

Review of SG Safeguarding 2: Protection and conservation of agricultural land

1. Introduction

1.1 This purpose of this paper is to review Supplementary Guidance Safeguarding of resources 2: *Protection and conservation of agricultural land (SG SR2)* to examine how it meets national policy requirements in view of any changes to national and local context. In addition, it will consider whether SG SR2 continues to provide a suitable basis for assessing and determining development proposals that would result in the loss of prime agricultural land.

2. Policy Approach

- 2.1 SG SR2 promotes the protection and retention of prime agricultural land (identified as classes 1, 2 and 3.1) wherever possible. The policy only approves development that would result in the loss of such land where, subject to other relevant policies, the site has been allocated in the local development plan. SG SR2 also permits loss where it is established that the social or economic benefits of the proposal demonstrably outweighs the value of the land or there is no appropriate alternative site.
- 2.2 The reasoned justification identifies the classification of prime agricultural land inline with the classes defined by the Macaulay Land Use Research Institute (which is now the James Hutton Institute as of 2011). It states that Aberdeenshire has limited prime agricultural land and therefore must be protected. In circumstances where the classification of the land is unknown, it is expected that the developer or applicant will demonstrate its quality.
- 2.3 It adds that the policy aims to direct development to land of lesser quality. Whilst Aberdeenshire only contains around 9% of Scotland's agricultural land, it consists of a much higher proportion of crops, livestock and agricultural labour. Therefore, in the interest of maintaining agricultural productivity as well as sustaining food production and working towards achieving Scottish Government climate change targets, prime agricultural land must be preserved where possible.

3. Background

National context

- 3.1 Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) provides national guidance in relation to planning and agricultural land. It emphasises that prime agricultural land is a finite natural resource and should only be developed where it is *'an essential component of the settlement strategy or is necessary to meet an established need, for example for major infrastructure development, where no other suitable site is available'* (SPP, 2010).
- 3.2 SPP does advise that small scale development directly associated with rural businesses (including dwellings) may be acceptable, as well as some renewable energy developments or minerals extraction where the land can be reinstated to its original agricultural quality after use.
- 3.3 Planning authorities are also advised to consider options that seek to minimise the loss of prime agricultural land when preparing the settlement strategy.

Strategic/regional context

- 3.4 The current draft of the Aberdeen City and Shire Strategic Development Plan does not specifically provide planning guidance in relation to prime agricultural land. It does highlight the importance of local growth and diversification areas (of which much of rural Aberdeenshire is) as providing rich agricultural land and environmental quality.

4. Drivers of Change

- 4.1 SG SR2 promotes the retention of prime agricultural land where possible and only allows the permanent loss of such land where it has been allocated within the development plan or it is demonstrated that the proposal has overriding social or economic benefit. This approach is supported by SPP.
- 4.2 SPP does stipulate that development is also permissible where it is for small scale development directly associated with rural businesses. SG SR2 does not directly refer to this, however it is considered that the greenbelt (STRL2) and rural development (SGRD1) policies adequately allow for this type of proposal through the 'essential worker' part of STRL2 and under farm succession in SG RD1.
- 4.3 There have been no significant changes in national policy and therefore it is not considered that any amendment is required to SG SR2.

5. Recommendations

- 5.1 On the basis of this information it is considered that SG SR2 is consistent with national policy and should be retained in its current form subject to the following minor amendments:
- The reference to the Macaulay Land Use Research Institute is updated to reflect its new position as part of the James Hutton Institute.
 - Reference is made to policies STRL2: Greenbelt and SG RD1: Housing and business development in the countryside in relation to permitting small scale development associated with rural businesses in line with SPP.

6. Summary of Main Points

- 6.1 SG SR2 aims to prevent the permanent loss of prime agricultural land and only permits development where it has been allocated in the local development plan or provides an over overriding social or economic benefit. In addition, where development is proposed, it must be demonstrated that there is no appropriate alternative site. This approach is consistent with Scottish Planning Policy which only permits development on quality agricultural land where it for essential purposes (such as infrastructure) or it is for small scale development which is directly associated with a rural business. Whilst this policy does not directly refer to the latter, it is considered that policies' STRL2 and SGRD1 provide an adequate allowance for this. It is however recommended that along with updating reference to the Macaulay Institute, that SG SR2 refers to associated policies STRL2 and SGRD1 in relation to small scale development associated with rural business and agriculture to provide greater compliance with SPP.

References

Aberdeen City and Shire Strategic Development Plan Authority (2013) Proposed Strategic Development Plan

Aberdeenshire Council (2012) *Aberdeenshire Local Development Plan 2012*

Scottish Government (2010) *Scottish Planning Policy*