

Roads to Regeneration?

New road building is frequently presented as essential for economic regeneration and prosperity. In the twenty-first century, making assumptions about such benefits needs to be challenged and replaced by robust analysis of the likely effects.



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Summary

Many proposals for new or widened roads are made on the basis of the economic regeneration benefits they will achieve. Understandably, this generates considerable support from the local business community and elected representatives eager to see their area prosper.

But how confident can we be that the provision of a new, or widened road will lead to significant benefits for the particular people living within the area affected? The evidence suggests that transport is, in fact, only one of a number of different factors which can influence local prosperity. Too frequently, assertions are made that a new road will support the local economy, without showing a clear link between the new road and the regeneration benefits.

The biggest study to examine the linkage between transport infrastructure and the economy was undertaken by the Government's Standing Advisory Committee on Trunk Road Assessment (SACTRA) in 1999. Their report and subsequent work has highlighted that broad generalisations about the economic benefits may be wide of the mark and that local factors can have a significant effect in determining whether the outcome is positive or negative for an area. Under some circumstances, policies aimed at traffic reduction can benefit the economy.

This report uses a number of examples from London, the West Midlands, South East, South West and North West to show how road schemes are being promoted with inflated, inadequate and unconvincing information to support them. Increasingly, such schemes are being challenged and found to be wanting.

It is in everyone's interests that damaging road schemes which won't deliver on their regeneration promises are scrapped. For Government, a desire to move towards more evidence-based policy making means more robust arguments will be needed in future. For the business community, there is a need for limited public funds to be directed towards schemes which deliver genuine benefits. And for anyone with an interest in the future of the countryside, it is vital that bogus arguments about economic regeneration are exposed and money ploughed into effective ways of sustaining the economy rather than more and bigger roads which encourage sprawling development.

This report highlights the need to put a large spotlight on assumptions made at national, regional, and local levels concerning the regeneration benefits of new road building. CPRE urges the Government and local authorities to apply the guidance published on *Economic Impact Reports* so that future decisions can be better informed and decisions on roads yet to be built reviewed. Ensuring we have the right information available on which to make decisions over new road schemes is critical if schemes of dubious merit are to be sent packing and those which could deliver genuine benefits are to be carefully assessed against other policy objectives, including protecting the countryside.

Paul Hamblin
Head of Transport and Natural Resources, CPRE
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New Roads – Old Assumptions

There may be many reasons why a new road is proposed, but frequently the enticement of new jobs and economic regeneration is among them. This may be the overriding objective of the road, or a supporting benefit. Regional and local economic interests soon appear to lend weight to this argument. Many local councillors are understandably attracted by proposals which are said to be capable of delivering jobs and economic benefits to their area. The Regional Development Agencies similarly can be strong advocates of new road building in the pursuit of regional competitiveness.

Major road schemes where the primary objective is economic regeneration

Region	Trunk Roads	Local Authority Roads	Total
South East	7	2	9
South West	1	2	3
East of England	3	3	6
West Midlands	2	6	8
East Midlands	1	3	4
Yorkshire & the Humber	1	6	7
North West	6	1	7
North East	1	4	5
Total	22	27	49

Source: Hansard, HoC, 13 Feb 2003, Col 898W

In February 2003, a response to a Parliamentary Question revealed that 49 major road schemes are being promoted principally because of their perceived economic benefits, while countless others will have regeneration as a secondary benefit. In August 2002, the then Transport Minister John Spellar in announcing £12 million for transport improvements in South Yorkshire and Merseyside, said ‘these improvements will contribute to the economic development and regeneration of the regions – improving sites for business, supporting local industry and helping to create jobs’.

Certainly rising traffic levels and congestion can hamper economic activity. The CBI estimates that billions are lost every year as a result. But will simply providing new infrastructure deliver the often quoted benefits? This report examines the evidence and finds that the debates to date are simplistic, and are often based on hear-say and untested assumptions.

Before decisions are taken on whether new road building is needed, it is critical that the benefits it is said to deliver are thoroughly tested. This is common sense before embarking on any major new infrastructure project, and critical before the Government is to be asked to support it. This has been reinforced by the modernising Government programme which has put increasing emphasis on the need for evidence-based policy making. Local communities are also rightly concerned by road building plans which threaten the countryside. They will be looking to public authorities to be able to provide firm evidence of the

economic consequences of a new or widened road. Only then, can a judgement really be made as to whether a new road is the right approach, or whether the cost (economic, social as well as environmental) is too high.

Before even considering the case for a new road, it is important that the economic implications of new road building are properly understood. The examples provided in this report illustrate the problems which can be encountered without such an understanding.

Transport and the Economy: Testing Assumptions

The Government, keen to establish the extent to which transport infrastructure could bring economic benefits, commissioned its expert advisors – the Standing Advisory Committee on Trunk Road Assessment (SACTRA) – to examine the issue. The SACTRA Committee comprises experts from academia, transport consultancy, and the business community, as well as an environmental representative. In the biggest study of its kind lasting three years, the Committee searched for evidence of the linkage.

Their final report *Transport and the Economy*, spanning over 300 pages, was published in June 1999. It focused on finding answers to key questions:

- do transport improvements lead to increased, or more efficient economic activity?
- can economic growth be de-coupled from traffic growth?
- is the situation different for peripheral areas?
- How can the appraisal of schemes be improved?

The findings of their report are highlighted below.

The main findings of the 1999 SACTRA Report were:

- local factors have a significant effect in determining whether a new or bigger road will deliver positive (or indeed negative) economic effects;
- the claims of national economic benefits from new roads are exaggerated;
- the distribution of the costs and benefits of new roads is a key issue which needs to be addressed;
- roads which link peripheral areas to more central locations risk undermining their own local economy; and
- traffic reduction policies can actually help the economy.

They illustrate that there are no easy answers to these questions and that generalisations about the economic benefits of road schemes can sometimes be way off the mark. The Government's response to the SACTRA report in May 2000 agreed that more work would be required to examine the economic effects of transport interventions, like new roads. One of the main conclusions was that an Economic Impact Report (EIR) should be produced for new road schemes to test whether their claimed economic benefits were genuine. The Government published in 2003, *Guidance on Preparing an Economic Impact Report*. This should become a key part of future transport appraisals. Meanwhile, however,

decisions over new road building are still being taken on the basis of dubious economic arguments where EIRs have not been produced.

Roads and improved economic efficiency

A new road, by improving access to an area the argument goes, will open up markets and development sites, generate jobs and aid regeneration. Surveys are then presented of local businesses many of whom happily subscribe to the view that inadequate transport links adversely affect their business. It might all sound plausible, were it not so simplistic.

A region's prosperity is dependent upon a range of factors, of which transport is but one. A good skills base, clear products, the level of entrepreneurship, a high quality environment, and a range of services to support employees and their families. The key issue is whether the provision of new transport infrastructure will make a direct difference to the local economy. Such 'cause and effect' relationships are frequently asserted, but rarely proven.

'Generalisations about the effects of transport on the economy are subject to strong dependence on local circumstances and conditions'

SACTRA 1999

The SACTRA Committee noted that local factors could have a big impact on the extent to which a new road would improve economic efficiency. If a new link road opened up a development site there is no guarantee that it would, in fact, be used. A report for the Department for Transport by consultants Steer Davis Gleave (2001) notes: 'In all cases, but especially where economic impacts are central to the case for the scheme, it is necessary to be able to demonstrate how the economic growth/development outcomes can be attributed to the transport scheme'.

There are some signs that this is now being understood. The East of England Development Agency (EEDA) *Infrastructure Benchmarking Study* (2000) notes that 'investment in infrastructure by itself will not deliver economic development or enhanced growth, except where lack of infrastructure is the major constraint on development'.

The quality of the countryside and wider environment should be an integral part of a regeneration programme too. A high quality environment is an important economic asset – for tourism, and supporting a healthy workforce. *The Valuing our Environment* report (2001) by the National Trust estimated that in rural areas, between 60-70% of tourism related jobs rely on a high quality environment. In the South West this generated 54,000 full time equivalent jobs. The South East Development Agency (SEEDA) *Regional Economic Strategy* (2002) notes that 'The current and potential contribution of the environment to the economy is not widely understood and there is a need to ensure it is embraced within regional and local strategies'. A survey by KPMG of over 800 top executives of foreign-owned firms found that quality of life was the main factor behind their reason to locate in the UK. Such thinking suggests a more sophisticated examination of the links between transport and the environment

will be required, which goes beyond simply mitigating the environmental impact of new infrastructure and which seeks to protect and improve the environment for its economic benefits.

Do bigger roads support Britain plc?

Nationally, investment in major new road schemes is seen as essential for the future prosperity of the country. But if such claims at a local level are uncertain, there is increasing evidence that at the national level such views are unfounded. SACTRA concluded that such claims were exaggerated. The Treasury too accepts that the stated benefits of new infrastructure have failed to materialise.

'Large scale public infrastructure investment, despite providing a short-term demand boost, has frequently failed to stimulate long term regional economic growth'

HM Treasury, *Productivity in the UK: (3) The Regional Dimension*

It is widely understood that inadequate information exists for assessing the wider national economic benefits of road building. As a consequence it is not covered in the Government's guidance on EIRs. This may not prevent some, however, from claiming direct links between economic prosperity and road building. But such assertions remain unclear and unproven.

The findings above are of critical importance to anyone involved in economic regeneration. Highway authorities, the Highways Agency, Regional Development Agencies, Regional Assemblies, planning authorities, Chambers of Commerce, CBI, HM Treasury and the Department for Transport should all take note if decisions are to deliver the intended benefits without damaging the countryside, or wider environment.

Is it possible to de-couple traffic levels from growth in the economy?

The Government's Progress Report on its Ten Year Transport Plan notes that traffic levels have risen faster than anticipated because of higher levels of economic growth. While this may be true, it does not necessarily follow that this need always be the case in future. If we are to make progress towards sustainable development, it is critical that any link between economic prosperity and traffic levels is broken.

'It is now widely accepted across the business sector as well as environmental interests that the link between economic growth and the growth in road traffic must be weakened'

South East Development Agency, *Regional Economic Strategy 2002*

SACTRA examined this issue and concluded that, while economic growth does have a strong effect on traffic growth, policies can influence the volume of traffic. Moreover, where the environmental damage caused by transport is not

properly covered in its price it will be possible for traffic reduction policies to 'increase economic welfare'. This situation applies to the UK where, according to the European Environment Agency, the price of motoring in 1991 only covered around 38% of the environmental damage and social costs caused by road transport (EEA, *Are we moving in the right direction?*, 2000).

New road building is often promoted on the grounds that it will alleviate congestion, and in so doing, reduce air pollution and delays. It follows that business costs will be reduced and the economy strengthened. This superficially attractive argument is flawed, however, since individual businesses are likely to see only marginal improvements in journey times as a consequence of major road building. The reason for this boils down to the Government's measurement of congestion which focuses on how fast a vehicle will travel (on average) compared with the posted speed limit. The Government concedes in its Progress Report on the Ten Year Transport Plan that congestion will continue to rise, perhaps by as much as 20% by 2010, even with the road building proposed. The national savings in congestion which the Government believes the plan can deliver are the result of a statistical exercise which adds up the millions of tiny time savings each motorist might receive in future years. The value to a business of saving seconds on a journey are questionable, especially given such savings can often be wiped out by bad weather, a road collision, or road works. The minuscule benefits frequently pale into insignificance compared with the long term environmental damage which could occur.

Who wins and who loses?

An important consideration with any proposed development is its distributional effect. This includes the impact which a new road will have on different geographical areas, industrial sectors, and income groups. Unfortunately many studies tend to describe the overall benefits to be gained from a new road, typically in terms of job creation. This hides the distributional effects and, in particular, fails to address how particular social groups or areas will be affected. For a road scheme to deliver genuine economic benefit, it will need to be shown how those in need of employment are actually going to benefit from the scheme. This requires an assessment of their aspirations and specific needs, against the suitability and accessibility of any employment opportunities which it is suggested would arise. At its simplest, an authority could find that a plan to generate significant numbers of new 'high-tech' jobs on the edge of an urban area actually benefits commuters living outside the area, since those living in the regeneration area may not possess the necessary skills and expertise to take up the jobs on offer. The experience of the Hastings study (see page 11) shows that a close examination of who will benefit, and who will lose out, as a consequence of new infrastructure can be quite a revealing exercise.

The Treasury appears to be increasingly interested in learning what the distributional effects of public projects will be. It's *Green Book on Appraisal* (sent to all Government departments), for example, notes, 'any distributional effects identified should be explicitly stated and quantified as far as possible. It follows from this that a rigorous analysis of how the costs and benefits of a proposal are spread across different socio-economic groups is recommended'.

Peripheral areas

New road building, the argument goes, will improve economic conditions of peripheral areas. In many regions, new roads are being proposed on the basis that they will reduce the peripherality of the area and so enhance its economic credentials. In the South West, Cornwall County Council has long argued that dualling the A303 through the Blackdown Hills (an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) was a necessary evil to reduce Cornwall's peripherality. In Norfolk, plans to dual the A47 through the Halvergate Marshes in the Broads National Park were promoted on the basis that 'there is a very strong argument for dualling to end the perception of remoteness of Great Yarmouth'. It was possible, therefore, to justify damaging a National Park in order to change 'perceptions'.

SACTRA's study examined this very point and noted that by increasing the capacity of the road network from a peripheral area to a more central location – traffic movements could increase in both directions. It is important to recognise that this might make it easier to service the needs of a region from the more central location (whether in the UK or Europe) and could, in fact, have the result of undermining local economies.

'there is no guarantee that transport improvement will benefit the local and regional economy at only one end of the route – roads operate in both directions, and in some circumstances the benefits will accrue to other competing regions'

SACTRA 1999

As a result, it is clear that without firm analysis of the likely effects, promoters of road building might be gambling with local jobs and businesses.

Case Studies

Northern Gateway Access Road – a lesson for all

The London Borough of Enfield promoted a Northern Gateway Access Road (NGAR) which would link a new regeneration site to the M25. The scheme aroused considerable controversy since it would plough through the Lea Valley Regional Park (an important green lung for London) and Ramney Marsh wildlife area. The scheme was considered at a public inquiry and the Borough made its case – which relied on the regeneration effects of the scheme.

The Inspector's report was highly critical of the case presented. He said: 'The evidence put forward to support the regeneration potential of NGAR is deeply flawed. It principally consists of a series of surveys recording general aspirations for better transport and less congestion, coupled with the letters of support from businesses. These however must be treated with great caution given that they represent the product of an exercise designed to generate supportive responses and carefully coordinated for the London Borough of Enfield by professional PR consultants. It is anyway difficult to identify a single one which explicitly says that an investment decision has actually been altered by the absence of NGAR.' (para 5.51, page 48)

The Inspector recommended that the scheme be dropped – a decision which the Secretary of State upheld. It was a costly and embarrassing lesson for those involved.

West Midlands Bypasses – desperately seeking evidence

Local authorities and the Regional Development Agency have long had aspirations to build a Strategic Western Bypass around the West Midlands conurbation. The road scheme (comprising bypasses for Stourbridge and Wolverhampton) would have run right through Green Belt land but was promoted on the basis of its regeneration benefits. A Government commissioned Multi-Modal Study recommended that the bypasses go ahead, yet failed to provide convincing evidence of their regeneration benefits. Hundreds of thousands of pounds was spent in a second study to highlight a positive economic case for the bypasses, this failed to provide a coherent argument for the scheme. Local campaigners, including CPRE stressed the distributional impact of the schemes, highlighting that they would suck out development from the urban area and simply lead to sprawling development.

The schemes were considered as part of the Draft Regional Planning Guidance for the West Midlands in 2002. A Panel examined the proposal in depth, taking evidence from those promoting the Western Bypasses as well as those opposed to it. They concluded 'In our view the importance of the Western Bypasses to the draft RPG's strategy for urban regeneration is far from proven... the Panel considers that the new roads would more likely lead to the release of greenfield sites outside the conurbation. Such development would in our view be more likely to encourage further decentralisation than to assist the areas of need'. This view was reflected in the Secretary of State for Transport's final decision

to reject the road schemes. The case of the Western Bypasses highlights the need for damaging schemes with dubious economic benefits to be dropped at an early stage, and for careful consideration to be given to the distribution of the costs and benefits of any new road.

Hastings Bypasses – evidence based decisions

The economic problems of the historic town of Hastings are well known, and stem from the decline in the ‘bucket-and-spade’ domestic tourism sector. West Sussex County Council, supported by the South East Regional Development Agency (SEEDA) and local businesses were lobbying for two bypasses which would service a new greenfield development at Bexhill. This would, it was claimed, spark the revival for Hastings. The schemes were considered in depth by the first of the Government’s ‘Multi-Modal Studies’. This highlighted that, depending upon the model used, the economic benefits would be minor and could even lead to a net loss of jobs to the area. What is more, the spatial distribution of effects means that those in most need (in Hastings town centre) would not have seen the stated benefits from a new out-of-town business park. In an important decision which sent shockwaves through the region, the Secretary of State decided that the claimed economic benefits of the schemes simply did not add up and rejected the bypasses while supporting public transport improvements and a town centre regeneration strategy. The Government is keen to develop more ‘evidence based’ policy making – which means that in future, other schemes around the country will need to clearly demonstrate, not simply assert, their potential economic benefits.

Weymouth Relief Road – overstating the case

For many years, Dorset County Council has proposed a new relief road for Weymouth. The coastal town, the Council believes, is being disadvantaged by congestion and a new relief road is considered essential to deliver economic improvements. The scheme – which would run through an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and threatens ancient woodland and a Site of Special Scientific Interest – has aroused considerable opposition. A big question mark hangs over the need for the new road.

Dorset County Council commissioned its own report on the economic benefits of the scheme, but it is felt that the case had been exaggerated. CPRE, Friends of the Earth and the Woodland Trust commissioned separate research to examine the County’s findings. This uncovered that Dorchester and Weymouth have an average unemployment rate of 1.6%, below the UK average of 3.2%, or even the average for the South West region of 2.0%. Furthermore, according to the Government’s Indices of Deprivation, Weymouth and Portland ranked 144th of 354 district and unitary authorities across the country. The County’s report crucially failed to examine the actual linkage between the provision of new tarmac and any changes in the local economy. It cannot be assumed, for example, that by increasing the accessibility to Weymouth through the new road, that this will necessarily lead to increased visits to attractions in the area. The road may in fact lead to leakage of tourism with local people travelling outside the area more, or others visiting the Weymouth area choosing to stay for shorter periods if access is made easier. What is needed is a ‘green tourism’ strategy which reduces dependence on the car.

The experience in Dorset highlights the need for Economic Impact Reports to consider how a new road will actually deliver economic benefits in practice. It highlights too, the tendency of authorities to overstate the economic needs of their area, or the benefits which a new road will achieve when seeking funding from Government. A proper means of quality control of EIRs is essential to address these problems.

A National Treasure – under threat

The Lake District National Park is a national treasure. Yet the recent decision by Government to support a 3.8km dualled bypass for High and Low Newton is likely to have a damaging effect on this special landscape. Cumbria County Council say in their Local Transport Plan that ‘the road is crucial to the area’s ability to retain its industry and regenerate its economy by attracting new investment’. Other bodies have, perhaps predictably, backed the case for a bypass too on the basis of its claimed economic benefits. The proposal for a bypass dates back to 1979.

CPRE recognises that the Furness area is in need of regeneration but the claim that highway improvement is the ‘magic key’ to opening all the benefits associated with economic regeneration has never been substantiated. Again, the causal link between the provision of a new road, and economic prosperity has not been made. Certainly, there hasn’t been evidence shown that the wider economic benefits expected from its construction could not be obtained at a lower cost (financially and environmentally) by other means.

Interestingly, the Government’s decision in October 2003 to give this scheme the go-ahead did not appear to be based on any of the regeneration arguments. Instead, the decision focused on the role of the bypass in removing traffic from the villages of High and Low Newton and thereby improving safety. The Government’s decision to omit any mention of regeneration in their decision, despite local support on these grounds, suggests that it remains unconvinced by the claims of regeneration benefits.

Delivering Sustainable Development in Regeneration

CPRE believes it is critical that Government policy continues to promote an urban renaissance. This should deliver tangible benefits in terms of enhanced quality of life in urban areas and a countryside protected from sprawling development. New road schemes through open countryside which it is claimed would deliver economic regeneration need to be subject to the most stringent scrutiny. A failure to do this will mean damaging road schemes are promoted which don't match up to the exaggerated expectations attached to them. At worst, they could actively undermine local economies in urban areas and peripheral regions.

A broader perspective

Transport policy should be consistent with policies to deliver urban regeneration and improve quality of life, rather than encouraging sprawl. If we are to deliver benefits to the deprived communities of our towns and cities, it is critical that policies are directed to improving those very areas. This may seem blatantly obvious yet, as the examples in Hastings and the West Midlands illustrate, sometimes regeneration areas are defined miles away from those most in need. Either those on low incomes would need to spend considerable money travelling to access the new job opportunities or, more likely, the jobs will be filled by people living elsewhere.

It is important that regeneration programmes start from a firm understanding of the needs of an area. While a new road may be a key issue in some locations, frequently the answers to effective regeneration lie in improvements elsewhere. Skills training, more demand responsive public transport services, lower business rates, improved child care facilities or the development of niche markets may all have more of an impact on economic prosperity, depending upon the circumstances of the area. In the rural environment this should also mean more discerning development which is designed to meet specific needs and recognises the importance of a high quality natural environment for future economic success.

Integrated transport

The Government's Transport White Paper recognised that any new transport interventions should be assessed for their impact on a wider range of factors than was previously the case. Each proposal should be consistent with the Transport White Paper and assessed using the New Approach to Appraisal (NATA). NATA includes analysis of the effects on environmental, safety, accessibility, integration with other government policies and economic issues. Even when economic benefits are found to occur, therefore, it will be necessary to consider these alongside effects on other priorities, particularly environmental protection.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is clear that, in future, it will be insufficient simply to assert that a new road will deliver economic benefits. Before decisions are made on new or widened roads, which could be potentially highly damaging to the environment, an Economic Impact Report should be prepared. The Government has said that Economic Impact Reports will now be required, these should help:

- inform decision making, in keeping with the drive towards evidence-based policy making;
- separate information on the genuine economic benefits of new roads from the more spurious arguments;
- enable proper consideration to be given to the distributional effects of new roads on different income groups and geographical areas;
- avoid developments being promoted which have serious environmental consequences but which are justified on the basis of inadequate information of their economic and social benefits; and
- assist in assessing the value for money of new road schemes against other transport alternatives.

Reforms in the appraisal and scrutiny of the economic implications of new road building are needed before decisions are taken on future schemes. There are, however, a number of road schemes where millions of pounds of public money have been earmarked where no EIR has been undertaken. These need to be urgently reviewed to ensure the benefits asserted for the scheme are genuine and that the schemes are consistent with wider Government objectives.

In particular, CPRE recommends:

- the Government should publish the procedures for enabling public consultation as part of the EIR process;
- Ministers should undertake not to approve controversial road schemes where inadequate evidence exists of economic benefits or where the environmental damage is overwhelming;
- EIRs should be produced and decisions reviewed for all schemes in the national roads programme, as well as local authority road schemes which have been approved or provisionally approved, where regeneration is one of the main claimed justifications for the scheme;
- Regional Development Agencies, the Highways Agency, and Regional Planning Bodies should stipulate that EIRs will be required before plans for major road schemes are proposed for inclusion in regional spatial plans or investment strategies;

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- Highway Authorities should review road building proposals in their Local Transport Plans and any additions in their Annual Progress Reports (APRs), to provide robust assessments of the economic effects of the schemes, and should publish their findings; and
 - an independent panel of experts should be established to provide a means of quality control and external verification of EIRs, and improve overall expertise in this area at national, regional and local levels.

Further Information

Transport and the Economy, Standing Advisory Committee on Trunk Road Assessment (SACTRA), 1999

The Government's Response to the SACTRA Report on 'Transport and the Economy', Department of Transport, Environment and the Regions, 2000

Guidance on Preparing an Economic Impact Report, Department for Transport, 2003

Economic Impact Reports for Road Schemes: a CPRE campaign briefing, CPRE, 2003

a CPRE campaign report

CPRE exists to promote the beauty, tranquillity and diversity of rural England by encouraging the sustainable use of land and other natural resources in town and country. We promote positive solutions for the long-term future of the countryside and to ensure change values its natural and built environment. Our Patron is Her Majesty The Queen. We have 59,000 supporters, a branch in every county, nine regional groups, over 200 local groups and a national office in central London. Membership is open to all. Formed in 1926, CPRE is a powerful combination of effective local action and strong national campaigning. Our President is Sir Max Hastings.

Campaign to Protect Rural England
128 Southwark Street
London SE1 0SW

Tel: 020 7981 2800
Fax: 020 7981 2899
Email: info@cpre.org.uk
www.cpre.org.uk

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