

RDC POLICY ON ONE-OFF HOUSING IN THE COUNTRYSIDE – Summary

Northern Ireland's rural areas, and the diversity of natural and cultural resources they contain, represent an important asset for the region as a whole for future economic growth and in the health and social well-being of people. So do its rural communities. Inappropriate development, however, can damage these assets, whilst well thought out development can enhance them.

We believe that rural policy and planning must

- **Protect and manage this asset base;**
- Be supported by an imaginative and widely supported vision for **rural communities and settlements as places for living;** and
- **Be inter-departmental - which sees planning in the countryside 'joined up'** with the rural development policies of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), the environmental policies of DARD and the Department of the Environment (DoE), Environment and Heritage Service, and Department for Regional Development regional policy as a whole, but also the policy objectives of Department of Education, Department of Culture Arts and Leisure, DHSS and DETI.

RDC is not in favour of a blanket policy for the whole of rural NI either for or against development. Clear information on trends and demand in different regions within NI is needed to make appropriate judgements on the required level of control. Leaving aside the importance of enabling sustainable economic development in the countryside, we would advocate the following :

- **Use of a sub-regional approach:** Different areas have different needs, face different challenges and have different 'carrying capacities' in relation to the number of new dwellings which they can absorb. Different circumstances need to be assessed to inform planning policy.
- **Local involvement in the process** – use of a sub-regional approach should allow for local involvement in the process, drawing on local knowledge and building support for positive planning approaches. However to achieve consensus, a significant level of discussion will be required drawing upon easily understood information about the area and the active promotion of a positive set of design and planning principles for rural areas.
- **Closer clustering of new dwellings around recognised settlements** Whilst one off dwellings need not be excluded, they should as far as possible be encouraged in 'village hinterlands'; coupled with initiatives to encourage more attractive development of village and smaller town centres as part of a 'village revival.

- **A review of the differences between applications for tourism and housing.** It is unacceptable that holiday homes can be permitted where homes for local families cannot. Nor should it be possible to carry out tourism related developments as a pre-cursor to housing. Appropriate tourism development should be supported to encourage local economic activity and diversification, but managed and assessed in conjunction with a local countryside development management group (for example, Mourne Heritage Trust).

RDC believes that a number of key questions must be asked of any proposed new dwelling in the countryside **if the overall fabric is not to be irreparably damaged.**¹

1. A single dwelling, appropriately located and designed, should be considered more favourably if the applicant can demonstrate that they or the dwelling can;

- **Contribute to the local economy** (through farming or enterprise, self employment and local employment of others)?
- **Contribute to social cohesion** (local family connections, contribution to local schools / other services)?
- **Contribute to the cultural asset base** (through the design and use of local materials, or renovation of a vernacular building)?
- **Avoid undermining resources of landscape or biodiversity** (proper siting, sympathetic design, visual impact, impact on habitats or countryside resources)?

2. Is there a strong argument to support this one-off dwelling – Is the applicant:

- The landowner or someone with a direct link to a farm or is he/she a farm family member?
- A person with strong family connections in the area or who was born into the area and has lived there for most of their life?

¹ *Note: These questions are not a substitute for Terms and Conditions set out in the DOE's current policy – A' Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland'. They are a list of considerations compiled by the RDC to assist with the development of a more sustainable approach to housing in the countryside.*

- A person who can establish an employment, social, medical or other need to live in the area?

3. House Location/Siting

- Will the proposed dwelling be obtrusive or detrimental to the visual character of the area?
- Can the new house be integrated into the rural landscape- is the proposed site well screened and sheltered by surrounding landscape and tree/hedge cover?

4. House Design

The RDC is opposed to house designs in the countryside which are unsympathetic and urban in nature.

- Is the house design appropriate to the rural countryside?
- Does it reflect vernacular buildings or traditional building forms in the local area?
- Is the scale, proportion and finish of the proposed building acceptable and appropriate to its local surroundings?

5. Surrounding Landscape

The entire landscape of Northern Ireland should be protected against inappropriate development, however, certain areas are more worthy of protection due to their natural beauty e.g. undeveloped scenic areas, mountain areas, areas of tourism value. In the main these are areas currently designated as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty or Areas of Specific Scientific Interest. These areas should be protected from development, which will affect their special character.

- What impact will the proposed dwelling have on its surroundings?
- Could the impact be minimised through appropriate siting and design?

6. Services

- Can you achieve a constant safe water supply (from the public water supply) to the site?
- Can the site accommodate the safe disposal of wastewater and sewage effluent?