

**Panel Question (i)**

**Are rural issues, including the development needs of small towns, adequately addressed in the draft RSS?**

1.1 The draft RSS takes an integrated approach to rural issues, addressing them in a range of policies across the plan, backed up by the framework policy for rural areas RDF3. This reflects the complex interrelationships between the regions urban and rural areas and strengthens rural policy. The Sustainability Appraisal of the draft RSS identifies a range of policies for which there will be positive impacts for rural areas when appraised against the relevant SA objectives<sup>1</sup>.

1.2 This reflects the national policy stance of “mainstreaming” rural issues into policy, an approach supported by NW Regional Rural Affairs Forum in their representation which states “The NWRRAF supports the integration of rural issues and needs throughout all the policies, rather than having a rural chapter”.

1.3 RDF2 and RDF3 set the spatial framework for rural areas, dealing with a range of rural issues including:

- The importance of local character, environment and quality of life in rural areas.
- The importance of strengthening and diversifying the rural economy.
- Meeting the needs of communities for services, housing and employment.
- Support for sustainable, appropriate agriculture, tourism and other land based activities.
- The importance of empowering local communities to help meet their own needs.
- An indication of where most development should go, with a concentration on the key service centres to meet the principles of sustainability set out in DP1.
- Acknowledgement of the need for a more flexible approach to development in sparse rural areas, where access to key service centres may be limited and reliance on agriculture and tourism greater.
- Acknowledgement that in rural areas adjacent to regional centres, towns and cities, the urban settlements can have an important role in providing services and employment for neighbouring rural areas.

1.4 A range of other policies in the plan expand on elements of this spatial framework. Key examples include:

- W1 refers to giving positive support to sustainable diversification and development of the rural economy throughout the rural areas. The tourism, food and nuclear sectors are referred to in relation to Cumbria.
- W6 and W7 set the framework for tourism in all areas, including all rural areas and specifically the National Park and AONBs, referring both to tourism’s important role in the rural economy and the need to ensure that it is of appropriate scale and quality and that key designated areas are protected from inappropriate development

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<sup>1</sup> Sustainability Appraisal Report of the Draft Regional Spatial Strategy for the North West of England, Entec for NWRA, January 2006 (Section 5.5 Rural Impacts). See also NWRA Statement on Matter 1E, para 1.6

- A range of policies in the RSS attempt address issues of access to services, including DP1, RDF1, RDF3, L1, RT1 and the subregional policies. L1 deals specifically with access to health, education and training.
- L5 takes a strong policy approach to affordable housing, with specific reference to the needs of the regions different rural areas.
- RT1 applies to rural areas, especially “Public, community and demand responsive transport networks should be developed which link employment, education and training opportunities to areas of need.”
- RT2 deals with management and maintenance of the highway network and has a specific section dealing with rural areas, including issues of tranquillity, air quality, and local countryside character.
- Reference is made in RT7 to developing integrated walking and cycling networks.
- Chapter 11 Enjoying and Managing North West deals with the full range of environmental, resource and heritage issues facing the North West’s rural areas.
- The sub regional Policy frameworks have elements of rural policy where specific to the sub regions, for example CNL3 deals with a range of key issues affecting the LDNP.

1.5 GONW raise concerns that the sub regional policies do not respond to the spatial variations in rural need and opportunities<sup>2</sup>. The Assembly considers that the Plan when read as a whole does reflect spatial differences in rural areas. RDF3 refers specifically to urban fringe and sparse rural areas. W1 and W6 refer to different economic needs and opportunities within different rural areas. The sub regional policies also give ‘location specific’ strategies e.g CNL 3 “Overall spatial policy for the Lake District”. We would invite GONW to provide clarity to the Panel<sup>3</sup> on how it envisages that Draft RSS could be reworded to address these concerns.

1.6 Regional Rural Delivery Frameworks play a key role in implementing the Government’s Rural Strategy 2004. The North West RRDF is an ‘enabling framework that integrates and joins up delivery across the full range of partner activities impacting on rural areas and communities’.<sup>4</sup> The RSS policy approaches clearly fit in well with the priorities of the North West Regional RRDF:

- Maximising the economic potential of the region’s rural areas
- Supporting sustainable farming and food
- Improving access to affordable rural housing
- Ensuring fair access to services in rural communities
- Empowering rural communities and addressing rural social exclusion
- Enhancing the value of our rural environmental inheritance

1.7 The RSS policy provides a comprehensive framework for LDFs to develop detailed settlement policy for the rural areas. Development in the region is

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<sup>2</sup> Paragraph 1f) of Annex 1 of the GONW response

<sup>3</sup> in its statements and during the EiP debate

<sup>4</sup> The North West Regional Rural Delivery Framework, GONW, April 2006 para.1.4

concentrated on regional centres, towns and cities. Outside of these the concentration is on Key Services Centres (KSCs) which will include most if not all “small towns”, and this will support their development needs.

1.8 This ties in with PPS 7 which states that both RSSs and LDFs should include policies to sustain, enhance and where appropriate revitalise country towns and villages (including through the provision of affordable housing) and for strong, diverse, economic activity, whilst maintaining local character and a high quality environment.

1.9 A more detailed approach to rural settlement policy would be too prescriptive and would not reflect the wide range of local rural circumstances across the region. In line with PPS11<sup>5</sup>, the Assembly have sought to avoid a simple repetition of national policy as PPS 7 provides guidance on smaller rural settlements. These points are in line with PPS11. However Assembly officers note several representations which have expressed concern that there is no reference to local centres outside KSCs (other than in policy CNL1 for Cumbria). In addition the Land Use Consultants study into KSCs<sup>6</sup> recommends that there should also be policy for local centres. Assembly officers therefore suggest how a strategic level policy for local centres could be developed<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Planning Policy Statement 11: Regional Spatial Strategies, DCLG, 2004 para 1.7 (**PP11**)

<sup>6</sup> Key Service Centres – Role and Function Study prepared by Land Use Consultants for North West Regional Assembly, 2006. Also see Briefing Paper 14 Key Service Centres – Role and Function Study and Initial NWRA response, NWRA, September 2006

<sup>7</sup> Briefing Paper 20 - Suggested Wording Changes to Draft RSS, NWRA, September 2006