

The Public's Response to PPS14

Report on submissions to the website – PPS14.com

Introduction

On March 16 2006, Lord Rooker announced the start of a consultation process for Draft Planning Policy Statement 14 which effectively banned one off housing in the countryside. PPS14 has been so controversial, that countless column inches and at least four television programmes have been dedicated to this issue in the last 12 weeks. Public meetings held throughout Northern Ireland have attracted audiences of up to 350 – a barometer, if any were needed of the depth of feeling over this issue amongst local people – especially those in rural communities.

The Department of Regional Development have not given any indication as to when they will publish the results of their public consultation and it is unclear as to whether they will fully publish all the responses to the consultation to allow independent verification of their conclusions.

This report analyses a representative sample of the opinions of ordinary people to PPS14. This was achieved by reviewing the responses given through an online form on the PPS14.com website. It is important to note that the views of those for or against the proposed legislation were treated equally and were not subject to any kind of weighting or screening.

Objectives

- To apply a quantitative analysis to the views expressed in the online submission forms.
- Gauge the perceived effects that this legislation will have on a number of key areas: the rural economy, the countryside and family life.
- Measure public opinion on how the PPS14 issue has been handled by the Department of Regional Development.

Data Analysis

A sample of 80 detailed responses were randomly chosen and the views expressed were subject to analysis based upon the above objectives.

Results

1. A staggering **99%** of respondents were against the introduction of PPS14 in its current form.

This figure clearly shows that an overwhelming majority of people believe that PPS14 should not proceed as currently structured. This figure also explains why the turnouts at the various public meetings have been so large.

2. **80%** of respondents expressed in their submission a desire to have a better policy.

This report will go into more depth on some of the alternative ideas expressed in the submissions on how best to achieve a balanced sustainable policy. It is also worth noting the Northern Ireland Assembly had this issue as one of its first debates and subsequently voted to set up a working party in order to achieve a “more balanced policy”.

3. **51%** of respondents expressly said that the rural economy would be adversely affected by this legislation and a further **68%** felt the countryside as a whole would be worse off.

At a time when agriculture is struggling to provide a sufficient income an important part of revitalising the rural economy is encouraging rural enterprise. Numerous submissions have been made by small rural manufacturers to the effect that a ban on one off housing will make it more difficult for employees to find suitable accommodation thus hindering the growth potential of successful businesses. These companies have become significantly more important to the rural economy as agriculture has declined.

4. Almost two thirds (**65%**) felt that this policy will disenfranchise those who have grown up and lived in the countryside and just over two thirds (**67%**) thought that this policy will adversely affect rural family life.

A number of the responses from the website were from the sons and daughters of farmers who had planned to stay near their family and thus be available for work on the farm. PPS14 completely disenfranchises these families and will force them to seek accommodation in towns.

The latest quarterly house price index reports that the price of the average home is rising at more than £600 a week. The ban on one off housing can only exacerbate this situation making it more difficult for first time buyers and those on low incomes.

5. **75%** of respondents made it clear that they felt the whole PPS14 document was badly thought out and **42%** even went so far as to criticise the Department of Regional Development for the way it has implemented the Draft proposals and subsequent public consultations.

Qualitative Analysis

What came through most strongly when reading the responses was the overwhelming opinion that whilst there were a number of individuals exploiting the system and applying for multiple sites, the people most affected by PPS14 are the ordinary local people who have a genuine reason and need to live in the countryside. PPS14 was therefore deemed to be completely out of proportion to the scale of the perceived problem. One respondent from Co L'Derry was typical of many:

"We own a plot of land on a family farm and we as a young family were looking forward to the day when we could begin building our new life. We have no desire to build several houses and sell them on for a quick profit. This policy is disastrous to farming families and to families wishing to live and contribute to the rural economy. This policy for ordinary families should be scrapped."

Another thread that was present throughout the responses was the realisation that PPS14, if implemented, would drive people who have spent their entire lives in the country, to towns and villages and the effect this would have on the rural economy and farming in particular – "House prices will cause local youths to become economic migrants."

It has already been mentioned that agriculture has endured a difficult period, and the quote below from a farmer's son highlights the issue:

"How can the agricultural industry hope to become sustainable and profitable once more in the future if a son or daughter is forced to move into towns or cities. A huge proportion of farmers today are part time but still need the income from the farm to survive. They have no future or hope with this policy."

The example above poses the question of whether PPS14 is Sustainable in any way, shape or form. The opinions expressed clearly show that the policy will have a detrimental effect on the rural economy and communities. Respondents stated that any policy should be aiming to help drive enterprise and reinvigorate rural communities – not the reverse.

Not all respondents were rural business owners, or farmers' relatives. Indeed, several respondents with expertise in building and sustainability expressed their views:

"I am an engineer. I promote energy efficient design and low energy technologies and strategies to encourage a sustainable approach to building design. I welcome and support government initiatives that help protect our environment and promote a more sustainable society. I do not support PPS14. I can see the basic rationale behind it but the policy is ill considered and in my opinion will restrict individuals who wish to live a more sustainable lifestyle."

House building technology has progressed to such a degree that truly sustainable housing is possible through the use of renewable materials and intelligent, energy efficient design. These comments from a person familiar with sustainable building technology show how poorly thought out PPS14 is.

Conclusions

The sub title of Draft Planning Policy Statement 14 was "Sustainable Development in the Countryside." The Global Development Research Centre defines this as:

"Development that meets the needs and aspirations of the current generation without compromising the ability to meet those of future generations."

What is abundantly clear from the responses is that PPS14 will in no way meet the needs of the current generation. There are many good examples of houses that are well designed and sited so that their overall impact on the surrounding area is minimal. It is also true that there are many bad examples, however with proper planning controls these can be eliminated from future development.

What emerges is the need for a policy that discourages short term speculative building in the countryside by developers, but which allows individuals to build a long term house for their immediate family and future generations. The dwelling should be well designed, energy efficient and built according to sustainable building practices.

Serious questions must also be asked of the Department of Regional Development who are responsible for PPS14, for it seems that the social and economic needs of the rural community have been superimposed in line with those in England – a region with completely different demographics and rural structure to that of Northern Ireland. Clearly the DRD have failed to properly recognise the needs of the rural community and the public consultations have not filled the respondents with confidence that their views were being heard.

The overall conclusion must be that whilst the intentions of PPS14 are laudable, 99% of respondents felt that the methods chosen will do more harm than good.

Recommendations

1. Withdraw the Draft Planning Policy Statement 14
2. Develop a sustainable policy that will **support** the rural economy and communities.
3. Adopt a neutral stance on one off housing, considering applications on their individual merits with reference to the local area and its needs.
4. Prevent speculative building in the countryside in favour of one off housing for families genuinely wishing to settle in an area.
5. Promote the highest standards in sustainable design and living through better controls and planning requirements.

Case Study – A South Down Resident

“I want to know where I am supposed to live! I have a field which was left to me by my father which I had hoped to build on. I do not want a large house, I cannot afford a large house, I just want a modest, affordable house in the area that I grew up in and near to where I work.

The house I currently live in is not mine to renovate or replace, every house in the estate agents windows are either priced more than twice what I could afford or are already under offer even before the advert is put in the window. Why can't the system be similar to that in the republic where the person is given planning permission for a plot of land and then restrict the size and type of house they can build? At least that way people would have the chance to build a modest house if they so wish, or if not, they can get onto the estate agents and buy a big house. I am going to be homeless with my partner and child within a year as the person who owns the house I currently live in will have to move back into it in order to have it renovated. I think the policy as it stands will totally isolate the rural community. It will mean that people will be forced to live in urban areas where they don't want to be and this will put added pressure on the infrastructure compounding the problems already present. This decision has been made by someone who has never lived in a rural area and who does not understand the NI rural community. I would beg the Minister to reconsider the policy and listen to the views of the people that it will affect the most, those whose homes, livelihoods and futures are all so dependent on his decision.”