

To: North East Central Hertfordshire Joint Strategic Plan Team

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CPRE Hertfordshire response to the North East Central Hertfordshire Vision 2050 Document

CPRE Hertfordshire welcomes the North, East, and Central Hertfordshire (NEC Herts) Vision 2050 as a collaborative strategic framework and applauds the efforts of the five local authorities—Broxbourne Borough Council, East Hertfordshire District Council, North Hertfordshire District Council, Stevenage Borough Council, and Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council—alongside Hertfordshire County Council.

The Vision, which aims to guide planning and development in the NEC Herts area up to 2050, focusing on sustainable growth that balances housing needs, infrastructure development, and environmental preservation, is a worthy and much-needed initiative. Whilst we recognise that this is an early stage in the strategy's development, CPRE Hertfordshire supports many of the principles outlined in the document.

The collaboration between councils to deliver a strategic approach to this important area of Hertfordshire's future is a welcome step, as such coordination has been lacking for many years. We would strongly encourage broad consultation as the Vision document evolves and would welcome CPRE Hertfordshire's involvement in these discussions on behalf of our members.

The Vision document aligns with many principles fundamental to CPRE Hertfordshire's work, namely recognition of the value of the countryside, truly affordable rural housing, a healthy rural economy, and the protection of designated areas such as Green Belt and the Chilterns National Landscape.

We are particularly pleased to see the following within the document:

- A clear recognition of the unique characteristics of the area, including its New Towns, Garden Cities, market towns, villages, and countryside.
- An understanding of the area's character, embracing the benefits of urban and rural living.
- Acknowledgement of the importance of conservation areas, precious chalk streams, agricultural land, and rich and varied ecosystems.

CPRE is working nationally and locally for a beautiful and living countryside

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- Recognition of the need to maintain the balance between urban areas and rural open spaces.
- Support for access to high-quality green infrastructure and open spaces.
- Promotion of “daily needs within a short walk,” reducing the carbon footprint and congestion while enhancing the rural economy.

Comments by Section

Place

- We support the acknowledgement of the need to protect and enhance the area's heritage and natural landscapes.
- We strongly endorse the principle of “proud residents living with easy access to green infrastructure and open spaces.”
- Maintaining the balance between urban development and open space is crucial to preserving the county's identity. This is a key purpose of the Green Belt, which must play a vital role.
- The principle of larger developments sustaining their own social and physical infrastructure is welcome where they can use previously developed land. With careful location planning on brownfield sites, larger developments in such locations can reduce pressure on more sensitive locations.
- While the idea of “daily needs within a short walk” is commendable, achieving this in rural communities will require increased investment in services, rather than directing resources solely to urban areas.

Environment

- We fully endorse the Vision's broad principles on climate action, biodiversity, safeguarding nature, and supporting a flourishing green and blue ecosystem.
- We are pleased to see recognition of the chalk streams in the region, which make up 10% of the world's total. Protecting and restoring these unique ecosystems must be prioritised now, not delayed until 2050.
- Climate action and the transition to renewable energy are vital, but they must not come at the expense of Hertfordshire's natural landscapes, agricultural land, or intrinsic character.
- We recommend a strong emphasis on rooftop solar panels for commercial and residential properties, including all new builds. CPRE research indicates that 60% of solar needs could be met using rooftops, avoiding unnecessary land loss.
- The Vision should reaffirm the importance of protecting and strengthening the Green Belt as a core principle. Decisions that undermine its role risk derailing the Vision's aims.



Infrastructure

- Solar energy is underrepresented in the document. Unchecked solar developments are consuming countryside, with significant consequences for food security and open spaces. This must be addressed urgently.
- Farming communities are an integral part of the Vision area's character, and their needs must be considered. Converting farmland into industrial units increases rural traffic and undermines the rural economy.
- Greater emphasis is needed on maximising brownfield sites for developments such as BESS (Battery Energy Storage Systems) and data centres, which are currently being located on rural and Green Belt land unnecessarily.
- The Vision must address the concept of "grey belt," which risks becoming another excuse for developing in rural and Green Belt areas.

Movement

- We support the Vision's principles of greening transport, maximising public transport, and enhancing accessibility.
- Access to the countryside is essential for physical and mental wellbeing, and we are pleased to see reference to the extensive public rights of way network.
- Initiatives such as the Herts to Essex Rapid Transit (HERT) require clear justification in environmental terms rather than simply enabling development.
- CPRE Hertfordshire advocates for improved wheelchair accessibility across all forms of transport and countryside access.
- Sustainable communities may reduce travel and congestion, but rural areas must receive fair investment in infrastructure and services, particularly where new development occurs.

People

- Delivering homes for a growing population is critical, but the Vision must ensure that developments align with genuine local needs rather than developer priorities.
- The Vision should address the potential of empty homes; the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors estimates there are 1.2 million empty properties across the UK.
- Rural housing needs must be acknowledged. CPRE research highlights the importance of housing for rural communities, which are at risk of being overshadowed by urban priorities.
- Access to the countryside is vital for physical and mental wellbeing, supporting the Vision's goal of "living better and feeling content."
- Skills development must also include rural skills to support the rural economy.

Economy

- A strong local economy is essential, and we endorse the principles of building a green economy. However, this must be carefully managed to avoid harming the environment or biodiversity.
- Growing skills in technology and services is important, but rural skills—both traditional and innovative—must also be nurtured.
- Localising the economy to reduce travel is a commendable goal, but it requires thoughtful integration into planning processes.

CPRE Hertfordshire's overriding concerns

CPRE Hertfordshire's concern is not so much with the vision but the chasm that is apparent between the utopian vision that is created in the document and the reality on the ground with the decisions being made by councils on major projects. There is a grave risk that the emphasis on urban development will ignore the value of the countryside, not only for open space and environmental benefits, but also for the contribution that can be made by the rural economy. The current rate of decimation of our Green Belt and Rural Areas is jeopardising many of the principles promoted in the document and compromising the basic characteristics of the county.

At present we are seeing on a weekly basis

- Solar Arrays eating up our countryside in an unplanned manner making open space less accessible to people and industrialising the rural landscape.
- Housing developments being approved without considering effective infrastructure and a real meaningful attempt to create the provision of services within a 15 min walk
- This is particularly true of rural and edge of village developments where we are seeing infrastructure contributions being diverted to the urban areas so failing to create sustainable rural communities
- Infrastructure projects including Luton and Stansted Airport, BESS, Solar and data centres damaging our countryside rather than targeting brown field sites
- Housing and other developments being located on the Green Belt and or Green Belt roll back reducing the essential open space between settlements that are essential to the core principle of the plan including to quote "Proud residents living within easy access of green infrastructure and open spaces"
- The misuse of the emerging "grey belt" as another excuse for development in the countryside and on the edges of urban areas.



Conclusion

While the Vision document outlines a comprehensive and aspirational framework for sustainable development, we are concerned about the disconnect between its principles and current decisions being made on the ground. Without immediate action to protect the Green Belt and Rural Areas, promote brownfield development and address rural needs, much of the Vision's potential could be lost.

We strongly endorse the Vision's principles and urge all councils to adopt them as guiding standards for current and future developments. CPRE Hertfordshire would welcome the opportunity to contribute to the consultation process as the strategy develops.

ENDS