

**Remarks by Carol Hamcke-Onstwedder, Vice-Chair, CPRE London
For the Joint National CPRE and London CPRE Christmas Celebration at St Botolph's
without Aldersgate, 11 December, 2018**

We are all familiar with the quote by Samuel Johnson in 1777 “when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life, for there is in London all that life can afford.” In 1985, Paul Theroux wrote, “A person who is tired of London is not necessarily tired of life; it might be that he just can’t find a parking space.” Somewhere in between these two quotes lies the very reason for the existence of CPRE London. We recognise the vibrancy, the culture, the heritage, the value of urban development with green spaces to create an incredible liveable city. Yet we also are experiencing the strains of London’s population growth resulting in encroachment on green spaces that are vital for health and well-being, enjoyment, and basic ecosystem preservation.

Some might say there is a difficulty in reconciling a very urban branch with an organisation whose membership is primarily located outside of cities and focusses on countryside. How do we, as CPRE’s London Branch, fit into this network? And how do we contribute to the enhancement of the countryside?

Let’s first consider--what is the countryside near us? The obvious visions that come to mind are London’s Green Belt and that technical term Metropolitan Open Land which provides no green visual to me at all.

So, what is our countryside? To me--it is parks, it is gardens, it is garden squares, it is the River Thames that winds its way through our great city, it’s the allotments, it’s playing fields, it’s small places like the Postman’s Park adjacent to this building, it’s roof gardens on our buildings, it’s flower pots and flower beds and beehives—such as in the nearby Barbican, it’s wetlands in Barnes and Walthamstow... it’s trees on our streets. Some might call it green infrastructure. This is countryside near us.

We have so many places to sit down or walk and just “smell the flowers” here in London. We also have places that support wildlife—like deer, the urban fox, and many bird species. All these places are ones we want to enhance, to ensure that Londoner’s have places to run, play ball, have fresh air, and also have some quiet space and just as important to all of us-- to support ecosystems to sustain wildlife and help with things like the urban heat effect.

I have always been of the belief that the greater countryside and its urban centres are inextricably linked. What we do in our cities will impact the countryside and vice versa. What has CPRE London tried to do to enhance the countryside near us, here in London?

Over the years CPRE London has promoted and encouraged development on brownfield sites, to reduce the likelihood of building on protected and unprotected green spaces. It has encouraged what I would call “liveable density”. CPRE London’s evidence-based research on urban development in our 2014 “Towards a Liveable London” publication, linked housing development to transport links and accessibility to services and also what ‘good’ density could look like.

Recently we have published work on “wasted spaces” highlighting the many sites that can be re-purposed, thereby eliminating the need to build on greenfield sites. And this work is complemented by national CPRE research on brownfield and compact sustainable communities. The London branch, therefore, provides immediate insight to the pros and cons of urban development and its implications for green spaces and the national charity lends its voice to support us.

Green Belt.... This is almost something that is in our DNA. We all know that CPRE London cherishes London's Green Belt. In 2016, we worked with our neighbouring branches, who also have London Green Belt within their borders, to identify how ambiguous policies are threatening precious green belt land. This was published under the title "Safe Under Us" and used as evidence to promote awareness of inconsistencies in the NPPF and to empower boroughs and local residents to be better educated about what planning policy allows or doesn't allow.

Since 2013 we have had political parties adopt our green spaces manifestos at both the local London level and at the national level. And we have been major contributors to numerous consultations on the London Plan. We are routinely invited to meetings with the GLA and will be participating in the public examination which begins in January. This is a very intensive and time-consuming process.

Currently, our small staff of three part-time workers are moving forward from strength to strength, promoting outreach and engagement with Londoners to provide a stronger voice about the importance of our parks through our "Go Parks London" initiative.

As a Londoner, I cherish green spaces inside and outside of London. Having previously lived in Manhattan, I understand the concept of concrete jungle. I cannot tell you strongly enough how lucky London is to have the green infrastructure or countryside that it already has.

My husband and I are keen photographers. We routinely walk in our local park with our cameras to capture the changing seasons and the birdlife. All I can say is that it is just beautiful. We watch the deer rut in Richmond park and treasure the mornings when there is the beauty of a frost. These green spaces are the fabric that holds London together.

We also explore the countryside around us. For example, this past August we drove down to Thursley, a marshland just south of Guildford, in the middle of the night to witness and photograph the Perseid meteor shower. We have directly benefitted as Londoners to the positive outcomes of national CPRE policies promoting dark skies, without which we would not have seen this amazing spectacle of nature.

CPRE's policies for all of England are just as important to Londoners as to those living in these areas... whether it be campaigning for dark skies or saving our soils.

This green infrastructure outside of London is critical to our well-being here in London, just as London's green spaces and development policy impacts the greater countryside. While we might be THE urban branch, we have much to gain by working with and alongside the national charity and other branches to truly reap the value of this incredible CPRE network – a strong voice in development, planning, and environmental issues. In other words, a strong voice for the countryside, however it is defined.

So, this year, yes...let's cherish the countryside near us, whatever and wherever that may be. Let's especially cherish the blue and green spaces in Greater London. Who knows, maybe we can see more stars in London, if we are bold enough. I share Vivienne Westwood's sentiments... "There's nothing like London. Nothing at all."

So, let's all be champions of London's countryside! I wish you all a very happy holiday season.

Carol Hamcke-Onstwedder