

Environmental Quality in Spatial Planning

*Incorporating the natural, built and historic environment,
and rural issues in plans and strategies*



Guidance to help in the preparation of Regional Spatial Strategies
and Local Development Frameworks



The Countryside Agency is the statutory body working to make the quality of life better for people in the countryside and the quality of the countryside better for everyone.

From April 2005, the Countryside Agency will operate as two divisions: Landscape, Access and Recreation whose function is helping everyone to respect, protect and enjoy the countryside and the Commission for Rural Communities whose function is rural watchdog, expert and adviser.



ENGLISH HERITAGE

English Heritage is the Government's statutory advisor with responsibility for protecting and promoting all aspects of the historic environment in England.



English Nature is the statutory body that champions the conservation and enhancement of the wildlife and natural features (geology) of England.



The Environment Agency is the public body taking the lead in protecting and improving the environment in England and Wales, making sure that air, land and water are looked after by everyone in today's society, so that tomorrow's generations inherit a cleaner, healthier world.

Environmental Quality in Spatial Planning – guidance

The Guidance is supported by a series of supplementary files available via the Agencies websites. These discuss the key messages and explain the action points in the guidance and/or provide more information that will assist in their delivery.

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This guidance does not take into account any changes resulting from the Government's Modernising Rural Delivery programme, which proposes the establishment of two new organisations: *Natural England* bringing together English Nature, the landscape, access and recreation functions of the Countryside Agency and most of the Rural Development Service; and the Commission for Rural Communities. Any changes will be reflected in future versions of this guidance.

Acknowledgements

This guidance was drafted by David Tyldesley and Associates under the auspices of a Steering Group comprising Joanna Russell (Countryside Agency), Duncan McCallum (English Heritage), Jonathan Price and Carl Simms (English Nature), Ann Skinner and Colin Eastman (Environment Agency). Representatives of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister attended some of the Steering Group meetings. The structure and content of an early draft of the guidance was the subject of a sounding board workshop held in Leeds and attended by representatives of local planning authorities, regional planning bodies, regional Government Offices, non-governmental organisations and the Agencies. The Steering Group expresses its appreciation for the comments received, which have been very influential in shaping the structure and content of the guidance.

The agencies would welcome feedback on the guidance as well as examples of good practice for inclusion in future versions. Please send any comments to: joanna.russell@countryside.gov.uk

Purpose of this guidance

Our quality of life, health and well-being rely on clean land, water and air, productive soils, available minerals and water resources, natural coastal and fluvial systems and processes. They also depend on distinctive and inspirational landscapes, a wealth of wildlife, vibrant communities, a healthy, well managed countryside and open spaces accessible for everyone to enjoy.

This guidance is produced by the Countryside Agency, English Heritage, English Nature and the Environment Agency (the agencies) to help planning authorities and regional planning bodies in preparing plans and strategies under the new planning system. It will also be used by the agencies' own staff. It is intended to supplement guidance issued by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (see **Supplementary File 1**).



The settlement of Yarmouth on the Isle of Wight contains a large number of historic buildings. The central core is designated as a conservation area and much of the adjacent estuary is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest. *English Heritage*

We are not seeking to impose any new requirements on planning authorities, rather to set out our views as to how planning authorities might achieve high standards of environmental quality in spatial planning. Planning authorities should therefore apply this guidance in the light of the scope of the particular plans and strategies they are preparing and the sustainability appraisal they will be undertaking.

Throughout this document 'environment' includes the natural, built and historic environment in urban and rural areas. We (the agencies) are interested in enhancing the quality of life for both urban and rural communities. In the guidance, we consider rural issues specifically to reflect the Countryside Agency's roles. The Countryside Agency believes that plans and strategies should be 'rural proofed', so that they properly reflect rural needs and circumstances (see www.countryside.gov.uk/ruralproofing).

In this guidance all plan-making bodies at regional and local levels are referred to as 'planning authorities', for convenience. We use the term 'plans and strategies' to encompass Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Development Frameworks. We have not separately set out what we would like to see in the different types of local development documents that will comprise the local Development Framework. Not all of the information in this guidance will be relevant to every local development document and planning authorities should use the guidance as they see fit. Much of the guidance will also be applicable to other types of regional and local plans and strategies.

We believe that our input to Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS), and Local Development Frameworks (LDF) is a priority, because of the importance of planning to the delivery of our objectives. However, our differing roles and resources mean that we may not all make our contributions in the same way. This guidance will help to ensure that our views are readily available, even where we are unable to make a fuller contribution to every document in a LDF or every consultation on an RSS.

We consider planning authorities should make sure they are able to develop the skills and expertise in-house to ensure that environmental and quality of life issues are fully integrated into plans and strategies.

The agencies' approach to the new planning system

The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 introduces fundamental changes to the planning system. We support the changes, especially the greater emphasis on sustainable development, spatial planning, community involvement and quality outcomes, and are committed to helping their delivery. The new system and the ODPM guidance provide a major opportunity for us to help deliver the policies and proposals that will shape new development and steer change, in England, in the future.

Some of our ideas are at the cutting edge of planning policy and practice. They are intended to be inspirational and aspirational, and as such will need developing and testing in practice. The guidance sets out examples of good practice that are drawn from plans prepared under the old planning system but could easily be adapted to fit the new system. Good practice is evolving and we will be pleased to hear from any plan-making bodies that are pursuing initiatives to develop good practice under the new planning system.

In particular, we are encouraging a move away from a 'topic-based' to an 'objectives-led' approach for plans and strategies. We are promoting the environment and rural issues in a new and better integrated policy framework, addressing wider sustainability issues whilst meeting local needs within a national, regional and district wide context. Under each section of the guidance, we set out *recommended actions* that we would encourage planning authorities to take on board. In **Supplementary Files 13** and **14** we have produced scoping or 'proofing' checklists to assist planning authorities in preparing RSS and LDF. These set out the issues the agencies would like to see considered for inclusion in plans and strategies.

Supplementary File 1 gives more information about the background to the guidance.

The agencies envisage a plan making system that is:

- | | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| ✓ properly resourced | ✓ better connected | ✓ firm but flexible |
| ✓ evidence based | ✓ fully integrated | ✓ rigorously tested |
| ✓ genuinely visionary | ✓ objectives-led | ✓ well delivered |
| ✓ realistically ambitious | ✓ spatially variable | ✓ adequately monitored |
| ✓ more inclusive | ✓ clearly prioritised | ✓ regularly reviewed |

so that development:

- is more sustainable; both in built form and location;
- respects the ability of the environment to accommodate change (including climate change);
- avoids damage to and increases or enhances the environmental resource;
- reduces risks to, and potentially arising from, the environment;
- respects local distinctiveness and sense of place and is of high design quality, so that it is valued by communities; and
- reflects local needs and provides local benefits.

Recommended Action

- *Planning authorities should contact the agencies as early as possible in the plan/strategy process. Although not a statutory requirement, it would be helpful if planning authorities could send a copy of their Local Development Scheme to each of the relevant contact points listed in Supplementary File 15.*

Improving and scoping the evidence base

Plans and strategies need to be founded on a thorough understanding of the state of the environment and, where appropriate, the needs of rural areas.

The evidence base needs to concentrate on gathering and analysing the information necessary to produce a synopsis of each area's state of the environment, and its social, economic and housing needs. This will inform the vision, policies and proposals and the production of the Environmental Report or Sustainability Appraisal.

This is the first and one of the most fundamental stages of plan making. It should be focused on what is or may be changing, the key pressures for change and what is needed to encourage beneficial change and prevent that which is harmful. **Supplementary File 2** provides sources of information relevant to our interests.

Recommended Action

- ▶ *Contact the agencies (see Supplementary File 15) to help to scope the environmental and rural issues in the plan and the evidence base needed to address them.*
- ▶ *Discuss with English Heritage, English Nature and the Environment Agency the use and handling of data.*
- ▶ *Start to identify areas that are distinct, because of their ability to accommodate change, or their sensitivity to change depending on their characteristics. Identify the changes these areas are experiencing or may be vulnerable to, or the nature and scale of their development needs and opportunities.*

Visionary plans and strategies

We would like to see genuinely visionary plans and strategies that are meaningful, and not just vague aspirations. The vision should be at the forefront of the plan or strategy and shape all aspects of it. Objectives, policies and proposals should flow from the vision and contribute to it.

The vision should embrace the objectives of the Community Strategy and should be a locally relevant, identifiable and attainable expression of what the community wants to achieve, set in the context of national, regional and sub-regional policies.

Recommended Action

- ▶ *Planning authorities should develop their visions for the 'future picture' so that the kind of environment and quality of life that they aspire to achieve in the future is clearly understood and sufficiently described to provide a steer for the planning system as a whole.*
- ▶ *The vision should clearly reflect the statutory duty to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development.*

Ambitious plans and strategies

Plans and strategies should be more ambitious about what can be done to enhance and manage the environment, plan for future change (including that brought about by climate change) and bring positive change to rural areas. The new provisions for planning contributions in the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 are a major opportunity for planning authorities to help set and deliver an agenda for improvement in the environment and quality of life.

Having identified alternative policy approaches and strategic development options for achieving the objectives, the plan or strategy should clearly set out how the selected option can deliver beneficial changes. A list of practical and achievable proposals could be drawn up and incorporated into RSS and LDFs with quantified targets and delivery timescales and mechanisms where possible. These proposals should include improvements to the environmental resource or 'infrastructure' on which all development relies. All significant development proposals should contribute to environmental resources. **Supplementary File 3** gives examples of such proposals.

Plans and strategies should be deliverable and show how objectives should be achieved. An example is the use of planning obligations and other delivery mechanisms to implement the spatial policies. Individual development proposals could be required to make a practical contribution in cases where it is located in or close to the relevant area or it could include proposals of a type that could contribute to the target. Other developments may make indirect contributions such as assisting with the funding of projects.



Providing 'green infrastructure' as part of new development is an important consideration in the planning process. Marston Vale Community Forest, Bedfordshire. Carl Simms/English Nature

Recommended Action

- ▶ *Planning authorities should consider more ambitious initiatives for the conservation, enhancement and better management of the environment and rural areas.*
- ▶ *Plans and strategies should indicate how these initiatives can be built into and delivered through the planning system and other delivery mechanisms.*

More inclusive plans and strategies

The involvement of particular stakeholders and the wider public should permeate through the whole planning process. We have helped to develop and test ways of involving local people and specific stakeholders in influencing the future of their area and their communities and we want to share that experience. We acknowledge the value of ‘front-loading’ community involvement as a way of generating better informed plans and of reducing potential conflict in later stages. **Supplementary File 4** gives examples and advice.

Recommended Action

- ▶ *Check that all of the appropriate bodies listed in Supplementary File 4 have been consulted and invited to engage in the planning process at the earliest possible stage.*
- ▶ *Planning authorities should consider how local community-led initiatives such as parish plans and market town action plans can best be used to inform or be part of the plan preparation process.*

Plans and strategies that are better connected externally

We see the wider scope of spatial planning as a major opportunity to strengthen links between RSS and LDF, Community Strategies, and a range of other plans and strategies in which we have an interest.

There is scope for mutual support between plans and strategies in the policy cascade from national through regional to local plans and strategies and horizontally between different sectors, including economic, social and environmental plans and strategies. **Figure 1** illustrates an example of how a variety of policy frameworks need to link in the web of plans and strategies.

The agencies are committed to:

- addressing economic, social and environmental issues together;
- ensuring that necessary development is sustainable, of high quality, in the right place and benefits local communities;
- ensuring that the economic and social value of environmental assets is recognised;
- enhancing the environment and promoting local distinctiveness;
- maintaining and where necessary restoring healthily-functioning natural systems and processes; and
- ensuring the potential contribution to the regional and local economy is unlocked in ways that protect and enhance the environment and stimulate regeneration and renewal.



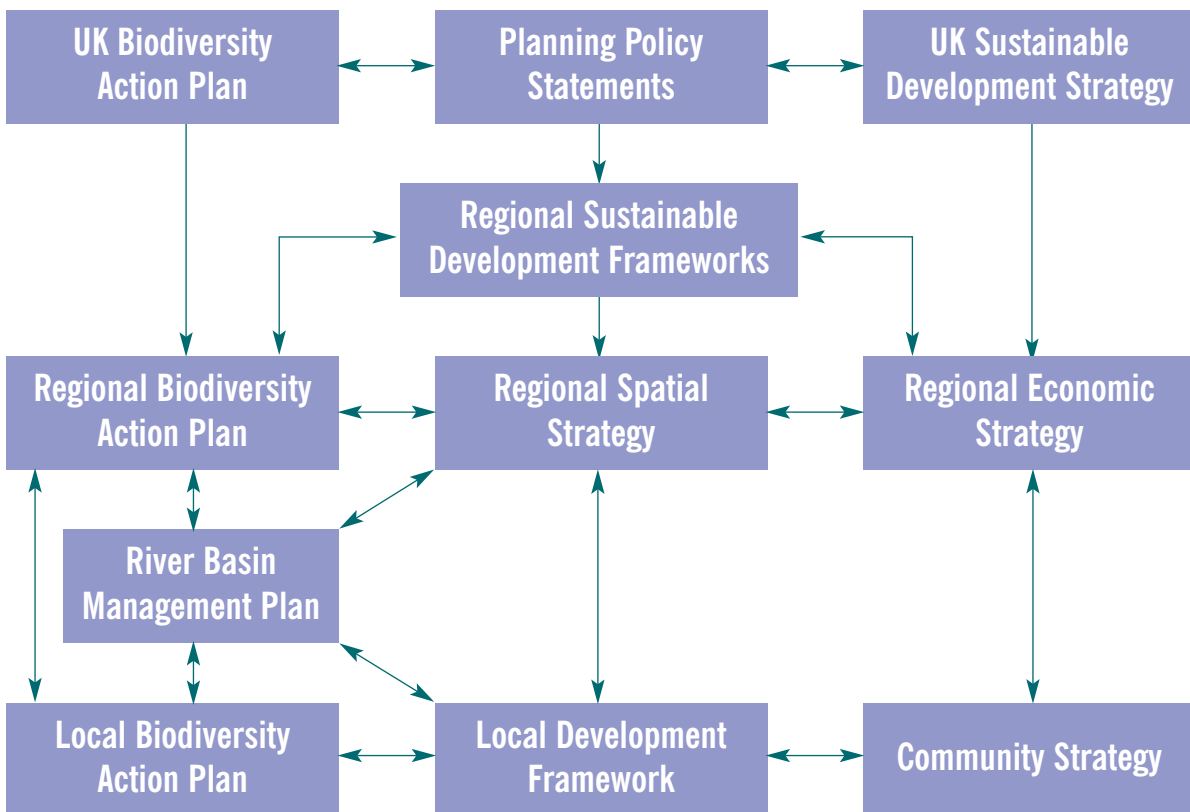
A pond, wetland, flood storage compensation for a small housing development near Buckfastleigh. *Environment Agency*

Recommended Action

► *Planning authorities should ensure that all their policies and proposals are consistent with other plans and strategies and the links between RSS and LDF and other plans and strategies are clearly identified, with their respective roles for delivering change well defined.*

FIGURE 1

Connecting plans and strategies – Examples of links in the web of plans and strategies



Integrated plans and strategies

Policy integration with win-win-win solutions

Sustainable development requires economic, social and environmental objectives to be met, together and at the same time. Policy integration is essentially about achieving these win-win-win solutions. We believe that integrated win-win-win solutions, which meet all three objectives without significant harm to any of them, should always be the goal. They are achievable and should be the basis for plans and strategies. Attempting to balance or trade-off environmental issues against local economic or social benefits is unlikely to deliver the best solution for communities in the long-term. It is not compatible with sustainable development principles.

However, it is recognised that such triple benefits are not possible in every case. Sometimes a win-win solution will be the best that can be achieved. The agencies are particularly keen to see plans and strategies secure a net environmental gain with no significant loss to any interest. Sustainability appraisal may be able to make use of Quality of Life Assessment to help to improve understanding of how development can cause least damage and deliver most benefits for sustainability.

Supplementary File 5 further discusses these concepts.

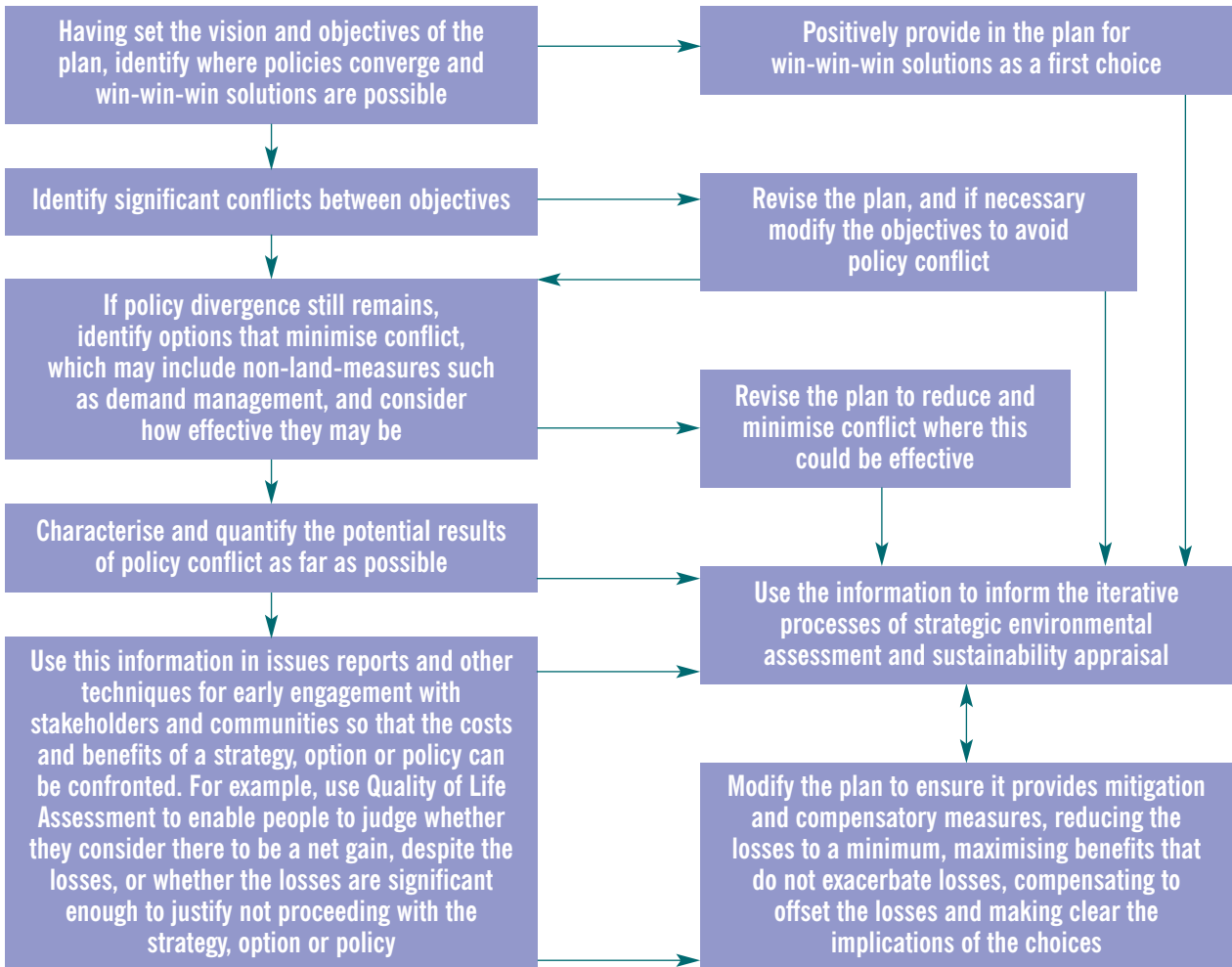
Some of the ‘crunch issues’ that RSS and LDF documents will need to face up to, such as accommodating new housing in sensitive areas, will mean that aspects of the environment may be depleted. But all development is capable of delivering benefits as well as fully mitigating and compensating for environmental harm. The agencies believe that the best way of planning for these scenarios is to adopt the sequential approach to decisions illustrated in **Figure 2**.



Brownfield sites at Canvey Wick, Canvey Island, where a win-win-win solution was achieved. See Supplementary File 5.
David Knight/English Nature

FIGURE 2

Suggested approach to policy integration



There will be times when greater priority will need to be given to the protection of the nationally and internationally important natural, built and historic environment, on which we depend physically, biologically and culturally, even at the cost of forgoing some immediate socio-economic benefits.

Strategies and plans should identify opportunities for gain more proactively, which may have been missed in the past. They should help to squeeze more benefit and less loss out of decisions. Planning authorities should think hard about how the location and design of essential new development could avoid harmful effects whilst bringing new benefits that would not otherwise occur. The impacts of future climate change should also be taken into account.

Recommended Action

► *Planning authorities should pro-actively look for win-win-win solutions first and where these are not possible, integrate social, economic and environmental objectives by using the flowchart in Figure 2 so that more benefits and fewer losses flow from development.*

Respecting the ability of the environment to accommodate change

There is scope to widen the range of studies that assess the environment's ability to accommodate change. For example, the location and design of development should be considered in ways that achieve a good environmental fit now, address past losses and, where appropriate, build in new capacity to help meet future development needs and environmental change. This would help in the Sustainability Appraisal process.

Supplementary File 6 provides further discussion of these issues and sources of information.

Development also needs to take full account of future impacts, particularly the effects of climate change and how the capacity of an area, such as coastal zones and river valleys, may change with rising sea levels, increased rainfall, increased storminess and other potential changes in weather patterns.



Moorland near Langdon Fell, Ireshopeburn, Northumberland.
Charley Headley/Countryside Agency

Recommended Action

Planning authorities should consider whether:

- ▶ *there are areas that are particularly suitable or unsuitable for development, including areas that may be affected by climate change;*
- ▶ *the ability of other areas to accommodate development may be increased and if so, how;*
- ▶ *it is possible to identify targets or thresholds or other indicators of development opportunity that would help to maximise environmental benefits;*
- ▶ *parameters could be defined that might feed into policy criteria and monitoring; specific actions need to be taken in the plan or strategy to take account of climate change;*
- ▶ *English Heritage, English Nature and the Environment Agency may be able to provide specific advice and assistance.*

Plans and strategies that are objectives-led

Objectives should lead the drafting of policies and proposals. They should flow from the vision and scoping of the plan or strategy (and from higher tier plans and policies) and should form the framework within which policies and proposals will fit.

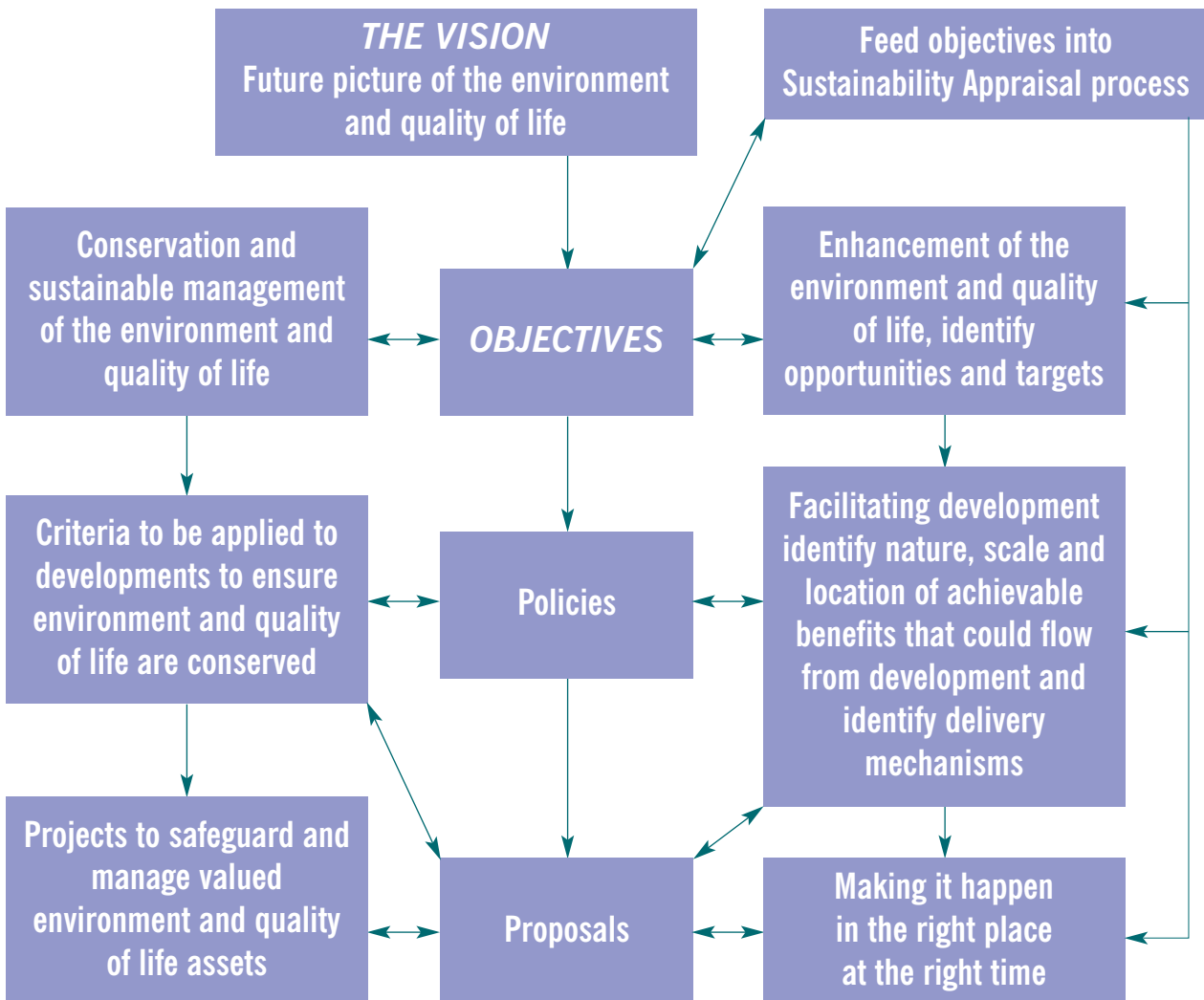
Objectives should not be a vague wish-list but a clear statement of what needs to be done to deliver outcomes such as facilitating sustainable development, what needs to be conserved; and what should be replaced, improved or restored. Of particular importance in establishing conservation needs is 'critical natural capital' and historic areas and features that, if lost or spoiled, can never be replaced. Examples are ancient semi-natural woodland, genetically unique populations of species, old field systems, historic parks or gardens, natural river or coastal systems and groundwater resources. Figure 3 illustrates the way in which the agencies see objectives leading policies and proposals in plans and strategies. **Supplementary File 7** further explores the objectives-led approach.



Historic environments need to be protected from new development through the planning system.
English Heritage

FIGURE 3

How objectives should lead policies and proposals



Plans and strategies that are spatially variable and prioritised

Spatial variation

Policies will need to vary across a plan area to reflect differing local needs, circumstances and objectives.

Planning authorities should consider whether development could be directed to places where it could not only avoid but also solve problems and create wider socio-economic and environmental benefits.

Policies and proposals should reflect the character of particular areas. Landscape Character Assessment, Historic Landscape Characterisation and River Basin and Catchment Flood Management Planning are important tools that should underpin policy.

Designations of various kinds have helped to express important spatial variations in development plans. The extent to which different areas are designated and the weight attached to, and implications of, the various designations will be very important to the spatial expression of policies in the plans and strategies and to the location, scale and types of development. **Supplementary File 8** provides further advice on spatial variation, policies and flexibility in plans and strategies.

Priorities

Plans should clearly indicate what is urgent, and what needs to be done first, in light of the vision and the objectives. This might require starting on the long-term changes as soon as possible, in order to see an effect in the plan period, as well as delivering short-term priorities.

Determining priorities can involve difficult choices. Prioritisation should be transparent and should involve communities and stakeholders in decisions. They should be able to understand why specific priorities have been identified and resourced. Sustainability Appraisal may be able to make use of Quality of Life Assessment to help planning authorities to identify and justify priorities.

Recommended Action

- ▶ *Planning authorities should ensure that their information base on environmental designations and other spatially variable evidence is up-to-date and consult the agencies if necessary.*
- ▶ *Planning authorities should ensure that their plans and strategies clearly indicate the relative importance of designations, giving greater weight to international and then national and local designations and the implications of the designations in policy terms.*
- ▶ *Policies should be tailored to meet local needs and reflect local circumstances. Planning authorities should ensure they have robust local information and evidence to underpin locally based spatial policies.*
- ▶ *Planning authorities should undertake detailed landscape character and historic landscape characterisation assessments and set out appropriate policies and proposals for different character areas.*
- ▶ *Planning authorities should undertake strategic flood risk assessments to identify development locations at least risk from flooding.*
- ▶ *Plans should clearly indicate what is urgent, and what needs to be done first, in light of the vision and the objectives.*

Firm but flexible plans and strategies

Plans and strategies should steer and control development positively but should be flexible enough to accommodate unforeseen, innovative and inspirational proposals.

Recommended Action

- ▶ *Planning authorities should ensure that plans and strategies encourage and accommodate unforeseen, innovative and inspirational developments that could add value to the area whilst ensuring that such developments are not inconsistent with other policies in the plan or strategy.*

Facilitating locally distinctive and valued development

We believe that it is fundamental to sustainable development and the quality of life that local needs are met locally. All new development should be well designed to fit and enhance its context. It should be locally distinctive, environmentally efficient in its use of resources, and valued by the community as a beneficial addition to the environment. **Supplementary File 9** lists a wide range of agency initiatives to support this objective and also provides sources of information about sustainable construction, discussed below.

Landscape Character Assessment, Historic Landscape Characterisation and River Basin Management Plans are important tools for informing policy frameworks about what is locally distinctive and important.

Recommended Action

- ▶ *Planning authorities should ensure that policies and proposals are included in plans and strategies to ensure that local needs are met locally by development that is locally distinctive and is valued by the community.*



Sinsay Fields, Cerne Abbas, Dorset. *Andy Tryner/Countryside Agency*

Facilitating more sustainable development

A key factor in the achievement of truly sustainable development involves the identification of sustainable locations to ensure that development avoids or enhances areas subject to environmental and heritage designations, is not subject to flooding or other natural hazards, and that water and waste facilities are available.

The agencies welcome the lead that has been provided by other organisations in improving building construction and engineering techniques that will deliver more sustainable buildings and infrastructure.

We commend measures such as using recycled building materials, avoiding or reducing pollution, reducing waste, remedying the effects of derelict and contaminated land, reducing water and energy consumption, using renewable energy, reducing the need to travel, increasing density and using less land. We

look to planning authorities to promote these measures in plans and strategies as an important contribution to sustainable development. We also urge planning authorities to ensure that plans and strategies are consistent with and promote the Government's waste hierarchy.

We will continue to engage in the planning system to ensure it promotes and adopts:

- the precautionary principle;
- the principle that the developer should avoid, or where not possible, mitigate and compensate for the adverse effects of development, minimise and then deal with its waste in the most sustainable way (including where necessary the polluter pays principle);
- the protection of environmental resources necessary for life;
- the provision of essential infrastructure including water resources, waste facilities, flood defenses and 'green' infrastructure
- the re-use of buildings before considering demolition;
- design of development that minimises its impact on the environment both during and after construction, taking account of climate change;
- development that generates and utilises renewable energy in appropriate ways; and
- working with, not against, nature and natural processes.

Supplementary File 9 gives further guidance on these aspects of sustainable development.



The River Whitton after bioengineering work to stabilise the banks. 'Soft' solutions should be considered instead of 'hard' engineering often used in new development. *Joanne Barlow/Environment Agency*

Recommended Action

- ▶ *Planning authorities are urged to develop policies and to refer in plans and strategies to the need to:*
 - ▶ *use construction and design techniques that encourage more sustainable forms of development and that favour the retention of existing buildings with their historic associations and the energy already expended and embodied in their construction.*
 - ▶ *ensure that the proposed location is the most sustainable for development.*

Plans and strategies that are rigorously tested

We are committed to playing as full a part in the processes of Sustainability Appraisal (including Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)) as resources allow. See **Supplementary File 10**.

In addition, we have developed checklists to help planning authorities and ourselves consider the environmental and rural content of a plan or strategy, at any stage. The checklist for RSS and sub-regional policies is reproduced at **Supplementary File 13**; the checklist for LDF documents is reproduced in **Supplementary File 14**.

Recommended Action

- ▶ *Planning authorities should check that they have the latest version of this guidance, especially the checklists in Supplementary Files 13 and 14 by visiting our websites.*
- ▶ *Planning authorities should consider using the checklists to scope the content of their plans or strategies or to assist in sustainability appraisals or other proofing and checking processes.*

Plans and strategies that are well delivered with high quality outcomes

We are optimistic that the new RSS, sub-regional policies, and LDF documents, including Supplementary Planning Documents and Area Action Plans, have the potential to improve development standards.

Rather than merely testing whether a development is 'bad enough to refuse', the Countryside Agency promotes the idea that planning authorities should consider whether it is 'good enough to approve'. Planning authorities are urged to incorporate this concept into development plans and development control and management in order to facilitate more sustainable, locally distinctive and high quality developments. Pre-application discussions to support more sustainable outcomes may be particularly helpful. There is considerable scope for using planning obligations to deliver benefits for the environment and rural areas. **Supplementary File 10** discusses further the testing and delivery of plans and strategies in this context.

Recommended Action

- ▶ *Planning authorities could enhance the quality of development in plans and strategies by promoting development that is 'good enough to approve'.*
- ▶ *Plans and strategies should identify benefits that can be secured through particular developments and indicate the scale, location and type of environmental and community benefits that planning authorities expect to be delivered through planning obligations or similar future mechanisms.*

Plans and strategies that are adequately monitored and regularly reviewed

We have contributed significantly to the development of indicators for measuring environmental change. We have participated in drawing up the national and local Quality of Life performance indicators managed by the Audit Commission and the Improvement and Development Agency. We commend planning authorities to refer to these when selecting indicators for monitoring but encourage planning authorities to develop their own indicators, with local relevance. In the light of this, our thoughts on the selection of indicators and targets to meet local circumstances are set out in **Supplementary File 11**.

Recommended Action

▶ *Planning authorities should refer to Quality of Life performance indicators in developing their own indicators for monitoring the effectiveness of plans and strategies, especially those that are capable of measuring changes that are particularly relevant to local circumstances and to meet local planning objectives.*

How we can help

In **Supplementary File 12** we explain in detail how each of the agencies can help planning authorities in the different stages of preparing plans and strategies. **Supplementary File 15** contains a list of our contact points.

