

Voices of the Blean:

The social impacts of a proposed large-scale housing development
on local communities

Rachael Reilly, July 2025



View across the land proposed for development from the south, Jeremy Kendall (Chaucer Fielder), July 2024



The countryside charity
Kent



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In March 2024, local communities in the villages of Blean, Tyler Hill and Rough Common, near Canterbury, Kent, learned that 100 hectares of greenfield land between their villages had been included as a site for a large 2,000-house “free-standing” “rural settlement” in the draft [Canterbury District Local Plan 2040](#), despite the fact that previous [landscape](#) and [sustainability assessments](#) had determined exactly the same land to be “technically unsuitable” for development.

The site, which is owned by the University of Kent, contains ancient woodland, streams, ponds and productive agricultural land. It is rich in biodiversity, providing a habitat for several endangered and protected species, including Skylarks, Yellowhammers, Common Swifts, Brown Long-eared Bats, Pipistrelle Bats and Great Crested Newts (which are being studied in internationally-recognised research pools at the University of Kent). It is an important wildlife corridor between the East and West Blean woodland complexes and has been designated an area of potential rewilding and biodiversity enhancement by the [Kent Wildlife Trust \(KWT\)](#).

Participatory social research was carried out in the villages of Tyler Hill, Blean and Rough Common over a two-week period in November 2024. The aim of the research was to listen to the voices of local residents, campaigners and community leaders to understand what is driving their concerns and the impact of the development proposal on their health and social wellbeing. The research puts the lived experience of local people and their emotional responses to the loss of green space and nature at the centre and illustrates how an inclusive and participatory approach to consultation can be a more effective way to engage with local communities.

Participatory research methods included focus group discussions and community mapping exercises (24 participants), participant-led community walks (16 participants), semi-structured individual interviews with key local stakeholders (12 participants), oral histories (three participants) and an online survey (230 participants).

Too often local communities who protest developments are dismissed by politicians and the media as ‘[nimbys](#)’, ‘[blockers](#)’ and ‘[naysayers](#)’ and there has been little attempt to understand their viewpoint and perspective. Participatory approaches and the inclusion of social impact indicators to measure the impact of loss of nature and green spaces on people’s health and social well-being can assist local authorities and central government to understand how local communities are affected by development proposals and why they protest. The deep attachment that rural communities hold to their local landscape and the grief and despair they feel at seeing it destroyed and permanently altered are real: their voices deserve to be heard in the complex debate about housing, development and economic growth in the UK.

Key Findings

The key findings of the research are presented through the voices of the participants. Photographs taken by members of the local community of the land, its nature and wildlife are used throughout the report to accompany the quotes and testimonies. The full report with detailed findings can be read [here](#).

1. Local residents have a deep attachment to their local landscape and an acute fear of losing it

Participants appreciate the land for its open countryside and beautiful views – a place of peace and tranquillity free from cars and pollution. They appreciate the green fields and productive farmland, the public footpaths and the Crab and Winkle cycle path, the ancient woodland, the hedgerows and the Sarre Penn stream that provide a habitat for birds and wildlife. Participants value the land for its ancient landscape and important historical and archaeological sites. Several participants had lived in

the local area for all, or most, of their lives. They associated the land with childhood memories and special events and identified their favourite places to observe and be in nature. They described the land as being part of their identity – who they were and where they belonged. They felt the potential loss of this land acutely – one person described it as *“like having a limb cut off”*.

2. The land proposed for development is used regularly by the local community and people from the surrounding area

People use the land regularly for exercise and recreation, cycling and walking to school and work, socialising and being in nature. The Crab & Winkle Way is particularly well used by local communities and people from the surrounding area. Participants said that the loss of open green space and a car-free route for running, cycling and walking would negatively impact their health and well-being.

3. There is a wealth of local knowledge among the local community that has been under-utilised and overlooked throughout the Local Plan process

Among participants in the social research were local experts in ornithology, arboriculture, the history and archaeology of the local area, in particular St Cosmus and St Damian Church, sustainable farming and agriculture, water and soil quality and flood risks and a world expert in environmental sustainability impact assessments. There has been a surge in ‘citizen science’ since the announcement of the development plans, with one birdwatcher recording 72 species of birds on the development site. As part of their interaction with the land, people have given names to particular parts of the landscape, often relating to the birds and wildlife that are frequently seen in these areas, such as ‘Skylark Field’, ‘Yellowhammer Corner’ and ‘Bluebell Wood’.

4. The main concern of local communities is the impact the proposed development will have on nature and wildlife

The biggest concern among research participants (40.3% of respondents to the social study) was the impact of the proposed development on nature and wildlife. Participants expressed specific concerns about how the development would impact the habitats of birds and wildlife in the area, in particular the Skylarks in the field next to the church. They expressed concern that the development would destroy an important wildlife corridor between the East and West Blean woodland complexes and the environmental impacts it would have on ancient woodland and the Sarre Penn stream. The loss of productive agricultural land and damage to the ancient landscape and monuments, including St Cosmus and St Damian Church and important archaeological sites, were key concerns raised during the focus group discussions and community walks.

5. Local residents are very concerned about the impacts of the proposed development on their daily lives

The second major concern for participants was how the development would impact their daily lives (38.5% of respondents to the social survey). Concerns included: noise, light and air pollution during years of construction; increased traffic and congestion on already overcrowded and dangerous roads; pressure on strained local infrastructure and public services from an increased population; the loss of a place for recreation and to be in nature; and the potential loss of property value due to the construction.

6. Residents fear that the new development would alter the rural character and distinct identity of their villages

A repeated concern was the creation of an urban sprawl between Tyler Hill, Blean and Rough Common that would dwarf the existing villages and have “no heart or identity”. Some participants said they would be more favourable to the development if it genuinely met local housing need, while others said they would support housing if it was sensitively planned within the boundaries of

the existing villages, rather than ‘plonking’ a disproportionately large development between the three villages.

7. Possible local benefits from the development include a new building for Blean primary school and new families for Blean church

Although most participants said they could not name any benefits that would improve the lives of the local population, some participants did identify possible benefits that might arise from the development. These included much-needed local housing; upgraded and new school buildings for Blean primary school; new families to revitalise Blean church community; improved public transport, cycle routes, infrastructure and public services. However, many participants said that the environmental and social costs of the proposed development far outweighed the benefits and they did not believe that the houses built would appropriately meet local needs.

8. The impacts of the development proposal on the health and social well-being of local communities are significant

64% of respondents to the social survey said that the development proposals had impacted their health and well-being. This included the initial shock of finding out about the development plans; constant worry and anxiety about the proposed development, including sleepless nights; fears that the development would impact their physical health – both through loss of outdoor recreation space and the increased air, noise and light pollution, especially for those with pre-existing health conditions such as asthma; a sense of helplessness and powerlessness over decisions affecting their lives; and stress and uncertainty about the future. Several people described the development plans as “life-changing”.

9. The development proposal has changed people’s plans for the future

28% of respondents to the social survey said that the development proposals had made them change their plans for the future and 36% said they were not sure. When asked how their plans for the future had changed, 62 out of 100 respondents said that they were considering moving away from the area, something they had never contemplated before, including people who had lived there all their lives and people who had chosen to move there for retirement. Several participants said they had consciously moved to the area because they wanted a more rural lifestyle and expressed dismay at the loss of control over their lives and futures. Several participants described the development plans as “*not what we signed up for*”.

10. Participants described a profound sense of disempowerment and disillusionment with the Local Plan consultation process

Most participants said they had no prior information or knowledge about the proposed development site until the publication of the draft Local Plan in March 2024 and described a “sense of shock” when they first heard about the plans. The majority of participants in the study were dissatisfied with how Canterbury City Council and the University of Kent had consulted with local communities. One of the main criticisms was the lack of detailed information about the development site, which participants said hindered their ability to adequately respond to the public consultation on the draft Local Plan. They criticised Canterbury City Council for the non-participatory way in which it had carried out the public consultation and for failing to engage in a genuine consultation with impacted communities. Several people said that this experience had eroded their faith in local and national democratic processes and institutions.

11. Some participants viewed the loss of green space and nature as part of an existential attack on nature and wildlife across the whole country, particularly in the south-east of England.

For some participants the potential loss of green space and damage to their local environment was about more than the loss of a local amenity or disruption to their daily lives – they viewed it as part of a national nature crisis. Participants were acutely aware of the threat to nature and biodiversity in the UK and felt a profound sense of responsibility to protect their local environment for the sake of future generations. These participants rejected the label ‘[nimby](#)’: some people said that they would protest large-scale developments wherever they resulted in the destruction of nature and wildlife, while others talked about reclaiming this derogatory term and transforming it into a more positive one, such as “*Nature In My Back Yard*”.

12. Local communities have organised to protest the proposed development and put forward an alternative land-use proposal

Local communities have come together to protest the planned development, forming a highly organised and visible local campaign group – [Save The Blean](#). The campaign enjoys widespread support throughout all three impacted communities: 59% of respondents to the social survey had participated in the public consultation on the Local Plan and 55% had engaged in some other kind of action. Campaign organisers said that overall the campaign had been a positive experience that brought the three communities together, although they acknowledged that sustaining engagement and interest over a long period was a challenge. Not only is the campaign group vociferously opposing the development, but in collaboration with Kent Wildlife Trust and RSPB they have also put forward an alternative vision for community management of the land, [The Blean Biopark](#), including plans for rewilding, habitat restoration, reforestation, regenerative farming, ecotourism and some small-scale housing.