

Annex B: Development Involving Agricultural Land

Agricultural Considerations

Agricultural land quality

B1 To assist in assessing land quality, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) has developed a method for classifying agricultural land by grade according to the extent to which its physical or chemical characteristics impose long term limitations on agricultural use for food production. The MAFF Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) system classifies land into five grades numbered 1 to 5, with grade 3 divided into two sub-grades (3a and 3b). The system was devised and introduced in the 1960s. Revised technical guidelines and criteria for grading using this system will be published in 1997, under the title Agricultural Land Classification of England and Wales. These guidelines update the system without changing the original concepts.

B2 The best and most versatile agricultural land falls into grades 1 and 2 and 3a. This land ranges from excellent (grade 1) to good quality (grade 3a) and is the most flexible, productive and efficient in response to inputs. It is thus best suited to adapting to the changing needs of agriculture and maintaining the competitiveness of UK agriculture vis a vis our international competitors. Such land collectively comprises about one third of the agricultural land in England and Wales.

B3 Land in grade 3b is of moderate quality with lower yields and/or a more restricted cropping range. Grades 4 and 5 are poor and very poor quality land with severe or very severe limitations respectively.

B4 Proposed changes to the use of the best and most versatile land are the most significant in terms of the national agricultural interest. Changes to land in sub-grade 3b or grades 4 or 5 would not normally be opposed on agricultural land quality grounds although in some areas, especially the hills and uplands, 3b and 4 land can have special importance for rural economic activity and management of individual farms.

B5 ALC maps covering the whole of England at a scale of 1:250,000 are available (see Annex J). These reconnaissance maps are produced for use in strategic planning and therefore provide only a generalised indication of the distribution of land quality. They do not differentiate between grades 3a and 3b. The maps are not suitable for use in evaluating individual sites where development is proposed. In such cases a re-survey at a large scale is necessary to obtain a definitive grade. Local planning authorities should discuss their requirements with MAFF.

Set-aside of agricultural land

B6 Set-aside under the Arable Areas Payments Scheme is a means of taking land temporarily out of agricultural production. The permitted uses of set-aside land, for example non-food cropping or coppicing, ensure that the land may be returned to productive agricultural use when a farmer's obligations under the scheme have ended. The Government's policy in respect of the best and most versatile agricultural land applies equally to land under set-aside, even when it is used temporarily for non-agricultural purposes.

Other factors

B7 Land quality will normally be the most important factor in considering the impact of development on agriculture. The effects of a proposed development on local agriculture may be

also material to its consideration. The factors indicated below may be relevant in deciding between sites of similar agricultural land quality, determining applications on lower quality land, and designing developments to minimise impact on local agriculture.

B8 The location of development in relation to farms - The proximity of other development to farms, and its nature, can influence the type of farming and the extent to which inherent land quality can be exploited. Certain locations may have agricultural advantages such as the accessibility to markets, processing plant and certain industries associated with agriculture. Conversely, farms with development close to them may suffer from trespass and other forms of disturbance which may affect the efficiency and upkeep of holdings. It may be possible to reduce any detrimental effects of development by locating compatible uses adjacent to farm land, by landscaping or by detailed provision in the layout of residential development.

B9 Farm size and structure - Farms vary considerably in size, type of farm business and layout. The loss of part of a holding can have important implications for the remainder. The effect of severance and fragmentation upon the farm and its structure may be relevant.

B10 Buildings and other fixed equipment - The efficiency of farms can be affected by the conditions and extent of buildings and other fixed equipment. The full use of these assets could be impaired by the loss of specific sites to development and there may be proposals to improve buildings and equipment which are tied to investment decisions already taken. The effect on the capital investment of a farm should, therefore, be taken into account as part of the consideration of the agricultural case.

B11 Irrigation - When irrigation is practised and water supplies are adequate and reliable, the productive capacity of agricultural land and its importance relative to non-irrigated land of the same grade will often be significantly increased.

B12 Other effects of development on agriculture - In addition to the factors referred to above development may have further consequences for agriculture. For example, it may be necessary to redesign land drainage systems disturbed by development and, where major development is involved, the drainage of surface water may require water courses to be re-aligned or improved to accept the increased flow. Freshwater and marine fisheries may be affected by discharges from industrial and other forms of development.

Procedural Arrangements For Consultation with MAFF

Consultation on development plans and Regional Guidance

B13 Local planning authorities preparing development plans or alterations to such plans under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 are advised to consult Government Departments where plan proposals appear to affect their interests. Local planning authorities preparing plans should therefore continue to consult MAFF and other Government Departments where appropriate. PPG12 on development plans and regional planning guidance gives further guidance. MAFF will continue to offer comment as they consider necessary on the preparation of plans, regardless of site size. MAFF will also continue to advise local planning authorities on the relative quality of agricultural land in the plan area and on identifying the best and most versatile land. The Secretary of State will consult MAFF when preparing or revising Regional Planning Guidance.

B14 Section 44(3) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 gives MAFF a statutory right to require that the Secretary of State should call in local plans to which MAFF continue to object.