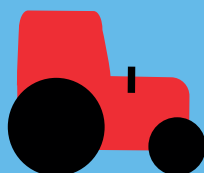


21st Century Countryside

7 'What if?' Questions for the future of West Yorkshire



Pages	
2	What if every land-use decision was a positive one for the countryside?
3 - 4	What if everyone in West Yorkshire lived within 15 minutes' walk of green, open space?
5 - 6	What if the M62 industrial corridor became full of wildlife and of places for people to connect with it?
7 - 8	What if we designed West Yorkshire as a natural carbon and water storage system?
9 - 10	What if we really did get to net-zero carbon by 2038?
11 - 12	What if West Yorkshire's countryside became famous as a place of inspiration?
13	What if the countryside really counted in decision-making?
14	Conclusions

This document was prepared by Stride Works Ltd on behalf of CPRE West Yorkshire, 58 Alexandra Crescent, Birkdale Road, Dewsbury, West Yorkshire WF13 4HL
Charity number: 500481

Andrew Wood | Planning Consultant and Author

What if every land-use decision was a positive one for the countryside?

Introducing the 21st Century Countryside

21st Century Countryside is CPRE's initiative to start a conversation about the future of West Yorkshire's countryside, and what we can do together to shape it. It poses a set of 'What if?' questions, and we want to talk to lots of people and organisations about how to answer them.

A 21st Century Countryside centres on the process of restoration. We have to make the 21st century about restoring natural systems and equitable ways of living. We also need it to be enjoyable and fruitful.

What, you may ask, can West Yorkshire do about that? And what can West Yorkshire's countryside do about that? After all, it's a tiny corner of the planet, and it's mostly urban, isn't it?

In fact, two thirds of all land in West Yorkshire is in the countryside. It's amazingly diverse, from the wilds of Ilkley Moor to the manicured estates of Nostell and Harewood, to the ex-industrial wetlands of Fairburn and Swillington Ings; and all the arable and livestock farmland in between.

And when local communities come to CPRE for help in protecting their countryside against a development that's of the wrong type or in the wrong place, they want to protect very specific things: a habitat for local wildlife; a landscape that tells a story over generations; a dark sky. Increasingly, they're also concerned about opportunities that they fear will be missed - opportunities for their children and grandchildren to reconnect to nature, and explore their neighbourhood without danger from road traffic; and opportunities for houses, businesses and shops to be built together in safe, walkable, climate-friendly communities.

This is why we've called our vision 21st Century Countryside. In the 21st century, more people need to live, learn, work and play in West Yorkshire, so they need the countryside more than ever. There's no such thing as a trade-off between providing the buildings people need and protecting the countryside - the only realistic option is to do both simultaneously, in an integrated way. It's all about using land positively.

Andrew Wood - Planning Consultant

What if everyone in West Yorkshire lived within 15 minutes' walk of green, open space?



The more people live in West Yorkshire, the more we need to care for and equip our habitat to support them.

Conventionally, the priority for decision-makers has been to promote economic growth, and to accept a degree of trade-off to achieve it. But that school of thought has not kept up with the times, as cutting-edge economists like Kate Raworth are clearly showing. Raworth's Doughnut Economics model describes economic development as being dependent on a social foundation - education, wellbeing, equality etc; and an environmental ceiling - beyond which the carrying capacity of the environment to sustain us begins to break down. In practice, we know that we have already breached the ceiling and we also know there are problems with the foundations, so both social and environmental restoration are essential and urgent.

Crucially, environmental and social restoration are activities in themselves, which generate employment. Furthermore, as two-thirds of our land is countryside, the role of that land in social and environmental restoration provides a huge opportunity.

Restoring the countryside for people means reconnecting everyone with what the countryside means for them.

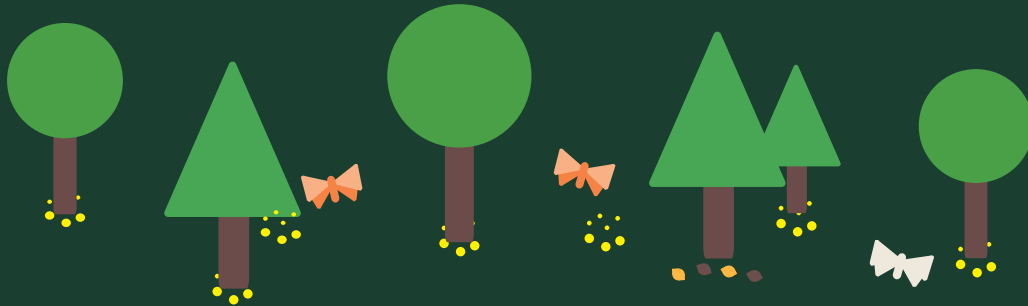




At present, local authorities are required to plan for new housing and employment on the basis of numerical targets, but the missing link is how we actually want places to change as a result of that development. For example, the centres of small towns like Dewsbury and Brighouse need a new lease of life, but most new development is planned for beyond their edges in the countryside, and town centre regeneration is treated as a separate issue.

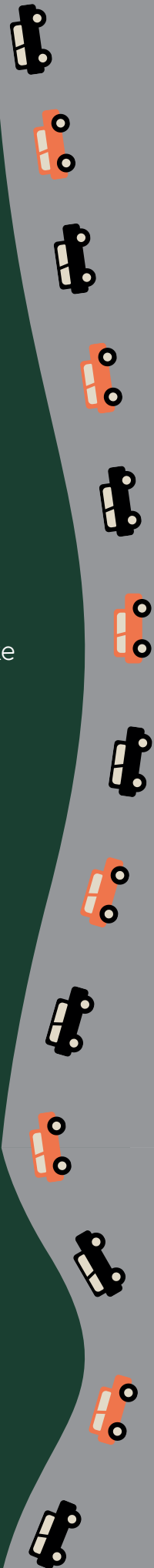
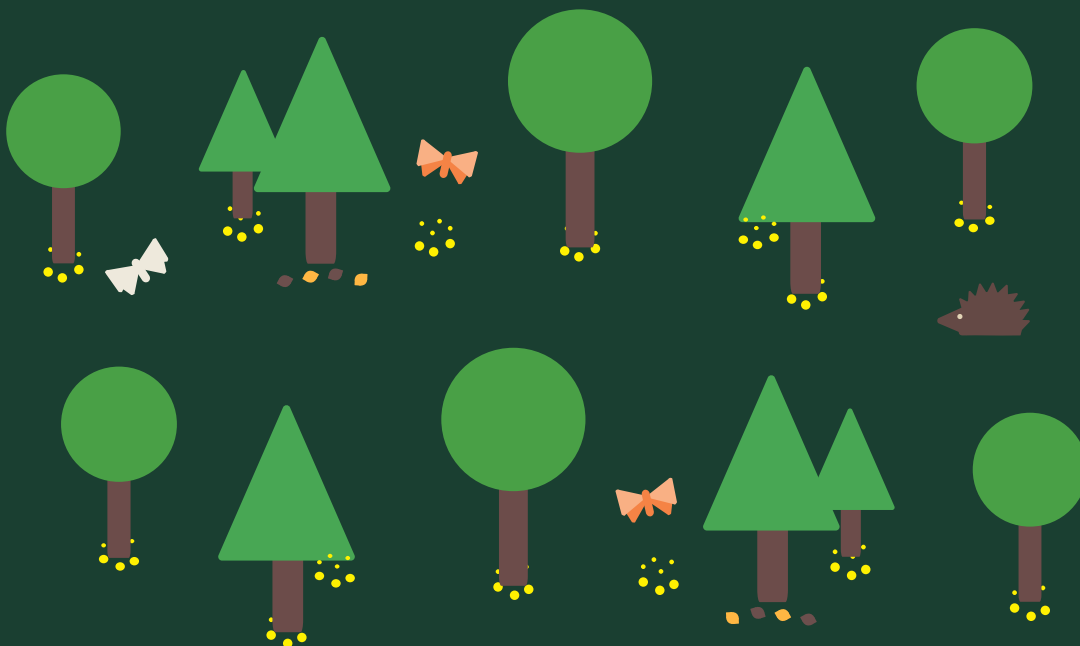
There is a great risk of losing something that's special about West Yorkshire. At the moment, although towns and villages are close together along the river valleys, you're never far from the countryside: from somewhere to walk, and breathe. This is easy to take for granted, but people in many other areas of the country don't enjoy this privilege. Compact settlements along river valleys are also better suited to being well-connected by public transport and by walking and cycling routes, and they tend to have lots of brownfield land. You can see this clearly in Halifax, Huddersfield, Shipley, and Castleford. We know that communities want these kinds of well-planned developments that can improve and restore both the towns and the countryside, so we need to find ways to make it happen.

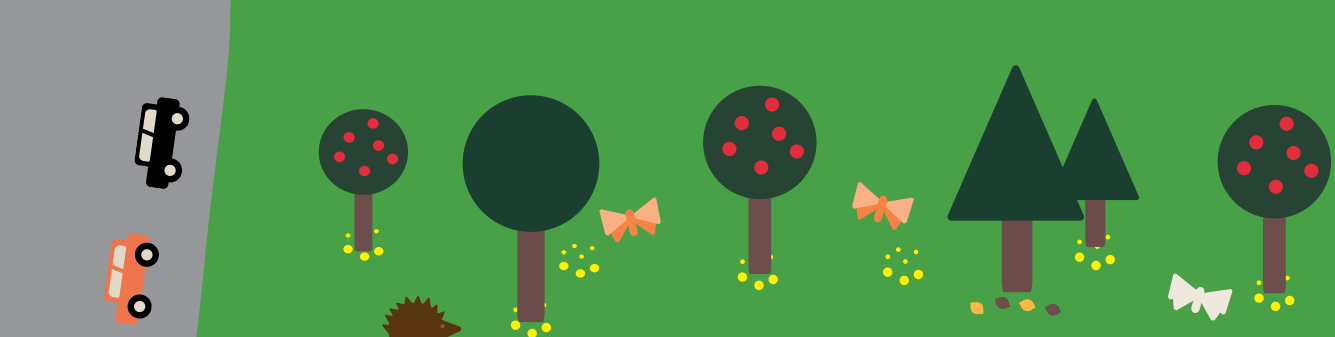
What if the M62 industrial corridor became full of wildlife and of places for people to connect with it?



One very distinctive characteristic of West Yorkshire is the way nature has regenerated in former industrial areas, especially in former quarries and open-cast mining areas. The canal system is also essential to helping support wildlife corridors. Nature is quick to reinhabit the places we make available.

This shows that a 'brownfield first' approach to recycling land does not always mean that it should be built on: rather, it means re-using it for the most useful and appropriate purpose. That's why we need a good system for determining the uses land could and should be put to.





The makings of that system already exist. All the local authorities in West Yorkshire have identified Wildlife Habitat Networks, and these should feed into the new Nature Recovery Networks that are a feature of the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan. The 'Biodiversity Net Gain' concept is also really important here, because it means that local authorities need to identify sites that can benefit from ecological enhancement and management. In other words, built developments should result in measurable improvements to the Nature Recovery Network.

CPRE's recent report 'Greener, Better Faster' - a response to the climate emergency - calls for a 40% increase in the total length of hedgerows in England by 2050. But this is not limited to open countryside. In fact, making native hedgerows a characteristic feature of urban fringe landscapes, where they can help absorb air pollution, provide shade and shelter, and welcome many more species back into housing and industrial estate areas, could make a big difference.

Built development need not be excluded from the habitat network, and in fact bringing nature into and through developments is super-important. We'd like to see ecologically degraded areas transformed into wildlife habitats, for example in and around the industrial estates that line the M1 and M62 motorway corridors. The interventions needed to make this happen may be localised - tree planting here, wetland creation there, changes to grass mowing regimes elsewhere; but there needs to be a unifying plan for how those changes can build up to form a bigger picture.



What if we designed West Yorkshire as a natural carbon and water storage system?

To respond to the climate emergency, we need to reverse the net flow of carbon, moving it from the atmosphere and back into the ground, where it can be put to use by plants to rebuild ecosystems. The same is true of water: replenishing soils and aquifers is crucial for restoring ecosystems. So a plan for carbon and water is a good proxy for a broader set of mitigation and adaptation measures - and West Yorkshire is an ideal place to try it.

West Yorkshire's peat bogs, woodlands, meadows and wetlands are all inextricably linked to the geography of its river valleys, and the same river patterns that characterise its natural systems also characterise the patterns of human activity. This presents an obvious and exciting opportunity to plan for people and nature together.

Here's West Yorkshire's hydrology in a nutshell. At the top of the hill is a very big sponge - the peat soils of the Moors. Water leaving the sponge runs down the steep-sided, glacial river valleys, where it has been exploited by humans to supply industry and development. The water then flows out into the broad floodplains where it irrigates arable farmland.



This simplified summary serves to highlight the problems that humans have created for West Yorkshire's hydrology. We have hugely reduced the holding capacity of the sponge through forest clearing, peat extraction, moorland erosion and farmland drainage. We have accelerated, narrowed and polluted the fast-flowing rivers, creating flooding in towns and villages and causing ecological damage. And we have allowed mono-cultural farming, fertilisers and pesticides to make the arable lowland soils a precarious place to try and grow food.

All of these problems are solvable, and the damage is reversible. But it requires a joining up of upland management, flood risk management, built development, agricultural practices and soil management that has been sorely lacking for many decades.

There is also a new incentive for change: soils and especially peat, are fantastic carbon stores, so rebuilding soils helps address climate mitigation. And the increased frequency of damaging floods in West Yorkshire creates a powerful financial reason to act, too.

Small-scale, community-based action can make a difference as well, as River Holme Connections have shown. By tapping into grant schemes and local fundraising, they have pursued a wide range of projects that are all connected by the river. The river is a water system, and it's also an idea that brings people together.



What if we really did get to net-zero carbon by 2038?

As a campaigning organisation, CPRE is often frustrated by how slowly our national and local governments seem to respond to the climate challenge. The science is well-established, and the risks of inaction are getting greater all the time. What on earth are we waiting for?

Given the enormity of the task, the answer to “which measures should we deploy?” is really “all of them”. But there is a tendency to see many issues as so big or so global as to make local interventions insignificant. That misses three crucial considerations.

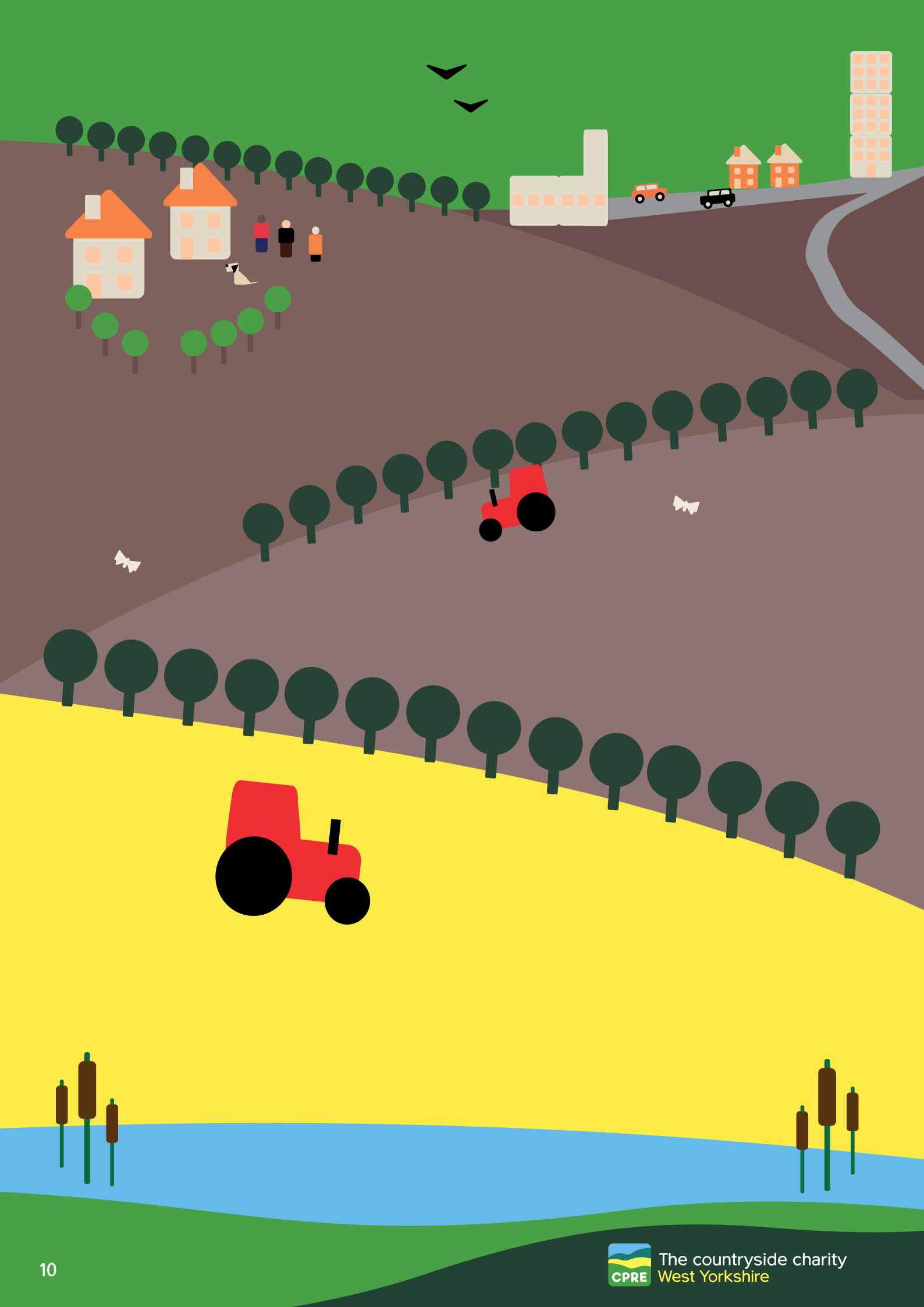
Firstly, West Yorkshire has a wealth of academic and industrial skills and knowledge on climate action, so we can effectively export good ideas and good practice to the world.

Secondly, the land in West Yorkshire, and how it is used, is our key resource for action. So, regardless of what other measures are or aren't taken, every land-use or development decision has a potential for climate action, and we have to urgently harness that potential.

Thirdly, many of the changes that will benefit the planet are also good for people in the immediate as well as longer term. Prime examples include reducing car-dependence, reducing air pollution, increasing walking, increasing urban tree cover, and increasing supply of locally-grown foods with low carbon and ecological footprints. And, of course, joined up approaches to water management in our river catchments.

There are some very encouraging signs that progress is happening. Natural flood management in the Colne, Calder and Upper Aire catchments enjoying significant public investment and a partnership approach. And West Yorkshire Combined Authority has published its Emissions Reductions Pathways report in 2020, which makes no bones about the scale of action needed to meet West Yorkshire's target of net zero carbon by 2038.

On the other hand, CPRE recently campaigned to reshape the Calderdale Local Plan, because in its current form it will cause a substantial increase in road traffic. And we also campaigned against the expansion of Leeds-Bradford Airport on climate grounds. In both cases, business-as-usual seems to persist. We are stepping up our campaigns on these matters. Where climate action is concerned, every piece of land, and every decision, must be made to count.

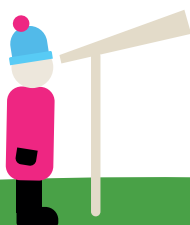


What if West Yorkshire's countryside became famous as a place of inspiration?

We know that West Yorkshire has an amazing cultural heritage, from the Brontës to Barbara Hepworth and Salt's Mill to Pontefract Castle; but what about the future? The 21st Century Countryside needs to be a fun and fulfilling place, no matter where you're from or what motivates you. In that way it will amass new cultural heritage. It will mean more to more people, from all walks of life.

Through our Ways of Seeing West Yorkshire project, we've met fantastic people who use and value the countryside for many different reasons. They lead walks - some just for fun, others that help people find their way through life's difficulties. They set up community farms, food initiatives and conservation groups, that bring together families from diverse backgrounds. They lead academic research ranging from soil science to the role of trees in carbon capture, to engaging young people in climate action. They run, swim and cycle. And they draw inspiration from the countryside for all forms of art, cultural expression and making.

One of the most interesting issues that emerged from the project was how the landscape, and the way people use it, form our shared cultural memory. So decisions made now are shaping that cultural memory for the future. For example, we met a rhubarb grower and visited the Rhubarb Festival. Rhubarb is one of the things that puts West Yorkshire on the global map, but a mixture of personal choices (will the grower's family continue the business?), land-use choices (should this land be repurposed for building, or perhaps for re-wilding?) and political choices (how will Brexit affect the export of rhubarb?) could bring about rapid changes.





For another example, we brought together two very different perspectives on the issues of dark skies and light pollution. We asked a 9-year old girl to describe her trip to a local observatory in Pontefract where she saw the stars and met enthusiastic astronomers. And we talked to a lighting engineer about the technicalities of lighting streets and public spaces in ways that make places safe and enjoyable at night-time. Experiencing the cosmos can be part of experiencing West Yorkshire's landscapes, and your opportunity to do so may be very different depending on the design of street lighting in your area. And as it will actually be night-time for roughly half of the 21st Century, we need to be able to enjoy it. That may be useful lens for examining how different people feel more or less safe and welcome in different environments: what will it be like in the dark?

Cities bid annually to be City of Culture. But West Yorkshire's countryside is so full of cultural interest and sources of inspiration, and we really should be celebrating it much more.



What if the countryside really counted in decision-making?

New developments, whether for homes, industry, public services or transport, provide key moments of land-use change. So every decision counts if we want positive outcomes. In every part of West Yorkshire, from Wetherby to Mirfield, large developments are happening and more are planned, and many of these will dramatically change their local landscapes.

Landscape and townscape are part of the same whole. The many country houses and estates that shaped much of West Yorkshire's countryside were built by the industrialists who also shaped the towns and cities, so their history is closely interwoven. At the moment, landscape and heritage are widely regarded as constraints on development, whereas they should really be key informants of good decision-making.

Places that work well for children, old people, those without cars, those who have physical or mental health challenges - these are the places that tend to work well for everyone. That is as true for the countryside as it is for towns. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought this issue into sharper focus: some people have been stranded in poor housing and poor environments, and suffered grief and stress; whilst others have had new opportunities to reconnect to their local countryside, to the seasons, and to streets where traffic is quiet and it's safe to play. Good place-making means listening to many different sides of the story, so we need to widen the conversation.

Culture, art and recreation are not luxuries. They're central to how we learn, and how we use and value our environment and our countryside. We need time and space to explore and find inspiration - whether that be from wildflowers, the night sky, the history of country estates, farming or industrial heritage. That's why we want to put our cultural landscapes at the heart of decisions about the 21st Century Countryside.

CPRE campaigns to protect the countryside. But instead of protecting it from bad outcomes - like yet another road widening, we should be able to protect it for good ones - such as local food growing or the Slow Ways walking network. To make the 21st Century Countryside a reality, we need a flow of good decisions ready to be made, and people empowered to make them.





Conclusions

This report marks the conclusion of a two year project and the starting point for many new conversations.

Our vision for a 21st Century Countryside has been shaped by the many people who have shared their stories with us. Through their eyes we have shown the breadth and depth of ways in which people value, use and draw inspiration from West Yorkshire's countryside. We extend our thanks to all those people, and we invite you to read much more about them in our [Ways of Seeing West Yorkshire online magazines](#).

Our thanks also to the national CPRE team for their financial and moral support for the project through the Strategic Collaboration Fund.

We hope that CPRE West Yorkshire, community groups, individuals, our five local authorities and the West Yorkshire Combined Authority can develop a shared vision for West Yorkshire's countryside - that can be championed and cherished by everyone. A truly great legacy for our future generations to enjoy.

CPRE depends upon charitable donations to continue its important work protecting the countryside for future generations. Please consider joining us, giving to us or volunteering for us: www.cprewestyorkshire.org.uk



Further Reading



Joint Vision for Planning, 2021

<https://www.cpre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Joint-vision-for-planning-January-2021.pdf>

Doughnut Economics

<https://www.kateraworth.com/doughnut/>



25 Year Environment Plan

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan>

Back to the Land -

Rethinking our approach to soils

https://www.cpre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/CPRE_FF3_Soil_26Nov_web.pdf



West Yorkshire Carbon Emissions Reduction Pathways

<https://www.westyorks-ca.gov.uk/media/4277/west-yorkshire-carbon-emission-reduction-pathways-technical-report-draft-v7-1.pdf>

Ways of Seeing West Yorkshire

<https://www.cprewestyorkshire.org.uk/discover-our-countryside/ways-of-seeing-west-yorkshire/>



Deliberative Democracy

<https://www.thersa.org/projects/deliberative-democracy>

