



The Countryside Agency is the statutory body working to make the quality of life better for people in the countryside and the quality of the countryside better for everyone.

From April 2005, the Countryside Agency will operate as two divisions: Landscape, Access and Recreation whose function is helping everyone to respect, protect and enjoy the countryside and the Commission for Rural Communities whose function is rural watchdog, expert and adviser.



ENGLISH HERITAGE

English Heritage is the Government's statutory advisor with responsibility for protecting and promoting all aspects of the historic environment in England.



English Nature is the statutory body that champions the conservation and enhancement of the wildlife and natural features (geology) of England.



The Environment Agency is the public body taking the lead in protecting and improving the environment in England and Wales, making sure that air, land and water are looked after by everyone in today's society, so that tomorrow's generations inherit a cleaner, healthier world.

Environmental Quality in Spatial Planning – guidance

The Guidance is supported by a series of supplementary files available via the Agencies websites. These discuss the key messages and explain the action points in the guidance and/or provide more information that will assist in their delivery.

Contents

Purpose of this guidance	3
The agencies' approach to the new planning system	4
Improving and scoping the evidence base	5
Visionary plans and strategies	5
Ambitious plans and strategies	6
More inclusive plans and strategies	7
Plans and strategies that are better connected externally	7
Integrated plans and strategies	9
Respecting the ability of the environment to accommodate change	11
Plans and strategies that are objectives-led	12
Plans and strategies that are spatially variable and prioritised	13
Firm and flexible plans and strategies	14
Facilitating locally distinctive and valued development	15
Facilitating more sustainable development	16
Plans and strategies that are rigorously tested	17
Plans and strategies that are well delivered with high quality outcomes	18
Plans and strategies that are adequately monitored and regularly reviewed	19
How we can help	19

This guidance does not take into account any changes resulting from the Government's Modernising Rural Delivery programme, which proposes the establishment of two new organisations: *Natural England* bringing together English Nature, the landscape, access and recreation functions of the Countryside Agency and most of the Rural Development Service; and the Commission for Rural Communities. Any changes will be reflected in future versions of this guidance.

Acknowledgements

This guidance was drafted by David Tyldesley and Associates under the auspices of a Steering Group comprising Joanna Russell (Countryside Agency), Duncan McCallum (English Heritage), Jonathan Price and Carl Simms (English Nature), Ann Skinner and Colin Eastman (Environment Agency). Representatives of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister attended some of the Steering Group meetings. The structure and content of an early draft of the guidance was the subject of a sounding board workshop held in Leeds and attended by representatives of local planning authorities, regional planning bodies, regional Government Offices, non-governmental organisations and the Agencies. The Steering Group expresses its appreciation for the comments received, which have been very influential in shaping the structure and content of the guidance.

The agencies would welcome feedback on the guidance as well as examples of good practice for inclusion in future versions. Please send any comments to: joanna.russell@countryside.gov.uk

Purpose of this guidance

Our quality of life, health and well-being rely on clean land, water and air, productive soils, available minerals and water resources, natural coastal and fluvial systems and processes. They also depend on distinctive and inspirational landscapes, a wealth of wildlife, vibrant communities, a healthy, well managed countryside and open spaces accessible for everyone to enjoy.

This guidance is produced by the Countryside Agency, English Heritage, English Nature and the Environment Agency (the agencies) to help planning authorities and regional planning bodies in preparing plans and strategies under the new planning system. It will also be used by the agencies' own staff. It is intended to supplement guidance issued by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (see **Supplementary File 1**).



The settlement of Yarmouth on the Isle of Wight contains a large number of historic buildings. The central core is designated as a conservation area and much of the adjacent estuary is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest. *English Heritage*

We are not seeking to impose any new requirements on planning authorities, rather to set out our views as to how planning authorities might achieve high standards of environmental quality in spatial planning. Planning authorities should therefore apply this guidance in the light of the scope of the particular plans and strategies they are preparing and the sustainability appraisal they will be undertaking.

Throughout this document 'environment' includes the natural, built and historic environment in urban and rural areas. We (the agencies) are interested in enhancing the quality of life for both urban and rural communities. In the guidance, we consider rural issues specifically to reflect the Countryside Agency's roles. The Countryside Agency believes that plans and strategies should be 'rural proofed', so that they properly reflect rural needs and circumstances (see www.countryside.gov.uk/ruralproofing).

In this guidance all plan-making bodies at regional and local levels are referred to as 'planning authorities', for convenience. We use the term 'plans and strategies' to encompass Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Development Frameworks. We have not separately set out what we would like to see in the different types of local development documents that will comprise the local Development Framework. Not all of the information in this guidance will be relevant to every local development document and planning authorities should use the guidance as they see fit. Much of the guidance will also be applicable to other types of regional and local plans and strategies.

We believe that our input to Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS), and Local Development Frameworks (LDF) is a priority, because of the importance of planning to the delivery of our objectives. However, our differing roles and resources mean that we may not all make our contributions in the same way. This guidance will help to ensure that our views are readily available, even where we are unable to make a fuller contribution to every document in a LDF or every consultation on an RSS.

We consider planning authorities should make sure they are able to develop the skills and expertise in-house to ensure that environmental and quality of life issues are fully integrated into plans and strategies.

The agencies' approach to the new planning system

The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 introduces fundamental changes to the planning system. We support the changes, especially the greater emphasis on sustainable development, spatial planning, community involvement and quality outcomes, and are committed to helping their delivery. The new system and the ODPM guidance provide a major opportunity for us to help deliver the policies and proposals that will shape new development and steer change, in England, in the future.

Some of our ideas are at the cutting edge of planning policy and practice. They are intended to be inspirational and aspirational, and as such will need developing and testing in practice. The guidance sets out examples of good practice that are drawn from plans prepared under the old planning system but could easily be adapted to fit the new system. Good practice is evolving and we will be pleased to hear from any plan-making bodies that are pursuing initiatives to develop good practice under the new planning system.

In particular, we are encouraging a move away from a 'topic-based' to an 'objectives-led' approach for plans and strategies. We are promoting the environment and rural issues in a new and better integrated policy framework, addressing wider sustainability issues whilst meeting local needs within a national, regional and district wide context. Under each section of the guidance, we set out *recommended actions* that we would encourage planning authorities to take on board. In **Supplementary Files 13** and **14** we have produced scoping or 'proofing' checklists to assist planning authorities in preparing RSS and LDF. These set out the issues the agencies would like to see considered for inclusion in plans and strategies.

Supplementary File 1 gives more information about the background to the guidance.

The agencies envisage a plan making system that is:

- | | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| ✓ properly resourced | ✓ better connected | ✓ firm but flexible |
| ✓ evidence based | ✓ fully integrated | ✓ rigorously tested |
| ✓ genuinely visionary | ✓ objectives-led | ✓ well delivered |
| ✓ realistically ambitious | ✓ spatially variable | ✓ adequately monitored |
| ✓ more inclusive | ✓ clearly prioritised | ✓ regularly reviewed |

so that development:

- is more sustainable; both in built form and location;
- respects the ability of the environment to accommodate change (including climate change);
- avoids damage to and increases or enhances the environmental resource;
- reduces risks to, and potentially arising from, the environment;
- respects local distinctiveness and sense of place and is of high design quality, so that it is valued by communities; and
- reflects local needs and provides local benefits.

Recommended Action

- ▶ *Planning authorities should contact the agencies as early as possible in the plan/strategy process. Although not a statutory requirement, it would be helpful if planning authorities could send a copy of their Local Development Scheme to each of the relevant contact points listed in Supplementary File 15.*

Improving and scoping the evidence base

Plans and strategies need to be founded on a thorough understanding of the state of the environment and, where appropriate, the needs of rural areas.

The evidence base needs to concentrate on gathering and analysing the information necessary to produce a synopsis of each area's state of the environment, and its social, economic and housing needs. This will inform the vision, policies and proposals and the production of the Environmental Report or Sustainability Appraisal.

This is the first and one of the most fundamental stages of plan making. It should be focused on what is or may be changing, the key pressures for change and what is needed to encourage beneficial change and prevent that which is harmful. **Supplementary File 2** provides sources of information relevant to our interests.

Recommended Action

- ▶ *Contact the agencies (see Supplementary File 15) to help to scope the environmental and rural issues in the plan and the evidence base needed to address them.*
- ▶ *Discuss with English Heritage, English Nature and the Environment Agency the use and handling of data.*
- ▶ *Start to identify areas that are distinct, because of their ability to accommodate change, or their sensitivity to change depending on their characteristics. Identify the changes these areas are experiencing or may be vulnerable to, or the nature and scale of their development needs and opportunities.*

Visionary plans and strategies

We would like to see genuinely visionary plans and strategies that are meaningful, and not just vague aspirations. The vision should be at the forefront of the plan or strategy and shape all aspects of it. Objectives, policies and proposals should flow from the vision and contribute to it.

The vision should embrace the objectives of the Community Strategy and should be a locally relevant, identifiable and attainable expression of what the community wants to achieve, set in the context of national, regional and sub-regional policies.

Recommended Action

- ▶ *Planning authorities should develop their visions for the 'future picture' so that the kind of environment and quality of life that they aspire to achieve in the future is clearly understood and sufficiently described to provide a steer for the planning system as a whole.*
- ▶ *The vision should clearly reflect the statutory duty to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development.*

