The countryside charity
Cornwall

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In this issue, **Richard Cogar** sets out the serious questions surrounding the use of farmland for solar power. This is a live debate here in Cornwall, where local food production is an important industry and a source of special pride. Farmers and landowners are making an increasing number of applications to make green fields over to large-scale solar arrays.

Also, there is more from **John Killick** on the pressing matter of our response to the government's new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). We present a shortened version of his submission to CPRE's ongoing national debate, where the issues specific to Cornwall are set out in no uncertain terms.

♥And a big **THANK YOU** for your support – we very much appreciate the ongoing commitment of our members as we seek to protect rural Cornwall and support sustainable development to meet local needs.

Illustration of Fair Park Solar Farm, Mitchell, currently proposed by Downing Renewable Developments.
Graphic credit: Downing Renewable Developments

Some thoughts on solar power

Richard Cogar

Almost exactly a year ago, the Prime Minister at that time, Rishi Sunak, set out his new approach to Net Zero: "…*a more pragmatic, proportionate and realistic approach to meeting Net Zero…*". This new approach included postponing the ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel vehicles until 2035, and at the same time licensing continuing North Sea exploratory oil drilling (the cost of which would be offset by generous tax rebates) and granting planning approval for a new coal mine in Cumbria. He went on to say that, "…*too often, motivated by short term thinking, politicians have taken the easy way out…".*

He chose not to say that his own Climate Change Committee was already warning that the UK had fallen well short of its Net Zero commitments. Many climate scientists and environmentalists were pronouncing that Mr Sunak had himself been motivated by short-term thinking and had, in fact, taken the easy way out.

With Mr Sunak now having more time to enjoy his North Yorkshire country pile (and heated swimming pool), the winds of change are blowing through Downing Street. Ed Miliband is the new Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero. On being appointed, he made a number of pledges, including boosting energy independence and cutting bills through clean power by 2030 and also leading on international climate action based on our domestic action. The ban on onshore wind farms would be lifted and early planning consent was given for four large solar farms up country. He has declared that he is in *"a clean energy sprint".*

Given the dire warnings issued to the last Government, the accelerated climate policy is welcome. However, there are a number of concerns being raised in Cornwall about solar farm planning applications (and, no doubt, elsewhere).
Typical of these was an application made by Windel Solar 4 for a 230-acre site at Canworthy, between Launceston and Bude. Despite opposition by local residents, together with Jacobstow and Warbstow Parish Councils, it was initially approved by the allocated Planning Officer, before being finally refused by the Council's Planning Committee, on the grounds of adverse visual impact in a rural area. (There is already a 138-acre solar farm in the area.)

The Canworthy landowners responded to concerns about the loss of agricultural land by stating that the proposed site was poor quality agricultural land (Agricultural Land Classification Grade 4), suitable only for grazing. No doubt they were largely right (although ALC Grade 4 land can apparently be used for occasional arable crops). In this case then, the prospect of covering around 230 acres of grassland with glass and steel was crucial in the Planning Committee's refusal.

Another application, awaiting approval at the time of writing, is for a 200-acre solar farm at Fair Park near Mitchell in Mid Cornwall, one of several in that area. It is being vigorously opposed by the Carland Action Group who, amongst other activities, have produced a short film, available online (Google: "Unfair Park"). Contributors include one local farmer, who points out the potential to graze sheep under any solar panels would be dramatically reduced, and another (organic) farmer, observing that the restricted light levels under solar panels would reduce soil nutrients to the extent that the health of grazing livestock would be affected. In any case, ground mounted solar is not particularly efficient; 140 acres of solar panels could power about 9,000 homes, whereas a single North Sea wind turbine could power around 16,000 homes. Solar panel efficiency drops dramatically during the low light levels every winter, and it isn't churlish to concede that Cornwall is one of the wettest counties in England.

Furthermore, the decades-long drive to increase conventional agricultural yields has led to wholesale reliance on petrochemicals in fertiliser, much of which is produced in Ukraine. Continuing to cover productive farmland in Britain with concrete, steel and glass isn't going to reduce this pressure. Italy has banned the installation of solar on farmland. By the way, fertiliser production, along with concrete and steel, is a massive CO2 generator; aren't we meant to be increasing our food security at the same time as we are decreasing our reliance on fossil fuels?

On the subject of food security, Britain is said to import about 40% of its food, some of which admittedly could not be produced here. The ratio seems to have been fairly constant in recent years and was actually higher before the Second World War. Britain's reliance on imported food was a point not lost on Hitler, who emulated Kaiser Wilhelm during the First World War by sending his U-boats into the North Atlantic, with devastating effects on Britain's food supplies. Misty-eyed nostalgia? In 2021, the container ship, Evergreen Given, ran aground and blocked the Suez Canal for six days, delaying the passage of 40 other vessels and severely affecting global supply chains. Part of the Evergreen's cargo consisted of foodstuffs.

To return to the Carland campaign, other contributors to the Carland Action Group film make the point that a massive solar farm would reduce wildlife numbers and biodiversity, increase flood risks and, of course, ruin the rural character of the area. Whilst some people might argue that putting an economic value on a nice view would be impossible, those same people might be reminded that tourism (for better or worse) is one of Cornwall's primary industries and the "industrialisation" of Cornwall's rural landscape might be an irreversible process with an uncertain outcome. Who wants to travel 250 miles or more from one of Britain's sprawling conurbations for a holiday in Cornwall, only to be presented with yet more acres of glass and concrete on arrival here? The economic point is emphasised by one couple featured in the film, whose highly acclaimed rural wedding venue business would certainly be ruined by the enveloping solar farm.

More generally, wasn't it only a couple of years ago, during Covid, that the media was saturated by opinion-formers extolling the mental health benefits of immersing ourselves in the natural world and the Green Belt (whoops - it's the Grey Belt now)? We're all being exhorted to put our shoulders to the wheel, "growing the economy".

Behind the altruism of the "clean energy sprint" there is (unsurprisingly) a gargantuan financial incentive. Let's talk about Returns on Investment (ROI). Most commercial solar panels utilise photovoltaic cells; when sunlight strikes these cells, energy is absorbed, creating an electrical charge. So-called inverters and storage batteries are required on-site and ideally, the site would be adjacent to a National Grid connection and south-facing. Only a small percentage of the sunlight striking the cells is converted into electricity; the rest is lost, although, as with all technology, efficiency is continually improving and costs are reducing. In fact, because of subsidies and economies of scale, China is the leading supplier of this technology, creating the intriguing situation that Britain and other western countries are trying to increase their energy security by reducing their dependence on Russian oil, whilst simultaneously increasing their dependence on Chinese renewables…

Solar farm start-up costs are formidable, and way beyond the means of most local farmers and landowners. They turn, therefore, to the solar farm developers by leasing their land to them and having the developers provide the investment. ROI is typically 10% to 20%, with leases extending anywhere between 25 and 40 years and with revenues usually index-linked. Estimates are that projects will pay for themselves within 5-10 years and presumably thereafter it's drinks all round in the Square Mile.

As for the farmers and landowners, one 2023 estimate is for a lease income of between £850-£1,100 per acre. Were such land to remain under the plough, typical prices per acre might be £119 for winter barley, £110 for winter wheat and only £42 for oilseed rape. These were Shropshire prices and it is assumed that Cornish prices would be similar. Furthermore, it appears that these prices do not include overheads such as fertilisers, labour or capital costs on machinery. Clearly, there is no need to get the calculator out at this point; the temptation is there for a farmer to succumb to temptation, switch off the 5am alarm clock and look forward to a guaranteed comfortable income for decades.

In the interests of balance, it ought to be mentioned that the concept of "agrovoltaics" has appeared in several European countries, China and in SE Asia. This might involve cropping between panels, elevating solar panels 2.5 to 5m above ground and cropping underneath, installing solar greenhouses on roofs or having dynamic systems: panels that are portable. In this way, the conflict between food production and energy production is at least mitigated. However, these developments are in their infancy and are yet to be introduced in any meaningful way in Britain.

Similar innovation seems to be absent in Britain. Roof mounted solar has been embraced with some enthusiasm in Germany, where almost 70% of new installations in 2023 were on rooftops. In France, all car parks having more than 80 spaces now have to include solar installations. According to independent research commissioned by the CPRE, installing solar on existing buildings and car parks by 2035 could achieve well over half of the 70GW target.

Instead, the National Policy Planning Framework has been revised to impose a mandatory increase in housing targets for most local authorities (in Cornwall, a 65% increase over the length of this Parliament). There appears to be no mandatory requirement for these houses to incorporate rooftop solar. At the same time, the planning applications by developers to cover productive Cornish farmland with solar panels continue.

A view of preparatory work at the NW end of the proposed Langarth Garden Village - planned eventually for up to 10,000 people - looking along the A390 towards RCHT Treliske over two miles distant.

Photo credit: Cornwall Council

House building in Cornwall: the planning policy debate

CPRE Cornwall has contributed to the debate at national CPRE about responses to the government's proposals for the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Further to that debate, ***John Killick*** *expanded upon the issues specific to Cornwall: the following is a shortened version of his essay:*

CPRE Cornwall agrees with the Chancellor's core beliefs, enunciated in early July 2024 when Labour took power, that sustained economic growth is the only route to improving living standards and the prosperity of the country. We also agree that improving the planning system could make this easier. However, we do not agree that the proposed 'standard method' envisaged is the best way of identifying where this growth should be over the whole country. We would prefer a much more strategic approach, identifying the industries and places where growth is likely to happen and therefore where more housing should be encouraged – at the same time reinforcing the specialised advantages of other areas where strategic industrial scale growth is less likely to be generated.

We think growth should be concentrated in and around our great metropolitan, industrial, commercial and university centres where the new industries of the 21st century are most likely to develop. For a long time, Britain has eschewed strategic industrial/locational policies but these seem now to be becoming more acceptable. We think there should be a clear distinction between central England and the more peripheral areas of the country such as Cornwall, Cumbria or Northumberland where this sort of commercial/industrial synergy is much less likely to happen.

We understand that the likely effects of the huge increase in digital communications will widen the central area. Cornwall is now effectively digitally connected: residents and visitors take advantage of this in many ways. For instance, it may encourage people who now think they can keep tabs on their job online for part of the week in order to move here. Their skills base may be high but may not necessarily contribute to Cornwall's productivity.

We propose that Cornwall, like other peripheral areas, should be dealt with so as to make best use of our particular specialisations. In our case these include agriculture, the maritime industries, tourism (including 'heritage') and what might be termed resource extraction: mining and renewable energy. We also have a distinctive, innovative and highly successful creative arts sector. All these need to be encouraged and sustained in a technically advanced and innovative manner, deploying the most advanced digital technology. Potential high-tech, high-value jobs could produce year-round, better paid employment for local people and thus help mitigate inequalities in the housing market.

Tourism is one of Cornwall's most important businesses. It is closely interlinked in various ways with agriculture, maritime industries, specialist food manufacturing and the creative arts. Obviously tourism is best known as 'sun and sand' but our weather is not sufficiently reliable for an exclusively 'seaside' economy, a term that in any case captures only part of our identity. What counts for Cornwall is not just seaside tourism but a more complex amalgam of characteristics which some might call a Cornish 'lifestyle' or 'brand'. Some of the main elements of these are widely circulated in glossy journals or in Cornwall Council's extensive promotional literature. However, 'lifestyle' and 'brand' are commercial terms and there is a far deeper element in Cornish history, art and culture.

Rather than struggling to tie down this rather intangible element ourselves we asked a well-known search engine, Microsoft Copilot, for a definition. This had the obvious advantage that search engines are by definition programmed to make insensate and therefore non-partisan trawls and summaries of the literature. This is Copilot's answer to the question – '*Does Cornwall have a strong brand image, and what is it?'*

The answers (verbatim) are as follows:

1: **Natural Beauty:** Cornwall is renowned for its stunning beaches, rugged coastlines, and picturesque countryside.
2: **Cultural Heritage:** Cornwall has a rich history and cultural heritage, including its own language, traditional music, and festivals.
3: **Local Produce:** Cornwall is famous for its food and drink, including Cornish pasties, clotted cream, and seafood.

4: **Creative Community:** The region has a vibrant arts scene, with many artists, writers, and craftspeople calling Cornwall home.
5: **Sustainability:** There is a strong focus on sustainability and eco-friendly practices in Cornwall.
6: **Adventure and Activities:** Cornwall offers a wide range of activities, from surfing and sailing to hiking and cycling.

We then asked if too much housing growth could have major adverse effects, and we were told of the following main impacts:

Environmental Impact:
1: **Loss of Natural Beauty**: Extensive construction could lead to the loss of green spaces, coastal areas and countryside that are central to Cornwall's appeal.
2: **Increased Pollution**: More housing and infrastructure could result in higher levels of pollution, affecting air and water quality.
3. **Strain on Ecosystems:** The natural habitats of local wildlife could be disrupted, leading to a decline in biodiversity.

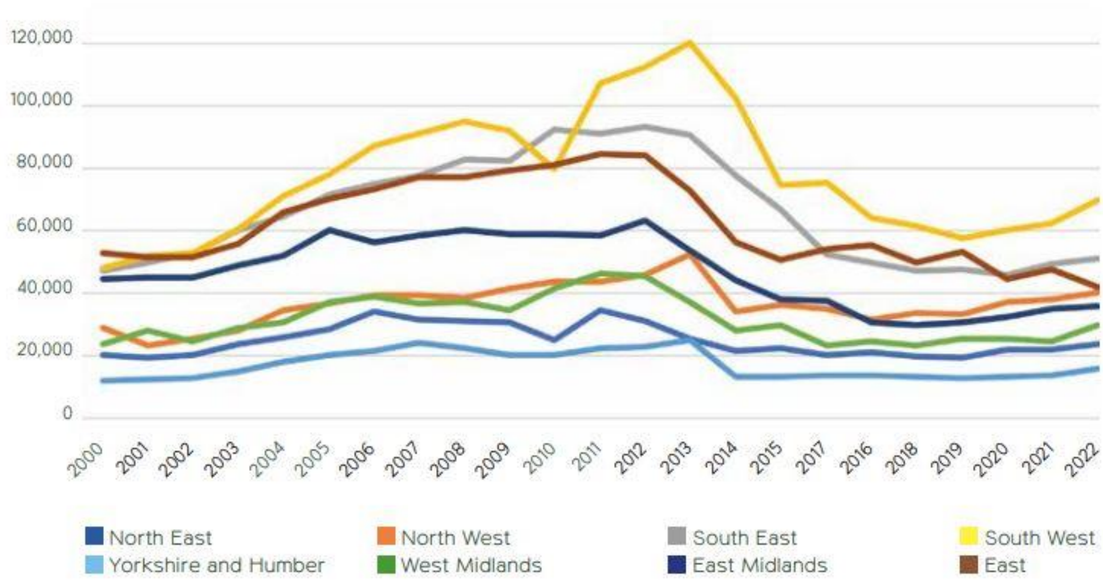
Commercial Impact:
1. **Tourism Decline:** If the natural and cultural attractions that draw visitors are compromised, Cornwall might see a decrease in tourism, which is a major part of its economy.
2. **Local Businesses**: The character of local businesses, which often rely on the unique appeal of Cornwall, could be affected by the influx of larger commercial enterprises.
3. **Property Prices**: Rapid development could lead to increased property prices, making it difficult for locals to afford housing and potentially changing the community's demographic.

Brand Image Impact:
1. **Cultural Erosion:** The influx of new residents and businesses might dilute Cornwall's cultural heritage and unique identity.
2. **Sustainability Concerns:** If the development is not managed sustainably, it could damage Cornwall's reputation as an eco-friendly destination.
3. **Community Disruption:** The character and cohesion of local communities could be affected, altering the social fabric that contributes to Cornwall's charm.

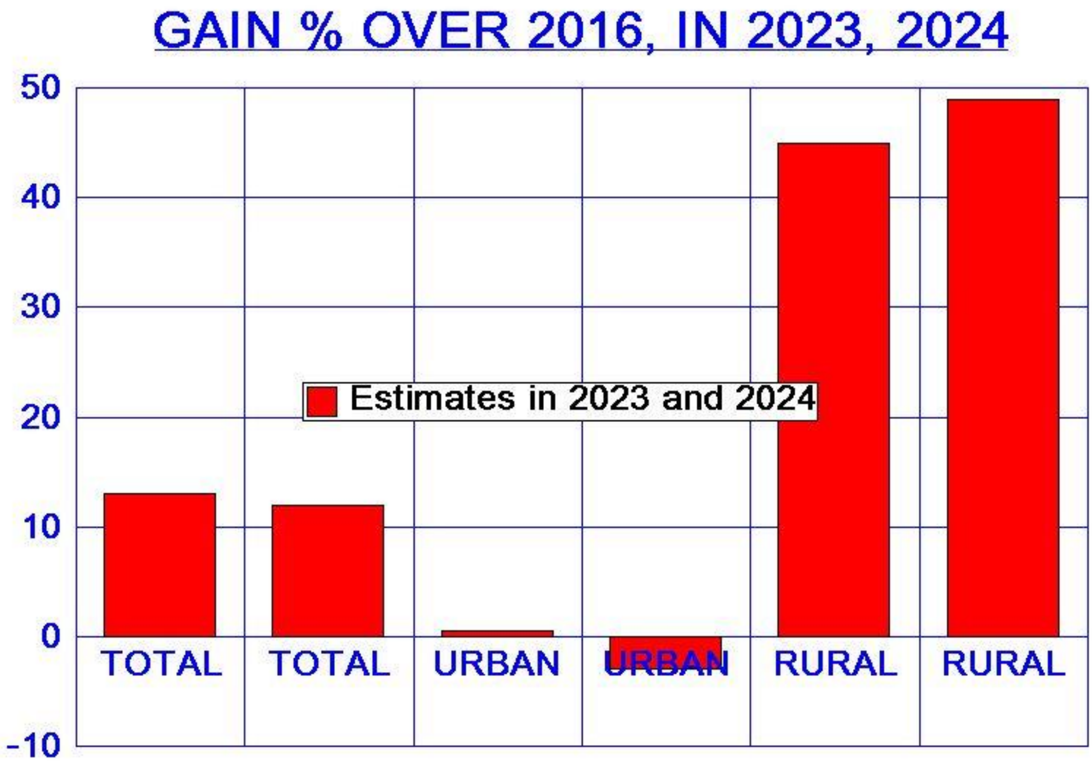
The Copilot might have made more of the erosion of cultural identity; Cornwall has an unusual cultural character, based on its hard environment and on its mining, farming, fishing, and cultural past. Copilot concluded: '*Balancing development with the preservation of Cornwall's unique attributes will be crucial. Sustainable planning and community involvement can help mitigate some of these potential negative impacts'.*

The demand for more houses in Cornwall can be said to issue from two forces: NEED and DESIRE. On need, there is undoubtedly a very large and long-standing need for new housing for local people to meet our housing crisis. We have 27,000 households on the Homechoice Register. This crisis has persisted despite the huge volume of house-building in Cornwall since 1961 and its acceleration under Cornwall Council's Local Plan since 2010. See **Chart A** below. It is not that the Council has not tried hard within its means to provide more affordable housing – building almost 9,000 between 2010 and 2022, or about 25% of the total housing gain and it has done much better than all or nearly all similar Local Authorities.

Chart A: **<u>Rural social housing waiting lists 2000- 2022</u>**



Source: CPRE



source: *CC Housing Monitor, June 2024*

The evidence for this is the location of local house-building in Cornwall as reported annually in the CC *Housing Monitor* and analysed in the June and August editions of the CPRE Cornwall Newsletter, as well as in research by the Cornish Studies Unit at the University of Exeter. Our research shows that despite the original intentions of the Cornwall Local Plan agreed in 2016, far more houses are being built in the coastal and rural areas of Cornwall than planned. See **Chart B**. It also shows the very large price range between different areas of the county, the richer areas on the coast having high prices and active housing markets and the poorer areas having cheaper houses and stagnant markets with too few houses available to rent or purchase at any price.

In fact, by far the largest source of demand has come from net migration into Cornwall by people keen to build or buy houses here. This has been encouraged by the relatively high target set by the previous government, whose formula was based on established trends and predictions by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). They attempted to emulate and encourage existing trends by setting targets and then letting the market, operating through speculative developers, decide what happened where.

Projecting from past experience the ONS estimated a net growth of population through the 2020s of about 4,000 per year, as shown in **Table C** below, see columns 1 and 4. This is then taken to justify a large increase in new houses required, see column 5. As over time the natural rate of growth and the net migration rate are falling (the former sharply) the demand for houses is likely to fall too, see columns 2 and 3. However, this calculation does not match: actual house-building, see column 6, and it seems to be considerably higher than the combined needs of the residents and incoming population. The increased number required by the new NPPF (column 7), takes this discrepancy even further, implying very much higher rates of net migration than those predicted by the ONS. The new NPPF assumes that if these numbers are built, the new owners will come in greater numbers (rewriting column 3) but this is a curious and destructive way to satisfy a LOCAL housing need.

Table C: ONS Predictions of Population Growth, 2018_43 (by thousands)

2018 Base 2019	Corn Pop Pred	Births less Deaths	Inwd less Outwd	New Pop	New Hses Calc	New Hses Built	New NPPF Proj
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
2018	566	-	-	-	-	3.43	3.43
2020	575	-1.4	5.8	4.4	2.0	3.03	3.03
2022	584	-1.6	5.8	4.2	1.9	2.73	2.73
2024	592	-1.7	5.8	4.1	1.9	3.89	3.89
2026	600	-1.9	5.7	3.8	1.7	3.12	4.45
2028	607	-2.1	5.7	3.6	1.6	3.43	4.45
2030	614	-2.3	5.6	3.3	1.5	2.51	4.45
2041	643	-2.8	5.4	2.5	1.1	-	4.45
2043	648	-2.9	5.4	2.5	1.1	-	4.45

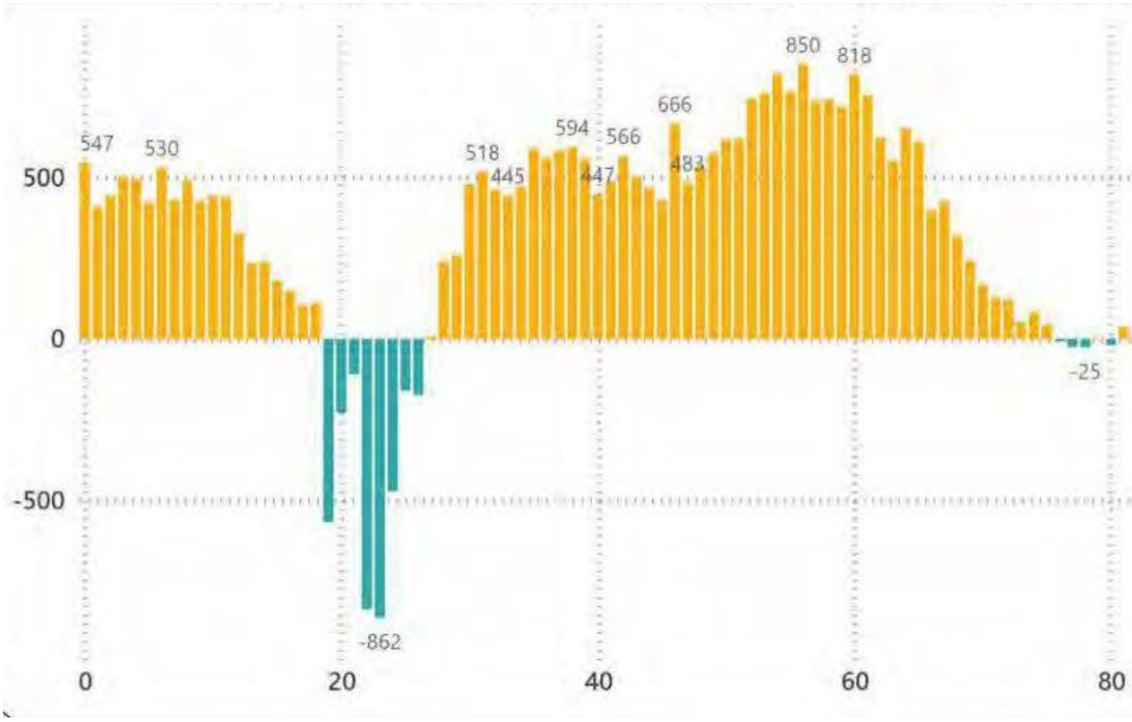
source: *ONS Lower Subnational Projection, Table T56, 2018*

Demand as calculated by the old method is declining but the large number of new houses being built still leaves many Cornish residents unable to find accommodation. Instead of building in the major towns, too much effort and space is being taken up catering for in-comers intent upon ‘escaping to the country’.

As we have said, the table shows that under the old method demand is declining. Both natural increase (column 2) and internal immigration (column 3) fall, thus almost halving the calculated new demand for houses by the 2040s (column 5). However, instead of using ONS predictions of likely population growth, the new NPPF formula (column7 from 2026) identifies the existing stock of houses as a ‘baseline’ in each Local Area and then modifies it upward by an ‘Affordability Ratio’. This baseline expansion is taken as proportionate to the size of existing communities with required supply calculated at 0.8% of the existing stock. In our case 0.8% of 296,000 equals 2,368 houses per year, which would then be modified upwards by the Affordability Ratio to 4,450 houses per year. In fact, we think this baseline is artificially high in Cornwall because of the high number of holiday houses and second homes.

The affordability ratio which modifies the baseline, based on the ratio of wages to house prices, is now - at 10.09% - substantially higher than it might be in a normal community. This is because of the relatively low wages in Cornwall on the one hand and of the relatively high house prices in the coastal parts of the county on the other. Column 7 in **Table C** shows the effect of the new NPPF being imposed in 2025, raising the total requirement (which Cornwall has in fact exceeded) - from 2,702 houses to 4,450 houses per year.

Chart D: **Net Annual Internal Migration into Cornwall by Single Year of Age 2016 to 2020**



Source: Cornwall Annual Monitoring Report, 2022

A lot depends on the number and age range of the incomers and out-goers and what they could contribute to our economy. **Chart D** above shows the net figures by age between 2016 and 2020, when about 120,000 entered and 92,000 left the county. The only age range in which out-goers predominate is between 18 and 24, when young people are likely to leave Cornwall to go to college or to find jobs elsewhere, and it is not quite offset by the incoming equivalent. The chart shows immigrants are by no means all retirees or near retirees but a substantial majority are between 45 and 70. Many have chosen to relocate for 'lifestyle' reasons on the back of equity from homes elsewhere. The net gain was 28,000 between 2016 and 2020 or 5,500 per year, requiring services and infrastructure that are currently failing to meet demand.

It is a reasonable hypothesis that the provision of new houses at about 3000 per year is the main driver of the incoming middle-aged to older population and that a slower rate of house growth would limit it. Simultaneously a higher annual rate of social and affordable house-building specifically for locals would reduce emigration, since a substantial number would trade lower wages and a Cornish lifestyle for the uncertain possibilities of leaving home. These considerations should be factored into decisions about total house-building in Cornwall in order to preserve a viable Cornish environment.

Cornwall is classed as a rural county with only about 6% of the area covered by discontinuous housing, brownfield sites and airfields etc. This is already higher than many other English rural areas – like Devon, Dorset, and Cumbria for instance – but at first sight should leave sufficient land for development.
However, the areas sufficiently attractive and effectively available for new housing are far more limited than the figure for the whole county, not only because the Cornwall National Landscape (AONB) covers 27% of Cornwall's land area and accounts for more than 60% of the most valuable coastline, which developers would like to access, but also because of the mixed characteristics of the territory.

Map 1: <u>Western parts of the Cornwall AONB</u>

source: *Cornwall AONB Management Plan,* AONB areas in blue

The limitations this imposes on large new-build sites is shown by examining what is happening around the Fal and Helford estuaries, around Helston and the Lizard and around Penzance and Newlyn. These parts of the AONB cover many of the best sites and have naturally attracted the attention of developers.

The present Local Plan as agreed by the Government Inspector in 2016 did not include any new build within the AONB but In the event, about 5% of Cornwall's new houses have been built in AONBs and the greatest concentration has been in the Falmouth/Penryn/Helston area. Large scale developments are not the only threat, as householders and small-scale developers put pressure on AONBs: ...'*perhaps not surprisingly the areas of greatest development pressure closely match the areas with the highest proportion of unoccupied dwellings indicating the nature of much of this development… There is a strong correlation between proximity to the coast and the number of applications received.' Cornwall AONB Annual Report 2021-22*.

In theory, the new NPPF leaves the status of the AONBs - and of the rural landscapes of Cornwall - protected to the same extent as before but it is difficult to see how, if the new NPPF formula becomes law, they will be able to escape increasingly intrusive development. More people will be housed but at very substantial environmental and cultural cost, while local people will still be priced out of the market.

Greater threats may come in countryside areas outside the AONBs, for example the mixed rural and semi-suburban areas round Falmouth and Penryn, and to the west of Truro. Gradual suburbanisation is taking place with parishes nearest to Falmouth or Truro most substantially affected.

The largest site currently being developed by Cornwall Council is Langarth Garden Village, planned for 10,000 people north west of Truro. Councillor Olly Monk speaks with pride of this development but his often quoted remark that ...'*we need ten more of these at least*' should be challenged. Sheer numbers of houses, most of them inevitably too expensive for local people, will not serve to solve the inequality of the housing market. It may be that restraining the second home and holiday rental markets - at least to some degree - would mitigate it but most effective of all would be to provide more social housing.

If you would like to see an e-mailed copy of the complete document, please contact admin@cprecornwall.org

Planning Update

Aerial view of Mount's Bay and St Michael's Mount showing the dimensions of one of several planning applications along the shore. Source: Cornwall Council

Recent Decisions

APP/3332576 (PA22/02389) Goran Churchtown Appeal against refusal. *Dismissed*	APP/3337474 (PA22/07887) Higher Lane, Mawgan Appeal against refusal. *Dismissed*	APP/3335610 PA23/05560 Sandgate, Lowertown Appeal against refusal. *Dismissed*

Objections submitted to Cornwall Council - Awaiting Decision

Land East Of Cove Hill, Port Navas Construction of 1 dwelling & solar array PA24/06454	Boat Cove Lane, Perranuthnoe Replacement of existing chalet PA24/04886
Shute Hill, Breage Residential development Planning Application PA23/09456	Pendower Beach Hotel Aparthotel and 3 dwellings Planning application PA24/00042
Gwinear Lane Solar farm Planning application PA23/09696	Cold Northcott Wind Farm Repowering & extension of windfarm Planning application PA23/02727
Pandarosa Farm, Bodmin Erection of 58 Dwellings Planning application PA23/07573	Quintrell Downs 400 holiday units Planning application PA23/09752
Penhale Camp, Camp Road, Holywell Bay Holiday and leisure facilities. Planning application PA22/02896	Carland Cross, Trispen Solar farm & battery storage Planning application PA23/02629
Penhale Camp, Camp Road, Holywell Bay 9 new dwellings 3 refurbed dwellings Planning application PA22/02794	Halgavor Moor Development of up to 540 dwellings. Planning application PA20/10618

Appeals to the Planning Inspectorate - Awaiting Decision

APP/3349687 (PA24/00716) St Hilary Appeal against refusal	APP/3344255 (PA22/11402) Meudon Hotel, Maenporth Appeal against refusal	APP/3348225 (PA23/08660) The Cornish Vineyard, Kea Appeal against refusal

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