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CPRE South East e-Bulletin Spring 2022

Welcome to the Spring 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. The e-Bulletin highlights current threats to the region's countryside and how these are being countered by CPRE branches in the region, as well as the positive initiatives undertaken by CPRE branches to reinforce the role that the countryside has to play in food production and biodiversity and in contributing to physical and mental wellbeing. 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.

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LATEST NEWS

The Queen's Speech

There has been a mixed reaction to the Government's latest announcements on planning and "Levelling-Up", contained in the Queen's Speech setting out the Government's legislative agenda for the new Parliament. The most positive aspect, however, is the dropping of the most egregious proposals from last year's Planning White Paper which would have been extremely harmful to local democracy and the planning system. Thanks to campaigning by CPRE and others at both national and local levels, especially the mobilisation of backbench MPs against the worst of the Government's original proposals, local communities will still be able to comment on and object to individual planning applications, and the pre-determined 'zoning' proposals have been dropped.

There was also an apparent U-turn by the Government in its recognition that it is local councils and housing associations that have the key role to play in building new homes, rather than the commercial developers. We all know that it is genuinely affordable housing that is needed, especially social housing. This had in fact been highlighted by Michael Gove a few months ago in a speech to Shelter. Just how meaningful this policy shift proves to be in practice may be doubtful, however, in view of the fact that the Government has also stated its intention to allow tenants of housing association homes to exercise a "Right to Buy", so the danger is that we may see a decline in the amount of social housing, not an increase.

National CPRE Chief Executive Crispin Truman commented: "The Government seems to be

learning from a decade of planning disasters. Too often we have dug up the countryside for unaffordable, unattractive and unpopular identikit homes. And we have not done enough to regenerate our towns and cities where housing need is greatest. The system has been loaded in favour of developers at the expense of communities crying out for genuinely affordable housing. If developers' 'gaming' of the system is finally coming to an end, it is reason to celebrate.

"Whether the government is putting forward the right solutions through the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill remains to be seen. This week could be a turning point to prevent further unnecessary loss of greenfield to poor quality and overpriced housing. The Government might finally apply a brownfield first approach to new developments; stop unnecessarily wasting valuable farmland; and build affordable and social homes where they're needed."

He added: "Local democracy needs to be strengthened, with people given greater powers to create thriving neighbourhoods and reject unsuitable developments. We doubt that street votes are the answer: they are not likely to make the planning system more inclusive. We look forward to seeing if the policies match up to the promise of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill."

The Government has also stated its intention to improve the Land Registry's records to include the registering of sites where developers have an *option* to build. This is very welcome. So too is the commitment to give extra powers to local planning authorities to issue Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs) on brownfield sites, to enable councils to

promote housebuilding on previously developed land. CPRE also welcomes the aim of simplifying Neighbourhood Plans, as these have often proved too costly and complicated for local communities, and have dissuaded many from engaging in this lowest-tier of local planning.

There are still some big questions surrounding the Government's agenda and particularly the Levelling-Up and Regeneration Bill. For instance, will the UK's new (post-Brexit) Environmental Regulations be as strong as the European regulations have been? The Levelling-Up Bill itself say little about the impact of climate change. There is also a question mark over the Government's intention to change the current "Duty to Cooperate" between LPAs to a softer version of the same that is being called "Alignment between Authorities".

On the plus side, there has been the suggestion (from Michael Gove himself) that the Government may be moving away from the national "300,000 houses per year" target. However, a Downing Street statement seems to contradict Mr Gove, so we are none the wiser at this stage. It is vital that CPRE – and MPs – keep up the pressure on Ministers to abandon this unrealistic target.

Threat to London's Green Belt grows

The London Green Belt Council has found that local planning authorities in London and the Home Counties are currently planning to release more than 48,000 acres (or 75 square miles) of Green Belt land for housebuilding.

Altogether, the total number of Green Belt sites earmarked for development has grown

by 30% in the space of one year – and many of these are major development sites, meaning that substantial areas of hitherto protected countryside and green spaces could be lost forever.

According to the London Green Belt Council, this represents an “unprecedented loss” of open spaces around the nation’s capital city at a time when this ‘climate safety belt’ is needed more than ever. At the same time, the LGBC points out, the measurable need for new housebuilding in London and the South East has shrunk as shown by the 2016 and 2018 population and household growth projections published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Publication of the ONS household statistics for 2020 had been expected around now but their release is being delayed to allow for the 2021 Census figures to be factored in. But it is widely understood that the 2020 figures, when issued, will confirm a continued downward trend in population growth, especially here in the South East.

The LGBC report, which will be published in June, also shows that the amount of brownfield land available for new building has increased. While recognising that local planning authorities’ Brownfield Registers mostly under-estimate the potential for regeneration of previously developed land, the LGBC points out that even on the Register’s numbers the 11,600 acres (18.1 square miles) of urban brownfield land currently available in the districts and boroughs covered by the London Green Belt would actually be sufficient to meet the region’s housing needs. If built at the right densities, this would be enough to deliver almost a quarter of a million new homes without any loss of Green Belt countryside at all.

Planning volunteers from CPRE county branches in Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent, London, Oxfordshire and Surrey all contributed to the major region-wide research exercise which the LGBC conducted in preparing its 2022 report, “Safe Under Us? The continued shrinking of London’s local countryside”. As the CPRE SE e-Bulletin goes to press, the Green Belt report is being finalised. Keep an eye on the London Green Belt Council’s website for updates:

www.londongreenbeltcouncil.org.uk

Axe to fall on Ox-Cam Arc?

Questions over the future of the Oxford-Cambridge Arc have been raised, as even those involved in the project say they need clarity over its future. Originally put forward by the government, the overall aim of the project is to encourage and guide growth in ‘the Arc, which covers the entire area between the university cities of Oxford and Cambridge, including large parts of Oxfordshire, Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire (including Milton Keynes), Northamptonshire and Cambridgeshire. It also links the South East and Eastern Regions. The Arc is considered by the Government to be “globally significant”, supporting over two-million jobs, and adding over £110 billion to the economy every year.

The official blurb for the Arc says: “There is an opportunity, recognised by government and local partners, to build a better economic, social and environmental future for the area. With high-quality, well-connected and sustainable communities making the Arc an even more beautiful place to live, work and visit.”

To achieve this, the intention is to create a Spatial Framework for the entire area. This framework would help coordinate the infrastructure, environment and new developments in the area. The Government said it was also looking to create an Arc Growth Body that would be a “clear economic leadership voice for the Arc”, and said that it would examine the case for new and/or expanded settlements in the area. Plans for a new major road linking Oxford and Cambridge were scrapped last year, to much relief for the CPRE branches whose counties would have been affected. Most recently, business leaders and pro-growth lobby groups have been alarmed by rumours emanating from within Government circles that the Spatial Framework will never happen and that to all intents and purposes ministers have abandoned their plans for the Ox-Cam Arc.

Press reports to this effect have been met with a stony silence from the Government, but the focus on “Levelling-Up” and the shift towards Northern priorities may suggest that the Arc is another investment programme that is about to be withdrawn.

‘Big win’ for campaigners in Hampshire

At the beginning of 2022, the Secretary of State refused an application for a major project to run two large electricity interconnector cables from France, onshore at Portsmouth, and into the heart of South Hampshire. Despite agreement to planting and landscaping measures to mitigate the impact of two very large buildings adjoining the South Downs National Park, CPRE Hampshire continued to maintain that this would not be

enough, and that the landscape character, visual amenity and tranquility of the local area and the National Park would be significantly damaged. This concern was the basis of CPRE Hampshire’s objection and participation in the formal Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIP) examination-in-public. CPRE Hants Vice-President Christopher Napier explained. “We were relieved that the Examining Authority was responsive to our views and reached the conclusion that there would be long lasting damage to the SDNP and the local area, and that this was accepted by the Secretary of State.”

He added: “We will continue to support the South Downs National Park Authority in their work to protect this special area of land. This is a nationally designated landscape and its core to our work at CPRE Hampshire for this to be maintained. We understand the need to look for options in the strategic development of our country. But it needs to be the right choice and in the right place for us to continue to live and enjoy a healthy and sustainable landscape.”

www.cprehampshire.org.uk

Worthing Council turns down housing estate plan

The usual bleak news from the South-East, where battles continue to rage over development threats to countryside and open spaces, has been dispelled by an encouraging turn of events in Sussex. A major development, proposed by the housebuilder Persimmon, would have had substantial impacts on landscape views into and out of the South Downs National Park and the National Trust’s

Highdown Estate. Both lie immediately north of the site. The effects of coalescence of the two communities of Goring and Ferring would be significant.

Persimmon's outline application for 475 houses on this green site close to the Sussex coast contravenes Worthing Council's spatial policy in which it commits to protecting this green gap in the current and emerging local plans. Local conservation groups in Goring and Ferring, together with Worthing's Civic Society, working in conjunction with CPRE Sussex, submitted objections to the council, reflecting local community concerns about the loss of publicly accessible green space. Campaigners argued that the existing landscape was fundamental to the quality of life for local residents. As CPRE Sussex trustee Bill Freeman explains, Persimmon claimed "that the development should be considered in the planning context of 'the tilted balance' under presumption of sustainable development, because of the authority's failure to have a five-year housing land supply."

Worthing Council decided against Persimmon and rejected the application. "This decision is absolutely the right one for the community and its wellbeing," says Bill, "and for the preservation of this much valued green space."

www.cpresussex.org.uk

Water worries at East Malling

East Malling and Larkfield Parish Council recently hosted a presentation by South East Water, which has announced plans for the building of a new pumping station close to the River Medway – at the site of the former

industrial complex, Aylesford Newsprint. Since the demolition of Aylesford Newsprint, plans have been put forward to turn the area into a small residential town in its own right, although so far, the site remains a wasteland. Running into the River Medway close by is the East Malling or Ditton Stream, which rises from the geological band of the Greensand Ridge to the south of East Malling village. Home to a population of wild brown trout, water voles, egrets and kingfishers, the stream's pure water has maintained a constant flow, even during periods of drought – a testament to the unusually strong aquifers which exist at the edge of the village.

Councillors quizzed South-East Water as to whether their new pumping station would deplete water levels in the stream, as it is thought that the new facility will provide much-needed supplies to the area's new housing. South-East Water were at pains to stress their great interest in the "health of the aquatic environment" and will closely monitor any fluctuation – which officials claim will be unlikely, due to the strength of the stream. They also argued that the rate of extraction of water at the old Aylesford Newsprint site would not be exceeded by the new pumping station. We will watch this situation with great interest. There has been considerable concern elsewhere in the South East, especially Sussex, about the disappearance of marsh and wetland as a result of high levels of water extraction by Southern Water.

Surrey's battles with the off-roaders

CPRE Surrey has raised concerns about the proliferation of off-road vehicles in the Surrey Hills AONB. For some months now, tension has

been mounting between residents of local villages and the growing numbers of off-road motorists on the various BOATs (Byways Open to All Traffic) across the Surrey Hills area.

Since the first of the Covid-19 lockdowns, the AONB has seen a significant increase in off-road motorised vehicles, with new tracks being illegally carved out on private land, causing damage to nesting sites and historic landscape features. Residents have also noted a spike in anti-social behaviour such as fly-tipping, trespassing and setting fire to vehicles. Both CPRE and its partners in the AONB have been raising concerns with Government about the exploitation of BOATs in the countryside.

Meanwhile, proposals for the provision of “Greenways” – a network of walking, cycling and horse-riding routes spanning all of Surrey – have been put forward by the Surrey Hills AONB Board in conjunction with the organisation Cycling UK, and supported by CPRE Surrey. Routes have been identified that will run parallel to existing road corridors and integrate with Rights of Way. One of these is the Leith Hill Greenway which will run from the village of Westhumble near Box Hill to Leith Hill, the highest point in the county. The formation of Greenways seeks to upgrade existing routes to create a significant benefit to local users of the countryside and to ensure traffic-free connections between significant local landmarks.

www.cpresurrey.org.uk

Kent faces more threats to its landscape and communities

From rural Tudeley and Capel near Tonbridge in the west, to the Thames Estuary

communities of Medway and the Isle of Grain in the north, and the towns and villages of Thanet in the far east of the county, Kent is facing yet more threats to its “Garden of England” identity.

The new Tunbridge Wells Local Plan (2020-2038) was submitted to the Planning Inspectorate at the start of November 2021, and the housing numbers defined by the Government’s “standard methodology” led to a high level of allocations of greenfield/agricultural sites in the Green Belt and the High Weald AONB. A total of 407.5 hectares of land are to be removed from the Green Belt in the borough, with no replacement land proposed. There is a variety of issues for individual sites; for example major developments at Spratsbrook Farm and Caenwood Farm (both in the Green Belt) adjacent to main urban area of Royal Tunbridge Wells and Southborough would exacerbate existing traffic and air-quality issues in the A26 Air Quality Management Area.

Meanwhile, the village of Tudeley has seen banners and placards along roadsides for many months – signs of local anger at the plans for a new (and hideously misnamed) “Garden Village”. In all, 183 hectares of Green Belt farmland in the district have been allocated in the Tunbridge Wells Local Plan for a sprawling development of 2,800 new houses. Tudeley “Garden Village” would see large swathes of Green Belt land being released for building, with no planned replacement elsewhere in the district. There is limited opportunity for safe active travel to services and facilities in larger settlements, so the new “garden village” is likely to result in heavy car-dependency. This is not remotely what was envisaged by the

pioneers of the Garden City Movement more than a century ago, when they argued for green communities combining the best of town and country. Instead, “garden communities” of this type, actively encouraged (and often financially supported) by the Government, are a prime example of developers ‘green-washing’ their schemes for demonstrably unsustainable urban developments, which they want to plonk down on green fields in the middle of the countryside.

Plans are also on the table for a massive 12,000-home “New Town” at Hoo St Werburgh, in north Kent, plus the expansion of other villages and a new railway station at Sharnal Street to take commuters to London. CPRE Kent argues that the new town would represent a complete destruction of the area’s character. At the same time, rumours abound of development proposals along the main road between the Medway towns and Gravesend – an area rich in migratory bird life. Readers of the CPRE South East Bulletin may remember that it was the Medway Estuary that not so long ago was earmarked as the site of a new London airport – popularly, or unpopularity, known as “Boris Island”.

www.cprekent.org.uk

“Top of the Poops”

The Environment Agency has released the 2021 sewage discharge figures for England. The data is provided by water and sewage companies annually and provides information for monitored storm overflows, the 1,800 without monitors are planned to be fitted by end of 2023. You can download the full data from the Defra website:

www.environment.data.gov.uk/dataset/21e15f12-0df8-4bfc-b763-45226c16a8ac

According to the campaign group Surfers Against Sewage, there were at least 372,500 sewage releases totalling over 2.6 million hours of raw sewage being dumped in Britain’s waterways last year. Analysis of the Environment Agency’s data has been published by Surfers Against Sewage in their report “Top of the Poops”. It appears that the situation in some areas is improving, albeit only very slightly. For instance, in Oxfordshire last year there were ‘only’ 3,045 sewage spills, totalling 40,233 hours of untreated sewage discharge, but this at least is a marginal improvement on the previous year.

The Rivers Trust has also updated its Sewage Map with the latest 2021 data. The map shows a large number of storm sewage overflows discharging untreated, raw sewage, into brooks and streams throughout England.

[Check out the map on the Rivers Trust website.](#)

Meanwhile, the Government has been consulting on its Storm Overflow Discharge Reduction Plan which it says will be “the largest investment to tackle storm sewage discharges in the history of the water sector” and which aims to protect the environment and public health while restoring rivers. However, CPRE Oxfordshire has expressed its concern that the Government’s targets run until 2050 whereas action is needed much sooner. They are also concerned that political pressure seems to be mostly focussed on the water industry but in CPRE’s view the Government and water regulators need to take action too.

Clean water campaigners are calling on the Government to be more ambitious in its goals and to set tougher targets, including a complete end to sewage pollution entering UK bathing waters by 2030 and a commitment to ensure the support is there to make certain that this happens.

CPRE Oxfordshire's response to the recent Government consultation may be read here:

www.cpreoxon.org.uk/resources/consultation-responses-2022/

Islanders renew fight against unsustainable housing targets

The Isle of Wight is often viewed as a rural haven, an escape from the increasing urban sprawl of much of the South East, but this tranquillity is threatened if nationally-imposed housing targets are followed. CPRE Isle of Wight chairman, Al Haig-Thomas, believes some of the planning reforms proposed by ministers represent a potential disaster for the island community: "In effectively removing local democracy from the planning system, individuals as well as councils are set to lose their right to object to specific developments," says Al. "Given our unique Island infrastructure constraints, and the nature of our externally driven housing demand, we've long argued that top down targets are not suitable for the Island. The new proposed method of calculating housing need continues to fail to account for the Island's housing demand being driven almost exclusively from people looking to move here to take advantage of our already lower house prices.

"By setting unrealistic targets that can't be met, it's likely the supply of more affordable

town centre units most demanded by young Islanders will actually be reduced, as developers are able to cherry-pick only the most profitable greenfield developments under the Government's presumption in favour of development."

www.isleofwight.cprelocalgroups.org.uk

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.