

# West Midlands Newsletter



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Twenty Second Edition

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## Introduction

Not surprisingly the end of 2011 was dominated by the impending changes to the planning system and particularly the controversy round the proposed National Planning Policy Framework. West Midlands CPRE and our Branches have been at the centre of lobbying by CPRE for improvements, to Parliamentarians to local authorities and to the Media.

Yes, there is room for improvements to streamline planning but no, good planning is not up for grabs.

Yes, we want the economy to prosper but not at the cost of our countryside or the expenses of much needed regeneration of run down urban communities.

Perhaps equally we could have expected to take an active role in the campaign around a new High Speed which would cut through some of our

most precious countryside, but with a strong emphasis on positive solutions and improving transport for everyone. The Government has moved on mitigation in its decision but probably not as much as we'd like and there's still Phase 2 to come.

We've been certainly out and about putting our case. We've been meeting MPs and other countryside organisations, we've been monitoring and trying to influence some of the new sub-regional bodies. And we've been on the television and in the newspapers.

When we wrote the last newsletter our Vice-chair Richard Wise was standing in as Chair but since then we've brought in a new permanent Chair, Jerry Birkbeck, and we are looking to strengthen our team further so that we can do more in 2012 to support branches in their campaigning and development while providing the National team with the evidence to back up their work in London.



This newsletter includes photographs kindly provided by Richard Williams of Herefordshire Branch. If you have pictures of countryside from your area we would love to add more pictures next time.

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## Localism - Local Planning or Government Diktat?

When we last wrote we knew that the Government's proposed planning reform would be a major concern to our members and a major issue for us campaigning at a regional and local level.

I suppose we couldn't have guessed that it would capture the imagination of the media in the way it did with long running coverage in papers such as the Daily Telegraph.

It's certainly stretched both our national and regional resources but we can be proud of the impact we've had.

### *Localism Act*

The Localism Bill was enacted at the very end of 2011. It's supposed to usher in a new era of community based planning with its emphasis on Neighbourhood Plans but in reality the real power will still lie with the Local Authorities local plan. For example, Core Strategies will set out key issues such as housing numbers and local communities will not be able to challenge those. And little has been done to empower communities to challenge decision.

Our calls for a Community Right of Appeal were rejected, although the Government says it will address the issue of costs which often stop Local Authorities challenging developers if their proposals undermine the Local Plan.

There seems to have been a battle between those in Government who would have trusted local communities more and those who believed freeing up the planning system would lead to economic development and the later have largely won out. No more so than in the draft NPPF.

### **NPPF**

The consultation on the draft of the new National Planning Policy Framework has certainly been high profile. CPRE has been constructive throughout, supporting the need to rationalise the plethora of planning policies, but at the same time opposing the weakening of planning to protect the countryside and promote good development.

Of course, the NPPF is only part of the picture and the Local Plan remains a corner stone, but in effect what's in the NPPF will determine planning into the future, especially while new plans are being developed or when new evidence makes plans out of date.



CPRE believes there are four key areas which need improving before the final version is issued this year.

1. A clear definition of sustainable development which includes all elements, social, environmental and economic and so that the presumption in favour of sustainable development isn't just a yes to any development.
2. A more balanced approach where economic growth is put in the context of wider social and environmental issues.
3. The reinstatement of a brownfield first policy. This simple approach has delivered urban regeneration. The Government's alternative, using land of least ecological impact is worthy but hard to police and addresses a different issue.
4. Some acknowledgement of the need to protect undesignated countryside which accounts for many of our most precious landscapes.

At the moment we think the NPPF is too Market Driven. In an area like the West Midlands it has only been by encouraging development on urban sites that we have achieved regeneration in many of our most deprived communities. If we let developers dictate where development goes and open the prospect of more greenfield land we will undermine that progress. Sites like i54 on the edge of Wolverhampton where Jaguar-Landrover recently decided to put their engine site are only coming forward because of long term commitment to brownfield regeneration in the West Midlands

Regional Spatial Strategy and in the investment policies of Advantage West Midlands.

There is, of course, much we like in the NPPF. The retention of a town centre first approach, the references to light pollution and tranquillity as well as the support for Green Belt, albeit a rather too restrictive approach to new Green Belts.

However, there are also detailed areas where we raised concerns, such as the approach to Conservation Areas and the effective weakening of the policy on greenfield office development.

The West Midlands Group, as well as providing information for the National Campaign team and branches, has been busy putting out its own media releases on issues like brownfield land and has written to all our MPs.

As a result we got a good number of detailed responses and were able to correct misinformation and ensure MPs raised our issues with Ministers and in the House. We've had a number of meetings with local MPs which we believe will help build up CPRE's support in Parliament.

We are currently assessing all the responses to the NPPF consultation from Local Authorities and expect to publish our report. It is encouraging to read many of our concerns echoed in their replies. Now is the time for the Government to amend its draft so that we have a planning system which can deliver needed development and protect the countryside.

### *Housing and LDFs*

Throughout the year Local Authorities have been pursuing developments of their local plans. We have welcomed the review of housing by authorities, such as Birmingham, to protect the countryside but in other cases, such as Lichfield, there is a continuation of an outdated approach which threatens green field sites beyond what we think is necessary.

We continue to support Branches in their core work on local planning and are monitoring the role out of Core Strategies and housing development.

### *Abolition of RSS*



And, of course, there is one piece of unfinished business from the regional past. The Government's attempts to abolish Regional Spatial Strategies ended up in Court and they were required to produce Strategic Environmental Assessments of the Impacts. A consultation on drafts SEAs for each strategy runs until 20 January 2012.

The Government says these assessments are voluntary but we believe they are compulsory.

And the Government's defence is not a very satisfactory one. They claim the environment will be improved because the NPPF contains policies to protect the environment and because local authorities will want to ensure the protection of their local countryside in a way regional planners didn't. We know from practical experience that the later claim is not always true and the former is untested until such time as the final NPPF is produced.



It would have been far more satisfactory if the SEAs had looked at what was actually in emerging local plans to see if it was better than the RSS and considered policies in the RSS which are lost in NPPF, such as the brownfield first approach.

We are not arguing for the retention of RSSs. We know good policies, such as the urban regeneration focus of the West Midlands plan, were undermined by an obsession with theoretical housing numbers. But we do believe there is a case for retaining an appropriate level of strategic planning and perhaps more importantly we think the Government needs to admit

that it can only claim the abolition is good for the environment if it ensures both the NPPF and local plans deliver on their claims of protecting the countryside.

## **New Kids on the Block**

Along with the ending of RSS we have now seen the dismantling of almost all of the regional political architecture. There is still a small contingent of the Regional Assembly, renamed to West Midlands Councils who support local authorities across the region. There are also a number of officer groups still, notably the Regional Planning Officers Group which Gerald Kells was invited to sit on this year and is proving invaluable in keeping us informed.

We continue to liaise with environmental colleagues as part of the West Midlands Regional Sustainability Forum as well as through discussion with organisations such as Sustainability West Midlands.

And we are involved in the Futures West Midlands Network, an informal group of planners interested in strategic issues.

The new strategic organisations, principally the Local Enterprise Partnerships, are much more ad hoc than we are used to with little guidance from Government and their geographies fall somewhere between branch and regional level. In many cases they do not have the same ethos of inclusivity. But we are working hard to engage with them and ironically Government itself still operates some of its departments regionally. The Business department,

for example, has created 'BIS local' which follows the West Midlands regional boundaries.

### ***Local Enterprise Partnerships***

The six West Midlands Local Enterprise Partnerships are now more firmly established with boards in place, websites and in many cases sub-groups looking at areas like planning and transport. The business-led focus has led to these being largely closed to organisations outside the business sector.

Some are coming up with business friendly planning guidelines which often reiterate timescales for planning applications and other business bugbears. A few are considering overarching strategies but with local authorities on board these are going to have to reflect the local authorities' plans.

However, Government is keen that LEPs have a strategic focus and is supporting them with development money as well as naming them in documents like the draft NPPF.

Of concern to us will be both their public pronouncements and the privileged access they may have to key local authority decision makers. They are organisations which are in danger of falling between being business lobby groups and strategic policy makers.

In November we published our national report on LEPs which raised many concerns. We highlighted both good and bad examples of LEP behaviour. The Black Country LEP work, for example, is rooted in a

broad sub-regional strategy but arguably that is a legacy of regional plan making.

On the other hand the Greater Birmingham LEP has been promoting an Enterprise Zone around the conurbation which would inevitably threaten the Green Belt, including the sensitive M42 corridor through the Meriden Gap.

We will continue to engage with and challenge LEPs, working with relevant branches, but clearly there is a long way to go before we can say they are as a whole promoting the kind of sustainable development we would like.



### ***Local Nature Partnerships***

A similar ad hoc process has led to the setting up of Local Nature Partnerships. On the face of it these might be seen as a balance to LEPs, but their geography is very different and they are likely to vary in how much they are engaged with strategic planning and sustainability issues.

Many are focused on funding for biodiversity projects, such as Nature Improvement Areas.

These are still very young organisations and it will be for CPRE to seek to influence them to ensure

they take on board our landscape and countryside concerns and the wider sustainability issues and challenges beyond delivering local biodiversity improvements.

### ***Rural and Farming Networks***

Another key new player will be rural and farming networks. These will replace the Regional Rural Affairs Forums. There were two successful bids in this region. One for the Marches and Staffordshire, one for Worcestershire and parts of Warwickshire.

In both cases the bids were driven by the Rural Hubs and they are likely to include business organisations, such as the Country Land and Business Association and the National Farmers Union, as well as groups promoting social goals. CPRE will want to ensure engagement and representation from people directly interested in the beauty of the countryside but with the successful bids only just announced that is likely to be an on-going process.



### **Where are we going?**

Transport is still a critical issue for us and we remain engaged with CENTRO through its Stakeholder Group, but we are very aware that they only cover

part of the region. There are still big challenges in terms of road proposals, such as the Hereford Bypass. We know there are lobbyists who would like to revive other schemes, such as the Western Orbital Motorway, but the economic situation and the impact on the countryside for the moment seem to be staving such proposals off.

We have supported a number of sustainable transport initiatives, notably the Local Transport Sustainability Fund bid from CENTRO. We will be commenting shortly on their Freight Strategy, seeking to balance the economic need for freight with ensuring large lorries are kept off unsuitable roads.

We continue to promote major public transport improvements across the region and continue to argue for significant improvements to bus, rail and metro to meet the growing demand for public transport and reduce the need for car travel.

We joined the clamour against staff reductions at London Midlands Stations and that has brought some relief.

We welcomed the upgrade of New Street Station to get rid of the shabby station and allow more passengers to use it, but we are very aware that this provides no more platform space and we need wider rail investment if the whole region is to benefit.

### ***High Speed Rail***

The biggest transport proposal to hit our region is, of course, High Speed Rail. CPRE has been clear throughout the debate that significant rail

improvements are needed, both to meet demand for travel to London and the North and to free up the local West Midlands network, given the constraints at New Street.

In examining the first leg (from London to Birmingham) we would have liked the Government to look more carefully at other routes to ensure they picked the best option.

We welcomed the increased tunnelling proposed in the recent announcement but understand that this will be small comfort for areas of Warwickshire and Staffordshire facing major blight.

We are also very concerned about the Interchange Station with its massive car park drawing traffic from around the region and the potential for green field development around it.

We will continue to work with CPRE Nationally and our affected branches to get further mitigation on the route and we will continue to argue that it's no good building HSR without investing in the local rail network because that benefits the Birmingham NEC site and Birmingham City Centre but sees areas like the Black Country continue to suffer economically and sidelines cities such as Coventry.

Next year we will begin to see proposals further north, potentially two lines through Staffordshire forming the bottom of the 'Y' network to Manchester and Leeds. Along with our Staffordshire colleagues we will want to be sure there is a case for a segregated line and that the environmental impacts are fully accounted for.

## And what about the environment?

With so many planning and transport issues we could be overwhelmed but there are still big rural concerns which we are seeking to address.



### *Renewable Energy*

It looked like we were going to see a proliferation of Solar Energy farms reducing land for farming and blighting the countryside. We got one in Herefordshire but the changes in Government funding mean that more solar money is likely to go where it should, into local small scale domestic schemes.

The issue of on-shore wind turbines remains of concern with DECC and others still pushing for large numbers of new schemes despite the impact on the environment. Across the region branches face the prospect of new proposals, although thankfully not on the scale of some of our colleagues in counties such as Northumberland. To help provide a sound basis for challenging those proposals which do not meet our landscape standards we are going to be examining the landscape impact this year.

Of course, wind turbines need to be linked to the grid and Shropshire Branch has faced challenges to run power lines across the county to support Welsh turbines. They have been working hard to get these either removed or underground.

### ***Heritage***

This year we produced a major report on how heritage was assessed in local plans and along with landscape this is an area we consider particularly important.

It's not just the iconic buildings. The redevelopment of the Royal Hotel in Leamington Spa led to a significant loss of heritage but because of the battle we put up it looks like the Grand Central in Birmingham has avoided the same fate.

We are campaigning hard on local protection, for example challenging the less than fulsome support for new Conservation Areas in the draft NPPF. We continue to be represented on the West Midlands Historic Environment Forum and will work closely with colleagues in organisations such as English Heritage to try and protect important buildings in the countryside and our market towns despite the difficult economic times.

### **The Regional Group Moves On...**

When we wrote the last newsletter Richard Wise, our Vice Chair was standing in as Chair. Since then we've recruited a new Chair, Jerry Birkbeck.

Jerry's background is in landscape planning and his commitment and energy is very welcome.

We've taken the opportunity to review how we operate and decided to run our transport and rural sub-groups as e-groups but maintain our housing and employment group. We appreciate the demands on branch volunteers so want to make sure every trip to Birmingham is worth it. And we want to reflect our changing role in an increasingly diffuse sub-regional world.

We're also hoping to give more sub-regional and branch support, but that partly depends on recruiting new regional volunteers and we will be advertising this year for new Vice Chairs to support Jerry and Richard with particular emphasis on planning and volunteer development skills.



### **Regional Group Officers:**

Chair, Jerry Birkbeck  
Vice-Chair, Richard Wise  
Secretary, Nicholas Butler  
Treasurer, David Cashmore  
Webmaster, Mick Jeffs  
Planning and Environment  
Sub-Group Chair, Ian Jardin