



The countryside charity
Bedfordshire

Bedfordshire Matters

Review of the Year 2023



Making an impact in 2023



Martin Christopher, Chair

Bedfordshire's countryside and urban spaces continue to be at threat from development with a consequent loss of amenity and biodiversity.

As a relatively small county by UK standards, the impact on Bedfordshire of the loss of green spaces and countryside is felt even more strongly than elsewhere. Locally, there is a growing awareness that the level of development seen in recent years is unsustainable if continued at this rate. Whilst acknowledging the need to ensure that the nation's housing needs are met and that employment opportunities are maintained, it is also critical that this is not at the expense of the environment that sustains us all.

During the last year CPRE Bedfordshire has once again been seeking to promote awareness of the challenges that face our county and has sought to influence policy decisions both locally and nationally. The encouraging news is that CPRE's voice is being heard more strongly and that our arguments are gaining a wider traction. With the help of our members and through the dedication of our volunteers and staff, the last year has seen many initiatives which have had a real impact across the county and a snapshot of what we have achieved together is briefly summarised below.

JANUARY

The year started with some good news for Flitwick's Church Road Local Action Group. We worked with them on their campaign to save Greenbelt land from development and happily the application was withdrawn. We also shared our response to the proposed relocation of Luton Rugby Football Club which became one of our most read website features of the year.



Church Road Flitwick

FEBRUARY

During February we encouraged you all to sign up for Star Count, CPRE's citizen science project that helps monitor light pollution and dark skies. The results from Bedfordshire and the rest of the country helped create an interactive map.

MARCH

We invited local groups to organise peaceful protest walks and 'March for the Countryside'. Groups from across the county developed walks, with events happening through the month. CPRE Bedfordshire provided a handy checklist of things to consider in the planning process and helped them promote their walks via our website and social media.



APRIL

We were delighted to welcome Chris Hinchliff from CPRE as our speaker at our AGM. He introduced the Rooftop Renewables campaign and answered questions from CPRE Bedfordshire members.

CPRE Bedfordshire joined forces with other CPRE areas led by our national campaigns team and we hit the ground running as shortly after our campaign went live, the government announced a Solar Taskforce to drive forward the deployment of solar energy.

Together we gathered almost 30,000 signatures in our petition and 34 Rooftop Solar Champions including 2 Bedfordshire MPs, Richard Fuller and Mohammad Yasin, who are now providing a voice for solar in parliament.

We also paid tribute to Michael Brooks, following his death. Michael was instrumental in founding CPRE Bedfordshire and was also our first Chair, holding the post for eight years. (See page 6 for our tribute to Michael)

MAY

May began with Hedgeline Help Out, a citizen science project to monitor the health of our hedgerows. We ended the month by opening the voting in the 2023 Bedfordshire Choice Award, the part of our Living Countryside Awards that gives the people of Bedfordshire a chance to have their say on the project that best promotes a living and thriving countryside.



A Bedfordshire hedgerow in May

JUNE

This was the month when our Living Countryside Awards judging team got out and about, meeting the people behind some fantastic projects right across the county. Elsewhere we were making statements to the Bedford Borough Council Local Plan 2040 Examination hearings and responding to the East West Rail route alignment announcement.



Harrold Country Park - Keep it Wild joint winner



JULY

The waiting was over for the entrants in the Living Countryside Awards as we announced the results. The winners were Friends of Windsor Drive Community Open Space, Warden Abbey Vineyard, Inclusive Farm, Friends of Harrold Odell Country Park and Barton Hill Farm. This month's web feature, The Green Belt Explained, proved popular with readers.

AUGUST

We were pleased to be able to share some good news from Meppershall. We worked with the Parish Council and the local community to oppose the development of a site on the High Street and the Planning Inspectorate dismissed the latest appeal by the developers. Local MPs Mohammad Yasin and Richard Fuller signed up as solar champions after meeting with us to discuss the Rooftop Renewables campaign.

SEPTEMBER

We supported the Shillington and Gravenhurst local action group in their campaign against development on Thomas's Meadow in Shillington. The site is in a Conservation Area. We were delighted when this application was refused.

OCTOBER

Ahead of the Mid Bedfordshire by-election we created a local manifesto which was sent to all candidates. After the election we met with new MP Alistair Strathern. In North Bedfordshire we had the opportunity to present our concerns about the impact of East West Rail on the Bedfordshire countryside to the Minister of State for Rail. We also continued to make representations to the Government Inspectors, alongside CPRE Hertfordshire, over our serious concerns about the expansion of Luton airport.

Our Explainer on the updating of the Central Bedfordshire Council Local Plan was published.

NOVEMBER

After being contacted by a number CPRE Bedfordshire members and local residents concerned about the proposed solar farm development in North Bedfordshire, we used our website to help raise awareness of plans. We also used social media to encourage people to engage with the consultation.

There was an early Christmas present for residents in Broom where we worked with a Local Action Group to help them object to a planning application. Central Bedfordshire Council, as the Local Planning Authority refused permission for the development on several grounds including a lack of sustainable transport options and changing the rural character of the village.



DECEMBER

We wrote to Mayor of Bedford, Tom Wootton, regarding the Inspector's post examination hearings advice on the Bedford Local Plan 2040. We called for the Mayor and local MPs to lobby for a reduction in the housing target for Bedford Borough.

We also used the last month of the year to plan for 2024. There's going to be lots going on! There will be an Understanding Planning Workshop for Parish and Town Councillors in February. We'll be putting the spotlight on hedgerows and launching our Hedgerow Heroes project. And there will be a General Election...



Empowering local people!

In 2023 we supported 15 Local Action Groups giving local people the skills and confidence to stand up for their local countryside.

In 2023 we supported 15 Local Action Groups giving local people the skills and confidence to stand up for their local countryside. These groups are set up and led by residents usually in response to a planning application in their neighbourhood. CPRE Bedfordshire provides support and guidance on both planning and campaigning to help the action groups achieve their aims.

“CPRE Bedfordshire has given us the confidence to stand up to developers and has shown that our actions can make a difference.”

Trudy Kelly, Chair, Shefford Town Action Group

We have developed a new section on our website to raise awareness of this work and the groups we are supporting and produced a guide on how to run a campaign. This includes using social media and a template for campaign planning as well as advice on engaging with the community. We believe that empowering local communities is the best way to make change happen and will continue to develop this area of work.



“The fact that we are still fighting and no planning application for “our” field has yet been accepted is in no small way due to CPRE Bedfordshire’s input into our campaign.”

Keith Lewis, Chairman Save Steppingley Road Field



Protest Walks - Maulden

A good year for our friends!

In November the Friends of Windsor Drive Community Open Space in Houghton Regis achieved Asset of Community Value status for the space. The Friends also won the Bedfordshire Choice Award in this year’s CPRE Bedfordshire Living Countryside Awards, picking up over a third of the votes! At the time our judges praised the way the group has led positive change, turning the space into a real community asset with an inclusive ethos.

As a newly formed Friends of group trying to save an open space, we had very little experience of working with or even finding relevant legislation to support our cause, CPRE Bedfordshire helped and continue to help, point us in the right direction, giving advice on how to approach certain situations we would otherwise have struggled with.

Jo Anderson, Friends of Windsor Drive Community Open Space





Michael Brooks

Long time CPRE Bedfordshire supporters were saddened to hear of the death of Michael Brooks. Michael was instrumental in founding CPRE Bedfordshire and was also our first Chair, holding the post for eight years.

Here friends from CPRE Bedfordshire and National CPRE share their memories.

When I joined the Branch Committee in 2001 I had been a member of CPRE for about two years and had seen some of the editions of Bedfordshire Matters produced by Michael – the title he himself had created with its dual meaning i.e. matters concerning Bedfordshire and the vocative Bedfordshire really matters! I'm pretty certain that rather than being just the editor he was also the only contributor.

After Michael's retirement, perhaps in awe, no one came forward to carry on production of the journal and at my first branch meeting I bemoaned this fact and went to some lengths to express its value in projecting the branch image. At this all eyes turned to me conveying the message "if you're so enthusiastic then maybe you should take it on" - which I did. Michael's fine example guided my rather shaky prowess in the early editions as I endeavoured to be his worthy successor and, so inspired, I went on to edit the journal for ten years.

Peter Scott

I knew Michael for over 12 years during my tenure of first the chair of the Cambridgeshire & Peterborough branch and then as chair of the East of England Regional Group. Michael's background as a town planner and his commonsense and advice provided a really sound basis for many a discussion and decision making. In recent years his adroit lead on the complex issues raised by the Oxford-Cambridge Arc was invaluable to the whole of CPRE. He will be greatly missed.

Michael Monk

Michael was a great contributor to CPRE and a real pleasure to work with. We particularly valued Michael's role with the OxCam working group as his active chairing was critical in getting us to campaign on the issue in a collaborative and effective manner. I don't think we can quite yet say at this stage that we have seen off OxCam but nonetheless we have been prominent and influential, and much of that has been down to him.

Paul Miner, Head of Policy & Planning, CPRE

Thank you!

Our work would not be possible without the support of our volunteers, members, donors, funders, trustees and staff so a big thank you to everyone who has contributed in 2023. Together we have made a difference to the Bedfordshire countryside.

If you would like to know more about the work of CPRE Bedfordshire or how you can support our important work, the please get in touch. We would love to hear from you!

info@cprebeds.org.uk

This year we've...

Helped you take action

Whether it's working with local action groups like those in Flitwick, Shillington and Broom, sharing petitions, or explaining how you can get involved with consultations, we've helped you to take action at both local and national level.

Helped you stay informed

Through our explainers and other web features, our downloadable consultation responses, briefing papers, social media and monthly emails, we share as much information as we can to keep you in the know about what's happening.

Helped you celebrate

Through our Living Countryside Awards we've celebrated the people and projects doing great things across Bedfordshire. We've given you the chance to have your say through the Bedfordshire Choice Award and presented plaques and certificates to the winners.

Helped you explore

We've published features on the best of Bedfordshire with tips for walks and things to see.



Protest Walks - Stondon

The final word.

Our Director, Lois Wright, looks forward to 2024

I am immensely proud of all we have achieved in 2023 and am positive we can build on this in the coming year. Our real strength at CPRE Bedfordshire is around connection - connecting with communities, connecting communities to each other, and connecting people to the countryside - and we plan to do more of this in 2024.

We will continue to work with local action groups and help develop and support community led activism because we know that giving people the skills and knowledge to stand up for their local environment is both empowering and effective.

Watch out for news on Hedgerow Heroes – The Bedfordshire Hedgerow Project which will be launched in early 2024. Again, we plan to work with local communities to help increase the amount of hedgerow in the county. Look out for ways to support and get involved in this exciting project from donating to our Hedge Fund, volunteering, sharing (or even contributing to) our Hedgerow blog or engaging with this project on social media.

Rooftop Renewables and Affordable Housing will be our two main campaigns that will run nationally but with a local focus and we will also be preparing for the impending election and engaging with local politicians.

And of course, we will continue working on issues such as East West Rail and London Luton Airport plus objecting to planning applications that impact on the countryside or rural life.

It looks like 2024 will be an interesting year!

The year in numbers



More than **1600** votes cast for the Bedfordshire Choice Award



Reached **1,000** followers on Facebook



We supported **15** Local Action Groups to stand up for their countryside



Objected to **100** windfall sites that were not part of the Local Plan



3,200 volunteer hours



300 walkers (plus a few dogs and horses!) took part in protest walks in March



30,000 people signed the Rooftop Renewables petition nationwide

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