

A photograph of three hikers walking away from the camera on a grassy path. The hiker on the right is wearing a backpack and a cap. The landscape is a mix of green fields, a wooden fence, and a blue body of water in the distance under a blue sky with light clouds.

Greener, Better, Faster

Countryside solutions to
the climate emergency and
for a green recovery



The
countryside
charity



Contents

- 4. Foreword
- 8. Executive summary
- 13. The challenges we face
- 16. Countryside solutions to the climate emergency
- 17. Common themes
- 20. Thriving landscapes
- 26. Food and farming
- 32. Building and planning
- 38. Transport
- 44. Energy
- 50. Next steps

Foreword

I was approached to write this foreword as a youth activist with a passion for action on the climate crisis. The effects of this crisis are beginning to set in, and the ramifications of inaction are clear.

This message is clearly received by school students, especially with the feeling of empowerment given to us by the School Strikes for Climate movement and inspirational people like Greta Thunberg. We may not be the policy makers of today, but some of us will be the policy makers of tomorrow and, in the meantime, we feel a responsibility to lobby for change for the good of our planet. I'm lucky enough to be a student at a school with a receptive leadership team and have played a small part in a large amount of action. Not all students have this privilege, which only strengthens our call for the government to take action.

The countryside is vital to our existence and provides so many positive things that go unseen. Biodiversity, carbon sequestration, food supply, mental health support. I feel that these things are undervalued and it can be very hard for my generation, more so than others, to access the countryside.

'The countryside is vital to our existence and provides so many positive things that go unseen. Biodiversity, carbon sequestration, food supply, mental health support. I feel these things are undervalued...'

Whether due to normally being in a classroom, living in an urban area with little greenspace or currently in lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic, lack of access to the countryside enforces an under-appreciation of its importance. The following report shows just how vital the countryside is, and, by providing a vision for the future backed by solutions of the present, it serves as a sincere call to action.

The next 30 years are paramount to averting ecological and climatic disaster. Harsher seasons and biodiversity loss will affect all those who interact with our countryside, that is the entire UK population. Reaching net zero carbon emissions as soon as possible will be one of the greatest challenges of this century, and with legislation from the UK government already in place, now is the time for policy from national and local governments to start working to meet this goal.

However well read you are on environmental matters, there will always be more to learn about our planet and by engaging with this report, you are becoming, or developing as, an advocate of listening to nature and urging the government to steer policy in the right direction.

It is all too easy to become overwhelmed by the seemingly infinite bad news on the environment. For me and other youth activists, documents like these show that the future is promising, and exciting. I hope the following pages give you as much pleasure and inspiration as they did me.

**Freddie Northcott, 17,
Christ's Hospital School.**



Greener, Better, Faster

Countryside solutions to the climate emergency and for a green recovery

The challenges we face

As councils and countries declare a climate emergency, the impact is already clear in our daily lives. The seasons are on the move, crops grown for generations fall and some species hover on the brink of extinction. Our countryside is changing - and we need to make sure it does so in a way that helps mitigate the impacts of the climate emergency and creates a countryside that we can all cherish.

But this is not the only crisis we face. Ecosystems are facing collapse and the biodiversity of our countryside is declining unabated. The coronavirus pandemic is the biggest public health crisis we've faced for generations, while the resulting lockdown and social distancing measures look to be the cause of an economic crisis far greater than that of the financial system's collapse in 2007-2008.

The government will now start making choices about how to support our society in its recovery from the coronavirus pandemic. Tackling the climate emergency, restoring nature, helping the economy recover and building resilience within our systems to prepare against future shocks should be inseparable.

The transformational change needed across society to reach net-zero emissions will touch every sector and every community. The places we live and the ways that we travel around, our livelihoods, the food we eat, and the countryside itself - the landscapes, habitats and wildlife living within it - are all going to change.

'Greener, better, faster' sets out how the countryside itself can provide many of the solutions to tackling climate breakdown, while supporting rural communities and economies to thrive.



The countryside charity

Thriving landscapes

We need to maximise our landscapes' ability to capture carbon through natural processes. This should be done in ways that complement and enhance their unique character, respect nature and support sustainable local economies.

Policy recommendations to the government

- Invest in the restoration and planting of England's hedgerows, to achieve at least a 40% increase in their length by 2050.
- Target efforts to make the diverse range of landscapes in England more resilient to the climate emergency, in a way that reinforces landscape character.
- Empower people to get involved in making their local areas more resilient to climate change through the creation and funding of training and event programmes.



'Our countryside is changing - and we need to make sure it does so in a way that helps mitigate the impacts of the climate emergency.'



Food and farming

Land should be valued in a way that respects the multiple jobs it can do – including and beyond producing food. Policies must support farming that stores carbon, puts back habitats for wildlife, provides fresh air and clean water, and looks after our precious landscapes.

Policy recommendations to the government

- Introduce an action plan for the land use sector to rapidly re-wet and restore peatland, expand woodland and agroforestry, drive uptake of agroecological practices to boost soil health and drive down emissions from inefficient use of synthetic nutrients.
- Commit to implementing an ambitious national food strategy to alter food demand to support improved health and sustainable low carbon land use.
- Urgently resource and commission a comprehensive national evidence base of land capability including properties of soils, land and other natural assets.

Planning and building

We need development to meet local needs, while contributing to efforts to mitigate and adapt to the climate emergency. Sustainable development needs to be redefined to focus on living within environmental limits and the importance of addressing the climate emergency.

Policy recommendations to the government

- Ensure that all planning decision makers, including local authorities and the Planning Inspectorate, are held to account regarding compliance with the climate change duty.
- Optimise the recycling of land that's already been used for buildings by adopting a truly 'brownfield first' policy.
- Radically tighten up building regulations to ensure that new buildings meet zero carbon standards. Existing buildings should also meet zero carbon standards in terms of heat and space.

Transport

We need a transport system that has healthy active travel such as walking and cycling at its heart, and ensures that everyone has easy access to reliable, convenient, affordable and comfortable public transport, whatever their level of personal mobility.

Policy recommendations to the government

- Introduce a legally binding national carbon budget and reduction pathway to 2045 for the transport sector. Projects that do not contribute towards it should not go ahead.
- Follow a clear hierarchy for all future transport investment, with money to be spent first on active travel options such as footpaths and cycle lanes, then provision of public transport, and lastly car travel.
- Create a ringfenced rural transport fund to support public transport services for rural communities that need to be better connected.

Energy

We need to transition to a decentralised, zero-carbon energy system that empowers and benefits local communities and is delivered in harmony with our natural environment and landscapes. Local authorities, local people, and more democratically engaged bodies must be empowered to positively shape their energy futures.

Policy recommendations to the government

- Immediately disincentivise all exploration and development for coal, oil and gas, and apply a strict energy hierarchy to future supply, prioritising demand reduction and energy efficiency and then renewables.
- Invest in a new generation of renewables, done in a way that benefits the rural economy; is supported by local communities; benefits wildlife; and minimises impacts on landscape, tranquillity and cultural heritage.
- Empower local communities to shape their energy future, both financially and through the introduction of participative approaches to planning for rural energy schemes.



The challenges we face

As councils and countries declare a climate emergency, the impact is already clear in our daily lives. The seasons are on the move, crops grown for generations fail and some species hover on the brink of extinction. Our countryside is changing - and we need to make sure it does so in a way that helps mitigate the impacts of the climate emergency and creates a countryside that we can all cherish.

In recent years, floods from heavy rainfall have brought to life the devastation a changing climate has on our daily lives. Images of sandbags piled up outside doors, submerged cars in flooded streets and local shops ruined by muddy water are now all too common.

Farmers struggle to grow our food and maintain their livelihoods in the face of such extreme weather, pushing the resilience of the countryside and its embattled communities to the limit. And some of our most cherished natural icons, such as English oak trees and beloved wildlife like hedgehogs and bumblebees, face challenges to adapt to changing weather patterns. Ecosystems are facing collapse and the biodiversity of our countryside is declining unabated. All of this threatens the look, feel and health of the landscapes we know and love. But these are not the only crises we face.

‘The seasons are on the move, crops grown for generations fail and some species hover on the brink of extinction.’

COVID-19: a green recovery?

The coronavirus pandemic is the biggest public health crisis we've faced for generations, while the resulting lockdown and social distancing measures look to be the cause of an economic crisis far greater than that of the financial system's collapse in 2007/08. All policy and investment-based decisions will now be seen through this lens.

The government will now start making choices about how to support our society in its recovery from the coronavirus pandemic. Public health and safety rightly come first. After this, rebuilding the economy will take priority, but it is imperative that this is not done at the expense of the other challenges

An opportunity to change tack

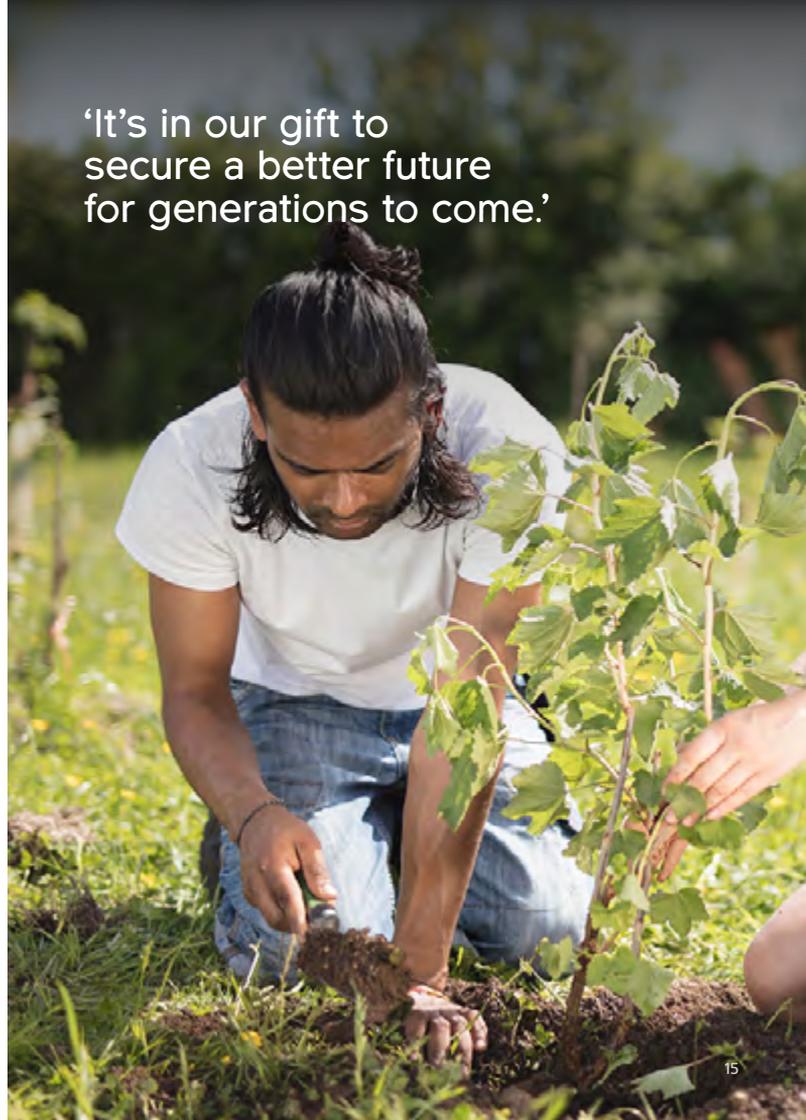
The decisions that we make now, and the approaches that we take, will shape our countryside and its communities for years to come. It's essential that we get it right from the start. The Committee on Climate Change has told the Prime Minister that addressing the climate emergency must be a key part of any economic recovery package. Tackling the climate emergency, restoring nature, helping the economy recover and building resilience within our systems to prepare against future shocks should be inseparable.

we face. Rather, the response must take full account of, and be closely interlinked with, the multiple and overlapping other crises that need addressing – such as the climate emergency.

We know we need to end the UK's contribution to the climate emergency as quickly as possible. Many of the solutions to get us there are well documented already, and we know that the transformational change needed across society will touch every sector and every community. The places we live and the ways that we travel around, our livelihoods, the food we eat, and the countryside itself – the landscapes, habitats and wildlife living within it – are all going to change.

We at CPRE, the countryside charity, have developed '[Greener, better, faster](#)' with this in mind. We set out how the countryside can be at the centre of the transformation to a net-zero society, while supporting rural communities and economies to thrive. It's in our gift to secure a better future for generations to come; a place to explore, live, grow, work and be inspired.

**'It's in our gift to
secure a better future
for generations to come.'**



Countryside solutions to the climate emergency

The countryside nourishes us in so many ways. At CPRE, we celebrate it for its inherent beauty and what it represents for us culturally as much as for the food, fresh water and mental and physical health benefits it gives us.

We're proud to promote, enhance and protect it for everyone to enjoy, and we recognise the huge risk the climate emergency poses to this.

But the countryside itself can provide many of the solutions to tackling climate breakdown. Better still, these changes will bring a host of other benefits to people and wildlife. By planting more trees and hedgerows, restoring peatlands and moving towards a more sustainable way of farming, we can use nature's toolbox to capture greenhouse gases from the air, while revitalising our natural environments. By shifting to sustainable public transport and more walking and cycling, we will cut emissions and reduce air pollution, while improving our wellbeing and reconnecting our market towns with increasingly isolated rural communities. In improving

the energy efficiency of our homes, we will reduce the demand for new energy supplies. This will lower electricity bills and lift millions of people out of fuel poverty. And by using renewable energy sources, we will move towards a green energy future that provides jobs and opportunities to rural communities.

Putting the countryside at the centre of our transition to a net-zero future is therefore crucial, and **'Greener, better, faster'** sets out how the government can best achieve this. We focus on five areas: thriving landscapes, food and farming, building and planning, transport, and energy – all of which are underpinned by a set of common themes, laid out below. For each area, we provide a vision of the future we hope to see and specific policy recommendations to get us there.

Common themes

Fair transition for rural areas

The countryside's role in delivering net-zero emissions provides an unrivalled opportunity to make it a more resilient and diverse place to live, work and enjoy. We must move towards a net-zero carbon future that is equitable and democratic, that empowers and benefits rural communities, supports a thriving rural economy, is sensitive to our cultural heritage and wildlife, and values our precious landscapes.

Work in harmony with nature and the countryside

Tackling the climate emergency can and must be done in a way that complements our natural world. We must recognise that reducing emissions is not the only challenge, but one of many that are interconnected and need to be addressed together. Nature-based solutions are an obvious starting point here, but all potential solutions must be judged through this lens.

Build resilience so we are ready for future crises

Polymaking must take a long-term, strategic approach. Government should invest in sustainable jobs and businesses that build resilience in our countryside communities. Local authorities must be empowered to respond to challenges in their areas and the planning system must be upheld and strengthened, guiding development decisions based on local need.

Be strategic in the way we use land

Many of the solutions we call for in **'Greener, better, faster'** involve changes in how we use land. To be done well, the government must develop an integrated, low-carbon land use strategy for England and associated action plans to inform the changes in land use and management required. This should identify spatially where delivery of multiple public goods, including ecosystem services, can be optimised or will be constrained.

‘The countryside
can provide
many of the
solutions to
tackling climate
breakdown.’



Thriving landscapes

We need to maximise our landscapes' ability to capture carbon through natural processes. This should be done in ways that complement and enhance their unique character, respect nature and support sustainable local economies.

Our vision for 2045

In 2045, England's landscapes are thriving, abundant in character and bustling with wildlife. The rich patchwork of fields and hedgerows remains but there is now an enhanced network of natural corridors criss-crossing the countryside, connecting new wilder areas and playing a vital role as nature-based solutions to the climate emergency.

Measures to mitigate and adapt to a changing climate have created new multifunctional, more resilient landscapes that reinforce local distinctiveness. The careful management of landscapes has reduced greenhouse gas emissions through natural processes such as preserving and adding to carbon-capturing hedgerows. While many areas remain recognisable, some have changed significantly for the better. All are much more diverse: more woodlands, from small shelter belts to copses, woods and forests.

'Communities are actively shaping how landscapes in their area can be enhanced in the future...'

The network of hedgerows has been enhanced, restored and replanted, with thousands of miles of new hedgerows spanning the country, new wetlands have been created and some areas have been deliberately left to nature, becoming wilder in character.

Of course, the changing climate has resulted in some casualties. We didn't act quickly enough. Some habitats were simply not resilient to increased temperatures, and others were lost to coastal inundation and erosion by rivers flooding. But a programme of managed creation of replacement habitats and the designation of more coastal and marine protected areas has been of great value in overcoming this loss.

The wider countryside and urban green spaces are valued by all of us for the role they play in cleaning the air, alleviating flooding and providing us with a place to relax and unwind. Sustainable tourism is booming in all these diverse and beautiful landscapes, helping rural communities to develop more resilient economies.

Landscape enhancement projects are ongoing around the country, with more native woodland and hedgerows being planted, giving local people the opportunity to get involved in improving the resilience of their landscapes. Communities are actively shaping how landscapes in their area can be enhanced in the future, in a way that makes them more resilient to the impacts of climate change.

Countryside challenge

As well as tackling the climate emergency, enhancing landscapes can provide an opportunity to build real connections between rural communities and the countryside they live in. Climate action should, therefore, be allied to community action to bring people closer to land to understand the impacts of how land is used.

Government nationally and locally should explore ways to involve and engage communities in helping to shape the countryside where they live: this could mean a greater role in decisions about how the landscape changes to being directly involved in creation of things like community supported orchards, woodland and new spaces for nature.

Change happening now

Ten years ago, CPRE Gloucestershire volunteers worked with a landowner to plant 1.5km of hedgerow at Dartley Farm, undoing the impact that intensive farming had been having on the landscape since the 1950s. Through this work the group reinvigorated biodiversity in the area, brought the community together and, by improving a footpath, enhanced people's enjoyment of the landscape. The project was run in partnership with the local primary school, the Royal Agricultural College and the Cotswold Voluntary Wardens. The hedgerow is now thriving as part of the landscape, while increasing its resilience to climate change.

Today, local CPRE groups in London, Oxfordshire, Sussex and Gloucestershire are working with partners in running landscape enhancement projects where local people get involved in hedge laying, tree planting and creating raised beds for vegetables and wildflowers. Unfortunately, there is inadequate funding for such landscape scale enhancement projects that are vital in tackling the climate emergency.





Policy recommendations
to the government

Thriving landscapes

Invest in the restoration and planting of England's hedgerows, to achieve at least a 40% increase in their length by 2050. The design of the proposed Nature for Climate Fund and Nature Recovery Network Fund, along with the Environmental Land Management Scheme, should include measures to deliver more hedgerows across the nation.

Target efforts to make the diverse range of landscapes in England more resilient to the climate emergency, in a way that reinforces landscape character. Any nature-based solution must take account of the local distinctiveness of the landscape. For example, tree planting should not be done en masse in monocultures, but rather by planting the species and quantities that best suit the character of the individual landscape.

Empower people to get involved in making their local areas more resilient to climate change through the creation and funding of training and event programmes as part of the Nature for Climate Fund and Nature Recovery Network Fund. This will give people the opportunity to learn new skills to deliver practical landscape and habitat enhancement.

Food and farming

Land should be valued in a way that respects the multiple jobs it can do – including and beyond producing food. Policies must support farming that stores carbon, puts back habitats for wildlife, provides fresh air and clean water, and looks after our precious landscapes.

Our vision for 2045

In 2045, the English countryside is healthy. Fields are worked in sympathy with ecology, with far fewer pesticides, less damage from heavy machinery and with a greater diversity of crops. Farmers face less financial risk because of these changes – their land, soils and crops are more resilient, and so are their businesses. The weather has become harsher and is unpredictable but healthy fertile soils cope better with the extremes of flooding and drought.

Our most valuable carbon stores, such as upland blanket bogs and moorland, have been substantially restored, while plant, insect and birdlife are flourishing. Cattle and sheep graze the hillsides at lower densities, giving nature the opportunity to thrive.

In the west, rich pasturelands have been enriched with new hedgerows. Animals grazing in groups move frequently from field to field, while larger fields are broken up by belts of trees giving food and shelter for livestock and creating habitats and natural corridors for wildlife.

‘Farms have developed networks of new ponds and mini reservoirs to survive droughts and their soils are fertile, healthier and more resilient.’

In the arable east, grazing livestock have returned to land that can no longer support crops. Free-range is the norm, so we see happy pigs and chickens outdoors, fertilising soils as they go. Farms have developed networks of new ponds and mini reservoirs to survive droughts and their soils are fertile, healthier and more resilient. Land is rarely ploughed but kept covered through winter, while wheat crops sit alongside apples, nuts, soft fruit and timber crops.

Some areas, such as the Fens, are now producing less food. They’ve been transformed into richer, wetter and more diverse landscapes with new reed beds, wildlife refuges and spaces for people to enjoy and explore. Carbon and soil losses are significantly reduced as the land gradually regenerates.

Around villages, towns and cities there are networks of smaller farms growing fruits, vegetables and salads. They sell direct into the local food market, to restaurants, pubs and cafes and to the council, schools, care homes and hospitals.

Most people are eating more than their five-a-day, with much of that coming fresh from their local patch. Air-freighted fruit and veg are long forgotten with most people enjoying more seasonal and fresh food. Food waste is largely a thing of the past, with any leftovers collected, treated and fed to animals or recycled by composting. The food system is resilient to climate and financial shocks and we are less reliant on international supply chains to feed our families than we have been in the past.



Countryside challenge

People living in rural areas are as reliant as urban populations on the clean water, fresh air and open space that the countryside provides. The countryside acts as the backdrop to their lives, which helps to build strong connections with the land. But these ties have weakened over recent decades as not so many people work in farming and the farms have become fewer and larger. The connection between our food and where and how it is produced has also fragmented, weakening understanding of how the choices we make affect the land around us and those who work it.

Rural residents and communities are well placed to lead on rebuilding the connections between where they live and the countryside around them. A natural democratic place to start is through food. Buying, preparing and eating locally-sourced food which respects land, producers and the limits of the natural world is an important step in moving agriculture towards net-zero. Government has a crucial role to play in this by supporting food producers to cut their emissions and promoting sustainable diets.

Change happening now

The Nature Friendly Farming Network brings together over 1,000 farmers of all types who champion sustainable farming that is good for nature. It showcases people like David Walston, Sally Spence and Paul Sousek who, on their farms, use natural approaches to regenerate soils, which lock up carbon and restore wildlife.

David farms 900 hectares in Cambridgeshire producing wheat, oil seed rape, peas, beans and oats with conservation agriculture - using no-till, cover and companion crops, few pesticides and lighter tractors to bring health to the soil, making it more resilient and productive. Sally also grows crops in Wiltshire with minimum or no till and raises native cattle to help restore the soil. Rich permanent grassland,

hedgerows and woodland store carbon and are managed to support a thriving population of farmland birds. Paul raises native cattle and sheep organically in North Cornwall on herb-rich grass leys mob-grazed by the cattle. Managed this way, the soil organic matter has risen from 3% to 8% in 15 years. Careful management of hedgerows and trees creates natural wildlife corridors and homes for new species of birds and insects. The farm is almost entirely powered by renewable energy and fuels.



Policy recommendations
to the government

Food and farming

Introduce an action plan for the land use sector to deliver net zero by 2045 with binding interim targets and localised carbon reduction plans. This should harmonise funding, taxation and regulation to rapidly re-wet and restore peatland, expand woodland and agroforestry, drive uptake of agroecological practices to boost soil health and drive down emissions from inefficient use of synthetic nutrients.

Commit to implementing an ambitious national food strategy to alter food demand to support improved health and sustainable low carbon land use. New policy tools are needed to rapidly drive down food waste from farm to fork and to improve diets.

Urgently resource and commission a comprehensive national evidence base of land capability including properties of soils, land and other natural assets to assess potential for delivery of essential ecosystem services in the context of changing climate.

Planning and building

We need development to meet local needs, while contributing to efforts to mitigate and adapt to the climate emergency. Sustainable development needs to be redefined to focus on living within environmental limits and the importance of addressing the climate emergency.

Our vision for 2045

Looking around in 2045, you don't just see countryside - you see valuable and valued open land. It's productive and rich in wildlife, playing an active part in reusing waste, recycling water and absorbing carbon dioxide. We all know that it's providing us with essential services just by being there.

Land around towns and cities is appreciated for its special role in providing easy access to nature and open space for millions of urban dwellers up and down the country. Over the past few decades, this land has been revitalised, becoming greener, wilder and more full of life.

Just like the countryside, our rural towns and villages look different from how they were in 2020 but remain distinctive and characterful.

'... we've recycled most of the sprawl of the early 21st century into characterful, walkable, mixed use places that people are genuinely delighted to live in.'

It was a close-run thing in the years following the deregulation of planning, when we lost so much of the best of our countryside to ill-fated speculative development. But since we've had a strong, locally-led planning system focused on ensuring that we balance competing demands on the use of land, with a remit for commissioning high-quality, zero-carbon homes that people can afford to live in, we've recycled most of the sprawl of the early 21st century into characterful, walkable, mixed-use places that people are genuinely delighted to live in. They are the conservation areas of the future, having been designed to be adaptable to future needs.

Nearby is a compact village of 3,000 people, its historic medieval core still protected for its remarkable heritage, and its church steeple (concealing the area's 12G super-fast mobile broadband antenna, keeping the area connected) visible beyond the solar-panelled rooftops of the community-led housing scheme. There is a mix of homes and workplaces at over 60 dwellings per hectare, now with a much reduced emphasis on private cars, thanks to a combination of mobile broadband and hydro-fuelled public transit to nearby towns.

Countryside challenge

Current development is not creating the liveable communities that are sustainable and allow residents to live low carbon lives. Action to ensure that the built environment meets the challenge of net-zero by 2045 also has many other benefits, including creating healthier, thriving communities. Issues are particularly acute in sparsely populated rural areas where there are fewer practical alternatives to travel by car, and homes and workplaces may be off the electricity grid, and hence fuelled by oil, delivered by truck. Nonetheless, thriving rural economies – and indeed wider society – often depends on people living and working in such areas.

Change happening now

The Goldsmith Street development is a block of over 100 social homes built by Norwich city council. All homes are built to exceptionally high energy efficiency standards, meaning there is far less need for heating when it's cold outside, reducing energy usage and bills by around 70%. The development has been thoughtfully designed in other ways too – the rooftops of each block are angled in such a way to avoid blocking the sunlight for the other homes, while communal space between the houses was planned to incentivise walking, socialising and giving children an area to play.





Policy recommendations
to the government

Planning and building

Ensure that all planning decision makers, including local authorities and the Planning Inspectorate, are held to account regarding compliance with the climate change duty in the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, with penalties for failing to comply and not meeting binding carbon targets.

Optimise the recycling of land that's already been used for buildings by adopting a truly 'brownfield first' policy. This will help maximise the protection of green spaces, making the most of natural capital in mitigating climate change.

Radically tighten up building regulations to ensure that new buildings meet zero carbon standards. Existing buildings should also meet zero carbon standards in terms of heat and space. New buildings should be designed to a high quality and built to last, while there should be a National Retrofit Strategy to target investment in retrofitting existing buildings, neighbourhoods and whole built-up areas for energy conservation and generation.

Transport

We need a transport system that has healthy active travel such as walking and cycling at its heart, and ensures that everyone has easy access to reliable, convenient, affordable and comfortable public transport, whatever their level of personal mobility.

Our vision for 2045

Most of the journeys we take in 2045 are short trips which we walk or cycle, keeping us fit and healthy, and enabling us to spend more time outside as we go about our lives.

When travelling a bit further, public transport is always the cheapest and most convenient option. Whether through dial-a-ride schemes or more frequent services, we can easily find an electric bus or shared car that reliably, comfortably and affordably takes us into town or to a nearby train station. We can catch a train from many more towns than we could in 2020 and travelling long distances by rail is cheaper than flying.

As a result, there are far fewer cars on the road. We spend less time stuck in traffic jams taking our kids to school or crammed into overcrowded trains to get to work. With less traffic to get caught in, buses get us where we need to go on time. Better still, we're saving huge amounts of money not having to buy, insure and repair our cars, or filling them up with petrol.

'The increased bus use has led to more footfall for our once-struggling village shops, pubs and high streets, giving local economies a much-needed boost and helping our countryside communities to thrive.'

The cost of day-to-day travel is now a much smaller part of family budgets, helping to lift many people out of debt and poverty, and increasing disposable incomes to be used elsewhere in the economy.

The increased bus use has led to more footfall for our once-struggling village shops, pubs and high streets, giving local economies a much-needed boost and helping our countryside communities to thrive. The shift towards walking and cycling has had wider economic impact as well, providing health benefits to society worth billions of pounds each year.

Perhaps best of all, our air and water is much cleaner. Parents no longer worry about the impact of air pollution on their children's lungs, and our streams, rivers, and seas are spared from thousands of tonnes of microplastic pollution from car tyres.

Our towns, villages, and countryside are more tranquil, providing us with the space we need to breathe, while quieter roads mean less fragmented landscapes, helping nature to recover and thrive.

Countryside challenge

People living in many rural areas are currently almost entirely dependent on driving in order to get about. Recent research for CPRE showed that many small rural towns are becoming 'transport deserts', meaning that there is inadequate public transport for the local population.

For the transition to a zero-carbon transport system to be fair for rural communities, it's essential that the process begins with a significant investment in public transport across the countryside.

With cuts to more than 3000 rural bus routes over the past decade, we need to see targeted investment to support bus routes for villages and rural towns that do not have the density of population to support commercial services. Similarly, far too few rural communities currently have links to the national rail network, so it's essential that the government prioritises transport investment on restoring lost branch lines and stations.

Change happening now

The Borders Railway is a 35-mile line linking a series of rural communities to Edinburgh. The numbers of passengers have far exceeded expectations, with 13 million passengers in the first year, twice the 650,000 predicted.

Completed in 2015, the Borders Railway has taken 40,000 car journeys off the road, showing how good public transport in rural areas can help create a future transport system in which we all drive a lot less.





Policy recommendations
to the government

Transport

Introduce a legally binding national carbon budget and reduction pathway to 2045 for the transport sector. Projects that do not contribute towards it should not go ahead. The national carbon budget will allow local authorities and sub-national transport bodies to plan their own part in delivering a zero-carbon transport future.

Follow a clear hierarchy for all future transport investment, with money to be spent first on active travel options such as footpaths and cycle lanes, then provision of public transport, and lastly car travel, mirroring the carbon footprint of the different modes of travel. Internal flights should be phased out. There should be no further airport expansion, and higher rates of taxation and other disincentives for frequent fliers should be developed.

Create 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. This 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.

Energy

We need to transition to a decentralised, zero-carbon energy system that empowers and benefits local communities and is delivered in harmony with our natural environment and landscapes. Local authorities, local people, and more democratically engaged bodies must be empowered to positively shape their energy futures.

Our vision for 2045

In 2045, England is powered entirely by clean, reliable, environmentally-sensitive renewable energy. Our carbon footprint has reduced dramatically since 2020, and we've taken great steps in tackling the climate emergency while building up resilience in our energy system.

In a nation free from fossil fuels, renewable energy installations are plentiful, efficient, and operating in harmony with their natural surroundings. Better still, many of these renewables are owned, at least in part, by local people who are enjoying the economic benefits and opportunities they provide.

Local people in villages and towns across the countryside have been proactively and positively engaged in shaping their energy futures, through the planning system and other means. They work with local authorities and energy suppliers as part of a process that includes participative decision-making and strategic planning. This creates a positive experience and improves outcomes for all involved.

'By engaging with local communities in a meaningful way, decision-makers have found that the process runs smoothly and receives more support from everyone involved.'

By engaging with local communities in a meaningful way, decision-makers have found that the process runs smoothly and receives more support from everyone involved. Sites for new renewables are identified and potential harmful impacts on wildlife, tranquillity and landscapes are avoided, or mitigated where unavoidable. The community shares in the benefits they bring, and the satisfaction of becoming more in control of their own energy.

Many of the new renewable energy installations are, inevitably, sited within the countryside due to the spatial constraints of urban areas. But, with a strong brownfield-first policy in place and reduced barriers to entry for community energy projects, previously developed land is used much more efficiently than ever before. Many of the buildings in cities and towns, including all new commercial buildings, are home to rooftop solar panels. This provides cheap, clean and decentralised energy to millions of city dwellers across the country.

Finally, we're all doing a lot more to match our demand for energy to the available supply, reducing overall use and minimising the impact of intermittency from wind or solar. This means that we require a lot less energy infrastructure overall, which has prevented the need for excessive large-scale industrial developments in the countryside.

Countryside challenge

Naturally, large amounts of renewable energy installations are going to be located within the countryside. This is a huge opportunity for rural areas, although not without risk. When done well, renewables can provide a host of benefits to people living in the countryside. Community and shared ownership opportunities allow people to enjoy the direct economic benefits, while cheaper energy and the possibility of new green jobs and the reinvestment of community funds contribute to a thriving rural economy. Community projects like this can also help to build social ties and bonds between neighbours, and if done in harmony with nature, renewables can also lead to improved biodiversity.

Communities across the countryside are best placed to understand how their local landscapes will be affected and can provide useful insights on minimising impacts. The planning system plays a crucial role here. Forward planning of capacity and potential will assist in resolving difficult decisions earlier in the development process, if there is early and meaningful public engagement. This should be complemented by a 'bottom-up' approach where rural communities are incentivised to come forward with local energy schemes, including additional resources to help create visions of 'new energy landscapes' to front-load engagement.

Change happening now

South Dartmoor Community Energy: Income generated from the Portworthy Solar Array near Lee Moor village (built on brownfield land from old china clay works) is given as grants to support the local community in three parishes. Instead of becoming profits for a large commercial company, this money has supported a new community orchard, an upgraded village playground, a local community transport association providing services for rural residents and helped to fund a local Scout Group project.





Policy recommendations
to the government

Energy

Immediately disincentivise all exploration and development for coal, oil and gas, and apply a strict energy hierarchy to future supply, prioritising demand reduction and energy efficiency and then renewables.

Invest in a new generation of renewables, including solar, wind and hydro that are strategically planned at the national, sub-regional and local levels. This should be done in a way that benefits the rural economy, forming a cornerstone of local enterprise and jobs; is supported by or owned by local communities; brings net benefits to wildlife; and minimises impacts on landscape, tranquillity and cultural heritage.

Empower local communities to shape their energy future, both financially and through other means. Set up a specific subsidy stream for community-owned energy generation to provide a financial incentive for communities to set up new schemes, as well as the introduction of participative approaches to planning for rural energy schemes.

Next steps

The response to the coronavirus pandemic has shown us what we can do when we come together. From mutual aid groups to NHS solidarity, we see the importance of our communities and how we're motivated to help each other through collective struggles. We've seen people offer support to those more vulnerable, and new bonds created between the old and the young.

Lessons like this are important for tackling the climate emergency. Now, together, we can work to create the future we want to see. One that puts people and nature at its heart, respects our communities and their strength, and sees our critical relationship with the countryside and the wider natural world.

Our challenge to government is to take these lessons on board and deliver this ambitious new platform of policies to reduce our emissions as quickly as possible in a way that works for people, nature and the environment.

If you'd like to find out more and get involved in our campaigns, please email: campaigns@cpre.org.uk

'It is still not too late to act. It will take a far-reaching vision, it will take courage, it will take fierce, fierce determination to act now, to lay the foundations where we may not know all the details about how to shape the ceiling. In other words it will take cathedral thinking. I ask you to please wake up and make [the] changes required possible. To do your best is no longer good enough. We must all do the seemingly impossible.'

Greta Thunberg,
Climate Activist and Founder of the School Strike Movement.

Contact us:

5-11 Lavington Street, London, SE1 0NZ

Telephone: 020 7981 2800

Email: externalaffairs@cpre.org.uk



@cprecountrysidecharity



@CPRE



@CPRE

cpre.org.uk

The Campaign to Protect Rural England is a company limited by guarantee
Registered in England number: 4302973 Registered charity number 1089685



The
countryside
charity