

Chapter (non-refereed)

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WORKSHOP REPORTS

Methods for the identification of priorities in rural planning

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Mr V Goodstadt of Strathclyde Regional Council took the Chair and indicated the range of conflicts which can arise even within one region, eg farming versus forestry, urban fringe difficulties, green belt constraints versus development.

Many contributors echoed the feeling of the main conference papers, that the lack of a national strategic policy led to a displeasing *ad hoc* approach, not least in regard to forestry.

The representative of the Forestry Commission outlined the arrangements for consultation over the Forestry Grant Scheme, which highlighted one of the key debates: who sets the priorities? Highland Region planners were prominent in asserting the democratic supremacy of the elected local authority. A trenchant comment from a land agent moved the discussion into the much researched area of whether elected authorities truly reflected local desires, and he asked whether planning controls were, in fact, a tyranny of the majority over individual entrepreneurs, and noted in passing that certain planning authorities — such as the Special Planning Board — were dominated by ministerial nominees. (It is, in fact, numerically incorrect to assert that nominees have a majority in the Lake District SPB, but they may dominate.) This traditional debate over the administrative mechanisms of setting priorities showed us to be a long way from any type of purely technical exercise.

A number of participants drew attention to the rapidly changing nature of rural areas as a principal determinant of the prioritization process. There had to be in-built flexibility, yet decisions were being taken — eg to afforest peatland — without certainty as to whether the underlying resource would be sterilized.

Contrasts were drawn between a number of methods for identifying priorities, particularly in regard to whether they actually minimized or emphasized the conflict:

- personal consultation and amelioration of particular interest concerns, as when a private forestry company meets local bodies separately to discuss a scheme;
- strategic planning via elected members and extensive public consultation, with the planning authority then acting as initiator and persuader;
- a straightforward extension of development control powers;
- integrated policy frameworks from bodies like the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries for Scotland or the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, given that legislation now provides them with a wider remit;
- experimental practical projects which could be extended (with appropriate modification to local circumstances) if successful;
- traditional designations with the problems of overlap and apparent unconcern for 'the rest'.

Interestingly, there was no firm agreement on whether conflict was beneficial in testing priorities and examining data thoroughly; or whether it was better generally to avoid contention and utilize data to help steer a middle course. Whilst not disputing that facts were sacred, participants were aware that different actors in the debates on rapid land use change would tend to utilize them in their own ways. Careful, objective, presentation remained as necessary as ever.