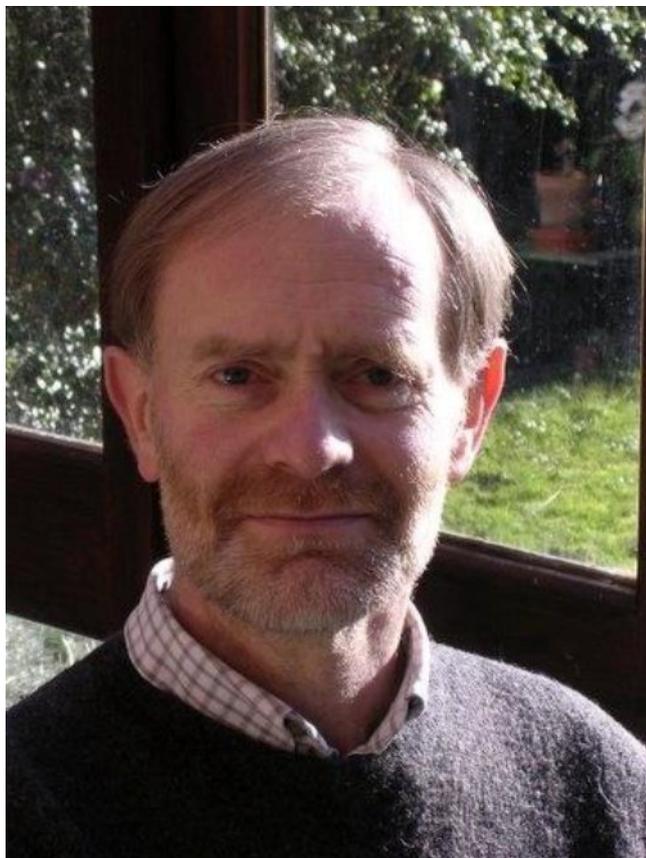


By Daniel Sharf



Zero Carbon Britain: Rethinking the Future (2013; pp 85) has been prepared on an estimate of 47% of carbon emissions being attributable to the food chain. This includes many important factors (e.g. proportion of meat, kinds of meat and land use changes) which are outside the scope of this discussion paper but, operating as a system, any change is likely to have wider intended and unintended consequences. The subject of this paper is the enhancement of local food production, processing and distribution which, hopefully, would have beneficial effects on emissions throughout the food chain.

The advantage of this proposal is that it has some clearly defined objectives that should be replicable throughout Britain. The proposals are also designed to be fully in accordance with the Localism Act 2011 and the presumption in favour of sustainable development in the National Planning Policy Framework. In these circumstances it should only be necessary to become engaged in the formulation development plans and in responding to planning applications either as members of

the general public or as members of lobby groups or of parish and/or district councils.

As background, it might be helpful to understand that “affordable housing” was only recognised by the planning system in the 1990s when a High Court judge supported a local planning authority in the making of a distinction between a dwelling that could be afforded by local people and general market housing. Since then the affordability of housing has not only been a material consideration but has become a main theme in policies adopted at national and local level. There is no legal difference between the affordability of a dwelling and the affordability of land for agriculture or horticulture as a material planning consideration. This is so long as a case is made out that, the affordability of and access to agricultural land is a matter of public interest and can be seen to be meeting a genuine need.

Britain has what is called a “plan-led” system and it is, therefore, appropriate to look first at the potential for devising policies to be incorporated in local plans and neighbourhood plans that support a low carbon food chain. Working on the premise that it is desirable to increase the amount of food produced in smallholdings in the urban fringe (including the edges of villages), the objective is to devise a policy framework to enable this to be achieved. Policies are needed to secure affordable and conveniently located housing for those working on the land together with buildings for storage and processing.

The driver for these proposals would be new housing built on the edges of towns and villages. It is probably unnecessary to debate whether or not this form of development, normally on greenfield land, is desirable because such permissions are currently being granted throughout the Country. The objective is to seek reasonably necessary community benefits out of these developments through the judicious use of planning conditions or, more likely, planning obligations (under section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990).

It is appropriate that development plans produced at district and/or neighbourhood level should include a list of community benefits to which the profits from new residential development should be required to contribute in order to make both the buildings themselves and their

location more sustainable. As well as the common enhancements to bus services, village halls and playgrounds, there is no reason why allotments (can legally be up to 2 acres) and smallholdings should not be included in this list. In many cases developments around the fringes of existing settlements occupy only part of a landholding and, supported by a strong case for the provision of smallholdings, housing could be limited to only part of the land to enable a smallholding (possibly designed for part-time work) could be secured as part of the development. This would normally be part of the site, but could be at some other convenient location. A housing policy would require one dwelling or more of those being permitted to be made subject to an agricultural occupancy condition. Although, in itself, the "ag tag" would limit the price and increase the affordability of such a dwelling (for sale or rent), it could also be possible to achieve a further discount through the planning obligations attached to the permission relating to the provision of affordable housing. Whilst negotiations requiring land and residential accommodation to be provided in this way could be problematic in respect of individual applications, if this requirement is carefully spelt out and justified in a local development plan (i.e. epitomising "sustainable development") these requirements should be resistant to challenge and deliverable by a plan-led planning system.

Section 106 is not designed to control the sale or lease of land and smallholdings might have to be secured by requiring the smallholding to be proposed as an integral part of the planning application for the residential application. A section 106 obligation could prevent the erection of dwellings on this area of land keeping it free and available for growing and grazing. Transfer of the holding to the Ecological Land Co-op¹ would ensure that it was put to proper (low carbon) use.

Planning authorities could be more attracted to this approach if it was also a policy of the local plan (or neighbourhood plan) to oppose the building of residential accommodation in the open countryside to serve new horticultural and agricultural enterprises. A planning authority could show that it was effectively creating a zone

around towns and villages where the acknowledged need for a growth in smallholdings could be met without building in isolated locations. Food enterprises on the edge of villages would enable those involved and their families to be part of a town or village community. There could also be employment policies encouraging the growth of horticultural and agricultural enterprises due to the associated job (and training) opportunities as well as the potential for community supported agriculture. It is not always easy to find suitable uses for existing agricultural buildings and policies could be used to support the provision and use of such buildings for food storage and processing relating to the new growing enterprises. Another important element of sustainability is biodiversity. In this respect the plan could point to the advantages of and provide encouragement to agroforestry, agro-ecology and permaculture.

Although new transport policies might not be necessary, the justification for local food reducing the movement of people and goods should be noted in the plan as part of following the NPPF 'golden thread' and the presumption in favour of sustainable development.

It is likely that the use of development plans at district or neighbourhood/parish level in this way would be made more difficult if and when the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) supersedes the arrangements currently available under section 106.

About the author:

Over the last 35 years Daniel Scharf MA MRTPI (www.DanthePlan.blogspot.com) has been employed as a Chartered town and country planner in the public, private and voluntary sectors. He teaches planning and has worked with the New Villages Association and Rural Resettlement Group and has been chairman of a parish council engaged in preparing a Neighbourhood Development Plan. Daniel is also a member of the Campaign Against Climate Change steering group.

¹ <http://ecologicaland.coop/contact-us>