furthermore, it sees such policy support being widened to encompass other facilities such as village halls and petrol stations. This is welcome, and is something that can be addressed in the review of the Council's Local Plan.

***Response: the recognition of the role that planning policies can play in supporting the retention of community facilities in villages is welcomed***

## **F Design & conservation**

- F1 Emphasis is placed in the PPS on securing high quality design, with the requirement to ensure that new building contributes to a sense of local identity. At the same time, it is stressed that a positive approach should be taken to high quality modern design that is sensitive to its setting and the character of the area. These issues have already been addressed by this authority through the recent publication of the draft Huntingdonshire Design Guide and Landscape & Townscape Assessment. The PPS also offers support to tools such as Village Design Statements and Parish Plans as means of highlighting local characteristics and raising design quality. Again, this is welcome support for a process in which the Council has already begun to engage (having adopted two Village Design Statements as SPG).

- F2 In an important change, the PPS states that 'local countryside designations', such as an Area of Best Landscape, are now considered to be 'unnecessary'. Planning authorities are encouraged to adopt criteria-based policies in their place. This reflects a wider concern that designating areas of 'best' landscape can diminish the attention paid to safeguarding and enhancing the qualities of 'ordinary' landscapes. This Council's recently-published Landscape & Townscape Assessment will provide a sound basis for the operation of appropriate criteria-based policies to address this issue, which will need to be included in the review of the Local Plan.
- F3 Nonetheless, the PPS does need to clarify what types of local designations this change is intended to preclude. It is assumed that it relates to measures to conserve and enhance the aesthetic qualities of the countryside. There would be concern if this change were used to prevent local authorities from adopting more 'strategic' policies, such as those to prevent coalescence between settlements (e.g. local or strategic gaps), or to secure improvements in the recreational opportunities available in the countryside (e.g. through the identification of 'community forests' or major habitat creation projects). The draft PPS already recognises the value of land around towns in providing opportunities to enhance recreational opportunities and manage potential land use conflicts, and it is important that local authorities are not prevented from adopting policies that would assist with this objective.

***Response: the draft PPS needs to clarify what 'local countryside designations' refers to, and should ensure that this does not preclude the adoption of appropriate strategic policies to manage land use around towns, such as local or strategic 'gaps'.***