

## **Planning for a revolution in local agriculture**

Whatever, one might feel about "localism" and the fact that this has been introduced through legislation drafted by the Coalition Government, there does appear to be some potential to use the powers in the Localism Act to reform if not revolutionise the production, processing and distribution of local food.

Memories are short and few might now recall that there was no such thing as "affordable housing" recognised by the planning system until the 1990s when a High Court judge supported a local planning authority in the making of a distinction between a dwelling that could be afforded by local people and general market housing. Following this judgement the affordability of housing was not only a material consideration but became a main theme in policies adopted at national and local level. This would appear as a parallel for establishing the affordability of land for agriculture or horticulture as a material planning consideration. Although, the "country" in town and country planning has been largely neglected, other than as the background of refusals of permissions to develop on greenfield and green belt land, and considering the agricultural quality of potential development sites, there is no reason why planning authorities should not start to be proactive in respect of issues relating to food from 'plough to plate'.

The potential for incorporating issues relating to food applies to both existing planning authorities and those embarking on the preparation of neighbourhood development plans. In some respects it would be much more effective if the required policy framework was set out in higher-level plans that cover large rural areas, including those where there is no appetite for producing neighbourhood plans. Innovating at the level of a planning authority has the very great advantage that it not only produces plans but also makes decisions on planning applications. However, it may be that change is more likely to be instigated by one or more parish councils out of concern about the way in which the land around their village is being used and how to realise its potential to enhance local food production. Incorporating the appropriate policies in neighbourhood development plans can inform other neighbourhood plans and the local plans being drawn up by district councils.

The basic conditions that need to be fulfilled by policies in neighbourhood development plans include conformity with both higher-level plans and with the principles of sustainable development as set out in the National Planning Policy Framework. Given that local food epitomises much of what is said in the NPPF about sustainability, compliance with the Framework should not be a problem. Dealing with a district planning authority and persuading it to forward a neighbourhood development plan for independent inspection and referendum could be more difficult. This path would be made easier by relying on some of the growing evidence relating to the importance of local food.

In order to promote local food there is only the need for a few interrelated policies and an understanding of the potential of planning obligations (currently entered into under section 106). This food revolution is predicated on the fact that new residential

development is most likely to be the only or most effective driver of change. The purpose of the policy is to increase the sustainability of the village (or town) by increasing the availability of local food supplies. The development plan should have a list of community benefits to which the profits from new residential development should be required to contribute in order to make both the buildings themselves and their location more sustainable. As well as the common enhancements to village halls and playgrounds, there is no reason why allotments and smallholdings should not be included in this list. Another housing policy could require one dwelling or more of those being proposed, to be subject to an agricultural occupancy condition. Although, in itself, the "ag tag" would limit the price of such a dwelling, it could also be possible to achieve a further discount through the planning obligations attached to the permission. In many cases a development of a scale appropriate to the village will occupy only part of the land owned by the applicant. It should, therefore, be possible to require some or all of the residual or remaining land to be sold or leased with the tied dwelling. S106 is not designed to control the sale or lease of land and this might have to be achieved by requiring the agricultural unit(s) to be proposed as an integral part of the residential application with a clause preventing its further development.

It might serve to reinforce the effectiveness of this policy if the development plan made it more difficult to build residential accommodation in the open countryside to serve new horticultural and agricultural enterprises. A planning authority could show that it was effectively creating a zone around the village(s) where the acknowledged need for a growth in smallholdings could be met without building in isolated locations. Food enterprises on the edge of villages would enable those involved and their families to be part of a village. There could also be employment policies encouraging the growth of horticultural and agricultural enterprises due to the associated job (and training) opportunities as well as the potential for community supported agriculture. It is not always easy to find suitable uses for existing agricultural buildings and policies could be used to support the provision and use of such buildings for food storage and processing relating to the new growing enterprises. Another important element of sustainability is biodiversity. In this respect the plan could point to the advantages of agroforestry, agroecology, community support agriculture and permaculture.

Although new transport policies might not be necessary, the justification for local food relating to the reduced movement of people and goods should be noted in the plan as part of meeting the NPPF presumption in favour of sustainable development.

It is likely that the use of development plans at district or neighbourhood/parish level in this way would be made more difficult if and when the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) supersedes the arrangements currently available under section 106. The ways in which planning obligations could be used to provide affordable agricultural dwellings and associated land and buildings would be much more difficult to secure through a limited fund of money collected through CIL, and provide a strong argument in favour of retaining the powers under s106.

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