

THE INSTITUTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

RURAL ENGLAND: A Discussion Document

Comments by The Institution of Environmental Sciences

April 1999

Introductory Note: This is a very wide-ranging set of questions covering all aspects of the rural environment. Our comments have been kept as brief as possible whilst addressing what we consider key issues. Not all the questions in the paper have been addressed.

Question 1. Principles and Objectives

The visions set out in paragraph 2.1 and the principles in paragraphs 2.2 to 2.6 are seen as correct and comprehensive. The perceived difficulty is one of achievement of these objectives. The main challenges are to achieve 'sustainable development' - as difficult in rural areas as elsewhere - and to reverse the decline in population and employment (the two are complementary). The priorities for future rural policies are seen as:

- Improved and viable public transport
- To identify and attract appropriate industry
- To ensure the provision of adequate LOCAL facilities (healthcare, police, leisure, etc.)

Contributions that can be made:

- public sector - good planning policies and fair allocation of funding
- private sector - directed investment in co-operation/partnership with local government
- voluntary sector - preservation activity and advice to local government bodies.

Questions 2,3 & 4. Responding to Change

Examples of acceptable new industries or business initiatives are:

- expansion of organic farming (this is of necessity slow in growth but current demand for products is starting to exceed supply capabilities)
- diversification into leisure industries
- light industry - 'clean', i.e. non-pollutant and also low energy consumers such as I.T.
- obvious areas such as agricultural and food research (based on or related to universities/colleges in rural regions e.g. Lincoln, Norwich, etc).

The latter may be a key area to enable the agri-food industries and the farming community to develop new policies for the future.

Criteria for establishing what is most valued in the countryside can only be established by consultation and by wide public debate. Consensus views should be sought.

Questions 5 & 6. Strong Communities

The concerns and priorities for the future provision of services to rural communities must be the same. In the context of 'sustainable development' the provision of a public transport network giving access to service centres must be a high priority.

In terms of the services themselves healthcare must be the top priority followed by education, police and leisure. The provision of improved services is dictated largely by financial policies at central and local government level and within the respective authority. Without the necessary funding, new policies or initiatives are largely meaningless, as we have seen only too often in the past!

Questions 7 & 8. A Fair and Inclusive Society

The key factor in developing initiatives to meet rural needs is consultation. This applies to all areas of activity affecting special groups and issues such as recreation and tourism. Relevant departments or sub-committees within District Authorities should consult first with Parish Councils on specific issues and then the consultation should be widened to take in local voluntary organisations both of a business and charitable nature.

Questions 9,10 & 11. Working in Partnership

As noted above rural issues need resolution at local levels in many cases. (Wider issues such as farming policy need discussion at national and regional level obviously). More responsibility should be returned to the Parish Councils in this respect and more consultation taken on the decision making process by District Councils.

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