

Give peace a chance

Has planning policy contributed to rural tranquillity?

Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), May 2015

Introduction

Tranquillity is a natural resource, and an essential quality of the countryside. It is a much valued aspect of human experience that CPRE has long championed. Although found in many places, it is the countryside that gives us the best chance to experience it. With its broad views, woodlands and heaths, wildlife, the sounds of nature, massive skies, and open water, the rural environment offers us many opportunities to experience deep tranquillity. It enables us to appreciate the beauty and harmony of the natural world. Tranquillity is a central part of why the countryside matters deeply to so many people and the reason many want to spend time there.

Being able to take a peaceful walk, cycle or ramble in tranquil countryside or hike along a national trail adds immeasurably to many people's quality of life. Tranquillity is not just a valued pleasure: there's plenty of evidence it has important benefits. Research has demonstrated that exposure to nature and, better still, immersion in it, is good for our health and wellbeing.ⁱ It reduces our stress levels, improves our mood and makes us feel good about ourselves. Areas that are tranquil give us the chance to get away from the pressures of modern life and recharge our batteries.ⁱⁱ They are part of our natural health service.

Tranquillity in national policy

The Government first acknowledged tranquillity as a special quality of the countryside in 2000. Since then it has been recognised by bodies such as the Civil Aviation Authority in its Future Airspace Strategy, High Speed Two Ltd, and Natural England, as well as many National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs). In 2012, tranquillity gained recognition in national planning policy for the first time. The Government now encourages local authorities to identify and protect areas that are valued by the public for their tranquillity. These include both smaller areas of Local Green Space, mainly in or near urban areas, and larger 'areas of tranquillity'.

CPRE welcomed the new policy in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) in 2012, while calling for better guidance on how to apply it and regular monitoring of rural tranquillity. Both are still lacking. As a result, CPRE decided to find out how local authorities, including National Parks and AONBs, have, if at all, been implementing the policy.

The survey

We contacted 340 planning authorities - including county, borough, district and unitary authorities, and all 10 national park authorities (NPAs) - as well as 34 AONBs. From 69 responses overallⁱⁱⁱ - 18% of authorities - we have analysed where tranquillity policy has been adopted, looked at the problems where it hasn't, and explored the implications for the development of policy and tranquillity protection. The headline results are set out in this report and have been used to develop recommendations for Government nationally and locally.

Key findings

- We asked whether the authority had a tranquillity policy in place, for how long and if it was due to the NPPF.^{iv} Two fifths (29 of 69) of planning authorities or AONBs had a policy and most (four fifths) were in AONB Management Plans or National Park Local Plans- designated landscapes with higher protection and generally higher levels of tranquillity. Most of these have had policies in place for five or more years, and do not reflect the more recent policy in the NPPF. Of local authorities covering urban and rural areas outside of 'designated' landscapes or the wider countryside, relatively few (one in seven) have tranquillity policies in their Local Plans.^v A small number - four - had developed an entirely new policy due to the NPPF and four others had adapted theirs to comply with the NPPF.
- We asked if the authority was planning to develop a policy on tranquillity if it didn't have one. Responses gave more positive signs that the NPPF is having an effect: eight authorities were planning to develop a policy - five of these for areas outside of designated areas, as well as two AONBs and a National Park. Yet, of the authorities without a tranquillity policy, more than three quarters (31 of 40) said they weren't planning to develop one. A very large majority of these (29 of 31, or more than nine out of 10) cover urban and wider countryside beyond designated landscapes.^{vi}
- We asked authorities for the reasons that prevented them developing a tranquillity policy. Some, mainly urban, saw little scope for identifying such areas. For more than half, their Local Plan was too far advanced to change when the NPPF was published. Nearly two-thirds gave three or more of the following reasons:
 - Lack of a clear definition of tranquillity
 - Lack of detail in national policy
 - Lack of detail in planning practice guidance
 - Lack of a suitable evidence base.^{vii}
- We asked authorities which tools they would find useful for developing tranquillity-related policies. There was strong agreement on the tools - better data and guidance - that would help them do this: access to a tranquillity GIS database (95%);^{viii} a tranquillity mapping report (94%); legal advice on a definition (88%); examples of tranquillity-related policies from other planning authorities (97%); and case studies of good practice in tranquillity protection and improvement (100%).^{ix}

- We asked authorities if they would support the case for developing new national tranquillity maps and a supporting GIS database. Those with and without policies were strongly supportive of the case - nine out of 10 overall - and all those with policies backed this call. Over two thirds of those without policies or any plans to develop them were supportive too.^x

The background

CPRE has long championed tranquillity and campaigned for it to be recognised and protected nationally and locally. In partnership with the Countryside Commission in the early 1990s, CPRE commissioned pioneering work by ASH Consulting to identify the extent of undisturbed countryside and of the intrusive effect of a range of factors including roads, power lines, airports and flight paths, and urban development. This resulted in our intrusion maps from the 1960s and 1990s.^{xi}

Repeated in 2007, these maps show around 50% of England by area was affected, up from 41% in the early 1990s.^{xii} These findings challenge those that argue for more development of the countryside because only a “small” percentage of England - around 10-11% - is developed. If anything, intrusion maps reflect the public view that a much larger area is affected by development: not only from its immediate footprint, but visual and noise impact on the landscape around.

In 2006, with support from the Government’s nature protection body, Natural England, CPRE funded Northumbria and Newcastle Universities to produce new tranquillity maps. Including factors that damage tranquillity or others which add to it, such as the presence of woodland or water courses, these maps show a more complex picture. They not only illustrate how fragmented the tranquillity of many areas of countryside has become, but also, using a scale for the whole of England, identify unspoilt areas worthy of - but currently lacking - better protection. Now made interactive, the maps can also help to identify locally valued areas for which we increasingly need to protect access, as pressure for development grows.^{xiii}

Current pressures

Like so many natural resources, rural tranquillity has been depleted over many years, but it is now under more pressure than ever:

- In December 2014, the Government announced a £15 billion Road Investment Strategy, the largest roads programme since the 1970s, which includes proposals for more than a thousand miles of new and widened roads.
- The Airports Commission is due to publish recommendations this summer for a new runway at either Heathrow or Gatwick; this would project more flights and noise onto either huge swathes of the Chilterns AONB and the Green Belt in West London or large tracts of the Sussex countryside, including the High Weald and Surrey Hills AONBs.
- Some 220,000 homes are proposed for Green Belt areas alone as well as 1200 hectares for industry;^{xiv} some 4,300 hectares (10,625 acres) of previously

undeveloped land are lost mainly to housing, infrastructure and industry every year.^{xv}

- There are 22,000 high voltage pylons covering 4,375 miles (7,000 km) of overhead lines across England and Wales^{xvi} with 355 miles (571 km) in protected landscapes;^{xvii} many miles of new lines with pylons and other infrastructure have been proposed, such as 40 miles in Somerset to serve the new Hinkley Point nuclear power station.^{xviii}
- Britain has more large solar farms than any other country and 408 installations that cover 25 acres or more, with many more in the pipeline; in the wrong location they can be all too visible and risk industrialising the countryside;^{xix} but with few large rooftop installations built, there is an opportunity for many more to produce electricity near to where it's needed and minimise negative impacts on the countryside.
- The last Government promised strong legal measures to protect the countryside and communities from shale gas and oil. Most of these were ultimately omitted from the Infrastructure Act 2015, although our most protected areas were afforded some safeguards. This is particularly concerning with the new Government due to license new areas in summer 2015.

Plans for new infrastructure and other development threaten to overwhelm new areas and further shrink and fragment the remaining reserves of tranquillity in the countryside. While developments such as these are often talked up in terms of benefits to jobs and the economy, the impact on unspoilt countryside and the value it has for people locally, regionally, and nationally and their quality of life, receives all too little thought.

Tranquillity needs to be properly valued in making decisions on housing, transport or energy infrastructure, so new developments don't unnecessarily damage and deplete it further. In the best of cases, tranquillity cannot only be maintained but made better in urban and rural areas.

There are encouraging signs that the new Government is taking seriously the design of some new infrastructure and its impact on the countryside. In February 2015, the Rt. Hon. John Hayes MP, roads minister for the Coalition Government, in a lecture for CPRE and the Campaign for Better Transport, explored how good design and beauty can be incorporated in the road network:

“Our goal is not just to undo the most intrusive, insensitive road design of the past 50 years. It's to create a new aesthetic. Values that reflect and even enhance the beauty of the local landscape. We need a new understanding that improving our road network isn't just about speeding up journeys at any cost. It's about creating a network that works better for communities and the environment too.”^{xx}

This was followed by a commitment in the *Conservative manifesto 2015* to “build new infrastructure in an environmentally-sensitive way” and for new roads and railways at least

to be built “in a way that limits, as far as possible, their impact on the environment”. The manifesto also commits the Government to developing new maps: “We will make it easier to access our beautiful landscapes, by providing free, comprehensive maps of all open-access green space.”^{xxi}

Progress is being made on several fronts:

- National Grid is spending £500 million up to 2021 to underground, screen or change the route of power lines in sensitive landscapes and to reduce the visual impact of new pylons.^{xxii}
- New speed limit guidance makes it easier to reduce speed limits to 40 mph with less clutter, for example in National Parks and AONBs.^{xxiii}
- £6 billion will be invested under the Road Investment Strategy on the strategic road network to resurface 80% of it with lower noise surfaces (as well as £75 million on measures such as noise barriers targeted at the worst affected communities).^{xxiv}

These initiatives show that, with ambition and care, turning back the tide of encroachment is possible.

There is a key role for local authorities and infrastructure providers and their regulators in making this happen. These bodies could plan to retrofit and refurbish existing infrastructure to reduce the impact on tranquillity. Significant improvements could be achieved with a range of measures: burying power lines, through better design and landscaping of buildings; intelligent lighting design - alongside switch-off and dimming schemes; and the use of quiet tarmac in rural areas, as well as urban areas where residents can benefit most. The concept of a design panel - already taken forward by High Speed Two Ltd and Highways England - could be extended to other infrastructure.

The relevant bodies should set up a design panel to include key stakeholders and develop a set of design principles to achieve effective, inclusive decision-making and which applies good design to enhance the tranquillity of the countryside. For each new piece of infrastructure, the planning and design phase should seek first to avoid areas of higher tranquillity; then to mitigate effects by reducing visual and noise impacts (such as by tunnelling, undergrounding power lines, sensitive landscaping and tree planting); and lastly to compensate for damage with other measures to seek to improve tranquillity overall.

There is a clear role for Government. With better guidance and information, current policy could achieve much more. New maps would not only show loss but opportunities for improvement. They also have the potential to show where policy is working and tranquillity is being enhanced. They could underpin delivering the manifesto commitment to achieving more environmentally sensitive infrastructure and add value to new open-access greenspace maps by identifying areas where deeper tranquillity can be found.

Ultimately, they could help the new Government deliver on its manifesto pledge “to ensure that public and private investment in the environment is directed where we need it most”.^{xxv}

Recommendations

CPRE calls on the new Government to take action to value and protect the character of the countryside, which gives people beautiful and tranquil places to enjoy and enriches their lives. We need to make the tranquillity policy that is already in national planning policy more effective. To do that we need improved guidance and an up-to-date evidence base to support tranquillity policy at local and national level.

CPRE is calling for the new Government to:

- Integrate tranquillity as a measure of environmental quality into manifesto proposals for new maps of greenspace and to use it as a tool to help deliver on its commitment to develop environmentally sensitive infrastructure.
- Put in place new, detailed planning guidance on tranquillity together with an agreed definition of tranquillity.
- Develop and publish a new “indicator” of tranquillity, comprising maps and the supporting datasets and publish them as open data.
- Commit to monitoring change regularly to support better policy making and spending of public funds.

CPRE is calling for infrastructure providers and their regulators to:

- Set up a design panel involving stakeholders and develop design principles to include enhancement of the tranquillity of the countryside.
- Publish open data setting out the Zone of Theoretical Visibility and noise contours of all new and existing infrastructure.
- Seek first to avoid areas of higher tranquillity for each new piece of infrastructure, or where necessary mitigate effects by reducing visual and noise impacts and compensating to improve tranquillity overall.
- Reduce impacts on tranquillity for existing infrastructure, such as by burying power lines, low impact lighting and noise-reducing tarmac.

CPRE is calling for local authorities to:

- Identify, protect and promote local areas of tranquillity in their Local Plan.
- Assess and minimise the impact on, and seek to improve, areas of tranquillity in the planning decisions they make.

- Develop a range of active measures to improve tranquillity, such as using quiet road surfaces and managing traffic to cut noise, using landscaping and tree planting to reduce visual intrusion, and adopting switch-off schemes to cut light pollution.

CPRE is committed to working with the new Government, infrastructure providers, local authorities and other bodies to support better policy making and enhance tranquillity as a vital national resource.

Caveats and limitations

Proportions given in key findings above are, unless otherwise stated, expressed as a fraction or percentage of the number answering the specific question, given as [N] in relevant footnotes. Although the total sample size is lower than 100, we use percentages only to simplify understanding of certain fractions, with no claims that these apply to the larger body of local authorities who did not answer our survey.

Generally, participants responded to the survey on a voluntary basis so the results are from a self-selected group. This could mean that respondents have more familiarity with or interest in tranquillity. As such, we acknowledge that findings from the survey may present an unduly optimistic picture of take-up of tranquillity policy. As response rates from national parks and AONBs are high and a large percentage of their total group (90% and 53% respectively), we have more confidence in generalising from these groups to the wider population.

Notes

ⁱ See, for example, analysis of the evidence base in R. Bragg, C. Wood and Barton, J. *Ecominds effects on Mental Wellbeing*, Mind 2013, p. 12:
<https://www.mind.org.uk/media/354166/Ecominds-effects-on-mental-wellbeing-evaluation-report.pdf>

ⁱⁱ The most recent Natural England survey of the public's engagement with the natural environment found that 88% of people agreed they felt calm and relaxed and 87% of people felt refreshed and revitalised after a visit to the natural environment, mainly urban greenspaces and the wider countryside: Figure 3.10 Outcomes of visits to the natural environment, in The Natural England MENE 2013-2014 survey, January 2015:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/monitor-of-engagement-with-the-natural-environment-2013-to-2014>

ⁱⁱⁱ These were from 41 Planning Authorities (other than NPAs), 9 National Park Authorities and 19 AONBs.

^{iv} Q2 *Do you have a tranquillity policy in either your local plan or any other relevant document?* [N69]; Q4 *If so, is this a) the continuation of a tranquillity policy your local authority has had for some time? Or b) an entirely new policy due to the National Planning Policy Framework?* [N24]; Q5 *If your policy is a continuation of an existing policy have you adapted it to comply with the NPPF?* [N27]

^v These are Suffolk Coastal and Waveney District Councils (DCs) - two authorities working in partnership and sharing services including planning (treated as one for the statistics here), Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC), Stockport MBC, Redbridge District Council, Tunbridge Wells DC, Mansfield DC.

^{vi} From answers to: Q2 *Do you have a tranquillity policy in either your local plan or any other relevant document?* [N69]: 29 answered yes and 40 no. For Q7 *If you don't currently have a policy on tranquillity are you developing one or planning to do so* [N62]: of those 40 without a policy 31 answered no to this question

and 8 yes indicating they were developing a policy (2 AONBs and 29 mainly borough, district or unitary councils).

vii Q8 *If you are not planning to develop a tranquillity policy which of the following reasons apply?* [N22]

viii A Geographic Information System (GIS) is designed to capture, store and check data, and enable people to analyse and understand all types of spatial or geographical data. See National Geographic [here](#).

ix From Q9 *If you already have a tranquillity policy or are developing one - which of these would you find useful in develop a tranquillity-related policy?* Access to GIS database [N38]: 36 Yes; Tranquillity mapping report [N34]: 32 Yes; Legal advice on definition [N32]: 28 Yes; Examples of policies from other local planning authorities [N36]; case studies of good practice [N38] 38 Yes.

x From Q 16 *Would your local authority support the case for the development of new national tranquillity maps and a GIS data base to help it develop its approach to tranquillity?* [N50]: 45 of 50 respondents answered Yes with 5 answering No. 100% (32) of those with a policy or developing one were supportive but also a high level of those without a policy or plans to develop one supported the case for new maps and data at 72% (13 of 18).

xi These were called tranquil areas maps until 2007 when they were renamed to avoid confusion with new tranquillity maps; they focus on negative factors of disturbance only.

xii Table 10, Land Use Consultants / CPRE, [Developing an Intrusion Map of England](#), September 2007

xiii These interactive tranquillity maps can be accessed [here](#).

xiv CPRE, [Green Belt under siege: the NPPF three years on - A CPRE analysis](#), March 2015

xv See Table 265: [Gross annual average change in land use to developed uses from all uses](#), England, 2002-2011

xvi <http://www.cpre.org.uk/what-we-do/energy-and-waste/electricity-pylons/the-issues>

xvii National Grid, presentation to CPRE, March 2014

xviii Just 5 miles will go underground through the Mendip Hills: ITV News, The pylons that put this view - and livelihoods - at risk, 7 January 2014:
<http://www.itv.com/news/west/2014-01-07/the-pylons-that-put-this-view-and-livelihoods-at-risk/>

xix A further 299 solar farms have planning consent but a change in the subsidy regime could prevent their construction: <http://www.wiki-solar.org/> cited in http://cprese.org.uk/eBulletin/CPRE_SE_eBulletin_April_2015.pdf

xx CPRE, John Hayes lecture on making roads beautiful, 20 January 2015:
<http://www.cpre.org.uk/magazine/features/item/3837-john-hayes-lecture-on-making-roads-beautiful>

xxi [The Conservative Party Manifesto 2015](#), pp. 54-55

xxii Roger Harrabin, 'National Grid unveils plans to bury cables underground', BBC News, 10 November 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-29989654>

xxiii Paragraph 130 in Department for Transport, *Setting Local Speed Limits*, Circular 1/13, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/63975/circular-01-2013.pdf

xxiv Department for Transport, *Roads Investment Strategy Overview*, December 2014, p. 14
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/road-investment-strategy-overview>

xxv [The Conservative Party Manifesto 2015](#), p. 55