

CPRE Kent AGM 2017 minutes

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE KENT BRANCH OF THE CAMPAIGN TO PROTECT RURAL ENGLAND (CHARITY NUMBER 1092012, COMPANY NUMBER 04335730) AND THE KENT BRANCH OF THE COUNCIL FOR THE PROTECTION OF RURAL ENGLAND (CHARITY NUMBER 286183) HELD ON NOVEMBER 17 2017 AT LENHAM COMMUNITY CENTRE

1. Apologies for absence

Both organisations were considered together. Seventy-one members were present and seven members sent apologies.

2. Minutes of 2016 AGM

The minutes of the annual general meeting held on November 19 2016 were presented and accepted unanimously. This was proposed by Graham Horner and seconded by John Wotton.

3. Chairman's Welcome

Christine Drury, Chairman, welcomed all present, stating that CPRE Kent would support wherever it could while remaining vigilant all over the county.

4. President's Address:

Graham Clarke, President, gave his traditionally humorous address while stressing, as an artist, the importance to him of visual appeal and highlighting the value of good tradesmen such as plumbers, bricklayers and chippies. He then treated members to a rendition of his poem, Night Shift.

5. Treasurer's Report:

Treasurer Michael Moore went through the summary accounts very briefly – a full set is available on the website.

He reported that donations and legacies – our biggest source of income – totalled £62,052, a figure substantially down on last year.

CPRE Kent had £88,000 of recovered costs from the Farthingloe Valley Court of Appeal case. We had a total expenditure of £320,000, with a surplus of £8,700.

No questions were asked from the floor about the statement of financial activities, although one member asked why so much cash was held at the bank.

Mr Moore replied that 7.5 per cent of our money was held in cash, in accordance with external advice. He did not think this unreasonable given the uncertainties of Brexit and stock market fluctuations.

Harry Rayner proposed, and Richard Knox-Johnston seconded, that the annual report and accounts be accepted. This was agreed unanimously.

Mrs Drury then told the meeting that the financial bill for the continuing Farthingloe Valley case would be quite large. She also wanted to record a huge thank-you to Richard Godfrey Faussett, who had stepped down as chairman of the investment committee, for helping steer CPRE Kent through the complexities of a £5 million portfolio.

6. To receive the annual report

Hilary Newport, Director, told the meeting that the work done by CPRE Kent fell into three broad themes: housing; infrastructure, notably transport this year; and the planning system, which was increasingly becoming less of an asset and more of a hindrance.

Focusing first on housing, Dr Newport referred to Farthingloe Valley, where development had been proposed on an industrial scale and with no affordable housing included in the scheme. CPRE Kent had of course been fighting this application.

At Ebbsfleet, meanwhile, we were finally seeing movement on a project for which planning permission was granted some 15 years ago and should ultimately deliver about 15,000 houses. CPRE Kent would be monitoring this development to see whether its concept of sustainability was met.

CPRE Kent was less keen on Otterpool Park, a scheme adding 12,000 houses to Shepway District Council's identified need of 8,800 homes. The area was already congested and subject to water stress, but with the Department for Communities and Local Government supportive of the project and the district council being both applicant and determinant it was hard to see where we could get any purchase on opposing it.

Turning to infrastructure, Dr Newport reported that a 12km line of 50m-high pylons across east Kent, linked to the Nemo Link project, had been granted planning permission in August. Efforts to mitigate the scheme appeared to have been of a limited nature.

She said that CPRE Kent was supportive of renewable energy but was alarmed at the astonishing scale of the recently revealed plans for Cleve Hill solar farm, which had a build footprint similar to that of nearby Faversham.

If permitted, Cleve Hill would be the first solar farm to be developed without subsidy, said Dr Newport, who questioned why 890 acres of agricultural land should be built on for such a scheme when so few roofs of new houses, for example, had them. There had to be better ways to deliver energy, she said.

Regarding transport, Dr Newport said the implementation of Operation Stack was intolerable and had to be addressed. But, again, there had to be better ways of managing the situation than the knee-jerk reaction of building a huge lorry park at Stanford. It was pleasing to hear that the government was reconsidering the plans.

Elsewhere, the news that a Lower Thames Crossing east of Gravesend had been approved was disappointing but not unexpected. Three lanes each way were now planned, but Dr Newport said the new road would not ease the problem of either congestion or air pollution at Dartford.

Indeed, *any* new crossing would reduce congestion by only 14 per cent – a pitiful reduction that did not justify the attendant loss of countryside.

The recent victory at Pond Farm, Newington, which saw the importance of air quality for the first time determine the outcome of a planning decision in this country, was cause for celebration.

Dr Newport paid tribute to Richard Knox-Johnston, who had pressed the issue of air quality in the case, and it was now rising up the wider agenda, leaving the planners scratching their heads about the way ahead.

She stressed that CPRE Kent, which was 88 years old, was highly supportive of the planning system, which should be used to direct the houses and development we needed to the places it should go.

However, it was becoming harder and harder to work with a system that was increasingly damaging and adversarial, setting undeliverable housing targets that ultimately allowed developers to simply pick the sites they wanted.

We believed this was wrong and would be doing our best to mould a system that would deliver the homes that were needed.

Mrs Drury then spoke, noting it was a shame we had to spend so much time fighting the bad in planning.

Developers, meanwhile, should be getting on and building projects that had won approval. Too many had been granted planning permission for sites but were simply regarding them as assets and not putting up the houses that were needed. CPRE was totally determined to undermine that situation, said Mrs Drury.

7. Questions and Answers with Helen Whately MP

Guest speaker Helen Whately, MP for Faversham and Mid Kent and CPRE Kent vice president, told the meeting she found submissions on planning issues from CPRE and individuals incredibly helpful although noted that Maidstone Borough Council had not appreciated her efforts to have its Local Plan called in.

Mrs Whately said she would focus on three main topics: Operation Stack, Cleve Hill solar farm and housing.

She said she was absolutely mindful of how bad the situation was for the county when Operation Stack was enacted, turning the M20 into a lorry park.

She accepted that CPRE Kent did not welcome the idea of a lorry park at Stanford but the planning process was fast-tracked because it needed to be done.

The recent announcement that Highways England was reviewing its commitment to the lorry park offered hope that it was taking a more innovative approach to the issue of cross-Channel services being disrupted.

For example, the middle of the motorway could be used for parking lorries, with the use of barriers and traffic moving in both directions.

Mrs Whately said a lorry-holding area near the Channel was needed but it would have to be delivered through the planning process.

As for the planned solar park at Cleve Hill, she said she had been taken by surprise by the announcement even though its location, on Graveney Marshes, was on her doorstep.

The proposal brought a dilemma. We want renewable energy, but Mrs Whately's first instinct was to be against a scheme covering such a huge and wonderfully open area. She was instinctively pretty sceptical about whether it was needed.

Getting to the third of her main themes, Mrs Whately said housing was the big issue. Housing provision had not kept up with population growth, meaning people in their 20s and 30s were still living at home with their parents. Not only were many not able to afford to buy a property but they also faced rising rents.

Some people suggested more housing be built in the north of England, taking the pressure off the South East, said Mrs Whately. While that was indeed happening, demand for housing was greatest in the South East and needed to be addressed.

As for the idea that housing should be for local people, that was understandable but was it morally right to stop others moving to an area?

There needed to be a conversation about the infrastructure serving new developments, while there might be a market correction anyway as larger houses were becoming more difficult to sell, Mrs Whately said.

There then followed questions from the floor for the MP; this session was chaired by Richard Knox-Johnston.

Richard Bate asked Mrs Whately to discourage politicians planning by virility symbol through enormous proposals that were not needed but that gave the impression of doing something grand. He cited the example of Otterpool Garden Town, a proposal for 12,000 houses in Shepway. He referred to the column chart displayed by Dr Newport that showed that of all the local authorities in Kent, Shepway was the only one in the government's recent planning for housing consultation that had been given a reduced housing requirement against its current assessment of need, reflecting the low priority of housing supply in the district. This made the earmarked site the least sensible place for such a massive scheme.

Mr Bate then asked the Mrs Whately to use every opportunity, especially with the Treasury, to press for the government to give far more attention to tackling demand for housing, instead of continually focusing on supply through the planning system.

There was plenty of land available – the Local Government Association had charted the dramatic rise in unimplemented planning permissions, while local authorities were releasing large amounts of land through Local Plans.

Releasing land would not bring down house prices. Enabling more people to find a home depended on direct provision of social housing and on bringing down house prices through housing finance methods. In particular, dead people should be taxed more heavily – they wouldn't notice – and the money used to build social housing.

One speaker from the floor said that immigration should be reduced if the housing crisis were to be tackled.

Felicity Simpson then thanked Mrs Whately for trying to make sense of Maidstone Borough Council's awful Local Plan. She urged politicians to get some realism into this government, saying that unless there was a move to prefabricated homes it would not be possible to get the required housing built.

Answering the three questions together, Mrs Whately said there needed to be more regional thinking in the planning system. She highlighted such schemes as Help to Buy, noting there was an argument to say that it pushed up prices in some areas although it did help people to get on the housing ladder. She accepted that migration into the country was a factor in the housing situation but it was not the only factor. On leaving the EU, the UK would have control over its borders, while a slowdown in immigration from Europe was expected even before then. Maidstone Borough Council, meanwhile, said it had built on most of its brownfield land. Mrs Whately was aware that some developers had been asking the government to help them build prefabricated homes; there was a short building period over the year – summer, effectively – whereas prefabs could be built indoors.

Another speaker from the floor (from Canterbury) stated that builders were not completing their quotas of affordable homes on developments. To help tackle this, housing associations should get more money so they could return to their former status. Finally, the speaker said nobody except CPRE was highlighting the accumulative effect of developments.

The final questioner in the session was concerned about delays in process, specifically excuses in response to applications for overnight parking sites.

Mrs Whately accepted that the shrinking of the percentage of affordable housing was a problem and agreed with the CPRE idea that there should be greater penalties for developers falling short in that regard. As for the cumulative effect of developments, she also agreed with the speaker, saying she had written to both Swale and Maidstone councils on the matter. The response had been, however, that the local authorities did not have sufficient resources for such process.

Returning to the subject of overnight lorry parking, Mrs Whately said we could not wait for Operation Stack. Work was ongoing with the government and Kent County Council for a series of smaller lorry parks. Closing the session, Mr Knox-Johnston asked why developers were guaranteed profits – no other industry had such advantage. He also said there was no strategic plan for England, the South East or Kent, making it difficult for the county council to plan strategically. Mrs Whately noted his observations.

8. Election of Honorary Officers

8.1 Chairman: Christine Drury was proposed by Graham Clarke and seconded by Richard Godfrey Faussett. This was approved unanimously.

8.2 Treasurer: Michael Moore was proposed by Harry Rayner and seconded by Nigel Britten. This was accepted unanimously.

8.3 The Board: Richard King proposed and Susan Pittman seconded the following members for re-election: Val Loseby (Shepway), Dr Hilary Moorby (Ashford), Derek Wanstall (Dover), Nigel Britten (Sevenoaks), Graham Warren (environment) and John Wotton (historic buildings). This was accepted unanimously.

Richard Bate, Peter Blandon and Gary Thomas had ended their time as trustees but agreed to be CPRE Kent vice presidents.

Richard King was returning as a trustee. This was proposed by Jessamy Blanford, seconded by Harry Rayner and accepted unanimously.

Derek Wanstall and John Wotton were proposed as joint vice chairmen by Richard Knox-Johnston and seconded by Graham Horner. This was accepted unanimously.

Henny Shotter (Maidstone) and David Wood (general member) were proposed as new trustees by Gary Thomas, seconded by Graham Warren. This was accepted unanimously.

8.4 Auditors: John Wotton proposed and Richard Knox-Johnston seconded the appointment of MHA Macintyre Hudson as auditors. This was approved unanimously

9. General Q&A on CPRE's work

Vivienne Parker asked why there had been no discussion on water. She highlighted the issue of flooding through storm drains and said that the site of the proposed Cleve Hill solar farm was expected to be under water within 20 years.

Christine Drury replied that CPRE Kent did have a water strategy for the county and had written in 2006 the strategy the Environment Agency should have written. She also gave the example of farmers on Romney Marsh coming to CPRE for advice.

Alex Hill spoke from the floor about the difficulty of participating in the process of consulting on the Lower Thames Crossing. He cited the £20 cost to Gravesham Borough Council of printing the scoping document in-house because of its tremendous size.

The final questioner asked what could be done to stop the developer Gladman winning 90 per cent of its planning applications.

Christine Drury replied that the only thing we could do was expose it – the next report from CPRE was going to do that. Also, Pond Farm was a victory for us.

She hoped Gladman would represent a short-lived crisis and that it would be drummed out of the building industry if not by other agencies then by members of that industry.

10. Close followed by lunch