

Matter 2C/South East England Regional Assembly



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Matter 2C: RURAL, SMALL TOWNS AND BUILT ENVIRONMENT

2C.1 Is there sufficient focus/explicit policy on rural issues (Box B1, Policy RE2, Policies H3, BE5&6)?

1. The geographic and functional relationships between the region's rural and urban areas form a key part of the character of the South East and this is reflected in the Plan. As the Plan sets out, although most people live in the region's urban areas, the rural parts of the South East form an important part of the region - not just because of their extent, quality and diversity, but also because of their socio-economic characteristics and essential linkages with wider regional and sub-regional economies.
2. The strategy set out in the Plan is for the majority of the development needs of the South East to be met in urban areas, whilst also encouraging sufficient development and investment to maintain and develop thriving and socially-inclusive rural communities. The Plan emphasises that positive planning and design should be encouraged in rural areas, and promotes action to be taken to foster vibrant communities which have the capacity and knowledge to plan for their future through community-led initiatives. The Plan also places policy emphasis on the need to foster a successful and diverse economy in rural areas and address inequalities on issues such as affordable housing and access to services.
3. Given the rural South East's dynamic and varied mix of environments, economies and communities, with close and complex interrelationships with urban areas, rural issues have been approached as a core context for the Plan. The Assembly felt that this approach was appropriate given a desire to ensure that rural issues were not seen in isolation, but rather as an integral part of the regional spatial strategy.
4. The Plan approach builds on extensive work undertaken by partners and stakeholders in the region, and is framed around four key principles that are set out in Box B1 in Section B of the Plan, as well as a range of regional, national and European guidance. These are:
 - Sustainable rural communities;
 - Sustainable rural economies;
 - Sustainable rural environments;
 - Sustainable natural resources.
5. In many instances the policies set out in the Plan are equally applicable to urban or rural settings, and the Assembly feels that specific 'geographic' emphasis is not required. In other cases rural-specific policies were felt to be required and are set out. This robust but flexible policy approach enables local authorities developing their LDDs and agencies taking forward other strategies to ensure that local spatial circumstances are reflected.

2C.2 Are the needs of smaller towns adequately recognised in draft RSS (including Policy BE5)?

1. Smaller rural towns are defined for purposes of the Plan as settlements with 3-10,000 population. In developing the Plan it was felt that given the nature of the region's settlement structure ie. a large number of medium size towns, that it would be appropriate to include specific policy emphasis on these settlements in terms of their current and future roles in the local or sub-regional context.
2. Whilst it is appropriate for the South East Plan to set out a regional level criteria-based policy on this issue, the specific needs of these towns are most appropriately addressed at the local level. As such, it is appropriate that the Plan emphasises a set of considerations that should be taken into account by local planning authorities in developing LDDs and other actions/strategies. The wider policy framework set out in the Plan is obviously also applicable to these settlements as appropriate, providing comprehensive policy coverage for the needs of smaller towns.

2C.3 Is the draft RSS's approach to the Built Environment soundly based and sufficiently regionally specific, particularly on suburban renewal and on the urban rural fringe (Policies BE3 and BE4)

1. That the South East England region is facing increasing development pressures is widely acknowledged. The South East Plan seeks to accommodate these by requiring development primarily in urban areas, and promoting urban renaissance (CC8a), whilst at the same time seeking to secure the protection and enhancement of the character of the environment and quality of life (CC12). The Chapter on the Built Environment sets out the means by which these key policy approaches can be realised.
2. Policy BE1 details how urban renaissance objectives (as promoted by national policy) can be delivered. It builds on, and updates, policies within RPG9 (which have now largely been taken on board by national policy), to provide guidance to local authorities and other partners about how both existing and new tools and mechanisms – such as Community Strategies, active management programmes, partnership working and tailored design frameworks – can be utilised in a proactive manner, to help address this region-wide issue of managing development pressures to secure high quality development and public realm in urban settings, accompanied by the timely provision of appropriate infrastructure and services.
3. Policies BE2, BE3 and BE4 build on this general guidance by focusing on two types of area which in the South East are particularly at risk from development pressures – the suburbs and the urban-rural fringe.

Suburbs

4. Research undertaken for the Assembly clearly demonstrates the need for a specific policy approach to suburban neighbourhoods in the South East, focusing on proactive planning and neighbourhood management. Suburbs in the South East fulfil a particular role, accommodating the majority of the region's population, and function in a different manner to 'urban' areas for this very reason. They face different pressures and require a different planning policy approach.
5. There is currently a national policy deficit of planning guidance for suburban areas. Policies BE2 and BE3 set out regional-level policy support to guide and assist local authorities in tackling the key changes facing suburbs in the South East. They focus on those neighbourhoods most in need of a clear policy framework – firstly, those facing pressures of intensification, and secondly those in need of renewal.
6. Policy BE2 has region-wide application. Policy BE3 focuses on the second of these, building on BE1 to promote an active management approach in neighbourhoods that have typically been neglected by planning policy in recent years. Neighbourhood management will not be viable (or indeed appropriate) in all suburbs, but in those under threat from physical and or socioeconomic decline, joined up working between stakeholders and an integrated management framework represents a positive tool to secure environmental improvements, economic investment and enhanced community pride.

Urban rural fringe

7. In the South East, the urban rural fringe is an increasingly pressurised fragile area, given the complex settlement patterns, the presence of Green Belt in many areas, the pressure on urban areas to accommodate development, and the need, in parts of the region, for sustainable urban extensions. The urban rural fringe can serve an important role around towns, but better management is often required to achieve its potential. Research¹ has demonstrated that action is needed at both a regional and local level. Policy BE4 builds on government policy and research² to promote processes and delivery mechanisms to manage the specific pressures on the urban rural fringe in this region.

¹ EiP Document Library Ref: Bn4.

² PPS7 + EiP Document Library Ref: Sn7, Sn8

8. Consideration has been given by the Assembly to defining the geographic extent of the urban rural fringe at a regional level (unpublished). Whilst the urban rural fringe can be mapped using a criteria-based definition, this is hypothetical and potentially misleading, not least because the urban rural fringe is a transitional space and a regional definition would be too inflexible. We anticipate that local authorities may be insufficiently resourced to conduct in-depth mapping exercises, but maintain that they are better placed to identify the broad geographic extent of local areas of urban rural fringe, the specific pressures and opportunities they present, and the means by which these areas can be planned and managed in a proactive, comprehensive way.