DOE Call for Evidence – Strategic Planning Policy for Development in the Countryside

MAG Response
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By email to:

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1.00 General

1.01 The DOE welcomed views in response to a call for Evidence as part of necessary information to inform the subsequent reviews of strategic planning policy for development in the countryside. MAG is pleased to respond.

1.02 While in support of the objectives of the Strategic Planning Policy Statement, the following comments are to assist the principal objective of sustainable development.

2.00 Context

2.01 The Oxford Dictionary defines countryside as: “the land and scenery of a rural area” and defines ‘rural’: as relating” to, or characteristic of the countryside rather than the town.”

2.02 The Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland (SPPS) defines the countryside as land lying outside settlement limits as identified in Local Development Plans.

2.03 In the Regional Development Strategy 2035 in the Glossary of Terms, Rural is defined:

   “As determined by the DARD Urban – Rural Definition Group, Rural encompasses Settlements with a population of 4500 or less. This includes approximately 35% of Northern Ireland’s population living in rural areas; the villages increased population by 13%; intermediate settlements by 11%; small villages, hamlets and open countryside by 9%.”

   These figures show that the fastest rate of population growth has been in small towns, villages and small settlements.

2.04 While the RDS 2035 defines the rural area to include settlements below 4500 population (see The Report of the Inter – Departmental Urban – Rural Definition Group on Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements by NISRA) and the Review of the Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements – March 2015 (which supports the rurality of small settlements in the Report, with a 5000 inhabitants ceiling for inclusion in a rural area), the SPPS excludes all small settlements despite the important relationship between the open countryside and, for example, settlements of less than 1000 people.
2.05 This exclusion is reflected in the Subject Policy – Housing in Settlements in SPPS which applies a sequential approach and identification of suitable sites for settlements with over 5000 population. This is qualified in Par 6.139 Diagram 3 Step 3 only if there is:

“Exceptional major expansion of a village or small rural settlement”

Yet in Par 6.64 of SPPS there is an acknowledgement that:

“It is also important to take into account the role and function of rural settlements and accessibility to existing services.”

2.06 The inclusion of small villages in the countryside into the definition of countryside in the SPPS would have the following advantages:

- Linking community plans, spatial, economic and social proposals to positive proposals for the countryside.
- Include coastal and loughside villages into a coastal and countryside assessment to reinforce the interdependence of adjoining villages with the surrounding countryside and coast.
- Co-ordinate greenways and public transport between villages and existing clusters of development.
- Co-ordinating integration of development on the periphery of small villages with the open countryside.
- Extend a positive message that enterprise and business are welcome close to established development, subject to location and integration.

2.07 If clusters of existing development have potential to sensitively integrate new housing and/or business into the landscape, the same potential exists for small villages with development limits based on development capacity determined by impact on the character of the surrounding landscape.
3.00 Landscape Character Areas

3.01 NIEA has produced 26 Landscape Character Areas covering Northern Ireland subject to a consultation which closed on 6th June 2010. Each Landscape Character Area provides information to inform “a strategic overview of the landscape which can be complemented by more detailed local studies in future”.

3.02 Previous to this more recent assessment, 130 Landscape Character Areas had been identified for Northern Ireland to inform the supplementary planning guidance to Planning Policy Statement: 18 - Renewable Energy – and the location, siting and design of development.

3.03 There are also conflicting interpretations between the SPPS and PPS 18 and PPS 21: Sustainable Development in the Countryside arising at planning appeals on wind farms which have been developed, some in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. A comprehensive Landscape Strategy for Northern Ireland is required to bring together a Vision for the countryside and more certainty on the locations which are acceptable for prominent developments. A Landscape Strategy was advocated by DOE in 2000 when it published the Landscape Character Assessment (please see section 6 below).

4.00 Design and Place Making

4.01 The beneficial impacts of good standards of civic stewardship, design and place making including landscaping, is particularly important in areas of low employment or multi-deprivation to reinforce social and economic efforts to attract private and public investment including Lottery and European Funding.

4.02 Good compatible design of the stewardship (the ‘software’ of the place) and the built environment (its ‘hardware’) is an essential component in creating best use of finance in delivering the spatial aspects of social and economic initiatives with the involvement of local communities.
5.00 Housing

5.01 While housing allocations in Local Development Plans will be guided by RDS Housing Growth Indicators to indicate the number of dwellings allocated to each Council Area, using the RDS housing evaluation framework to take account of differing capacities in each settlement, housing in the countryside including villages should be a separate programme.

5.02 Housing in the countryside along with mixed development is required to take account of replacement housing open to extensions if required, plots for detached houses, high value houses, holiday homes, brown field sites, social housing if identified, as well as the use of redundant buildings for housing.

5.03 Rural regeneration requires to be presented to the local community and the many passionate communities of interest as a separate programme with information available from each council and the appropriate stewardship and design guidance necessary to kick start rural regeneration particularly in the historic main streets of many towns and villages.

6.00 A Northern Ireland Countryside Conservation Area

6.01 MAG advocated during the public consultation process for PPS 21 the designation of the Northern Ireland Countryside as a Conservation Area:

6.02 Conservation Area designation would ensure that its world renowned beauty and special architectural and historic character with traditional buildings nestling in some great landscapes would be important considerations in assessing future development proposals, including demolitions,

6.03 MAG returns to this advocacy now that PPS 21 and the SPPS are being reviewed. Designation as a Conservation Area could be undertaken using the excellent resource of the DOE Landscape Character Assessment as the Conservation Area development guidelines, particularly the detailed original local work that produced 130 Landscape Character Areas covering all of Northern Ireland in 2000.
7.00 Conclusion

7.01 Planning Policy needs to be long term and it needs to be consistent. The countryside has been around for a long time and examples from other countries show that in a very short time its character can be seriously eroded for apparent economic gain which quickly destroys the asset and removes any gain. The public interest is best served by a policy that recognises the value of the place while not stifling development but ensuring that it retains or enhances the character of the area – one of the principal opportunities presented by a Conservation Area designation.

7.02 The DOE publication in 2000 gives an excellent basis for development guidance in a Countryside Conservation Area such as that proposed by MAG, noting:

Towards a Landscape Strategy for Northern Ireland

Section 4 of this report outlines the key issues that face Northern Ireland’s landscapes today, and suggests a strategic approach to their conservation and enhancement. The first steps are to recognise the value of ‘ordinary landscapes’, and to understand the evolving patterns of land use and landscape character. Among the key issues to be addressed are the impact of new buildings in the countryside, the loss of distinctive landscape settings to settlements, the erosion of traditional rural landscape patterns and features, and the visual effects of major infrastructure developments. There are also more subtle, insidious threats, such as neglect of public open spaces, damage to the settings of historic features, and loss of areas of semi-natural habitat.


7.03 This work should be built upon and built into any proposed changes to SPPS and PPS21, ensuring that a consistent policy is applied to the countryside across Northern Ireland with its twelve planning authorities, eleven of which are under the control of District Councils.

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