

TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE ENGLISH COUNTRYSIDE

Brian PLUMMER

Abstract

Since the early 90s government has seen sustainable development as key to economic regeneration and environmental protection in the countryside set against a changing rural agenda. The role of the State and its agencies, local government and the private sector in delivering sustainable rural development, is outlined and specific examples are considered. The strengths and weaknesses of the system are noted. It is concluded that much progress has been achieved in the last decade but concern exists as to how far sustainable policies may be managed to serve perceived national social/economic interests.

Key Words

sustainable development, environment, localisation, partnership, England

Résumé

Depuis le début des années 90, le gouvernement a considéré le développement durable comme la clé pour la régénération économique et la protection de l'environnement. A côté du rôle de l'Etat et de ses agences, les gouvernements locaux et le secteur privé sont également intervenus dans l'expansion du développement rural durable. Des exemples spécifiques illustrent ces interventions et permettront de souligner les forces et faiblesses du système. Si beaucoup de progrès ont été faits durant la dernière décennie, une interrogation demeure : Jusqu'où les politiques de développement durable peuvent-elles servir et ne pas rentrer en conflit avec les intérêts socio-économiques nationaux.

Mots-clés

développement durable, environnement, localisation, participation, Angleterre

I. INTRODUCTION

The term sustainable development is at once both vague and complex. It is widely used and adopted by many to advance their own particular and often divergent objectives. Some argue that sustainable growth is a contradiction (Wright, 2001).

The publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987 defined sustainable development as « development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs ». The report also defined sustainability as « meeting the basic needs of all and extending to all the opportunities to satisfy their aspirations for a better life » (Blowers, 1993). The Brundtland Report and the Rio Earth Summit were influential in formulating environment policy in Britain and since the early 90s government established « sustainability » as a matter to be addressed by all levels of government (DoE, 1992). Since then it has been further refined and articulated.

Most recently sustainable rural development policies have been outlined in the Rural White Paper 2000 (Our

Countryside the Future : A Fair Deal for Rural England). These policies stress the importance of developing sustainable economies in the countryside able to tackle economic problems such as deprivation as well as conservation of landscape and wildlife. The White Paper stresses the need for recreation and invites wide public participation in achieving these ends.

The major environmental agencies, English Nature and the Countryside Agency, underline these commitments (English Nature, 2001 & Countryside Agency, 2001). Ultimately however it is the motivation and willingness of local communities to be involved and to bring pressure to bear on government to see that sustainability is achieved (Ecovast, 1994).

II. THE BACKGROUND

In England the development of sustainable policies should be viewed with the following background in mind •

- The crisis in agriculture
- The reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)

- The process of devolution
- The high public regard and concern for the countryside.

The path to post productive agriculture has not been easy (Lowe, 1993). In order to maintain the *sustainability* of farm incomes in the face of falling, and increasingly less subsidised, product prices some farmers have continued to farm intensively on land not « set aside » (see Webster, 1999). In the livestock sector the critical situation has been exacerbated by a series of epidemics which has affected all sectors of the rural economy. Since 1987 the total farming population has fallen by 28 %. In some areas the fall has been even greater. In Cambridgeshire the total population engaged in agriculture represents only 1,5 % of the total population of the County (Regional Trends, 2001). Agriculture's contribution to the national economy has fallen to less than 1 % (Countryside Agency, 2001). Paradoxically however there has been no sharp fall in the area of land classified as agricultural which accounts for circa 70 % of the land area of England. Therefore changes toward a more sustainable but different agriculture inevitably will have a considerable spatial significance on the character of England's varied countryside.

The reform of the CAP towards a more sustainable agriculture will lead to a slimming and removal of support for commodity production (decoupling) and the introduction of « cross compliance » which enables payment to farmers undertaking specific environmental activity (Christensen & Rygnestad, 2000). The second « pillar » reforms have as their objective the creation of a productive sustainable rural economy enabling an orderly adjustment to the declining role of agriculture in the countryside and, through agri-environmental schemes to conserve, enhance and sustain the character of the countryside.

In England devolution has resulted in the establishment of eight regions (excluding London). The Regions and their Regional Development Agencies are charged with developing policies aimed at integrating rural and regional priorities as a basis for sustainable development in the wider countryside (Lowe & Ward, 1998).

Public concern for, and recreational use of, the countryside is widespread in Britain. Some 10 % of the population of England is actively involved in conservation issues while tourist visits grew by 50 % between 1993 and 2000 (Countryside Agency, 2001). Such figures indicate powerful lobbies which cannot be ignored by government in their shaping of sustainable rural development policies. This has been most recently exemplified in the formulation of the Countryside and Right of Way Act 2000.

III. DELIVERY OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The government is committed to sustainable development for the economy as a whole. It enacts appropriate measures and sets out broad policy guidance. Advice on policy can be channelled through its independent Commission for Sustainable Development. National policies are paralleled in local government and through agencies such as English Nature (EN) and the Countryside Agency (CA) see Fig. 1. Mechanisms for the delivery of policy are complex, crossing individual ministries and agencies and involving private individuals and organisations often within the framework of a public private partnership.

A. Region Input

The eight English Regions work through Regional Development Agencies with the object of facilitating national government policies. Planning operates through the Regional Planning Guidance process. Guidance notes now incorporate a commitment to securing sustainable development emphasising an holistic approach through the integration of social economic and environmental perspectives within their specific area. There is also a requirement for appraisal (Counsel and Bruff, 2001). Such an approach provide a regional perspective which is essential to safeguard the wider environment and to highlight environmental problems such as arise from the unequal endowment of environmental capital both within and between regions (see Potter, 1997).

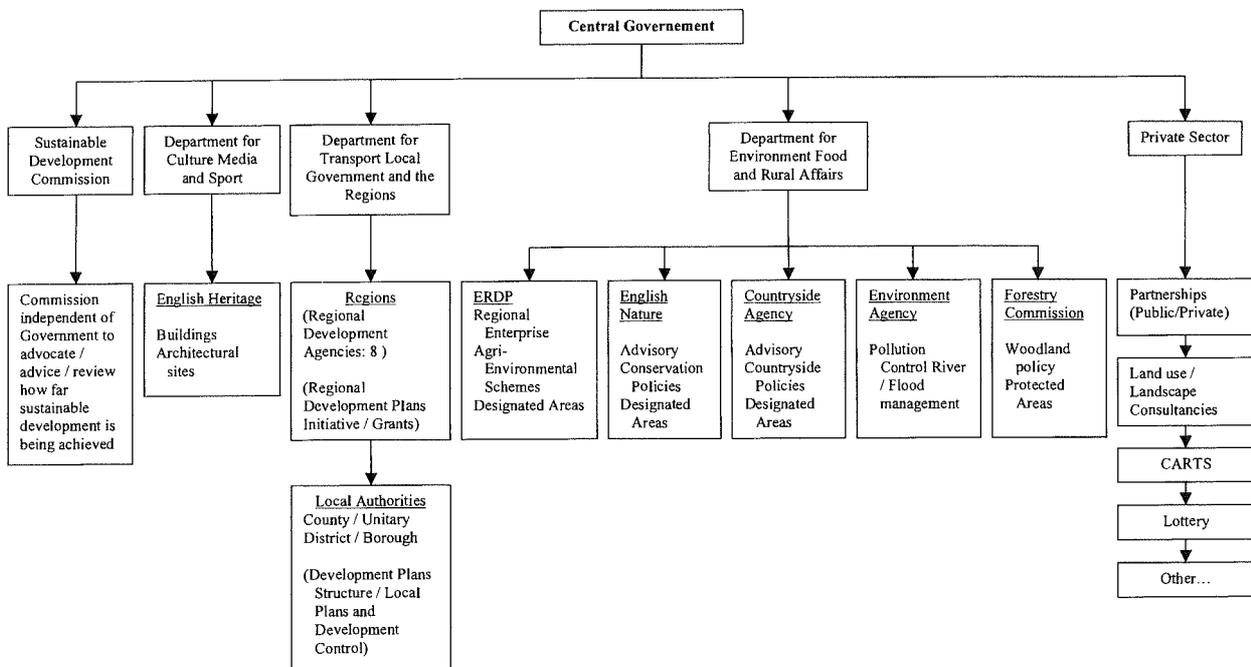
Within regions Local Authorities (LAs) formulate broad development plans, including a sustainable element, for preferred land use. Over 50 % of LAs are committed to implementing Local Agenda 21 policies. The planning is done in consultation with the regions and in line with national policy. Strategic issues are addressed through Structure Plans. Local Plans are more specific and arise from measures which LAs and private organisations wish to advance. Local Plans are submitted for planning permission (development control). Generally agricultural land, except for special cases such as environmental protection, land use change..., is not covered by the planning acts. Since the Countryside Act of 1968 many LAs have well developed policies to protect the distinctiveness and heritage of their areas. This is often achieved through co-operation with others; local conservation workers and EN and CA in particular. LAs have a difficult balancing act to perform in judging between « excessive » and « acceptable » development. The CA have suggested that any significant environmental losses arising from development should be mitigated or compensated for through associated

measures. In other words environmental goods which are important locally should be « replaced » locally thus insuring a degree of sustainability (CA, 2000 & CRN, 2001).

Regional Development Agencies (RDA) are able to work alongside LAs and NGOs by providing support for initiatives and demonstrating how the EU, Region, LAs and other organisations work together to achieve sustainable development. The Bakewel Project is a case in point. It has contributed significantly to sustaining this market town in the Peak District National Park at a time of declining agriculture. 60 % of the working population are now employed in services, banking and business. A specific objective involved the strengthening of the

economic base of the area through training initiatives and diversification of the rural economy aimed at encouraging sustainable economic growth. Through the establishment of an Agricultural Business Centre the farming sector was encouraged to « grow sustainably and diversify ». The RDA was a major player in the project partnership and through « Rural Challenge » and the « Single Regeneration Budget » was able to fund 12 % of the costs while the private sector provided 50 % and LAs and the EU the remainder. A particular achievement has been significant job creation and retraining. The project has enabled « the comprehensive and sustainable regeneration of this market town » (Derbyshire Dales, District Council, 2001).

Figure 1 : Delivery of sustainable development



B. Environmental Input

The Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) is the major government ministry concerned with the countryside. Its role is « to sustain and enhance the distinctive environment, economy and social fabric of the English countryside » (MAFF, 2001). One of the ways of achieving this is through the *English Rural Development Programme* (ERDP). The objective of the programme is to encourage the development of sustainable farming enterprises on the assumption they will assist in the delivery of a sustainable rural economy safeguarding both

communities and environment. There are two priorities. *Firstly* providing necessary support in such areas as retraining, investment, diversification, marketing... and more widely in the rural community through the Rural Enterprise Scheme. This scheme operates, often with other players, as part of larger, integrated, projects taking care of infrastructural matters (rural bus services) and rural heritage (buildings). *Secondly* conservation and enhancement of the farming environment. There are two measures, one dealing with less favoured rural priority areas where many small hill farmers find that diversification is an increasingly difficult option. The

other, Agri-environmental measures which currently comprise ten schemes including Environmentally Sensitive Areas, Countryside Stewardship, Organic Farming, Farm Woodland Premium...

The Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme involves sustainable farm management of valued countryside regionally designated including such landscapes as The Downs, The Broads, North Peak, Somerset Levels... There are now twenty two areas covering 10 % of England's agricultural land. However as the scheme is voluntary, and perhaps the financial incentive insufficient, uptake of agreed sustainable farming practice covers only 532,000 ha (Defra, 2001). Agreements with Defra through its Rural Development Service are tailored to meet specific objectives and, above basic requirements, payments to farmer are based on the level of sustainability they sign up to.

The Countryside Stewardship Scheme (fig. 2). This scheme, which incorporates the former Habitat Scheme, is important as it is less restrictive in geographical area than ESAs and targets, again on a regional basis, a variety of landscapes and their habitat types. Significantly this includes a pilot arable stewardship scheme in areas of low environmental stock. As Webster (1999) points out care must be taken in targeting these schemes to recognise the variability of the natural endowment within and between regions. At present this arable scheme is being evaluated. Stewardship also covers « set aside » areas (designated as a supply control measure but often having an environmental « benefit »). The scheme is also seen as being flexible extending to the protection of « fragments » of landscape such as old hedgerows and orchards. Farmers enter a ten year management agreement to manage land in an environmentally beneficial way in return for scheme is competitive as funding is limited.

Figure 2 : The Countryside Stewardship Scheme

Environmentally Sensitive Areas	Uptake	1996		1999		Total
		Total for 2000				10,915
Countryside Stewardship Scheme						
Countryside Stewardship	Uptake	1,139		1,189		9,989
	Area	15,083		52,442		195,427
Linear Features (km) ² (hedge / walls ...)		1,987		2,264		12,736
Previous Habitat Scheme (now incorporated into Countryside Stewardship)	Uptake	109		19*		431
	Area	1,400		241		7,115
Farm Premium Woodland	Uptake	740		471		3,569
	Area	2,387		1,538		13,078

*1997

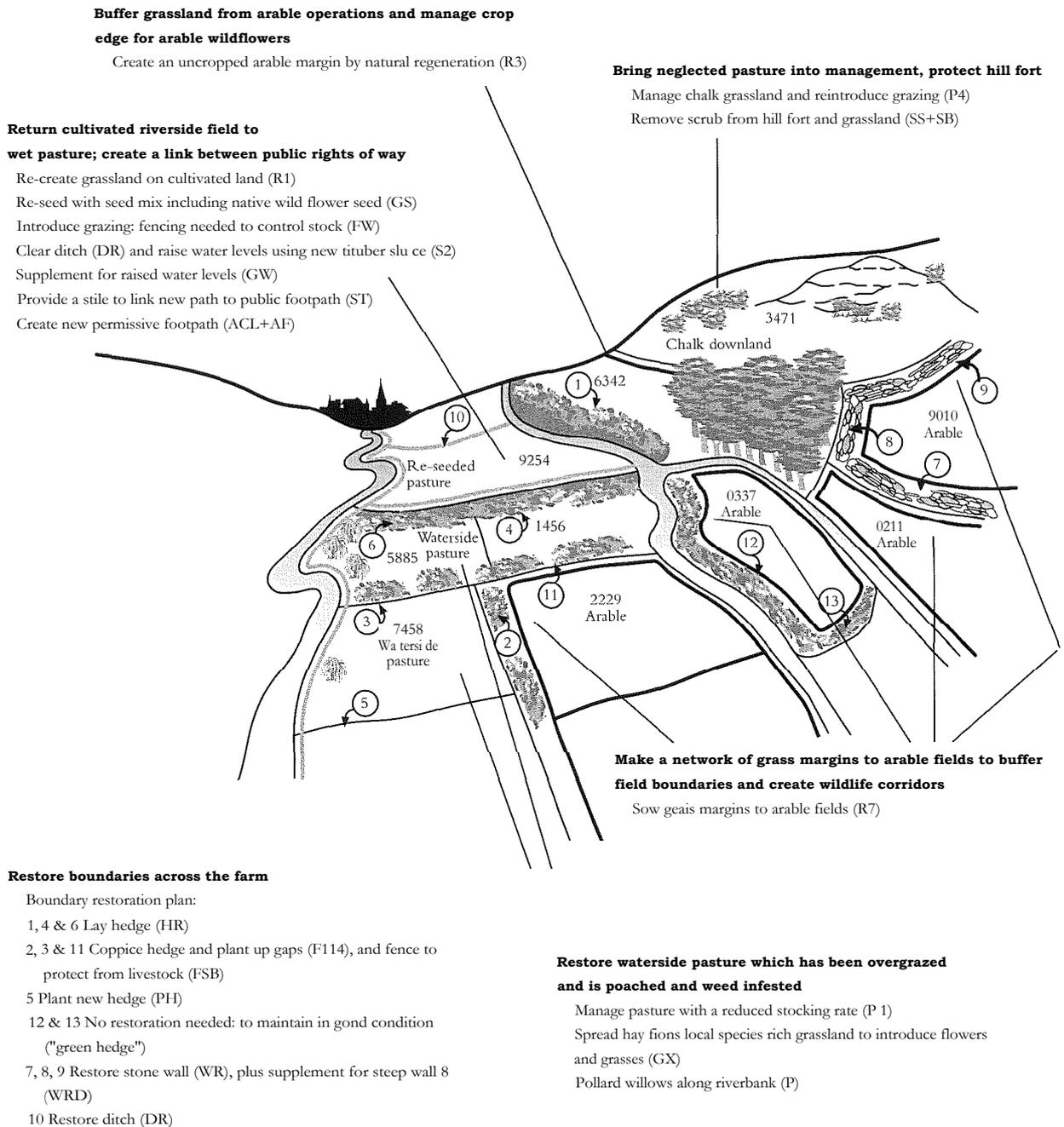
Defra 2001

Uptake tends to be greatest in the north and west and can be seen as financially attractive given the greater difficulties associated with farming in these areas as well as falling farming incomes generally. The total uptake is nearly 200,000 ha (see fig. 3).

These schemes and others within the ERDP programme represent positive incentives together with the mechanism for the delivery of sustainable goods in the countryside.

The environmental agencies play an important part in framing environmental policies and managing countryside resources to secure their sustainability in the wider context of rural development. Defra is sek² by three agencies; English Nature, The Countryside Agency and The Environment Agency. The Forestry Commission is also involved in sustaining indigenous woodland through the « Broadleaves Programme » and other initiative

Figure 3 : Example application



English Nature stresses the link between environmentally sustainable agriculture and nature conservation. Its objective is to encourage positive wildlife management over the whole of the country and not only confined to special sites (English Nature, 2001). Nevertheless designated sites such as National Nature Reserves and Sites of Special Scientific Interest safeguard special habitats and their biodiversity. Many of these sites represent critical (irreplaceable) environmental stock and thus contribute to wildlife sustainability. English Nature promotes a policy of interdependence between agriculture and nature conservation and encourages positive working relationships with farmers and landowners. Sites are often managed under partnership agreements with English Nature approving the management structure and in some cases offering financial assistance.

The Countryside Agency advises all levels of government on countryside issues (CA 2001). The Agency's strategic vision for rural England is inclusive, to provide access as well as protection and to assist in rural regeneration. The overarching principle which runs through all their objectives is sustainable development. The Agency also has an overview and planning role in the creation and management of designated areas which characterise the English countryside. The best known being English National Parks (10 including the proposed parks — New Forest and South Downs) and thirty-seven Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs). The Countryside Agency, together with partners, has established, and financially assisted, a number of environmental projects aimed at improving the quality of rural life such as the Local Heritage Initiative and the Millennium Green project.

The Environment Agency. The objective of the Agency is to monitor the state of the land. This is a wide remit which includes the monitoring and control of pollution, water, resource management including flood protection and land drainage. Under the Water Regulations Act 1991 the Agency has a statutory responsibility to take account of conservation issues, natural beauty and recreation needs. As a regulatory agency it works closely with the Regions and all levels of government.

English Heritage advises the Department for Culture Media and Sport on the listing of buildings and on their preservation. It maintains and repairs many historic buildings and distributes grants to further building conservation. English Heritage works with government and other organisations.

Private Sector Initiatives play an increasingly important part in working towards achieving sustainable rural development through sound management practices and partnership initiatives. The National Trust is one of the country's largest landowners with a membership of 2.7 million. It endeavours to manage its extensive estate

(200,000 ha) sustainability. Another influential group is the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds which undertakes sustainable management of the natural environment on its estate (43,000 ha).

There are many conservation, amenity and recreation groups — CARTS (Dwyer & Hodge, 1996). They play a vital role in the countryside working actively for local environmental protection and betterment. Private land use consultancies are retained by government and others to appraise projects independently. CAG Land Use Consultants in co-operation with the government agencies (see above) have developed a holistic approach to sustainable development design and planning through a system known as « Quality Life Capital ». (CAG/LUC, 2001). The group stresses the importance of *local participation* which, if followed through into Local Agenda 21, can provide for local partnership on the ground.

Heritage Lottery Funding, often in association with other partners (see above), provides assistance to local groups for the care of their particular landscapes, traditions and culture adding to the quality of rural life.

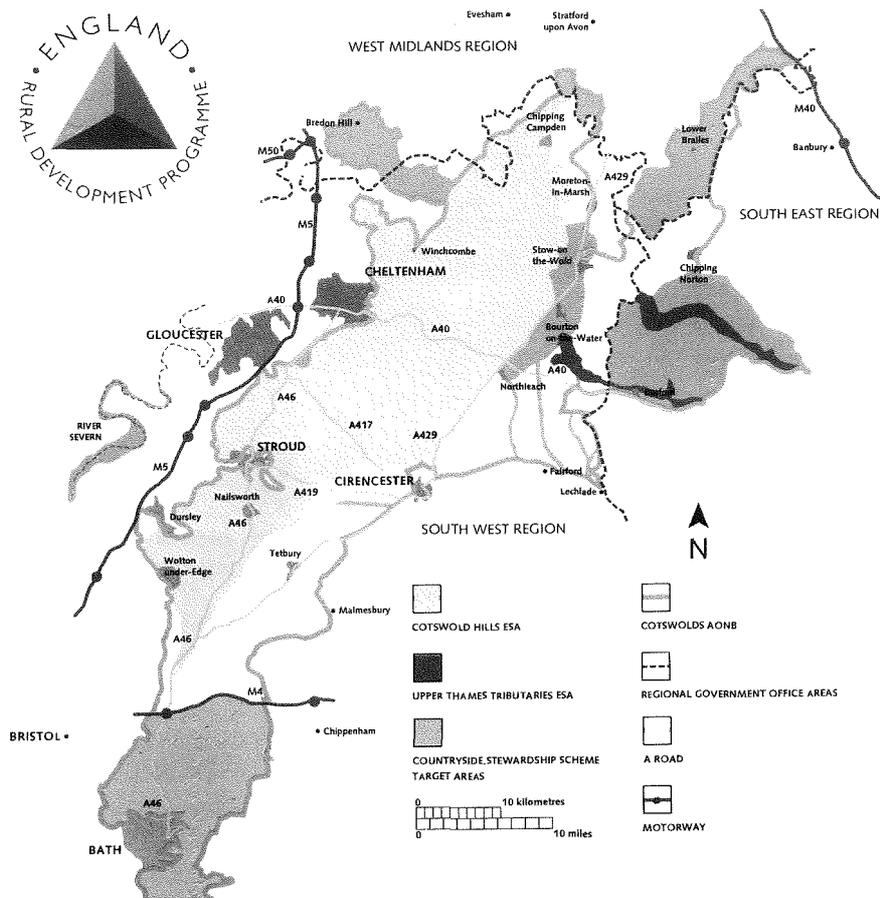
IV. INTEGRATION

How closely can the various parties, government, agencies, NGOs and others involved work together to deliver the objective of sustainable rural development? The Bakewell Project provides one scenario the Cotswold Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty another. Both show a degree of horizontal and vertical integration involving co-operation and openness between the various parties and their agendas, at both the national and local level, aimed at achieving progress toward sustaining their economies, cultures and landscape.

The Cotswold AONB comprising some 200,000 ha was established in 1966 and extended in 1990 (fig. 4). It operates through partnership. Thirty organisations are represented including all the LAs, government agencies, farmer, tourist and conservation groups, land and business, NGOs and pressure groups such as the Council for the Preservation of Rural England. This partnership works explicitly to « promote sustainable development (Cotswold Partnership 2001) as well as to « conserve and enhance » the area. The Partnership is guided by a management strategy and business plan. Everyday operations are carried out by a small management team responsible to an advisory committee of the Partnership representing an interests.

The AONB Partnership is financed jointly by the LAs (£140,000) and the Countryside Agency (£160,000). Other partners contribute £20,000 with a total budget for 2000-2001 of nearly £320,000. (ibid).

Figure 4 : The Cotswold AONB

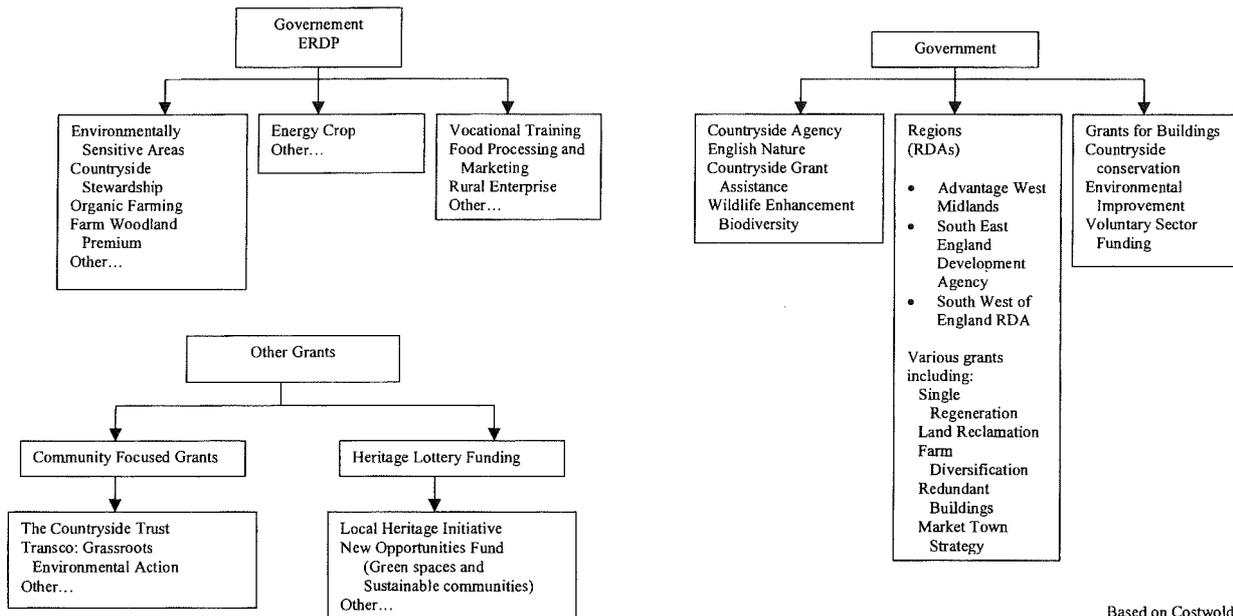


Undoubtedly one reason for the success of the Cotswold AONB Partnership has been the networking of its many partners who are able to prosecute a number of environmental agendas successfully. Furthermore a wide network not only draws together many communities to become stakeholders in the exercise. Additional financial support can be brought into the frame through various funding channels covering a very wide range of environmental, countryside and community activities and available to individuals and organisations within the AONB (fig. 5).

V. DISCUSSION

Considerable progress has been achieved in developing sustainable policies and practice in the countryside. At present nearly 50 % of the land area of England falls under some form of « protective » designation ranging from Green Belts to Local Nature Reserves although the presumption of protective and sustainable management sometimes fall wide of the mark. Pollution has been reduced, soil erosion minimised, habitat loss slowed and more rigorous environmental management is in place assisted by EU directives.

Figure 5 Funding channels



Based on Costwoldlion
Spring Summer 2001

Nevertheless there are serious debts. 73 % of upland heath and 68 % of upland calcareous grassland within Sites of Special Scientific Interest are seen to be in an unfavourable or declining condition and unlikely to be sustained (CA, 2001). Many traditional buildings and other heritage features are considered at risk. National Parks suffer from many recreational pressures, incompatible military activity, industrial encroachment (quarrying) and major road building schemes. Both within and outside designated areas inappropriate development pressures pose a major threat to sustainable rural development. There are projections for over 20 % urban growth within the period 1991 — 2016 in the South West Region and over 10 % in practically all other rural areas (National Statistics, 2001).

Although sustainability is the government's « overarching environmental agenda » it is bedevilled by different interpretations and practice depending on the nature, level and monitoring of the exercise. As with any initiative of this nature there are strengths and weaknesses which are summarised below. Some become more evident with the passage of time and change of circumstance.

Strengths

- The principle of sustainable rural development for the betterment of the rural environment is generally understood and continues to gain public support.

- Sustainable development is now incorporated into government policy and widely disseminated through the planning system and environmental agencies.
- Monitoring and appraisal is being introduced into Regional Planning Guidance.
- Increasing recognition of the need for an holistic approach.
- Sustainability is now an objective of agricultural policy with the development of a series of flexible approaches.
- The business sector increasingly adopts sustainable environmental policies.
- Many sources for the funding of sustainable projects are now available.
- In many instances local partnerships are effective in the delivery of sustainable rural development.

Weaknesses

- The perceived national interest may allow inappropriate projects to override regional and or local sustainability.
- At the regional/local level serious difficulties arise in reconciling conflicting aspirations for sustainable development. Implementation of sustainable policies is made difficult by their complexity and lack of co-ordination between players. Continued degradation of the rural environment and decline of the rural infrastructure.

Present support for agri-environmental programmes and for the development of sustainable farm diversification measures is inadequate.

- Despite large areas of the countryside enjoying some form of protective designation only a relatively small area of the rural environment is under sustainable management.
- Need for the development of adequate methodology for monitoring and appraisal of all « sustainable » programmes.

VI. CONCLUSION

Within the period of the last decade there has been a significant shift in policies which address the management of the countryside. Government thinking now emphasises inclusivity and devolution in policy making to achieve a measure of sustainable rural development.

Inclusion is one of the evident aims behind the establishment of Defra and its development of a more integrated approach to rural policy. While still intimately concerned with agriculture the depai tillent increasingly recognises the changing realities in the countryside.

Localisation means more emphasis on regional and particularly local policies which support the needs of *different* countrysides and the needs of *different* communities to assist them in achieving rural sustainability.

Within this general framework a number of issues may be usefully addressed.

Co-ordination. A new regional policy, an increasingly diversified countryside and environmental programmes within agriculture calls for a much doser « horizontal » and « vertical » co-ordination between the various departments, agencies and levels of government than currently exists especially as all are signed up to sustainable policies. There has been some movement. Recently The Countryside Agency and English Nature have worked more closely together and presently they are being urged to further co-ordinate their work wherever possible. A merger of the two agencies could presage a more co-operative yet flexible approach dovetailing the management of the rural environment. There is a need for more constructive work between these agencies and the Rural Development Service in the operation of the various English Rural Development schemes (greater liaison is desirable between these players within the Cotswold AONB, see above). As the rural economy continues to diversify there is an increasing need for « rural and « regional » affaires to be considered together within the context of sustainable development. There is evidence that critical actors on the rural stage are nuancing their policies to achieve greater co-ordination of programmes regionally.

Integration. In recent years the number of protected areas has increased. However the value of such a sectorial approach to environmental conservation has been increasingly questioned especially rince Rio in 1992. It is argued that the selection of « special » areas runs counter to the principle of `indivisible » sustainable development. At the practical level, often within arbitrary boundaries, these areas have failed to secure protection from outside deleterious impacts. Conserving and sustaining the rural environment should not be confined to special sectoral areas alone (Bishop et al., 1997). However special designation is still necessary where « critical » non replaceable environmental capital needs protection (Selman, 2000). The tenor of the argument suggests the need fewer, better protected, sites.

Partnership. In recent years emphasis has been placed on local partnerships to achieve sustainable rural development. There is however still a need for local communities, individuals and NGOs to be brought more centrally into the decision making process. There are many types of partnership some for specific objectives (e.g. Bakewell Project) and some which are ongoing such as the Cotswold Partnership. There are further examples such as the South West Shropshire « Rural Challenge » partnership. All engage people at the local level and « add value » to the quality of local life.

Funding. Over the last four years there has been an increase in funding for rural affairs from central government (DETR, 2000) and more recently for the amount ringfenced for AONBs has been increased. However it is less than £15,000 annually if divided equally between the 37 AONBs. This example suggests that government funding in a non priority area falls below that which might be reasonably expected for encouraging sustainable rural development projects. The « knock on » effect curtails desirable countryside initiatives. It reduces the number of successful applicants for assistance under the agri-environmental schemes and depresses the financial support awarded to them. Overall less than 20 % of farm units have successfully accessed these grants although it is fair to indicate that applications may have been tuned down for other reasons.

VII. THE FUTURE

Public pressure on government expressed through bodies such as Ecovast as well as the evident success of many sustainable development initiatives ranging from those supported by the EU to those undertaken by LAs and their partners suggest fertile ground for advance.

As environmental conservation moves away from designated area protection towards sustainability and regeneration in the wider countryside the role of National Parks and AONBs may be questioned. However given the considerable geographical area they occupy they can be

said to represent the general countryside in microcosm yet they enjoy the advantage of having a clear environmental mandate, professional teams and access to outside support which provides the necessary skills to co-ordinate all the players, both public and private in partnership, to deliver the most appropriate sustainable development policies to secure the protection of their local environments. Parks and AONBs might be seen in the future as « one stop shops » models for the dissemination of best practice in sustainable rural management. Such a scenario is not without problems. It would require the reallocation of some planning activities and the surrender of some jealously guarded policy responsibilities by Regional Development Agencies. Concomitantly it would require an increase in public funding from Defra.

Optimism must be tinged with caution. Can we be sure that government is committed? The signs are mixed. As already indicated there needs to be a considerable expansion of the various agri-environmental schemes and especially to assist viable diversification programmes. Although it is proposed that funding will increase up to 2006/7 (MAFF, 2001) it is not certain that this will be achieved in the present economic climate or that it will be able to meet the expected growth demand.

Sustainable rural development is seen by government as a fundamental overarching principle underlying public policy and not just one of sectoral interest. How far the rhetoric is translated into practice will provide some measure of government's real commitment to the principles which underpin sustainable development. At the present time the government is proposing significantly more housing in rural areas than LAs believe is sustainable and it has been suggested that Regional Development Agencies could be invoked to overrule local planning authorities and thus lead to inappropriate development in areas which are already vulnerable. A further indication of reality as opposed to the rhetoric of government policy will become clearer with the public enquiry into the proposed container port development at Dibden Bay near Southampton. At present both English Nature and the Countryside Agency have come down strongly against the project because of its perceived « serious and dramatic negative environmental impact » (Countryside Focus, 2001) while the Regional Development Agency's view is to have no view at the present time (pers. Comm. South East England Development Agency).

Sustainability or « continuance » of the countryside depends not only on the prudent use of environmental resources, including rural land, but also on the socio-economic sustainability of its communities. The extent to which this balance is achieved will determine the future of the English countryside.

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Adresse de l'auteur :
Brin PLUMMER
Brunei University
Uxbridge UB8 3PH
England