



Briefing

Planning Policy Statement 14 Sustainable Development in the Countryside

1.0 Introduction

In adopting a presumption against development in open countryside, the Department for Regional Development (DRD) has taken an important step in moving Northern Ireland towards more sustainable forms of rural development. Friends of the Earth shares the view of DRD that the current level and form of rural development is unsustainable and that urgent action is now needed to prevent further erosion of the Northern Ireland countryside as a social, environmental and economic asset. In this briefing, Friends of the Earth sets out the case for the new policy and refutes some of the arguments cited by those who are opposing it.

2.0 Background

Friends of the Earth supports new Government proposals to protect Northern Ireland's countryside by limiting the number of new houses that can be built in rural areas, outside existing settlements. Draft Planning Policy Statement 14, Sustainable Development in the Countryside was published by the Department for Regional Development on 16 March 2006, proposing the introduction of strict limits on the further spread of 'bungalow blight' across the region. A Ministerial Statement accompanied the policy and gives it immediate effect, in order to prevent Planning Service being inundated with applications for new housing during the statutory consultation period which ends on 9 June.

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Friends of the Earth is:

- dedicated to protecting the environment and promoting a sustainable future for Northern Ireland**
- the UK and Ireland's most influential environmental campaigning organisation**
- the most extensive environmental network in the world, with over 60 national organisations across five continents**
- a unique network of campaigning local groups working in over 200 communities throughout the UK and Ireland**
- dependent upon individuals for over 90 per cent of its income.**

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3.0 The case for PPS14

3.1 Landscape quality

Single dwellings, that is individual dwellings situated by themselves and not in a settlement, now account for half of all dwellings constructed in Northern Ireland. There are more applications being approved for one-off houses in the Northern Ireland countryside than in the whole of England, Scotland and Wales combined. This is degrading the appearance of the countryside, undermining its landscape quality and visual appeal.

The new policy is necessary to prevent Donegal-style development where, it has been rumoured, Fáilte Ireland (the Irish Tourist Board) has used ten-year old photographs in its promotional literature because the sprawl of bungalows across the county has undermined its landscape quality and tourist appeal.

3.2 Transport

Low density settlement patterns undermine the viability of public transport services and increase reliance on the private car. Car dependency is such that most rural dwellers rely on their car for 100 per cent of their journeys. It is not economically viable to provide public transport services to a dispersed rural population, indeed current settlement patterns are having an adverse impact on the frequency of services to rural towns and villages as thousands of potential users have opted to live beyond their reach, in the open countryside.

3.3 Climate change

Closely related to transport is the question of climate change. Many rural dwellers do not work in the countryside and instead travel long distances by car to work in Belfast and other urban centres. Their exhaust emissions contribute to climate change. A survey of 1,250 rural households in the Republic of Ireland found that one quarter of rural dwellers commute more than 40 miles a day to work.

3.4 Social cohesion

The same survey found that nearly 40 per cent of non-farming rural households have no involvement in any community, voluntary or sporting organisation, and have little or no contact with their neighbours. The report said: "Many commuters are simply 'sleeping' in their rural homes. This disconnectivity and lack of neighbourliness creates concern for the social fabric of many rural areas."

3.5 Water quality/septic tanks

Single dwellings tend not to be on a mains sewer and rely instead on septic tanks, many of which are badly sited and poorly maintained. Sewage pollution leaks into loughs, rivers, streams and sheughs, as well as into ground water. A recent report by a Government-appointed advisory body, the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside, found that:

- 60 per cent of septic tank discharges are reaching surface waters across Northern Ireland.
- 17 per cent of homes in Northern Ireland use septic tanks, compared with a UK average of just 4 per cent.
- There are more than 100,000 septic tanks in Northern Ireland.
- 12 per cent of phosphate pollution reaching Lough Erne comes from septic tanks.
- 14 per cent of phosphate pollution reaching Lough Neagh comes from septic tanks.
- Many septic tanks are not regularly emptied of sludge.

- About 90 per cent of water bodies in Northern Ireland are at risk of failing the quality standards required by the European Water Framework Directive, and non-compliance carries with it the risk of hefty fines.

While much can be done to improve the regulation of existing septic tanks, it is also essential to restrict the number of new houses being connected to non-mains sewerage.

3.6 Vitality of rural towns and villages

63,000 new homes have been denied to rural settlements during the last ten years, according to the Royal Institute for Chartered Surveyors. The vitality and prosperity of market towns, villages and hamlets has been undermined by a planning regime that allows large numbers of people to live in the open countryside.

4.0 The case against PPS14

4.1 The figures are flawed

Opponents of the new policy have attempted to undermine DRD's position by highlighting the double counting of outline and reserved matters consents. The most important issue, however, is the trend over time and the figures clearly show there has been an exponential increase in the number of consents issued over the last decade. Whatever the actual number of dwellings in the countryside, no-one can deny that almost every area of rural Northern Ireland has witnessed an unprecedented level of house-building.

4.2 The problem is design, not location

Some detractors of PPS14 have suggested that if the objective is to secure sustainable forms of development, policies should be focused on design quality rather than location. Friends of the Earth recognises the problem of poor design and the need for action in this area, however this argument fails to acknowledge the impact on the environment of the location, density and servicing arrangements of dispersed development. Even well designed dwellings are likely to lead to almost total car dependency, undermining the viability of public transport services locally and contributing to climate change. They will be connected to septic tanks which in turn may pollute local waterways, and they will undermine the vitality and prosperity of market towns and villages. The continuing suburbanisation of the Northern Ireland countryside will erode landscape quality, a loss which will be experienced by rural and urban dwellers, as well as by tourists and future generations.

4.3 Restraint is 'anti-rural'

Opponents of the new policy claim that it is anti-rural but this is also clearly untrue. The policy allows those with genuine housing needs to live in the countryside, while housing allocations to hamlets, villages and market towns will continue to provide housing where it can be serviced in a more sustainable way.

4.4 Dispersed housing is traditional in Ireland

Those who are opposed to PPS14 claim that a dispersed settlement pattern is traditional in Ireland but this is not so. A survey of historic settlement patterns carried out for An Taisce, the National Trust for Ireland, found that houses were grouped together. The survey looked at settlement patterns in Kerry before and after the Famine, in 1841 and 1894, and found that clusters of 15-20 houses were the norm.

There are complex factors behind the current rural form, among them state intervention over almost a century. Indeed all settlement patterns have evolved as a result of various socio-economic contexts. Historically, land tenure and agricultural practices would have had a particularly dominant influence. In more recent times, it has been the low cost of private car use, an aspiration for a suburban lifestyle and a failure to properly value the environmental costs of development that have driven the demand for such dispersed development, rather than any widespread concern for the vernacular.

4.5 The policy will strangle the rural economy

It has been suggested that restricting the number of houses built in the open countryside will have devastating consequences for the rural economy as demand diminishes for construction work and building materials. This is an argument that is difficult to support. There is no suggestion that the overall level of construction will diminish, instead housing development will be displaced within settlement limits. It appears untenable that there is any sector of the construction industry that is solely rural in character or that any company would go out of business because the location of a new dwelling shifted a few miles to the nearest village.

4.6 House prices will rise

Detractors of the policy appear to want it both ways. On the one hand, some claim that the number of dwellings being built in the countryside is not as high as has been claimed by DRD while, on the other hand, some claim that PPS14 will restrict the supply of housing to the extent that it will have a significant impact on house prices. These positions are clearly incompatible. It is recognised that additional development restraint may affect the housing supply but it must be remembered that DRD has a process to regularly review this (see www.rdshousingreviewpanel.com) and release additional land should it be shown to be having a significant impact on house prices.

4.7 There is a right to live in the countryside

While some sections of the Northern Ireland community may feel strongly that they have a right to live in the countryside, there is no legal basis for such a claim, just as there is no right to live in any particular town or street. The strategic planning process is essentially concerned with balancing long-term regional interests with those of private individuals. It is regrettable that there exists some resentment about this, however Friends of the Earth is satisfied that this policy is being introduced with the aim of securing genuine and important long-term objectives.

5.0 Conclusion

Friends of the Earth's vision for the countryside is one in which farmers make a good living producing safe food for local consumption, growing energy crops to help combat climate change, and managing their land in ways that support wildlife. The sale of agricultural land for building sites, and the consequent suburbanisation of the countryside cannot be allowed to continue. PPS14 is a necessary step in moving Northern Ireland towards more sustainable forms of rural development. Friends of the Earth therefore believes that DRD is fully justified in bringing forward this policy at this time and urges the Department to resist any pressure to ameliorate the approach adopted.

6.0 Next steps

For further information, contact Lisa Fagan on 028 9023 3600 or email lisaf@foe.co.uk. Friends of the Earth's detailed response to PPS14 will shortly be published at www.foe.co.uk/ni. To register your support for PPS14, visit www.supportPPS14.org.