

Panellist contribution by Andy Tickle

Panel 2 – CPRE summary

CPRE is a long established English NGO focused on threats to rural areas; our main mode of engagement is through the land use planning system. We have a network of county branches throughout England and a co-ordinating national office in London that also undertakes policy advocacy in Whitehall and beyond.

Currently the big issues facing the countryside (and hence CPRE) are changes to the planning system such as the 'localism' agenda, provision of affordable housing and meeting overall housing need without the need for urban sprawl, promoting local food webs and more environmentally-friendly agriculture, our usage of natural resources, including minerals and moving to a low carbon economy. The growth agenda of the current government, which also sees planning as a serious impediment, is a significant concern although attempts to improve local involvement in decision making are seen as a positive step.

We would see ourselves as a prominent part of any Big Environmental Society and we have been for decades. Our work at a local and regional level is predominantly carried out by concerned activists working in a voluntary capacity. Without this involvement of the main 'field organisation', CPRE's ability to engage, campaign, inform and educate, would be massively curtailed. We have 55,000 members across England and sister organisations in Wales and Scotland.

Our ability to pursue effective policy agendas and campaigns is also vitally dependent on forming coalitions at a range of levels: locally with small ad hoc activist groups (perhaps opposed to a particular development, e.g. a quarry), regionally with a range of agencies such as Natural England and also nationally with other large environmental NGOs such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, the RSPB etc on key issues such as new high speed railways. Other recent effective UK campaigns have also been organised by umbrella 'enabling' e-organisations such as 38degrees, who masterminded the opposition to selling off publicly-owned forests.

In terms of expectations, we expect the state to act on an evidence base, consult fairly, make decisions transparently and be responsive to public opinion. By and large, this happens. We also expect to work with like-minded government agencies, especially Natural England, on key topics of mutual concern. This has worked well, for example on the future of the green belt. Finally we expect to mirror the public's concerns for the rural environment and act as their champion. To do so effectively, we need to broaden our appeal and widen our supporter base. This requires better understanding of how we communicate key messages to the wider public.