



Campaign to Protect  
Rural England  
OXFORDSHIRE

## **THE FUTURE OF OXFORDSHIRE'S COUNTRYSIDE**

### **A Summary of the CPRE discussion on Friday 16 May 2008**

In his Welcome & Overview, Bruce Tremayne, Chairman CPRE Oxon, explained that the discussion on the Future of Oxfordshire's Countryside was not being held in order to produce a definitive vision. Rather it was intended to get together those with a local perspective and insight into the relevant issues to imagine the future of Oxfordshire's countryside in twenty years' time to feed into the CPRE National Office process and Vision.

Delegates were enthusiastic about the Vision for Oxfordshire in 2026 that Bruce Tremayne outlined in his presentation (See attached). In summary, he said Oxfordshire should be: "A productive working countryside, where there is space for people and wildlife to thrive and enjoy, with plenty of local identity and diversity reflecting the underlying geology and topography."

Ben Stafford, Head of Campaigns, CPRE National Office, attended the meeting and explained to delegates that the summary of the discussion would feed into the NO Vision 20:26, which will be published in late 2008.

#### **Discussion 1: Level and Location of Development.**

A few salient themes recurred during the discussion on level and location of development, namely; planning, housing/development, population, peak oil/globalisation, localisation, sustainability, biodiversity and land use.

##### **Planning**

- The planning system was seen as key to protecting the landscape and it was recognised that there is a need to strengthen participation in public consultation processes.
- The current planning system was described as a top down process; there needs to be more local say over planning.
- The challenge for the SE Plan, which will outline the level of development for Oxfordshire, to be announced in September 2008, will be how to provide adequate amenities for new homes.

##### **Housing/Development**

- There was agreement that there must be no development in the Green Belt, including the area south of Grenoble Road and at Weston-on-the-Green.

- House building was seen to be driven by profit not need. While the social need is there in Oxfordshire, ‘mixed development plans’ were viewed as a means of making a profit at the expense of the countryside.
- The question was posed: Does new housing have to damage the environment? Can we not build eco-friendly homes that are sensitive to the local environment?
- There was consensus that affordable homes must remain affordable, that they must not be allowed to enter the open market.
- It was agreed that new housing should be focused on brownfield and that we should perhaps be building higher density or compact housing as advocated by CPRE NO.
- A holistic planning approach was seen to be needed where towns shouldn’t keep being enlarged, but should be curtailed by Green Belt and other means and that houses needed to be merged sensitively into the countryside.

### **Population**

- It was recognised that there is already a population problem in Oxfordshire, hence the need for more housing and that population density in the county has to be addressed.
- It was felt that building more houses will encourage the growth of the population.
- It was noted that the county’s population is driven by ‘inward mobilisation’, not migration or high fertility rates, as is popularly conceived.
- The Government was seen to be shunning the issue of population.

### **Peak oil/Globalisation**

- Several delegates said CPRE’s Vision 20:26 failed to recognise that oil underpins the global economy and that if oil prices continue to rise, mobility will be greatly reduced; this will totally transform the way we live and our countryside.
- It was felt by one delegate that the theory of market globalisation needs to be challenged and that the free movement of capital and people has proved disastrous.

### **Localisation**

- There was a consensus that the concept of localisation should underpin any vision for Oxfordshire or England’s countryside in 2026.

### **Sustainability**

- There was agreement that planning rules must promote sustainable development.
- Many agreed that market towns are the most sustainable sites for new housing; villages are not sustainable since they lack the necessary infrastructure.
- There was support for the concept of ‘Transition Oxfordshire’ – where all elements of the county are brought together, including financial experts. People in the county need to see themselves as part of a whole/sustainable community.
- Delegates were reminded that sustainability is an international/regional and local issue and that what we do in Oxfordshire impacts on the global environment.

### **Biodiversity**

- Delegates were reminded that there is an Opportunity Map for Conservation Target Areas (CTAs)\* which identifies 36 target areas covering 17% of the county; 10 of the 26 target areas have been identified as priority areas for work in

consultation with 10 lead partners, coordinated by ONCF. (\*Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre)

- It was recognised that the county has a low level of biodiversity compared to other counties.

### **Land use**

- It was noted that historically, land of agricultural value has been designated a particular Grade or value and protected from development. This is no longer the case (eg) proposed development on agricultural land at Weston-on-the-Green. This designation and the protection it affords needs to be made more robust.

### **Summary by Ben Stafford**

In his summary of this discussion, Ben Stafford said that the vibrancy of the countryside was key to the Vision. On the issue of population, Ben noted that politicians don't want to touch this issue since it is too contentious and not a vote winner. He said that quality of life indicators rather than economic indicators are becoming more and more popular, especially with Conservative Party. Design of development was crucial he said, as is affordability of new homes.

### **Discussion 2: Farming, Forestry & Minerals.**

This discussion focused on the three themes of farming, forestry and minerals.

#### **Farming**

- The rural economy was seen as fundamental to the preservation of the countryside. There is a steady drift of economy from rural areas to urban areas. Rural areas have to have jobs, otherwise they become rural suburbia. Rural economies cannot survive on farming alone – too mechanised. Dairy farms are in sharp decline – 135,000 down to 12,000 and expected to fall to 8,000.
- Supermarkets were seen to have total control over farming and there was agreement that they needed to be regulated so farmers are not priced out of business. Culture of supermarkets has broken the chain between supply and demand in UK. Supermarkets dictating agricultural production.
- Delegates agreed that planners and politicians rarely recognise the true value of land. We must return to the principle whereby the best agricultural land is managed and protected. Need to focus on energy efficient land (eg) heavy soils, like clay, are energy inefficient, whereas lighter soils are energy efficient. Dichotomy between land and conservation is misleading – if land is good and productive and energy efficient, should it be conserved or used? Forest/woodland should be planted where the land is poor quality. A SE perspective is required, not a county perspective. The bottom line is we cannot produce the food we need as things are. Fuel crisis at heart of farming debate.
- With fuel prices rising every day, farming has to move away from reliance on chemicals and oil. Mainstream farming has to give way to alternative methods of farming. It is time the farming community listened to the ecologists.
- It was agreed that biodiversity can be a by-product of commercial activity (eg) farming and that farming has to be managed for biodiversity and commercial benefits.

- Delegates acknowledged that food security will become an important issue in the near future.
- There was recognition that we need to grow our own food and learn how to cook it.
- 60% of UK's food requirements produced in UK – this cannot continue if population rises, agricultural land is sold to developers, flooding is allowed, food prices continue to rise, etc.
- Only 3% of market is organic, it has reached a plateau - too expensive, especially with oil prices soaring. This will not change, unless oil prices drop.
- Some delegates called on CPRE NO to look at the option of G M crops.
- There was agreement that there needs to be a balance between farming and sustainability.

### **Forestry and Woodland**

- Delegates agreed that we need to manage our woodland better. 7% of county covered in woodland, least wooded in SE (UK least wooded in Europe). 1 million of hardwood imported into UK each year. Much of woodland in UK is full of 'rubbish' (eg) unprofitable and little biodiversity. Woodland needs to be economically viable. We need to think strategically about where to plant woods. Carbon management should be part of the plan.
- There was agreement that the loss of management over forests had led to loss of biodiversity.
- Delegates agreed there was a need to reconnect the 'wood chain' (ie) who owns woods/who manages them/what's in them.
- It was commented upon that young people are not going into forestry. Too expensive to start up. Forestry needs more resources from Government; 17 million p/a compared to farming which gets billions. Yet forests can provide carbon 'sinks', lessen need for imports, create and protect biodiversity and provide recreation – all part of Government's sustainability plan.
- There was a call for county/UK to produce its own timber, since we cannot keep moving it around the globe – the rising cost of fuel won't allow it. For example county could provide Didcot power station with wood rather than importing it from Indonesia.
- It was agreed that forests and woodland have to be managed for biodiversity and commercial benefits.
- It was recognised that climate change is going to fundamentally alter the landscape. We have to look 100 years+ ahead and plan for potential changes (eg) maybe we should be planting walnut rather than beech.
- It was pointed out by one delegate that woodchip biomass is a sustainable alternative to oil. The Wychwood Project, West Oxon, are considering producing biomass to supply to developers, who are now required to do carbon audits on all new builds. Biomass is green and cheap and can be produced locally for the local market.
- Delegates were reminded that there has been a u-turn on the future for biomass. Shouldn't use valuable and productive land to plant biomass.

### **Minerals**

- Gravel extraction was seen as dangerous and damaging to landscape. How to resist GOSE plans/how to resist targets imposed on SE? Targets for Oxfordshire to be set in latter part of 2008.

- Restoration can be beneficial to environment and biodiversity – how to ameliorate work once done?

### **Summary by Ben Stafford**

In his summary of this discussion, Ben recognised that there may be a contradiction in CPRE's Vision 20:26, (ie) how can we produce our own food if land is being flooded, and more areas are being wooded and made wilder? He said a balance needs to be found between the following issues: food/landscape/biodiversity/energy. He said Oxfordshire can never be 'wild' but that it does have CTAs. He said an appropriate assessment is needed by CPRE of the environmental impact of biofuels. He concluded by saying that he didn't feel it was a question of greener towns or protected countryside, and that we could achieve both.

### **Discussion 3: Social Needs and Wellbeing - Energy, Water, Leisure.**

The final discussion focused primarily on the issues of energy, water and leisure, but there was a strong consensus that 'green education' lay at the heart of protecting Oxfordshire's landscape.

#### **Energy**

- Delegates agreed that the focus must be on reducing energy consumption.
- An overall energy policy is needed; one which deals with tranquillity issues and which recognises the limits of the environment.
- Some delegates felt that wind turbines are not efficient/productive in urban areas and that the Government target is not realistic.
- Others made the case that wind farms should not be built inland at all and that CPRE must look at the option of Nuclear power, otherwise the landscape will be covered by 1,000s of wind turbines. It was noted that by 2015 we will run out of electricity if we don't consider the Nuclear option and that all nuclear stations have to be replaced soon.
- Proponents of the nuclear option said nuclear power has no carbon footprint.
- Others reminded delegates that there is currently no solution to the storage of nuclear waste; until we solve this, then we shouldn't pursue nuclear power. No one wants to live next to a nuclear power station. Didcot not a likely site for a future power station.

#### **Water**

- Delegates recognised that water is fundamental to the future of Oxfordshire's landscape and links three important themes of the discussion – farming/energy/industry.
- It was recognised that sustainability will begin to drive policy decisions concerning water.
- The role of flood plains was discussed. It was agreed that the risk of flooding has to be managed, but balanced with farming needs. Flood plains contribute to biodiversity. Should forests be allowed to flood?
- The focus needs to be on reducing consumption of water. Rate of consumption still rising. How we manage water will determine nature of countryside. We cannot move water around, too heavy/expensive.

- There was agreement that the reservoir at Abingdon is not necessary. Rather Thames Water needs look at alternatives, (eg) reducing leakage/ increasing use of water meters. Salination plant in Thames estuary may influence decision.

### **Leisure/Well-being**

- Over 2,600 miles of paths, bridleways, and byways in Oxfordshire, but low percentage of accessible green space in county.
- There needs to be greater access to the countryside, particularly at a time when access is being threatened.
- Leisure of all sorts is a key element in peoples' lives and CPRE is well placed to draw attention to the need for a strategy on the use of the countryside for leisure.
- Green spaces sometimes more important to peoples' well-being than Green Belt.
- More green space and trees needed to provide carbon 'sinks', to prevent flooding and to create shade as earth warms up.
- Traffic noise continues to increase throughout the county impacting adversely on tranquillity.
- Spread of lighting for safety and leisure impacts on night sky.
- Overflying aircraft noise increases, exacerbated by expansions at Kidlington, Brize and Benson and proposals to reroute flights over Chilterns AONB, impacting adversely on tranquillity.

### **Education**

- Environmental education is the key to getting people to understand what impacts their decisions have on the landscape locally, regionally and globally (eg) Timescape at Northmoor and Northmoor Food Festival ideal examples of 'green education'.
- The time is ripe for CPRE to champion an educational project focusing on Food and Landscape.
- 'Planet Earth Season', to be held in Winter 2008; CPRE Oxon invited to come on board this county initiative.

### **Summary by Ben Stafford**

Ben said that CPRE is not convinced that the case is proven for GM crops. He said that the energy debate, especially the nuclear option, polarises opinion within CPRE and conceded that perhaps CPRE has to admit that Nuclear power will have less damaging impact on countryside. He reminded delegates that the issue of waste is crucial and that it has to be answered adequately. As for wind power, he said the central issue is location, (ie) the protection of the landscape is the central concern. He said that offshore wind farms are preferable. Ben agreed that energy must be saved/reduced. Given 30% of carbon emissions are from houses, he said that eco-homes must be the future. On the issue of water, he said that desalination is very energy expensive and that leakage needs to be addressed. He concluded by reminding delegates that the issues discussed are not specific to Oxfordshire, but relevant across England and that a strategic approach was required if the beauty, tranquillity and diversity of the landscape is to be protected.

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