

# BERKSHIRE VOICE

Newsletter of the Berkshire Branch of the Campaign to Protect Rural England – June 2023



*The Kennet and Avon Canal [Photo: C Keene LRPS]*



The countryside charity  
Berkshire

# All change in Berkshire local government

Four of the six councils in Berkshire changed hands in the recent local elections.

With the exception of **Reading** – where Labour held onto power – and **Wokingham** – which stays under No Overall Control – the political complexion of Berkshire has changed dramatically, with many long-serving councillors losing their seats.

The Liberal Democrats took control of both **West Berkshire** and **Windsor & Maidenhead**, while Labour took **Bracknell Forest** from the Conservatives. In all three of these formerly rock-solid Conservative areas the party lost heavily and scores of Conservative councillors were toppled.

Only **Slough** bucked the trend and went from a Labour majority to Conservative leadership, albeit a minority administration.

It is hard to say what impact these political changes will have on planning and land-use policy in the Royal County but it is hoped that the new administrations will be more reluctant than their immediate predecessors to allow inappropriate development in the countryside and open spaces.

Rest assured that CPRE Berkshire will continue to press for more protection of the natural environment, and in particular for an approach that prioritizes nature conservation, wildlife-friendly farming, and the health and wellbeing of local communities, rather than sacrificing precious countryside to developers and polluters.

In the run-up to the election, we contacted all the major parties and wrote to candidates setting out our 'Manifesto for Berkshire's Countryside' and urging them to endorse our policies on the environment. (We also hope they will join CPRE and learn more about our campaigns for the countryside!)

In our Manifesto we called on all election candidates to “acknowledge that the heritage of the Royal County of Berkshire is entrusted to us, and so endeavour to protect all our precious countryside and open spaces, including the Green Belt and Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, so that it remains attractive and tranquil while preserving the integrity and character of our historic towns and villages.”

The policies set out in the Manifesto were as follows:

- ***Halt the industrialisation of our hillsides and rural landscapes***, in particular the construction of energy schemes that disfigure the countryside, are hazardous to wildlife and pose health risks to local communities; and by promoting roof-top renewable energy as a greener alternative wherever practicable.
- ***Aim for a cleaner environment in our Royal County*** by working in partnership with the water companies to stop the release of sewage into our rivers and streams, and by striving to eliminate littering and fly-tipping in our countryside.
- ***Maintain a strict 'Brownfield First' policy*** that focuses on regenerating previously developed land and encouraging sustainable high-density developments on brownfield urban sites.



- **Meet genuine local housing needs in our towns and villages** through the provision of well-designed, appropriately-sized, high-quality homes that local people can afford – including social housing for rent.
- **Reduce traffic congestion by promoting sustainable transport**, cycling and walking, and in particular by boosting investment in local bus services to end rural isolation and improve access to medical, leisure and retail facilities.
- **Promote nature conservation, wildlife protection and biodiversity** through policies that encourage sustainable farming and land-use, protect and promote hedgerows and ancient woodland, and fully recognise the crucial importance of the natural environment to our entire way of life.
- **Enable people of all ages and abilities to stay healthy and enjoy our environment** by reconnecting with nature in safe, accessible, local countryside, with well-maintained walking and cycling routes in every Berkshire district.

We are continuing to press for acceptance of CPRE Berkshire’s approach and will use the Manifesto in our ongoing communication with councillors in the months ahead. We also propose to expand upon this Manifesto in time for next year’s anticipated General Election so that we are able to present a similar document to candidates for Parliament.

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## Let the wild flowers bloom!

CPRE Berkshire is supporting the ‘No Mow May’ initiative from Plantlife and the Wildlife Trust and is urging people in Berkshire to help our mission of ‘nature recovery’ by letting the grass grow in May and June.

The wild flowers that have appeared in our lawns during the last few months have not only livened up the grass but they provide essential habitats for bees and butterflies. The numbers of pollinators are in decline here in

Berkshire and throughout Britain, and they need all the help they can get.



Gardens are important wildlife havens and if we let our lawns grow in the coming weeks we will be doing nature a big favour. Allowing dandelions and daisies to bring a splash of colour to our lawns is also the easiest and most practical way to enable to enable more bees and butterflies to survive.

As well as encouraging people to see the advantages of letting their lawns grow for a few months, we would like local councils in Berkshire to leave green spaces such as roadside verges to grow wild where it is safe to do so. Some of the councils have already been doing this, but this should not be a one-off.

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## Branch welcomes new team members

We are delighted to announce that we have several new members of the CPRE Berkshire team.

Following last year's appointment of Andy Smith, an experienced journalist and a former director of CPRE Surrey, as our Media and Communications Officer, we have recently engaged the services of Rajiv Chelani as our Projects Manager.

Rajiv has been actively involved with various environmental initiatives in Berkshire, including Transition Maidenhead, promoting sustainability, renewable energy and recycling in the local area. He was also the founding director of a co-housing project for the Thames Valley, and has worked in the private, public and voluntary sectors in a variety of management and consultancy roles.

He joins us in a part-time role, working with CPRE Berkshire chair Greg Wilkinson, branch secretary Gloria Keene and media/comms officer Andy Smith, to initiate and deliver projects that broaden our impact on the wider community.

In addition, we now have a Local Transport Champion in Berkshire – Eira Jones. A new CPRE volunteer, Eira's role is to help us deliver CPRE's vision of a more comprehensive and cohesive bus network for rural areas. In this capacity she will be talking to local councils, and to community and amenity groups throughout Berkshire, as well as working with CPRE activists to make the case for better bus services.



Photo: Creative Commons

Her immediate priority is to help publicize Better Transport Week (12-18 June), which is run by CPRE's partner the Campaign for Better Transport. The main focus for Eira will be on Tuesday 13 June which has been designated as Bus and Coach Day.

Eira can be contacted via the CPRE Berkshire office. For more information on Better Transport Week, go to: [www.bettertransport.org.uk](http://www.bettertransport.org.uk)

We are always on the lookout for more volunteers for the Berkshire Branch of CPRE. In particular we still need more 'activists' in the east of the county – in the boroughs of Bracknell Forest, Slough, Windsor & Maidenhead, and Wokingham. If you would like to get more actively involved in CPRE Berkshire, at the county-wide level or in one of our district groups, please contact the Branch Office.

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# Stop polluting our rivers!

A 'hot topic' that has generated a lot of headlines and front page stories for CPRE Berkshire in recent months has been the appalling state of some of the Royal County's rivers and streams. This follows revelations of a series of sewage releases into rivers.

One of the most serious cases has been the consistent and deliberate release of sewage into the Foudry Brook, near the village of Stratfield Mortimer in West Berkshire. The brook, which flows into the River Kennet just west of Reading, is in an environmentally sensitive area of countryside and close to the archaeologically important Roman site of Silchester and several Bronze Age barrows. The brook also passes through the Pamber nature reserve.

CPRE Berkshire chair Greg Wilkinson told the local press: "We are appalled by what is being done to the Foudry Brook. We cannot continue to allow the natural environment of the Royal County, and in particular the biodiversity of our beautiful countryside, to be ruined in this way. We are seeing too many examples of this happening. That is why we made it one of our priority concerns in our Manifesto for Berkshire's Countryside.



"But, alarmingly, this is far from being an isolated incident, as there have been previous reports of sewage being released into the Foudry Brook, and a stretch of the River Kennet near Hungerford has been found to contain significant amount of agricultural chemicals such as insecticides which may have drained into it from nearby farmland. This combination of sewage releases and accidental leakage of chemicals into our rivers is an absolute disgrace. I hope that newly elected councillors will be able to work with the Environment Agency, the water and waste industry and with local farmers and landowners to find long-term solutions that will put a stop to

this problem of pollution in our rivers and streams."

Nationally, the water industry has committed to investing in new systems to prevent sewage releases, but in the meantime pollution of this type is still a problem and we need to monitor this situation very closely. If you know of sewage being released into rivers and streams in your area, please let us know.

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## Eco-friendly solar energy

There are ways to meet 'net zero' without erecting massive wind turbines on our hills or smothering farmland with acres of solar panels. This is what we in CPRE Berkshire believe, and it was therefore a relief to receive a copy of National CPRE's latest report on rooftop renewables which proves that we don't have to have 'windfarms' or 'solar farms'.

By far the most sensible, practical and environmentally-friendly way to regenerate renewable energy is by putting photovoltaic panels on roofs, and especially by making use of large areas of roofing such as on factories, warehouses, office blocks, schools and hospitals. There is also a vast and currently untapped resource in the form of car parks which can easily and inexpensively be 'roofed' with solar panels.



Research for CPRE by the Energy Institute at University College London shows that “decarbonising the grid requires far less land than previously feared”. The UCL Energy Institute recommends that the Government sets a national rooftop solar target of generating at least 40GW of power by 2035. Installing solar panels unobtrusively on existing buildings and car parks would enjoy near-universal public support and help minimise objections to large solar farms in the countryside, the report says.

The potential of urban brownfield sites to generate renewable energy is being dramatically underutilised at present. While some ground-based solar energy schemes may be necessary in the long term, our countryside can be protected and the need for greenfield schemes removed if there is a policy of ‘Rooftop Renewables First’.

CPRE is calling on the Government to ensure that all suitable new buildings have rooftop solar as standard. Regulations should be updated so that solar capacity is a requirement of planning permission for major refurbishments of existing buildings, and for all new residential, commercial and industrial buildings.

Launching the report, Roger Mortlock, chief executive of national CPRE, said: “We are missing a trick in failing to install more solar panels on roofs and car parks. Rooftop solar has almost universal public support. It’s unobtrusive and largely out of the line of sight, which means fewer objections and a speedier passage through the planning system. Given the urgency of the climate crisis, it’s time that renewables are fitted as standard on all new development. Homeowners expect it on new homes and it’s crazy to see massive new warehouses, with roofs the size of football pitches, waved through without any expectation they install rooftop solar.”

But this comes with a dire warning. If we don’t use rooftops effectively for renewable energy, an area of countryside larger than the size of Greater London will be required for ground-mounted solar schemes. CPRE’s view is that this land could be much better used for either nature recovery, public access or low-impact food production, or a mixture of these.

CPRE Berkshire chair Greg Wilkinson says: “This is an extremely important issue for us in Berkshire. We are all for renewable energy but not the sort of schemes that industrialize our rural landscapes and do more harm than good. Rooftop schemes are the best as they can be implemented on a large scale without affecting the appearance or tranquillity of the countryside.”



*An example of what we’ll increasingly see across our countryside if we don’t get more rooftop solar energy [Photo: CPRE]*

# Why we need darker skies

Communities throughout Berkshire are being badly affected by light pollution and true darkness at night is a rarity in this county.

We are not alone in this; light pollution now affects the vast majority of the UK population, with three-quarters of people finding their view of the night sky obscured.

In fact, the data from CPRE's recent Star Count reveals that only five percent of people in Britain can enjoy the wonder of a truly dark starry sky.

In Berkshire, 56.7% of participants counted fewer than 10 stars, indicating 'severe' light pollution. Only 6.7% of people participating in the Star Count here in Berkshire counted over 30 stars and are lucky enough to experience truly dark skies.

This is very bad news. Starry skies and true darkness at night are part of the essential rhythm of nature. But they are as crucial to people's health and wellbeing as they are to wildlife.

There is considerable evidence that, without night-time darkness, all our sleep patterns are interrupted and the mental and physical health of many people can be badly affected.

Being able to see stars at night is not just an issue for astronomers but for all of us. That is why we should do all we can to reduce light pollution and give us back our dark, starry skies.

CPRE Berkshire wants local councils in the Royal County to work together to examine the design and siting of street lighting with the aim of reducing light pollution, and to provide advice to local residents and businesses on how to minimise intrusive lighting in and around homes and workplaces.

CPRE is part of the UK Dark Skies Partnership which aims to reduce unnecessary and inappropriate light pollution and achieve behavioural change through education and the promotion of more environmentally-sensitive lighting.

In evidence presented recently to the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee, CPRE recommended that local authorities should have legal powers to control light pollution through planning regulations. Outdoor advertisements are already managed in a similar way.

Further to that, key changes to national and local planning policy were identified that, if implemented, should lead to a step-change in reducing light pollution, including policies to protect dark skies and intrinsically dark landscapes.

To find out more, go to [www.darkskiesmatter.org.uk](http://www.darkskiesmatter.org.uk), and for further information on CPRE Berkshire's other campaigns, visit the group's website [www.cpreberkshire.org.uk](http://www.cpreberkshire.org.uk) or follow @CPREBerkshire on social media.

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# Forthcoming events

## Friday 7 July 2023



The 2023 **Annual General Meeting** of The Berkshire Branch of CPRE will be held on Friday 7 July in The Long Gallery at Englefield House, Theale, RG7 5EN, by kind permission of The Rt Hon Lord Benyon. We are delighted to announce that Lord Benyon has consented to be our guest speaker on this occasion. The former MP for Newbury, he is currently a member of the House of Lords and serves as the Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). All members of the Branch and their guests are welcome but tickets must be booked in advance; please contact the Branch Office for further details.

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## Tuesday 14 November 2023

This year's **CPRE Berkshire Historical Luncheon** will be on Thursday 14 November at Goring and Streatley Golf Club, Rectory Road, Streatley-on-Thames, RG8 9QA. Local historian and author Clive Williams OBE will give a talk on the history of the Craven family from their extraordinary rise to wealth in Tudor England to glory under the Stuarts and Hanoverians, when Craven earls and barons were the greatest landowners in Berkshire and amongst the richest peers in Britain, followed by the decline in their fortunes. Tickets for lunch are £38 (this includes a two-course lunch and coffee). All members and guests are welcome; booking details are available from the Branch Office.

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*Berkshire Voice* is the bulletin of the Berkshire Branch of the Campaign to Protect Rural England.

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