

## **4 The definition of sustainable development**

48. As we have already noted, the NPPF is a document that both guides the writing of Local Plans, and is intended to be used as a substitute Local Plan where none has been produced by a local authority.<sup>[92]</sup> Assessing the suitability of the NPPF for this task involves looking both at its sufficiency—addressed in the previous chapter—and at the appropriateness of its content. In the following two chapters we examine two aspects of that content: the definition of sustainable development, and the overall balance of the document.

### **The NPPF definition**

49. The draft NPPF defines sustainable development as:

Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It is central to the economic, environmental and social success of the country and is the core principle underpinning planning. Simply stated, the principle recognises the importance of ensuring that all people should be able to satisfy their basic needs and enjoy a better quality of life, both now and in the future.<sup>[93]</sup>

50. The definition of sustainable development is at the heart of our discussions on the NPPF. The Framework states that the presumption in favour of sustainable development, "should be seen as a golden thread running through both plan making and decision taking."<sup>[94]</sup> If that is the intention, then the role of sustainable development (considered in Chapter 5) and the way in which the concept is defined become crucial to the document as a whole. We recognise that, if the final NPPF contains an agreed definition of sustainable development which is balanced and comprehensive, then the 'presumption in favour of sustainable development' becomes a very constructive part of the Government's wider environmental, social and economic agendas, rather than solely some sort of stick to compel the completion of Local Plans or, as some of our evidence argues, simply a presumption in favour of development.<sup>[95]</sup>

51. However, one of the first difficulties encountered is that, on the one hand, the NPPF contains the definition of sustainable development quoted above, but, on the other, the draft Framework also states that:

When taken as a whole, the policies in this Framework set out the Government's view of what constitutes sustainable development in practice and how the planning system is expected to deliver it.<sup>[96]</sup>

As Stuart Hylton, representing the Planning Officers Society, stated, "What that is saying is you have a definition that runs to 52 pages whose conclusions will inevitably point in all sorts of different directions."<sup>[97]</sup> Whilst we can appreciate the thinking behind an approach that encourages users of the NPPF to read it as a whole, we consider that this approach will lead to far more uncertainty and, possibly, legal challenge. The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) took legal advice on this, among other aspects of the NPPF, and its Chief Executive, Shaun Spiers, stated:

On the question on sustainability, what the NPPF says is that the sustainable development is the 52 pages. What our lawyer, John Hobson, says is that the

problem with this is that the 'key sustainable development principles are not easy to identify or extract from the text of the NPPF'.[\[98\]](#)

52. We agree that the Government's statements relating to the need to look at the NPPF as a whole in order to ascertain its view of sustainable development are not helpful in this context. The Government should focus on arriving at an agreed, succinct and useful definition which is clearly identified as such within the NPPF.

53. The evidence we received which addressed the definition of sustainable development can be grouped into five categories: those who deemed it an almost impossible job to define sustainable development; those who felt that the definition in the draft NPPF was sufficient; those who wanted the addition of material from other recent Government documents; and those who felt that the NPPF should present a more positive approach to the environmental aspects of sustainable development. Overlaying these were those who considered that the definition in the NPPF needed to be framed in a way that encouraged local authorities to set out their own definitions in their Local Plans. We deal with each of these approaches in turn. We have also taken into account the conclusions reached by the Environmental Audit Committee which took evidence on this specific issue.

### **Is the 'Brundtland' definition in the draft NPPF adequate?**

54. The evidence to this inquiry has, amongst other things, demonstrated the difficulty of setting down any agreed definition of sustainable development. John Rhodes of Quod told us that:

Everybody has a different view of sustainability. It is possible I could give you any case study for a development proposal and we could all disagree about whether or not it was sustainable. Trying to identify what sustainability really means is almost the holy grail.[\[99\]](#)

The difficulty of clarifying the concept in a way that could shed light on practical circumstances was reinforced to us by statements such as "sustainable development is development that is sustainable, we would argue."[\[100\]](#)

We do not want to underestimate the difficulties of drafting a definition, but we are of the opinion that a clear definition is a vital component of the NPPF. The definition in the draft NPPF clearly draws on the definition put forward in the 1987 report from the UN World Commission on Environment and Development, the 'Brundtland Report'.[\[101\]](#) This is development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".[\[102\]](#) Professor Paul Cheshire queried, "Who could be against the Brundtland formulation of sustainable development? My worry is: how do you translate that into actual decision making about parcels of land?"[\[103\]](#) The combination of the clarity of the Brundtland definition and the difficulty of adding to it was brought out clearly by Stephen Wright of the John Lewis Partnership:

I think the NPPF does set out a Brundtland definition; it makes it clear it is about social, economic and environmental considerations. It is very difficult then to come up with a more technical and detailed definition that applies cross-sector and that will pass the test of time.[\[104\]](#)

55. The 'Brundtland' definition of sustainable development has the advantages of being succinct, of encompassing a number of concepts within one sentence and of being recognisable not only to those most directly involved in seeking to achieve sustainable development but, to an extent, to the wider public. We consider that any definition in the NPPF needs to build on the 'Brundtland' definition rather than starting from scratch.

## Should the definition go further?

56. The Environmental Audit Committee, however, found that several groups argued that thinking on sustainable development has moved on somewhat from 1987.<sup>[105]</sup> A number of witnesses to our inquiry have referred, for example, to the benefits of drawing on the principles in the 2005 Sustainable Development Strategy.<sup>[106]</sup> The Government set out five guiding principles of sustainable development in that Strategy:

- Living Within Environmental Limits;
- Ensuring a Strong, Healthy and Just Society;
- Achieving a Sustainable Economy;
- Promoting Good Governance; and
- Using Sound Science Responsibly.

Dr Hugh Ellis of the TCPA said that:

Brundtland is an interesting starting point, but it is now more than 30 years out of date. It is very surprising to see it represented in the NPPF. The 2005 definition is not a partisan one; it represents 25 years' experience of what sustainable development is. I think the five ideas around sustainable development remain critical, but there is one very important principle that the NPPF deliberately ignores: the concept of environmental limits.<sup>[107]</sup>

57. Tony Burton of Civic Voice pointed out that "there was a lot of consensus about the 2005 Strategy and the key principles around social justice and environmental limits", which he considered needed to be embodied in the Framework.<sup>[108]</sup> Sustainable development was defined in Planning Policy Statement 1 in terms similar to that of the 2005 Strategy, and the same principles also underpinned the February 2011 Defra document, *Mainstreaming Sustainable Development*.<sup>[109]</sup> During a debate on the Localism Bill in the House in November 2011, the Minister, Greg Clark, said: "I could not have been clearer when I said that we have no difficulty with the 2005 strategy or its wording."<sup>[110]</sup> We agree, and consider that the five guiding principles from the 2005 Sustainable Development Strategy are useful in identifying key aspirations against which development proposals should be judged. We have heard from a number of witnesses that the concept of 'living within environmental limits' is a particularly useful in this respect.<sup>[111]</sup>

58. We welcome the constructive approach that the Minister has taken in respect of the definition of sustainable development and, in particular, the fact that he has encouraged us and all those concerned about this issue to go beyond existing definitions. Indeed, the Minister told the Environmental Audit Committee (EAC) that:

I think some of the recent thinking in the Natural Environment White Paper [...] goes beyond some of the thinking in 2005 to talk not just about a sort of defensive not breaching limits, but being more ambitious than that, saying we should have net gain, that development and other activities should result in net gain to the environment. We have many habitats in our country that have been despoiled over the years. My view is that we should take the opportunity to restore them. I would not want to set down a definition that was less ambitious than, for example, would have been in the Natural Environment White Paper.<sup>[112]</sup>

59. The Government's 2011 Natural Environment White Paper states that:

Through reforms of the planning system, we will take a strategic approach to planning for nature within and across local areas. This approach will guide development to the best locations, encourage greener design and enable

development to enhance natural networks. We will retain the protection and improvement of the natural environment as core objectives of the planning system. [...] we will improve the quality and increase the value of the natural environment across England.[113]

60. We see great value in an approach to sustainable development that seeks to enhance the value of the natural environment through the development process instead of just protecting it, as valuable as that latter activity is. We share the views of the EAC that:

the NPPF should embrace a wider definition of sustainable development than just the Brundtland definition. It should include or refer explicitly to the 2005 Sustainable Development Strategy [...] But it should go further still, and reflect the primacy of environmental limits, couched more firmly in terms of seeking environmental improvement. By doing so, it would encourage local authorities to include in their Local Plans a requirement for some types of development to include environmental gain.[114]

### **The adaptation of a sustainable development definition by local authorities**

61. We considered whether there was a tension between a strong national definition of sustainable development in the NPPF and the need for local authorities to set their own definition according to local circumstances and priorities. Dr Adam Marshall of the British Chambers of Commerce provided an example of contrasting local circumstances:

I like the fact that local communities will be able to determine for themselves to a certain extent what constitutes 'sustainable'. I have spent a lot of time in chambers of commerce around the country. When you go to many authorities in the North of England, for example, which have long taken a very positive approach to planning, for them sustainability at the end of the day is about jobs and economic activity. Many years ago one council leader said to me that the best thing in the world that could happen to him was that a B&Q shed should open on a piece of contaminated brownfield land, because it creates jobs and economic activity in the area. Southern local authority representatives have said to me, 'The worst thing that could happen to me is the opening of a B&Q shed in this area, because it will create enormous amounts of traffic, pressure on local infrastructure, etc.' [115]

This was echoed by John Slaughter of the Home Builders Federation who agreed that:

You have to allow for the fact that circumstances do vary from area to area. In terms of balancing sustainability, a point we made in our written evidence is that, in some areas, you would probably in practice give more weight to environmental factors.[116]

62. We agree that it is both good practice and in the nature of localism that local authorities should be encouraged to apply the definition of sustainable development in a way that meets their local circumstances. The EAC expressed the clear view that a definition of sustainable development in the NPPF that captured the fundamental principles in the 2005 Sustainable Development Strategy would enable "local authorities to interpret sustainable development for the circumstances of their particular areas." [117]

### **Environmental, social and economic aspects**

63. There are other issues considered elsewhere in this report that impact directly on the formulation of a definition.[118] These are the need for balance between the 'elements' of sustainable development, and the question of whether the definition should make explicit reference not only to environmental, social and economic aspects, but also to cultural aspects. When giving evidence to the EAC, the Minister stated that "the economy has always been a part of the definition of sustainability and we do need homes and jobs", but

gave the reassurance that any appearance in the NPPF of giving greater weight to the economic pillar was "not intentional".<sup>[119]</sup> This stance reflects that taken by the Prime Minister in a letter to the National Trust in which he stated that:

I believe that sustainable development has environmental and social dimensions as well as an economic dimension, and we fully recognise the need for a balance between the three. Indeed, the purpose of the planning system as a whole, and of our proposals for it, is to achieve such a balance.<sup>[120]</sup>

The Environmental Audit Committee recommended that the Government ensure in the revised NPPF that there is "no potential for confusion about the equal importance of all three aspects of sustainable development."<sup>[121]</sup>

64. As seen in Chapter 3 of this report, we received strong evidence that the NPPF did not pay sufficient attention to the cultural aspects of planning policy and decisions. Witnesses spoke of culture in terms of sport and of the arts<sup>[122]</sup> but we recognise that the concept of culture can be extended to include all aspects of community life. In the light of these representations we see a compelling case for the definition of sustainable development to include a cultural dimension as part of the social pillar of the definition of sustainable development.

### **Conclusions on the definition of sustainable development**

65. We welcome the Government's willingness to look again at the definition of sustainable development contained in the NPPF. In the course of a debate on the Localism Bill, the Minister for Decentralisation told the House that:

A cogent case has been made—let me put it that way—for expanding and strengthening the definition in the NPPF. I hope that that demonstrates, on the basis of this House's experience of the scrutiny of the Bill and the commitments the Government have made, that there is no difference in our commitment to the matter. Indeed, I have expressed a personal view that I think we could go a little further than the 2005 strategy. We will reflect on these contributions in the consultation on the NPPF and respond in due course.<sup>[123]</sup>

66. **Any new definition of sustainable development must contain the following elements:**

- a) **the clear and identifiable use of wording from the Brundtland report as this is well known and understood;**
- b) **the restating of the five guiding principles from the 2005 sustainable development strategy; and**
- c) **an explicit statement of the need to address and to seek to achieve all of the aspects of sustainable development, and not to start by assuming that one aspect can be traded off against another.**

67. The definition below is put forward as an example of how these elements may be incorporated into a definition.

*Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of existing communities and future generations to meet their own needs. It is central to the economic, environmental and social success of the country both that these three aspects of development are addressed*

*positively and equally and that planning both serves to protect and to enhance and add value to the environment. This is the core principle underpinning planning.*

*Policies in plans and decisions on development should be assessed against the principles that the nation and areas within it should live within their environmental limits; should achieve a sustainable economy and should seek to ensure a strong, healthy and just society.*

*The achievement of sustainable development through planning should be based on the responsible use of a sound evidence base and developed through an open and democratic system.*

**68. We consider that the definition of sustainable development must give a clear indication of what constitutes sustainable development, while encouraging local authorities to apply this definition to their own local circumstances and allowing them the scope to do so.**

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92 *Draft NPPF*, para 26 [Back](#)

93 *Draft NPPF*, para 9 [Back](#)

94 *Draft NPPF*, para 14 [Back](#)

95 Ev w11 [Cutting Edge Planning and Design]; Ev 108 [The National Trust]; Ev 128 [Civic Voice]; Ev 139 [The Campaign to Protect Rural England] [Back](#)

96 *Draft NPPF*, para 12 [Back](#)

97 Q 139 [Back](#)

98 Q 241 [Back](#)

99 Q 23 [Back](#)

100 Q 48 [Alex Morton] [Back](#)

101 Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, 1987 [Back](#)

102 *Draft NPPF*, para 9 [Back](#)

103 Q 48 [Back](#)

104 Q 197 [Back](#)

105 Environment Audit Committee, *Sustainable Development in the National Planning Policy Framework*, HC 1480, para 29 [Back](#)

106 Defra, *Securing the Future: The UK Sustainable Development Strategy*, Cm 6467 [Back](#)

107 Q 48 [Back](#)

108 Q 192; see also Q 229 [Emmalene Gottwald]. [Back](#)

109 Environment Audit Committee, *Sustainable Development in the National Planning Policy Framework*, HC 1480, paras 31-32 [Back](#)

110 HC Deb, 7 November 2011, col 123 [Back](#)

111 See for example, Ev 92; Ev w286. [Back](#)

112 Environment Audit Committee, *Sustainable Development in the National Planning Policy Framework*, HC 1480, Q 52 [Back](#)

113 Defra, *The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature*, Cm 8082, June 2011, pp 3, 6 [Back](#)

114 Environment Audit Committee, *Sustainable Development in the National Planning Policy Framework*, HC 1480, para 35 [Back](#)

115 Q 23 [Back](#)

116 Q 102 [Back](#)

117 Environment Audit Committee, *Sustainable Development in the National Planning Policy Framework*, HC 1480, paras 31-32, 39 [Back](#)

118 See chapters Error! Reference source not found., Error! Reference source not found., Error! Reference source not found.. [Back](#)

119 Environment Audit Committee, *Sustainable Development in the National Planning Policy Framework*, HC 1480, Q 56 [Back](#)

120 [www.nationaltrust.org.uk](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk) [Back](#)

121 Environment Audit Committee, *Sustainable Development in the National Planning Policy Framework*, HC 1480, para 10 [Back](#)

122 See, for example, Qq 197 and 181. [Back](#)

123 HC Deb, 7 November 2011, col 123 [Back](#)