

Minutes of the Annual General Meeting 2024

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE KENT BRANCH OF THE CAMPAIGN TO PROTECT RURAL ENGLAND (CHARITY NUMBER 1092012, COMPANY NUMBER 04335730) AND THE KENT BRANCH OF THE COUNCIL FOR THE PROTECTION OF RURAL ENGLAND (CHARITY NUMBER 286183) HELD ON NOVEMBER 22 2024 AT LENHAM COMMUNITY CENTRE

1. Apologies for Absence

Both organisations were considered together. Forty-three members were present, eight sent apologies and there were nine proxies.

2. Chairman's Welcome

Ben Moorhead, Chairman, welcomed all present and introduced new President Jonathan Tennant.

3. President's Introduction

JT said it was an absolute honour to have been invited to take on the role of President. He had lived and worked in the countryside all his life – 35 of those years had been in Aldington.

He had noticed a real acceleration of change in Kent, while nationally we now had an expanded population of 68 million. His own parish of Aldington knew something of these pressures, with up to 25 per cent of it threatened by the feeding frenzy of solar farms.

He referred to the government's stated ambition to see 1.5 million homes built by 2030, pondering that there were plenty of ministers with fountain pens full of ink to sign off schemes.

Perhaps, he said, though we might not win the wars, we could look to be involved as much as possible in the peace through the conditioning of consents and giving local planning authorities constructive, workable ideas.

4. Minutes of 2023 AGM

The minutes of the annual general meeting held on November 10 2023 were presented and accepted unanimously – no questions were asked. This was proposed by Amanda Cottrell and seconded by Richard King.

5. Director's Report

Hilary Newport, Director, reflected both on the past year and the past 20 years as this was to be her last meeting as Director.

She went on to say that raising housing-delivery targets did not raise standards. Referring to JT's previous remark, she said there was now a feeding frenzy on everything – the onslaught on the countryside never stopped. However, CPRE Kent had seen off many threats and that had kept her going.

A career-high had been the Court of Appeal victory over Farthingloe and the Western Heights, when the judge had talked about CPRE bringing sensible cases to court.

She paid tribute to the staff and trustees, saying her time at CPRE Kent had been the best job she had ever had.

6. Chairman's Report

BM introduced new Director Andrea Griffiths, saying she had the perfect blend of ecological and environmental awareness.

He then paid tribute to departing Director HN, whom he described as a manager and unifier with great tenacity. She had been in the role for the last 22 years and we would miss her dreadfully. He then led all in giving her three cheers. BM wished HN the happiest retirement spending more time on her narrowboat.

BM then paid tribute to the staff before thanking Treasurer Mike Moore for his work.

Julian Glenister was also thanked for his work as a trustee before having to stand down due to personal reasons. Happily, Rod Muir had subsequently "come out of the mist" as an effective replacement.

Nigel Britten had been involved with CPRE Kent for 30 years but was now stepping down as Sevenoaks committee chairman despite staying on as a general board member. He deserved a medal for his efforts, said BM, so he was going to get one! At which point, BM handed NB the CPRE Medal.

Further thanks were due to Peter Blandon, stepping down as Swale committee chairman after many years, and to Rt Hon Damian Green, another new trustee with, as BM put it, knowledge of local and central government and planning, as well as environmental and social conscience.

BM then turned to the threats to the rural environment, noting that two million acres of farmland and woodland in the country had been lost to development over the last 25 years. Kent had seen the greatest growth in urbanisation of any county from 1990-2015, with 33,600 acres lost. This level was not sustainable, he said.

BM was concerned about the government having scant regard for CPRE's rooftop-solar and brownfield-first policies before referring to the Duchy of Cornwall's plan to build on wonderful farmland near Faversham – surely we can do better, he said.

The chairman did, though, suspect we might see a slowdown in housebuilding due to properties not selling.

He also referred to government plans to build 500,000 homes on the Green Belt or the 'grey belt', noting wryly the commitment to not "build on genuine nature spots"... not much comfort there, he said.

However, he did applaud the government's initiative on social housing.

The chairman noted that, although things might appear gloomy, there was sometimes mitigation to bring light, for example the prospect of renewable-energy schemes in North Africa that could potentially provide a substantial amount of our energy requirements.

Sadly, he then had to refer to some of the "worst things" of the previous year.

These included the illegal dumping of landfill waste at Hoad's Wood; the huge proposed solar farm at Aldington that would wrap around an attractive village ("like being in a microwave"); a solar farm on Ash Level ("things should be sited in the best places – not just where a farmer fancies"); development of a hotel, spa and surfing lagoon at Betteshanger Country Park; and National Grid's destructive Sea Link scheme at Minster in east Kent. We would have to deal with such matters on planning grounds, said BM.

Moving on, BM said his job as chairman was to steer the charity to a good place so we could keep a good staff and secure funding.

He then turned to membership matters. There were six branches across the country with fewer than 100 members, while most did not have a paid director. We were very fortunate in that regard, he said.

BM personally had an idea for a young person's membership rate or even a no-payment rate in a bid to expand membership, while he thought we could go to schools and colleges to talk about CPRE.

In relation to planning, we could be the go-to partner to discuss development sites, which we could possibly have moved to more appropriate areas.

Turning to strategy, BM said ours was a bit too long so he and HN had made it punchier so it could be "read at 10 paces". The strategy would be reviewed further with the new Director.

He concluded this section of the AGM by saying CPRE Kent would remain a strong voice in the countryside and a significant force to be reckoned with.

7. Introduction to the new Director

New Director Andrea Griffiths gave a short introduction to say hallo. Much of her career had been in countryside management and ecology, with a recent focus on invasive-species management and great crested newts. She spoke of the holistic value of nature on people's health.

AG had loved her previous work but felt she was not making enough of a difference; hence she looked to CPRE because the countryside and nature did not have its own voice.

8. Treasurer's Report

Treasurer Michael Moore went through the summary accounts briefly – all present had a copy of them and they were also available on the CPRE Kent website.

He noted a total income of some £252,000 for the year, with a £65,000 deficit. A deficit was to be expected, he said, with £50,000 a year coming out of capital reserves to cover running costs.

It had been a good year on the financial markets, which was good news for our financial investments, while our Maidstone property had gained £60,000 in value over the year.

The total charity had total resources of some £6,070,000.

A questioner asked if CPRE Kent investments were ethically placed. MM replied that we could never be 100 per cent but generally we tried to keep away from unethical investments.

Our accounts were audited by Kreston Reeves.

9. Honorary Officers

(Honorary Officers do not need to be elected)

9.1 Patron: Sir Robert Worcester KBE DL remained in office as Patron.

9.2 President: Jonathan Tennant had accepted the role of President.

9.3 Vice Presidents: Amanda Cottrell OBE DL, Richard King and Richard Knox-Johnston remained in office.

10. Election of Members of the Board

10.1 Chairman: Michael Moore proposed, and John Wotton seconded, that Ben Moorhead DL be re-elected as Chairman. This was approved unanimously.

10.2 Treasurer: Richard King proposed, and Amanda Cottrell seconded, that Michael Moore be re-elected as treasurer. This was approved unanimously.

10.3 District Committee and Specialist Group Members: David Wood proposed, and John Wotton seconded, the following as district committee and specialist group members: Christine Drury, Graham Horner and Peter Lorenzo. All were approved unanimously.

10.4 General Members: David Wood proposed, and John Wotton seconded, Paul Buckley and Val Loseby as general members. Both were approved unanimously.

10.5 Returning Member: David Wood proposed, and John Wotton seconded, Nigel Britten as a returning general member. This was approved unanimously.

10.6: New nominations: Ben Moorhead nominated, and John Wotton seconded, Damian Green as a new general member. This was approved unanimously. Nigel Britten nominated, and Paul Buckley seconded, Rod Muir as a new general member. This was approved unanimously.

11. Auditors: Michael Moore proposed, and David Morris seconded, the appointment of Kreston Reeves as auditors. This was approved unanimously.

12. Liz Milne: Making Space for Nature:

In her keynote speech, Liz Milne, natural environment and coast manager with the county council, talked about Making Space for Nature, part of the wider Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS).

She addressed the issue of why we needed to recover nature, citing, for example, depressing statistics from the State of Nature 2023 report. In Kent, where population growth has been higher than that of the rest of the country, 10 per cent of species were threatened with extinction in the county; there was a lack of management for wildlife; only 69 per cent of the county's SSSIs were in a favourable position; and we were on the brink of ecological collapse.

The LNRS was a legal requirement of the Environment Act 2021, with the county council having responsibility for Kent's, although it was not *its* strategy.

LM said the difference between this and similar, previous, strategies was that this one was community-led.

It would map where action to protect and enhance nature should go, although it would not provide nature with formal protection. However, it would be linked to funding mechanisms, so actions should be incentivised.

The LNRS would have a statutory role in informing Local Plans and be published in 2025 – which is when the real work would start, some 1,000 individuals having been involved in its development.

LM gave some personal reflections on what had been achieved so far, noting firstly the sheer scale of the project and the massive challenge of what was to be put in the strategy.

Nature really was on the brink, she said, but this was against a backdrop of failing protections and systems.

There had been a failure to realise that a healthy environment was central to economic growth, which should not be at the expense of nature.

LM said apathy had been an issue, with a lack of faith or understanding of systems.

There was also the issue of uncertainty in politics, but perhaps what would most determine the success of the project was the resource devoted to it.

So what was different this time? Why did LM have hope?

- Genuine delivery systems
- Multiple references to the importance of the LNRS
- This was the most robust strategy of its type yet created
- The partnership and momentum created by LNRS participation
- The evident desire and interest to recover nature across many sectors – this was no longer reserved just for “the greenies”
- Because we had to have hope...

There were then questions and observations from the floor. These included the significance of the farming community (who had not been helped by the recent Budget and would now be looking at everything carried forward as a negative and not a positive); the possibility of bringing in money through Biodiversity Net Gain; the importance of parish councils; the potential of securing money from large solar-farm projects; the value of farming clusters; and the possibility of setting specific environmental requirements for developments.

Some of the questions on the efficacy of LNRS were quite challenging (“no teeth, no money”; “all carrot and no stick”), but LM highlighted the broad welcome among planners for the strategy and stressed its positive aspects.

The talk had certainly given food for thought...

11. Close followed by lunch