

Basingstoke and Deane Local Plan 2011 to 2029 Public Examination Hearings

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Submission by CPRE Hampshire

1. The rural economy is important to CPRE. The organisation exists to protect the countryside, but it also has an interest in ensuring a 'living countryside'. This interest is reflected in an annual countryside awards scheme. This seeks to foster a vibrant countryside and promote the richness of the landscape. A further impetus to consider the rural economy comes from continued urban pressures for development, and their effect on the countryside. Nonetheless, the local plan should adopt a positive stance, aiming, where possible, to support and encourage appropriate rural uses.
2. Opportunities and initiatives will arise that are not foreseen by the local plan, and require a positive attitude, not merely a development control response. The Plan should better take account of the diverse roles and make-up of rural areas. It should more effectively recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside and seek to support thriving rural communities within it.
3. Rural tourism is also important, and the planning system should attempt to support and encourage appropriate installations. A vision is needed to encourage a diverse and higher value tourism sector. This could play an enhanced role in the sustainable development of north Hampshire by providing a greater variety of jobs over a wide range of skill levels. It could provide stronger support for urban regeneration, which is already a local plan objective. This could help diversify and develop the rural economy. It could also support and promote quality and distinctiveness in the borough.

Sustaining the Rural Economy

4. CPRE believes that protection of the character of rural areas and the maintenance of a thriving rural community can go hand-in-hand. By permitting small-scale economic expansion, councils can promote sustainable rural areas without resulting in a fossilised community. The planning system needs to play a more active role in guiding development to sustainable locations and workable solutions.
5. Proposals for rural economic development should be supported and encouraged where the type and scale of the development is appropriate to its location. In relation to economic development in the countryside, a partnership-based approach should be adopted. This could aim to protect the countryside and give encouragement for thriving rural communities. Schemes of farm diversification which may lead to improved income for farmers, while sustaining their main agricultural enterprise should also be supported.

Policy EP4 – Rural Economy

6. The policy as set out in the Plan does not enshrine sufficient flexibility to support and encourage economic growth and rural jobs. The Plan does not reflect any proper understanding of the potential in the rural economy. The rural economy has the potential to make a huge contribution to our entrepreneurial power and economic growth, but only given the right conditions. The rural economy is dominated by small businesses. The Plan lacks the power and imagination to revitalise the rural economy.

7. It is small businesses in rural areas that will provide the engine for economic growth. However, rural businesses face challenges not encountered by their urban equivalents. They struggle against the odds of poor communications, weak broadband services, and patchy transport services. The Plan will do little to provide a flexible and workable planning policy, assist in gaining appropriate planning consents.

8. The Plan should support enriching the character and vitality of villages and the open countryside. It should also support market towns as vibrant centres, fulfilling an influential role in the region. Attractive environments are vital to Hampshire's tourism offer and to the wider health and well-being of its residents. There exists the potential for development, leisure, recreation and tourism pressure to erode the character and nature of the landscape, and this should be avoided and properly managed.

Tourism in Hampshire

9. Tourism and related industries make a major contribution to the economy of Hampshire. Spending on tourism and employment in the sector has grown. However, the nature of the industry has changed. A decline in long stay holidays has been compensated for by the rise in business trips, visits to friends and relatives and short breaks. These trends have been accompanied by growth in day visits to attractions, such as museums and galleries, and to the countryside. The challenge lies in being able to support this in a way that is equitable, and reduces barriers to growth.

10. It would be wrong to have a rigid test that only development which can be proven to have an essential 'need' should be located in rural areas. Developments need to be acceptable. It is often best to leave the policies a little open, with room for pragmatism and flexibility. This is in the nature of localism and good judgement.

11. Positive Local Plan policies that are neither rigid nor inflexible, and which fit local circumstances will be most appropriate for achieving dynamic, flourishing rural communities, and also contributing to the wider objectives of sustainable development.

12. CPRE supports policies for the economic development of rural areas, including the conservation and enhancement of the natural and built environment. The borough is largely rural in extent and includes many locally distinctive and attractive landscapes greatly valued by residents and visitors alike. Better economic development and diversification is essential to maintaining and encouraging flourishing rural communities.

Conclusions

13. The rural economy has unfulfilled potential. Rural businesses make a huge contribution to the wealth and well-being of the communities in which they are based. However, they have the potential to expand, grow further and revitalise local rural communities. One of the barriers to such growth is often the unsympathetic system of planning control. A more positive and understanding attitude is essential in the future.

14. In order to achieve the true potential of the rural economy, the Plan should demonstrate an awareness of the barriers faced when operating in a rural location. The Plan needs to put in place effective policies to help local rural business grow. It needs to be innovative in the promoting the benefits of farm diversification and tourism, as well as operating a planning system that is responsive to its needs. It also needs to address the barrier of distance to market as a reason that holds back rural economic expansion. It can help overcome this barrier and realise the true potential of the rural economy.