



Response of The Ponteland Civic Society to the Draft National Planning Policy Framework

1. Introduction: The Society

The ***Ponteland Civic Society*** is a local amenity society formed for the public benefit in the Ponteland area, with the following objectives:

- * To promote high standards of town planning, architecture and landscape.*
- * To inform the public in the geography, history, natural history, architecture and landscape of the area.*
- * To secure the preservation, protection, sustainable development and improvement of features of historic or public interest, including amenity spaces and landscape.*

The Society has approximately 80 Members at the present time and operates with an Executive Committee of 10 members. It holds between 5 and 7 public lectures per annum on subjects concerned with Heritage, Planning, Regeneration, Architecture, Landscape and matters of related interest.

The Society collaborates with the Ponteland Town Council and the Northumberland County Council on matters of common interest and comments as necessary on Local Plans and proposals for Regeneration of the Town Centre. Contacts have been maintained with the County Council since 2005 on the continuance of adequate Library provision the Town, and the future development of Library facilities.

In 2010 The Society prepared a Report for the Town Council on *Street Clutter*, and has been in discussion with the Town and County Councils since 2009 with the objective of making progress on a *Ponteland Conservation Area Character Appraisal (CACA)*.

The Society is in favour of the provision of Affordable Housing in the area, but finds that the interests of Developers lies more often in top-end housing redevelopments or concentration on supermarkets or restaurants.

Most of the day-to-day activities of The Society devolve around the scrutiny of Planning Applications within the Parish, offering comments or objections as seen fit. The Society is more particularly concerned with proposals which involve, or have an impact upon, the Ponteland Conservation Area or aspects of the local Heritage or streetscape which may be damaged or compromised.

2. Executive Summary

The ***Ponteland Civic Society*** is familiar with the complexities of the present planning system, is sympathetic to the need for simplification, and would like to see more community involvement in planning decisions in order to encourage good development and achieve balance in the spatial, economic and social development of communities. Our approach to these proposals is therefore cautiously in favour but with some very strong reservations.

In particular, we are *not* in favour of the proposition that the purpose of planning is (or should be) primarily to achieve “sustainable development”, and consider that unless a detailed and robust definition of “sustainable” is provided which incorporates the concept of “balance” *before* these proposals come into force, then the overall effect on the landscape will be, at best, extremely negative and at worst, disastrous.

We do, of course, wish to see appropriate industrial and housing development – particularly Affordable Housing – but do not believe that the planning system is a real obstacle at the present time. The shortfall is due primarily to (a) the lack of available finance and (b) the inability (or unwillingness) of builders to take up existing planning permissions or utilise existing land banks until more profitable trading conditions arise.

We consider that some means should be found to persuade builders to build those dwellings which are actually required in the places where there is an established need, and that more emphasis should be placed on good design. We also recognise that there may be situations where it is unavoidable to encroach on Greenfield sites in order to achieve these objectives, but the main emphasis should be on Brownfield sites.

Whilst commendable intentions are expressed about the Green Belt, we consider that the primary emphasis placed upon economic development in the NPPF will inevitably lead to the Green Belt being sacrificed – stage by stage – and increasingly justified by case law and precedent. Much more specific safeguards are needed to avoid this situation arising.

We have similar views concerning the Historic Environment, where we would wish to see a wider view of what may constitute a “Heritage Asset”, i.e. one which may not be Listed or in Conservation Area, but of potential importance to communities in the future.

We are, from experience, very much in favour of Local Plans, and consider that existing Plans should remain in force and be adhered to until formally updated after a proper consultation process; we oppose entirely any suggestion that these Plans may be ignored or bypassed as being “out of date” for reasons of expediency. The ill-defined concept of “Community Right to Build” would also, we feel, be a potential way of by-passing all planning controls. The proposal, if adopted, would inevitably be open to infiltration by special-interest groups.

It is our firm view that the series of *Planning Policy Guidance* (PPG) and *Statement* (PPS) documents serve an important reference and definition role in planning, and consider that they should be retained and complied with until such time as they can be formally revised and/or simplified, rather than being summarily scrapped. Lack of definition inevitably leads to disputes, costly legal challenges and delays, so proving extremely counter-productive.

3. Responses to Part 3: Consultation Questions and Comments

Ministerial Foreword

The first line of this introduction states that “the purpose of planning is to achieve sustainable development” whereas the underlying motivation for the original act was to apply some degree of control over what had become the haphazard development of anything anywhere and which was having a disastrous effect on the country’s overall environment. The emphasis was on control rather than the promotion of development as a primary function.

If “sustainable development” is to be any kind of objective, a much more precise and detailed definition of the word “sustainable” is essential. The definition borrowed from the Brundtland Commission, *Our Common Future* was created more in an international context, with particular reference to provision for the poor and the changing situation with regard to technology. It is *not* adequate for town and country planning applications in the United Kingdom.

The statement “our standards of design can be so much higher...etc.” is much to be welcomed, but large-scale builders habitually impose their standard designs on buyers, and with the current financial climate leading to a loss of qualified designers in the profession, there is little prospect of improvement with the new proposals.

We do not accept the contention that “in recent years planning has tended to exclude rather than include people and communities.” Consultation has always been carried out in this area but housing allocations have more often been prescribed by central Government. Such high-level prescriptions have, for example, resulted in Cramlington New Town *not* being completed, so holding back residential and industrial development.

Responses to Questions

Delivering Sustainable Development

Q. The Framework has the right approach to establishing and defining the presumption in favour of sustainable development.

1a. Disagree.

1b. Paras. 9 & 10.

An important aspect of “sustainability” in towns and cities is that of **balance**, i.e. a mix of buildings and facilities which provide all necessary support for the existing and future population and can be developed in tandem at an appropriate rate to continually meet developing needs. The Draft NPPF ignores this aspect.

The concept of balance must apply not only to the built environment but also to the infrastructure, i.e. local employment, roads, schools, transport, leisure, open spaces, energy, water/sewerage, telephone/broadband, civic amenities, etc.

In the interests of protecting the local character and environment there must also be the ability to refuse certain classes of development such as, for example, night-clubs, betting shops, restaurants, et. al., where a number beyond a certain point can be deemed to be detrimental to the present or future character of the neighbourhood. This can be particularly important for small settlements or villages where an inappropriate developments could create a serious imbalance and degrade the character of the place over a period of time.

Para. 14. We agree fully that all areas need Local Plans and that these should be unambiguous, comprehensive and as brief as practicable. However, we

disagree profoundly that Local Planning Authorities should “grant permission where the plan is absent, silent, indeterminate or where relevant policies are out of date.” These words provide massive loopholes by which lawyers for any Developers will be enabled to obtain permission for anything they want.

Paras 15 to 18. Whilst we support the idea that the planning system has an important role to play in economic development, the apparent concept that this should be its *primary* role is not acceptable. The idea that it is proper that there should be “power to promote more development than is set out in the Local Plan” is a clear invitation to Developers to abandon all constraints.

Para.19. Much of this section is commendable. We are bound to comment, however, that in many rural areas public transport is poor or non-existent and is unlikely to improve since it is only marginally viable.

Plan-Making

Q. The Framework has the right approach to establishing and defining the presumption in favour of sustainable development.

2a. Neither Agree nor Disagree.

2b. Paras 20. to 24. Whilst we are disappointed by the tiresome repetition of the ill-defined term “sustainable” we are in broad agreement with the objectives expressed. We approve of the intention to explore the implications of delivering “community infrastructure.”

Para. 25. We endorse the concept of “collaboration with neighbourhoods, local organisations and business”.

Para. 26. We consider that, where a Local Plan already exists, it is necessary that it should continue to be complied with until a suitably revised Plan has been formally approved. To bypass existing policies or declare them to be “out-of-date” and therefore capable of being ignored would be, in our view, quite improper if not illegal.

Para. 28. There is nothing in this paragraph which explains how Developers may be constrained to meet the requirement for any particular type of housing. We have found that Developers will always seek to avoid the provision of Affordable Housing in favour of up-market homes or old peoples’ flats, presumably because the latter are more profitable.

Joint Working

Q. The policies for planning strategically across local boundaries provide a clear framework and enough flexibility for councils and other bodies to work together effectively.

2c. Agree.

2d. Paras. 29 to 52. We agree with the concept of Joint Working and many of the related proposals. It must surely be realised, however, that the amount of prediction, consultation and various Assessments implied in all these paragraphs is unlikely to be achieved in the near future with the depleted staffs and other responsibilities with which local Councils are currently faced. Simplification is needed to make all these aspirations deliverable.

Para. 39. The ideas contained in these paragraphs are unlikely to work because Developers and Landowners will not be willing to divulge their costs, and the community view of what is “acceptable” may well differ from theirs.

Para. 40. It is not clear how the “Community Infrastructure Levy” would work and who would receive it.

Paras. 49 to 51. This whole section appears to be somewhat at odds with the idea of logical, planned development to meet identified needs. It would appear that a

“Neighbourhood Forum” (which could contain local Developers) would be able to override carefully-prepared Local Plans. It would be naïve to assume that merely requiring local planning authorities to set out their policies for the area, etc., will achieve the results hoped for.

Decision Taking

Q. In the policies on development management, the level of detail is appropriate.

3a. Agree.

3b. Para. 53. We consider that the primary objective of development management should be to foster delivery of appropriate sustainable development, only subject to a proper definition of “sustainable”. See comments on *Foreword*.

Paras. 54 to 64. We are in broad agreement with these proposals.

Paras. 65 & 66. It is not at all clear what is meant by “Community Right to Build Orders”, and exactly what would constitute “the Community” for these purposes. In our experience, referendums generally elicit little response and they would be easy to hi-jack by sectional interests.

Paras 67 to 70. Agreed.

Q. Any guidance needed to support the new Framework should be light-touch and could be provided by organisations outside Government.

4a. Agree.

4b. Heritage and Amenity groups should be encouraged to offer guidance on sustainability, balance, and the long-term interest of the community at large. Business groups will lobby anyway, whether invited to or not.

Business and Economic Development

Q. The ‘planning for business’ policies will encourage economic activity and give business the certainty and confidence to invest.

5a. Agree.

5b. Para. 74. We have issues with the “presumption in favour of sustainable development” which, from our experience, is not adequately defined and will therefore provide a predictable legal loophole. See previous comments.

Q. What market signals could be most useful in plan making and decisions, and how could such information be best used to inform decisions?

5c. We are not able to comment.

Q. The town centre policies will enable communities to encourage retail, business and leisure development in the right locations and protect the vitality and viability of town centres.

6a. Agree.

6b. Para. 76. We favour these provisions, particularly the 5th.

Para. 77. A “sequential approach” is not adequately defined.

Para. 81. We favour these provisions, particularly the 3rd but would stress the importance of “appropriate.”

Transport

Q. *The policy on planning for transport takes the right approach.*

7a. Agree.

7b. Para. 82. We support the objectives in this paragraph, but point out that in many areas “sustainable” bus services are not available due to the infrequency of services or the lack of services which extend into the evening.

Para. 89. We are very much in favour of requirements 2 and 3.

Communications Infrastructure

Q. *Policy on communications infrastructure is adequate to allow effective communications development and technological advances.*

8a. Agree.

8b. Para. 98. It is our experience that organisations seeking to install new antennas near to schools, colleges, etc., do not seek to have adequate consultation with local relevant bodies and community organisations, and do not adequately investigate alternative sites on existing buildings; this needs to be enforced.

Para. 99. It is our experience that the general public would not generally agree with the proposition that “local planning authorities should not question whether the service to be provided is needed..... etc.”

Minerals

Q. *The policies on minerals planning adopt the right approach.*

9a. Agree.

9b. Para. 106. We are not entirely happy with the presumption against the extraction of coal. In our area there has been opencast extraction over many years and this is an important part of the development of the region.

Housing

Q. *The policies on housing will enable communities to deliver a wide choice of high quality homes, in the right location, to meet local demand.*

10a. Agree.

10b. Para.111. The objectives for local planning authorities are desirable aspirations; few builders will be willing or able to sign up to these, however, since they are profit-making organisations who will build what is most profitable in places where it is easiest to do so; we suspect that they may even have a vested interest in maintaining a housing shortage in order to keep prices high – witness the large land banks and planning permissions already granted but not proceeded with. The delivery of high-quality homes, available to first-time buyers, will require more robust Government intervention than is indicated in this paragraph.

Para. 112. We think that new residential development in rural areas is frequently hampered by builders’ practice of only offering a standard dwelling range, rather than adopting design solutions which respect local scale, materials and character.

Planning for Schools

Q. *The policy on planning for schools takes the right approach.*

11a. Neither Agree nor Disagree.

11b. Para. 127. There is inadequate information provided to enable a reasoned view to be expressed on this issue. In particular, there is no mention of local need in terms of available places locally and student numbers, etc., and we feel this should be a factor to be considered.

Design

Q. The policy on planning and design is appropriate and useful.

12a. Strongly Agree.

12b. Para. 118. We see no reason why Planning Policies should not require a particular architectural style in locations where this is important and necessary to create or preserve a particular environment.

Para. 120. It is not clear what is intended here. Local Authorities have very limited budgets and insufficient design expertise to supply "local design review arrangements" as suggested, however desirable this may be.

Green Belt

Q. The policy on planning and the Green Belt gives a strong clear message on Green Belt protection.

13a. Disagree.

13b. Para. 133. This paragraph (and those which follow it) expresses commendable intentions with regard to the preservation and management of the Green Belt. It is not clear, however, that the requirement in the Foreword and elsewhere for the planning system to promote "sustainable development" will not be used routinely to override all these good intentions.

Para. 141. As an alternative to putting a village in the Green Belt or placing it in a Conservation Area, we suggest the use of assessments similar to Character Appraisals (for Conservation Areas) which could provide protection with more flexibility.

Para. 145. The 3rd provision in this group would appear to permit the building of any road or rail facilities within the Green Belt. We are not in favour of this unless there is a more adequate definition of the criteria for it.

Para. 146. This provision appears to make it possible to build within the Green Belt on the grounds of increased energy production from renewable sources. We are not in agreement with this unless some more specific definition is provided for the demonstration of "very special circumstances."

Climate Change, Flooding and Coastal Change

Q. The policy relating to climate change takes the right approach.

14a. Agree.

14b. Para. 148. This paragraph implicitly assumes that the transition to a low carbon economy is both possible and practicable. This may or may not prove to be the case but in the meantime we feel that planning should be required to do no more than "support continued progress towards a low carbon economy."

Para. 151. We feel that, in certain cases, it could be right to refuse planning permission where a building is incompatible with, or cause material harm to, a heritage asset, even if not designated.

Q. The policy on renewable energy will support the delivery of renewable and low carbon energy.

14c. Agree.

14d. No comments.

Q. The draft Framework sets out clear and workable proposals for plan-making and development management for renewable and low carbon energy, including the test for developments proposed outside of opportunity areas identified by local authorities.

14e. Neither Agree nor Disagree

14f. Para. 153. This paragraph is unclear in its intentions; we fear that it would routinely prevent developments that “promote high levels of sustainability” from being refused on the grounds that what is proposed would be incompatible with the existing townscape.

Q. The policy on flooding and coastal change provides the right level of protection.

14g. Agree.

14h. Our agreement is based on the assumption that PPG25 will fully apply.

Natural and Local Environment

Q. Policy relating to the natural and local environment provides the appropriate framework to protect and enhance the environment.

15a. Agree.

15b. Para. 165. Whilst the general intentions of this section are admirable, we take exception to the presumption in favour of “sustainable development” which, being not fully defined, could provide a loophole whereby inappropriate development would be permitted.

Historic Environment

Q. This policy provides the right level of protection for heritage assets.

16a. Agree, but only on the assumption that PPS5 remains in force.

16b. Para. 177. Whilst agreeing, we consider it is too narrow a view to restrict this section to Heritage Assets which are either Listed or in Conservation Areas. Future generations may have a wider view of what constitutes a Heritage Asset in the same way that, for example, Industrial Archaeology has become important in recent years.

It should, perhaps, be recognised that not everything can be foreseen and some leeway should be incorporated to allow for such factors.

Impact Assessment

We do not, in general, consider that these questions come within our field of competence and have therefore decided not to respond.