



Revitalising Rural

Realising the Vision

The Rural Services Network

We are a membership organisation and we work on your behalf for rural communities.

The RSN is the national champion for rural services, ensuring that people in rural areas have a strong voice. We are fighting for a fair deal for rural communities to maintain their social and economic viability for the benefit of the nation.

Our membership comprises 121 rural local authorities plus over 215 other rural service providers and interest groups including Rural Housing Associations, Healthcare Trusts and Charities.

You can find out more about the RSN at our website www.rsnonline.org.uk.

We always welcome new members and if you are interested in joining the RSN, click here for more information. [Join the RSN!](#)

Revitalising Rural, Realising the Vision

Revitalising Rural, Realising the Vision is a campaign run by the RSN, which sets out a number of policy asks in 14 key subject areas to help support rural areas to achieve their full potential, and to 'level-up' areas of historical underinvestment.



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RURAL PLANNING



Why it matters

To maintain their sustainability rural communities must meet a range of economic, social, and environmental needs. One key role for the planning system is to balance those needs, both when defining appropriate plan policies and when deciding on individual planning applications.

Rural communities need a mix of housing which suits their evolving populations, not least in terms of its tenure, dwelling size, and suitability for different age groups. They also need workspaces that can meet the needs of businesses, recognising that some will seek to expand and some to relocate.

The planning system also has a role to support the retention of existing or plan for enhanced services, community facilities and town centres, thereby contributing hugely to rural quality of life. Where large scale development is planned, schools, health facilities and utilities should keep pace.

The quality of their nearby environment is valued highly by rural communities, who look to the planning system to protect them from inappropriate development. Moreover, the English countryside is a massive draw, underpinning rural tourism and the visitor economy.

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The national policy context

Key elements of national policy include:

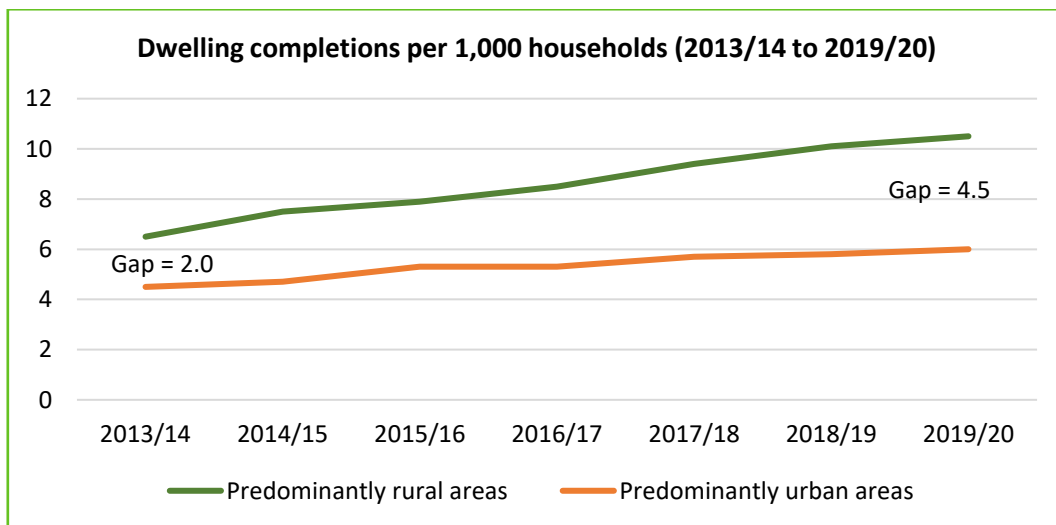
- National Planning Policy Framework – the NPPF sets out the Government’s planning policies and how it expects them to be applied through the planning system at a local level. Its overarching stated aim is to promote sustainable development. Further detail how to interpret policies in the NPPF is provided by National Planning Practice Guidance.
- Local Plans – local planning authorities (district, borough and unitary councils, and National Park Authorities) produce Local Plans for the coming decade or two and must keep these up to date through regular revisions. They set out policies that proactively shape development and reactively decide planning applications, having been written to reflect local circumstances whilst conforming with the NPPF.
- Planning White Paper – however, the Government has published a Planning White Paper proposing a radical overhaul of the planning system, with areas zoned for growth, renewal, or protection. If implemented, Local Plans would be simplified, containing fewer policies and updated every five years. More policies would be set centrally in a rewritten NPPF. Linked to Local Plans would be design codes setting parameters for acceptable development.
- Neighbourhood Plans – a growing number of Parish and Town Councils (or Neighbourhood Forums in unparished areas) have opted to produce a Neighbourhood Plan, with policies which reflect the land use and development priorities of their residents. These must conform with both the area’s Local Plan and the NPPF.
- Housing need – a key Government objective is to increase the rate of new house building. Its ambition is for delivery of 300,000 new homes per year by the mid-2020s. This includes both market and affordable housing (see the section on Affordable Housing). All Local Plans include a housing target and local planning authorities must demonstrate a supply for the next five years. Government introduced a Housing Delivery Test which penalises authorities if their area falls far behind on delivering that target. Housing and other development is subject to a Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), to help cover associated costs of upgrading infrastructure and expanding public services.
- Countryside protection – development is strictly controlled in the highest value landscapes designated as National Parks or Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The countryside around major cities is also, sometimes, protected by Green Belt to avoid urban sprawl. So too are sites designated as important for wildlife or their habitats, such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest. More widely, Local Plans seek to manage the scale, type and character of development in small rural settlements and to restrict development in open countryside. Conversely, many rural towns have large extension sites allocated for house building.



The rural dimension

On a proportionate basis, significantly more new homes are being built in predominantly rural areas than in predominantly urban areas.¹ The number of new homes completed has been increasing over the last five years. By 2019/20 the annual rate in predominantly rural areas was over 10 completions for every 1,000 households.

In predominantly rural areas 90% of new additions to the housing stock are because of new build developments. A further 8% are due to change of building use and almost 2% due to conversions.

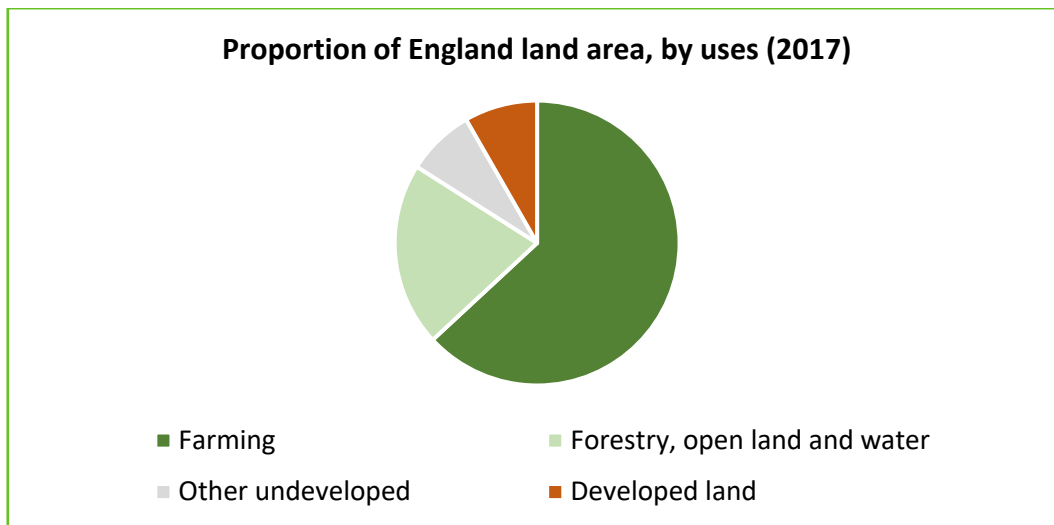


Just over 8% of the land area of England is taken up by developed uses.² These include residential, industrial, commercial, transport and utilities, mineral extraction, and landfill.

Almost 92% of the land area of England is taken up by undeveloped uses. These include farming, which comprises 63% of England's land area. Some of the undeveloped land lies within urban settlements e.g. as parks, playing fields and residential gardens.

¹ *Statistical Digest of Rural England*, Defra, based on data from MHCLG Live Tables on House Building.

² *Land Use in England 2017*, MHCLG (2019).



There are ten designated National Parks in England, which collectively cover over 9% of the country's land area.³ The largest of these is the Lake District National Park at 2,362 square kilometres. Some 334,000 people live in a National Park, more than a third of them in the South Downs National Park.

There are thirty-four designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in England, which collectively cover almost 15% of the country's land area.⁴ The largest of these is the Cotswolds AONB at 2,038 square kilometres.

A further 13% of the land area of England is designated as Green Belt, these being around the urban fringe.

By mid-2019 there were 839 completed Neighbourhood Plans which had resulted in a successful referendum, many of them in rural locations.⁵ Local authority areas with the largest number of Plans having reached that stage were Herefordshire, Cornwall, Wiltshire, Cheshire East and Aylesbury Vale.

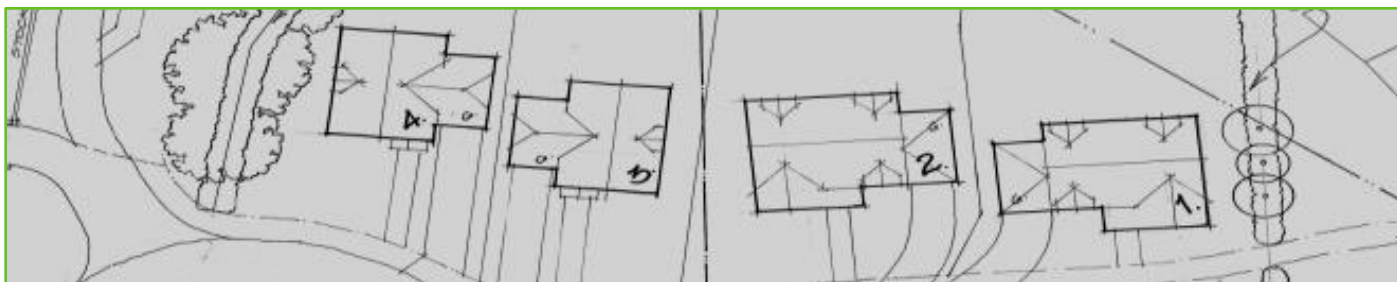
Policy solutions

A successful land use planning system needs to have both the ability and local flexibility to plan for rural communities which are sustainable in economic, social, and environmental terms, meeting the varied needs of small as well as large settlements. Current proposals set out in the Planning White Paper (PWP) will need to be revisited and considerably revised if they are to deliver that objective.

³ *National Park Facts and Figures*, National Parks UK (website accessed 2020).

⁴ *The UK's AONBs – Overview*, National Association of AONBs (website accessed 2020).

⁵ *Notes on neighbourhood planning – edition 23*, MHCLG (2019).



Rural Planning

Specific policy asks

Zoning in Local Plans: the PWP's (Planning White Paper) proposed division of land into three types of zones – Growth, Renewal and Protection – is simplistic and is unlikely to account for varying circumstances in different rural areas. Whether designation of many rural areas as Protection would enable their needs to be met depends on the detail of allowable development in such zones (which has not yet been defined). It is vital that such designation does not stifle all development or introduce arbitrary definitions of 'sustainable communities'.

Community engagement: PWP proposals to drop community consultation from the planning application process (except for technical matters) should be reversed. They will otherwise disenfranchise residents, Parish and Town Councils, and others with a direct interest. Inevitably, many residents will not engage with technical Local Plan making processes but will engage when a tangible development proposal arises. Encouraging more digital engagement with the planning process is welcome, but non-digital input must also be retained. A digital only approach would exclude some from having a say, due to lack of digital skills, ability to afford IT or poor connectivity.

Neighbourhood planning: PWP proposals need to be clarified to offer a substantive future role for Neighbourhood Plans. They currently appear to see such Plans as offering design guidance for applicants, which alone turns them into little more than statutory Village Design Statements. The proposed changes also risk overwriting existing Neighbourhood Plans, into which thousands of communities have put immense amounts of volunteer effort.

Infrastructure Levy: PWP proposals to combine Section 106 and CIL into a single Infrastructure Levy, whilst having some good intentions, raise practical concerns and need amending. It is vital that local planning authorities have the ability to specify or secure affordable housing on development sites. They should also be able to decide the tenure of that housing, based on needs in their areas. A concern is that, currently, Section 106 agreements are the means to enforce local connection (where appropriate) and in-perpetuity arrangements, which ensure that affordable homes remain affordable and available to meet local needs into the future. It is critical that a legally enforceable mechanism is retained.

Related policy asks appear in the chapter Availability of Affordable Housing.