



The countryside charity

CPRE South East e-Bulletin

Autumn 2022

Welcome to the Autumn 2022 issue of the CPRE South East e-Bulletin. This is a quarterly digest of the latest news and views on land-use planning and development in the south-eastern counties of England. This e-Bulletin is published by CPRE South East as a service to all of CPRE's branches and local groups in this region, and for other countryside-campaigners.

IN THIS ISSUE

GROWTH, GROWTH, GROWTH!	1
PM declares war on "anti-growth coalition"	2
New Levelling-up ministerial team	3
The least effective way to enhance energy efficiency	3
Solar farm time extension refused	4
Lights, cameras, take action!	4
Hampshire launches "Hedge Fund"	5
New Chair for CPRE Berkshire	5
Govt go-ahead for freight hub at Manston	6
Mole Valley Local Plan	6
Housing battles in London boroughs	7
Green Belt threats double in six years	7
Whither local democracy?	8

"GROWTH, GROWTH, GROWTH!"

Having re-written this newsletter six times already in the space of just three weeks, it would be an understatement to point out we are in a fast-changing political situation! Each day brings fresh political drama and the future for the Prime Minister is looking increasingly uncertain. In particular, it is now questionable whether the Government can continue its attachment to the 'Growth, growth, growth' doctrine. This has profound implications for the English countryside, not least here in the South East.

The new Chancellor of the Exchequer, South West Surrey MP Jeremy Hunt, has admitted that the Government made "mistakes" in recent weeks and he has pledged that a new approach will be adopted. Hunt has some track record in his own constituency of helping defend Green Belt and other countryside threatened with inappropriate development.

But how different will the Conservatives' "refreshed" policies be from those unveiled by the former Chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng, on 23 September? As ministers panic about how else to plug the suddenly widened black hole in the nation's finances, the danger to the environment could even be greater, now that the economy is on life-support.

For CPRE, especially here in the South East of England, we still face the threat of unfettered development being unleashed on our countryside and natural environment through proposals to "liberalise the planning system", allow more speculative housebuilding, inappropriately-sited solar farms and wind turbines; throw out a raft of essential environmental protection regulations, and lift the moratorium on fracking introduced by Liz Truss's predecessor. And, all this to "turbo-charge" economic growth.

Alongside the tax cuts, now scrapped, the environmental and planning "reforms" were key elements of the ideologically-driven budget and accompanying "Growth Plan" put forward last month. After the chaos of the last three weeks, will these policies for economic growth be retained,

adapted or dropped? How strong is backbench resistance to the Government on environmental matters?

In the weeks ahead, CPRE branches in the South East will need to bring maximum pressure to bear on Conservative MPs – especially those in the Cabinet, such as Mr Hunt – to think again about this ill-considered Growth Plan. Time is of the essence, so if you haven't contacted your local MP yet about this, please do so as a matter of urgency.

It is entirely possible that “rebellious” backbench Tory MPs, having already forced a series of Government u-turns on other issues, may well be emboldened to block the planning and environmental changes when they are put before the House of Commons. But can we wait that long? Far better to exert whatever influence we can now, and hard!

Reigate MP Crispin Blunt believes “the game is up” for Liz Truss, but whether the Prime Minister soldiers on at No.10 or is ousted, unless and until the Growth Plan is officially binned and the threats to our environmental protections are dropped, we must *fight, fight, fight* to oppose the ultra-libertarian agenda of growth, growth, growth. The big risk to environmentalists must be that the Government, having junked those aspects of the 23 September mini-budget that “spooked the markets” so much, may be even more determined to press ahead with other aspects of its growth agenda. At this stage, it is hard to tell.

PM declares war on “anti-growth coalition”

In her speech to the Conservative Party conference on 5 October, the Prime Minister mentioned “growth” 30 times in 30 minutes! She branded her opponents “*the anti-growth coalition*,” and clearly intended this category to include the entire environmental movement and countryside campaigners such as CPRE.

There is no doubt that for CPRE one of the most alarming aspects of the Government's Growth Plan is the creation of 38 de-regulated “investment zones” throughout England. The creation of these high-growth zones will directly threaten many of our

most vulnerable landscapes, woodlands, wildlife biodiversity, and precious open spaces.

[By loosening the planning rules in target areas, these de-regulated zones “*will accelerate the housing and infrastructure the UK needs to drive economic growth. They will cut back unnecessary bureaucratic requirements and processes and red tape that slow down development, cut taxes to back business, and, as a result, attract new investment to create jobs.*”

The environmental movement (sorry, “anti-growth coalition”!) has reacted with horror to the Growth Plan. Hilary McGrady, Director-General of The National Trust, described the new investment zones as representing “a free-for-all for nature and heritage,” despite the fact that “green spaces and beauty are vital to attract investment and for a good quality of life.”

Craig Bennett, Chief Executive of The Wildlife Trusts, expressed shock at the intention to sweep away vital environmental regulations, saying that “environmental organisations were concerned that vital nature protections would be lost through Brexit but we were told all would be fine. Instead we have a catastrophe.”

CPRE Kent Director, Dr Hilary Newport said: “It is imperative that, regardless of the severity of the economic crises of the moment, we do not turn our back on the environmental protections that are essential for our local communities and ecosystems, and vital for the future of the whole planet.”

It has already been revealed, by the Royal Town Planning Institute, that expenditure on planning by English councils has been halved in the past 12 years, so with smaller budgets for planning, and with the carrot of investment, it is inevitable that cash-strapped and under-staffed local authorities will fail to prioritise protection of the countryside and instead will be jumping over each other to try to gain the funding and the business generation opportunities that these new de-regulated zones offer.

We have only to remember the eagerness of councils to secure the New Homes Bonus and other

incentives such as the Infrastructure Levy. And the Government will of course give every encouragement to any local authority that seeks to designate an investment zone.

In his statement to the House of Commons on 17 October – his first as Chancellor – Jeremy Hunt reiterated the Government’s commitment to investment zones and to changing European environmental regulations which had been thus far retained since Brexit. Questioned on the Government’s lifting of the moratorium on fracking, the Chancellor said that fracking would be subject to local support (although it is unclear how this support would be measured!).

Interestingly, there is an application for a drilling licence at Dunsfold in Mr Hunt’s own South-West Surrey constituency. If he opposes fracking at Dunsfold, is the Chancellor part of the “anti-growth coalition”?!

New Levelling-up ministerial team

The new Secretary of State for Levelling-up, Housing and Communities is Simon Clarke MP. He is the fourth Levelling-Up Secretary in less than a year (after Robert Jenrick, Michael Gove and Greg Clark). Back in 2018, Simon Clarke wrote a paper calling on Theresa May’s government “to unlock Green Belt land within a half-mile radius of train stations to construct 1.5million new houses.” He has a history of supporting deregulation and opposing what he considers “Nimbyism”.

Underneath Clarke are the Minister of State, Paul Scully (responsible for local government policy) and four Parliamentary Under-Secretaries: Lee Rowley (with specific responsibility for housing strategy, investment zones, and planning reform), Dehenna Davison (local growth funding and planning casework), Andrew Stephenson (social housing, homelessness and rough sleeping) and Baroness Scott of Bybrook (local resilience and emergencies). Given the frequency of changes within the Government at present it may be wise to continue checking the Department’s website www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-levelling-up-housing-and-communities

in case there are further changes to the ministerial line-up and responsibilities!

“The least effective way to enhance energy security”

One of the first actions of the Liz Truss Government was to announce an end to the moratorium on fracking that had been in place since 2019. **CPRE Sussex** has described the decision to give fracking the green light as a “hideous mistake” but noted that the moratorium, when in place, had been only partly effective as it had not stopped oil exploration applications in other guises such as “acidizing”.

CPRE Sussex Director Brian Kilkelly said: “The people of Sussex do not want their beautiful countryside torn up, and pumped with poison, all for the sake of more climate wrecking fossil fuels. Allowing the limited oil reserves below Sussex’s wonderful countryside to be exploited for private profit will not fuel a single power station, will contribute nothing to our national energy security or to reduce energy costs. We will hold this Government to their promise that licences will only be granted with the support of local communities.”

He added: “In Sussex, so far as is known, we only have exploitable oil reserves. These will not help reduce our gas imports. Fracking is therefore not only devastating for the countryside, it is also the least effective way to enhance energy security.” Check out www.cpresussex.org.uk for details of CPRE’s campaigns against oil exploration in Sussex.

Solar farm time-extension refused

South Oxfordshire District Council planning committee voted unanimously against a five-year extension of the Nuneham Courtney solar farm. Despite having approved the original application last year, this time the committee found that the 139-hectare solar farm, located on a hillside in the Green Belt overlooking the City of Oxford, would be harmful to the Green Belt and therefore contrary to their own Council’s core policy that whilst renewable energy developments are usually

welcome they should not be permitted where there is significant harm to the Green Belt.

Helen Marshall of **CPRE Oxfordshire** said: “Planning permission was granted in December 2021 because District Council officers had failed to explain to committee members that South Oxfordshire’s policy dictated that development should be refused. Perhaps that’s because they were themselves urging the planning committee to approve it! This time, CPRE explained the policy and although planning officers were still urging the committee to approve for another five years, the committee turned it down unanimously. CPRE Oxfordshire welcomes renewable energy and agrees sites need to be established somewhere but not everywhere.”

Pathways to a Zero Carbon Oxford, a strategy paper which South Oxfordshire and other local authorities in the county have contributed to, points out that at the very most 1% of Oxfordshire’s land surface needs to be given over to solar farms. Since 3% of Oxford’s land area is already covered with houses and industrial roofs, surely these could be used? “There is no reason why solar farms should be sited on the Green Belt, within Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty or on land used for food production,” says Helen.

The committee’s latest decision is good news, and a success for CPRE Oxfordshire, but, Helen points out, “the original permission remains, and the site will exist for 35 years. We will keep fighting to ensure that solar farms and other development is kept to the right places and not sites in the Oxford Green Belt. CPRE Oxfordshire continues to call for a county-wide strategy to plan renewable energy sites.” For more information go to www.cpreoxfordshire.org.uk

Lights, cameras, take action!

Campaigners are **CPRE Buckinghamshire** are increasingly concerned about the number of film and television studios in the county. Buckinghamshire is already home to seven such studios, including several major international studios, but is now facing proposals for another

five either within the county or on its borders. CPRE Bucks is asking: Just how many do we really need? Pinewood received approval earlier this year for a large extension into the London Metropolitan Green Belt, despite strong local opposition, and Bovingdon (which is in Hertfordshire but right on the boundary with Bucks) now also wants to expand. There are also whole new sites being proposed in Little Marlow, Bucks, in Broxbourne (Herts) and in Surrey.

The proposal at Little Marlow (between the A404 Marlow By-Pass and the Spade Oak Nature Reserve) is particularly contentious because it is proposed for exactly the same area of land that the Council recently approved (via its adopted Local Plan) to become a Country Park, and it is immediately adjacent to the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Furthermore, Wycombe Wanderers are also proposing a new Training Ground in the same area and together these proposals could effectively kill off any chance of creating a new Country Park for the public to enjoy.

“We are not against new jobs,” says CPRE Bucks’ head of planning Neil Salisbury, “but this area already has enough film studio space that could be more efficiently used. Film studios are notoriously inefficient on land use.” He points out that the Little Marlow site was the subject of extensive public consultation and consideration by a Government Inspector before being incorporated into the Wycombe Local Plan as Policy RUR4. That Policy states (amongst other things):

- The area is allocated for outdoor recreation (and we know how important that is as the recent pandemic has emphasised the benefits of that to our health).
- Planning permission will NOT be granted for development within the country park that has an adverse effect on the amenities, setting, or which prejudices the function of the area for the purposes of a country park.

“But before the ink was even dry on the Local Plan there were already powerful commercial entities proposing to drive a coach and horses through that

policy,” says Neil. The branch objected to the development and urged others to do so. Check the branch website, www.cprebucks.org.uk for updates.

Hampshire launches “Hedge Fund”

Community groups in Hampshire are being invited to apply for grants of up to £750 to assist with the planting or restoration of hedges in areas accessible to the public.

Announcing the launch of the scheme, **CPRE Hampshire** Vice-Chair Boyd McCleary said: “At CPRE Hampshire we are passionate about hedges, not only as a beautiful feature of the countryside, green spaces and gardens, but for the contribution they make to reversing the effects of climate change, and in providing shelter, homes, safe travel and food to all kinds of wildlife. So, in recognition of the value they offer, we have launched a Community ‘Hedge’ Fund. The aim is to reach across Hampshire to assist the national CPRE target of increasing the length of hedgerows in the UK by 40% by 2050.”

Around half of England’s hedgerows have disappeared since the Second World War and many more have been seriously degraded or are otherwise under threat. “This is a great opportunity to get local communities involved and get some more hedges planted or repaired in public spaces that really need it,” says Boyd.

Recent initiatives include a project in the South West of Hampshire to restore and plant hedgerows, involving schools, the local Young Farmers and a team of volunteers. An initiative is also currently underway with Hampshire County Farms in a new location near Fareham, with volunteers and community groups involved. For details of CPRE Hampshire’s Hedge Fund, email their Hedgerow Co-ordinator Ellie Banks at ellie.banks@cprehampshire.org.uk or visit the website www.cprehampshire.org.uk

New Chair for CPRE Berkshire

Greg Wilkinson has been appointed Chair of CPRE Berkshire and was introduced to members at the recent branch AGM. The meeting was the first in-person AGM to be held by CPRE Berkshire after two years of restricted access due to the Covid pandemic. This year’s speaker, Andrew Davis, farming correspondent for the Newbury Weekly News, gave an interesting talk, listing three primary objectives for farming and agriculture: food production, nature recovery and combatting climate change. Farmers want more emphasis on food production, he told the meeting, but it is difficult to make a profit from farming without Government support. There is a bright future for farming, he felt, but the question is: how do we get there?

The winners of CPRE Berkshire’s Dorothy Morley Conservation Awards 2022 were announced by branch Vice-Chair, Dr Christina Hill Williams DL. She presented cheques and certificates to the two most successful conservation projects undertaken by schools. First prize was awarded to Kennet School with a cheque for £1,000 and the second prize awarded to Curridge School with a cheque for £500.

The conservation awards are held every two years as a tribute to Dorothy Morley, who was chair of Newbury & Hungerford District for CPRE and the local Wildlife Trust. The awards involve contact with some 350 schools in Berkshire. “Dorothy Morley believed in protecting the living environment as a means to improving the quality of life for all,” explains CPRE Berkshire’s Gloria Keene, “not only as key elements for a sustainable future but also building a strong sense of community and partnership in both towns and villages.”

For more information on CPRE activities in Berkshire, go to www.cpreberks.org.uk

Government go-ahead for “freight hub” at Manston

Plans for the “upgrade and reopening” of Manston Airport in East Kent have been approved by the Department for Transport. In August, Grant Shapps, the then Transport Secretary, confirmed the Development Consent Order for developers River Oak Strategic Partners to go ahead with their plans for a freight hub at Manston, having been “satisfied that there is a clear justification for authorising the development”.

The decision follows a redetermination of River Oak’s application for the DCO after its previous approval had been quashed by the High Court following a judicial review launched by Jenny Dawes, chair of Ramsgate Coastal Community Team. Although there is still the potential for another judicial review (and a Crowd Justice appeal has already been opened), there is widespread perception that the proposed development will now proceed, at least to some degree.

Hilary Newport, Director of **CPRE Kent** said: “So much for the climate crisis! The decision makes a mockery of the Heathrow third-runway judgement, where the Court of Appeal ruled that proposals had not considered our country’s commitment to reduce carbon emissions. As with the previous determination, the developer could not demonstrate need, there were adverse impacts on traffic and transport and there were concerns over noise pollution.”

She added: “The initial Examining Authority of four inspectors had recommended the Secretary of State refuse the DCO due to conservation of habitats and species regulations. For a second time, their clear and unambiguous conclusion has been thrown aside.”

David Morrish, from CRPE’s local Thanet group, said: “It is interesting to see the Secretary of State return to his true love and *raison d’être* of aviation by announcing that the reopening of Manston as a freight hub can proceed. As expected, River Oak, which I understand owns the majority of the land at the airport, has been given the go-ahead to reopen Manston as a freight hub.

“What it means for Thanet is that the limitless supply of land wanted by Thanet planners for 17,000 new houses does not now include the Manston site. However, I suspect that for the hub to gain traction it might be necessary for a group of speculative developers to jump on board and help finance the project in an era when Heathrow and Gatwick management will be looking to airfreight to replace the plummeting passenger trade.” Visit www.cprekent.org.uk for the full story.

Mole Valley Local Plan

Examination of the Regulation 19 Mole Valley Local Plan is about to conclude. (Mole Valley covers much of central Surrey including the towns of Dorking and Leatherhead.) The Plan put forward by Mole Valley District Council in Surrey is of special interest as the Council has decided not to meet the Government’s Standard Method housing figure of 7,750 dwellings over the Plan period. They have instead proposed some 6,000 dwellings, or 70% of the target figure.

This is a very ambitious strategy and although some Green Belt and countryside sites are still proposed for housing, the number and capacity has been reduced by over half from the Regulation 18 Plan of 2020 that was so heavily criticised by **CPRE Surrey**, the London Green Belt Council, and by local residents.

There is considerable opposition to some proposed Green Belt releases, especially in Bookham and Ashted, which amount to several hundred new dwellings. It appears that the Inspector is largely satisfied that the Plan meets the “Duty to Cooperate” as this was examined in the early summer and she has proceeded to other matters this autumn.

Not surprisingly the subjects under most scrutiny (and opposition to Mole Valley Council’s plan from housebuilders) are the Spatial Strategy, housing needs, the Green Belt boundary review, site selection and allocations. CPRE Surrey planning adviser Keith Tothill comments: “The Inspector has been at pains to listen to all views and has interrogated the Council’s case in detail. However, she has given very little clue as to what she will be

including in her recommendations. It would, however, be a major triumph for the Council if it is able to persuade the Inspector that its strategy of not reaching the Standard Methodology housing figure is a sound one.”

Meanwhile, nearby Elmbridge Borough Council (which covers Esher, Weybridge, Walton-on-Thames and surrounding areas) has also decided in its Regulation 19 Plan not to meet its Standard Method housing target, but unlike Mole Valley it is proposing *no Green Belt housing allocations at all*. Elmbridge Council proposes to submit its Plan by the end of this year, with an Examination in 2023. “The Council’s strategy is high risk,” says Keith Tohill, “but CPRE Surrey supports what it is attempting to achieve.

Keep up-to-date on CPRE Surrey’s campaigns at: www.cpresurrey.org.uk

Housing battles in London boroughs

CPRE London is campaigning against attempts by various London borough councils to redesignate Green Belt land as development sites. For instance, the London Borough of Hounslow is proposing de-designating Green Belt via its West of Borough Local Plan Review. These proposals contravene national policy guidance and the policies of the London Mayor.

“Far and away the worst case,” says CPRE London’s Alice Roberts, “is Hounslow Council which is set to destroy protected Green Belt the size of 200 football pitches. Its plans to build over 125 hectares of Green Belt are unnecessary and unjustified. We do not need to build on our Green Belt. We have so much derelict and poorly-used space in London which can be redeveloped. The council is ignoring the potential for nearby, previously-developed sites, which currently make poor use of space, to be redeveloped instead.”

London’s Green Belt protects valuable countryside needed for sports and recreation and top-grade agricultural land, vital for our food security, as well as being a “climate safety belt”, keeping London’s temperature under control and managing increasing flood and heavy rainfall events. What’s

more, adds Alice, it provides vital habitat for nature at a time which we are facing a nature crisis.

“Many of the sites proposed for development are also Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation. Green Belt also saves us from high-carbon sprawling development and makes sure we have a compact, low-carbon city. Sprawl will mean even more appalling traffic and pollution in an area already beset by major air quality and congestion issues.” Almost unbelievably, one of the Hounslow sites proposed for development is the location of a “causewayed enclosure”, a scheduled monument dating from between c.3000-2400BC. Visit www.cprelondon.org.uk

Green Belt threats double in six years

Local councils in London and the Home Counties are currently planning to allow building on more than 48,000 acres (75 square miles) of Green Belt land, according to research by the **London Green Belt Council** (LGBC) and CPRE branches in **Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent, London** and **Surrey**. The latest LGBC report shows that the amount of London’s local countryside targeted for development has more than doubled in the last six years.

The report highlights the fact that many councils are still using housing figures based on out-of-date (2014) population and household projections from the Office for National Statistics when more recent and more accurate figures are available which show a marked slowing-down of population increase. In short, far fewer houses are actually needed than are currently being planned for. Altogether the amount of Green Belt land offered up for development has increased by 21% since 2021, and a massive 127% since 2016 when LGBC first started tracking threats to London’s local countryside. The three counties of Hertfordshire, Essex and Surrey between them account for two thirds of all current development threats to London’s Green Belt.

LGBC Chair Richard Knox-Johnston says: “It is a fallacy that building in the Green Belt will provide affordable homes. New development in the Green Belt is mainly 4 or 5-bedroomed homes built at

very low densities since those are the most profitable for developers to build, so not providing affordable homes for young people. Published data shows that there are sufficient brownfield urban sites within these Green Belt districts and boroughs to deliver nearly a quarter of a million new homes – enough to replace all the houses now planned for Green Belt land.”

Copies of the report are available to download online from the LGBC website:
www.londongreenbeltcouncil.org.uk

Whither local democracy?

This question will be familiar to many who are fighting for the countryside in the South East. A particularly glaring example of local feelings being disregarded has just manifested itself in the Borough of Epsom & Ewell, in the London Green Belt. A planning application to build an estate of 20 houses on the site of the Borough’s last working farm at Langley Bottom was unanimously rejected by the Council’s Planning Committee, drawing on the advice of its planning officers.

Among the very many objections to the proposals were representations from the Epsom Civic Society, the Residents Association and the local CPRE group. Profound concerns were expressed not just about the housing estate’s evident adverse effects on the Green Belt, but also on its potential to disrupt the local horse race training industry and other horse riders, the impact of additional traffic on the local road network, and the potential disruption to those living nearby.

Following a Public Hearing and site visit, the Government-appointed Planning Inspector has decided that, because Epsom & Ewell cannot demonstrate a five-year housing land supply, the development should go ahead. Little or no weight was given in his decision document to the fact that the democratically elected councillors and the vast majority of local people who had expressed an opinion had opposed the scheme, as had the professionals who are employed to advise the Council. Two reports, commissioned by the Borough, on possible changes to its Green Belt boundary had concluded that this site was an inappropriate one for housing development.

Local campaigners are left wondering how such a decision can be arrived at, when it is known that the household projections, on which calculations of housing need are based, grossly overestimate how many additional people will, in the future, need to be housed locally.

CPRE SE e-Bulletin

CPRE South East e-Bulletin is edited by Andy Smith, an independent writer, on behalf of the SE regional group of CPRE. Andy can be contacted on 07737 271676 or email wordsmithreviews@yahoo.co.uk. Views expressed in this e-Bulletin are those of the editor and do not necessarily reflect the policies of CPRE. You can subscribe to this e-Bulletin by emailing wordsmithreviews@yahoo.co.uk with the title SOUTH EAST BULLETIN in the subject line.