



The countryside charity
Avon and Bristol

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Chair
David Worskett

ANNUAL REPORT 2020/21

Chairman's Report to Members

To say that the last 18 months have been both unusual and difficult would be stating the obvious. However, your local CPRE charity has despite everything continued to make good progress. This formal report to the AGM can only summarise the key points.

Governance

In May 2020 we completed the process of converting into a Community Interest Organisation (CIO) which is the recommended model for charities such as ours. I am pleased to say that by sticking firmly to the Charity Commission and CPRE models and guidelines we did not need to use lawyers and as a result did not incur any fees or charges. At the same time we changed our banking arrangements so that they are now more 'charity friendly' and allow us to do sensible things such as electronic transfers. Our Hon. Treasurer and Trustee, Kaley Hart, has been tireless in sorting out new arrangements and streamlining our banking and payments systems.

One of the CIO's initial trustees, Gill Rawlings, felt obliged to resign because of other commitments, leaving us one trustee short. In practice we need to strengthen the Trustee Board by two or three people with the right experience so, as I have said in my covering letter, it would be good to hear from anyone interested.

Starry skies

Our biggest initiative over the period has been our 'Starry Skies' project, initially launched with significant financial help from national CPRE. Despite the project being blown off course by the pandemic, we have succeeded in running some very successful on-line events, with considerable engagement from CPRE members and non-members and very successful collaborations with other organisations including the Royal Astronomical Society and the University of Bath. This has been our lead project in terms of our work to try to build better understanding and appreciation of the countryside, especially among people who have relatively little awareness of the issues – or the benefits and sheer joy that the countryside can bring. Although we will move onto another main project for this key strand of our work next year, we have set up 'Starry Skies' so that the work - and investment - is not wasted but can continue to be accessed, not least as part of national CPRE's annual 'Star Count' week.

Planning

The work of the charity really splits into two strands, closely related but different in kind. Building understanding and appreciation of the countryside is one strand and is obviously the key to the future, as without that the broader political and public support for the countryside will continue to decline. The second strand, however, is immediate, and equally challenging. It is of course what CPRE does, day in day out, across the country, on planning. Here in Avon and Bristol we have the huge benefit of three incredibly active and knowledgeable CPRE District Groups. They undertake the bulk of the work we do on planning. They are, in 'Game of Thrones' terms, our 'Watchers on the Wall', constantly vigilant for inappropriate development proposals and attempts by others to 'game' our complex planning system. Of course, where major planning proposals cut across the District and Unitary Authority boundaries, they are picked up and we give support at the Avon and Bristol level, but there is nothing like local knowledge on many of the issues that come our way.



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In a short report it is impossible to do justice to all the work done on planning issues but those that stand out are perhaps our very important contributions to the rejection of plans to expand Bristol Airport, now subject to appeal with the Planning Inspectors; successful efforts to persuade the new WECA Mayor to abandon plans for the ring road through Whitchurch; the opening salvos of what will be a major battle to stop large scale and unnecessary housebuilding in North Somerset; and a crash course in Anaerobic Digesters to try to stop a huge, industrial scale Anaerobic Digester plant well within the Green Belt near Keynsham.

There is so much more one could say, but I come back to the point that the two strands of work complement each other and it is the fact that we do both - one far-sighted and proactive, the other defensive and protective - that gives CPRE its great strength nationally and locally.

Political lobbying

Throughout the period we have been active in lobbying our local Councillors and MPs, some of whom are of course more receptive than others. It would I think be true to say that after the last local elections we have found ourselves often much more in agreement with the councils in North Somerset and B&NES, perhaps less so with S. Gloucestershire and uncertain about where Bristol stands on some of our key 'asks'. We have certainly done well at joining forces with other like-minded organisations to put important cases across, and, lead by our Director, Sophie Spencer, we are now building strong links and becoming more effective as a result.

National CPRE

Being part of the National CPRE Network is one of our greatest assets. Over the last 18 months it has not only allowed us access to unrivalled expertise but also to very significant project funding not only for 'Starry Skies' but for PR support in various forms as well. Cooperation with neighbouring local CPRE Charities through the SW Regional Forum has also been a significant benefit. National CPRE is itself going through a period of major transformation and, as always with such things, there are anxieties and patience is needed while those responsible work through the various stages.

Finances and fundraising

The financial position is clearly shown on the attached annual accounts. In essence it remains stable (as does membership) but the pandemic has meant that it has been impossible to make the sort of step-change that we really need in order to allow us to deliver more now and secure the future as well. Doing so will be the top priority as it becomes possible to launch new initiatives over the coming year. We have undoubtedly raised awareness of who we are and what we do, but as with very many organisations, converting awareness, often achieved through social media activity, into revenue remains an elusive goal.

All the financial support members currently give is hugely appreciated but I hope you will not mind if at various stages we ask for more. However, we are absolutely conscious that we need to go after 'new money' be it from new members, project funding from Trusts or revenue raising events and activities and we will be energetically doing so. We have recruited a number of new volunteers, including a volunteer Co-ordinator, to help us take this forward.

Finally, I cannot close this report without formally thanking all those who work so hard to make CPRE Avon and Bristol the successful small charity that it is. I am hugely grateful to all my fellow trustees for their guidance and support, and to our district groups – and especially their indefatigable chairs. However, my biggest thanks must go to our Director, Sophie Spencer, who works tirelessly and extremely effectively at every level to keep the show on the road and without whom we would be nowhere.

David Worskett
Chair, CPRE Avon and Bristol
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