

# CPRE Essex AGM: Chairman's Report

October 2021

With Covid, the past year has been very different for all of us and most challenging. However, when I reviewed the strategy we unveiled last year and judged our progress towards these aims, I hope you will agree that it certainly has not stopped us in many areas. We have just had to work differently.

Our aims were:

## **Connect people and the countryside**

Lockdown has seen many people, myself included, exploring the countryside by necessity both for exercise and well-being and that certainly has been the case in Essex. In fact, the Essex Way, which was conceived by CPRE, will be very much in the public eye next year as we are currently planning events to mark its 50th year.

## **Promote health and well-being projects**

Earlier this year we ran a series of Zoom presentations with guest speakers. On six dark winter and early spring nights we went round the world's wildlife through the lens of a camera, explored the Stour Valley AONB, visited our favourite Essex churches, explored Essex wildflowers, went to the oyster beds of Brightlingsea and, finally, viewed a famous water mill with all its history. Audiences grew and grew with each presentation.

## **Work with local and national government. Lobby governments, national and local**

With the proposed changes to be made to the planning laws that are due to be presented to Parliament this autumn via a White Paper, national CPRE has been taking a leading role, supported by the county branches, to try to ensure that fertile Essex arable land is not all built on.

We also sent out our aims and aspirations to all the prospective candidates in the local elections in May, expressing what we thought was very important if they were elected. This had a good response and formed the basis of a large contact list of local government councillors. Clearly, climate change was one of the major issues.

## **Work with or promote other applicable organisations**

Our website has gone from strength to strength during the year. By adding links with social media platforms, we now regularly attract audiences of a 1,000 hits a month. Key to this success is our hard-working communications expert and also the ever-changing content of the website. One such area of content is our conduit with other organisations including RCCE, Essex Police, local church organisations, Young Farmers *etc.*

## **Increase membership**

Whilst this has not increased a great deal during the year, it is fair to say that, unlike many other charity-based organisations, our membership has remained stable. What we are now very conscious of is promoting to non-members when they call upon us for help is that we are a charity and this in itself has helped to create new members.

However, our main area of concern is our lack of young members. I hope that this may be alleviated when many of the national-based initiatives take place post-Covid.

### **Grow our capacity**

Clearly, we need to grow our capacity in Essex if we are to give our members the service they deserve. This is at all levels. From our vice presidents to volunteers for specific projects. To that end, we are just embarking on the use of the new national recruitment system.

### **Other areas of business**

Throughout the year we have been instrumental in providing help and guidance on numerous planning applications. We have helped in the creation of several Local Plans, made inputs into the London Green Belt organisation, our CPRE regional office, Thames estuary development issues, Oxford-Cambridge Arc, solar farm proposals *etc.*

### **Looking Forward**

Events to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Essex Way will give us some good publicity in the coming year and these will be supported by National Office.

We will continue to lobby government as and when necessary.

Development of our website will continue, as will our use of other media messaging such as local radio and newspapers.

Post-Covid/Brexit and planning changes will provide many challenges for CPRE both at national and local level, but the biggest challenge of all will be climate change. I believe CPRE can become a very powerful organisation, making educated proposals in this area and maybe it will help attract younger members.

David N Knight