

CPRE Rutland

Chairman's Report – July 2021

It scarcely needs to be said that the last year or so has been difficult and challenging in many ways, but I believe that, despite all the restrictions, CPRE, both nationally and locally, has achieved a great deal, mainly, of course, by taking advantage of the various on-line means many of us are now using. We have seen much greater recognition of the importance of the countryside and of the need to protect our environment, both for our own well-being and as the Climate Change agenda ramps up. There has also been a marked increase in the degree of government engagement and the level of effective publicity the organisation is attracting, covering a range of topics including the planning reforms, rural transport and, most recently, the forthcoming parliamentary launch of our hedgerow research programme.

National Achievements

Probably the most significant issue to arise over the last year has been the Government's somewhat controversial proposals to reform the planning system. CPRE submitted a very strong response to the consultation at the end of last year, and the Secretary of State, Robert Jenrick, had two separate meetings with CPRE members to discuss the various criticisms raised. So far, the only substantial change has been to the so-called mutant algorithm for determining housing numbers, but there are many other areas which have attracted considerable censure, not least from within the government's own ranks. The latest on this is that, in collaboration with a number of other organisations, CPRE has published a set of six tests which we believe must be met by any revision to the proposed reforms.

I have previously mentioned the initiative to introduce a Deposit Return Scheme for drinks containers. CPRE's campaign has actually been running since 2008 but, notwithstanding the more recent consultation and declarations of support from government ministers, it seems there is now no prospect of legislation until 2024 at the earliest. The CPRE Campaign continues, as many of our supporters will have seen, under the heading of 'Message in a Bottle'.

This year's CPRE Star Count attracted a record number of responses from members of the public, and the results show that our skies seem to be significantly darker than in the past, probably another consequence of reduced activity during lockdowns.

Last year, working with the WI, CPRE issued a report entitled 'Transport deserts', which laid out the significant reductions evident in rural public transport in many areas of the country, together with the impact this is having. This was followed earlier this year by a further report - 'Every village, every hour' -, looking more specifically at the shortage of bus services, and drawing comparisons with the much more useful provisions in some other European countries where many smaller settlements are guaranteed at least hourly services pretty much all day long every day of the week. The report was formally launched at a public meeting on 23rd March at which Baroness Vere, Minister for Transport, amongst others, spoke. There is widespread support for much better services and growing realisation of the wider benefits this could bring; Rutland County Council (RCC) has expressed keen interest in following up on this.

Local Developments

Our major project, Rutland 2036, which launched early last year, and which was funded by grants from National CPRE and the East Midlands Region, has now achieved most of its objectives. The project was launched at a major public meeting last February in Oakham, and has been ably led by Ron Simpson, our Vice-chair.

We set out to produce:

- A Housing Needs Survey
- A professional and robust response to the Rutland Local Plan consultation under Regulation 19
- A statement of vision for the county.

We engaged a team consultants to support the work, one of whom, Sarah Hatherhill, specialising in design and presentation aspects, has actually joined the branch. One of the main aims of the project, essential in justifying the national grant, was to encourage greater collaboration with other organisations and, where appropriate, other CPRE branches. We also set ourselves a target to increase branch membership.

Housing Needs Survey

Housing numbers used by local authorities to set building targets are generally derived top-down from statistical population forecasts. We believe that it is important for individual parishes to be able to determine their needs for housing at a local level, perhaps to inform their neighbourhood plans. With assistance from RCC, we therefore produced a Housing Needs Survey, which was piloted around Uppingham, with a response rate from residents of around 10%. This exercise indicated a number of improvements to the survey questionnaire, which is now in its finished form and available through our website to any authority whom it might assist. The results of the pilot study have been used in support of plans for a small housing development in Uppingham.

Rutland Local Plan

The Rutland Local Plan currently in force dates back to 2011. An updated plan has been in gestation now for around four years, starting before proposals to redevelop St George's Barracks were being considered. Since it was confirmed that the MoD intended to vacate the barracks, however, Rutland County Council has been pursuing a strategy supporting a substantial but largely unwelcome development there. This has resulted in significant changes to the original draft plan, whose evolution has followed a somewhat bumpy course through the requisite stages. Last year, it reached the stage known as Regulation 19, a public consultation prior to submission to the Planning Inspectorate leading to a formal Examination in Public. It had been hoped that this would culminate in the adoption of the new plan later this year.

Based on the advice from our consultants, we raised a number of substantial comments in response to the public consultation under Regulation 19 of the draft local plan, finding it both legally non-compliant and technically unsound on a range of grounds, including:

- The lack of any realistic statement of vision for the county, on which the plan should have been based – this has been a consistent criticism we have raised with RCC
- Serious inadequacies in the Sustainability Appraisal and Strategic Environmental Assessment
- Major flaws in the overall consultation process
- Concerns regarding the allocation of some 650 houses to meet housing needs in South Kesteven
- Shortcomings in the development of the underlying spatial strategy, especially with regard to the inclusion of a major new settlement at St George's Barracks.

We continue to believe that the draft is likely to fail should it go to the public inquiry, and did endeavour to persuade RCC of this before the formal consultation closed, but to no avail.

Overall, the authority received over 1000 representations from 338 separate respondents. Despite many of these claiming significant shortcomings in the plan, questioning both its legality and its soundness, the

Council's response to almost all of these was 'No Change', in many cases arguing that due process had been correctly and robustly followed. The essentially unchanged draft Rutland Local Plan was accordingly submitted to the Planning Inspectorate, in anticipation of the Public Inquiry into its soundness and legality taking place during the summer.

The Council's decision in March to reject the grant from the Housing Infrastructure Fund, funds which were critical to the plan, has led to further delays, and demonstrates that the Council's strategy was not only high risk in terms of costs, timescales and its dependence on the soundness of the new Local Plan, but also likely to fail due to the lack of support, not only from the public at large, but also from within the Council itself; we understand that the decision was based to a large extent on the risks inherent in the Council's strategy and this was the main thrust of my deputation to the Council meeting in March. It is not without significance that, in response to later questions from the appointed planning inspector, the Council's response on forecast housing numbers over the period of the plan made it quite clear that the established targets could be met easily without building a single dwelling at St George's Barracks for the next ten years.

Concerns have been raised elsewhere that ongoing delays to the adoption of a new local plan risk allowing unwanted development as a consequence of not having the five-year supply of building land required by the NPPF. In the specific case of St George's Barracks, fears have been expressed that this might allow the MoD to build whatever it liked on the site, overturning any refusal of planning permission at appeal. Another CPRE branch, CPRE Devon, has investigated the issue in general, however, and found that there is significant legal precedent for the rejection of appeals by developers seeking planning permissions on the basis of a lack of building land supply. I have passed this advice on to RCC.

The decision to reject the offer of a grant from the Housing Infrastructure Fund has led to the Council having to explore alternative ways to make up the funding shortfall and consider the possibility of modifying or even withdrawing the draft local plan; we don't now expect to see any decision on this until later in the year.

We sincerely hope that this heralds a new approach, in which an agreed vision for the future of the county is developed first (see below), and a revised local plan is then produced to deliver against that vision; we have recommended this approach to the new Chief Executive.

Vision for Rutland

We embarked on the development of our vision statement last autumn, with two online meetings to gather views from interested parties, including neighbouring CPRE branches. We decided to delay further work, however, as we were invited by RCC to participate in the Future Rutland Conversation. This is a welcome exercise by the Council to collect views on a range of relevant issues from around the county during April and May this year, before launching its vision statement later in the year. We are currently helping in the review of the initial outcomes of the public consultations, which should lead to a draft vision being produced next month. It remains our intention that a coherent and agreed vision statement should emerge, in which CPRE Rutland's and RCC's ambitions for the county are closely aligned.

Rutland Design Guide

In March, RCC issued for consultation a new Design Guide for building in the county. This was, in fact, a joint effort with South Kesteven District Council, although it was not clear why such a joint approach was necessary. We commented on this and other features of the report and await the next steps.

Planning Applications

Apart from the local plan and the St George's Barracks proposals, a number of planning applications have

attracted our attention over the last year, including the large solar farm at Langham, the filling station on the A47 at Uppingham, holiday homes development at Woolfox and, most recently and still under consideration, large housing development proposals at Ketton and at Oakham. With the valuable support of our experienced planner, Carolyn Cartwright, we continue to provide robust responses to these and others.

CPRE Transport Initiatives

We have started to work with RCC in seeking improvements to rural transport in the county. The Council is currently working on producing a Bus Service Improvement Plan to meet a requirement from national government, and is keen for us to support this from the work at national level outlined above.

Collaboration with RCC

Through our work on the Rutland 2036 Project, and with the arrival of a new Chief Executive in Rutland County Council, we are building a much closer working relationship with the Council, as I have indicated already. We were asked to support the Future Rutland Conversation and are currently engaged in reviewing the initial results before the vision statement itself is drafted. We have also had an initial meeting, at their request, with the Council Leader and Deputy Leader with a view to working more closely together for the longer-term benefit of the county.

RCC is also keen to enlist our help with their plans for improvements to rural bus services in the county and has recently established a Climate Action Group, which we are supporting.

Rutland Round

Our booklet describing the Rutland Round, the walk around the county, continues to be in demand and is now available to purchase through our web-site. The creator of the walk and the booklet's author, John Williams, has previously received awards from CPRE for his sterling efforts, and has recently also received an award from the Ramblers Association, as you may have seen from the local press recently.

Web-Site

With the help of our design consultant, we now have our own web-site, which many may well have used already. Copies of the Rutland Round and our Housing Needs Survey are now available through this means. From our initial experience of operating the site, we can now see that there are a number of improvements which need to be made.

Branch Constitution

We have updated our constitution, mainly to take account of advances in technology. The main changes are to allow us to use internet banking and to provide for electronic voting on resolutions at general meetings of the membership. We have also formalised the establishment of an executive committee, comprising the appointed officers of the branch, and this arrangement seems to be working well, allowing us much greater agility in responding to issues as they arise.

The revised document has received the blessing of the national trustees and remains only to be approved by the membership.

Membership

One of the objectives we set for our project was to increase the branch membership by at least 20%. As

you will know, this was actually achieved very early on in the programme, when the membership total, already the highest per capita membership of any CPRE branch, rose to just over 140; it has remained at around this level ever since. We are still looking for more volunteers, however, particularly to help with the evolution and maintenance of our web-site, and to strengthen our planning capability.

It has long been my intention that we should produce regular newsletters to keep members and others informed. This has seemed particularly important over the last year or so when we have not been able to meet in person. To this end, a newsletter has been sent out to members each quarter over the last year or so, and has also been published on our web-site. I hope that this has proved of value to members. I am most grateful to Annabelle Meek for her efforts in maintaining effective communication generally with the membership.

We have been most fortunate to have received some generous donations, as noted in the financial report. Our sincere thanks go to the donors, who have enabled us to achieve even more for the benefit of the community and the rural environment.

Yet again, we ran a successful Christmas Quiz at the end of last year, making it available for the first time via our web-site. We hope to develop this further in coming years. Our thanks, as usual, go to our tame quizmaster, Philip Riley, for his ongoing efforts to challenge us all.

Looking Forward

We clearly need to complete the work on our proposed statement of vision for Rutland, working with the Future Rutland Conversation project as well as with neighbouring CPRE branches. We will continue to engage with and hopefully influence the local plan development and increase our efforts in addressing the growing environmental challenges. There are also opportunities to develop our publicity activities further, particularly through enhancements to our web-site and the use of other social media.

Our nationally-funded project, Rutland 2036, and the inevitable focus on the evolution of the Rutland Local Plan over the last few years have helped us to establish CPRE Rutland as a much more significant presence in the county and one with which RCC is keen to continue to engage. I believe that this provides a sound basis from which to move forward in encouraging greater growth and increasing the profile and influence of the branch still further. Against this background, the election of a new chair offers a timely opportunity to review and refresh the way the branch operates in order to take full advantage of the achievements of recent years. I thank you all for your support during my tenure and wish my successor, and the branch as a whole, every success in the future.

Malcolm Touchin
Chair, CPRE Rutland
July 2021