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Planning Bulletin: The Government's Response To The Taylor Review

Background

The Prime Minister asked Matthew Taylor, MP for Truro and St Austell, to conduct a review on how land use and planning can better support rural business and deliver affordable housing. This Review was presented to Government on 23 July 2008.

The Government's response to the Matthew Taylor Review, entitled "Living Working Countryside" was published on 25 March 2009.

This planning bulletin summarises the Government's response and gives our assessment of that response.

Government response to the Taylor Review

The Taylor Review made 48 recommendations covering various topics relating to planning strategy, market town expansion, living working villages, the rural economy and what steps it considers are required to euphemistically 'unblock the system'. With this in mind, this summary is structured as follows:

- Strategy Approach to the rural communities
- Residential Development (including affordable housing)
- Economic development
- Infrastructure

Strategy Approach to the Rural Communities

The Taylor Review makes considerable play about the biased approach of the planning system which perceives development in rural areas as inherently unsustainable. This has clearly struck a chord with the Government, as the 'one size fits all' approach is recognised as not doing justice to rural communities and a need for striking the right balance is cited.

The Government has therefore included rural issues within draft PPS4 relating to economic development (see our separate planning bulletin), but in addition, the Government has introduced a "rural proofing" consideration to development plan policy making which requires the policy maker to:

- Consider if their policy is likely to have different impact in rural areas, because of particular rural circumstances or needs.
- Make a proper assessment of those impacts, if they are likely to be significant.
- Adjust policy where appropriate, with solutions to meet rural needs and circumstances.

Residential Development

The review recommends that the publication of practical guidance on the sustainable growth of new communities. In response, the Government is of the opinion that sufficient guidance already exists from the likes of CABE or the TCPA about urban extensions and further guidance is not necessary. However, the Government does cite the potential establishment of a Master planning Awards Panel to co-ordinate a competition for examples of best practice.

In terms of the greenfield/brownfield balance, the Government accepts that sustainability should not be too narrowly interpreted and the Authority can be reasonable in deciding leaving a small brownfield site alone and direct development elsewhere.

In respect of affordable housing, the Government's response seeks to encourage the provision of affordable housing in rural communities and refers back to the provisions of PPS3. In addition, the Home and Communities Agency (HCA) will identify underperforming authorities and encourage them to improve their delivery. However, whilst encouraging the empowerment of local communities to improve matters, this has to be done in the context of the plan making system.

Economic Development

The Government's response to economic development in the countryside is that guidance is now to be provided into draft document PPS4, thereby cancelling PPS7 "Sustainable Development

in Rural Areas” Key policies relating to economic development in rural areas are given in draft policy EC9 (Local Planning Approach to Rural Areas); EC13; Village and Local centre shops and services; EC14 (Re use or replacement of buildings in the countryside); EC15 (Tourism in Rural Areas).

Collectively these policies seek to protect the open countryside by supporting the conversion and re-use of existing buildings (especially buildings of historic or architectural importance) in the countryside - particularly when they are adjacent to or closely related to towns or villages for economic development) and to identify local service centres that are the preferred location for new economic development.

Within or at the edge of such local centres, the focus of most new development - housing, employment and other services and facilities should be provided.

The guidance also supports rural tourism and leisure developments that benefit rural business, communities and visitors and which will enrich, rather than harm, the character of the countryside, its towns and villages.

Draft PPS4 also seeks to protect village shops and services (such as post offices, petrol filling stations and rural public houses) from redevelopment to alternative uses. In respect of new retail development, the Government proposes that Authorities should respond positively to proposals which are designed to improve village and local centre shops.

Streamlining the Planning System

Many of the Review’s recommendations echo the findings of the Killian Pretty review of the need to review the procedures and regulations relating to the control of development by the English planning system. These are now separately by the Government - see our separate planning bulletin on the Government’s response to the Killian Pretty review of March 2009. However, in terms of housing and economic data collection, the Government endorses the consistent use of National Statistics Urban/Rural definitions.

In respect of development plan issues, the Government will be revising guidance on the weight to be attached to emerging development plan documents and this will be provided in the Plan Making Manual.

Other Matters

The Review tackled the issue of second homes and recommended the trialling of planning rules relating to the change of use of full time homes to part-time occupation or holiday lets. In response, the Government accepted that this is a highly emotive issue but was of the opinion that it could not be tackled effectively though the planning system because of difficulties associated with effective enforcement.

Assessment

Of particular interest in the Taylor Review response is the creation of a new PPS4 and the Government’s approach to new residential development in rural locations (irrespective of tenure). It is clear that the Government is supportive of a change of approach and recognises that there is a sustainability trap which rural locations fall into.

The publication of draft PPS4 which encompasses but urban and rural policy guidance provides an interesting demonstration of Government thinking on rural issues.

In respect of residential development, whilst considerable reference is made to facilitating the provision of affordable housing in rural areas, the underlying message is that the existing provisions of PPS3 in respect of brownfield/greenfield and urban/rural locations for development are sufficiently robust to address the housing challenge. It is for the Regional Assemblies (and their RDA replacements) with Local Authorities to develop an appropriate strategy which facilitates new development in rural communities.

On the whole, the Government’s response should be welcomed as it would appear to be promoting a more positive approach to development in rural areas. However, this has to be balanced with the time needed to launch and adopt a new PPS4 and allow for a change in attitude about sustainable development in rural communities.

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