

The Art of Village Planning: Retrospect and Prospect

***or* Chronicles of a Death Foretold ?**

Trevor Cherrett, Head of Planning, Housing & Transport, Commission for Rural Communities, England; November 2006

Introduction

In this Paper I attempt to draw some lessons from the experience of village planning in England. 'Village planning', however, requires a circumspect approach, since formal statutory planning only dates from the 1947 Town & Country Planning Act, and has focused heavily on towns and cities. Much of what we admire about the English village derives from previous eras of 'unplanned' organic growth and change, now part of the 'national heritage'. Hence the 'art' of village planning.

However, I am not just talking about the physical design and environment within which villages are planned, important though they are. I am also talking about the past, present and future prospects of the village from the perspective of their economic *raison d'être*; their community life and culture; social inclusion and justice; and last but not least, the looming threat of climate change.

I draw from the perspective of a rural policy practitioner and sometime academic, who has also spent 20 years on the 'front lines' working for an independent rural community NGO.

A Death Foretold ?

The English village has a special place in the heart of the nation. This is partly a nostalgic longing for an arcadian past, in which rural communities were at one with the landscape and its people. The 19th and early 20th Centuries consummated this longing through the creation or invention of a countryside of recreation and retreat in reaction to the ugliness, dirt and squalor of the industrial revolution, publicly and influentially expressed in the poems of John Betjeman - "come friendly bombs, and fall on Slough". Later in the second half of the 20th Century the English village became the location of choice for the commuters and retired who could afford the escalating property prices created by a highly protected countryside, and the cheap motoring which made such lifestyles feasible.

Yet - or because of these sentiments and changes - a regular media storyline over the last 30 years or so has been "the death of the English village". The symptoms of this fatal illness have been the steady decline of local services, the crises facing agriculture and fishing, and

the departure of young people – pulled by the lure of town and city education, jobs, and entertainment, but also pushed by the lack of rural jobs and affordable housing. At worst this leads to a physical withering away of the village and its community; at best it results in an affluent but ageing ghetto.

But there is another side to this story too. Economic activity in many rural areas is buoyant in response to the opportunities offered by IT, good road access, and a pleasant environment. Home working is quietly but incessantly on the increase (1). Similarly, some services are able to exploit technology to deliver services locally – for example, computer diagnoses in local health clinics, on-line shopping delivery, and so on. And much rural community life has flourished in the wake of the skills, energy and time which some of the new affluent incomer have brought to the village.

So the English village appears to face mixed fortunes. But its prospects depend not only on the market and consumer responses to the kinds of economic, social and environmental changes mentioned above, but also to society's responses to those changes and how these responses are translated into public policy. Village planning will be an important part of that policy, and deserves careful analysis and evaluation.

Retrospect: pre-statutory planning

Arguably the English love affair with the village is not only linked to the romantic appreciation of the countryside, championed by Wordsworth and others, but also the aesthetic appreciation of *form following function* in an unselfconscious way. The village developed organically in response to location, site conditions, aspect, slope and perhaps most importantly of all, vernacular materials – such as the thatched cottage, chalk and flint walls, gritstone barns, and so on. Not so much art, perhaps, as *craft*, the expert activities of the artisan builder, thatcher, stonemason. Later, of course, this craftsmanship was celebrated in the arts and craft movements of the 19th and 20th Century, from William Morris to the Bloomsbury set. And it is celebrated today in the loving preservation and reconstruction of village houses and cottages.

But if the pretty cottages and lanes of rural England tell a story of harmony between humans and the landscape, they conceal many more tales of economic hardship and social injustice. From the Black Death onwards, many village disappeared altogether, whilst the later Enclosure Acts forced many people from the land. Even the pastoral idylls of southern England witnessed riots, arson and strife – indeed the Tolpuddle Martyrs foretold the very birth of the Labour Movement.

At the same time some philanthropic industrialists and landowners were building model villages for their workers, such as Robert Owen in New Lanark and Titus Salt at Saltaire. Responsible landowners built good homes for their workers on landed estates throughout the land, albeit founded on the unspoken rules of feudal *noblesse oblige*, and no security of tenure.

Today such ventures are more likely to be aimed at meeting the needs of the elderly (2), although occasional attempts are also made to develop new 'truly sustainable' villages, not all of which receive favourable receptions from planners. (3)

Retrospect: post-war town and country planning

The 1947 Town and Country Planning Act was partly a response to the need for organised post-war reconstruction, partly to prevent further industrial and housing sprawl on the edge of towns and cities, and partly a desire to provide decent, well planned homes for people. It was an impressive piece of legislation within the post-war settlement of the welfare state, and much of its structure and goals remain intact, at least in principle. But it was mainly about towns and cities rather than the countryside or villages. The latter were seen as part of the agricultural landscape, which was both protected from development to prevent further intrusion in to the countryside, and heavily supported economically by agricultural subsidies. Thus the heavy foundation stones were laid for a rural policy regime of *urban containment* (4) with village growth restricted mainly to small council house estates on the edge of the village, or in isolated pockets to house forestry workers.

What happened in practice of course was that the planned new towns of post-war England could not contain all the growth in households arising from the baby boom years. People 'voted with their feet' if they could to escape the towns. They leapfrogged the green belt girdles around the urban cities and conurbations, and lived in the smaller towns and villages beyond. Often they commuted back to their urban employment centres by train and car. From the sixties onwards the English village became a battleground between planning policy and market pressures. As a result house prices leapt upwards as demand outstripped supply. *Nimbys* (not in my backyard) and *bananas* (build absolutely nothing anywhere now or again) supported the planners, who continued to restrict development on several key grounds: firstly, to prevent urban sprawl (the green belt policy); secondly to avoid development where there was a lack of available services – the 'key village' policy (ironically, the widespread availability of water, electricity and sewerage after the war had made previously 'countrified'

areas more attractive to residents than ever before); or simply 'to protect the countryside for its own sake'

Meanwhile although agriculture was prospering under a highly successful policy regime of state support for private production, the agricultural labour force was steadily declining, such that the economic *raison d'être* and the social composition of the village was changing rapidly, trends which have been well documented (5) and continue to this day.

Today: Rural policy reviewed

By the end of the 20th Century it was becoming increasingly obvious that the twin policies of economic support for agriculture and planning restrictions against development had led to serious market distortions and social problems – notably, the need to diversify agricultural production, and the disconnection of villages from the land; the shortage of affordable housing for rural people and the continued decline of rural services.

Accordingly, two major Rural White Papers appeared in the early 90s and in 2000 under successive governments, both aiming to support a 'living and working countryside'. Diverse employment, affordable housing, and key services featured strongly, alongside the conservation of the countryside and its wildlife. Local involvement of village people was also encouraged, building on the 'vital villages' programmes developed by the Countryside Agency. 'Refreshed' in 2004 (6) the Rural White Paper provided a template for today's rural policies.

Despite these comprehensive reviews, rural policy – and thereby the future of the village – continues to be 'contested territory', and enveloped in uncertainty and confusion. This is primarily because *urban regeneration* also continues to occupy the central ground of planning policy, aimed not only at revitalising town centres and urban economies, but reflecting a belief that urban development is the *more sustainable* approach by concentrating people, jobs and services in a smaller area and reducing the need to travel. And so the 'key village' policies of the 20th Century have been succeeded and consolidated by the 'brown field' policies of urban regeneration and 'sustainable planning'. But the negative effect on village planning and development remains the same.

This contested policy territory is exemplified by the apparent dissonance between the Dept of Communities and Local Government's recent draft Planning Policy Statement 3 (PPS3) which encourages new market and affordable housing in rural towns and villages to meet the very high housing needs expressed in the Barker Report and the recommendations of the

Affordable Rural Housing Commission (7) earlier this year, and the current crop of Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) which concentrate development overwhelmingly in urban areas in order to link homes more closely to the main employment areas, and protect the countryside. How these national and regional policies will be translated at the local level through Local Development Frameworks (LDFs) will be crucial for the future economic, social and environmental prospects of the English village .

Why the policy makers and planners have got it wrong

At the risk of over-simplification, the operation of planning, housing and much service delivery appears to be based on the view that rural communities – especially the smaller ones – are fundamentally unsustainable.

What is the justification for this view ? Three main arguments lie behind it:-

Firstly, the post-war planning principles of urban containment and countryside protection “for its own sake” – the notion that we must prevent ribbon development and urban sprawl at all costs.

Secondly, that we must minimise the dispersal of new development in order to reduce the CO2 emissions resulting from the consequent increase in car journeys.

Thirdly, that we must focus new development in places where services – shops, health centres, transport etc - are more viable, ie larger villages and towns.

These are plausible arguments, but I believe that they are flawed. At best they exaggerate the case, and at worst they are misleading.

Firstly, the threat to the countryside is grossly over-exaggerated. It would take many centuries to ‘concrete it over’, even at the highest rates of land take. That isn’t to say that there should be a free –for –all: rather that we should be clear about what we are protecting, for example fine landscape, wildlife, or good farmland. Preventing the coalescence of urban areas – the classic rationale of the green belt - is also laudable, and rightly celebrated as an important part of post-war English planning. But what is much less justified is the imposition of a *general* presumption against development in rural areas - the characteristic stance of post-war planning. Of course we should be very careful about what, where, why and how we encourage and allow new development in rural areas. In particular, careful consideration will need to be given to the *design* of new development, respecting the local character and

distinctiveness of particular villages and landscapes; and the *infrastructure* needed to support new development, but noting that *spare capacity* should be taken into account as well as overloaded services when locating new development.

Similarly, the environmental threat of dispersed development has been over-emphasised, firstly because such development is quantitatively marginal to *existing* development; secondly because car travel and consequent CO2 emissions are more dependent on economic and social conditions and behaviour than simply the *location* of development; and thirdly, by the same token, urban locations can be as polluting as rural ones in terms of journeys and CO2 emissions if they are not well planned with good public transport, as James Shorten's research for Land Use Consultants has shown in the case of large urban extensions on the edge of Bristol (8). And as he and others also argue, the solution surely lies with better and more efficient and less polluting *transport* as much as patterns of settlement location, which are relatively fixed anyway. Which is not say that such settlement patterns are irrelevant to how transport can be better provided, for example by exploiting corridors of development which can be more easily linked, such as villages in a valley.

Finally, but perhaps most importantly for rural communities, is the service viability argument. There is no doubt that rural services have declined over recent decades, especially in the smaller settlements, despite an overall net increase in rural population. But this decline is related to complex factors linked to concentration, centralisation, privatisation, and computerisation, which affect urban areas as well – note for example the recent massive closures of urban post offices. And new ways of delivering services by computer can help reverse these effects – from on-line shopping to local surgery diagnoses (9). Moreover, as James Shorten's work again shows, rural people travel far and wide for work, shopping, land leisure trips – reflecting the availability of relatively cheap car transport. The traditional hierarchy of village, market town and city no longer exists in simple form (if it ever did). Thus the availability of local services will not necessarily halt the growth of travel, although it will of course help. And we also need to consider the needs of the substantial minority who do not have access to private cars. Indeed, quite the opposite, especially if and when the higher costs of private motoring and congestion also point to a need for much better public or community transport.

So to conclude, I believe that **rural planning policy suffers from an intuitively plausible but subjective view that rural settlements – especially the smaller ones – are fundamentally 'unsustainable'**. Such a view lacks rigorous evidence to support it and leads

to disproportionate development location policies which are over – concentrated in urban areas.

This is not to say that there is no substance in the arguments against rural development; rather that *both urban and rural settlements* score poorly in many aspects of sustainability. And a fairer approach is to identify ways in which rural communities can become *more* sustainable, rather than writing some of them off from the start. To do this we need to carry out much more research and analysis on identifying the key criteria for sustainable development – economically, socially, culturally, and environmentally – and how those criteria score in different locations and patterns of development. This is a huge task - a journey of discovery rather than a discrete project. But given the stark warnings sounded by the Stern Report on climate change, we must start this journey sooner rather than later.

How can the village community be involved ?

So much for the theories surrounding sustainable development. But what about the community's voice in this debate ? There is a strong tradition in English rural planning of involving rural communities: *village appraisals*, a local survey of information and opinions, were one of the early vehicles; later *parish plans*, developed as more positive and pro-active action plans which could feed into statutory local plans (now Local Development Frameworks) evolved. Supported by the former Countryside Agency's '*Vital Villages*' programme, and facilitated by independent countywide Rural Community Councils, Parish Plans were seen as an important tool by which village people could not only make their voice heard, but also how they could influence and contribute to the statutory planning process; this approach followed up the successes of the earlier *Village Design Statement*, in which local people themselves set out the key criteria by which new development should be assessed, and which in some cases were adopted as part of statutory local plans.

Meanwhile, the recent reforms of the English Planning system (the creation of regional strategies and new Local Development Frameworks), together with the introduction of wider *community planning* processes embracing – in theory at least – all aspects of policy, has changed the landscape of governance. They have introduced new opportunities for, but also blockages to, involving rural communities in setting out policies and visions for the future. In the short term the creation of new community planning processes, served by Local Strategic Partnerships, has served to confuse the often familiar (if not always cordial) relationship between parishes and planners. At the same time the new planning system has also introduced new public participation processes, set out in statements of community involvement (SCIs), which have cut across the links which were being developed between parish plans and local plans. Since these new procedures are complicated, confusing, and

frequently changing, professional planners and policy makers frequently find them difficult to interpret and implement. No wonder that rural communities are more often than not bewildered.....

And yet the introduction of a comprehensive community planning process, supported by local strategic partnerships, offers new possibilities for rural communities to become more involved in *all* the policies which affect their future, and which a local plan is well placed to address. With good will on both sides, and a willingness to take responsibility, effective bridging between local community-led aspirations and wider Community Strategies, Local Area Agreements, and Local Development Frameworks should be possible. (10)

Prospect: Planning for Sustainable Rural Communities

I have tried to show in this paper how village planning has evolved in England to the point where its future will depend on how policies will be debated and implemented at two main levels – the strategic and the community.

At the strategic level I have highlighted the conflict between the rural regeneration policies derived from the Rural White Papers, together with the need to provide homes for the substantial increase in households in rural areas as well as rural (as acknowledged in the Affordable Rural Housing Commission's report of May 2006 and in draft PPS3), and the heavy focus on urban regeneration, especially in regional strategies. Although the latter are rightly concerned to locate homes near the main employment centres (for example the South West's Principal Urban Areas), and prevent or at least reduce the 'hollowing out' of urban conurbations (for example the West Midlands), my argument is that this policy need not and should not be taken to the extremes of preventing almost all rural development. There is room for both urban and rural regeneration, supported by more balanced and sophisticated analyses of sustainable development which go beyond 'urban good, rural bad' for the reasons outlined in this paper. **Otherwise many thousands of villages will be virtually condemned to no growth, no social justice, little economic growth or change, and the cultural prospects of the affluent ghetto.**

At the community level my view is that the community planning processes introduced in England are comprehensive and well worked out 'on paper'. The danger is that vertical 'silo' agencies and targets undermine horizontal cohesion, and that local political and community will is lacking. But potentially they offer the prospect of involving the wider community in a proper debate about the future of their area in *all* its aspects, which in turn provides a more logical basis for formulating spatial planning policies. And we have a mounting body of

research on how that link between the local community and policy making can be *bridged* (10) by appropriate local procedures.

Parish Plans or similar could and should play a very important part in this process, providing valuable inputs to the community and local plans in multiple ways: as a *vision* for the future of the village, as expressed by its inhabitants; as an expression of the social and economic *needs* of those inhabitants; and as a locally formulated *design brief* to guide future development. Parish Plans can offer a route for genuine community involvement and participation provided that village communities involve all sections of the community, including those less involved in village affairs; that they take responsibility for addressing all the social and economic problems facing the village (and not for example, presenting a simple 'wish list' or a 'nimby's charter'); that local government authorities and agencies ensure that local communities receive the help and support they need, for example through independent enabling bodies; that government agencies co-ordinate their policy processes and enable local communities to feed in their input in a relevant and timely way; and last but not least, that government in all its forms takes these 'bottom-up' inputs seriously, and provides meaningful feedback.

Finally, this paper has addressed the concept of 'sustainable development' in terms of meeting economic, social and cultural needs as well as environmental constraints, as set out in Defra's framework for sustainable development and the government's sustainable development strategy (11). Recently, the Stern Report (12) confirmed the economic risks surrounding future climate change and the urgent need to reduce carbon emissions immediately. Clearly rural communities must address this issue as much as urban areas, which will have major impacts on car travel and lifestyles. Rural people on lower incomes who rely on car travel may become even more disadvantaged. But none of this detracts from my view that the changes which will need to be made are more concerned less with urban or rural location per se, and more to do with comprehensively and radically reducing CO₂ emissions through improving public transport, producing energy more efficiently, improving the efficiency and pollution reduction of all vehicles, and changing our lifestyles with regard to energy consumption, recycling, travel, and so on. The case for putting a halt to rural life has not yet been conclusively made, although some planning policies might appear that way.....

Rural communities can address climate change at the local level through parish plans and the like, again with help and advice. Examples in England include the concept of the 'carbon-free village, eco-neighbourhoods, and co-operative housing initiatives (3). They should be

encouraged, alongside local, regional and central government action. The possibility even arises that the severe challenge of climate change will serve to unite communities and government in facing a common threat.

Lessons for the future

My conclusion in this paper is that although the future of the English village, especially the smaller village, is under increasing threat, it can flourish provided that rural policies are developed sensitively to address local circumstances. Some of the key lessons of the English experience are :-

1. That national policies must stress the social and economic needs of rural communities as well as the environmental constraints made imperative from the risks of climate change
2. That regional planning and housing strategies must also recognise these needs, and allocate development accordingly
3. That community planning processes must be made to work effectively in terms of:-
 - a) bringing together all relevant agencies
 - b) allocating their resources to meet local area needs at the 'horizontal' level as well as 'vertical' objectives and targets
 - c) genuinely involving local communities through accessible 'bridging' links between government agencies and local rural communities
4. That rural communities are encouraged and supported to prepare plans for their own communities, involving all sections of that community, which embrace their social, economic and cultural aspirations as well as working towards more environmentally sustainable lifestyles
5. That more thorough research is undertaken to identify the key criteria determining economic, social, cultural and environmental sustainability, how they can be measured, and how rural policies can be effectively appraised at regional, local and village levels.

If these lessons are applied effectively, then we may hope that the reports of the death of the village will have been, like Mark Twain's, greatly exaggerated.

Notes and References

- 1 Current research undertaken for the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC)
- 2 The Joseph Rowntree Trust's *Hartrigg Oak* opened in 1998 as the UK's first Continuing Care Retirement Community
- 3 There are many examples of people living and working on the land who have fallen foul of planning regulations and local opposition when attempting to build homes and workshops (eg the *Tinkers Bubble* case); more recently *Ashton Hayes* in Cheshire has set out to become England's first 'carbon neutral village', while James Shorten of Land Use Consultants has proposed the case for 'exceptionally sustainable development' in 'eco-neighbourhoods'.
- 4 The urban focus of post war English planning has been comprehensively documented by Professor Peter Hall et al in *The Containment of Urban England* (1973)
- 5 Notably *Green and Pleasant Land* ? Howard Newby, 1979.
- 6 *Our countryside:the future*; Review of the Rural White Paper; Defra 2004
- 7 *Affordable Rural Housing Commission* , final report: Defra May 2006
- 8 This paper was one of five 'thinkpieces' prepared for the Commission for Rural Communities and can be found on www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk
- 9 The outlook for rural services in England has been researched in detail *The Future of Services in Rural England – A Scenario for 2015*; report to Defra by University of Gloucestershire, Countryside & Community Research Unit, April 2005
- 10 The opportunities and barriers to effective 'bridging' between local community –led planning and wider, more formal strategies and service agreements have been explored through action research and documented in the 'Bridges' research project *Parish and Town Plans,Market Town Action Plans – links to Local Strategic Partnerships and Community Strategies* (Glos CCRU op cit) in April 2004 (with a companion Good Practice report *Planning for Vital Communities* (Countryside Agency June 2004); and in *An Exciting Future for Community Plans*, recommendations arising from researching parish plans in the South West of England by BDOR Ltd for the Market Towns & Coastal Towns Association (MCTA) and the South West ACRE Network of Rural Community Councils (SWAN).
- 11 *Securing the future;delivering UK sustainable development strategy*; HM Government (undated)
- 12 *The Stern Review: The Economics of Climate Change*; HM Treasury October 2006

