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**CONTRIBUTORS** Geoff Carverhill,  
Graham Ferrie, Prof. Mike Alder FRAGS

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## 1 Chairman's Update

*Welcome to the new-look Outlook.*

*We intend to have at least three issues a year, with an easily accessible 'Outlook online' on our website. We also now have an Instagram page running alongside our Facebook page.*

As usual, there has been plenty to do at CPRE Northamptonshire. Our volunteers have been extremely busy with requests for advice on what I can only describe as a barrage of planning enquiries, resulting in our technical secretaries responding to major planning and environmental issues. It seems that developers are pushing harder and faster to get hold of their piece of Northamptonshire, whether it be solar farm applications, or major projects such as new logistics threats. Much of our current activity is as a result of the bizarre and undemocratic government mandates that will effectively industrialise vast areas of the English countryside. This has recently culminated in an internal struggle between Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, Ed Miliband's 'net zero by 2030' crusade and Chancellor Rachel Reeves' growth at any cost' agenda.



**In recognition of 40 years of planning advice and support, Alan Mayes is presented with his award from CPRE's Lizzie Bundred-Woodward.**

We are, however, doing our best to support ongoing campaign groups such as STAUNCH at Titchmarsh and Save Towcester Now, both of whom are fighting logistics applications, as well as the campaign group fighting the Kettering Energy Park development, and now 'RAW – Rothwell Against Warehousing'. Although we achieved a success in the Towcester application being rejected by 11 votes to 1 by the WNC Strategic Planning Committee, the applicant, DHL, has appealed and an inquiry is to be held during February. The fight goes on!

On a calmer note, we are delighted to feature the artwork of Northamptonshire artist and illustrator, Carry Akroyd, which we hope will offer a positive glimpse of the county from a different perspective. Also, at our last Planning Roadshow, held at Great Houghton in September, we said a big thank you to Alan Mayes, our Honorary Planning Technical Secretary, with a CPRE national award for long-service - 40 years of providing planning advice and support. The award was presented by Lizzie Bundred-Woodward, from CPRE national office.

Thanks to all our volunteers and trustees for their efforts. Now, where did I put my planning blockers cudgel?

**Geoff Carverhill**



**Middle England came out in force to protest at the DHL application at Towcester in September 2024.**

## ② Ground-mounted solar power – short-term profits and the uncomfortable truths

**by Geoff Carverhill**  
**Photos: Shutterstock**

In our Spring 2024 edition of Outlook, Brian Skittrall reported on one of the most serious environmental threats to our county - proposals for a massive 500MW, 4.63 square mile, or 2,965 acre industrial solar farm on seven sites, enveloping the villages of Walgrave, Holcot, Moulton, Mears Ashby, Earls Barton, and wrapping around Easton Maudit, Grendon and Warrington near Olney. The developer, Green Hill Solar Ltd is part of Island Green Power Ltd, who has similar schemes in East Anglia, Spain, Australia and New Zealand and are now part of Macquarie Asset Management of Sydney, Australia.

Since the scheme was announced, a lot has emerged regarding the potential long-term damage it will cause, not only to the environment and affected countryside, but also the knock-on effects to farming and associated rural businesses. Perhaps the principal concern, which is worrying many pundits in the farming industry if this scheme, and others like it in other regions go ahead, is that of the nation's food security.

The government's tunnel-visioned intransigence to farming in general, but in particular to food security, is concerning, but its lack of concern, or understanding, about the long-term effect on our finite land resources, is very worrying. The fact that, from an aesthetic point of view, thousands of glinting, shiny PV solar panels, a mixture of low-mounted and 'as tall as a two-story suburban house-sized' tracker panels, will make the Hubble telescope look like a Ford Focus door-mirror, is neither here nor there when it comes to our ability to feed ourselves!

In the Autumn of last year CPRE Northamptonshire supported the cross-county steering group 'STOP Greenhill Solar', which was formed to co-ordinate opposition to the scheme, by attending Saturday morning meetings at village halls. The response from local people, and in particular from farmers, was palpable, with food security a main concern. Generally, farmers want to do what they do best – farming, but it is understandable that many are seeking other sources of income, for example, by leasing their land for solar projects. But our understanding is that this is not the case with a majority of farmers, as 64% of farmers in the UK, according to the Tenant Farmers Association and the campaign group UK Solar Alliance, are tenant farmers. The majority of land being made available for ground-mounted solar projects in the UK is owned by absentee landlords and big country estates. In Northamptonshire's case it is Oxford University who own vast swathes of land around Mears Ashby and Earls Barton, and Compton Estates, whose forfeiting of land around Easton Maudit and Grendon will wipe out farmland and associated businesses in one fell swoop. Around 2,000 acres of the 2,965 acres targeted by Island Green Power is 'Best and Most Versatile' agricultural land.

## Why is this happening? What are the alternatives?

So, why is this happening and what are the alternatives to ensure food security and ensure we meet the UK's net zero targets? The why is simple: Opportunistic developers have seen the enormous profits that can be made in providing ground-mounted solar. According to UK Solar Alliance, "billions of pounds of profit are the attraction, not Net Zero targets". 'Inward investment' from offshore hedge funds, raising questions about provenance and control, is focusing on the UK as a prime target for massive profits, for relatively small outlay.

Despite substantial compensation packages being offered to tenants, the grim scenario is that many tenant farmers' businesses will cease. If, for example, half of a farmer's land is owned and half is tenanted, the tenanted land that is leased to a developer for ground-mounted solar can make the rest of the farmland unviable. One local farmer, although unwilling to go on record, was keen to paint a picture, as seen through his eyes:

"Farming is the biggest job in the world! ... If 1,000 acres of wheat are buried under solar, we would no longer produce enough wheat to feed, for example [a town like] Wellingborough, i.e. 70,000 people = 30,000 homes. That's two loaves of bread per household, per week! Where's that 1,000 acres going to come from?"



**Ground-mounted solar panels.**

Other 'knock on' effects include supplies to companies such as Weetabix, a local Northamptonshire company that prides itself on being able to buy wheat for its breakfast cereals within a fifty mile radius of its production facility at Burton Latimer.

Some farmers, such as Nick Wright, commenting on the BBC Politics Live programme in April 2024, about a 2,500 acre Sunnica NSIP solar application in Cambridgeshire, stated:

"We must protect our food self-sufficiency. In 1984, we were 78% self-sufficient; in 2024 we were 60% self-sufficient. With our food sufficiency targets falling, we cannot afford to lose land."

The commonly trotted out factually inaccurate statement that the renewables industry make is that the land is only a 'temporary loss'. This is nonsense. Nick Wright's last comment echoes those of CPRE and other campaign organisations, "If land is covered up for between 40 and 60 years, it is lost forever!"

So, what are the alternatives? This industrialisation of our countryside will affect all our lives if the current trend is not reversed. CPRE acknowledge that solar power is a key source of renewable energy that can bring us closer to net carbon zero quicker, by using domestic and industrial building rooftops instead of ground-mounted solar. Our report, 'Shout from the rooftops: delivering a common sense solar revolution', published in May 2023, was backed up by a study from the UCL Energy Institute. The research found that 60-70 percent of the 2035 target for solar power could be achieved with a 'rooftop first' approach. Rooftop solar is now becoming the norm in European countries: Italy has banned solar on farmland and in France it is mandatory for all new car parks with 80 spaces or more to have a roof-mounted solar installation. CPRE will continue to try to influence government to do the right thing. We can, and must have food security through farming as well as renewable energy sources.

The answers are there, for those who want to listen!

## ③ Government policies leading to food insecurity

**By Prof. Mike Alder FRAGS – UK Solar Alliance**

Steve Reed, the Secretary of State for the Environment, said at the recent Oxford Farming Conference that food security is national security. Unfortunately, government policies are heading the UK towards food insecurity.

The way the country uses its land is the central point in the food security debate. Land area is finite and land use is changing at a rapid rate. Relaxation in planning guidance (NPPF National Planning Policy Framework) will make it easier to transfer agricultural land to other uses. In particular, plans to build more homes on so-called grey belt could have a big impact. Recently the countryside charity CPRE pointed out that 11 percent of farmland is in green belt, yet this area produces a disproportionately high amount of food. CPRE suggests that this land yields a fifth of the country's cereals, 14 percent of potatoes and 13 percent of milk. A lot of land loss to farming is associated with the drive to net zero. Natural England have suggested in a recent report that food production could decline by 25 percent if measures to meet the most ambitious targets are enacted.

There are some measurable and significant land use changes. The area of utilized agricultural area was 18 million hectares in 2005 but is now 17 million hectares and declining. Land being used for energy purposes is one of the main drivers of change. In 2023 133,000 hectares of agricultural land was used to grow bio energy crops and it is suggested that this will increase by 23,000 hectares a year. Solar farms currently account for 30,000 hectares and to hit net zero targets will require at least 84,000 hectares if this increase is land based.

This means that in the next few years 8 percent of the croppable area of the UK could be lost. In addition, housing targets of 1.5 million homes could lead to a further loss of 48,000 hectares plus additional infrastructure impacts.

The main government agricultural policies revolve around the Higher Tier Countryside Stewardship Scheme and the Sustainable Farming Initiative. These schemes are admirable environmental policies but, in many cases, will lead to lower food production levels or remove farmland completely in, for example rewilding schemes.

There is therefore an urgent need for a national land use strategy that has been long promised but has not been delivered. This strategy must protect valuable food producing land and include proposals for a better system of measuring such land.

The UK produces 60 percent of all the food it consumes but when food exports are included the figure falls to 54 percent. To maintain this level of sufficiency will require more production on less land and this is unlikely since crop yields have been reasonably consistent over the last twenty years. Indeed 2024 yields were significantly down: wheat by 20 percent, oil seed rape by 32 percent and potatoes by 9 percent. Weather extremes resulting almost certainly from climate change caused these reductions. Climate change is undoubtedly the elephant in the room when it comes to UK food production.

There are other factors affecting UK food self-sufficiency, not least population. The UK population is 68 million and is set to increase to around 74 million by 2026 primarily fueled by net migration currently over 700,000/year.

Less land in production and more mouths to feed means more food importation, which could soon become 50 percent of our national food needs. An analysis of where the UK imports its food from shows a considerable vulnerability of supply for a number of products with climate change being a significant factor. Reliance on food imports is a dangerous policy when it comes to food security.

Government must put home based food production at the heart of its rural policies. These policies must include the production of a strong land use strategy with an appropriate land grading system. The strategy must have a proper balance between environmental schemes and those relating to food production. Other factors such as inheritance tax affecting small family farms need to be reconsidered.

If changes are not made, then current policies will lead to food insecurity. In the short term this will be seen by food price inflation and food poverty and in the medium to long term by food shortages.



Mike Alder was founder chair of the UK Solar Alliance campaign group, which is currently working closely with CPRE national office on the many issues facing the destruction and potential industrialisation of farmland in the UK by ground-mounted solar.



## ④ Housing - Getting the numbers right

Graham Ferrie asks:

*'Is it now time to take a fresh look at housing forecasts?'*

Photographs: Geoff Carverhill

Our current Government seems to be mesmerised by the imperative of building new houses. This isn't new. The last Government was similarly inclined. This impacts our countryside dramatically where land owners see possibilities of making huge profits by selling their land to housebuilding. I visited the potential site for 850 new houses in the farmland gap between Grange Park and Quinton in Northamptonshire. The housing development being proposed would replace arable land with an urban settlement. Grange Park would join onto Quinton, with Foxfields Country Park sandwiched in the middle. If WNC approves this application, it would mean the disappearance of Quinton's character and status as a separate village. The development should be refused, as it was previously, but is now at high risk of being approved because of the Government's promise to build 1,500,000 new homes in their term of office. This is pure vandalism of the rural environment and is very much centre stage on CPRE's agenda.



The central core of the thinking is that if the Housing Market supply is increased the price declines. This is basic economics but in the case of housing, the market dynamics are far too complex for such naïve thinking.

It is evident that the Housing Market is highly price inelastic. That means that even if a huge building programme were to take place it is highly unlikely that the price of housing would decrease. The main consequence of the current Government's building programme is to keep the developers from going bust. The risk of this creating excess housing will not harm the developers (developers don't build unless they can sell!) but it will impact current housing stock. The counter arguments seem to have been studiously ignored. However, they can be unearthed.

Our current problem with housing is extremely complex. It is therefore very helpful to start by reflecting that housing has a dual function: it is a place to live, but it is also an asset that pays a return in the form of the owner occupier not having to pay rent.

If total housing stock is forecast to fall short of total households, then clearly, you must build. But historically total housing stock has exceeded total households by 3 to 5 percent. The emphasis on building large numbers of dwellings lies in the forecasting which consistently over-estimates building needs. This is a problem of methodology. Just look at the WNC HENA (West Northamptonshire Housing and Economic Needs Assessment). The HENA over forecasts population growth and refuses to consider the possibilities of a declining population (and hence housing needs). This is against a background of many developed countries (including China) waking up to the fact that fertility rates are falling and a reduction in population is inevitable.



**New housing at Overstone near Moulton. Nicely laid out and built, but not a solar roof panel to be seen!**

Digging into the detail reveals a rather worrying fudge. West Northamptonshire Council is in the process of building its Consolidated Local Plan through to 2041. Within the HENA is some important information which is from the Office of National Statistics. (It is table 42 in section 8.1.49 if you want to check).

This tells us that in 2011 there were over 5,000 more houses than households, but this reduced to 4,100 in 2021.

What is interesting is that the numbers for excess stock are not shown in the document. It seems to be an inconvenient fact that we have, for the last ten years an EXCESS of housing. Indeed, the discussion goes on to state that "supply has not been able to keep up with demand" even though the numbers show otherwise. The rest of section 8 jumps through hoops to align this picture with the 'required' picture set by central Government in the Planning Policy Guidance (PPG), which matches the 300,000 figure.

So, an EXCESS of 4,100 dwellings in 2021 (which has been more or less consistent for ten years) leads to the conclusion that WNC must build 2,173 MORE houses each year to 2041. In my view that is simply illogical.

To find the source of the problem we must look at the building cartels. These are groups of developers who lobby Parliament and Government to secure the future of their own businesses. Such is the common functioning of British business. The problem lies in the biased cases being voiced by the developers and the (well evidenced) financial support given to the political parties that colours the thinking.

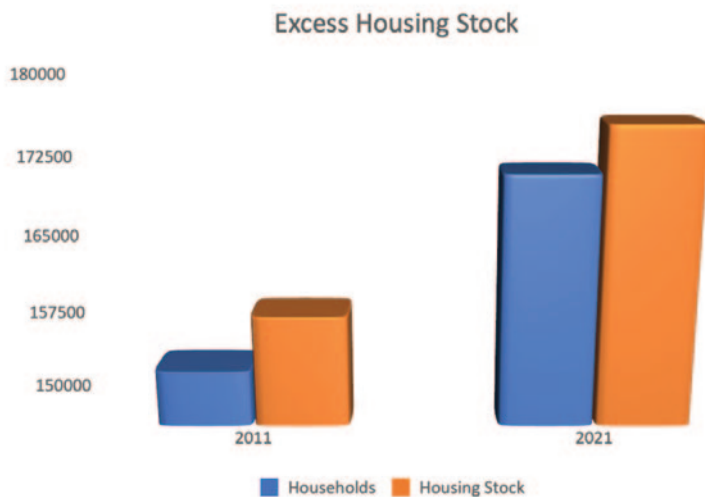
It seems to me that the government's target of building 300,000 houses a year is simply unsupported by any facts. It is a made-up number.

Two more points:

1. This is not just WNC. The methodology is driven by the National PPG. All local authorities are required to do the same or the plan will not be approved by the planning inspector. What we end up with is Soviet style central planning. It must be pretty demoralising for the planning staff at local authority level.

2. We know that the house builders will not build unless they know they can sell. In Quinton's case the developer will only build to real demand. As 850 dwellings are likely to flood the market, they will be relying on inward migration to fill the gap, but the surrounding counties are likely to be in the same situation (particularly Cambridge).

Where will the buyers come from?



# 5 Profile – Carry Akroyd – Artist and Illustrator

by Geoff Carverhill

Carry Akroyd is a Northamptonshire painter and printmaker living in the village of Luddington in the Brook, a few miles from where she was born. In her beautifully illustrated 2017 book 'Found in the Fields' she describes the landscape and countryside where she lives as 'nowhere special' and an 'understated landscape'. But it is her connection with the landscape and countryside and her affection for the poetry of John Clare that informs her artwork. It is dynamic, colourful and unique. Landscape and wildlife are her usual subjects and as a keen bird-noticer, birds usually fly into her artworks. But she is not afraid of painting what she sees, so occasionally windfarms, tractors and trucks on dual carriageways will snake through her artworks, alongside the flowers, birds and wildlife of Northamptonshire.

As an illustrator, Carry has created black-and-white and colour illustrations for poetry collections, including two for the John Clare Society, as well as natural history books and many book covers. Her prints illustrate the long-standing Bird of the Month column in *The Oldie*, written by John McEwen. Carry and John's first book, *A Sparrow's Life's as Sweet as Ours*, was published by Bloomsbury in 2019 as was her latest, *Swoop Sing Perch Paddle*, published in 2024, with words also by John McEwen.

Last Autumn, Carry had an exhibition of her work at the Heseltine Gallery at Middleton Cheney. I spoke to her about her connections with the countryside, her influences and the Northamptonshire poet John Clare:

"When Clare was young he saw the effects of the enclosures on his parishes – the trees and hedges that he was really familiar with were eradicated. I saw a very similar thing to that happening 200 years later, when intensification of farming rapidly changed the landscape that I had grown up with... Favourite trees vanished, hedges disappeared, ponds got filled in and basically it went from mixed farming to being arable, and there was really high subsidies on wheat, so every square inch that could be ploughed up and have wheat on it was sacrificed.



Carry Akroyd at her Autumn 2024 exhibition in the Heseltine Gallery.



**Arable Fox – “Mr Fox is a favourite emblem for me; he symbolises surviving on the margins against all odds. Unlike the plentiful urban foxes with take-aways at close hand, in arable country the fox has huge territories.**

“Clare actually writes about keeping grain prices low, because when the grain prices go high, it is nature that pays the price. In the mid-1980s to mid-90s, all down the eastern side of England, farming was being turned over to arable... They [now] realise that mixed farming is better for the soil.”

Akroyd cites recent initiatives that have changed farmers' way of working: “There was the entry-level stewardship that allowed set-aside around the edges of fields [for wild flowers, which benefits crops by allowing pollinators to feed on flowering plants, which in turn attracts insects that pollinate some of the crops]. That was brilliant, but as soon as that stopped [the subsidies] they ploughed those strips back up again, and now there are different incentives... there's less deep ploughing, [for example]... I live on the edge of the fens, and in the bit of the fens that John Clare knew, and I know, the peat has almost gone away, so they recognise that things have got to change.”

**To find out more about Carry, and to buy her books, see <https://carryakroyd.co.uk/publications/>**

