



A vision for Buckinghamshire

August 2020



The countryside charity
Buckinghamshire

CPRE is the countryside charity that campaigns to promote, enhance and protect the countryside for everyone's benefit, wherever they live. With a local CPRE in every county, we work with communities, businesses and government to find positive and lasting ways to help the countryside thrive - today and for generations to come.



Welcome

Our CPRE vision for Buckinghamshire (“Our Vision”) is a key opportunity for us all to contribute to the debate about how we protect our environment whilst managing the pressures to develop. The land we have is a finite supply and all of it serves a purpose. Once it is changed, it cannot be recovered. How we value the countryside and our historic towns and villages is the key to the future and defines the quality of society we aspire to moving forward.

Buckinghamshire is facing many challenges including population growth and the pressure to build more houses, increased infrastructure, such as HS2, and climate change. We must plan effectively, fully valuing our countryside and environment. The unified Buckinghamshire Council will give us an opportunity to have a strategic debate on making the most of our most precious and finite resource. It is no longer enough to just protect what we have left. We need a strategic approach to land use, which invests in Buckinghamshire’s vital natural resources and delivers a sustainable future for both the countryside and the residents of Buckinghamshire.

Paula Buck, Chairman, CPRE Buckinghamshire

“It has been a privilege to represent a constituency in Buckinghamshire for over 28 years, where the environment and countryside has been a focal interest, particularly with our rare chalk streams. Buckinghamshire has so much to offer, with easy access for visitors. I consider the area to be a “green lung” for London, which is under enormous pressure to deliver housing, transport and other developments. I initiated the call for the Chilterns AONB to be considered for National Park status, in the hope this would provide a greater level of protection for our natural environment.”

Rt Hon Dame Cheryl Gillan DBE MP (Joint President)

“I’ve always loved the Buckinghamshire countryside. As a boy, growing up in north-west London, I remember family walks along the Chess Valley and scout hikes on the Chiltern scarp and woodlands. As MP for Aylesbury I saw how people living in towns value their access to the countryside. While town and countryside will change, as they have done for centuries, we need to work together to ensure that green spaces, abundant wildlife, clean air and water and tranquillity are still there for future generations.”

Sir David Lidington KCB CBE (Joint President)

Throughout this document, we ask whether you agree with key points of our vision. We would love to debate these points with you further (whether you agree or not) and the last section explains how you can get involved to influence thinking on the future of our precious Bucks countryside..

Buckinghamshire:

A great place to live

Buckinghamshire is a wonderful and popular place to live. It is one of the oldest counties in England, having existed since the Kingdom of Mercia (585–919), which gives it a rich heritage in both its built and natural environment. Buckinghamshire is essentially a rural county, even though it is so close to London. From the beautiful rolling hills of the Chilterns in the south to the wide open attractive landscapes in the north there is a wide range of countryside to enjoy. There are no cities, but many market towns and villages. None are particularly large, except Milton Keynes. Many towns and villages retain much of their original character and look as though they've not changed for centuries.

It is also an accessible location with easy access to London via rail and road links. This has led to much of the southern part of the county being regarded as a commuter belt. Access to other parts of the country is easy too, with many major roads and rail lines either going through Buckinghamshire or being within easy reach. There are also two international airports: Heathrow and Luton, on the edges of our county. Its location, accessibility and attractive environment mean it is a hugely popular place to live.

But it is under unprecedented threat

Buckinghamshire's rate of growth is well above the national average and population projections up to 2026 predict that more than 50% of the expected growth will be due to people moving to the county from other parts of the UK, confirming its popularity. This growth, and other threats from major, national infrastructure projects, is already putting a huge demand on available land, resources and on the countryside generally. We are in danger of destroying the very attributes that made the county such an attractive place to live. Indeed, it is already happening, according to a Halifax Survey in 2008 of the places with the best quality of life, people in Buckinghamshire enjoyed the best quality of life in Britain. However, by the time the same survey was conducted in 2020, Buckinghamshire had dropped out of the top 50.

We need to act now

To stop the damage that is already happening – and improve our environment to tackle a global climate crisis - is a huge challenge and in our view it requires a clear, county-wide strategy. CPRE Buckinghamshire seeks to influence that strategy to ensure that the countryside is protected for future generations and sustainably provides all the environmental and health benefits it brings. To achieve this through our campaigning requires that we have a clear vision of what we are trying to achieve.


This document is that vision. It sets out how we believe the county should develop over the next 30 years.

Our Vision

A case for change

CPRE Buckinghamshire, the Countryside Charity, champions much more than just the protection of the countryside. We believe that all the things that make Buckinghamshire unique, including its historic towns and villages, its communities and its economy have a part to play. Not just in protecting the countryside, but improving it for future generations to enjoy.

We believe that by planning our future with a strategic vision, taking a balanced approach to growth and the needs of all of us who live and work in Buckinghamshire, we can ensure the protection of our environment as well as our future prosperity. We need a shared vision that enables us to work together with all other stakeholders to plan for growth in a better way, respecting the distinctiveness of our countryside and our built environment that makes Buckinghamshire special.



Our Vision is of a beautiful and thriving Buckinghamshire countryside that enriches all our lives.



Our countryside

Is at the heart of Our Vision

It is well established that people benefit if they feel good about their surroundings, appreciating the beauty that is there to see. The countryside is also central to maintaining a healthy life style. We want to see that the countryside remains unspoilt and people are able to appreciate the sights, smells and sounds of nature. Attractive landscapes, birdsong, tranquillity, dark skies and fresh (ie: unpolluted) air are proven to be beneficial to mental health, while physical health is also helped by access to lovely walks in beautiful surroundings. While we recognise we have to deal with an increasing population and changes in demographics, we do not think this must be at the expense of the countryside and the benefits it brings.

With damage already happening – and the climate undoubtedly changing for the worse - our long-term aim is to try and ensure we leave this beautiful county to future generations in a better state than we found it. This means working to:

- Ensure people can reap the health and well-being benefits of the countryside
- Improve the environment and tackle climate change
- Ensure that development and growth is truly sustainable and reflects local needs
- Promote sustainable farming practices that are in harmony with nature and the countryside
- Maintain and improve the wonderful diversity of landscapes, flora and fauna.

A well-managed countryside that puts the environment front and centre will have a significant bearing on health and lifestyle.

Together, the environment and socio-economic conditions have been shown to be the largest single aspects impacting on health and well-being. Therefore we want to ensure a quality living environment (a major influence on socio-economic outcomes), within an attractive physical and sustainable natural environment.

We know that maintaining and enhancing an unspoilt countryside with sustainable transport links will improve air quality. This, in turn, will help to reduce the impact on people's health and mitigate the more than 3,000 deaths per annum that occur in Buckinghamshire alone due to atmospheric pollution (Public Health England data). At the same time access for residents and visitors to the sights, sounds and peaceful public spaces will also have positive benefits on mental health. This will be important as we manage development to serve a growing population.

Accessibility is key

We believe that everyone should have easy access to open countryside, preferably within walking distance or short travelling time, without the need for a car. Sustainable, good public transport links to and between villages, towns and the countryside is key to moving people away from relying on cars but walking and cycling are, we believe, the best way for getting out into the country.

Do you agree we should:

- Promote access for all to open countryside free from pollution?

Our countryside (continued)

Is at the heart of Our Vision

Improve the environment and tackle climate change

But the countryside is not only good for our well-being, it is absolutely essential to our continued existence. We must reverse the rising temperatures and pollution that are threatening our future and the countryside is the main weapon in our armoury to fight climate change. Of course, we in Buckinghamshire cannot do this alone, but we need to play our part. Our largely rural environment, close to the huge built-up area of London, means steps we take to tackle climate change can, not only help the population of Bucks, but millions more people in the capital.

Trees, plants and soil are three of the main carbon sinks and we need to not only protect them, but improve them if we are to counter the impact of the built environment. We have to take radical action because there is currently a major imbalance between pollution generation (of all types) and the environment's ability to absorb it.

Do you agree we should:

- Make addressing Climate Change intrinsic in every planning decision?

Ensure that development and growth is truly sustainable and reflects local needs

The United Nations defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. We completely agree. By that definition, it is self-evident that losing green fields to concrete and tarmac and consuming limited resources generally, cannot be sustainable. Trees that are lost must at least be replaced by similar, locally native species. Rivers, especially chalk streams, need to be cleaned up and maintained. Hedgerows, the home for so many types of wildlife, need to be retained, improved and, where possible, increased. But maintaining the status quo is not enough, we need to do more in order to reverse the direction of climate change. That means more trees, less extraction from threatened rivers and streams and generally improve other carbon sinks, including grassland and other vegetation.

Growth needs to be concentrated on where its impact is minimised and that means concentrating on existing built-up areas and brownfield generally (brownfield is the term used for previously developed land). We believe that development and growth can still happen without compromising the countryside.

Promoting sustainable farming practices

Farming provides food and jobs

Imported food does not support rural employment in Buckinghamshire and can have a huge carbon footprint. The supply of imported food may be expensive in world markets and not secure. Many towns in the county support farmers' markets and many farms have their own shops. We believe in supporting the rural economy, to safeguard jobs, to provide fresh food and to fight climate change.

Farming provides access to the countryside

In many cases public footpaths are across farmland. Farmers help maintain these rights of way and in return we can appreciate and respect the stewardship land that farmers provide. Access to the countryside means opportunities to enjoy and benefit from the unique landscape in Buckinghamshire, whether walking, running, cycling, or picnicking. We believe in encouraging access to the countryside for all, while remembering that much of it is working land that would not be maintained without the county's farmers. We support the Countryside Code published by Natural England (see www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-countryside-code).

Farming supports the environment

Sustainable, organic farming, promoting soil quality, hedgerow management and forestry are ways in which farming protects and encourages wildlife in Buckinghamshire. Without a healthy environment, many rare animals, insects and plants would not survive and our lives would be poorer for it. We believe that a thriving rural economy is vital to support oases for wildlife, and keep these safe for the future.

Do you agree we should:

- Support farming to improve productivity while also enhancing biodiversity?



Biodiversity is so important

We need to protect it

Buckinghamshire supports a diversity of habitats and species. It is rich with diverse flora & fauna, some thriving, but some rare and many endangered. However, compared with other English counties, it is not well served in terms of its biodiversity resources. In fact, Buckinghamshire has a very low percentage area of land designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), which only account for 1.4% of the county, compared to a national figure of 7.7% (England). Even Greater London has a higher proportion of land designated as SSSI at 2.4%. A national report by Plantlife entitled "Our Vanishing Flora" ranked Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes 39th out of 52 counties in terms of the rate of plant extinctions. Therefore we need to protect, and enhance, biodiversity. Our Vision is to help protect these habitats and species to allow them to flourish and ensure we can also continue to enjoy the variety, scenery and contribution they provide to our ecosystem.

We are fortunate to have many conservation activities in place; we need to continue to support and grow these. We have more than 100 specifically protected species and over 200 noted as being a priority to help, all well distributed throughout our region.

The Chilterns is an IPA (Important Plant Area) benefiting from chalk rock and ancient woodland plus rare fen and heathland, providing fertile ground for common and rare flowers we can all enjoy. These include orchids, eyebright as well as the familiar hue of bluebells that delight us in spring. However, many of these are endangered and need protecting from further local destructive development to survive. These include our very own county flower, the Chiltern Gentian, which is one of the rarest in the UK and boasts sensational purple trumpet-shaped flowers late summer.



Chiltern Gentian

Biodiversity is so important (continued)

We need to protect it

Another important feature of the Chilterns is the presence of nine extremely rare chalk streams. Chalk streams are said to be ecologically England's rainforests, but they are all in severe danger. Their pure, clear, constant water from underground chalk aquifers and springs, flowing across flinty gravel beds, make them perfect sources of clean water. They are ideal for lots of wild creatures to breed and thrive. However they are being robbed of their water for the mains supplies, for farming and industry such that they are becoming dry and severely depleted. In many places they are also used as drains, hidden in culverts or neglected.

There are planning rules in place, via the NPPF (National Planning Policy Framework), that help support local habitats. These rules rely on current information and continued support.

We need to conserve and encourage our designated protection sites (Special Areas of Conservation, SACs, and SSSIs) and many protected species (e.g. otters via the European Protected Species Directive as well as water vole, kingfisher and barn owls via the Wildlife and Countryside Act). We also have the success story of red kites which shows how protection schemes can really work. Our SSSIs and SACs need local support and will be important in achieving Our Vision.

Do you agree we should:

- Help protect and enhance our splendid array of flora and fauna?
- Work to protect our precious chalk streams?
- Ensure biodiversity has a better weighting in planning decisions?

River Chess near Chesham



Housing

The big issue

The current population of Buckinghamshire is approximately 855,000 (2018 figures). Projected growth rate estimates vary widely and depend on some major investment decisions to be made by the government, but the population could reach 1.3 million or more by 2050. They need homes and meeting that demand while maintaining and protecting the countryside is perhaps the biggest challenge.

Containing the sprawl

“Urban Sprawl” is the unrestricted growth of housing, commercial development and roads over large expanses of land, with little concern for urban planning. It happens because of weak planning controls, a lack of strategic forethought and because developers know it is cheaper to build on undeveloped land (green fields) than on brownfield as the latter often has problems due to the need to demolish existing buildings and de-contaminate the land.

Almost half of the population of Buckinghamshire live in one of six major towns, some of which are already surrounded by the London Metropolitan Green Belt (LMGB) and hence are afforded some degree of protection against urban sprawl. However the two largest towns, Aylesbury and Milton Keynes, are not constrained in this way and have seen considerable expansion in recent years, to the extent that some small villages have effectively been swallowed up.

To minimise the loss of countryside, we believe we should maximise the use of brownfield land within current town boundaries. CPRE has demonstrated, through its research, that there is plenty of scope for growth in that way. We believe we need to get creative over the use of brownfield land to achieve a better balance between residential, office and factory space.

Concentrating development within existing town boundaries also has the considerable advantage of reducing transport needs and revitalising our town centres which have become very depressed as the retail industry has increasingly moved from the high street to online.

Development in villages needs to be sensitive

The other half of the population of Buckinghamshire live in over 200 much smaller towns, villages and hamlets, many with populations of less than 1,000 people. To be sustainable, they need to be re-vitalised and well-connected. Public transport is key to their survival. While we accept some new homes are necessary, they should be affordable, for local people and sympathetically designed to fit in with the local environment.

Do you agree we should:

- Maximise the re-use of brownfield land?
- Rejuvenate town centres by building new homes within existing town boundaries?
- Invest in better transport links to connect villages?

Business practices are changing

And can help meet the challenge

Business is essential. Business drives the economy and our standard of life. But business practices are changing and we believe that there is no need for more countryside to be lost to business and industrial development in the next 30 years. Increased home working and better strategic planning of the relationship between homes and places of employment can minimise impact on the countryside as well as minimising, or even negating, the need for any additional physical infrastructure. On the other hand, it does have implications for electronic communication infrastructures that need to be addressed. There are implications for transport, both local and national, and for utilities (water and energy) from new ways of working. Retail, too, is undergoing a fundamental change that is impacting our high streets.

There is an opportunity to integrate planning

Historically, planning for development of housing, employment, transport infrastructure and resources such as water, energy and communications have been carried out separately. In our view this has had a detrimental effect on the environment and our countryside leading to unnecessary, and sometimes inefficient, development. We believe that Buckinghamshire needs a unified, all-encompassing “Master Plan” that recognises and addresses changes in working practices, the use of resources (such as water, energy and communications), transport, community services and infrastructure as well as housing and employment (which are in the traditional scope of current Core Strategies).

Do you agree we should:

- Have a unified, all-encompassing Master Plan for the county that addresses all aspects of living and working in the county and reflects new ways of working and living?

Realising Our Vision

Making it happen

Development is irreversible, so care is needed

Once the countryside is changed, for instance by development, building roads, pollution or water extraction, it is changed for ever. When a green field is built on, it cannot be replaced. National and local conservation, environmental and heritage bodies throughout the country have been established to monitor, advise, lobby and influence everyone from the general public to our key decision makers. They have a voice which should be heard. Our society is dynamic and changes brought about by issues such as population increase and climate change must be embraced, but the views of these bodies need to play a key part in all decisions taken in the future. Our Vision says it is common sense to listen to and respect the arguments.



Langley Park, Iwer

How do we realise Our Vision for Buckinghamshire?

Our countryside, landscape and historic environment are at the heart of protecting our future prosperity. Our land is not an endless resource to be squandered. Conserving, maintaining and improving these assets is essential if we are to prosper. This takes collective, and innovative, planning. We seek to influence a broad church of our politicians, business leaders, farmers, conservation bodies, academics, service providers and all our key decision makers to play a full part in all decisions taken in the future, and not be left on the side lines. We need creative solutions that use technologies and original thinking to maximum effect. But more than that, communities must also be involved with meaningful, well thought through and responsible consultation. Our young people must also have a vital say, for this is their future we are dealing with. All councillors, MPs, the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), Local Nature Partnership (LNP) and business leaders must ensure meaningful consultations take place and our collective views are taken into account. We believe it is a common sense approach to have a shared and agreed vision.

If you agree, please help us to achieve this by joining us or supporting us as described on the next page.

Sign up to Our Vision

How you can help

Let's make a better, more healthy and prosperous Bucks a reality. Our Vision for Buckinghamshire is about bringing our collective common sense and local focus back into planning our future. This will allow Buckinghamshire to grow providing the housing and jobs we need, whilst also protecting and enhancing our natural environment.

Our businesses and communities can flourish and we can add value, not only to the population of Buckinghamshire, but to the future of Britain. It will take a change of approach to implement some of these ideas, but we must demand these challenges are met with well-considered, robust and sustainable long term plans.

You can support, or contribute to, "Our Vision" for Buckinghamshire by:

- becoming a member of CPRE (join via our website, see below)
- joining as a volunteer
- giving a donation to support our campaign (also via our website)
- writing to your MP or Councillor
- following us on Twitter and Facebook.

We are also always looking for volunteers to help us in a wide variety of roles. This can be anything from conducting research or supporting planning responses through to particular focus areas such as transport, agriculture or sustainability. We look forward to hearing from you!



www.cprebucks.org.uk



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