

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**



**Kent
Wildlife Trust**

Acknowledgements

This report was researched and written by Rachael Reilly, an independent researcher affiliated with UCL Anthropology. The research was supervised by Dr Emily Woodhouse, Associate Professor in Interdisciplinary Environmental Anthropology at UCL, and approved by the UCL Anthropology Department Research Ethics Committee Project ID Number: **SHSAnth-2425-017-1**. Limited funding for this research was provided by UCL Anthropology Department and CPRE Kent. The report is co-published by CPRE Kent, the countryside charity; the Community Planning Alliance (CPA), Kent Wildlife Trust (KWT) and UCL Anthropology Department. Dr Emily Woodhouse, UCL Anthropology; Andrea Griffiths, Richard Thompson and David Mairs, CPRE Kent; Nicky Carter (née Britton-Williams), Lawrence Ball and Jack Stubbins, KWT; and Rosie Pearson, Community Planning Alliance, provided editorial input and support during the research and publication of the report.

I am extremely grateful to UCL Anthropology Department, CPRE Kent, Kent Wildlife Trust and the Community Planning Alliance for their assistance and support during the research, writing and publication of this report. I am grateful to Save The Blean Action Group, Hackington Parish Council and St Cosmus and St Damian Church for their support in disseminating information about the research and advertising it on their respective social media platforms, websites, newsletters and noticeboards. Special thanks to Save The Blean Action Group and Hackington Parish Council for their assistance in facilitating the research and providing local contacts. I am very grateful to Tyler Hill and Blean Village Hall Committees for allowing me to use their premises to carry out the field research and for their support during the research. Thank you to Save Brooklands Farm Campaign, Conserve Adisham's Rural Environment (CARE) campaign, CPRE Kent, KWT and the University of Kent for agreeing to meet with me as part of this research.

Finally, a special thank-you to all the individuals who gave up their time to participate in the research through focus group discussions, community walks, individual interviews and oral histories. This report could not have been written without your time, thoughtful reflections and input. Thank you to everyone in the local community who agreed for their photos to be used to illustrate the report.

This report is dedicated to my parents – John and Penelope Reilly, who live in Tyler Hill. To my mother for teaching us about the countryside from a very young age and inculcating in us a love of nature and to both my parents for fighting to protect their local environment. Thank you.

Rachael Reilly, July 2025

Forewords

CPRE Kent, the countryside charity

When CPRE Kent were first approached about supporting this project, it struck a powerful chord with us. We have long felt a growing frustration at how legitimate local concerns are routinely being written off as ‘nimby’ by default and how toxic and polarised the public debate around development has become. Dismissing this kind of concern as nimbyism is not only wrong, it also risks silencing the very voices we most need in the planning process.

Here at CPRE, we campaign for housing that genuinely meets local needs and respects the character of the countryside. We know that the countryside must play a part in solving the housing crisis and we support truly affordable homes for local people. But the pursuit of arbitrary targets at all costs, paired with a system that sidelines local knowledge and democratic scrutiny, leads to poor outcomes for people and the environment alike. What this report makes clear is that communities are not calling for no planning at all. They want planning done well. People are not saying no to housing. They are asking for homes that are genuinely needed, that fit their surroundings and that respect the natural environment. This is not opposition for its own sake. It is a call for something better.

Too often councils are expected to produce plans at speed with insufficient resources while also taking on levels of growth their landscapes, environment and infrastructure cannot sustain. The community is left out of the conversation. With the government’s current direction of travel on planning reforms, such as proposals to weaken planning committees and centralise planning policies even further, the few chances left for communities to have a say are at risk. What this report shows is that people are not just worried about losing land. They are worried about losing their voice, their connection to place and their sense of belonging.

Yet as this report also shows, communities are far from powerless. What comes through clearly is a deep sense of care, knowledge and quiet determination. People are stepping up with solutions. They are offering ideas, sharing local insight and setting out a more thoughtful and grounded vision for how we plan. It is that spirit we need to support if we are serious about creating the kind of balanced and sustainable development that CPRE stands for.

This report is a warning but also a call for change. It shows why local voices matter and why they cannot be ignored. It pushes back against the idea that we must choose between homes or nature, between progress or protection. Instead, it calls for honest conversation about what good planning really means. Not just for Blean, but for Kent and for communities everywhere

Richard Thompson
Planner, CPRE Kent



The countryside charity
Kent

Community Planning Alliance

As Chairman of the Community Planning Alliance, I am honoured to write a foreword to this report, which documents the profound and often painful experiences of local people faced with the threat of a large-scale development proposal. There is a deeply-felt sense of loss and grief, which is not unique to the Blean. The threat to the community's local countryside and natural environment is not abstract – it is intensely personal. The potential destruction of fields, woodlands and habitats brings with it a feeling of mourning for places that are cherished and formative, places that hold memories, meaning and identity.

What also emerges clearly is the depth of people's attachment to their landscape – not just as a scenic backdrop but as a lived space that shapes daily life, well-being and social connection. This is a countryside that is walked, worked, observed and loved. It is deeply concerning that the extensive local knowledge and insight offered by these communities is so often overlooked during the planning process. People know their local area with a richness that no desktop study or remote consultant could replicate. They see the subtle shifts in land, season and species. That this knowledge is so rarely invited into planning decisions is not just a missed opportunity – it is a democratic failing.

The concerns raised in this report reflect many of the issues we at the Community Planning Alliance hear about across the UK: the loss of green space, the fragmentation of nature and habitats, threats to sites of cultural and historic importance and the encroachment on valuable agricultural land. And yet these are not voices opposed to all change. Many people express a willingness to embrace positive development – particularly when it serves genuine local needs, enhances the area and aligns with ecological and social values.

What the report also highlights is the emotional and social cost of being excluded from meaningful participation. The stress, uncertainty and sense of powerlessness caused by opaque planning processes have a real impact on mental and physical health. For many, it affects not only how they feel now but how they plan – or can't plan – for the future.

Despite these challenges, what shines through is the energy and resolve of local people to stand up for what they value. Communities are coming together with remarkable courage and creativity: organising, sharing skills and speaking out. They are putting forward alternative visions – community-led, sustainable and hopeful – that reimagine how land can be used for the benefit of people and nature alike.

Too often, those who speak out are dismissed with labels like 'nimby'. But what this report reveals is something far more nuanced and principled: a desire to protect the unique character, ecology and culture of a place – not just for themselves but for generations to come.

This report is a testament to the strength and wisdom of communities who care deeply about the places they live. It should serve as a wake-up call to decision-makers: we need a planning system that values local voices, respects lived knowledge and truly considers the long-term health of our landscapes and the people who inhabit them.

Rosie Pearson

Chairman, Community Planning Alliance



Kent Wildlife Trust

The UK is at a pivotal moment in how it balances the need for new housing and infrastructure with the need to protect and restore nature. The national planning framework is undergoing some of its most significant reforms in decades, which should present opportunity for infrastructure planning to be truly aligned with the urgent need to tackle the nature and climate crisis. Instead, a troubling narrative has emerged that casts nature as a barrier to progress and dismisses anyone raising environmental concerns as nimbys (not in my back yard) or as mere naysayers. In our experience this couldn't be further from the truth. Every week we are contacted by our members who are worried about the destruction of nature and are seeking advice on what action they can take.

Kent Wildlife Trust have a long history of giving nature a voice in the planning system. But with Kent under exceptional development pressure, it is not possible for us to be involved with every planning application that will have a negative impact on the environment. That is why it is vitally important that local communities feel equipped and empowered to speak up for nature and to feel that their voice will be heard.

This research shows the real sense of disconnect and disempowerment felt by communities local to the proposed University of Kent development, and we know that this is not an isolated issue.

The knowledge and expertise of local people, their deep connection to the land and wildlife that inhabits it, should not be dismissed or belittled in the planning system. Instead of reducing opportunities for community consultation, better outcomes for people and wildlife would be achieved through more effectively engaging communities at the earliest possible stages of strategic planning. Ensuring that the right development is delivered in the right place is key to ensuring that development and nature recovery can be delivered side by side, providing sustainable homes and thriving ecosystems to support generations to come.

Nicky Carter (née Britton-Williams)

Planning and Policy Manager
Kent Wildlife Trust



Kent
Wildlife Trust

Voices of the Blean:

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

The UK government plans to build [1.5 million houses](#) in England in its first term in Parliament.¹ To achieve this, it is undertaking a radical reform of planning laws and regulations.ⁱ [Local authorities' control](#) over planning processes will be curtailed and the [opportunity for local communities](#) to object and challenge planning proposals will be severely limited. The government has removed decades-old protections to prevent building on green-belt land and is proposing that instead of carrying out [site-specific environmental assessments](#) developers can pay into a [central 'nature fund'](#) with less focus on avoiding environmental damage.ⁱⁱ Across the country, local communities are fighting to protect their green space and wildlife, with increased restrictions on their rights to object and fewer avenues for their voices to be heard.ⁱⁱⁱ

The social research is set against this backdrop. 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](#) (referred to as site C12),² despite the fact that previous [landscape](#) and [sustainability assessments](#) had determined exactly the same land to be “technically unsuitable” for development.³ A public consultation on the draft Local Plan was held from March to June 2024. Canterbury City Council is reviewing almost [4,000 public responses](#) to the consultation and has [postponed a final decision](#) on the Local Plan until spring 2026 to take into account [new planning regulations](#) that came into effect in December 2024.⁴ An additional Regulation 18 consultation will be held on the draft Local Plan in September 2025 (the fifth public consultation on the new Local Plan) and a final Regulation 19 consultation will take place in spring 2026. The final Plan is due to be submitted to the Planning Inspectorate in autumn 2026.

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 \(KWT\)](#).



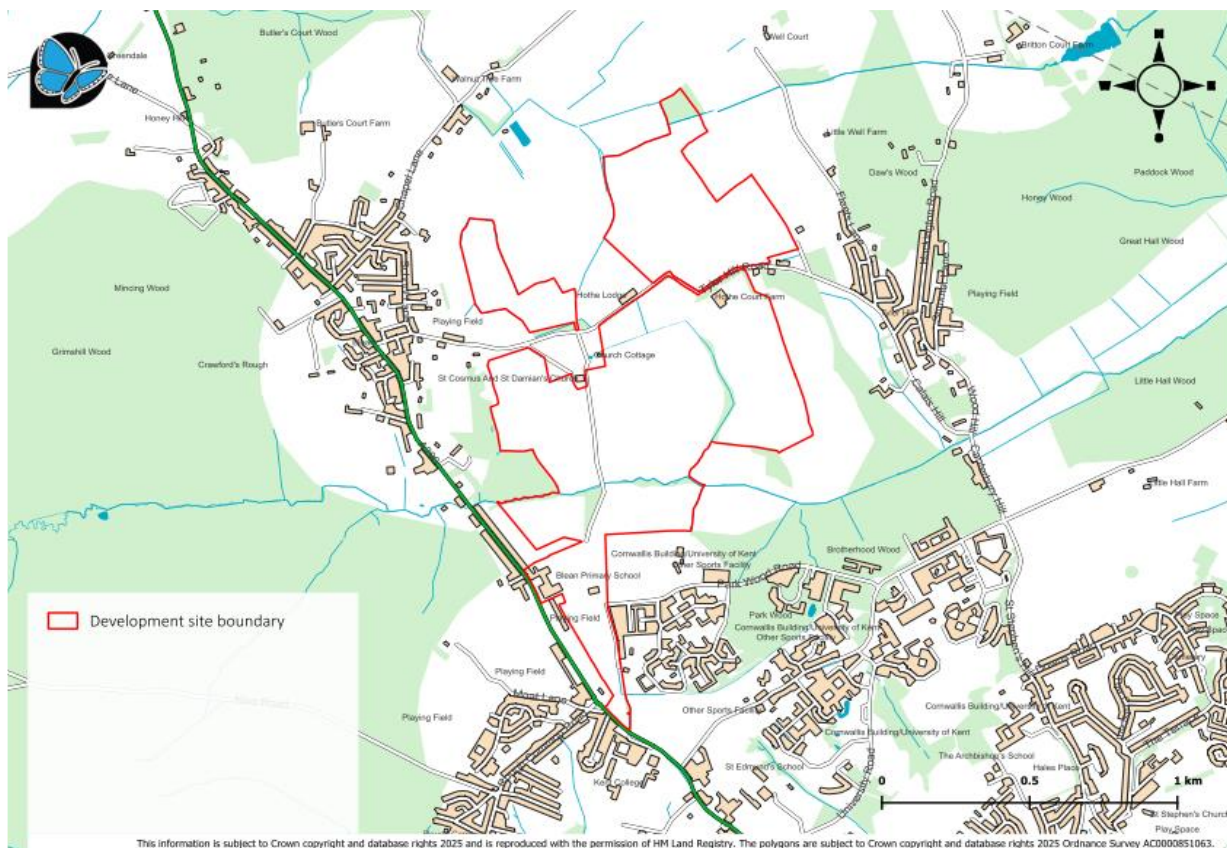
Wildlife seen on the Blean site by local residents: Firecrest, September 2024; Kieron McDonnell; Heath Fritillary butterfly, June 2024: Kieron McDonnell; Yellowhammer, April 2024: Job Dexters; Brown Trout in the Sarre Penn, June 2025: Job Dexters

¹ HM Government [Plan for Change: Milestones for mission-led government](#), 5 December 2024

² See p. 51 [Draft Canterbury district Local Plan \(2040\)](#)

³ See p. 34 Canterbury City Council [Sustainability Appraisal of Strategic Land Availability Assessment](#), July 2022

⁴ The new [National Planning Policy Framework](#) was published in December 2004



Site Map: Courtesy of Kent Wildlife Trust

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 lives. Too often the views of local communities are drowned out in technical planning processes and ‘consultation’ is restricted to the rigid confines of the statutory planning system. Residents who do raise their voices are dismissed by politicians and the media as ‘nimbys’, ‘blockers’ and ‘naysayers’ who hold up developments and stall economic growth and there has been little attempt to understand their viewpoint and perspective. This report aims to present an alternative perspective to this narrative.

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. It examines how large-scale development proposals impact the health and social well-being of local communities – both in terms of the loss of access to green space and nature and through the planning process itself. The research is rooted in an understanding that the social impacts of development projects are best evaluated in terms of holistic well-being that captures what people value and the impact on their quality of life.^{iv} Participatory social 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).



Community mapping exercise, November 2024: Rachael Reilly



Community walks, November 2024: Rachael Reilly

This research was designed to listen to and document the views and perspectives of those communities living next to and directly impacted by the development plans. As such, it did not examine the wider question of the need for housing in the Canterbury area,^v or interview people who may benefit from the housing. Participants in the research were generally self-selecting and the majority were opposed to the proposed development, with a few exceptions among respondents to the social survey and one participant in the focus group discussions.

The research examines just one side of the complex housing crisis in the UK – those communities whose lives will be directly impacted by the loss of green space and permanent alteration of their local landscape due to housing construction in their area. It acknowledges the deep housing crisis in the UK, with hundreds of thousands of people, many of them families with children, living in inadequate temporary accommodation, thousands of homeless people living in hostels or on the streets, and more than one million people on social housing waiting lists: their needs are critical and cannot be ignored.^{vi} The report doesn't provide answers to the complex housing crisis these people face, or whether the vast housing estates being built across farmland in the south-east of England will actually meet their needs,^{vii} but it does give space for the voices of local communities who will lose out in the government's drive to build to be listened to and heard.

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](#).

KEY FINDINGS OF BLEAN STUDY

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

"I have walked every square inch of this land over nearly 20 years. I know every blade of grass, every tree and every branch of every tree. I have spent a long time in all the little pockets of this land, whether it's on the Crab and Winkle railway line, whether it's in the fields along the Sarre Penn, in Long Thin Wood. I've seen it in every phase of the seasons. I've seen it in every phase of the weather, I've seen it in every condition, day and night."

Individual interview with Rowan*, 25 November. *All names in the report have been changed.

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.

"Access to wild places is severely reduced and this area still has a sense of the ancient woodland & historical landscape that the Blean area is so valued for." Social Survey Response, Q. 16



Landscape looking across the Blean from the south, August 2024: Jeremy Kendall (Chaucer Fielder)

Many people expressed a deep attachment to St Cosmus and St Damian Church and recognised the isolated location of the 'church in the fields', which they said was part of its unique history and cultural identity. They feared that this would be irrevocably altered by the proposed development.

"One of the strap lines for Blean Church is it's the 'church in the fields'. And there's something important historically about the fact that the church is in a remote position surrounded by nature... obviously to surround it by buildings would wipe out that historical legacy."

Individual interview with Vicar of Blean Church, 22 November



St Cosmos and St Damian Church, Blean, May 2024: Stephen Burke

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”*.⁵

“My entire childhood is in these fields and valleys and brooks... always lived here.”

Speaker D, Focus Group Discussion, Blean, 27 November

Some participants said that they used and appreciated the land more now knowing that it may be lost, while others said they now found it too distressing to be on the land.

“The threat of 2,000 houses has made me value the land more and appreciate how precious it is, especially when greenfield sites around us are all being swallowed up for housing.”

“Every time I walk through the Sarre Penn valley I think of the damage the proposed development will do. That saddens me.” Social Survey Responses, Q. 18

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

“I use the woods regularly for running and for cycling and occasionally for walking when I have some time. I’ve always loved the Sarre Penn valley. I think it’s a beautiful place and I will be very depressed to see it go.” Speaker C, Focus Group Discussion, Tyler Hill, 19 November

Many 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.

⁵ Speaker A, Focus Group Discussion, Blean, 27 November



Cyclists on Crab & Winkle Way, 4 May 2024: Stephen Burke; Horseriders, Crab & Winkle Way, June 2024: Margaret Connolly; Walkers on Crab & Winkle Way, November 2024: Rachael Reilly

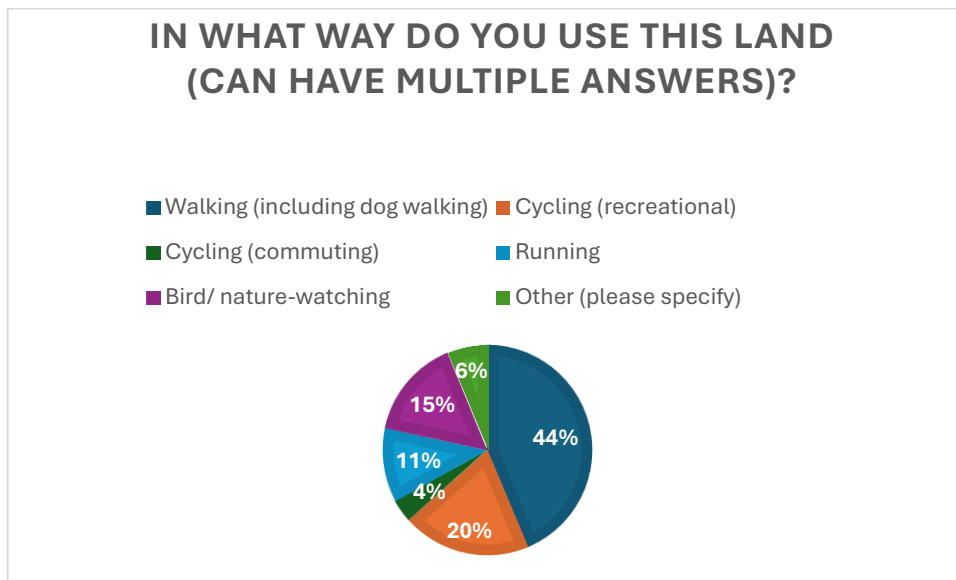


Figure 1: Social Survey Q15: Answered: 224; Skipped: 7

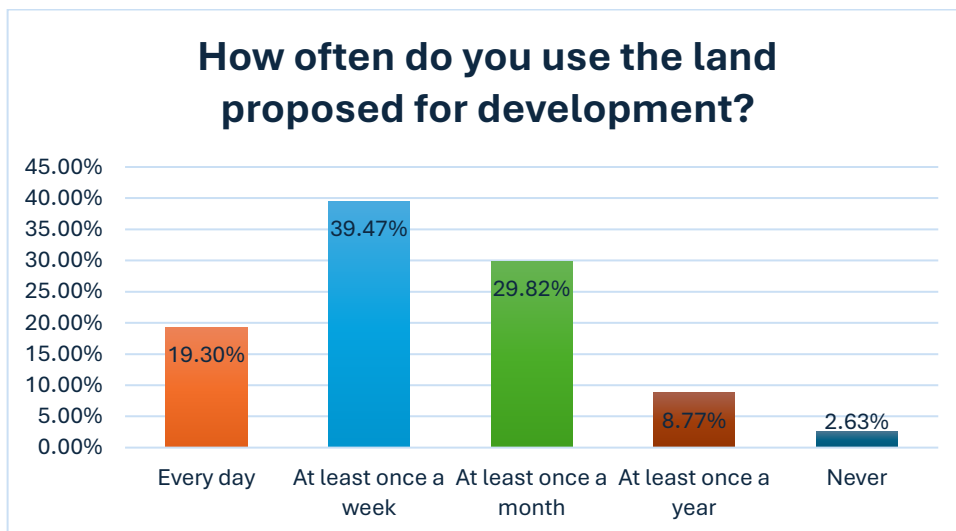
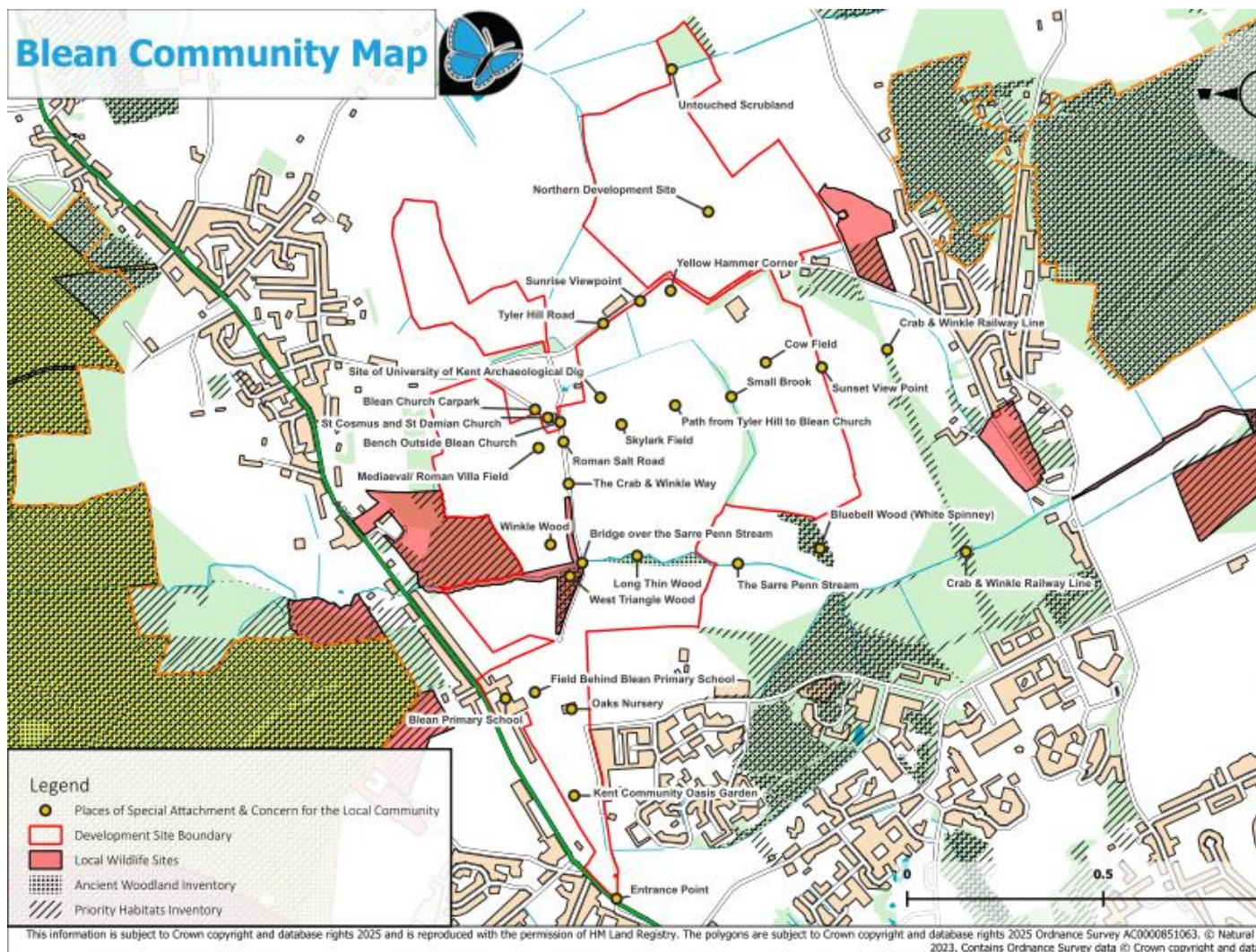


Figure 2: Social Survey Q14: Answered: 228; Skipped: 2



Community Map of the Blean, based on information gathered during the participatory research: Courtesy of Kent Wildlife Trust

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

"I've lived here for 24 years in the village and I do a lot of birdwatching in the surrounding woods and the surrounding farmland. I've recorded about 72 species so far this year. I've always been keen on birds. It will be very sad, I think, losing this beautiful area." Participant A, Community Walk, 21 November

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'.



Photos taken by local birdwatchers: Goldfinch, April 2024: Job Dexters; Song Thrush, January 2025: Kieron McDonnell; Chiffchaff, April 2024: Job Dexters

Several participants noted that the ecological surveys commissioned by the University of Kent's land agent had concluded that the site had "limited ecological value."^{viii} They argued that local residents who use the land regularly have a deeper understanding of the biodiversity of the local area than outside consultants who only visit the site once or twice:

"There is a visible contradiction between their [external consultants'] assessment of the biodiversity value and the assessment of everyone who lives around there. And this is not only people who are deliberately looking for the most rare species... this is just people who walk around and say 'Well, look, there's a Nightingale, there's the Skylark, the Yellowhammer, the Meadow Pipit... the Facebook page is a good sort of log, there are people recording, identifying, posting their findings. And that constitutes a much more reliable and realistic ecological survey, I think.'" Individual Interview with Rowan, 25 November*



Bluebell Wood, April 2024: Wendy Stennett; Path from Tyler Hill to Blean Church through 'Skylark Field', June 2025: Kieron McDonnell

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

“It is not possible to separate in my mind the loss of the agricultural land from the other aspects – loss of a decent distance walking route, wildlife, loss of nature, loss of tranquil recreation space, loss of cultural heritage, damage to the remaining environment, flood risks & run-off risks & general degradation of a treasured area currently managed well. The Blean has already been badly fragmented but enough remains for it to be a very precious resource.” Social Survey Response, Q. 23

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 also key concerns raised during the focus group discussions and community walks.



Ancient hedgerows in spring, April 2024: Wendy Stennett; Sarre Penn stream in Long Thin Wood, February 2025: Kieron McDonnell; Skylark: Dave Smith

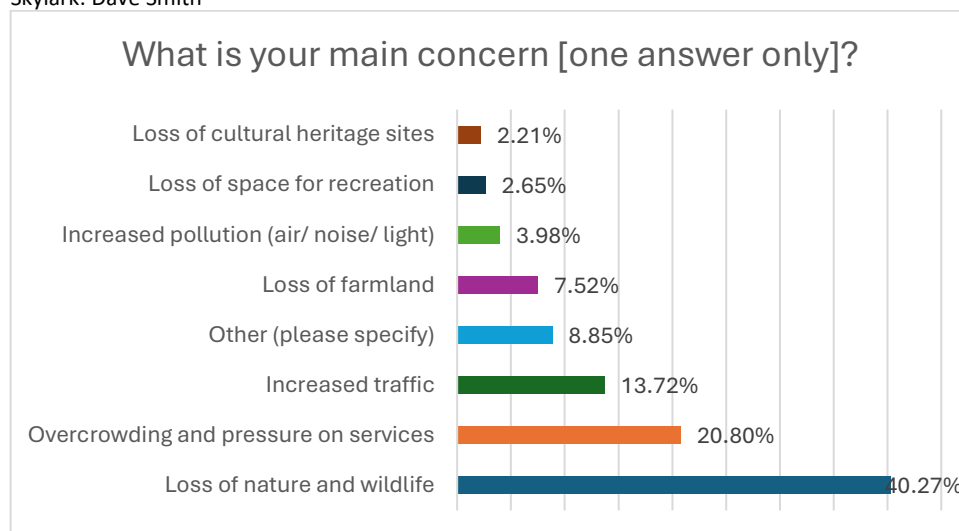


Figure 3: Social Survey Q 20: Answered: 226; Skipped: 4

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

I live close to the proposed development site and every time I pass through the area I now imagine what it would be like concreted over with a new town built here. I feel very sad and fearful, and I dread the destruction during the many years of the build – the earth shaking, the tearing down of trees, the mowing down of hedgerows, animals fleeing never to return. Social Survey Response, Q. 23

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

“It’s going to be a small town, which means that we are going to lose the rural character of our villages. And it’s going to be an urban sprawl. That’s what is going to happen. There will be no distinction between what’s going to be built and our villages will just be subsumed.”

Individual interview with Holly,* 22 November

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”.⁶ 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.



Aerial view of proposed development site showing villages of Blean, Tyler Hill and Rough Common

⁶ Speaker A, Focus Group Discussion, Tyler Hill, 20 November

"I don't think anyone in Tyler Hill or Blean would object to housebuilding that was linked to each of the villages, to a slight enlargement of Tyler Hill or slight enlargement of Blean, but not having a town three times the size of either village in between them – it is so out of proportion."

Speaker G, Focus Group Discussion, Tyler Hill, 19 November

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

Although most participants in the study said they could not name any benefits that would improve the lives of the local population,⁷ 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.

"The houses will be too expensive for the majority of people who are in desperate need of housing. There really are no benefits." Response to Social Survey, Q. 21

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

"Walking regularly along the Sarre Penn and Crab and Winkle Way is a balm to the soul and losing this would be devastating." Response to Social Survey, Q. 23

Not only did participants anticipate that the construction phase and concomitant loss of green space and nature would negatively impact their physical and mental health but they also explained how the planning process itself had affected their health and well-being.

Participants described the mental and physical health benefits of having access to this land, as a place to exercise, de-stress and be in nature:

"I'm just so saddened that the joy that this land has brought me and my children could be taken away. Each time I ran those Park Run hills on a Saturday morning, I just marvelled at the beauty of the landscape and it inspired me to keep running and enjoying the incredible scenery. How can you take that away from people?" Social Survey Response, Q. 23

⁷ 180 people (out of a total of 230 participants) responded to an open-ended question in the social survey about the possible benefits of the proposed development: of these, 118 people (65%) said it would bring no benefits to the local community in this location.



Runners on Crab & Winkle Way, October 2024: Gary Sampson

64% of respondents to the social survey said that the development proposals had already 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”.

“We are all asthmatic and chose to move to Blean as there is more countryside and less traffic pollution compared with urban areas. I fear the pollution and its impact on our health that will be negatively impacted by the proposed development.” Social Survey Response, Q. 25

“We have many identities. I guess we don’t have one fixed identity, but one of them is that you see yourself in this environment, you belong. It’s a sense of belonging, isn’t it? And the feeling of powerlessness and hopelessness at not being able to affect change and not being able to stop it. Sometimes it’s just overwhelming because I’m thinking ‘OK, if we can’t do anything about it, then who can?’.” Individual Interview with Holly,* 22 November



The Blean in spring, May 2025: Wendy Stennett

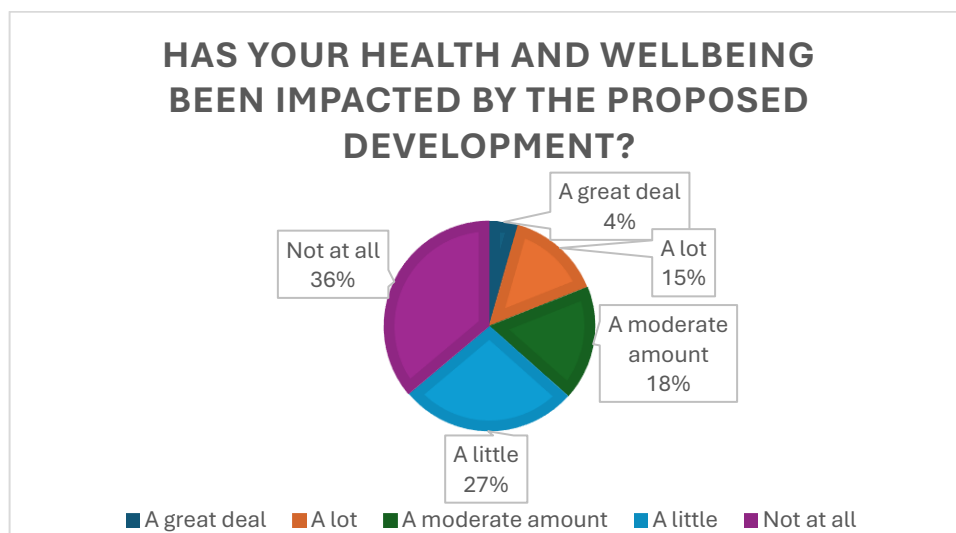


Figure 4: Social Survey, Q. 22, Answered: 3 227; Skipped: 3

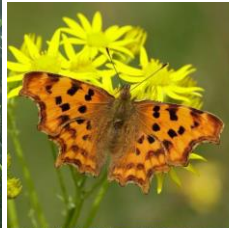
9. The development proposal has changed people's plans for the future

"My family have lived in Blean for over 284 years. Sadly, I don't want to be here when it is destroyed!" Social Survey Response, Q. 25

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"*.⁸

⁸ Speaker B, Focus Group Discussion, Tyler Hill, 20 November 2024

"I had no plans to move, but this development will threaten that. My concern is that Blean will become the centre of a sprawling estate with a lot more traffic and light pollution. These are already very high due to many other developments in the surrounding area. If I wanted to live in a town or city, I would have, but I love the quiet. So, I feel like I am going to be 'forced' to move away from my family home, which will have an impact on my family (I have 2 children)." Social Survey Response, Q. 25



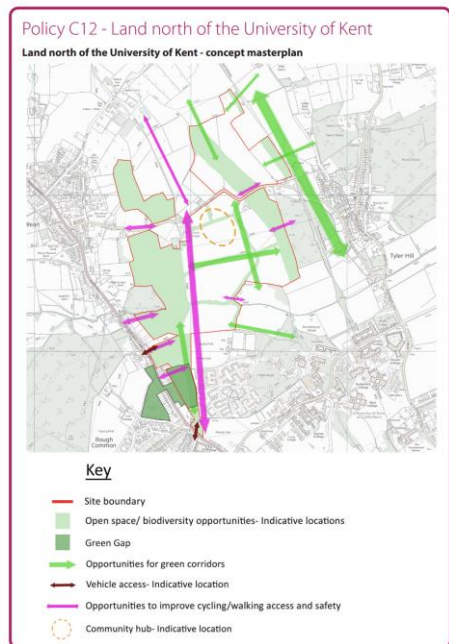
Children walking through sweetcorn ('Skylark Field'), August 2024: Robert Wildman; From left, Comma butterfly: Iain Leach; Path through wheatfield: Isola B; Great Crested Newt: Lena I; Crab & Winkle Way: Julia Kirby Smith; Marbled White butterfly, June 2025: Kieron McDonnell

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

"I am angry. I'm very angry with the university for what they've done. I'm angry with the city council for the manner in which all this information came out. It was a shock!"

Participant A, Focus Group Discussion, Blean, 20 November

Most participants in the study 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.



52



Site C12, Draft Canterbury District Local Plan, 2040, p. 52; Public consultation meeting, Guildhall, Canterbury, April 2024: Ania Bobrowicz

“And we just looked at this thing and just were kind of horrified because on many levels it was obviously going to be life-changing for us, but also looking at it, it was so obtuse. You know, it was sort of pink arrows and green arrows and this kind of masterplan that didn’t show any houses or roads or things that you obviously know they plan to be there. So it just felt very deliberately obtuse, actually.” Individual interview with Hazel,* 18 November

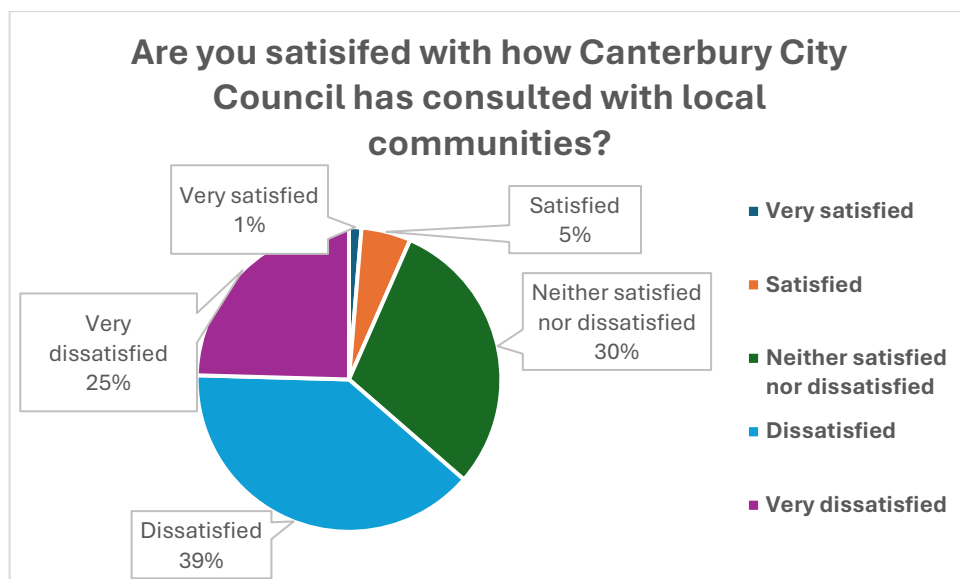


Figure 5: Social Survey Q. 12: Answered: 228: Skipped: 2

Are you satisfied with how the University of Kent has consulted with local communities?

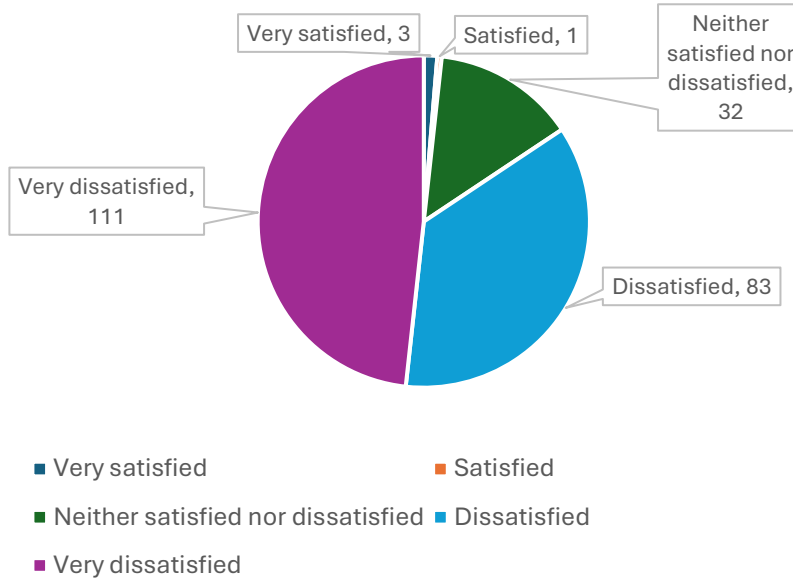


Figure 7: Social Survey Q. 11: Answered: 230; Skipped: 0

Even though participation in the public consultation on the draft Local Plan was high (1,244 out of 3,819 responses were on the Blean site), there was a strong sense of disempowerment among participants. Most people believed they would not be listened to and what they said would make no difference.

"I think the city council actually did it [the consultation] because they had to do it. I don't think they really listened to what we said. I went to one of the meetings.... I wanted details of exactly what they were going to do and how they were going to do it and they haven't got that information, which irritates me intensely." Speaker A, Focus Group Discussion, Blean, 20 November

Do you think you will be listened to during the public consultation?

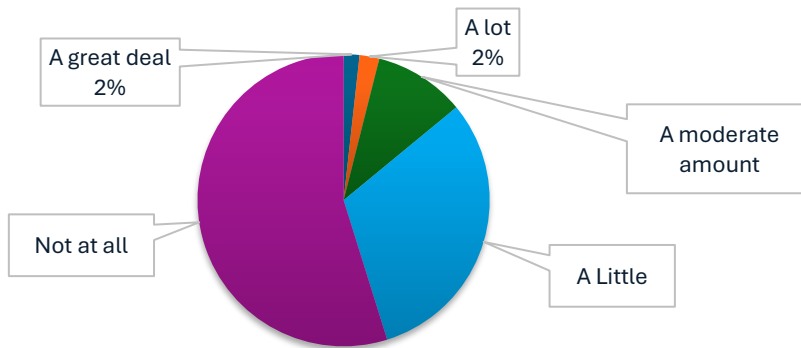


Figure 6: Social Survey Q. 12: Answered: 228; Skipped: 2

Several people said that this experience had eroded their faith in local and national democratic processes and institutions.

It made me lose respect for the Parish Council, Canterbury Council and the Government. This is a quick fix to demands for housing without any strategy and without any investment in the areas that actually will benefit from more housing. Blean is not one of these areas. Social Survey Response, Q. 25

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.

“Once it’s gone, it’s gone. And there’s too much around here. It’s got to stop, hasn’t it? For our well-being and our children’s well-being and nature. I think we have a responsibility to the world as well. You know, it’s not just our world.” Speaker B, Focus Group Discussion, Blean, 27 November

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 – one of the most nature-depleted^{ix} and [least biodiverse countries](#)^x in the world – 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!*”.

“We’ve got to look after it because nature everywhere is becoming decimated. If we don’t do it, who else would? I mean, biodiversity is so poor across the whole of the UK, one of the most biodiversity-depleted countries in the world, that’s our record. What are we leaving for our children? And if we can’t sort it out at a local level, OK, I’m not a Prime Minister, I’m not a politician, but if we can’t sort it out at a local level, it’s got to start somewhere... absolutely there is a sense of responsibility for what we’re leaving for the younger generations.” Individual interview with Holly,* 22 November



Restore Nature March, London, June 2024: Ania Bobrowicz

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

“You can’t sit back. I think you’ve got to fight if you feel strongly. I mean, if we lose at the end of the day, at least we know we’ve tried.” Speaker A, Focus Group Discussion, Blean, 27 November

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, as evidenced by the number of placards outside people’s homes and the high level of response to the public consultation on the draft Local Plan: 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:

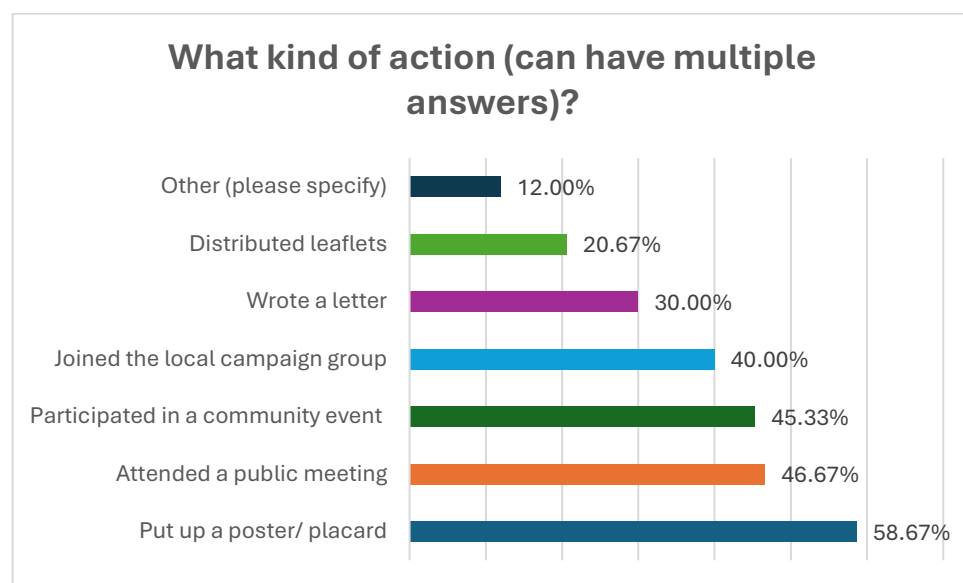


Figure 8: Social Survey Q. 9: Answered: 150; Skipped: 80

Campaign organisers said that overall the campaign had been a positive experience that brought the three communities together, although they acknowledged that sustaining engagement, energy and interest over a long period was a challenge.

“I think the positive thing is that we actually have more of a sense of community, I think we really have pulled together. I’ve spoken to people I haven’t spoken to before... I know a lot more people now in the village than I ever did and we’ve pulled together.”

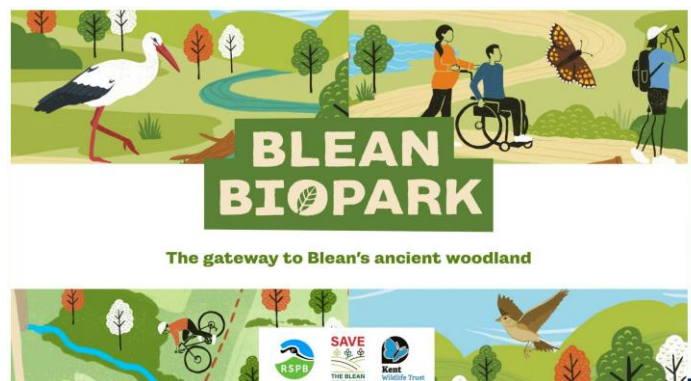
Speaker A, Focus Group Discussion, Tyler Hill, 20 November



Community protest walk, 20 April 2024: Julia Kirby-Smith; Save The Blean march from Canterbury to the University of Kent, 25 May 2024: Ania Bobrowicz and John Buckels

Not only is the campaign group vociferously opposing the development, but in collaboration with KWT 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.⁹ The University of Kent and Canterbury City Council are reviewing their proposal.

“Essentially, we’ve realised that we can fight or fund sort of two approaches. And obviously we will do all the fighting and we’ve continued to do that. But in terms of funding, you know, clearly the land is basically up for sale. They obviously want to get the highest amount possible, but we’re looking at what alternative proposal we can put together and we’d like to try and buy the land for the community and for the district.” Individual interview with Save The Blean Representative, 18 November 2024



CONCLUSION

The views of the participants in this study and their emotional responses to the threat of losing green space and the permanent alteration of their local landscape can be found in rural communities throughout the UK, in particular across the south-east of England and in Kent, where the drive to build is especially intense.^{xi} What makes this study different is its approach: taking the time to listen, document and record these views and emotions. In an increasingly divisive national debate about housing and infrastructure development, where local communities feel disempowered and disillusioned, an inclusive and participatory approach to consultation can bring significant benefits. As one participant said in their feedback on this study:

⁹ For more information about [The Blean Biopark](#) proposal see the [Save The Blean website](#).

“The researcher’s interest, concern & questions about our emotional attachment to the landscape & our responses to the impending loss felt extremely validating. Sharing these responses with other people who had similar feelings reduced my feelings of being alone, helpless & unheard. I felt more optimistic about being heard.” Participant feedback form, 20 November 2024

Far from restricting local communities’ ability to engage in planning processes and provide input into decisions that will impact their lives and local environment, as the new [Planning and Infrastructure Bill](#)^{xii} threatens to do, local authorities and central government should be seeking ways to engage more constructively and consult meaningfully with local communities. If local residents are unable to participate in decisions that profoundly impact their lives, well-being and future, they are likely to become alienated and disengaged and the chasm between policy-makers and rural populations will grow wider. 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 more accurately how local communities are affected 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.



Sunrise over the Blean, November 2024: Rachael Reilly

Endnotes

ⁱ These include reforms to the [National Planning Policy Framework](#) introduced in December 2024 and the new [Planning and Infrastructure Bill](#), which is currently under consideration in the [House of Lords](#) (July 2025).

ⁱⁱ The [Wildlife Trusts and the RSPB](#) have strongly criticised the proposal in the [Planning and Infrastructure Bill](#) to allow developers to pay into a central ‘nature fund’ rather than carry out site-specific environmental mitigation measures, which they say will remove vital environmental protections for endangered species and habitats and they are lobbying for this section of the Bill (Part 3) to be scrapped.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Community Planning Alliance (CPA) has documented more than 700 local campaign groups fighting to save their green spaces. An interactive map highlighting the location of campaign groups and the developments they are fighting can be found on the [CPA website](#).

^{iv} There is an extensive body of literature on social impact assessments and holistic human wellbeing with respect to development and conservation projects in the global south. See for example: Woodhouse, E.; Homewood, K. M., Beauchamp, E., Clements, T., McCabe, J. T., Wilkie, D., Milner-Gulland, E. J. (2015) *Guiding principles for evaluating the impacts of conservation interventions on human well-being*. Philosophical transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B. Biological sciences, Vol.370 (1681)

^v There were 2,089 people on the Canterbury District housing waiting list in 2023. See [UK Government Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government](#): Table 600: “Number of households on local authority housing registers (waiting lists).”

^{vi} Research by the homelessness charity [Shelter](#) in December 2024 found that there was a total of 354,000 homeless people in Britain, of whom 326,000 people were living in temporary accommodation, 3,900 people were sleeping rough on the streets (on any given night) and a further 16,600 single people were living in hostels or other homeless accommodation. Of the 126,000 households in temporary accommodation, more than 80,000 were families with children. Due to the chronic shortage of housing for social rent, more than 1.3 million households are on social housing waiting lists across the country.

^{vii} These issues are addressed in a 2025 report by the Community Planning Alliance, [Homes For Everyone](#), which sets out a plan for how Britain can meet its housing needs without uprooting nature, concreting over food-producing land and destroying communities’ sense of place and heritage and in a 2023 report by CPRE [Unravelling a crisis: The state of rural affordable housing in England](#).

^{viii} See p. 27 Avison Young, [University of Kent Representation to the Draft Canterbury District Local Plan, 2020-2045, January 2023](#).

According to the University of Kent’s land agents, Avison Young, a Preliminary Ecological Appraisal (Phase 1 Habitat Survey) (‘PEA’) concluded that the university sites were of “limited botanical interest” and the site itself had “limited ecological value”, while “existing valuable habitats can either be retained or re-provided on-site”.

^{ix} A study in 2021 showed that only 3% of land in England is truly protected for nature (5% in the whole of the UK), falling far short of the global goal of 30% of land protected for nature by 2030 ([30by30](#)) agreed at the UN Biodiversity Summit in 2022 (COP 15). Starnes, T., Beresford, A.E., Buchanan, G.M., Lewis, M., Hughes, A., Gregory, R.D. 2021. *The extent and effectiveness of protected areas in the UK*, Global Ecology and Conservation, Vol. 30.

^x Ashworth, J. 10 October 2021, [Analysis warns global biodiversity is below ‘safe limit’ ahead of COP 15](#) Natural History Museum; Phillips, H., De Palma, A.; Gonzalez, R.E.; Contu, S. et al. 2021. [The Biodiversity Intactness Index - country, region and global-level summaries for the year 1970 to 2050 under various scenarios \[Data set\]](#). The Natural History Museum.

^{xi} Although not included in this report, the views and sentiments expressed by two other local campaign groups – [Conserve Adisham’s Rural Environment \(CARE\)](#) and the [Save Brooklands Farm](#) campaign – closely mirrored those expressed by participants in the Blean.

^{xii} The [Planning and Infrastructure Bill](#) is currently under consideration in the [House of Lords](#) (July 2025). The CPRE, the [Wildlife Trusts](#) and the [Community Planning Alliance](#) have all criticised the Bill for its restrictions on [local involvement in planning decisions](#) and its damaging implications for nature and wildlife. [Wildlife charities](#), including the Wildlife Trusts and RSPB, have described Part 3 of the Bill on ‘Nature Recovery’ as a ‘[licence to kill nature](#)’ as it removes vital existing environmental protections and would result in irreparable damage to Britain’s already fragile natural landscapes, habitats and wildlife species without adequately compensating local communities for lost nature and green spaces.