Abstract: This report comments on and provides a suggested basis for the Council’s response to the draft guidance on Planning for Rural Development contained in the Consultative Draft Scottish Planning Policy. When finalised it will replace the existing National Planning Policy Guideline (NPPG) 15 Rural Development.

1 RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Committee:-

1. note the content of the Draft SPP setting national policy on Planning for Rural Development and agree this report as the basis for the Council’s response to the Scottish Executive;

2. agree that when finalised the SPP on Planning for Rural Development be taken into account in preparation of land use planning policy for Angus and as a material consideration in development control casework.

2 INTRODUCTION

2.1 The Scottish Executive published a consultation paper on SPP Planning for Rural Development on 28 January 2004. This new draft Scottish Planning Policy draws on earlier research undertaken into NPPG 15 and has been prepared in consultation with core groups, business, environmental, farming and planning authority interests and a wider sounding group of rural stakeholders. Further research on different planning regimes (typologies), as referred to in the Draft is currently underway by the Scottish Executive as is the preparation of a Planning Advice Note which will provide examples of best practice on planning and rural diversification.

2.2 For the purposes of the SPP rural Scotland means the countryside and towns of 3,000 population or less. The links between rural areas, small towns and urban areas are however also important. There has been a renaissance in many parts of rural Scotland with population levels increasing over the past 20 years. The Draft SPP suggests rural areas have an important role in helping to meet this demand although it is recognised that most new development is likely to continue to be located in or adjacent to existing urban areas. At its broadest level the Draft SPP encourages a more supportive attitude towards appropriate development whilst acknowledging the enormous diversity of rural Scotland.

2.3 This report highlights the key points arising from the Consultative Draft SPP and any land use planning policy issues for Angus Council. When finalised the new SPP will replace the existing NPPG15, issued in 1999. A copy of the Consultative Draft SPP has been placed in the Member’s Lounge.
2.4 The consultation document invites comments by 21 April 2004. In order to meet this timescale a copy of this report has been forwarded to the Scottish Executive as the draft response of Angus Council subject to confirmation following consideration and agreement by this Committee.

3 SUMMARY OF DRAFT SPP

3.1 The Draft SPP identifies that rural areas in Scotland are evolving in response to a number of changes and that planning policy needs to keep pace with this change and requires to be realistic and sensitive to the process underway.

3.2 Planning Authorities should ensure that development needs to be appropriate to the circumstances in their particular area. What will be suitable in one part of an area may not be in another. The use of rural planning typologies, a local vision and evidence based policy approach are essential elements for guiding and promoting sustainable rural development in Scotland.

3.3 The Draft SPP sets out the approach and objectives which should underpin planning policy and decisions affecting rural areas in Scotland. The overarching policy aim is to have a prosperous rural economy with stable or increasing population which is balanced in terms of age structure and where local communities have reasonable access to good quality services.

3.4 The role of both development planning and community planning is recognised as helping to create opportunities for development in sustainable locations.

3.5 The Draft SPP sets out guidance on the following:-

- New development
- Economic development
- Diversification
- Housing
- Rural accessibility
- Environmental quality
- Enhancement
- Development planning – key considerations
- Public involvement and links with community planning
- Implementation
- Development control
- Additional guidance

3.6 The Draft SPP emphasises the importance of existing settlements in accommodating new development particularly in the more populated areas. However, both here and in less populated areas there is a strong direction for a more flexible approach to encourage further scope for development.

3.7 Significant change in the economic structure of rural areas is recognised and while traditional industry – agricultural and forestry – is expected to continue to be important, accessibility to the rural area by private car and telecommunications has opened up scope for new types of business development. Tourism in particular is highlighted as a major opportunity within rural areas.
3.8 Further diversification of the rural economy should be encouraged and while there are many examples of successful diversification projects throughout Scotland there is scope for further initiatives and creativity in this sector. The importance of cross funding, particularly through housing projects, for some diversification projects is identified. A Planning Advice Note on rural diversification is to be published in the near future providing examples of good practice.

3.9 In terms of housing within rural areas, the Draft SPP emphasises the link with guidance already provided in SPP 3 “Planning for Housing” (February 2003). This sets out national policy in respect of small scale rural housing development including clusters and groups in close proximity to settlements, replacement housing, plots on which to build individually designed houses and holiday homes. Development Plans (Structure Plans and Local Plans) have a particularly important role in setting out planning policy for these matters at a local level. Issues relating to affordable housing in rural areas are highlighted, together with potential mechanisms for delivery of this type of housing. The contribution of Local Housing Strategies in identifying and addressing affordable housing issues is also acknowledged.

3.10 The capacity of rural areas to absorb new houses and development will be influenced by several factors including proximity to essential services, accessibility, drainage and sewage capacity. The Draft SPP supports the use of typologies in rural planning where this can differentiate among varying characteristics and requirements across an area.

3.11 Design quality is also important in support of sustaining the character and quality of natural heritage areas and safeguarding countryside character. The impact of badly designed and sited houses is often particularly important in rural areas because of the visibility over large distances. ‘Fit in the landscape’ and design are therefore particularly important. Establishment of good design standards, use of sustainable materials and energy efficiency are all encouraged by the Draft SPP.

3.12 The importance of the development control process in ensuring a consistent approach to decision making is identified together with the importance of working in partnership with not only the community but the various agencies involved in rural development.

3.13 Further advice on rural development will be issued through a new Planning Advice Note on rural diversification, an updated PAN on housing in the countryside and a research report on rural planning typologies.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Angus is characterised by a network of inter-related communities, including small towns, a large number of villages and smaller settlements set in an extensive and diverse rural area. The Draft SPP on planning for rural development is therefore of considerable relevance and importance to the preparation and implementation of land use planning policy in Angus including the current review of the Angus Local Plan.

4.2 Rural land use planning policy in Angus has developed alongside changing requirements of rural communities. Many of the key points highlighted by the Draft SPP are already embodied in the adopted Angus Local Plan, and/or being considered as part of finalising the Angus Local Plan Review. These include the continued use of a rural typology as a basis for implementation of housing policy in the Angus countryside; encouragement and support for rural diversification, rural business, and tourism; reuse of existing vacant property.
4.3 Similarly the Council’s Rural Strategy recognises that many of the relevant issues are long term and inter-related arising from far reaching changes which have continued to affect rural society including concerns about the weakening economic and social fabric of some rural areas.

4.4 Agriculture and forestry continue to be important to the Angus rural economy although changes particularly in farming have had a significant impact on the rural economic structure. The economic development section of the Draft SPP provides little by way of new or innovative material. What is there, however, supports the Council’s existing approach to business development in the rural area which recognises the opportunities that can come from new technologies, tourism projects and niche markets which offer potential for innovative proposals that can assist in the diversification of the rural economy and create employment throughout rural Angus. The Scottish Executive intend to publish a Planning Advice Note specifically on rural diversification and this will give examples of practice throughout Scotland and will be useful in considering the opportunities for such activities in Angus.

4.5 A major strand of the Draft SPP relates to housing development in rural areas. Demand for new housing in the countryside continues to be evident, particularly in areas close to population centres, where services and facilities are readily available. In Angus planning applications for new housing in the countryside have continued to increase over recent years.

4.6 In Angus a multi-strand approach is based on encouraging development particularly in towns and villages, conversion of redundant farm steadings and a two-tier approach for housing in the open countryside. This recognises that rural Angus is not a single homogenous area varying significantly in character, land use, population levels, and availability and access to a range of services and facilities. The Adopted Angus Local Plan uses rural settlement units (RSUs) to express the policy for new housing development in rural areas outwith defined settlement boundaries. This policy seeks to encourage development in those areas most in need of additional population to support and sustain the local services.

4.7 Census population figures for rural Angus for 1991 and 2001 indicate that the approach adopted to rural housing policy has resulted in many parts of the area gaining population or stabilising population loss. In terms of new housing in rural Angus, over 800 houses (on sites less than 5) have been approved in the period 1996 – 2003.

4.8 Use of a rural typology is advocated by the Draft SPP as a basis for expression of rural housing policy. The Draft SPP therefore generally supports the broad approach contained in the Council’s Local Plan policies. The review of the Angus Local Plan provides an opportunity for fine tuning the rural Housing policy.

4.9 Guidance on the design of houses in rural Angus is contained in the Council’s Advice Note 5 “Houses in the Open Countryside”. The general issue of design and use of materials in rural areas will continue to require careful attention.

4.10 Clarification from the Scottish Executive would be helpful on the continued use of occupancy conditions tying dwelling units to agricultural and/or forestry use. The Angus Local Plan establishes guidance for dealing with proposals for essential worker housing, generally requiring evidence that it is necessary for the operational needs of a farm or rural business that a full or part-time worker live in close proximity to their place of work. The Draft SPP suggests that such a practice will no longer be relevant for this type of housing. This may require an adjustment to current Council policy.
4.11 The Draft SPP suggests that Planning Authorities should specifically allocate land in Development Plans to help meet the demand for holiday, weekend and second homes, in addition to other housing requirements. While there are undoubtedly a number of such properties within Angus proposals are assessed against the general policies for housing development within the open countryside. The Adopted Local Plan sets out a policy in support of chalet development but no specific sites are allocated through the Local Plan process. I would suggest no change to the current practice in Angus.

5 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report.

6 HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS

6.1 There are no human rights implications arising from this report.

7 CONSULTATION

7.1 The Chief Executive, Director of Finance, and Director of Law & Administration have been consulted in the preparation of this report.

8 CONCLUSION

8.1 Rural areas in Scotland are continuing to evolve in response to a range of influences. Planning policy needs to be responsive to the changing requirements and set out opportunities for new development. Broad guidance at national level also needs to be capable of being tailored to each Local Authority area taking into account the differing economic, social and environmental characteristics of that area.

8.2 Much of the basis of the guidance set out in the Draft SPP is already contained in the Adopted Angus Local Plan. The Council’s use of rural typologies and support for rural business, tourism and a range of opportunity for housing is in support of the principles set out in the Draft SPP. A key area for fine tuning is housing in the countryside and this is currently being addressed through the Angus Local Plan Review.

NOTE

No background papers, as defined by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, (other than any containing confidential or exempt information) were relied on to any material extent in preparing the above Report.

AA/GDP/KW
19 April 2004

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