Spring-Summer 2025

Kent Countryside Voice

Rural crime
...is it out of control?

Betrayed again
How proposed planning reforms offer little for those in housing need

Countryside Day
Come celebrate rural Kent!

CPRE The countryside charity Kent

Vicky Ellis used watercolour and pencil to create this entrancing image of a hedgehog

Cover: Eye to eye with a leveret (Frances Crickmore)

CONTENTS

Spring - Summer 2025

contact us

Please join us to help protect the countryside we all love - CPRE membership starts at just £5 per month.

www.cprekent.org.uk

We always love to hear from our members, so please feel free to drop us a line and tell us what's happening in your part of the county. We are especially eager to hear from anyone who would like to volunteer in any way. If you want to help us keep Kent beautiful, then get in touch with us at **info@cprekent.org.uk** or call **01233 714540**.

Director Andrea Griffiths andrea.griffiths@cprekent.org.uk
General Manager Vicky Ellis vicky.ellis@cprekent.org.uk
Planning team Julie Davies julie.davies@cprekent.org.uk
Richard Thompson richard.thompson@cprekent.org.uk
Campaigns and PR Manager David Mairs david.mairs@cprekent.org.uk

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Andrea Griffiths

Director's Report

I started my journey with CPRE Kent in November 2024, so as you read this I'll have been in post for about six months. I think it's safe to say, what with the new government having taken up its office four months prior and the following changes to the planning system and housing targets, my start with CPRE Kent has been something of a baptism of fire.

My previous life involved managing a small team of countryside officers and undertaking such things as invasive-species control, tree-planting, pond-creation and newt-surveying (Chancellor Rachel Reeves's opinion of newts differs somewhat to mine).

Coming from an ecology and land-management background to CPRE Kent, which revolves almost entirely around the language of planning, has been one thing, but doing so at the exact same time as the new government unleashed its tsunami of change and what, quite frankly, feels like an attack on the English countryside and its wildlife has been another.

When you work in countryside and wildlife conservation, you're no stranger to the emotions of frustration and, sometimes, despair. I am used to these reactions and, while utilising the holistic value of my local ancient woodland to calm my daily ecoanxiety, have become used to ploughing on and doing what I can. But the challenge of moving into a team who are fighting to save the countryside from concrete and glass at a time when the government's rhetoric of 'build build build' is heard at every turn has felt vast at times.

CPRE are not anti-housing - we campaign for proper affordable housing to address the housing crisis, which, with a brownfield-first approach, would also save our countryside and food-growing fields. It is clear to us that building 1.5 million homes under current conditions and agreements is not going to address the housing crisis, though it will succeed in further accelerating the biodiversity crisis if a brownfield-first approach is not fully embraced.

CPRE are, of course, in support of renewable energy, but it is clear to us that covering our best and most versatile farmland in solar panels (which should go on the rooftops of all these new-builds) seriously threatens our food security and undermines all efforts to conserve and restore our countryside.

It's also clear to us that the rhetoric that nature stands in our way will be our ultimate downfall as, without nature, we have nothing. Yet... here we are, fighting to be heard among a sea of 'growth'. It is evident to us that if you want 'growth' you acknowledge that our land is finite and not about to double in size and you invest in industry that is sustainable, not on bulldozing our beautiful landscapes to make way for houses that are still too expensive for the average person to buy.

Still, if we are used to these feelings of frustration, we are also used to and up to the challenge. Notable currently is our challenge of the decision to approve new houses in the High Weald National Landscape at Turnden, which we are taking to judicial review.

In trying times, it is important to think positively and to understand the importance of taking time to acknowledge achievements. It's not all doom and gloom - far from it.

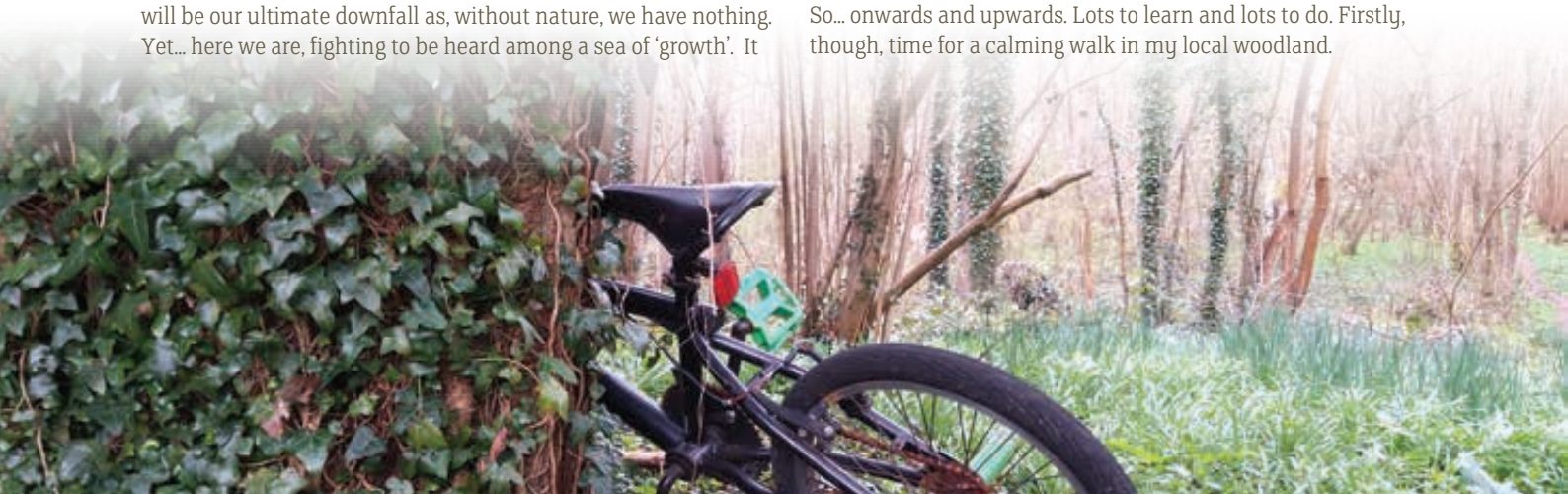
This issue of KCV focuses on wildlife crime, so it's important to highlight that plans are finally under way for the clearance of Hoad's Wood after the previous landscape-changing flytipping events.

It's also important to note the collapse of the London Resort scheme on the Swanscombe peninsula and the refusal of 115 proposed housing units at Minster. CPRE Kent and others spent much time and resources campaigning against all of these. Given current times, these are not trivial victories.

In addition, we look forward to welcoming some new 'feelgood' projects that will not only improve our countryside and benefit our wildlife but give us and our members a boost, too.

We wait with bated breath to see if our bid to plant 10 kilometres of hedgerow across Kent in 2025 has been successful and we are having talks to launch a local dark-skies project. We are also hosting our own CPRE Kent Countryside Day this autumn, so save the date of Sunday, September 7, and come and join us at Bilsington Priory to celebrate our countryside and wildlife.

So... onwards and upwards. Lots to learn and lots to do. Firstly, though, time for a calming walk in my local woodland.



There can't be many of us who haven't come across burnt-out vehicles in the rural landscape (Julie Davies)

THE COUNTRYSIDE: OUR FORGOTTEN CRIME SCENE?

Many people who live and work in rural Kent feel under siege from a growing onslaught of criminality, reports **David Mairs**

"Our friend found them poaching and took a picture of their car, so they threatened to kill all his dogs and burn his house down."

Just another day in the idyllic Garden of England...

It's only talking to people like John and Terry (not their real names), who work in the east Kent countryside, that you begin to get even an inkling of the scale of rural crime in our county.

"It's honestly like the Wild West out here. Flytipping, motorbikes everywhere, people firing air-rifles out of cars, driving quad bikes through the middle of fields, using catapults on gamebirds and wildlife, hare-coursing... the list is endless," says John, a gamekeeper.

Catapults seem to have become almost a fashion accessory for some, with their use more and more evident over recent years.

"It's crazy that they're not classified as offensive weapons," says John. "They can kill people. And some of the characters using them clearly know what they're doing - we've seen pictures on social media of about 30 squirrels killed with catapults piled up in the local woods. Whatever we might think of squirrels, you've got be good to do that."

Amid a wider rural disorder, hare-coursing is one of the more perpetual and growing concerns and can be associated with a range of other crimes.

"It often goes hand in hand with vandalism and theft," says John. "Land Rovers, gates, farm machinery, even salt-spreaders - nothing is safe from these people.

"We're told some of the coursing is live-streamed to Arab countries, where large sums of money are bet on the outcome, while videos show how many hares certain dogs catch, which puts up their value."

Despite such potential value, the coursers' apparent disregard for their own animals can be all too evident.

"I came across one the other day training a Saluki from a moving vehicle. Its lead was trapped in the door with only about a foot of it between the car and the dog - it was all it could do to keep up."

Such is the extent of the issue that police forces across the country have set up Operation Galileo, which aims to take a unified approach to deterring hare-coursing.

More specifically, Kent Police are part of a '7 Forces' agreement with their counterparts in Essex, Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, ▸

Cambridgeshire, Suffolk and Norfolk to 'act as one' in dealing with the problem.

And a problem rural crime most certainly is. "There's hardly a night you go out when you don't have to call the police," says John.

Depressingly, Terry, who works on an estate, is only too quick to confirm how things are. "In the three years I've been doing this job, I've had to call out the police at least a hundred times - and that's just me!

"The other week, I saw them [poachers] every night I was out, even if I'd only been out for an hour or so. The police said jokingly 'Stop calling us, you're giving us too much to do'.

"But in my experience the police are doing a good job. For instance, I called in a car the other evening and they were there in less than five minutes with two units and four officers. They said they'd stay there for an hour or until they were called somewhere else. Ninety per cent of the time they're here in five minutes."

Reassuringly, given that the police are sometimes criticised for failing to confront particular elements of society or that they fear to tread in 'no-go areas' of Kent, John shares a positive view of the officers in his area.

"My understanding is that there are about 15 officers in the Rural Task Force, but they get called in to the towns as well so they can't always be here in the countryside. They're a good bunch of blokes, but we get the strong impression they're under-resourced."

Such lack of resource, perceived or otherwise, prompted the National Gamekeepers' Organisation to survey its 13,000-odd members to gauge their feelings on rural crime and policing.

John Clarke, of the NGO, says: "The survey, which ran from November last year through to the end of January, was carried out with the aim of being able to approach both the government and Police and Crime Commissioners [PCCs] to ask for more funding to support the police in rural areas.

"This was never about attacking hard-working officers, who have their hands tied by lack of funding and resources. Rather it was always about trying to get funding and support for dedicated police officers who are passionate about the communities they work in. There was a time when there was a police house in most villages - now there are none, leaving communities vulnerable.

"The rural community as a whole feel forgotten and abandoned when it comes to crime, with many people who live and work in the UK's remotest areas feeling they are easy pickings for the big, organised-crime gangs that target the length and breadth of the rural UK - mostly unchallenged.

"Within the past six months, cases have included a gamekeeper who was run over by poachers, suffering life-changing injuries and who is lucky to be alive today; a farmer surrounded by 4x4s while the occupants fired catapults at him and his vehicle; and an organised illegal coursing event in Cambridgeshire that had 50 cars tearing across and destroying farmers' fields and terrorising anyone who dared challenge them.

"The NGO has already written to Dame Diana Johnson, the Policing Minister, calling for the creation of a national task force on hare-coursing and poaching gangs and demanding stronger enforcement measures to address this escalating crisis.

"We are approaching PCCs and offering police forces free training days to teach officers about the effect that all rural crime, including poaching, can have, not only on rural communities but also on the wildlife that lives there."

The NGO's national survey results were startling:

- 90.2 per cent of respondents were not confident that if they had to call the police in an emergency they would get a satisfactory response
- 85.8 per cent thought that at the current state of policing they were not supported or protected living and or working in the countryside
- 89.9 per cent thought a greater police presence would reduce incidents of rural crime
- 68.3 per cent said that they had been threatened or intimidated while protecting their property or going about their job

An all too familiar sight in the Kent countryside...

- 58.3 per cent had feared for their own or a member of their family's safety while living in the countryside

Keepers were also asked which crimes they had experienced:

- 69.5 per cent had been affected by poaching, with 85.2 per cent of those citing running dogs as the main problem
- 54.3 per cent cited antisocial behaviour
- 52.5 per cent had experienced damage to property, including traps, pens and infrastructure
- 50.2 per cent had been affected by illegal off-roading
- 33 per cent had suffered a burglary at either home or work
- 29 per cent had experienced livestock-worrying

In the light of such miserable figures, it comes as no surprise to hear a similar tale of woe relating to rural crime from the CLA (Country Land and Business Association).

On the February day the latest flytipping results were announced, a spokesman said: "The number of cases in parts of the South East has shot up by 75 per cent in a year. Today's figures from Defra [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs] show there were more than a million incidents of flytipping on public land in England in the last year - and 100,000 in the South East alone.

"Councils in England dealt with 1.15 million flytipping incidents in 2023-2024, though these figures only account for waste illegally dumped on public land that has been reported to the authorities.

"In Kent, there were 26,002 incidents reported on public land in 2023-24, a rise of 5 per cent year on year. Within that, some areas saw bigger increases - especially Maidstone (19 per cent), Medway (14 per cent), Tonbridge and Malling (13 per cent) and Canterbury (13 per cent).

"In terms of actions taken, there were only 2,000 Fixed Penalty Notices issued for flytipping across the South East, so that's 2 per cent of cases, and only half were actually paid. Only 20 vehicles were seized across the region last year, while there were 106 court fines issued and one custodial sentence."

The CLA's regional director Tim Bamford echoed the widespread feeling of frustration and exasperation with an

Thieves caused more than £1,000 damage to the visitor centre at Kent Wildlife Trust's Sevenoaks reserve (KWT)

Some 30,000 tonnes of landfill waste was dumped illegally at Hoad's Wood near Bethersden (see page 13)

astonishingly grim situation: "Rural communities have had enough of flytipping and waste crime, and the government must act. Farmers and the countryside are increasingly being targeted by organised-crime gangs, often violent, who know that rural areas are under-policed and so they target them. The long-promised rural crime strategy needs to be published as soon as possible.

"It's not just litter blotting the landscape, but tons of household and commercial waste that can often be hazardous - even including asbestos and chemicals - endangering farmers, wildlife, livestock, crops and the environment.

"As the new government itself has pointed out, the crime rate in rural areas has surged by 32 per cent since 2011, faster than in urban areas. People, communities and businesses deserve to feel safe and protected, and the first place to start must surely be ending the chronic under-funding of rural police forces.

"Rural crime places a heavy burden on already-isolated communities up and down the country. Well-established criminal gangs are dumping waste, hare-coursing and poaching, stealing machinery and often moving it abroad - this is not small-scale or opportunistic crime.

"As our own recent survey of 1,000 people living in rural areas found, more than half of respondents said they were either 'very unconfident' or 'somewhat unconfident' that their local police can tackle crime.

"Rural communities are fed up with the constant barrage of incidents. Victims of flytipping also have to pay to have dumped waste removed from their land, only adding to the injustice.

"Building up a comprehensive picture of the severity of the problems is often difficult, which in turn means tackling rural crime goes under-resourced, gifting criminals an open goal in which to operate.

"Government must empower the police, the courts and rural communities to fight crime, defending themselves, their property and their neighbourhoods." ▸

The CLA is calling for all police forces to have adequate equipment packs, improved rural training for all 999 and 101 call-handlers and guidance for local authorities to ringfence fines from flytipping to fund enforcement and clean-up activities.

Although Kent unquestionably suffers more than most (NFU Mutual figures rank us fifth in the table of counties worst affected by the cost of rural crime), of course the scourge of criminality afflicts much of the country. Colin Rayner, whose family farm across the county border in Surrey, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire, says: "The Rayner family farms have incidents of flytipping every day, from a bag of garden waste to lorryloads of waste.

"We have made our farms into medieval forts to try to reduce large loads of waste being tipped on the farms. The cost to the family in terms of extra security, clearing up the waste and threats from the flytipping gangs is too much to bear at times."

It isn't just farms that suffer from the onslaught. Kent Wildlife Trust manages more than 9,000 acres of land over some 80 nature reserves and, perhaps predictably, has been subject to the attentions of unwelcome visitors.

KWT's Sally Smith says: "The trust has seen a steady rise in crimes reported to the police each year, ranging from vandalism to theft and burglary, as criminals take advantage of the charity's rural locations.

"Most recently, the visitor centre at Sevenoaks was targeted by thieves who caused more than £1,000 damage, smashing through the front doors before stealing the till. The incident was captured on CCTV and reported to the police.

"Just months earlier, the reserve had been hit when thieves broke into a storage container and stole power tools. While the property is insured, these repeated crimes drive up insurance premiums and demand valuable staff time for repairs and clean-up.

"Elsewhere, at Oare Marshes, vandals damaged parking signage, while visitors fell victim to fraud when criminals replaced the RingGo parking QR code with a link to a scam website.

"KWT works closely with the police's Rural Task Force. However, due to the remoteness of these locations and limited evidence, many incidents remain unsolved."

And so what of the police, in one sense the biggest player of all in this arena? Over to Sergeant Darren Walshaw of the county's Rural Task Force: "Kent is known as the Garden of England for its extensive rural areas and it is understandable it sees more reports of rural crime than other, less rural, counties.

"The dedicated Rural Task Force, made up of specially-trained officers, focuses solely on building strong relationships with members of the rural community and tackling those that do our rural communities harm.

"Furthermore, we work closely with partner agencies such as the National Farmers' Union, the Environment Agency, RSPCA and local authorities to build a clear picture of rural crime in Kent and organise a number of operations based on the seasonal pattern of offending.

"We continue to encourage people who live and work in rural areas to report any suspicious incidents to us as soon as possible either online at **www.kent.police.uk/report** or by calling 999 in an emergency."

With so much media focus on England's towns and cities, the scale of rural crime is too rarely acknowledged, while it would seem the countryside escapes no aspect of illegal activity.

We will end where we started, with John the gamekeeper, who more than once has come across people collecting 'magic mushrooms', enjoyed by some for their hallucinogenic effects upon consumption. Far from a group of wandering hippies with daisy chains in their golden locks singing The Age of Aquarius, the picture is very different.

"These individuals who come out picking mushrooms - a lot of them aren't very nice people," he says. "Many are addicts and there are some really unsavoury characters - drugs are a big problem."

As our conversation winds to a close, John concludes: "It doesn't paint a very good picture of living in the countryside, does it?"

In truth, like most countrymen, he loves rural life, but the deeply unpleasant reality is that crime on our farms, estates, woods, downs and marshes is a real blight on this county... and a whole lot more needs to be done to tackle it. ■

The beauty of the Medway Gap - this is Birling - has been compromised by antisocial behaviour

SAFE AND SOUND

Andrea Griffiths, CPRE Kent director, examines the striking success of a project tackling illegal and antisocial behaviour in the Medway Gap

"Historically, society has allowed the myth of the crime-free rural idyll to persist."

So wrote the historian GE Mingay in his book The Rural Idyll back in 1989, but it's now well understood quite what a myth it is.

The theft of farm machinery and vehicles, equine equipment, horses and livestock; dog attacks; vandalism of our heritage assets; flytipping; quad bike and ATV (all-terrain vehicle) use; hare-coursing; badger-baiting... the examples of rural crime run on and on, and the figures are startling.

Last year's figures from NFU Mutual indicate that the cost of rural crime in Kent was £1.9 million in 2023 and, while figures in the county had fallen marginally since the previous year, the general cost of rural crime nationwide had increased by 4.3 per cent to £52.8m.

Seventy-seven per cent of NFU agents said they knew farmers who had been repeatedly targeted and, not surprisingly, 86 per cent said they thought rural crime was negatively affecting farmers' mental well-being.

These are striking statistics given that, according to the National Rural Crime Network (2024), 28 per cent of rural-crime victims do not even report their experiences.

Rural crime is becoming more organised, more sophisticated and harder to tackle, but it's not a new phenomenon. Thankfully, we have the National Rural Crime Network and Rural Task Forces, but what about landscape-scale rural-crime-prevention partnerships? Well, thankfully, in one part of Kent we have one: the Securing the Landscape project.

Securing the Landscape

The Securing the Landscape partnership was formed as part of the Valley of Visions Landscape Partnership in the Medway Gap, delivered by the Kent Downs National Landscape (formally Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)) from 2007.

At the time this was an ambitious and exciting project to address what had been perceived as some of the most damaging activities to part of the nationally protected landscape of the Kent Downs. The issues of illegal motorised access (mainly from 4x4s and trials bikes) and flytipping, along with heritage crime, were considered by landowners ▸

and residents in the rural areas of the Medway Valley between Rochester and Maidstone (known as the Medway Gap) as a significant blight on what was otherwise a beautiful area of Kent.

The result was the Securing the Landscape (STL) initiative, a project led by the Kent Downs National Landscape in partnership with Kent Police, local landowners and community groups and funded initially by the Heritage Lottery Fund and other partners.

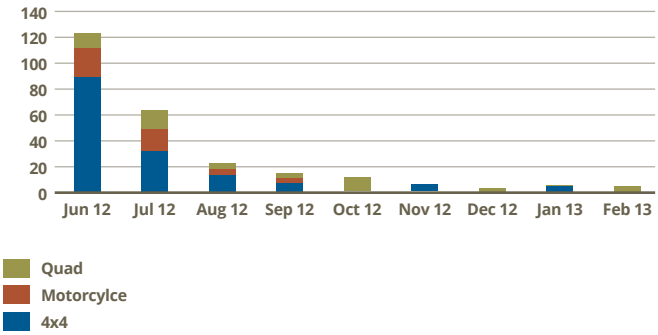
When the Valley of Visions project (and funding) concluded in 2014, the STL element was retained and fully funded by local partners.

The project has worked with landowners to increase land security by creating resources such as the Securing the Landscape Toolkit, which gives practical advice and suggestions such as target-hardening. The project has been able to improve intelligence via addressing the under-reporting of issues and has been successful at installing many physical barriers at key locations to enable target-hardening and the prevention of illegal access at identified 'hot-spots'. STL also introduced an Experimental Traffic Regulation Order (ETRO) and permit system on the byway at Holly Hill.

Holly Hill nestles in the North Downs National Landscape between Snodland and Vigo. It is a small woodland, but what it lacks in size it makes up for in elevation, being one of the highest woodland areas in Kent, with stunning views all the way to Canary Wharf in London.

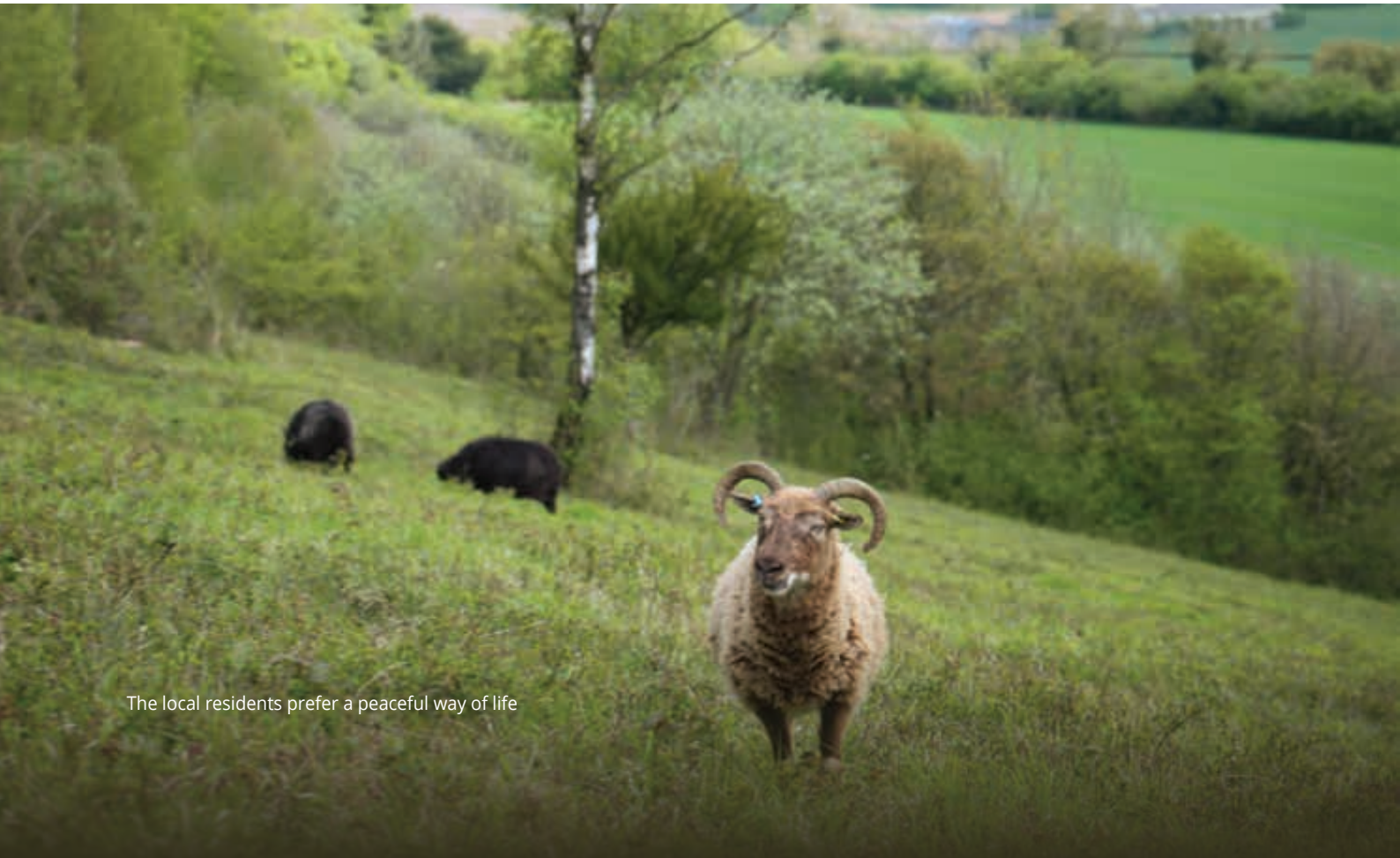
Holly Hill is made up of a mixture of beech, yew and chalk grassland and in spring the wood explodes into colour with a carpet of bluebells.

Motorised illegal incidents recorded at Holly Hill



It's now well documented that off-road vehicle-use significantly affects flora and fauna, with plant cover and richness being significantly lower than equivalent sites without this type of disturbance. Soil compaction is also increased considerably in areas with off-road vehicle use. This is all of course without mentioning the disturbance to wildlife and people using the woodland for harmless recreation and the general loss of beautiful features with the now-apparent ruts and damaged footpaths.

Luckily for the peaceful little woodland of Holly Hill up on the downs, the results of the STL project have been significant, with a reduction of 58 per cent in targeted activities to the end of 2011 from the baseline established in 2006-7 (Kent Police reported incidents). This is particularly impressive when it is widely recognised that activity was under-reported prior to the STL project inception.



The local residents prefer a peaceful way of life

The Securing the Landscape area is marked by the red line (copyright Kent Downs National Landscape and Ordnance Survey)

The last analysis indicated an overall reduction of 80 per cent in illegal and antisocial behaviour during the STL project throughout, while the ETRO at Holly Hill has reduced illegal motorised access within the woodland by 99 per cent, based on covert camera-recording and incidents reported to the police (see graph on previous page).

The STL project is a great case study of what can be achieved when people and teams work together. The project has seen an improvement in coordination between neighbourhood policing and off-road bike and rural-partnership teams and has facilitated several successful targeted operations. Improved coordination with other partners has also resulted in a reduction in the number of flytipping cases and the swift removal of dumped waste.

There have even been workshops for disaffected youths and engagement with local motorcycle-owners over appropriate and legal use, together with more engagement with local people about the effects of dogs on livestock and awareness-raising of the increase in dog attacks.

Sharing lessons learnt and best practice is key, and the project has shared across the country and with partners in northern France through a Securing the Landscape conference.

The partnership funding of a Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) and vehicle to patrol the project area to tackle illegal and antisocial behaviour has been significant in securing and retaining a considerable reduction in rural crime and antisocial behaviour in the area. The provision of a funded PCSO and Special Constable to patrol problem areas, liaise with the public and provide a visible deterrent has clearly helped.

However, rural crime is not going away anytime soon and evidence suggests it is becoming more targeted and organised, so what is the future of the STL project?

Peter Morris, North Downs Way trail officer for the Kent Downs National Landscape, said: "The project currently lives a little hand to mouth, with the police providing a service to match the level of funding we are able to provide from the partnership.

"Ideally, we would identify a longer-term source of funding as we had in the early days of the project that could support a full-time PCSO across the project area. We have recently seen some partners leave the project but have had new partners join, so there is clearly demand and benefit in keeping the project live.

"The key strength is the network of like-minded landowners, land managers and public bodies working together with Kent Police to keep on top of illegal and antisocial behaviour while we identify where the long-term stability of the project is sourced from, alongside the solutions to the day-to-day operational issues we experience on the ground."

We hope that the STL project can continue and expand into the future. It's a wonderful model and has managed thus far to support landowners and reduce illegal and antisocial behaviour in the beautiful Medway Gap area. Long may it continue to do so.

Acknowledgements: With thanks to Peter Morris, who provided much of the detail for this article, and Guy Nevill for the photographs ■

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CPRE Kent Countryside Day

Sunday, September 7, 2025

This event is part of a nationwide CPRE celebration of everything that is great about the countryside.

Come along to the **Kent Countryside Day** and enjoy talks, walks, art-and-craft stalls, artisan shopping, kids' activities and refreshments. You can also learn more about CPRE Kent's work to protect, promote and celebrate the countryside and local green spaces.

CPRE Kent are delighted to be able to host the event at the lovely **Bilsington Priory Estate**.

This gorgeous estate sits between Ashford and Folkestone and comprises 400 acres of grass and woodland. Join a talk and learn about the 13th-century Augustinian priory, founded in 1253, and see the Edwardian manor house within seven acres of beautiful gardens.

More information about the talks, walks and activities are coming soon, but in the meantime save the date and get your tickets via **Eventbrite.**

Tickets: £10 per non-member adult. Children and CPRE Kent members have free entry.

Join CPRE Kent today and get free entry.

Third-party activities, stalls and refreshments will be at an additional cost, payable on the day.

All images Bilsington Priory Estate (copyright). With thanks to Bilsington Priory Estate.

CPRE The countryside charity Kent

Campaigns

How CPRE Kent fights for our rural environment across the county

Turnden

CPRE Kent has set up a CrowdJustice page to help fund its challenge to the government's decision to permit a housing development at Turnden in the High Weald National Landscape (formerly AONB).

Following our pre-action protocol letter in relation to the granting of planning permission for 165 houses at Turnden, near Cranbrook, made by Housing Minister Matthew Pennycook on behalf of Housing Secretary Angela Rayner, we applied for a judicial review.

Our challenge is based on the enhanced duty of decision-makers under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 to seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the national landscape.

We believe that the case is of wider significance for the standard of statutory protection that such landscapes enjoy.

The judicial review will of course cost money, so we are appealing to supporters and countryside-lovers to help fund that challenge. See the CPRE Kent website and search 'CrowdJustice' if you would like to contribute (see also page 29)

Hoad's Wood

It's not as quick as many would have liked, but positive things are finally happening at Hoad's Wood, the site near Bethersden blighted by some 30,000 tonnes of illegally-dumped landfill.

The road past the entrance to the wood has been closed as a prelude to the clearance of the site, which is being overseen by the Environment Agency. It is hoped removal of the waste will begin in May, but it might not be completed until summer next year at a cost of up to £15 million.

The first stage of the process also involves turning an existing track in the wood into a road to enable the removal.

Highsted Park

The decision by Angela Rayner, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, to call in the proposed massive Highsted Park housing development near Sittingbourne just hours before Swale Borough Council's planning committee was due to consider the application shocked many. CPRE Kent is making representation at the inquiry, which began on Tuesday, March 11, and is expected to last 12 weeks (see also page 28).

Sea Link

At the time of writing, we are expecting National Grid to apply for a Development Consent Order for its proposed underwater electricity link between Suffolk and Kent.

The plans entail onshore converter stations at either end, with NG intending the link make landfall in Kent at Pegwell Bay, part of Pegwell and Sandwich Bay National Nature Reserve. It is feared the proposals could prove disastrous for wildlife.

CPRE Kent wants to see evidence that NG has properly ruled out less environmentally damaging options, including the use of suitable brownfield sites, and that the cumulative-effects assessment is undertaken robustly (see also page 28).

Lower Thames Crossing

An application for a Development Consent Order for the Lower Thames Crossing was approved by Transport Secretary Heidi Alexander on Tuesday, March 25.

Despite the approval, questions over funding remain.

CPRE Kent has taken an active role in the lengthy planning process and maintains its view that the adverse environmental and financial impacts of the scheme outweigh any benefits (see also page 26).

Highland Court

The High Court decision not to overturn Canterbury City Council's approval of the Chapel Down application to build a huge warehouse in the Kent Downs National Landscape at Highland Court, near Canterbury, is being challenged by an environmental campaigner. The appeal is due to be heard on Tuesday and Wednesday, July 8-9.

Stonestreet Green Solar

CPRE Kent remains actively involved in the examination of the proposed Stonestreet Green Solar Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP), near Aldington, which covers some 192 hectares. While supportive of renewable energy in principle, we continue to voice significant concerns over the potential loss of Best and Most Versatile (BMV) agricultural land, inadequacies in ecological mitigation measures, substantial landscape impacts and adverse effects on public rights of way (PROW).

The application is in examination, with key issues and impacts under scrutiny by the Planning Inspectorate. This is due to continue through early 2025, after which the Planning Inspectorate will make a recommendation to the Secretary of State on whether to grant development consent.

Oast Park

This former golf course at Snodland has been allowed to rewild and is now a wildlife haven. The site is opposite a Local Wildlife Site, Leybourne Lakes, and is within both the North Downs National Landscape and the Green Belt. It is also relatively close to Burham Marshes Site of Special Scientific Interest. The site is facing a hybrid application to build two 3G sports pitches, a clubhouse, spectator stand and ancillary infrastructure, along with 150 dwellings (none of which will be affordable), golf-driving range, padel tennis courts and parking. Such a development would bring light pollution, congestion, noise and disturbance to an otherwise relatively tranquil area. CPRE Kent is putting in a robust response to these inappropriate proposals.

Chairman's Update

Ben Moorhead

The government's apparent attempt to stifle the voices of organisations such as ours will not work

CPRE Kent have been working incredibly hard in the face of very tough challenges and against a background that in Britain has witnessed two million acres of grassland and woods lost to development over 25 years, including playing fields. This is an area the size of Suffolk and Sussex combined. Is this progress?

The whole team have been working incredibly hard in our core areas, including planning, landscape and ecology, and in spreading our message through a variety of media.

The new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) has introduced some of the most consequential changes to our planning rules for a generation. There is a return of housing targets and a stated mission of 1.5 million houses over the next five years. This will involve mandatory (*ie* compulsory, obligatory, inescapable) targets that also set priorities on the 'grey belt' (what Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer has called 'the ugly parts' of the Green Belt).

It is also clear that government wishes to stifle local voices as local authorities or other devolved bodies are told they must join in set targets among the target of 300,000 homes each year. I understand a notional target of 500,000 homes on grey belt may have been set over the five years. CPRE Kent still have a voice and a strong purpose since, whatever the targets set, we have a unique understanding of our landscape, flora and ecology, so we are well placed to influence.

All this against the uncertainty of how services in Kent will be maintained and how the planning processes will be carried out, and whether new processes will produce better outcomes, *ie* better local solutions to local questions.

A number of our council leaders seem to be of the view that devolution will give the local population a stronger voice. In the latest update in February, Kent and Medway councils had not been selected by the government to be included as part of the Devolution Priority Plan. In cricketing parlance, we are 'in the corridor of uncertainty'. Thus, we will not be part of the fast-tracked programme for the creation of a Mayoral Strategic Combined Authority or new unitary council.

The county council leader found this decision by government "totally incomprehensible". He said: "I am astonished by this decision and bitterly disappointed that residents and businesses of Kent have been let down by the government and will not be able to benefit from the increased monies, powers and opportunities provided through devolution."

Meanwhile, over the county border, there is consultation on establishing a Mayoral Combined County Authority across East Sussex, West Sussex and Brighton and Hove. Within the corridor of uncertainty, it is very clear that we will not return to sufficient Kentish autonomy, the likes of which go back to 'gavelkind', where Kent's own customs reigned supreme in Saxon England and even under William I!

Among the greatest invaders in recent times are Housing Minister Matthew Pennycook on behalf of his boss, Angela Rayner, who led the assault on

The timeless beauty of the Kent landscape is under threat from the frenetic rush for growth at any cost (Julie Davies)

How poorer life would be without the wildlife that makes our countryside home... this is a brimstone butterfly (David Mairs)

the National Landscape around Turnden, near Cranbrook, in granting planning permission for 165 houses on this protected site.

Our challenge to government, led by our own Richard Thompson (very ably supported by John Wotton, Julie Davies and Andrea Griffiths), was based on the failure by the Secretary of State to have regard to the enhanced duty in decision-making under the CROW Act (Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000), which seeks to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing National Landscapes.

The outcome of our case will have implications across all protected landscapes in England. I must thank all those who have given of their time and also who have generously contributed to our funding appeal. We should know soon whether our claim will go forward.

Hopefully over the next few weeks we will see more sunshine, particularly compared with the gloom of last spring. Members will know that in recent years we have been challenging some massive solar plans in the wrong places or on special landscapes.

It is interesting to note that when one looks at the mix of energy contribution solar is firmly at the bottom of the table with some 4 per cent, while wind, which takes up less land, contributes 25-28 per cent. But under the Energy Secretary's net-zero plans, more may equal less in relative terms. We should also not forget the huge pylon schemes needed to carry the power from wind and solar farms. The scar tissue will never disappear. Where they are constructed should be near existing power lines, for example as in the case of the earlier Brookland scheme on Romney Marsh.

Among other uncertainties in Kent, the government recently (January 31) launched its consultation on land use, which will help farm businesses to maximise the potential of multiple uses of land but support "long-term food production" and capacity.

The consultation seeks views of farmers, landowners, businesses and nature groups (like CPRE) across the country. But we should be in no doubt that this consultation will also be used to support the government's 1.5 million-homes target, possibly by splitting away less productive land into multiple uses from the more productive land.

It can be argued in the frenetic rush for growth and houses at any cost and with breakneck speed that the government is seeking to stifle the voices and noise made by organisations such as ours because to do so suits its agenda.

I do not believe this will work, mainly because in the modern world we have a ready audience and we have many ways of speaking and lobbying and recruiting our base, which is much wider than the sum of our membership. Thank you to David Mairs for opening our window on the world. And thank you to Andrea for her sustained leadership, Vicky Ellis for her management and work on the ecology of Kent and to Richard and Julie for keeping us sound on planning.

Thank you especially to all our district chairs and committee members, who are our eyes and ears and worker bees in the CPRE hive. ■

Lockdown brought many frustrations, but it surely brought some families closer together

REMEMBER WHEN WE WALKED THE WALK?

CPRE Kent planner and Pink Wellies blogger Julie Davies reflects on lockdown, when many of us took the advice we were all being given and got ourselves into nature, and asks whether our well-being has suffered since as we've failed to keep up the good habits

If you're anything like me, I bet that in 2020 you spentmore time enjoying country walks than in any other period of your life. And then lockdown was over. Did you promise yourself that you'd keep up the walking habit? And did you?

I kept a diary of my lockdown walks, which were published as regular blog posts under the title Pink Wellies on the CPRE Kent website. Sadly, things have gone downhill since.

My daughter was under the impression that the Prime Minister was ordering us to go out on daily walks. Once it had finally dawned on her that it was her mother that was making a break for freedom, she wasn't nearly as keen to continue the habit.

Partly this was my fault. Husband and daughter quickly realised that the answer to their question of how long our walks would be (my response: a few miles) was not entirely factually correct.

I can name the exact walk when I was rumbled. When the promised five-miler turned into nine. It was a walk I really enjoyed. Close to home but in slightly unfamiliar territory. A pitstop outside a grand historic country home and then a picnic in the corner of a field. Utter bliss.

A year or so later, my daughter endured her practice and real-thing Duke of Edinburgh overnight hikes. It turned out that none of her group were skilled map-readers, but she was able to get them out of trouble because she recognised where they were - so those lockdown walks weren't a waste of her time after all.

I'm rather sad that our period of family walks has come to an end. The dog gets walked, but we don't walk for pleasure.

And I'm wondering whether that's having an adverse impact on our well-being. We're not being 'forced' outside - and the comforts of home are, well, too comforting to leave. Does this resonate with you?

CPRE has done loads of research highlighting the value of being able to access green spaces and the natural world. With this in mind, the charity is trying to go a step further and encourage people to use the countryside as a tonic - to give us all a well-being boost.

It's well documented that fresh air and the distractions of nature can soothe the mind. Anxieties can be forgotten (however temporarily).

Indeed, a growing number of health professionals and community workers are advocating the use of 'green therapy'. That is, time spent immersed in nature to help our mental health. When physically going to work and school wasn't an option, and as the whole world slowed down, we learnt a lot about being in the moment.

Do you remember noticing the endless sunny days of spring without a vapour trail in the sky? The silent motorways?

Well, perhaps now is the time to practise being in the moment. To engage our senses and to become more mindful.

This is something we've taken on board at our Charing office. Since our return to (hybrid) working in the office we've made a specific point of getting out into the countryside and walking for 45 minutes a couple of times a week.

It's a bit like when in lockdown - we tramp a favourite route, with occasional variations. And we throw in the odd route walked backwards - or should I say in the reverse direction! Sometimes we strike out anew and then regret our impetuosity as we lose the footpath and end up climbing over gates in our office smarts.

But it feels good. We get a chance to talk. Some of it highbrow work-related stuff, other times just family news and gossip. Walking side by side means we're on an equal footing with the hierarchy of the workplace forgotten.

And we notice.

We engage our senses.

We see things. We hear things. We smell things. We touch things. And when it's wild garlic season we taste things, too. And it goes without saying, don't eat what you don't know is safe for you.

We've seen llamas, a bat (in the sunshine of early afternoon), common buzzards and common spotted orchids. And dipped our hands in freezing-cold streams.

We're fortunate to be able to do this, with our office in Charing and the countryside just steps away. But what if you can't get out into the countryside, whether that be for locational, time-constraint or mobility reasons?

How can you get your green therapy? How can you find your countryside next door?

Your bit of countryside might be the grass verge down your road, the area of green space designed into the housing development where you live, or your back garden.

Now's the time to restore your sense of calm and get outdoors, if only for a few minutes.

I was talking to a friend recently and she told me that she and her husband sit out in their garden at 6am every day for their first cuppa. Easy to do in the summer. In the winter they sit in their coats.

They're noticing. And with that they're being in the moment. Engaging their senses and being mindful. Which is all good for their mental health.

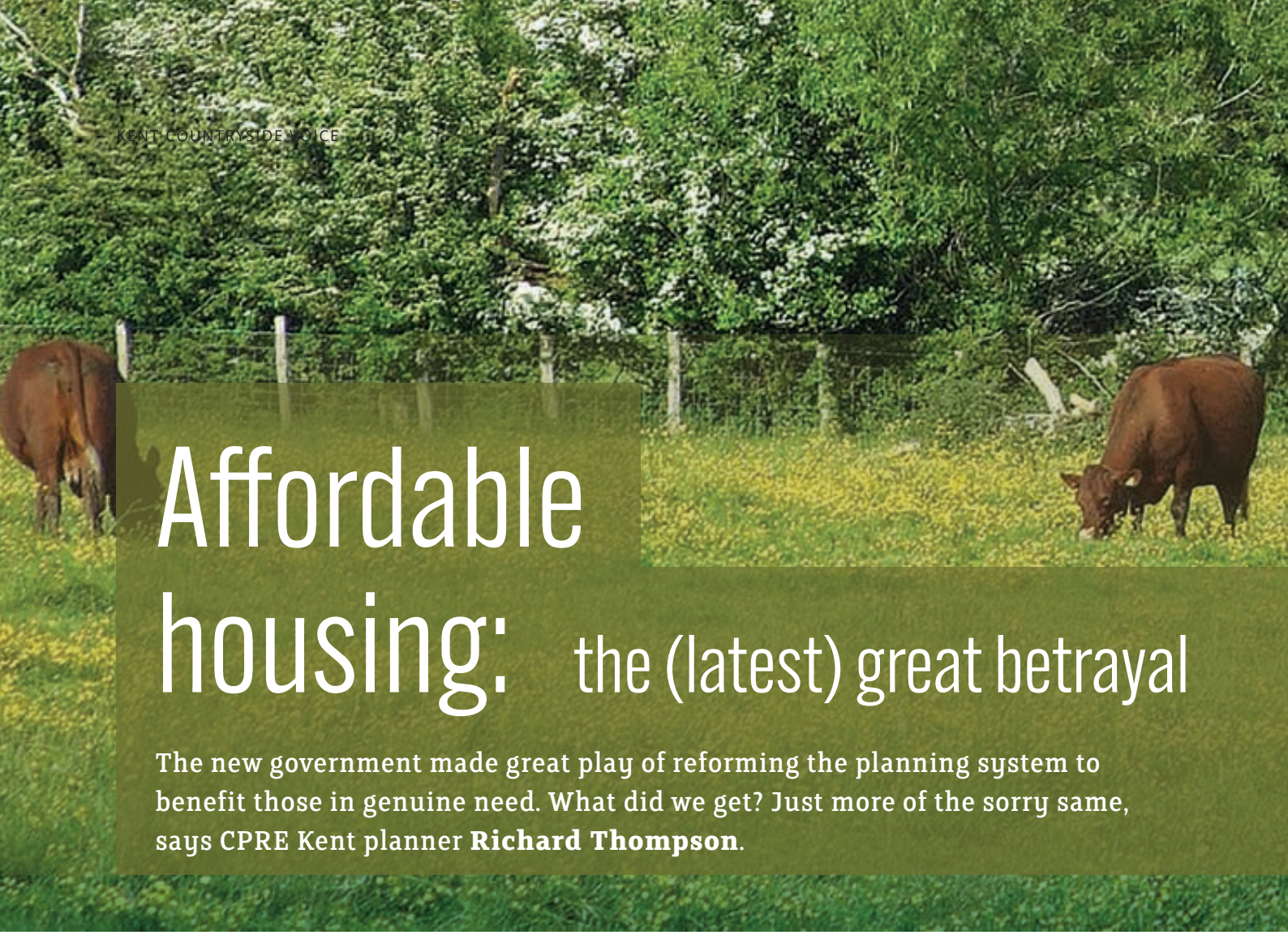
From the convenience of your garden, you never know what wildlife you might spot. Managing your lawnmowing regime to allow longer sections of grass in parts of your garden will encourage wildflowers to grow, which in turn will attract pollinators like bees and butterflies.

Any areas you feel comfortable being left unmown for longer will provide vital sanctuary and support the lifecycle of invertebrates such as butterflies, moths, flies, aphids, spiders, bees, wasps, slugs and snails.

And then all you'll need is a small pond and frogs to keep your slug population in check.

So perhaps it's time to make a resolution (the time of year doesn't matter). To commit to getting out into nature, to start noticing what's around you and celebrate wildlife. ■

That faraway time when so many of our roads and lanes were traffic-free...



Affordable housing: the (latest) great betrayal

The new government made great play of reforming the planning system to benefit those in genuine need. What did we get? Just more of the sorry same, says CPRE Kent planner Richard Thompson.

"... there is one barrier so big, so imposing that it blocks out all light from the other side. A blockage that stops this country building roads, grid connections, laboratories, trainlines, warehouses, windfarms, power stations. An obstacle to the aspirations of millions - now and in the future - who deserve the security of home ownership. A future hidden by our restrictive planning system... Conference, we must bulldoze through it."

So was the scene set by Sir Keir Starmer at his address to the 2023 Labour Party Conference, ahead of the party's election success the following year. And true to his word, the newly-elected Labour government has embarked on an ambitious planning reform, claiming that an overhaul of the system will remove barriers and unlock housing supply.

The government's plan is apparently simple: Let's sharply increase housing targets and commit to delivering 1.5 million homes by 2029. Let's remove as many barriers as possible to planning permission being granted, even if refusal would be on the most justifiable of grounds. Let's then just sit back and watch as the development industry falls over itself to build these houses at any cost.

And if the development industry doesn't build enough houses? That's OK, we will just punish local authorities and the communities they serve by forcing them to grant more planning permissions at locations where they really should be refused.

In Kent alone, this has translated into sharply-rising housing targets for almost all local authorities, with an overall countywide increase of 1,438 homes per year. Except in Kent, the development industry already builds nowhere near the current target, let alone the new target. The reason for this, as we have written many times before, is far more complex than what can be blamed on the planning system alone.

For starters, we would say the problem is not the failure of local authorities to grant planning permission. Indeed, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) has just released a report highlighting that developers have secured planning permission for more than 1.4 million homes since 2007 but have not gone on to build them[1]. In Kent alone, some 55,115 housing units either had or almost had planning permission as of March 2023[2].

More fundamentally, just increasing the target and expecting the development industry to not only deliver more houses but to deliver these at lower, more affordable, prices is pie-in-the-sky thinking. As we have also said many times before, the development industry, quite understandably, is never going to build at a rate that over-supplies a local housing market, forcing it to reduce prices and lower profits.

But therein lies the most depressing factor about the current

The proposed Heathlands garden village is likely to change this area forever... but who will really benefit?

reforms. By just repeating the same old rhetoric that blames the planning system for all the country's housing woes, the real issue is being conveniently sidestepped - the failure of government policy to provide genuinely affordable and secure housing to those in housing need, particularly among our rural communities.

This is particularly disappointing coming from a Labour government.

A large part of the failure stems from the fact that the government continues to blur the distinction between the housing that society needs and the housing that the market demands. 'Housing need' refers to the number of homes we need to provide to fulfil the basic shelter needs of the population. It is this, as a minimum, for which we should be planning. 'Housing demand', on the other hand, refers to the number of homes individuals and investors can and are willing to buy in any given market - a demand that is notionally infinite.

The problem is, the development industry naturally prioritises meeting such market demand as that is where the quickest and largest profits lie. There are however no such big profits to be made in providing affordable housing. Rather, this is now almost entirely dependent on a mixture of government grants and agreements made with developers as part of the planning process. Except those developers are often, and increasingly, negotiating down their affordable-housing obligations, citing viability concerns and the lack of Registered Providers able or willing to fund new affordable housing.

And this has real-world consequences. A shortage of affordable social or council housing, combined with rising homelessness due to evictions, has seen the number of people living in emergency temporary accommodation rise in recent years. According to the latest government data[3], as of June 2024, 123,100 homeless households were in temporary accommodation in England - a 16.3 per cent increase on the previous year.

In Kent, there was a 56 per cent increase of households in temporary accommodation between 2018-2022[4]. Sevenoaks, for instance, delivered just 35 affordable homes in the last reported year, one of the lowest rates in the county. And that's before you get into the discussion of what is deemed to be 'affordable' for the purposes of the reported statistics; for example, in Sevenoaks a private monthly rent of £1,312 would currently be deemed 'affordable'[5] for the purposes of planning definition within the National Planning Policy Framework.

Consequently, we have a situation where we are sacrificing our countryside trying to meet what is only ever going to be an unsatisfiable market demand while simultaneously completely failing to provide housing for those in genuine housing need. ▸

Is the government trying to do anything more than just increasing housing targets to provide affordable and secure housing to those in housing need? Well, in February this year it announced an additional £300 million for the Affordable Homes Programme, claiming it would deliver 2,800 homes. Respectfully, this is a drop in the ocean compared with the scale of the crisis and in any event the funding is directed largely to existing rather than new projects[6].

Fast-forward to the government's set piece on planning reforms, the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, which was published on Tuesday, March 11. This provided the opportunity for the government to set ambitious targets for the delivery of affordable and social homes in both urban and rural areas; to redefine 'affordable housing' to a more realistic definition that links affordability to local incomes rather than market rates; to strengthen the rules around viability assessments so developers can no longer water down their comments; and to introduce planning controls on short-term lets and second homes.

With the government's press release describing the Bill as "creating the biggest building boom in a generation" that would "tackle the housing crisis we have inherited head on - not only for people desperate to buy a home, but for the families and young children stuck in temporary accommodation and in need of a safe, secure roof over their heads", hopes were certainly high.

So what did we get?

Well, there is a bit of positive tinkering around with hope values in the context of compulsory-purchase rules that appear intended to assist with the delivery of the government's new-towns agenda. And that seems to be about it. In fact, affordable housing is only mentioned twice in the Bill.

Instead, we have yet more blaming of the planning system, with public-consultation requirements for the largest of developments being reduced, with the democratic safeguards offered by planning committees being watered down and, most concerning for us at CPRE Kent, a proposal by which developers can sidestep the long-fought-for environmental protections afforded by the Habitat Regulations, Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) and Protection of Badgers Act 1992.


Genuinely-held concerns about excessive development are being dismissed out of hand by the new government with an already-tired rhetoric

This is not the answer. This is just more of the same, although some might argue only worse.

Instead of allowing developers to dictate housing supply based on profit motives, government policy must focus on genuine solutions to deliver homes where they are needed most. This means a renewed financial commitment to social housing, reintroducing public-sector-led housebuilding and implementing stronger regulations to ensure that homes built under affordability schemes are genuinely accessible to local residents.

At the very least, this means ensuring that the houses that already have planning permission are actually built and ensuring developers are not able to wriggle out of affordable-housing commitments.

Without such a shift in focus towards policy solutions that provides genuinely affordable housing, Kent's residents will continue to be priced out while the countryside is sacrificed for executive homes and identikit developments that do little if anything to serve the communities they impact.

What we don't need is yet more of the same tired old rhetoric that labels newts and bats, along with anyone with a genuinely-held concern about development in their area, as "blockers". ■


'Residents will continue to be priced out while the countryside is sacrificed for executive homes and identikit developments'

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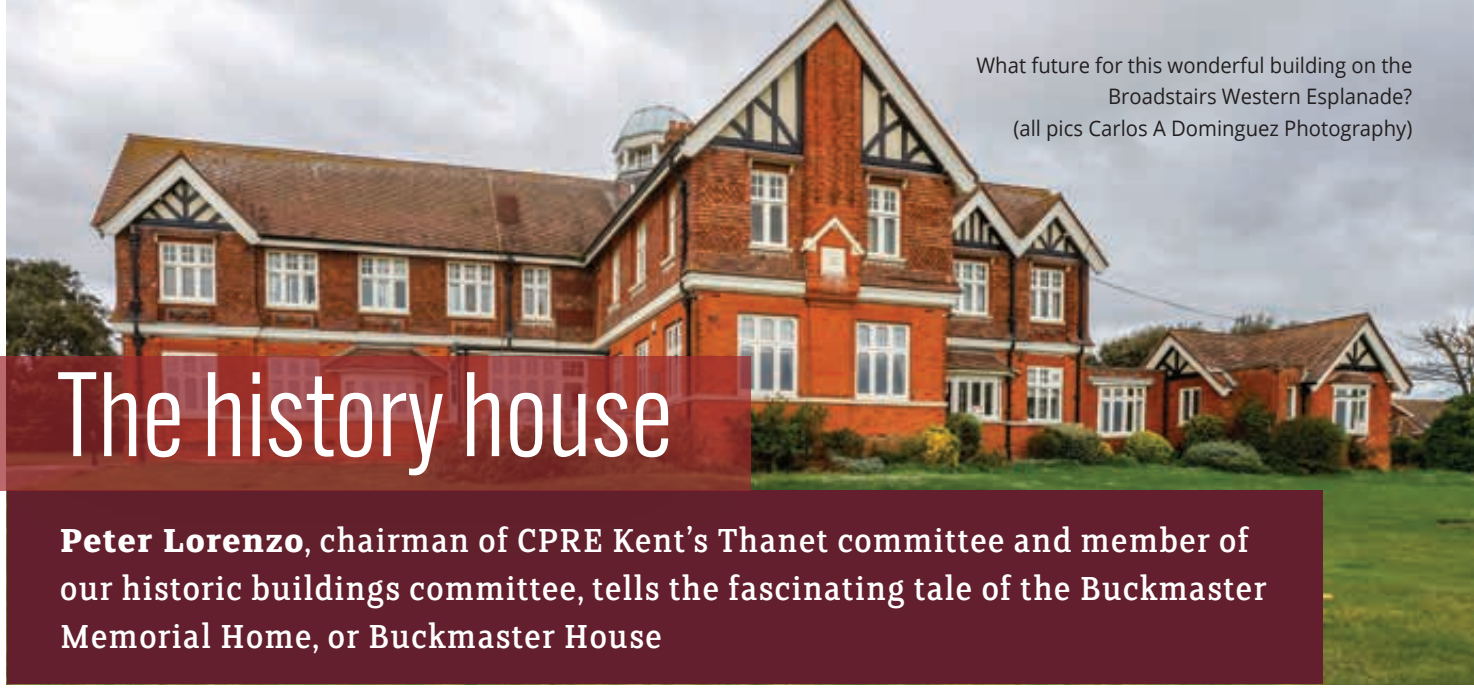


What future for this wonderful building on the Broadstairs Western Esplanade? (all pics Carlos A Dominguez Photography)

The history house

Peter Lorenzo, chairman of CPRE Kent's Thanet committee and member of our historic buildings committee, tells the fascinating tale of the Buckmaster Memorial Home, or Buckmaster House

Buckmaster House in Broadstairs was built, furnished and endowed by Jane Buckmaster in memory of her husband, Thomas Buckmaster, of Bruntsfield House in Brixton. It was built as a convalescent home for ladies of the Protestant faith without sufficient means to enable them to pay for holidays at the seaside.

Thomas and William Buckmaster were successful tailors in Savile Row. They became substantial property-owners, with two houses in Savile Row, a large house in Piccadilly and property in Brixton.

Thomas died in 1891 and the planning and design of the house was put in hand in 1883. The land was bought in 1894 and the architect was HB Langham of Broadstairs and the builder Wise of Deal.

Broadstairs was probably chosen because a nephew and two nieces of her late husband lived in Thanet - William Buckmaster's children (Reverend John North Buckmaster, Maria and Marion). Maria's husband Reverend Alfred Whitehead joined the management committee to oversee the running of the home.

The Ward Lock travel guide published about 1905 referred to the town as "our watering place" and quoted Dickens describing it in 1894 as "a good sea, fresh breezes, fine sands and pleasant walks. It is one of the freshest and purest little places in the world". The guide went on to say that the Buckmaster Memorial Home building "is one of the most handsome in the town".

The original and many of the later trustees were members of the Buckmaster or Cheyne families, mainly through William's line through his son, Rev John North Buckmaster, who was born in 1837, educated at Rugby and Oxford and ordained in 1863. He married Catherine Tomson (of the Kentish brewery Tomson and Wotton) in 1872 and died in 1910.

John had two sons, William and Herbert. William was an original trustee and his brother, Herbert, founded Buck's Club in London after the First World War and ran it for 50 years. The drink Buck's Fizz was first served at the club. Herbert married Gladys (later Dame Gladys) Cooper and their daughter, Joan North Buckmaster, married the actor Robert Morley.

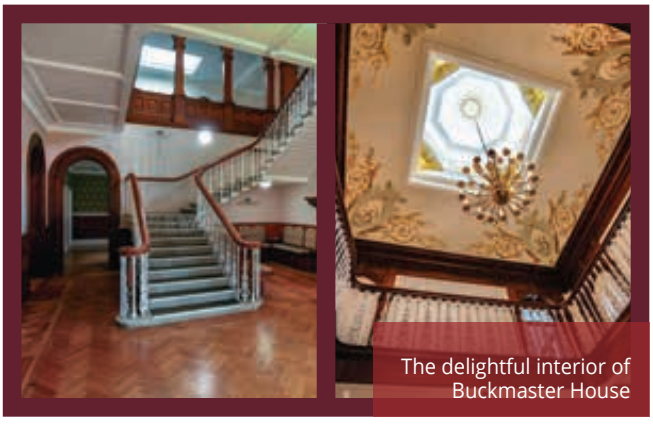
The last Buckmaster to serve as a trustee was Joan Morley, who retired after 47 years. The home was originally designed with 12 bedrooms upstairs built along three corridors leading off the main landing. Smaller rooms for domestic staff were at the back of the house.

During the period 1982-1994 the home was enlarged - long-term residence was given priority over short-stay. In 1995 there were 26 single bedrooms and only one or two were kept for holiday guests. Ronald C McAlister and Molly G Proctor wrote a history of the home from 1895 to 1995.

The care firm Abbeyfield Society took over responsibility for the building in 2018 and ran it as a retirement home before declaring that it could not be "operated sustainably" and closing it in April last year. It then put Buckmaster House up for sale at a price of £3.5 million.

The former Broadstairs Society had suggested, and the town council agreed, that the property should be locally listed and it is contained in the town's Neighbourhood Plan as such.

Plans to convert Buckmaster House into a 17-bedroom residential family centre have been lodged with Thanet District Council, but at the time of writing no decision had been made. ■



The delightful interior of Buckmaster House

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At CPRE Kent, the countryside charity, our mission is to protect the county from inappropriate development and create a sustainable, beautiful future for Kent. We campaign to protect and preserve our beautiful countryside and its biodiversity for future generations to enjoy.

Can I help CPRE Kent?

One of the most meaningful ways you can support our work is by leaving CPRE Kent a gift in your will. Your gift will provide vital support for our cause, enabling us to continue our valuable work to support communities and protect the countryside.

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Plastics are an ever-present blight around our shores (Aled Llywelyn/ Marine Conservation Society)

THE PERSISTING PERIL OF PLASTIC

Kevin Pressland, CPRE Kent member and environmental campaigner, highlights an issue that he says needs tackling urgently

My home district of Thanet is gifted with a wonderful coastline and prime agricultural land, but do we really value it? Do national and international governments throughout the world care as they continue to resist legislation to thwart the production of single-use plastics?

The United Nations says that world society has "only recycled about 10 per cent of the seven billion tons of plastic we have created since its invention and things are likely to only get worse'. The BBC series Mediterranean with Simon Reeves showed the implications.

Society claims to be concerned about the generation to come, yet it is willing to sacrifice this for supposed convenient packaging that has damaging consequences for soils, seas, food systems, biodiversity and, yes, our health. We are quick to fly the flag of the NHS and rightly so, but do we not have the responsibility to prevent illness in the first place as government and local authorities and as individuals and businesses?

This is another example of lack of full-systems thinking. Nature does not produce waste like we do - it has effective recycling systems keyed into its very functioning. Biodiversity in this, the Anthropocene (the era in which humans are the dominant force on Earth), is diminishing and many scientists believe we're in the middle of the sixth mass extinction... caused by humans. Single-use plastics are playing a massive part in this decline.

We need governments to ban single-use plastics and enable local authorities to have the financial resources to set up commercial composting facilities that would adequately compost truly biodegradable compostable packaging.

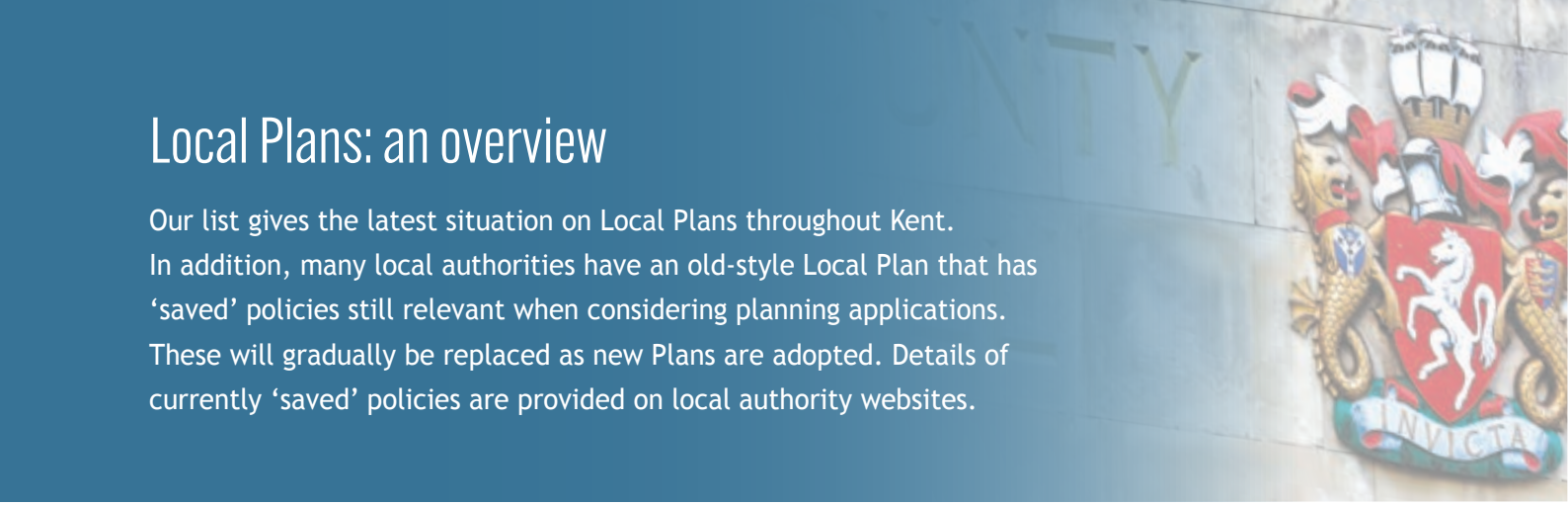
Our governments need to enable the creation of networks from product manufacture to product sale to consumer waste and then commercial composting - a merry-go-round of efficient use, a cyclical system. As a bonus, these systems could produce energy to houses, council facilities and so on. Our current systems of production to waste are inadequate to create these cyclical approaches.

Young inspirational people like Ella and Amy Meek, Myra Rose Craig, Vanessa Nakate, Daniel Koto Dagnon, Greta Thunberg, Nyombi Morris, Lesein Mutunkei, Luisa Neubauer, Autumn Peltier and Malala Yousafzai are leading thinkers who see the harm our systems are wreaking. Do not our young people, other creatures and the biodiverse habitats with which we share the world and that supply us with water, food and air deserve better? It is in all our interests to address this issue, not keep kicking the can down the road.

If we look at just a monetary perspective, it will cost more if we do not act - money will not protect what is being lost and will be lost. We need to act now. ■

Local Plans: an overview

Our list gives the latest situation on Local Plans throughout Kent. In addition, many local authorities have an old-style Local Plan that has 'saved' policies still relevant when considering planning applications. These will gradually be replaced as new Plans are adopted. Details of currently 'saved' policies are provided on local authority websites.



Ashford:

- Regulation 18 consultation is expected spring 2025.

Canterbury:

- Regulation 18 consultation took place last year. A new settlement at Cooting Farm, Adisham, has been deleted. A new settlement was proposed at Blean. The next round of consultation is expected to be held in the autumn..

Dartford:

- Local Plan adopted April 22, 2024.

Dover:

- Local Plan adopted October 16, 2024..

Folkestone & Hythe:

- Places and Polices Local Plan was adopted in September 2020. The Core Strategy Review was adopted in March 2022. Regulation 18 consultation on a new Local Plan is expected early in 2026.

Gravesham:

- The next round of consultation is awaiting resolution of issues surrounding traffic modelling in connection with the Lower Thames Crossing.

Maidstone:

- Local Plan adopted March 20, 2024. Work has started on Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) for Lidsing, Lenham Heath and Invicta Barracks, Maidstone.

Medway:

- A second round of Regulation 18 consultation took place last year. Regulation 19 consultation is expected to take place this summer.

Sevenoaks:

- A second round of Regulation 18 consultation took place last year. Regulation 19 consultation is expected to take place this summer.

Swale:

- Local Plan preparation is on hold awaiting the Secretary of State's call-in of two planning applications at Highsted Park. Regulation 18 consultation is expected to take place at the end of the year.

Thanet:

- A revised Local Development Scheme was published in July 2024. Regulation 18 consultation is expected to take place in the autumn of 2026.

Tonbridge and Malling:

- The council made the decision in July 2024 to pause work on its Local Plan until the revised NPPF is published. A revised Local Development Scheme is awaited..

Tunbridge Wells:

- Hearing sessions resumed in autumn 2024. The inspector's final report is awaited..

District	Plan	Apr-Jun 2025	Jul-Sep 2025	Oct-Dec 2025	Jan-Mar 2026	Apr-Jun 2026	Jul-Sep 2026	Oct-Dec 2026	Notes
Ashford	Local Plan 2042	Consultation			Consultation			Examination	Adopted 2019
Canterbury	Local Plan 2040			Consultation				Examination	Adopted 2017
Dartford	Local Plan 2037								Adopted 22.4.24
Dover	Local Plan 2020-2040	Adoption							Adopted 16.10.24
Folkestone & Hythe	Local Plan				Consultation				Adopted 2020
Gravesham	Core Strategy Review and Allocations DPD 2036	Consultation		Examination			Adoption		Adopted 2014
Maidstone	Local Plan 2022-2037								Adopted 20.3.24
Medway	Local Plan 2041	Consultation			Examination		Adoption		Adopted 2003
Sevenoaks	Local Plan 2025- 2038	Consultation		Examination		Adoption			Adopted 2011
Swale	Local Plan 2022-2038			Consultation		Consultation		Examination	Adopted 2017
Thanet	Local Plan 2020-2040						Consultation		Adopted 2020
Tonbridge & Malling	Local Plan 2031	Consultation		Consultation		Examination			Adopted 2007
Tunbridge Wells	Local Plan 2033								Adopted 2010

Regulation 18 consultation: early stage consultation often with open questions and a wider remit for consultation input.

Regulation 19 consultation: views sought on whether the Local Plan is legally compliant and meets the tests of soundness set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

Examination in Public (EIP): hearings held by a planning inspector to assess whether the Local Plan has been prepared in line with relevant legal requirements and meets the tests of soundness.

• For guidance on Local Plans, see FAQs at www.cprekent.org.uk

KEY

- Regulation 18
- Regulation 19
- Examination
- Adoption

Around the districts

A quick catch-up with our committees. Don't forget, if you would like to become more involved with CPRE Kent in your local area please contact us in the office and we will put you in touch with your district chairman.

Ashford - Christine Drury

- The next Local Plan work by the borough's strategic planning team is ongoing but still behind closed doors - we await the white smoke of a draft being published after Easter.
- Ashford's housing target was reduced slightly on the new calculation method, but market conditions plus the Stodmarsh NNR constraints are adding to the backlog in delivery. Meanwhile, developers continue to press proposals on unallocated and inappropriate sites. The council is holding firm in Hamstreet and has twice rejected housing on Cotton Hill as unsustainable and inconvenient, as well as on its landscape and ecology impacts on the Royal Military Canal to the south and the Ham Street Woods SSSI to the north.
- A fight against Chilmington Green development extending south along the A28 to Possingham Farm has been lost at appeal. This is very depressing; the inspector in effect dismissed the Chilmington Green masterplan boundary constraints as out of date. How can this be so when current reserved-matters applications are presented with reference to the masterplan?
- Plans for Brompton Bicycles to move its factory and operations from west London to Ashford are still being discussed; the proposals include wetland creation and Holloway architecture in the Willesborough Dykes east of Asda. It is good the company is not in a hurry to move - there is a lot more to do to satisfy the Environment Agency and work out the logistics before any groundworks start.
- CPRE can engage and support locally, and sometimes influence national policy, but the really tough work is so often done by local action groups - nowhere is this more so now than for the residents of Aldington and Mersham parishes, who are fighting two very large solar-farm proposals smothering and diverting footpaths across the precious Kent countryside that should be remaining in agriculture between Ashford and the huge new Otterpool Park development.
- By the summer the clearing of 30,000 tonnes of illegally-dumped waste at Hoad's Wood SSSI should be well under way.

Canterbury - Sarah Cassidy

- The erstwhile chair of the Canterbury group, Nick Blake, had to step down in the autumn owing to illness. He has since moved to Hampshire. We wish him better health in future and record our gratitude for his dedication and his many imaginative interventions with district councillors and council officers responsible for planning and development. The lacuna left by Nick's departure will be filled provisionally by Sarah Cassidy and Peter Styles, who will cooperate to convene the group and establish a priority list of issues local CPRE members wish to tackle. Matters of evident concern in the near future include housing developments around Sturry, Broad Oak, Hersden, Thanington, Chartham and Whitstable.
- A crucial milestone for the district will come with the next iteration of a revised draft Local Plan. It may be issued by the city council quite soon and there are fears it will be subject only to a technical Regulation 19 consultation process prior to formal adoption. The current draft of the Plan includes highly controversial greenfield site allocations around the village of Blean, at Brooklands Farm near Chestfield and the so-called Merton Park (south-west of Canterbury and just north of the A2), together with a Canterbury south-west link road and a new Broad Oak reservoir. In response to the last Regulation 18 consultation on the draft Plan in early 2024, CPRE roundly criticised the size and locations of the strategic greenfield site allocations, questioned the deliverability of elements of the Plan and proposed a more ambitious approach by the council to the identification and allocation of brownfield sites.

Dartford and Gravesham - Alex Hills

- The government's approval of the Lower Thames Crossing is in defiance of the facts. The Development Consent Order documents showed the Dartford crossing would still be over capacity from day one and within five years would be back to the current levels. They also show the LTC will not achieve any of its objectives, deliver very poor value for money, increase congestion and cause destruction of ancient woodland. We will explore every possible avenue in stopping this wretched scheme until the ground is broken.
- The company behind the proposed London Resort theme park on the Swanscombe peninsula has been wound up.

Dover - Derek Wanstall

- At the February meeting, committee members were informed I would be staying on as chairman.
- May I, as in the past, invite any members in the district that they can contact me by phone on 01304 363610 or by email at d.wanstall22@btinternet.com if they feel the committee can assist in any way.
- Planning issues cannot be more concerning, especially with Dover's Local Plan being considered and the number of houses the government would like to see built.
- There is much concern among local residents about a large solar farm on Ash Level.
- What a great shame the county council is closing eight windmills - these should be protected.

Maidstone - vacant

- Sadly, there is no district committee in place in the Maidstone area, so we are without our eyes and ears on the ground. If you have a few hours to spare - and are interested in becoming more involved in looking at planning applications in the rural area around Maidstone - we'd love to hear from you..

Medway - Anna Simmonds

- Since my appointment as Medway chair at the beginning of February, as a group of one, I have been focused on meeting CPRE Kent staff and fellow chairs and reviewing the weekly planning application list.
- Medway has some significant legacy housing developments, for example 1,400 homes on Rochester Riverside and the further 600 homes at Chatham Waterside, as well as a number of very large developments planned for the Hoo peninsula. Added to the longstanding planned 200-home redevelopment of the old civic centre in Strood, while not necessarily impacting the countryside, there is a lot of development alongside the River Medway. Medway Council states that 1,658 new homes a year are needed to keep up with how Medway's population is forecast to grow. This is a total of almost 28,000 over the next 16 years. Given the volume, I will be focusing on encouraging new members to join while continuing to review the planning-application list and monitoring the volume of developments.
- CPRE Kent has objected to the proposed 800 homes earmarked for Best and Most Versatile farmland near Wainscott and has sent an objection to the felling of oaks subject to Tree Preservation Orders in Hoo.

Sevenoaks - Nigel Britten

- On the planning front there are two big issues. The application for 340 houses and a school on an unallocated Green Belt site in Edenbridge, which we opposed unsuccessfully, has outline permission but now wants more. The new application is for 450 houses and a secondary school on an enlarged site.
- Local opposition is strong and has been organised impressively. Our objection rests obviously on Green Belt, low density and flood risk. It is also debatable, on the county council's figures, whether population growth would meet the level required to justify building the school. If not, the allocated space would revert to the developer for more housing.
- On top of that, Edenbridge is bracing itself as the likely target for major Green Belt housing allocations in the next Local Plan Regulation 18, now due this autumn - despite having no A road, train or bus connection to the principal town, Sevenoaks.
- The other application is for a solar farm near New Ash Green. Vicky Ellis and I have been involved from an early stage. The site is Green Belt but not National Landscape or BMV (Best and Most Versatile), but there is ancient woodland at risk. The local opposition group NONAGS, No New Ash Green Solar, has raised funds to engage Richard Buxton Solicitors and has support from Tom Tugendhat MP.
- Finally, before handing over to new chair Wendy Fallon, I'm delighted to report that our secretary Susan Pittman, who helped start this committee more than 30 years ago, is at last able to stand down thanks to a volunteer coming forward - a past parish council chair who should prove a real asset for our work.

Shepway - Graham Horner

- The district is facing a rash of solar-power projects of increasing size. The proposal by Low Carbon on 1,500 acres of land around Old Romney would be bigger than the Cleve Hill site near Faversham and is entirely on Best and Most Versatile (BMV) farmland. We have given advice to local group Hands Off Our Marsh and are supporting their campaign.
- Several other projects of similar or larger size have been planned for sites on Romney Marsh and at Dungeness, but details are not out yet. All of these are big enough to be submitted as Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs), for which the opportunity for residents to object or influence things is limited. All this solar power will need to feed into the Grid, so a massive substation is also needed somewhere on the Marsh.
- A smaller project (100 acres) at St Mary in the Marsh will be determined by Folkestone & Hythe District Council as a normal planning application. FHDC itself is proposing a solar array on 47 acres at Court-at-Street as part of the Otterpool Park project.
- We were pleased that FHDC agreed with us and refused permission for the 54-acre Pent Farm solar array near Postling in the North Downs National Landscape, but this tidal wave of energy projects is going to be tough to resist, given central-government policy. Surely they can't all be needed? Possibly the most we can achieve going forward is that the impact of these things on residents and wildlife can be kept to the absolute minimum possible.

Swale - Nigel Kay

- After many years of demanding work, Peter Blandon has stepped down as chair of the Swale committee but agreed to continue as a member, so we will not be losing his expertise entirely. Malcolm Moore has also stood down after many years involved with CPRE. We would like to record our thanks to them both.
- In view of the planning challenges to the district, with at least three major contentious schemes and numerous smaller ones, the committee will in future be meeting monthly.
- The position here is made worse by the Local Plan being out of date and Swale Borough Council deciding to postpone work on updating it. A revised Local Development Scheme was published July 2024. This indicated that Regulation 18 consultation would take place before the end of 2024, with Regulation 19 consultation in 2025. On Friday, December 5, the council decided to delay preparation of the Local Plan pending outcome of the Highsted Park application call-in, details of which are given below. CPRE Kent lobbied the council about this delay, drawing to its attention the fact that any claims of prematurity in considering this site will be set aside because there is no emerging Plan to which weight can be given. It is expected that Regulation 18 consultation is likely to take place in October this year.
- Quinn Estates has applied for the development of more than 9,000 properties at Highsted Park, near Sittingbourne. This includes 7,150 homes stretching from west of Teynham south to the M2, where there would be a new junction, and a separate but linked scheme for 1,250 homes north of the A2 at Teynham, which would enable the completion of the eastern section of the Sittingbourne Northern Relief Road to Bapchild. The scheme was called in by Angela Rayner, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. CPRE Kent submitted representations and has lodged a request with the programme officers regarding addressing the inspector in person. We are also assisting a local community action group. The inquiry is set for 12 weeks, having begun on Tuesday, March 11.
- A hybrid planning application for 2,500 homes has been submitted on Duchy of Cornwall land south-east of Faversham. CPRE Kent has objected on the grounds that the development is not Plan-led. National Highways has lodged a holding objection that has necessitated the application providing additional information relating to the impact on the safety, reliability and/or operational efficiency of the strategic road network.
- There is a scheme to build at least 1,740 dwellings at Winterbourne Farm, Dunkirk.

Thanet - Peter Lorenzo

- It's been a fairly busy time for Thanet. I continue to chair the Save Minster Marshes group and we are being advised by the Environmental Law Foundation on the legal steps to take. Hopefully, when the announcement that National Grid has applied to the Planning Inspectorate for a Development Consent Order, our arguments about the breach of the Gunning Principles, Section III of the Horlock Guidelines and Rule 1 of the Holford Rules will be sufficient for it to go back to the drawing board and examine brownfield sites.

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Mole Country Stores
Broad Oak Road,
Canterbury CT2 7SN

Sturry Post Office
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Canterbury CT2 0BD

Premier
258 Sturry Road,
Canterbury CT1 1HQ

Loddington Farm Shop
Loddington Lane, Linton,
Maidstone ME17 4AG

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- Devolution was discussed at a recent meeting. The members present - and there were quite a few - felt the proposed reforms represented the most extensive changes to English local government since the 1974 Local Government Act. By consolidating smaller councils into larger unitary authorities, the government wants to enhance efficiency, capacity and financial resilience. However, there were concerns expressed that larger councils might become more disconnected from local communities, potentially impacting the quality of local decision-making and services. I also attended a Zoom meeting about devolution where the views expressed by other CPRE members were much the same. These issues will present a challenge and continue to be on the agenda for some time to come.
- I was amused, however, to hear the name Professor Colin Copus mentioned during the discussion and his excoriating view of the proposals. He and I worked together at the London Borough of Barnet many years ago. It seems he hasn't changed...

Tonbridge & Malling - vacant

- We have no district committee in place in Tonbridge & Malling borough, so we are without our eyes and ears on the ground. If you have some time to spare - and are interested in looking at planning applications and commenting on the council's emerging Local Plan - please do let us know..

Tunbridge Wells - John Wotton

- Over recent months, we have participated in the final hearings before the inspector in the Examination in Public of the new Local Plan. In this, we have been most ably represented by CPRE Kent planner Julie Davies and, particularly in relation to the Turnden allocation, Richard Thompson. We were very pleased that our director Andrea Griffiths took the trouble to come to the final hearing day and also to spend a day visiting two sites in the borough, Turnden and Tudeley village. Subject to any unexpected developments, we await the inspector's report.
- Angela Rayner, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, took a decision on the called-in application by Berkeley Homes to build 165 homes on a greenfield site, Turnden, in the High Weald National Landscape (HWNL) near Cranbrook. Permission has been granted on grounds that we find wholly unconvincing, especially in the light of changed circumstances since the inspector's report recommending permission be granted. The branch, having taken legal advice on the decision, launched judicial review proceedings, seeking to quash the decision on grounds relating to failure to perform her enhanced duty to seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the HWNL. National CPRE, the HWNL Unit and Natural England are being kept informed of the progress of the case, which we believe to be of potentially national significance. A CrowdJustice appeal has been launched to help defray the costs of this litigation.
- We have welcomed two new, very active, members to the committee: one is a professional ecological consultant and the other will help us keep abreast of issues arising in Paddock Wood, where much of the borough's development will be concentrated over the coming years, and in Pembury.
- We have objected to several applications around the borough, chiefly on grounds of harm to the HWNL or to biodiversity. We have commented in detail on the Environmental Impact Assessment scoping opinion for the first of the large proposed housing development in Paddock Wood and have maintained our objection to two linked applications for large solar arrays in the HWNL, one near Hawkhurst and the other between Brenchley and Cranbrook.
- An application was made in open-ended terms for the conversion of a very large battery-chicken facility to commercial and industrial uses. This site is in a rural location between Staplehurst and Sissinghurst, right on the border between Tunbridge Wells and Maidstone. We objected, but subsequently commitments were made by the owner regarding local bus services and highways and permission has now been granted.
- We considered carefully an application for a large new dairy facility, with new homes for agricultural workers, on farmland near Colliers Green, which was drawn to our attention by local residents. We commented in some detail, noting the contribution the proposed development could make to the rural economy but also raising concerns about the impact of the development on the setting of the HWNL and environmental risks including run-off into watercourses and effects on nearby ancient woodland.

Historic Buildings - John Wotton

- The committee met in October and January. We have continued to review threats to heritage assets around the county, commenting ourselves or providing advice and assistance to district committees.
- Following the county council's decision to change to its recently-adopted Heritage Conservation Strategy to permit the disposal of the eight listed windmills that it owns, no proposals to transfer ownership of any of the windmills have come to the committee's attention. Several members have continued to liaise with the volunteer groups for their local windmills.
- The committee objected to an application to demolish Grade II*-listed Providence Chapel, Cranbrook.
- After a site visit by the secretary, the committee concluded that the proposed Ash Level solar park did not harm Richborough Fort.
- The secretary followed up with Ashford Borough Council concerns expressed by a CPRE Kent member about the condition of the ruins of St Mary's Church, Pluckley.
- Several committee members responded to a request by the chair of Teynham Parish Council (committee member Paul Townson) for heritage expertise for the public inquiry into the called-in Highsted Park application.
- Graham Horner and Michael Peters continued to review the committee's archives and seek potential permanent homes for these documents.
- We remain in need of new members, especially to cover Ashford, Dartford, Gravesham, Maidstone and Medway.

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Events 2025

Where we've been... and where we're going to be

- **Farm Expo, Detling, Wednesday, March 5**
- **Living Land, Detling, Thursday, May 1**
- **Wildlife Walk, Trosley Country Park Friday, May 16 (see website for details)**
- **Kent County Show, Detling, Friday-Sunday, July 4-6**
- **Countryside Day, Bilsington Priory Sunday, September 7 (see page 12)**
- **Weald of Kent Ploughing Match, Headcorn Saturday, September 13**
- **East Kent Ploughing Match, Quex Park, Wednesday, September 24**
- **Green Christmas Fair, Faversham Date to be confirmed**
- **CPRE Kent Christmas lunch Date to be confirmed**

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Lottery results

Here are the Lottery winners since the last edition of Kent Countryside Voice:

October 24
Mrs M Palmer £50
Mr M Loveday £30
Mr T Mansfield £20

November 24
Mrs L Dowling £50
Mrs M Davis £30
Mr T Mansfield £20

December 24
Dr R Insall £100
Mr S Winn £50

January 25
Mr T Mansfield £50
Mr S Winn £30
Mr R Brewin £20

February 25
Mrs A Hone £50
Mrs M Fox £30
Ms C Simmons £20

March 25
Ms J Kostelnk £50
Dr R Insall £30
Dr F Simpson £20

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CPRE Kent,
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