

A beautiful countryside to sustain us all

We need to value and protect the countryside for the countless benefits it provides to our health, prosperity and wellbeing.

The next Government should:

- **Enhance people's experience of the countryside**, by committing to monitoring rural tranquillity and dark skies and the policies created to improve them.

Why is the experience of the countryside important?

England's diverse countryside and landscapes are hugely important to the nation's health and wellbeing, providing attractive places for people to live, work or play and making a significant contribution to the economy through tourism and farming. Landscape is more than just 'the view' - it is our perception of a place, combining how we appreciate its aesthetic qualities - its patterns, colours, smells, textures and sounds - and the associations we attach to them, such as memories, feelings of familiarity or a sense of awe. The relationship between people, place and nature is the ever-changing backdrop to our daily lives. The most recent¹ Natural England survey of how people engage with the natural environment found that people made 1.31 billion visits to the countryside. It also revealed that 96% of people think that having green spaces close to where they live is important.

Almost 25% of England is designated as a National Park or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs); these places are often referred to as the jewels in England's crown. The beauty of these landscapes makes a huge contribution to the rural economy; for example, an estimated 95 million visitors to National Parks and surrounding areas each year spend more than £4bn and support 68,000 jobs.

But CPRE believes that all landscapes matter: from mountains, uplands, moors and the seascapes of our stunning coastline, to rolling countryside, heritage sites and traditional green parks in urban and rural areas, each with their own distinctive character, history and sense of place.

Many people visit landscapes they love to experience tranquillity,² which is what makes the countryside different from cities, suburbs and towns. There is evidence that experiencing tranquil places can help people recover from stress or mental illness, as well as physical health problems related to inactivity and obesity. The Natural England survey also found that 88% of people felt refreshed and revitalised after a visit to the countryside. But even in the depths of the countryside, genuine dark starry nights are becoming harder and harder to find - security lights, floodlights and streetlights all break into the darkness, blurring the distinction between town and countryside.

What's the problem?

England's landscapes are under threat. CPRE believes National Parks and AONBs should be protected from major development, such as intrusive or badly designed energy, housing or transport infrastructure, unless it is deemed to be in the national interest and shown that no other

¹ The Natural England 2014 MENE survey: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/monitor-of-engagement-with-the-natural-environment-2013-to-2014>

² The NE survey showed that 29% of people visit the natural environment to relax and unwind; along with 17% who visited to seek peace and quiet.

suitable site exists. In practice, both National Parks and AONBs are under a growing threat from inappropriate developments. Some of these threats arise as a result of national policies, such as the national road-building strategy, and others as a result of a combination of national and local factors, such as a lack of five-year land supply for housing.

If our designated landscapes are not safe from inappropriate development, what does this mean for the wider countryside that is valued by the local community? Some of these have an existing local authority landscape designation but they are all of local value. CPRE research in 2011 found that 55% of English countryside is unprotected by a nationally recognised designation, such as National Park, AONB, Site of Special Scientific Interest or Green Belt. One of the core planning principles in the National Planning Policy Framework is to 'recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside'. But recent analysis has found that more than half (52%) of local authorities did not have up-to-date adopted Local Plans in place.³ As a result, they are under increased pressure to approve any application for development in line with policies in the NPPF, rather than with local views.

Development pressure means that tranquil places are at risk, and truly dark skies free from light pollution have become rare. For example, between 1993 and 2000 artificial light in England increased by 26%. CPRE has gathered evidence about how light pollution affects views of the night sky by running a Star Count since 2011.⁴ The results have shown that 54-59% of participants are living with severe light pollution. While CPRE agrees that some of this light is necessary, much of it is wasting energy, increasing air pollution and disrupting people's sleep. Our quality of life is being reduced by light pollution.

If landscape, and the experience of it, is not prioritised by Government policies then we risk the slow erosion of what makes our countryside special.

How can we fix it?

With increasing pressure for housing, transport and other infrastructure, it is more important than ever that Government policy, funding and legislation recognise the enormous contribution that distinctive, beautiful, characterful and cared for landscapes make to the nation.

CPRE believes that political parties should commit to:

- strengthen the National Planning Policy Framework by giving greater weight to the protection of National Parks and AONBs, including their setting, from major development;
- ensure our National Parks, AONBs and green spaces have sufficient budgets and staff resources to guarantee their long-term protection and enhancement;
- the use of local landscape designations and policies, to help protect areas of countryside that are valued by local communities;
- monitoring England's tranquillity and dark skies at regular periods, to establish change over time and ensure that national and local policies can be improved as needed.

What CPRE is doing and how you can help

CPRE, in partnership with several other organisations, has developed *Landscapes for Everyone: Creating a Better Future*⁵ - a narrative about why landscape matters and what political action is needed to ensure a better future for England's landscapes. We are also highlighting threats to both designated and locally valued landscapes around the country, with the aim of showing how national policy impacts on local planning decisions.⁶

³ [Countryside Promises, Planning Realities](#) CPRE (2013)

⁴ The results of the 2014 Star Count can be viewed on our [website](#)

⁵ [Landscapes for Everyone: Creating a Better Future](#) (2015)

⁶ [Going, Going, Gone? England's disappearing landscapes](#) CPRE (2013)

In 2014, we surveyed 83 English local authorities to find out how they manage lighting in their areas; both in how they deal with light as part of the planning system and the management of street lighting. Our consequent report, *Shedding Light*,⁷ analysed the bigger picture about lighting in England and made recommendations for what councils could do to ensure that lighting is properly controlled - you could help by contacting your council to promote our report and recommendations, as well as reporting any problem lighting in your area. CPRE is currently seeking funding to create new maps of light pollution in England and wants the government to commit to monitoring light pollution and tranquillity.

If you would like to take action please consider:

- Supporting CPRE's Charter - www.saveourcountryside.org.uk
- Contacting your MP by letter or email to raise concerns, and to ask them to support our Charter
- Seeking to influence 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.

⁷ [Shedding Light: A Survey of local authority approaches to lighting in England](#) CPRE (2014)