



Campaign to Protect  
Rural England

## *Policy Position Statement*

# Sustainable Development

The countryside provides us with natural resources such as soil, water, minerals and energy. It uplifts us spiritually through its beauty and tranquillity. It supplies over 60% of our food and is a home for wildlife and over 14 million people. Yet the countryside is under intense pressure from new development, traffic, and the exploitation of those natural resources. Sustainable development is about resolving these competing issues and creating 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' [1]. This requires the long term protection of the environment upon which we all depend.

### **What are the issues for the countryside?**

Although the countryside provides many benefits to people in both rural and urban areas, it is under threat from a variety of unsustainable trends. Examples include:

The raw materials of the land are dug up to provide for housing and other built development. Every year quarries take out over 200 million tonnes of non-renewable aggregate.

Rivers and groundwater come under stress as we consume ever greater amounts of water. Average household consumption of water has increased by 70% over the past thirty years.

Tens of thousands of new houses are built on greenfields year on year. And the countryside faces a massive increase in the scale of house-building, particularly in the

wider South East, with little recognition of environmental limits.

Meanwhile, past trends in farming have generated their own pressures, in particular from subsidies designed to maximise food production. The industrialisation of farming, the decline of mixed farms, woodlands, and the loss of traditional landscape features (such as ponds and hedgerows) have all led to the distinctiveness of the countryside being eroded.

Traffic levels have increased significantly and are forecast to grow by a further 30% on rural roads between 2000-2010. Across the country, proposals for new roads continue to present a threat to rural landscapes, as does the massive expansion in air travel.

The countryside has traditionally been used as a depository of society's waste. In 2003, there were around 2,300 landfill

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*website or contact:*

*CPRE Publications*  
*128 Southwark Street*  
*London SE1 0SW*  
*Tel:*  
*020 7981 2800*  
*Fax:*  
*020 7981 2899*  
*Email:*  
*info@cpre.org.uk*  
*Website:*  
*www.cpre.org.uk*

sites in England and Wales - large holes in the ground where all kinds of materials are dumped rather than recycled. In 2002/3, 43% of all waste in the UK was disposed of in this way. This is the same amount of all waste that is recycled. But a very low 17% of household waste is recycled.

The overall effect of these changes has been the expansion of the developed area and a shattering of tranquillity in the countryside.

Land is itself a finite resource and needs to be carefully managed. The system of spatial or land use planning in England is designed to address these competing demands and ensure that the outcomes, in terms of how land is used, is sustainable and in the wider public interest. But frequently the process of spatial planning comes under intense pressure to allow developments on the basis of short term economic interests. The quantified needs for economic development frequently override the more qualitative values of the countryside.

Unsustainable trends in development, energy use and transport are also leading to climate change, which itself could have a profound impact on the countryside's character. But the ways in which we respond to this threat, for example through new renewable energy, needs to be carefully managed too.

Amid the drive to consume more, develop faster and travel further, the real costs to society and the environment have frequently been overlooked. That is why the concept of Sustainable Development is potentially of such great value. It requires those responsible for economic development and social progress to examine the environmental consequences

of their activities from the outset, and involve people more in decision making. However, detractors of Sustainable Development suggest the concept is vague, and frequently sidelined when it comes to big decisions within Government.

### **CPRE's approach**

CPRE exists to promote the sustainable use of land and other natural resources in town and country. Our starting point is a recognition that the health, quality and integrity of the environment are fundamental to the existence of the economy and to both public and individual well-being. So we support a strong environmental interpretation of sustainable development.

Some consider environmental protection to be a brake on economic or social progress. Frequently reference is made to the need to 'balance' these competing objectives. For CPRE this misses the inter-connections between these objectives, and the need to reconcile society's needs within environmental limits.

CPRE rejects notions of balance and crude trade-offs as the basis for decision making, and campaigns for environmentally sustainable development. Rather than mitigating or compensating for environmental damage, the aim should be to avoid damage in the first place. This is essential if we are to both protect and enhance the countryside.

Moving towards environmentally sustainable development requires a shift in focus:

- > from demanding what we want from the countryside to taking what the environment can sustain;

- > from delivering what is in the interest of maximising GDP, to securing what is of benefit to the community;
- > from consuming more, to managing demand and getting more from less;
- > from accepting standardisation to championing local variation and high quality;
- > from promoting globalisation at any cost, to regulating businesses to better manage our common future; and
- > by encouraging Governments to recognise that responsibility for the environment should be integrated, from the outset, in all areas of decision making.

It also means identifying the environmental consequences of decisions at the beginning, rather than simply trying to manage environmental damage (eg. considering the capacity to extract minerals before you decide the extent of new building, rather than afterwards).

The Government's Sustainable Development Strategy, *Securing our Future 2005*, describes how 'the goal of sustainable development is to enable all people throughout the world to satisfy their basic needs and enjoy a better quality of life, without compromising the quality of life of future generations'. CPRE believes a high quality countryside is an essential part of achieving that objective and helping people to feel contented. Indeed, it is an irreplaceable part of our history and culture.

Protecting the countryside should be a key element of achieving sustainable

development. If we are to protect the countryside, then it is important that people are able to enjoy and connect with it. From a sense of connection, care for the countryside grows. Yet, modern lifestyles mean that, for many, those connections are being blurred or even broken altogether. Building materials come from a builders merchant, rather than a hillside quarry. Food is packaged and provided as if from a conveyor belt, rather than from a farm. We have seemingly limitless supplies of water from the tap, ignoring the effects on our rivers. We must make clear the effects of our patterns of consumption on the countryside. Ensuring full public participation in the decisions over how we plan the use and management of those resources is important too.

Making the necessary shift in focus also means improving the tools we rely on for decision making and amending current priorities. CPRE believes this includes:

- > improving our appreciation and the definition of environmental limits, including the social and cultural dimensions when identifying the 'environmental capacity' of an area or resource;
- > greater use of Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) [2] for informing decisions at national, regional and local levels;
- > re-invigorating the Greening Government initiative [3] within Whitehall so that all departments aim to protect the environment;
- > each Government department gearing its policies around 'de-coupling' environmental damage from economic

progress (eg. improving well-being in society without increasing consumption of natural resources); and

- > turning the Treasury into a department for well-being, which actively promotes the use of price signals that encourage behaviour more compatible with environmentally sustainable development.

But how will we know if we're moving in the right direction? The Government is using 68 indicators to measure progress towards meeting sustainable development. What you measure really does matter.

Traditionally, progress has been measured by GDP and other narrow economic indicators. The intention of successive Governments has been to broaden these to cover other issues, such as the environment. We welcome this initiative but believe that in practice these broader indicators are often eclipsed by GDP when the big decisions are made. Other, less tangible qualities (like countryside character or tranquillity) tend to be disregarded.

The health of the countryside is an important indicator of the health of the country. If we continue to lose its character and tranquillity to ill conceived development, poor land management, or traffic growth, then we are all the poorer for it. That is why CPRE believes the Government's sustainable development indicators should include one on 'Countryside Quality', which includes an assessment of one of its key assets, its tranquillity. The Rural White Paper 2000 included a commitment to develop such an indicator, but it is not included in the Government's new framework.

## What can you do?

You can help to promote environmentally sustainable development through engaging with decision makers in your area, and in decisions you make in your own daily life. You could:-

- > Write to your MP and encourage him or her to urge the Government to adopt a 'countryside quality' sustainable development indicator.

- > Get involved in the planning process. Decisions made by planners shape our future. There's plenty of information on how to do this on

[www.cpre.org.uk/planninghelp](http://www.cpre.org.uk/planninghelp)

- > Consider making changes to your own lifestyle to reduce the impact on the countryside. Reduce your consumption of energy and water. Buying less packaged goods cuts down on waste, and making the most of recycling facilities nearby can reduce pressure for landfill sites or new incinerators. Buy locally grown produce.

- > Walk and cycle more where you can, and plan your journeys so you don't need to travel so far. Make the most of public transport services which are available.

- > Use the countryside for quiet recreation. Only by appreciating the beauty of the countryside and sharing these experiences with others can we hope to protect and enhance it.

There are other suggestions for easy ways to help in our other position statements available on CPRE's website.

## Further Reading

*Securing our future*, HM Government, March 2005. *The Government's Strategy for Sustainable Development*.

*Unlocking the landscape*, CPRE, 2005. *An action pack explaining how to use landscape character assessment and help people describe their connection to their local area*.

*What You Measure Matters*, CPRE, 1998. *A publication highlighting how GDP is not a sensible measure of happiness. It advocates a green approach to competitiveness with different indicators*.

*Measuring the Unmeasurable*, CPRE, 1995. *A fun leaflet exploring the less tangible aspects of the countryside which are highly valued*.

## Notes

1. This famous definition of Sustainable Development was presented by the World Commission on Environment and Development in their report, *Our Common Future*, 1987. The Commission was chaired by Norwegian Prime Minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland.

2. Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is a process designed to ensure decision makers consider the implications for the environment of different options, before coming to a decision. This could relate to a Government policy, the development of a Plan, or a Programme. SEA is a systematic process that looks at environmental effects, identifies alternative options, and supports public involvement in these key decisions. A European Directive, 2001/42/EC, sets out the requirements for public Plans and Programmes.

3. The Greening Government initiative was established following the 1990 Environment White Paper. It aims to better integrate environmental considerations into all areas of Government policy making and activities. Each Government department has, for example, to report its progress in meeting environmental targets (such as on energy consumption), and has a Green Minister who leads on this agenda.

*Sense and Sustainability, CPRE, 1993. A report written by Mike Jacobs which explores land use planning and sustainable development, and how it can be applied in practice*

## Websites

*[www.sustainable-development.gov.uk](http://www.sustainable-development.gov.uk)  
The Government's website on sustainable development. Contains the strategy, information on the 68 top indicators for sustainable development and other useful links. A pocket guide to the indicators is also available via this website.*

*[www.sd-commission.org.uk](http://www.sd-commission.org.uk)  
The website for the Sustainable Development Commission, a body established by the Government to promote the concept and be a watchdog on progress in delivering it.*