



DON'T SACRIFICE OUR COUNTRYSIDE

A campaign briefing from the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE)
July 2013

'Our open spaces are being destroyed unnecessarily. Previously developed brownfield land should be re-used first to protect the beauty and tranquillity of our countryside and breathe new life into our towns and cities.'

Why is the countryside important?

The English countryside is central to our national identity. Despite being one of the most densely populated countries in the world, England has successfully protected most of its land area (all but 8.9%) from built development. The countryside is precious, irreplaceable and finite - a beautiful national asset for us all. How we use land is largely determined by the planning system which can ensure we protect the countryside while at the same time providing for the economic development and new housing that the country needs. With growing global concerns about climate change, food security, the depletion of nature, and population growth, we need to manage our countryside sustainably and protect it from inappropriate and unnecessary development - for the food and raw materials it provides, for nature, and for its beauty and the freedom it offers.

What's the problem?

Despite being one of the most densely populated countries in the world, England has successfully protected most of its land area (all but 8.9%) from built development. But there is growing evidence that more and more of our countryside is being destroyed by haphazard and badly planned developments.

Weakened national planning policy - Recent changes in national policy have resulted in greenfield sites being used when suitable brownfield sites are available. Since 1989, on average, 67 square kilometres of undeveloped land, or an area larger than the city of Southampton, has been lost every year to development¹. Since 2003 the trend of countryside loss has slowed but a weakening of planning policies requiring brownfield sites to be used before greenfields that were in place until 2012 looks likely to increase the rate of loss. Local authorities and planning inspectors are now increasingly allowing large scale greenfield development when enough suitable brownfield land is available for over 1.5 million new homes according to the most recent (2009) Government figures. On top of this, local plans across England propose at least 400,000 new dwellings on greenfield sites, with over 80,000 of these planned on Green Belt land², despite this land having special planning protection.

Lack of recognition for undesignated countryside - There are special controls over development in nationally protected landscapes (National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty) and wildlife sites (eg. Sites of Special Scientific Interest), and in Green Belts. But between them these areas cover less than half (or 45%) of England's countryside. Much valuable countryside is undesignated, for example the landscape of Charnwood in Leicestershire (see Case Study). More than a third (around 40%) of England's countryside is high quality (Grades 1-3a) agricultural land, much of it outside designated areas. Only a small proportion of this land has been mapped in

¹ See Government land use change statistics at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-land-use-change-statistics>. The area of Southampton is 51 square kilometres or 19 square miles

² CPRE, *Countryside Promises Planning Realities* March 2013.

detail³, and there are currently no special planning protections affecting the use of this land. This makes it vulnerable to development proposals such as those recently seen in Taunton Deane (see Case Study).

CASE STUDY - Charnwood

Charnwood Borough in Leicestershire has no Green Belt or nationally protected landscapes. The National Character Area profile for 'Charnwood', covering much of the Borough, describes 'a unique landscape, marked out by its geology and upland qualities, which contrast with the surrounding gentle lowlands'. The area is under continued pressure for new housing development. The Borough Council has particularly struggled to get a new Local Plan in place. The East Midlands Regional Plan, which focused most new development on brownfield sites in and around Derby, Leicester and Nottingham (alongside some losses of Green Belt land), has now been revoked. The lack of an up to date plan has made the Borough increasingly vulnerable to applications for large scale housing development, with Planning Inspectors allowing three recent appeals. The most recent of these, in May 2013, involved up to 300 dwellings on a greenfield site on the edge of Barrow Upon Soar.

CASE STUDY - Taunton, Somerset

In April 2013, Taunton Deane Borough Council voted to grant planning permission for 315 houses to the south east of the town, despite calls from local campaigners and over 800 objections. The land is countryside with no national policy protection. It contains both Grade 2 agricultural land (the second highest category in terms of quality) and part of a 'green wedge', a local planning designation protecting the countryside setting of Taunton. Development on the site had previously been rejected for the above reasons, and because most of the residents were likely to rely on cars to get to local schools or shops. Council officers noted issues about the loss of high quality agricultural land, but argued that 'national planning policy does not attribute significant weight to this matter'. The Government refused in July 2013 to call in the application as it was not considered to be of national importance.

England's countryside is increasingly disturbed by noise and visual intrusion - Findings from 2007 CPRE research show that nearly half (49.90%) of England's countryside is disturbed by noise or visual intrusion, an increase of nearly a fifth since the 1990s⁴. Light pollution levels across England increased by 26% between 1993 and 2000.⁵ This gloomy picture has been reinforced by the 2007 findings of the Countryside Survey, which noted significant decline in the condition of ponds and a 6.1% reduction in the length of managed hedgerows⁶, and by the 2013 State of Nature report which

³ Defra Soil Research Programme, Review of the weight that should be given to the protection of best and most versatile (BMV) land, Technical Report SP1501/TR, p.12/13, 2010, <http://randd.defra.gov.uk/Default.aspx?Menu=Menu&Module=More&Location=None&Completed=2&ProjectID=17207>.

⁴ www.cpre.org.uk/resources/countryside/tranquil-places/item/1760-england-fragmented-countryside-england-and-the-regions-intrusion-statistics

⁵ <http://www.cpre.org.uk/resources/countryside/dark-skies/item/1986->

⁶ See www.countryside-survey.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdfs/reports2007/england2007/CS-England-Results2007-ExecSumm.pdf.

found that 60% of the species assessed 'have declined over the last 50 years and 31% have declined strongly'⁷.

How can we fix the problem?

- **More encouragement needs to be given to local authorities and developers to use brownfield sites before greenfield.** A 'smart growth' approach is the best way of accommodating necessary development while protecting the vital asset that is our countryside. This ensures that we use suitable brownfield sites in urban areas, well linked to public services and infrastructure such as transport, before allowing greenfield sites to be built on. To achieve this, the NPPF needs to be reinforced by new Government planning guidance which prioritises brownfield regeneration.
- **Regeneration focus for Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs)** - LEPs should be specifically guided to prioritise the regeneration of brownfield sites that are primarily suitable for business or commercial use in line with democratically agreed planning policies.
- **Use of financial incentives** -Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) should be used to prioritise the redevelopment of brownfield sites and new measures, such as Tax Increment Financing, used to cover the upfront costs of regenerating brownfield sites.
- **Action at the local level to improve the beauty and tranquillity of the countryside.** Local authorities should set planning policies to reduce light pollution, identify and protect areas of tranquillity and make use of the new Local Green Space designation.

What CPRE is doing and how people can help

At the national level CPRE seeks to influence planning legislation, policy and guidance to ensure a more sustainable approach to planning. Ministers have continued to state their commitment to protecting the Green Belt and reusing brownfield land but more needs to be done, particularly to protect ordinary, undesignated countryside. CPRE has produced tranquillity maps which can be used as the supporting evidence local authorities need to introduce planning policies to identify and protect areas of tranquillity. We can supply data to be used on request.

Local pressure is also vitally important. If you would like to take action please consider:

- Supporting CPRE's Charter - www.saveourcountryside.org.uk
- Writing to or emailing your local MP to ask them to support our Charter
- Feeding in relevant case studies from your local area that can help inform our national campaigning work. Please send them to charter@cpre.org.uk
- Seeking to influence the policies in your local plan and commenting on local planning applications. Visit www.planninghelp.org.uk and <http://www.cpre.org.uk/local-group-resources/campaigning/planning> for advice and tips.

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⁷ www.rspb.org.uk/stateofnature, p6.