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If you're lucky enough to fly as a private pilot, Guernsey is extraordinarily well placed. Why? Well, there are scores of airports dotted around France, within easy reach of Guernsey, which (generally speaking) will welcome you with open arms. If the airport is not designated as a customs' airport, never mind. By speaking to customs 24 hours or so in advance, all will be well. Laissez-faire applies. But, get on the wrong side of a French bureaucrat, and life is hell. Thus if you have to divert to a different airport because of adverse weather, or you catch a custom's man on a bad day, woe betide you. Behind that mask of "calme", lurks a difficult, frustrating, potentially expensive and wholly unreasonable jobsworth.

This leads me neatly on to the Environment Department. For an organisation so woefully under-resourced, and despite all public perception to the contrary, the Environment Department generally does a very good job in processing applications within a reasonable time and in the majority of cases the result is to the satisfaction of the applicant. But, as we all know, occasionally it behaves like a completely spoiled child. It takes the narrowest possible view of the policies enshrined in detailed development plans and you get absolutely nowhere, other than by waving a big stick and, quite often, not even then. On these occasions, the Department's planners live in a world untroubled by reality or logic or by what a huge majority of Guernsey people would regard as fair or reasonable.

Why do I bat on about this, when we all know that that's true? On this occasion, I simply wish to call the attention of those bored enough to read my stuff to the fact that the arrogance and intransigence of the Department has brought to a complete stop any new build in the rural area. I write about this, because I am constantly surprised at how few people realise how restrictive the housing policy is.

When the review of the Rural Area Plan was published in draft form in 2003, the stark message in respect of "new build" (i.e. the building of new houses rather than the replacement or conversion of existing houses or other buildings) was that it was to be banned in totality, save in respect of housing to be provided by the States Housing Authority (as it then was) or a recognised housing association. Thus, however non-rural the appearance of a site, or however domesticated or industrialised or useless-for-anything-else it might be, there was to be no new housing. A number (a large one) of residents in the rural area were outraged at this, and on behalf of many clients I sought to persuade the Planning Inspector at the relevant public inquiry that the following rider be added to the relevant policy:-

"Exceptionally, a single unit of accommodation may be permitted in circumstances where the effect of such construction in terms of siting, design, scale and amenity is minimal."

The idea behind my representation was so that, for example, if there were a number of houses surrounding a forlorn piece of land which by no means could be regarded as being agricultural or

horticultural in type or as having any visual worth, such site might in extreme circumstances be used for infill building.

The Inspector did not accept that representation fully, but he did go so far as to recommend that infilling be allowed for one or a maximum of two dwellings in a small gap in an otherwise built-up frontage or locality in a non-designated area where the land was already in an authorised urban use or had been granted permission under Policy RCE6 for inclusion within the curtilage of such a use because the land was not suitable for agricultural, horticultural, open communal recreational or wildlife conservation use because of its size, nature and/or location. I'm sorry about that mouthful but, put shortly, the Inspector met more than half-way my representation and those of many other individuals and of some of my colleagues at the Bar.

"No" said the Environment Department to the views of the kindly Mr Robotom (the Inspector). It was of the opinion that the Inspector "had not identified a need for new-build houses within the rural area". Tell that to the various representors. Tell that to owners of useless pieces of land. Tell that to people who live in heavily built-up areas with an adjacent plot screaming to be used properly.

What the Environment Department was doing was what it does so very often, and that was in a cavalier way to dismiss the findings of a person who had sat for countless hours throughout a tedious planning inquiry and had as much knowledge – if not better – of what was going on in the Island than political members of the Department. The problem, of course, is that when these things go to the States for debate, States' members simply don't have time to deal with them properly. The Rural Plan was listed for debate at the November meeting with another few punchy billets – in addition, that is, to the Rural Area Plan Billet and the three volumes, amounting to the thick end of 500 pages, of the Inspector's report. Quite apart from the sheer volume of reading material, what the deputies are confronted with at a planning debate is technically a bit confusing. First, there is the draft development plan. Then the members have to consider all of the representations which are written up by the Inspector. They then have to go on and note what recommendations the Inspector has made in respect of that draft plan – which often involve complex amendments to that draft plan. Then they have to understand the extent to which the Environment Department has accepted those recommendations outright, rejected those recommendations outright or come up with proposals which amend those recommendations. Quite frankly, I think that all of this is too much for some deputies and that they only pay lip service to reading it.

Anyway, apart from my bleating, the one point which I wish to make is that if you wish to build a new house in the rural area, don't even think about it. Buy a used one instead. There are lots in this brochure.