

Creating rural resorts in the UK

UK planning and policy considerations

Developing a resort in the UK countryside? You must be mad. Securing planning consent for development in our towns and cities can be hard enough, but in the countryside? Life is too short.

But is it? Given the strong case for UK resort investment in our countryside, what advice do Colliers CRE's Planners have for the rural resort developer?

Rural areas need people and money. People with money who spend it locally are the best. People who spend money there throughout the year are better still. Country dwellers know this and planning policies are beginning to change. Even the Government has announced its intention to review green belt policies, perhaps the most sacrosanct of all planning principles. Hinting at meaningful tweaks that will surely follow, Minister Ruth Kelly said in a speech on 29 January 2007 that she had 'no intention of making fundamental change to green belt policy, just making sure it is fit for purpose in twenty-first century England'. Read into that what you will.

necessary, means there is a route forward that is not quite so much in the headlights as a major planning application. If you are to convince an Inspector that the proposal has merit, it has to be well presented, with policy and practical issues appropriately addressed.

The alternative is to embark on a planning application. Whether it is an outline application dealing with the principles or a full application dealing with the detail, the extent of information that has to be provided is now appreciable. It is not wise to take on the key planning policies like green belt or National Park designation, unless in the latter case the proposals have genuine merit, for example resolving a brownfield site or restoring a neglected building. There will always be a need for careful work to fit the development into the landscape and to promote its benefits. Ensuring local residents are on side will also be critical.

A resort needs to be seen as more than just houses in the countryside or else it will simply be regarded as part of the way that housing supply targets are met, which in turn will have a range of implications and trigger requirements for affordable housing.

'Planning Policy Statement 7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas' (ISBN: 0 11 753923 6), published by the Government in August 2004, includes the following paragraphs:

Para 37: The Government expects most tourist accommodation requiring new buildings to be located in, or adjacent to, existing towns and villages.

Para 38: The conversion of suitable existing rural buildings to provide hotel and other serviced accommodation should be allowed, taking into account the policies on the re-use of rural buildings ... Similarly, planning authorities should adopt a positive approach to proposed extensions to existing tourist accommodation where the scale of the extension is appropriate to its location and where the extension may help to ensure the future viability of such businesses.

Para 40: Local planning authorities should support the provision of other forms of self-catering holiday accommodation in rural areas where this would accord with sustainable development objectives.

Inevitably, people want everything the benefits that new development can bring but without changing much-loved areas. To succeed, the development industry has become far more adept at delivering high-quality, innovative projects in sensitive areas. Careful site selection, good design, PR and attention to evolving principles of sustainable living are all critical to success in promoting a new resort. As ever, planning policy will have to be addressed. It is not as unhelpful as one might expect.

Proposals for a resort in any rural setting will always sound controversial to local residents and will be something of an unknown quantity to most rural planning authorities. Securing an allocation in a development plan is usually the surest way forward. This will take time and many local authorities are already well advanced with preparing their Local Development Frameworks (LDFs). The key in this respect is to convince planning officers, in the first instance, of the merits of the proposals. Next, it will be critical to have a well thought through proposal that deals with site-specific issues and demonstrates real benefits for the existing community. Developers also need to be wary of pitfalls. Simple things like an increase in traffic on rural roads has scuppered many seemingly well thought through proposals. Then there are local residents and councillors to consider. Even so, the ability to promote a scheme through the local inquiry process, if

Timeshare resorts, such Barnsdale in Rutland and the Clowance Estate in Cornwall, have succeeded in planning terms because they are not seen as housing at all, but as part of the area's tourism infrastructure.

The increasing political support for new tourism accommodation will continue to be critical in planning terms and is why fractional sales, with their greater throughput of occupants contributing to the local economy, will inevitably be preferred in planning terms to simple groupings of second homes.

If there is a growing recognition of the need to be more flexible in rural locations, the corollary is that to gain consent, design, sustainability and benefits for the local community are likely to become even more critical.

Nigel Cooper is Head of the Colliers CRE Planning service