

Rural Planning Seminar – AI Summary meeting notes

5 November 2025

Summary

The meeting focused on rural planning challenges and sustainable community development, with discussions led by Kerry Booth, RSN Chief Executive on government planning policies and Ian Brown's presentation on agroforestry initiatives. Participants explored various rural housing and land use issues, including affordable housing concerns, brownfield development, and the potential of agroforestry to integrate trees into farming landscapes. The conversation ended with discussions on community engagement through digital platforms and the need for flexible funding approaches that account for rural costs and challenges.

Introduction

Kerry Booth, Chief Executive of the Rural Services Network, introduced the seminar on rural planning, highlighting the need for sustainable communities and fair funding for rural areas. She discussed the government's changes to planning policies, including the Planning and Infrastructure Bill and the NPPF consultation, and emphasised the importance of rural-proofing policies. Kerry also mentioned the Open Letter on Permitted Development Rights and the Rural Design Guide, and encouraged participants to complete the Delivering for All campaign survey to gather more rural perspectives.

Agroforestry: Integrating Trees in Farming

Ian Brown, Churchill Fellow and a third-generation tenant farmer from rural Northumberland, shared his experience and vision for agroforestry, highlighting its potential to integrate trees into farming landscapes for sustainable food and timber production. He emphasised the importance of planning and collaboration among various organisations to overcome resistance from farmers and land tenure constraints. Ian called for a more integrated approach to land use, including renewable energy, and urged the inclusion of agroforestry in the planning system.

Agroforestry's Role in Climate Solutions

Ian shared his experiences from trips abroad, highlighting the value of trees and agroforestry in addressing various issues such as climate change, flooding, and biodiversity. He emphasised the need for joined-up thinking in tree planting and agroforestry practices, citing examples from Africa and Europe. The discussion

touched on the benefits of trees for temperature regulation, noise reduction, and social prescribing. Participants also discussed the potential of agroforestry in food production and its integration with other land uses like solar farms and crop farming.

Rural Policy and Planning Advocacy

Paul Miner, Head of Policy at CPRE, discussed their national advocacy work, focusing on rural policy and communities. Paul highlighted CPRE's priorities, including protecting greenbelts, promoting affordable rural housing, and supporting a brownfield-first approach. Paul expressed concerns about the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, particularly the proposed Nature Restoration Fund, and called for more democratic involvement in planning decisions. He also discussed the need for a strategic land use approach and the potential impact of new national development management policies.

Rural Planning and Community Engagement

The meeting focused on rural planning challenges, with Kerry signposting research on rural exception sites and highlighting their underutilisation in local authorities across the country. Councillor Duncton discussed sustainable housing in rural areas, emphasising the importance of brownfield sites and the need to protect agricultural land for solar farms. Councillor Guthrie raised concerns about developers reducing affordable housing commitments after long delays, which Paul acknowledged as a widespread issue. Charlie Moore, representing Commonplace, emphasised the importance of community engagement in rural planning and introduced their digital platform for facilitating resident insights and trust-building in planning processes.

Enhancing Public Trust Through Engagement

Charlie presented research findings on public trust in local government and affordable housing concerns, highlighting that 2 in 3 people lack trust in their local government and 76% feel unsatisfied about affordable housing availability. He discussed Commonplace's approach to community engagement, emphasising the shift from traditional one-off consultations to continuous digital engagement cycles that better reach and involve residents. Charlie showcased various use cases of Commonplace's tools, including local plans, design codes, and housing developments, and presented an AI-powered innovation for processing engagement data more efficiently. He also introduced new tools like Organic for monitoring social media conversations and Pulse surveys for targeted online engagement to reach underrepresented groups.

Rural Housing Challenges and Solutions

The meeting focused on rural housing challenges and potential solutions. Trevor Cherrett from the Town and Country Planning Association highlighted his personal concerns about the government's approach to housing development in rural areas, including the impact on local services and infrastructure. He emphasised the need for a bottom-up approach to planning and housing provision. Charlie from Common Place discussed their digital engagement platform and efforts to involve young people in the planning process. The group also addressed issues around digital connectivity in rural areas and the importance of hybrid engagement methods. The conversation ended with a discussion on grant funding and the need for flexible funding that accounts for rural costs.