

## **POLICY STATEMENT**

### **FARMING AND LAND MANAGEMENT**

#### **Summary of policy position**

*We recognise that good management of the landscape depends on the viability of farming. Our policies support farm businesses and diversification but in a way which should also help deliver environmental objectives. Accordingly we:*

- *Encourage farmers to bid for funding for conservation work through Countryside Stewardship.*
- *Support adding value to products through direct sales and local sales.*
- *Support the protection from development and from flooding of Best and Most Versatile agricultural land.*
- *Support the conversion for appropriate alternative employment uses of redundant traditional farm buildings and the replacement of more modern redundant buildings by well-designed new buildings for employment or community purposes.*
- *Support the conversion of listed or fine traditional agricultural buildings for residential purposes where this is demonstrably the only way to achieve long term preservation.*
- *Are not opposed in principle to new developments such as polytunnels or new farm buildings but view each case on its merits.*
- *Seek to limit local over-concentration of equestrian establishments.*
- *Recognise the contribution that field sports make to the conservation of valued landscape features and biodiversity.*

#### **Background**

Farmers and landowners are the owners and custodians of most of our countryside and of many of the buildings sited in the open countryside. Some of these buildings are of historic and architectural merit; the majority are larger more modern system-built functional structures. The vast majority of farmers care for their environment and put in measures wherever possible to mitigate adverse changes which are driven by the economic realities of farming.

A characteristic of traditional farming in much of Gloucestershire is that is dominated by small farms and small fields. The pattern of field boundaries (whether dry stone walls, hedges, fences or shelter tree belts) is an essential component of the character of the landscape. Grazing livestock farming is on the decline yet a living

grazed landscape is characteristic of much of the landscape, particularly on the Cotswold escarpment and in the Forest of Dean.

Farming is under economic pressure due to competition from overseas (huge fields and much less regulation) and supermarket buying power. The logical response to these pressures is to go for the economies of scale of larger fields and larger farms to allow large machinery to operate and to raise the financing required for modern technology. This route to economic viability could be damaging to the Gloucestershire countryside but we need to be pragmatic and constructive in our approach to this dilemma - always mindful that economic viability is essential to the good management of our landscape.

The communities which tend to care most about their environment are living and working communities. It is essential that there is a dispersal of economic activity into rural areas to prevent villages becoming mostly populated by retirees and commuters.

The conservation of most rural parts of Gloucestershire depends on the related themes of ensuring farmers make a reasonable living within the existing landscape structure and ensuring our villages remain vibrant communities. Farming itself no longer provides the core of a community and vitality therefore depends upon generating other sources of economic activity.

There are a number of fundamental factors which CPRE Gloucestershire can not influence – technical innovation, changes in the European Common Agricultural Policy and the level of Government support for agriculture, levelling of the international playing field, and the distribution of European rural development funds. However, we can monitor the effects these influences have on the appearance of the countryside.

For us it does not matter who owns farmland or the extent that farms merge to form larger units. What matters is how the land is used and its distinctive elements conserved and that the detailed knowledge of the land, which small farmers have and contractors do not, is not lost.

For farmers to maintain the character of the countryside and wildlife they should continue to be encouraged to take full advantage of the support for conservation measures potentially available under the new Countryside Stewardship scheme which will replace the Environmental Stewardship Scheme and England Woodland Grant Scheme in 2015. But farmers need more than the payments and income support available through the CAP, and cannot rely on a resurgence in prices for their produce. Farmers, therefore, have to get more out of their assets and continue to diversify income away from traditional agricultural income. The issue for CPRE is how can this be done without damaging the countryside.

The Government has made it easier for farmers to find new uses for traditional, but redundant, agricultural buildings by allowing change of use without planning permission for other business uses and for up to three residential units, although the latter change does not apply in National Parks and AONBs.

Our policies are to:

- Encourage farmers to bid for funding for conservation work through Countryside Stewardship.
- Support adding value to products through direct sales and local sales. We will support farm shops which have this objective. We will lobby local supermarkets to increase local purchasing, and encourage more public procurement of local produce. We will put effort into understanding local food supply chains.
- Support the protection from development and from flooding of the Best and Most Versatile agricultural land by reminding planning authorities and the Environment Agency of current national planning policy and by promoting the long term need to preserve this valuable and increasingly scarce natural (soil) resource. In a local context the availability of such high quality soils is essential to the production of many vegetable and fruit crops, which can help to supply genuine local foods.
- Sponsor and support projects to protect and restore hedgerows and walls where they are important visual elements of the local landscape.
- Support the conversion of traditional farm buildings for alternative uses where these are no longer needed for agriculture. Our preference is for uses which deliver additional income to the farmer rather than short term gains from selling the assets.
- Support the conversion or replacement of more modern redundant farm buildings for use for employment or community purposes. Our support will be conditional on an acceptable plan for maintaining or developing farm activity and we will oppose schemes where we feel “redundancy” is a first step towards releasing existing buildings for development to be replaced later by substitute agricultural buildings. In such cases we will lobby for the existing buildings simply to be replaced with fit for purpose agricultural buildings. It should be an aim that any replacement buildings are visually an improvement on those they replace and we note that such buildings may be suitable for exploiting farm produced renewable energy.
- Support the conversion of listed or fine traditional agricultural buildings for residential purposes where this is demonstrably the only way to achieve long term preservation. Elsewhere we will continue to argue for a presumption against new housing in the open countryside. However, there may, occasionally, be circumstances where there is a demonstrable case for new accommodation on the farm for essential management purposes. We would expect the proposed location, size and type of dwelling to reflect its stated purpose.
- Insist that all conversions must be to a design standard which ensures that the outward appearance maintains the essence of an agricultural building.

- Not to be opposed in principle to new developments such as polytunnels or new farm buildings but view each case on its merits. In forming a view on the impact of proposed new developments and whether they are acceptable within the landscape, we will start from what is distinctive in the landscape using landscape character assessment and whether the scale of development would have a material effect. Our first approach will be to seek to advise how such development might be acceptably located or scaled given the need, in many cases, for the development to be located on suitable soil.
- Seek to limit the local over-concentration of equestrian establishments where this would be contrary to the local landscape character, create pressure to construct new housing to accommodate owners/employees or would have safety implications in the use of the local roads network.
- Recognise the contribution that field sports make to the conservation of valued landscape features and biodiversity.

The above imply active discussion with the farming community to find positive solutions, which we can then support, rather than an adversarial approach.

We also recognise that, currently, the main farming sectors would not survive without income support. Using the income support payment to encourage environmental benefits is fine – but, ultimately, farmers must be paid and on time.

**Updated May 2014**

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**CPRE Gloucestershire Policy Statements are regularly reviewed and updated as necessary. They should be read as a set**