

An emerging land-use policy for England

1. Introduction

There is no explicit rural policy or a national land-use strategy for England. However, many aspects of other emerging policies, taken together, give a direction of travel towards one. Government's main advisors on policies that affect rural areas, Natural England, are increasingly tightly focused on promoting biodiversity and enabling 'natural systems' to be used to help achieve net-zero. In the absence of an effective government advisory organisation concerned with rural socio-economic matters, Natural England's policy view, from its specific perspective, tends to dominate.

So, what are the policies that will impact on rural areas and land-use over the next few years?:

- The **25 year Environment Strategy** for which Natural England holds lead responsibility
- The Government's Ten Point Plan for a **Green Industrial Revolution**, but especially the target to "protect and improve **30% of UK land** by 2030"
- Government's gradual implementation of the Glover Commission recommendations for **National Parks and AONBs** including more and larger AONBs and a single 'tasking' regime for both of these (see attached map for extent of rural England).
- The objectives that have been set for replacing **farm/food subsidy** with 'public money (to landowners) for public goods' and the ever-increasing complexity and focus on certain designated landscapes for this.
- The proposals in the **Planning White Paper** for zoning at a local level (even if these now must be viewed with caution) and the distribution of public money to create affordable housing.
- Government's negative response to requests to put in place **fair funding** that would enable equivalent delivery of public services in both urban and rural areas.

2. A policy inferred

National Parks represent 9.3% of the UK land mass and a population of 321,000 people. The current AONBs are larger, occupying 15% of the land mass in England and 5% in Wales. Around 1.2m people live in the current AONBs. Following the Glover review new AONBs are being created and some existing ones extended. With the small addition of other protected areas, the Government's target of 30% of the land mass 'protected' could be thought to have been met by these designations alone.

It is not much of a stretch to conclude that Government's implied policy is to recognise three broad types of rural area:

1. The first category, '**protected landscapes**', will be growing recipients of 'public money for public goods'. They will continue to attract visitors, contribute to biodiversity targets and demonstrate to the public that we care about the beauty of the countryside. On current policies they will be the subject of development constraint, so that only small amounts of housing development within a local 'secondary market' will be permitted. Contrary to general understanding NPs and AONBs share the same level of 'protected' status in the planning system.
2. The second category could be **high quality agricultural land**. The major driver for much that takes place is likely to be agricultural efficiency and automation. Conventional economic and industrial measures of productivity will apply and will be pursued with vigour. Whilst some 'public money for public goods', may be available for biodiversity, flood relief etc. the bulk is likely to be directed at industrial scale initiatives to sequester carbon. The determinant of land-use will be productivity. Housing development will be permitted to meet economic need, but the land take is likely to be limited.

Action with Communities in Rural England

3. The **remainder** of rural England could be where a more front loaded, and possibly laissez-faire, planning regime could be put in place. This is where the bulk of new housing, economic infrastructure, PV farms, warehousing and the remainder of the development required to serve a modern industrial, albeit net-zero, economy will have to be located.

3. Does this matter?

The key question for a national charity whose purposes are to protect the interests of both rural communities and their most potentially disadvantaged members is: does it matter if this is our national rural and landscape strategy? ACRE's vision is of rural areas that are living and working places, with strong communities and opportunities for all.

The risks to this vision seem to be clear, although the extent to which these risks could be mitigated will depend on how this general direction of policy is implemented:

- The impact on communities in the protected landscapes will vary because of their widely varying geographies. Those near urban centres could become exclusive and excluding, primarily through ever-rising house prices and public services being needed by an ever-reducing proportion of the population. The possible impact on more remote ones is harder to predict and could depend on how much money society can afford to direct to 'buying' public goods. In the near future competition for public funds will be fierce.
- There are huge dilemmas between food production for the cities, agricultural productivity and biodiversity in the areas of high-quality agricultural land. Communities could easily become functional islands of people offering little by way of wider prospects to their next generation and public services centralised only to major towns.
- With most economic and social development focused on the rump of rural and peri-urban areas, many of the settlements could grow to the point where it would be hard to consider them rural communities. There may be scope here to influence the re-shaping of the planning system and the direction of net-zero infrastructure spending in order to maintain the best of rural community life, whilst making services more accessible for all.

4. Implications for the work of the ACRE Network

These are major, long term, and large-scale shifts in policy, so the opportunities for ACRE to influence them may be small. Some directions of policy for our work, however, are clear:

- We should urge NPs and AONBs to plan for a greater allocation of housing in their areas to meet local needs and be clear that this is entirely consistent with their objectives.
- We should seek a partnership with NPs and AONBs. This could help to promote consistently, in rural areas that are both inside and outside their designated areas, the NP's socio-economic Duty.
- In addition, rather than continuing to regret the lack of a governmental rural socio-economic advisor (Countryside Agency, Commission for Rural Communities) we should plan a strategy for developing a relationship with Natural England, the Environment Agency and the land-use/ environment parts of DEFRA.

Our preferred strategy would probably be to promote the interests of balanced rural communities 'for their own sake'. However, it is just as important that people who live in rural areas, and their communities, are understood to be an essential part of the infrastructure that will achieve greater biodiversity, net-zero, improved diet and health etc.. And for this they will need homes, services, access to education, opportunities etc..

The ACRE Network's strength in this regard is its total coverage of rural England and its track record of making things happen with local partners.

Protected Landscapes in England

