

# Response to PPS14 – Sustainable Development in the Countryside Issues Paper

## 1.0 Background

- 1.1 The Rural Community Network (RCN) is a voluntary organisation established by local community organisations to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage and community development
- 1.2 RCN would like to make a number of general points in responding to the issues paper. In making this response RCN draws upon feedback received from those that participated in a range of rural consultation events facilitated by RCN from June 2003.

## 2.0 Should planning permission be limited to zoned development areas?

- 3.1 Planning permission should not be limited within zoned development areas. To limit development to towns, villages and hamlets would be in direct contrast to prevailing rural character. Restricted zoned development with no building in the open countryside would result in towns and villages becoming bigger and merging and losing any sense of individual identity.

*'... we are not starting from a blank page, rural Northern Ireland is not like rural England we do not all live in nicely defined villages.'*

*'... our smaller villages are already being swallowed up by other larger towns, if this were to happen Strabane would eventually swallow-up Sion Mills.'*

- 3.2 There is however a clear need for some form of improved regulation. Completely unchecked development could have similar detrimental impacts on rural character.

*'... we don't want another Donegal, Spanish Haciendas with eagles on the gate-posts in every field.'*

- 3.3 No single 'A-typical character' can represent the diversity of rural character across the region. Planning, planners, PPS14 and the range of RDS implementation tools have a key role in managing the balance between 'build where you want' and 'completely zoned development'.

## 4.0 Who should live in the countryside?

- 4.1 The right to live in the countryside should not be limited to agricultural need. There is a need to acknowledge and plan for the diversity of people that live in rural areas. Farmers however own the majority of the land and as such their needs should be carefully considered, particularly in light of recent developments in agriculture and the implications of CAP reform.

- 4.2 There is a clear need to differentiate between 'demand' and 'need'. Preferential treatment should be considered for applications from people / families with proven connection to a locality. There are obvious difficulties with regard to implementing such an approach, criteria would need to go beyond simply a proven connection to the land, and include a list of criteria, which might include things like, job creation, impact on local schools and services etc.

*'... who and how will they decide what proven connection means?'*

- 4.3 One size may not fit all. Such a policy might be appropriate in some areas and not in others, e.g. a preferential system would be required in areas where local community / community identity is under threat from for example second / holiday home development. In areas however where populations are declining and local primary schools and post offices are threatened with closure, the policy should reflect the local need to attract 'new blood' into the area.
- 4.4 There should be a special requirement to purchase land to meet social need and identify latent demand built into PPS14. In rural areas the demand for housing is often hidden. RCN's experience would suggest that local people are best placed to identify demand and priorities at the local level.

*'... people tend not to put their name down for houses in areas where they don't think houses are going to be built.'*

- 4.5 The diversity in local circumstance will require different solutions across the region, thus PPS14 should provide the framework within which tailored solutions to specific locally informed needs and priorities can be developed.

## **5.0 What is 'Rural Character'?**

- 5.1 Rural character is not homogenous across the region. Rural character varies on a sub-regional basis. Dispersed rural dwellings actually define rural character. PPS14 needs to acknowledge this diversity, the heritage and history of an area should be considered in any planning exercise.
- 5.2 Rural design is similarly not homogenous. Modernisation and progress with regard to modern designs could be applied in ways which are sensitive to local circumstances, it is possible to build modern houses which fit with the countryside and compliment that which is already there.

*'... If we didn't embrace progress we'd all still be living in mud huts with thatched roofs.'*

- 5.3 Existing design guidance has resulted in much of the bad homogenous housing development (one and a half storey house with dormer windows) that is prevalent in rural areas. Local knowledge, experience and expertise should be drawn upon in developing locally appropriate design guidelines. Such guidelines would take account of local character and promote the use of local materials in construction. Design guidelines should be flexible enough at a local level to allow for a variety of housing design in the open countryside.

## **6.0 Balancing Social, Economic & Environmental Sustainability**

6.1 Balance is key to managing the complexity of the issues of social, economic and environmental development. Creating the space to have the complex conversations and to build the capacity of all the stakeholders involved should be a priority for PPS14. Striking the right balance is key in promoting vibrant and sustainable rural areas. The weighting given to social, environmental or economic considerations in any proposal for development should be informed by and based upon an assessment of local circumstance and reflect the needs of this experience.

*'... there should be no universal approach to taking decisions on commercial developments in the countryside'*

6.2 Attaching 'planning gain' in the form of contribution to community should be considered for commercial developments in rural areas e.g. use of local materials / services in production (local distributors), set a level of staffing to be sourced locally, promoting corporate social responsibility.

## **7.0 Spatial Equity**

7.1 In rural areas where little previous development has occurred and few services are provided this in itself should not preclude that area from ever having any type of service development.

## **8.0 Localised policy development**

8.1 Localised input into local policy development is a theme running through out this response. Whilst challenging, through PPS14 there is an opportunity to at least create the space to explore in more depth the possibilities such an approach could afford.

8.2 This suggestion of increased local input to planning at a local level is based on the premise that informed local people are best placed to make locally sensitised contributions to local planning decisions. Local input could help in making decisions about local character, in identifying local needs, in highlighting issues of concern, in gauging demand and where the pressure for development is coming from.

8.3 A one policy fits all approach can not adequately create the framework within which planners could make consistent decisions across the region. There is an opportunity through PPS14 to set some regionally relevant policies but more importantly to provide the framework within which local planners working with / through meaningful consultation with the communities in their area develop locally sensitive policies.

## **9.0 Conclusion - Key themes:**

### **9.1 Local needs analysis:**

9.1.1 Need in rural areas is often hidden. It is difficult for people from the outside to see beyond the green fields and open space. What has clearly emerged from RCN's experience is that local people perceive themselves to be best placed to identify their own particular needs, issues and concerns. As such they are best qualified to inform policy development and to be actively involved in implementing and reviewing measures.

### **9.2 Perceptions of planners & planning:**

9.2.1 Generally perceptions of planning and planners in Northern Ireland are poor among rural dwellers. These negative perceptions can be attributed to a range of locally informed experiences. The development, implementation, enforcement and regular review of agreed localised policies could help to address these perceptions.

### **9.3 Localised policy development:**

9.3.1 The strongest theme running throughout this response is the request that PPS14 consider creating the space to explore the potential for localised policy development. Rural character is not homogenous across the region. There is a clear need for the diversity of local rural character and circumstance to be acknowledged and for different solutions across the region to be developed. Investment in activities aimed at exploring how to engage rural people in localised planning policy development with regard to sustainable development in the countryside (on-going / follow-up consultation and policy review);

9.3.2 Policies should be tailored to the specific locally informed needs of any area / place. Development plans, as the localised policy delivery vehicles, at present do not go far enough with regard to dealing with the specific needs of rural areas. A more rigorous process of rural specific consultation should be built into the development planning process to ensure that the specific needs of those living in rural areas are addressed.

October 2004