

**COUNCIL FOR NATURE CONSERVATION AND THE COUNTRYSIDE  
PLANNING GROUP  
MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON  
THURSDAY, 27 APRIL 2005  
IN HILL STREET, BELFAST**

Present were:

Mr J Jackson, Chairman  
Mr B Black  
Prof B Smith,

In attendance:

Ms B O'Neill, EHS  
  
Mr C Francey, Secretariat

**1. Apologies**

There were apologies from Mrs B Turnbull and Prof S Turner.

**2. Terms of Reference**

Members agreed that the terms of reference for the Group should remain the same as the terms drawn up by the Group in 2004.

In fulfilling these terms it was felt that the Group needed to be proactive and at the same time recognise the constraints on staff within the Department in carrying forward policy initiatives.

**3. PPS14 – Sustainable Development in the Countryside**

The Chairman informed members that DRD had set up a number of public meetings throughout Northern Ireland as part of the consultation process relating to PPS14.

In discussion members made a number of points and comments as follows:

- It was noted that with the announcement in the RoI last year giving permission to farmers for replacement dwellings, there will be a major impact on the countryside. In the case of Northern Ireland and the draft PPS14, many MLAs take the view that they should support their rural constituents and would therefore have concerns about the new proposed policy.
- Many of the current planning applications for development in the countryside are centered on areas relative to the new Area Plans.
- It was felt that Council should have a broad focus on unpopular government policies and directives and look at a strategic review of wise use of the countryside.

- A media management strategy should be developed to highlight the impact of inappropriate development in the countryside.
- It was suggested that it might be useful to identify a number of issues over a 12 month period e.g the Mourne, Antrim Coast and Glens and Fermanagh. Consider the weaknesses, conclusions, disjointed planning decisions and the lack of political drive, all of which are having a detrimental effect on the countryside.
- The emphasis on 'need ' and not choice within the proposed policy was to be welcomed.
- It was likely that Council had a consensus view in support of the proposed policy and that any response to the consultation paper should not focus on the minutiae, but rather it should consider the paper in the context of sustainable development and the overall concepts of the government's Regional Development Strategy.

The Chairman undertook to prepare a draft response for presentation to Council.

**ACTION:                      Prepare draft response                      Chairman**

#### **4.0 National Parks**

##### **4.1 National Parks Draft legislation – expected late 2006**

Ms O'Neill highlighted the difficulties associated with the drafting of the new legislation for NPs and the possible knock on effect for progress. She pointed out, however, that work is continuing with policy documents and consideration of the major changes arising from the Review of Public Administration and their impact on the process.

##### **4.2 Mourne Consultation – Summer/Autumn 2006**

Ms O'Neill informed members that the Mourne Working Party will be carrying out consultations on boundary proposals for the NP. Local councils and political parties will be invited to participate. Currently a plan of action for the consultation process is to be decided with consideration being given to the use of 'surgery' type arrangements as well as public meetings. In addition, a communications and media plan is to be drawn up and a facilitator appointed to take the process forward. The consultations process is scheduled for the autumn. It is hoped that the report on the NP boundary will be available in early 2007.

The WP also commissioned research on the impacts of NP designation in NI. Other research has been carried out by the Rural Development Council.

Members noted that it was likely the legislative process required to establish the NP will take 5 years. It was felt that given the constraints on the resources this was not an unreasonable time span to complete the process. Members were concerned that during this period the land in the Mourne would be subject to degradation. However, it was pointed out that other policies and regulations can be used to manage and protect the area.

#### **5. Economic and Social Benefits of Landscape for Rural Development (Exemplified by reference to Sperrins Tourism)**

The Chairman outlined the example of Sperrins Tourism in the economic and social benefits of landscape areas, particularly the advantages of rural communities in sustainable development. Sperrins Tourism had recognised the potential for developing recreation in the countryside and encouraged local community groups to identify opportunities in cottage industries and cultural tourism. These communities had applied these opportunities in a sustainable way recognising that the countryside was our only natural resource. Mr Black highlighted the example of the approach taken by the devolved government in Wales which had set up a department embracing agriculture and the environment. It was estimated that there were some 100,000 jobs involving the countryside in Wales.

It was agreed that it would be useful for members to undertake a field visit to assess the impact and benefits of the Sperrins Tourism body.

**ACTION: Arrange field visit Chairman/Secretariat**

## **6. RPA Legislation**

The Chairman informed members that he had attended a conference in Belfast City Hall which considered the implications for planning under the Review of Public Administration. It was recognised that there will be substantial legislative change to planning in deciding which powers remain centrally and which of them will be devolved to local councils.

## **7. SEA**

It was noted that SEA had to be applied to all Area Plans and policy documents. Some of these were only 'tick box' exercises.

The Planning Group agreed to monitor how the implementation of SEA is applied.

## **8. Programme for Review and Designation of AONBs**

Ms O'Neill updated members on the review of AONBs. The Sperrins AONB was likely to be held in abeyance until the Area Plan has been finalised. Benevenagh had already been presented to Council in 2005. Strangford and Lecale are on the EHS agenda for redesignation under AMLO 1985. EHS was currently considering a management strategy for AONBs.

Ms O'Neill reported that it was disappointing that EHS was unable to progress changes in the AONB legislation at this stage which would enable it to put in place management programmes, but it had to be recognised that currently there is no statutory requirement on EHS to manage AONBs. There were good examples, however, of successful management in the Mourne by the Mourne Heritage Trust.

There was a suggestion that it might be worthwhile for EHS to advise PS on pending designations of AONBs so that planning could exercise its powers in development control. Members recognised, however, that this approach would be without gain because AONBs were not a material consideration in the planning process. There was, however, some control in the co-terminosity of AONBs with PS Countryside Policy Areas (CPAs). Members stressed the need for statutory commitments in designating AONBs.

The Chairman asked that EHS gives an update on the EHS Shared Horizons programme to full Council at an early date. Mrs O'Neill undertook to prepare an appropriate paper.

**9. Any other or Alternative areas of work**

There was no other or alternative areas of work to be considered.

**10. Any Other Business**

**10.1 Mournes AONB**

Members expressed concern about the extensive remodelling of the field boundaries in the Mournes. The landscape and grazing regimes were changing. It appears that landowners are clearing their fields and selling the stones for financial gain. However, there was no action that could be taken under existing legislation to prevent this. Members suggested that the practice should be drawn to the attention of Government at Ministerial level.

It was agreed to report this matter to full Council at its next meeting in May.

(the meeting finished at 12.40pm)