



Make your voice heard!

A six-week public consultation is currently underway in **West Berkshire** and we are urging CPRE members in the district to take part by offering your views. This is part of the District Council's Local Plan Review and is your chance to have your say on the Council's approach to future development in the district, including the distribution of new housing. It is vitally important that the real requirements of local communities and the vital need to protect our local countryside are taken properly into account when the Council comes to drawing up the next stage of its Local Plan.

CPRE Berkshire believes that genuine housing needs in West Berkshire can more than adequately be met by regenerating 'brownfield' (previously developed) land (*see the article on Local Elections and Brownfield Regeneration in this newsletter*) rather than by sacrificing countryside in and around the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) or by swamping local villages with excessive development. We are also calling for a significant reduction in the housing numbers currently imposed on West Berkshire through the Local Plan process, pointing out that the housing targets currently used by the District Council are no longer binding on them and are merely 'advisory', due to a recent change of government policy announced by Housing Secretary Michael Gove.

Across Berkshire as a whole there are 359 brownfield sites, which would be sufficient to build at least 21,000 houses. Despite these sites being logged by local councils in their Brownfield Registers, areas of countryside are still being allocated for housebuilding. In West Berkshire, there are as many as 53 brownfield sites totalling 46.54 hectares, which CPRE estimates would allow building of 2,837 new homes without the need to build on any farmland or countryside.

Greg Wilkinson, Chairman of CPRE Berkshire said: "It is clear that there is no need for West Berkshire Council to plan housing estates in countryside areas which would have a seriously damaging impact on the rural environment, especially on the AONB. The Council's public consultation is an opportunity for local residents to make their voices heard and to register their opposition to unnecessary and unsustainable development proposals which risk permanent harm to this rural area with its beautiful landscapes, pretty villages and quiet country lanes."

Please go to the Council's website www.westberks.gov.uk and take a look at the Local Plan Review documentation. The consultation closes on 3rd March, so time is of the essence!

Thoughts from the Chair

I am honoured to have been elected as Chair of the Trustees for CPRE Berkshire and look forward to working with all our members and volunteers to protect and promote our wonderful Berkshire landscapes and to try to build our capacity at the local level. For the last six years I chaired Berkshire Vision (Berkshire County Blind Society) and I am involved with two charities that help people with disabilities to access the River Thames (Accessible Boating Thames and Rivertime Boat Trust) as well as being an active member of The Rotary Club of Reading Abbey.

Since retiring from paid employment I have enjoyed quite a wide portfolio of charity positions and hope that these have provided the appropriate experience from which to draw as your new Chair of Trustees. I was born and raised in the Yorkshire Wolds, where I still retain many links, and where I developed my passion for the rural life and for beautiful scenery. My wife and I regularly drive off to the hills both in Berkshire (when I am not on the river) and in Yorkshire and still enjoy the emotional buzz that scenic landscapes provide.

In my first few months I have worked with my fellow Trustees of CPRE Berkshire and agreed a strategic plan which focuses on four main areas:

- Protect, enhance & champion our natural heritage
- Promote sustainable land use
- Support renewable energy projects where appropriate and where harm to the landscape can be minimised
- Build CPRE Berkshire's capacity, mobilise volunteers, and build local partnerships

The centenary of CPRE is just three years away: 2026 is not only the 100th anniversary of the national charity CPRE (formed as the Council for the Preservation of Rural England in 1926) but also of our CPRE Berkshire branch, as ours was one of the first local branches to be created. We will be celebrating this important milestone and promoting various activities as we approach 2026.

We will work hard to promote the value and benefits of Berkshire's countryside and create a stronger voice to protect and enhance what we cherish – especially our Green Belt, North Wessex Downs AONB, the Rivers Thames and Kennet, and the many other areas of natural landscape and beauty. We will promote access to the countryside and highlight the benefits for positive mental health and wellbeing. We want to see the right development in the right place and we need your help to ensure that this happens.

We are passionate about the regeneration opportunities of pursuing a 'brownfield first' policy, and will strive to promote conservation, wildlife protection and biodiversity in our county. Over-development damages the local quality of life and we will challenge, when appropriate, where we believe that is happening and we need the help of local people to ensure that we get this right.

Renewable energy is important and is the way forward if we are to move towards a zero-carbon energy system. We support solar power and wind turbines so long as they are strategically planned and appropriately located. Solar panels should be on rooftops not good farming land. Brownfield not greenfield sites must be the priority. We will not support the ravaging and industrialization of our countryside; renewables must be sited sympathetically and planned sensibly.

Unfortunately, in common with many other CPRE branches, we have a shrinking membership and we are not currently able to monitor all of the areas within Berkshire – we need more help. (*See the article below – Your local branch needs you!*) In Bracknell we saw some energetic contributions from CPRE Trustee Rebecca Murphy, who worked tirelessly to ensure that the **Bracknell Forest** Local Plan reflected local values. It was through the efforts and skills of Rebecca and a small group of like-minded people that we persuaded the Planning Inspectorate in their recent decision to advise the Borough Council to remove the proposed development at Jealotts Hill that would have decimated over 110 hectares of greenfield land. For family reasons Rebecca has relocated to Sussex and we miss her passion and her energy. We need local people to help us to protect and promote their local areas.

We are seeking to develop productive partnerships across Berkshire. I have meetings arranged in the coming weeks with the Deputy Ranger at Windsor Great Park, with the Director and Staff of the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) and Reading University. We continue to value many other relationships, with such as the North Wessex Downs AONB, and we will actively seek out other potential partners who share our passion and our values. We want to grow our influence and we need the help of similarly minded local people of we are to make a real difference.

I am very pleased to welcome Andy Smith, our new Media, Communications and Development Officer. A professional journalist and active countryside campaigner, Andy joined us in November and has already made making significant improvements to our website, our public face and PR impact, generating positive local press coverage and getting the CPRE message across in the media. I sincerely hope that Andy will be the first of many new faces in the Berkshire branch as we must grow our capacity if we are to be effective. Not only do we need to increase our membership we also need to increase our volunteer numbers and the impact that they can make.

If you are passionate about our local landscapes and feel that you might be able to help with what we do please contact us (through the website) as we would love to involve you as we move towards our centenary to celebrate, once again, the continuing beauty of our Royal County.

Greg

Greg Wilkinson
Chair – CPRE Berkshire

Your countryside – fight for it!



A Berkshire rural scene [Photo: C Keene LRPS]

Film studios ‘will harm the Green Belt’

In recent years there has been a plethora of planning applications for new film and television studio complexes to the west of London, especially in Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Surrey. Some of these have been on brownfield sites, but the latest, for a huge (60,000 sq.m) film studio complex at Holyport, near Bray, in the borough of **Windsor & Maidenhead**, is especially worrying as this is Green Belt land and we believe it would set a dangerous precedent, opening the floodgates to more developments of this type in Berkshire and beyond.

CPRE Berkshire has written to Windsor & Maidenhead Borough Council objecting to the proposal by developers Greystoke Land to build these new film studios, close to the existing Bray Film Studios. We consider the scheme to be an unnecessary and damaging development that could lead to further Green Belt land grabs by developers. CPRE believes that, if Greystoke’s application is approved by the Council, the environmental harm that would be done to the countryside would far outweigh any potential economic benefit to the local area. Not only would the development mean further encroachment and the loss of precious open space but it would have a direct impact on nearby heritage assets in the Holyport Conservation Area.

Building in the Green Belt is only permitted where there are ‘very special circumstances’ but this is a high bar and we do not accept that this test has been met by Greystoke Land. CPRE Berkshire is calling on the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead to reject this potentially very damaging proposal. We hope that councillors will do their duty by protecting the green spaces and heritage of the Royal Borough. Our comments are echoed by the London Green Belt Council, the umbrella group for more than 100 local amenity societies, countryside protection groups and residents’ associations throughout the Metropolitan Green Belt.

Keep your eyes on the skies!



Star Count 2023 is here! Between 17 and 24 February we are encouraging CPRE Berkshire members to take part in the annual ‘citizen science’ project organized by the CPRE national charity. Last year, thousands of people throughout England signed up for the Star Count and enthusiastically counted the stars in the night skies above them, and we want to make sure that Berkshire plays an active part in the 2023 project.

Dark and starry skies are a special part of enjoying our countryside. Nothing beats looking upwards to see velvety blackness, with twinkling constellations as far as the eye can see. But light pollution is a huge blight on our night skies. It seriously disrupts wildlife, affects our sleep cycles, and excess lighting contributes to carbon emissions. That is why CPRE came up with the annual Star Count, to promote a return to natural starry skies. We want to make sure that we can all enjoy starlit nights, and we need your help in measuring what effect light is having on our views of the galaxy. And the best way to see how many stars we can all see in the sky is to count them! So, for just one week, we are asking people from all across the country to become ‘citizen scientists’ and look heavenwards for one night. We hope lots of people in Berkshire will sign up to take part in this year’s exciting project which really is something the whole family can get involved in!

Over the years, many thousands of people in different parts of England have submitted their counts, which CPRE's experts then analyse and compare with previous years. CPRE then publishes its findings on the website (www.cpre.org.uk) and emails all those who took part to let them know the results for their area and for the whole country. The results will help CPRE create an up-to-date map of where star-spotters are enjoying deep, dark skies, and also show where light pollution is most serious.

To take part, all you need to do count all the stars you can see in the Orion constellation. CPRE can then use the results to map and track light pollution trends across the country. You don't need any special equipment, like a telescope – it's all done with the naked eye. And CPRE will provide extra guidance, news and tips so that you can get the most out of it. Star Count is a great activity, whether on your own, with friends or with family. And you don't need to go out of your way. You can take part at your local green space, your garden, or even just by looking out of your window – but be sure to switch all your lights off first! To sign up for Star Count, go to www.cpre.org.uk and click on the link.

Success for CPRE hedgerow campaign



Hedgerow in Berkshire [Photo: C Keene LRPS]

CPRE Berkshire is celebrating a major policy success the recent announcement by the Government that it has set a national target to help farmers and landowners create thousands of miles of new hedgerows.

Under the Government's new Environmental Improvement Plan, ministers have committed to create or restore 30,000 miles of hedgerows a year by 2037, and 45,000-miles a year by 2050. The target underpins aims to restore England's hedgerow network and puts farmers at the heart of the mission to reconnect nature in this country. The new policy is a major achievement for CPRE, which has been campaigning to persuade MPs to agree to promote wildlife conservation

and biodiversity through a national policy to plant more hedgerows. Restoring our network of hedgerows has been a priority for CPRE's campaigning work in the countryside over the last year and it is great news that we now have from ministers a binding commitment to the first ever national hedgerow-planting target. This is testament to the efforts of CPRE volunteers and to the thousands of people who signed CPRE's hedgerow petition last year.

CPRE Berkshire will be working with other environmental groups to provide opportunities for supporters to get involved in hedgerow planting and restoration projects in Berkshire later in 2023. This will include events under the banner of the 'Big Help Out' project in April and May this year, linked to the King's Coronation on 6 May. 'Big Help Out' will highlight the positive impact that volunteering has in communities across the country in recognition of the King's commitment to public service, and CPRE is involved alongside the National Trust and other environmental bodies. Under 'Big Help Out', people will be encouraged to try volunteering and see the positive benefits it has in their local area. CPRE is delighted to be part of this initiative and we urge members and supporters in Berkshire to get involved. Further details will be available from March onwards, so to find out more about opportunities to take part, check our website www.cpreberkshire.org.uk, email us at cpreberkshire@btopenworld.com for updates, and follow CPRE Berkshire on Twitter and Facebook.

Development plans branded 'cuckoo'

CPRE Berkshire is opposing a development scheme in Ascot which we believe is disproportionate and unsuitable for the area. The proposal is for a concentration of new offices, shops, housing and theatre/cinema auditorium off the High Street. Local CPRE activists have branded the scheme as 'cuckoo' because, just as the cuckoo uses other birds' nests to lay their eggs, the developer of this scheme is using other people's land for parking.

CPRE believes the application submitted by developer London Square to the Royal Borough of **Windsor and Maidenhead** should be rejected because the concentration of new buildings including over 130 dwellings and a combined floorspace of 2,500 sq.m on such a small parcel of land would be disproportionate and would represent a significant over-development of the area. We also oppose the loss of trees which this development would involve (40% of the 115 trees on the site would be felled).

The area is poorly served by public transport, which means travel by car, but the developers are not proposing any car parking facilities for shoppers or visitors, despite Ascot already having a lack of parking spaces. London Square has instead offered the car parks on land it does not own. CPRE Berkshire supports development in towns if it saves pressure on the countryside but this scheme is badly planned and totally disproportionate. Anyone thinking this development is acceptable is living in cloud cuckoo land!

Your local branch needs you!

As we enter a new year, with so much political uncertainty, local elections just a few months away and the government looking afresh at the planning system, the countryside, villages and open spaces of Berkshire are still being eyed up by developers and we face growing threats to our Green Belt and the edges of the AONB. Local councils are in some cases pressing ahead with Local Plans and in others putting them on hold due to confusion and mixed messages from central government. Meanwhile, sensitive rural locations are blighted as planning applications come forward while we await the next stage of a local planning process or the next round of 'planning reforms' from Whitehall.

CPRE Berkshire is working alongside local residents and action groups in communities throughout the county, rallying to the defence of our precious and vulnerable countryside. So, with all this going on, the year ahead looks set to be busier than ever for your local CPRE branch! But to continue this vital work we need your support. We rely entirely on the goodwill of our members and supporters, so please donate your money *or your time* to CPRE Berkshire if you can. We

need to build up our Fighting Fund but just as urgently we need to find new volunteers for our local groups, especially for those areas where we are currently rather thin on the ground. In particular we need volunteers to help us in the following areas: **Slough, Bracknell Forest, and Wokingham** – although of course we will be happy to have new volunteers in any Berkshire district!

So, if you are able to give just a little of your time to assist CPRE in our campaigning, letter-writing, fundraising, organizing local events, monitoring planning applications, liaising with councillors, or any other aspect of our work, please email our Branch Secretary, Gloria Keene, at cpreberkshire@btopenworld.com to arrange an exploratory discussion. If, for example, you think you might be able to help us develop some positive projects that encourage local people to actively enjoy our landscapes, then we would love to hear from you!

Victory for Jealott's Hill campaign

In January came the terrific news that the Planning Inspectorate had instructed **Bracknell Forest** Council to remove Jealott's Hill, a Green Belt site in Warfield, from the Draft Local Plan where it had been earmarked for a so-called 'Garden Village' – in other words a massive mixed-use development with thousands of new houses. Removal of the Jealott's Hill site is one of a long list of recommended modifications by the Inspector which need to be considered by the Council and implemented if the Plan is to come into force.

The proposals for Jealott's Hill included not just 2,000+ dwellings but eight gypsy and traveller pitches and a 72,000 sq m 'Science & Innovation Park'. Had the proposals (known in the draft Plan as 'Policy LP7- Land at Jealott's Hill Warfield') secured approval, they would have meant substantial urbanisation of over 200 hectares of Green Belt land, 115 hectares of which is currently in agricultural use. These proposals, which have been in the plan since a public consultation in November 2019, have been highly controversial locally and led to the formation of the Save Jealott's Hill Campaign with support from CPRE Berkshire and the London Green Belt Council. SJHC mounted a fierce challenge on behalf of the local community in Warfield at the public examination of the Plan.

The Council will now need to respond to the Inspector's letter and conduct a further public consultation later this year on proposed changes to the draft. There is a link to the Inspectors' Letter dated 19 January 2023 and referenced 'EXAM 61' in the Examination Documents list on the Examination website:

<https://www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/planning-and-building-control/planning/planning-policy/emerging-bracknell-forest-local-plan/examination-documents>

NPPF Consultation

The Department for Levelling-Up, Housing & Communities is currently consulting on an update to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). CPRE National office and the branches have agreed that there should be an overall 'One CPRE' submission from the entire CPRE Network and we have therefore provided Berkshire's input to this via the South East regional group.

The One CPRE submission is still taking shape but there is broad agreement among branches on the priorities and these are being incorporated in the submission to the Government. These are: the need for a 'Brownfield First' policy for new housing development; to protect agricultural land for food security; to change the current methodology for calculating 'housing need' and recognize that market demand is not the same as 'need'; to redefine the concept of 'affordable' housing (at present it is assumed that anything 20% below market prices is affordable – an utterly absurd idea in the premium-priced South East of England!); and to switch to 'rooftop renewables' instead of the current trend towards large 'solar farms' and landscape-scarring windfarms which could see vast areas of countryside industrialized.

LOCAL ELECTIONS 2023:

Stand up for your countryside!

National CPRE has published a manifesto for the forthcoming Local Elections and we believe that there are some very important proposals in this manifesto which CPRE Berkshire members would endorse. We urge you to challenge the election candidates in your area and ask them to sign up to the CPRE manifesto, which will be published on the national and Berkshire CPRE websites in the coming weeks. The policies set out in the manifesto are as follows:

Brownfield first

CPRE's 2022 State of brownfield report shows that the amount of previously developed land continues to grow across England. Currently there's enough space for over 1.2 million homes to be built across 23,000 sites covering more than 27,000 hectares of brownfield land. That is why CPRE is asking candidates to commit to:

- Ensuring all brownfield land that is suitable for housing, and could potentially come forward as a source of land supply, is identified by:
 - Properly resourcing the search for brownfield land;
 - Working with local communities to identify suitable sites;
 - Ensuring that local planning authorities are updating their brownfield registers at least once a year as required by Regulation 17 of the Town and Country Planning (Brownfield Land Register) Regulations 2017;
- Using all means available to bring suitable brownfield sites forward for housing by:
 - Maximising any funding opportunities which may become available;
 - Working with delivery partners to get brownfield sites approved, using Compulsory Purchase Powers where necessary.
- Ensuring that any Infrastructure levies, including Community Infrastructure Levy and Section 106 requirements, are set at a level which positively discourages greenfield land development over brownfield land development to reflect the higher costs of greenfield development to local communities;
- Only allowing greenfield developments if the above steps have been undertaken, with exceptions for affordable and social homes to address local need.

Rooftop renewables

Opposition to industrial-sized solar farms in the countryside is growing, yet there is huge untapped potential for rooftop solar across the country, with 250,000 hectares of south facing commercial roof space alone, and a further 20,000 hectares of car parks. Making the best use of this rooftop space would dramatically reduce the pressure for controversial greenfield solar farms. CPRE is therefore calling on local government to adopt a renewables strategy that prioritises rooftops, surface car parks and brownfield sites in a concerted effort to attract wide public support. That is why CPRE is asking candidates to commit to:

- Taking all means possible to ensure solar PV or thermal panels are the standard expectation for all suitably-orientated roofs on new buildings, including homes. This should be at the forefront of any new or updated Climate Strategy or Action Plan, any Corporate Strategy or any emerging local plan.
- Prioritising the installation of solar PV or thermal panels upon all suitably-orientated roofs on publicly owned buildings or suitable publicly owned brownfield land. Where previous commitments have been made by Councils to this effect, ensure that these commitments are being resourced, monitored and met.
- Bringing forward local plan policies to allow refusal of planning permission for homes unless they are Future Homes Standard or equivalent.
- Bringing forward local plan policies which only allow planning permission to be granted for commercial or public car parking spaces if they also provide solar energy generation.

- Actively seeking out opportunities to install solar panels on suitable brownfield land, avoiding best and most versatile agricultural land, requiring provisions for multi-functional benefits and achieving best practice standards for landscape and natural capital.

Rural transport

We want everyone to have genuine, sustainable travel choices, keeping cars off the road and pollution out of the atmosphere. CPRE advocates for local transport improvements, improving connectivity and reducing loneliness, isolation and access for everyone. That is why CPRE is asking candidates to commit to:

- Maintaining current levels of bus services
- Keeping vital public transport routes in place such as those connecting communities to hospitals, social care routes, places of employment, and educational facilities.

Give us your feedback!

We are keen to hear your feedback on how you get on, especially if you can secure commitments from candidates on specific pledges from the CPRE manifesto. Please email cpreberkshire@btopenworld.com with any news!

Opportunities for brownfield regeneration

In December the national CPRE 'State of Brownfield' report was published, and this made clear how many opportunities there are to site new housing on previously developed land rather than pushing it into our countryside. The Berkshire branch welcomed this important report and our statements on the subjects were extensively covered in the local press at the time. In these statements we urged local councils to make sure that housebuilding and other development is kept away from the Green Belt and the AONB, and we called on councils to revise the housing numbers in their Local Plans, pointing to the fact that there are already more than enough brownfield sites to meet local housing needs.

As the CPRE report showed, nationally, throughout England, there is enough brownfield land to build 1.2 million new homes, but only 45% of brownfield sites have planning permission for housing and even where permission has been granted developers are slow to build. This leaves 550,000 homes with planning permission still awaiting development. In Berkshire, we have 359 such brownfield sites across the county, which would be sufficient to build at least 21,000 houses. These sites have been logged by local councils in their Brownfield Registers, and yet several of Berkshire's local councils are still allocating large areas of countryside including Green Belt open spaces and farmland for housebuilding.

For example, **Bracknell Forest** Council has 22 brownfield sites on its register, 11 of which already have planning permission for housebuilding. The amount of brownfield land totals 40.75 hectares in the district. This, says CPRE, is sufficient for 2,608 new houses; 1,580 already have planning permission. The borough of Windsor & Maidenhead has 32 brownfield sites registered, covering 72 hectares, enough to build 1,808 new homes.

Reading Council has 140 brownfield sites, 126.35 hectares, sufficient for 10,124 houses – the largest housing capacity in the county. Even in rural **West Berkshire**, there are as many as 53 brownfield sites, totalling 46.54 hectares, enough land to construct 2,837 new homes without the need to build on any farmland or countryside at all. But most brownfield sites either have no current planning permission for housing or, if they have permission, homes are not being built fast enough.

In the same week that the CPRE brownfield report came out, the Levelling-Up & Communities Secretary, Michael Gove, made a statement on housing policy in which he said that the Government no longer intends for housing targets to be mandatory, merely 'advisory', and committed to allow communities a bigger say on how many new houses are built and where they should be built. CPRE Berkshire chairman Greg Wilkinson commented: "When the housing numbers are no longer mandatory, and when there is already considerable potential for new homes to be built on brownfield sites, it is clearly wrong for local councils in our county to be offering up vast swathes of countryside to developers, especially Green

Belt land and protected landscapes such as AONB. Despite developers pretending that planning constraints such as Green Belt are the obstacle to building the homes that people need, it is apparent from the latest CPRE report that this is not the case. The problem is that developers are just not interested in building houses on brownfield sites.”

CPRE’s brownfield report calls for a range of measures to protect green fields, farmland and countryside, while boosting the development of social and truly affordable homes in areas where it is most needed. Previous research has shown that development of the highest quality farmland has soared 1,000-fold in 10 years, while brownfield sites wait for regeneration. Meanwhile, the demand for social housing is growing six times faster than the rate of supply in rural areas and, at current rates, the backlog of low-income families needing accommodation would take over 120 years to clear. In addition to the findings of the CPRE brownfield report, there was also a recent report by the House of Lords committee on land use in England, which called for a national strategy and framework to make more efficient use of available land in town and country and to achieve a better balance between development and the environment.



CPRE Berkshire fights for a living, working countryside [Photo: C Keene LRPS]



The countryside charity
Berkshire

Berkshire Voice is the bulletin of the Berkshire Branch of the Campaign to Protect Rural England. Editor: Andy Smith, tel. 07737 271676. To contribute to future issues of this newsletter please email Andy at CPREBerkshireMedia@gmail.com

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