



July 2020

Regenerate our countryside, regenerate ourselves

A manifesto for a resilient
countryside after coronavirus



The
countryside
charity





During coronavirus, many of us have connected more closely than ever to our nearby countryside and green spaces. In enjoying these places near to us, drawing breath on our daily walks or feeling calmed by watching wildlife, or in longing for the places we can't access, we've realised how much we value the countryside next door or our local precious green oases.



We've talked more about how essential it is for everyone to have that breathing space, that quiet power of nature near at hand, and we've been struck afresh by the regenerative properties of these green connections. Without them, we're a lesser version of ourselves.



They reinvent, refresh, regenerate us. They leave us healthier, fitter, calmer, happier; more ready to face what comes next. We need nature. We need the countryside. And we remember now that we must never take it for granted.

As we emerge from the coronavirus pandemic, the government has to make tough choices about how it'll support the country and the economy's recovery. Let's hold onto that new, deeper understanding of how regenerated by green spaces we felt during the toughest of times, and how nature and the countryside cared for us. Let's make sure that we now care more for the countryside in return.





We will have to work hard, for people and for places. Choices made now will shape our countryside and its communities for decades to come. They need to make us more resilient against climate, financial or health emergencies to come. But we're helped by a happy alignment. We don't need to choose between people, environment or the economy. In this critical historical moment, we have the ability to create a society where they each support and benefit one another.

Lockdown has given us a new era of awareness, a new recognition of the regenerative possibilities close at hand. Our recent poll found that two-thirds of people think protecting and enhancing green spaces should be a higher government priority after coronavirus. We have a unique chance to secure a better future for generations to come, a future where we can all access nature and the countryside to explore, live, grow, work, be inspired.

**In focusing on regenerating our countryside,
we regenerate ourselves.**



How the government can help

Regenerate our green spaces

CPRE is calling on the government to enhance and protect the countryside around our towns and cities, including the Green Belt, delivering better quality green spaces near to where people live.



Limiting us to our local areas during lockdown, the pandemic was a stark reminder of the importance of quality green space near to our homes. But our Green Belts, the ‘countryside next door’ for 30 million people, are being gnawed away by housing developments. Worse still, these developments too often consist of executive houses at low densities, with few affordable homes for local people – an example of a planning system that’s not working for local communities or the environment.

The government can make progress by:

- **Supporting local councils and communities to deliver the right development in the right places through an insistence on up-to-date local plans**, with better guidance and monitoring. These plans need to have stronger and better-implemented policies on good design that contributes to tackling the climate and nature emergencies.
- **Recycling land that’s already been used** for buildings by adopting a truly ‘brownfield first’ policy. This will not only help maximise the protection of green spaces but also provide housing and amenities where people need them.
- **Enhancing our Green Belts, our countryside next door**, through greener farming methods and land use. This can be achieved by setting aside at least 20% of funds for the countryside around towns through the new Environmental Land Management system, providing more fresh food for people in our towns and cities; and better managed countryside that’s easier for people to visit and enjoy.



Regenerate ourselves

We believe the health and wellbeing benefits of the countryside should be available to everyone. But huge inequalities exist in access to it. Many young people, people with reduced mobility, people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and black, Asian and minority ethnic people are not able to enjoy the benefits of time spent in the countryside.

CPRE is calling on the government to help increase access to the countryside for everyone, but especially for those who don't currently benefit.

The coronavirus pandemic has shown us more than ever how important green spaces are for our mental and physical health, but highlighted the inequalities in who has access.



We can make progress by:

- **Guaranteeing every child a night in nature** in a National Park or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty as part of the national curriculum. Meaningful time in the countryside should be a universal right for every child.
- **Adapting and expanding the education system's role** to ensure that the adults of tomorrow have the knowledge and understanding to respond to the nature and climate crises. This should include teaching about the role of the countryside in mitigating, and adapting to, climate change.
- **Increasing funding for the many tried-and-tested community outreach projects** that have already enabled greater engagement with the countryside for marginalised groups. These experiences have been transformative for those who have taken part.



Regenerate our rural economies

A thriving countryside is dependent on people living and working in active, sustainable rural communities. Largely populated by small businesses, rural towns and villages have been particularly hard hit by the economic fallout of the virus. Many of these businesses rely on visitors and have been financially devastated. This includes some farmers left particularly vulnerable by coronavirus who need our support. And our rural communities, many with existing high levels of hidden deprivation, have been hit hard by a lockdown that impacted on already frail connectivity.



We want the government to take decisive action to provide a lifeline to these rural communities by facilitating the rural economic recovery, an essential part of the wider economy, contributing more than £260 billion of economic activity a year.

The government can make progress by:

- **Establishing a rural economy task force** working across government to develop a comprehensive strategy for supporting the rural economy, especially farming and tourism, as we emerge from the pandemic. It should focus on the elements that disproportionately affect rural communities, such as support for small businesses and improved broadband and mobile phone coverage.
- **Investing in rural social housing to provide** genuinely affordable homes for our key workers. Coronavirus has reminded us how important care workers, bus drivers and other essential workers are to our health and happiness. Currently these workers are too often priced out of rural areas, undermining the resilience of countryside communities.
- **Creating a ringfenced rural transport fund** to support public transport services for rural communities that need to be better connected. Among other aims, it should ensure that public transport cutbacks during the pandemic don't become permanent. The money can be found by reallocating the more than £27 billion due to be spent on building new roads, which will only lead to more carbon emissions.

Time for our regeneration:
how to build back better





We don't have to choose between a thriving countryside, assertive action for post-coronavirus healing and tackling the climate emergency. As we emerge from this crisis, our chance is now: we can build back better. This is the best way to honour the regenerative powers of our green spaces that we've learned to value anew in these most unprecedented of times.

Right now, the government can regenerate both people and places. It can create a more equal society while accelerating a just transition to net-zero carbon. Done well, this transition can help reduce inequality, supporting the most needy and ensuring that the benefits to come are shared equally.

These opportunities, moments of seismic change, are vanishingly rare. Last year saw the government set into law a net-zero climate target. In November 2021, the UK hosts COP26, the UN Climate Summit. This is our time. Now more than perhaps at any other point, the UK can lead the world in accelerating the transition to net zero.

The countryside must play a central role. In fact, the countryside and our green spaces can provide many of the solutions to tackling the climate emergency – and these changes will bring a host of other benefits to communities and wildlife and increase the resilience of people, places and economy.





Here's what building back better with the countryside at its heart can look like:

- By planting more trees and hedgerows and sustainably regenerating peatlands and farming practice, we can use nature's toolbox to capture greenhouse gases from the air while regenerating our natural environments
- In improving the energy efficiency of our homes, we'll reduce demand for new energy supplies, lowering electricity bills and lifting millions of people out of fuel poverty
- By shifting to sustainable public transport and more walking and cycling, we'll cut emissions and reduce air pollution while improving our wellbeing and reconnecting our market towns with increasingly isolated rural communities to regenerate ourselves
- By using renewable energy sources, we will move towards a green energy future that provides jobs and opportunities to rural communities to regenerate our economy.

All this is possible.





Coronavirus and lockdown have demonstrated how important access to green space and the ability to connect with nature are to our physical and mental wellbeing. Now it's time to ensure a green recovery that pays respect to this importance. In regenerating our countryside and green spaces, we regenerate our systems and structures, our planet – and ourselves.

About CPRE, the countryside charity

CPRE is the countryside charity. We campaign to promote, enhance and protect the countryside for everyone's benefit, wherever they live. With a local CPRE in almost every county and more than 20,000 members, we work with communities, businesses and government, nationally and locally, to find positive and lasting ways to help the countryside thrive – today and for generations to come.

If you'd like to find out more about CPRE's public affairs work or arrange a meeting, please contact our External Affairs Team via externalaffairs@cpre.org.uk.

And for more information on CPRE's countryside solutions to the climate emergency, please see our Greener, better, faster action plan for the government.



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