



Campaign to Protect
Rural England



2026

A Vision for the Countryside



In the first decade of the 21st century, the English countryside was under huge threat. The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) was heavily engaged in resisting inappropriate development. Protecting the countryside tended to take precedence over improving it.

In truth, the quality of much of the countryside *has* improved in recent decades, even as its overall extent and tranquillity have diminished. Better farming practices, the efforts of some landowners, particularly conservation charities, and initiatives such as the National Forest and community forests have all helped.

But in 2009 there is a pervasive pessimism about the ability of the countryside to survive the pressures it faces from built development, climate change and the impacts of globalisation. There is certainly little confidence that development in rural areas can actually be beneficial.

That is not how CPRE feels. Our belief is that by 2026, our centenary year, this pessimism will appear strangely misplaced.

This is our vision...

Shaun Spiers
Chief Executive, CPRE

Changing attitudes



There is a new focus on quality of life, embracing beauty, local character and the enjoyment of green, open spaces.



It is 2026 and the English countryside is more beautiful, more varied and more tranquil than it was 20 years before. Great care is taken to ensure that new buildings enhance local distinctiveness and the sense of place. Litter and fly-tipping are no longer tolerated. Both rural and urban communities benefit from a thriving countryside.

Almost nine-tenths of England's total land area remains open and green, with relatively little countryside lost to development over the previous 20 years.

One reason for this is that social attitudes have changed profoundly. In the face of growing environmental consciousness and a common understanding that financial prosperity alone does not result in good lives, economic growth is no longer seen as an end in itself. There has been a retreat from consumerism and a new focus on quality of life, embracing the beauty of our surroundings, local character and the enjoyment of green, open spaces. Pioneer Transition Towns and low-carbon villages have shown the way forward for other communities. People everywhere, including country dwellers, live much greener lives.

Better planning



Successful urban regeneration, through developing brownfield land and a significant 'greening' of towns and cities, has been crucial in protecting the countryside. Attitudes to property have changed. Following the crash of 2008-9, the aim of government policy was to create a stable housing market. Over two million high-quality homes have been created since 2009, with many old buildings renovated for housing. But property is no longer seen principally as an investment. Homes are places to live.

The Green Belt has played a vital role in safeguarding the countryside and reinvigorating towns and cities. In 2026 there is more Green Belt and it is better protected. At the same time, Green Belt land is more attractive and more accessible, providing an invaluable breathing space for town and city dwellers and supplying them with food.

Above all, the protection of the countryside and greening of the town has been the achievement of a reinvigorated, democratic planning system. Planning is now supported across the political spectrum – not

just as a tool for delivering economic development, but as the means by which society ensures genuinely sustainable development. Quality of life and environmental protection, notably the need to tackle climate change, are given serious weight within the system, and most decisions on land use are taken locally. There has been a serious devolution of power, including tax-raising powers, to local authorities based on identifiable communities to which residents feel a sense of loyalty, including counties and parishes.

Successful urban regeneration has been crucial in protecting the countryside.

New life in the countryside



Many more people live and work in the countryside, and visit it for pleasure. Rural communities are stronger and more diverse. Many villages have grown, but most of the new homes are permanently affordable. There has been a decline in the 'hypermobility' that characterised the early years of the century. Of course, people still travel to and

within the countryside, but with improved access to services, including local shops, post offices and schools, people no longer have to travel long distances to meet their basic needs. They walk and cycle more, and there has been a revival of rural railways.

In 2026 people in both town and country are much more interested in the countryside and recognise the health and spiritual benefits it has to offer. Children engage much more with nature and the outside world. They are free to climb trees, play conkers and get their knees dirty.

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Food and farming



Most of England's countryside is farmed in 2026. We eat more local food and we eat better. Interest in local foods goes beyond the individual consumer – schools, hospitals and care homes also favour local foods and local suppliers. High quality agricultural land is protected from development. A national soil strategy has helped boost food production with less need for artificial fertilisers.

England's farmers are valued once more for the food they produce, but also for doing a superb job of conserving the familiar, beautiful patchwork of landscapes we love. They are paid to do this and they prosper. Consequently, farming has attracted new blood. Farm animals are treated well. Many more adults and children visit the countryside, and when they do, they see more animals outdoors. The wild flowers, birds, insects and mammals that had so dwindled over the previous 70 years have returned in a rush of sights, sounds and smells.

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Changing landscapes



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While farmland still dominates England's countryside, there is much more woodland, rich in wildlife. These forests are connected by a grid of wildlife-friendly green corridors, including hedgerows. Several large wetlands have been created. And some remote upland areas have been deliberately left to nature and natural processes, becoming wilder in character.

Better management of our coastline helps protect marine life and guard against rising sea levels. At the same time, seaside communities have revived as more people choose to holiday at home.

There is less light pollution across the country, thanks to better designed and less energy-hungry lighting. Truly dark skies provide breathtaking views of the stars and planets.

Green energy



In 2026, England's countryside makes an important contribution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and to helping people and wildlife adapt to climate change. The land is managed to prevent the flooding of houses and good farmland, but some countryside is wetter than before, benefitting leisure and wildlife.

Rural buildings are more energy efficient. Small-scale renewables are common, aided by effective local energy distribution. There has been a large growth in green energy, but decisions on energy developments of all kinds take full account of the character of the landscape.

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A virtuous circle



In 2026 a new consensus on the importance of the countryside has enabled the country to move beyond acrimonious battles between 'NIMBYs' and 'philistine developers'. Development does happen in rural areas, but it does so through a democratic planning system that recognises the vital importance of the finite countryside. There is even a new confidence that sensitive, well-planned development can improve and beautify rural areas.

As more people come to understand, visit and value the countryside, we are seeing a virtuous circle: the countryside improves, people care for it more, it is further improved and valued.

The countryside no longer seems permanently under threat, destined to shrink and degrade. Rather, it is valued and enjoyed by all as a huge national asset.

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Vision voices

'In 2026, everyone feels connected to the countryside; it is ours, the place where we go to be inspired, challenged, relax, work, play, volunteer and learn. Everyone has a stake in their countryside, and is prepared to stand up and defend it en masse; each of us will be responsible, through a democratic planning system, for shaping our backyard.'

Anne Robinson, CPRE Trustee

'There are particular places in the countryside that come as close to perfection as you're ever likely to find on this planet. It is inexpressibly vital that we carefully manage and enhance a landscape that is so rare and dangerously finite. A healthy farming industry, a 'greener' Green Belt and planning decisions that take environmental, social and climate change considerations into account are critical ambitions for our countryside.'

Bill Bryson, CPRE President

'Take a minute to imagine a transformed British landscape. A Britain in which you could walk for a day and not leave the cover of trees. A Britain filled with new spaces for nature, both in the landscape and in our lives and imaginations.'

Robert Macfarlane

'Sometimes the countryside has been reduced to a leisure activity, a package deal shorn of nature's life-affirming rhythm, and cleansed of the muck and smell that is so much a part of rural life. But the real thing is there – every right-of-way is an invitation, every stile a step into somewhere gentle and generous.'

George Alagiah

'Enjoying the countryside is free and we fought long and hard to gain access. Walking, riding a bike, sitting and enjoying a view and watching birds are all important ways to improve your quality of life.'

Janet Street-Porter

'Carbon-cutting, freeing ourselves from the grid, securing the energy supplies for a business: there are so many different motivations for embracing a revolutionary attitude towards small-scale power.'

Lucy Siegle

'Sustainable cities should be compact, polycentric and ecologically aware, and achieving this will also preserve and energise rural England.'

Lord Rogers

'By 2026 my hope is that every child will have access to the countryside, will be excited about scrabbling around in the mud; coming face to face with nature and building a love-affair with wildlife that will last for all their life. Wild spaces will not be something they just see on TV or in picture books but will be a reality in their day to day life.'

Cavan Scott

'Wherever possible we should be avoiding irreversible changes in land use. And we should definitely be avoiding any irreversible loss of the kind of skills and experience on which our ability to produce food (and manage our land for biodiversity, carbon storage and flood control) will completely depend in the future.'

Jonathon Porritt

'The English countryside is at a tipping point – it could go forever and we would wake up wondering how it happened. We will miss the fields, the sense of space, the landscapes, the quiet, the birdsong, the night sky, the hedgerows, the wildlife. And we will know we didn't do enough to keep what we prize so highly. We must each act before it's too late.'

Dame Joan Bakewell





Campaign to Protect Rural England

Campaigning for a beautiful and living countryside

CPRE is a charity that campaigns for a sustainable future for the English countryside. We want a beautiful, tranquil and diverse countryside that everyone can value and enjoy.

Formed in 1926, CPRE has a network of over 200 local groups. There's a branch in every county and a group in every region, as well as a national office in London. Our Patron is Her Majesty the Queen; our President is the celebrated author Bill Bryson. Membership is open to all.

Do you share our vision and want to help us make it a reality?

Find out more at www.cpre.org.uk

Contact us today

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Campaign to Protect
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