

The Colne Valley Regional Park is fighting for its life

Briefing note for local MPs and Council Leaders, September 2021

Introduction

The Colne Valley Regional Park (CVRP) was created in the mid 1960s by local authorities of London, Bucks, Herts, Berks and Surrey that had the foresight to realise its strategic and ecological importance as a green lung on the western edge of London.

The Park is a unique and irreplaceable environment, covering 43 square miles including 200km of waterways and over 70 lakes. More than three million people live within ten miles of the Park. Since its foundation, it has achieved much and enjoys growing local support. It has played a crucial role during the pandemic, when thousands of people discovered a valued green space on their doorstep.

It is led by a charitable trust and backed by 75 member organisations, the environmental charity Groundwork South acts as its managing agent. As a result, the CVRP has punched consistently above its weight, in 2020/21 delivering projects to protect, manage and enhance the local environment to the value of over £14 for every £1 invested by local authorities and corporate supporters into the Park.

However, the Regional Park is under immense pressure. It is no exaggeration to say that today **the Colne Valley is fighting for its life**.

Threats

- The area faces **unprecedented development pressure**, see the maps in the Appendix. Multiple proposals are under consideration but **without any coordinated vision or strategy**. The cumulative effect will be to a) drastically reduce the huge benefits the Colne Valley provides for millions of people in relation to recreation, health, wellbeing and access to nature; b) further **decline of biodiversity and increasing habitat fragmentation**; c) further **decline of the rural economy** as productive farmland is lost.
- In the context of, for example, the need for new housing, **perceptions regarding the Green Belt have become distorted**. It is often portrayed as a negative factor, rather than a vital resource for well-being, recreation, farming and the preservation of wildlife.
- **The CVRP has no protection, status and powers** in a way that AONBs have. Its core funding is inadequate for the tasks of securing project funding, promoting the park and responding to multiple planning threats.
- **Lack of long term investment has brought the quality of local rivers to crisis point**. Our experience is that the Environment Agency is woefully under-funded and unable to meet its responsibilities. The result is a grave and completely unprecedented pollution crisis.
- In some areas **landscape quality is declining fast** due to unauthorised activities or blight due to perceived future development potential.

The current situation is not sustainable. It carries grave risks for the future of the CVRP, not least because the current model is so reliant on grant funding. Our experience is that grant funders are reluctant to fund essential core work of protecting and promoting the CVRP, as a result outcomes are largely driven by the whims and priorities of those providing the financial support.

In contrast, the Chilterns AONB and the Lee Valley Regional Park have core funding enabling them to appoint dedicated staff, including planning officers. Instead, the CVRP has to rely on the adaptability of the managing agent, a truly enormous input from voluntary directors and trustees, and the generosity and commitment of a part-time planning consultant. Overall, this falls far short of what is needed to keep pace with the threats pressing in on every side.

Meeting the challenges – how you can help

There are nine MPs whose constituencies include the CVRP (including the Prime Minister’s), and eight council leaders. You can help us protect the green belt and improve the countryside as a green lung & natural resource for future generations in the following ways:

1. Supporting projects

We are at the concept stage of a multi-million pound application to Highways England for ‘designated funds’ to enhance the environment along the corridors of the M25, M40, M4 and other major roads. We would welcome support from local MPs and council leaders.

Local Authorities can work with us to identify funding opportunities for landscape recovery, river restoration and community engagement projects .

2. Local Plans

Local policies are needed that specifically protect the CVRP, lead to comprehensive enhancement of the Park and deal with the specific issues raised by development near watercourses. The CVRP has produced a Green Infrastructure Strategy and we would like to see this adopted by local authorities and used to inform their own strategies.

By working with the CVRP local authorities can meet their duties to “plan positively” for green belt (see the text box)

3. National Policy

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) needs a tighter definition of ‘very special circumstances’ for planning proposals in the green belt.

Paragraph 142 of the NPPF specifies that where local plans remove land from the Green Belt, there must be compensatory improvement for what remains. It is unclear whether this also applies to developments falling outside the democratic process, where ‘very special circumstances’ are cited. It is critical for the future of the CVRP that this specific point is clarified in an updated NPPF.

The parts of the Environment Bill concerned with biodiversity net gain are welcome. However, this delivers solely for biodiversity, while failing to do anything for landscape quality and function – key issues regarding the way the countryside is used, experienced and enjoyed by people. A focus on the wider benefits that the CVRP delivers is essential.

Improved resources are needed for the Environment Agency to enable it to achieve its purpose to act as guardian of our local rivers.

NPPF Para 145 (our highlighting):
“Once Green Belts have been defined, local planning authorities should **plan positively to enhance their beneficial use**, such as looking for opportunities to provide **access**; to provide opportunities for **outdoor sport and recreation**; to **retain and enhance landscapes, visual amenity and biodiversity**; or to **improve damaged and derelict land.**”

4. Specific protection, status and resources for the Colne Valley Regional Park

The CVRP needs tangible protection, status and resourcing to underpin its [vision and meet its objectives](#), all of which are of mutual benefit to local authorities and the people living in their respective areas.

Protective designation for the CVRP could be achieved through:

- Adoption of specific legislation for the CVRP, or regional parks nationally. An alternative could be to designate the Colne Valley as outlined in the Wildlife Trust's 'wild belt' proposal with a focus in the CVRP on recovery of wildlife, landscape quality and farming.
- Policies in Local Plans and other initiatives of Local Authorities that enhance protection, status and resources of the Park. It is essential this is co-ordinated across county boundaries.
- Extension of the boundary of the Chilterns AONB/proposed Chilterns National Park to include the Colne Valley Regional Park.

5. Protective designation for wildlife

The mosaic of lakes, rivers and wetlands in the Regional Park are important for wildlife. Yet, despite isolated sites being protected the value and connectivity that the whole landscape provides is not recognised, possibly because it falls on the edge of five counties and has not been looked at in a coherent way. An evidence-based approach is needed and the gathering of evidence funded. Progressing this is time critical.

6. Core Funding

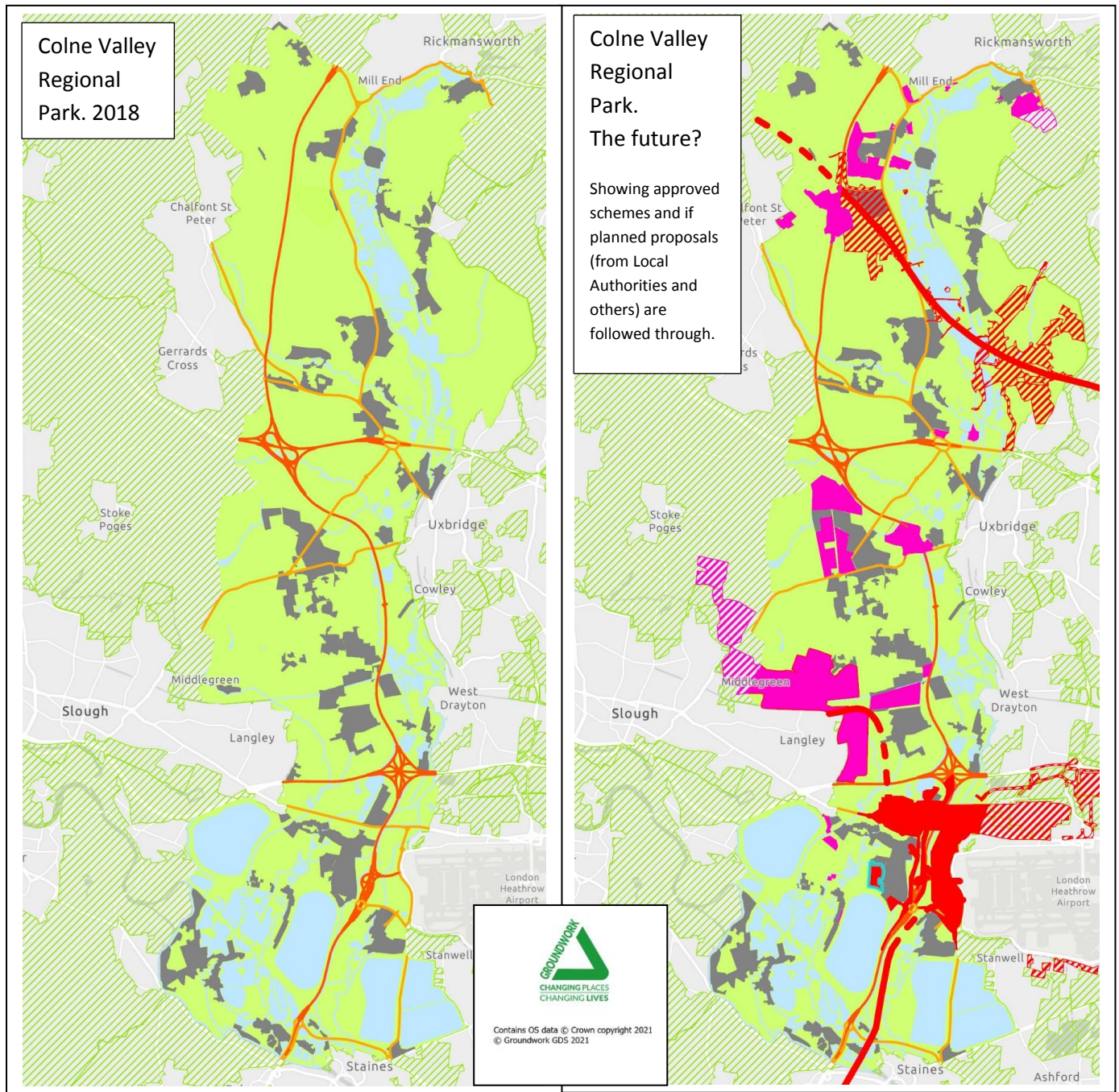
We would welcome input on identifying means to improve the resourcing of the CVRP, either through increased local authority contributions; grants from central government along similar lines to how AONBs are funded; or a local levy.

Whatever the approach, there is a clear need to provide long-term sustainability of core funding so that the Regional Park is not solely reliant on the fickle priorities of grant funding.

Conclusion.

Our predecessors had the wisdom to establish the Green Belt and the Colne Valley Regional Park over fifty years ago. The Park has an important role to play for countryside recreation, nature conservation, food production and as a gateway and buffer to the Chilterns. However, the current threats to the CVRP are unprecedented and unless they can be addressed are an existential threat to its survival. The baton has passed to us, and action is needed now if it is to survive for future generations to enjoy.

APPENDIX: Proposed Development.



- Main built up areas in CVRP
 - Colne Valley Regional Park (Green Belt)
 - Green Belt & Metropolitan Open Land outside CVRP
 - HS2rail (dashed = tunnel)
 - HS2 construction/other work
 - Green-belt developments in and adjacent to the CVRP (dashed areas are outside CVRP)
- MSA – Chalfont MSA application/ appeal (as at Aug 2021)
- 3RDC – sites already released from Green Belt/ developed – Reach Free School built, Maple Lodge Warehouse site subject to applications.
- 3RDC – sites proposed in draft 3RDC Local Plan (Aug 2021)
- SB&C – South Bucks & Chiltern DCs 2019 Local Plan (withdrawn)