

Matter 4, Issue 1, Question 4 - How did the Council consider the economic and other benefits of best and most versatile agricultural land in pursuing the growth options in the Plan?

Foreword: I am Chairman of Thanet Branch of Kent CPRE and have lived in Thanet for nearly 6 years. I became interested in and involved with local planning since the approval by the Thanet Council of the first Draft of a Local Plan and the proposal to “plan” for an extra 12000 houses in Thanet.

Government's Chief Scientific Advisor in 2009 stated that UK food production should double by 2040 however housing targets and allocations are destroying top quality farmland:

New housing in Thanet on greenfield sites (approximately 15,000 houses @33/ha) would require an area of 450ha, of primarily Grade 1 agricultural land.

Construction of all new housing contained in national targets for the whole of Kent of 168,000 units over the next 20 years would require 5,000ha across the whole of Kent - the greater part of which is currently in use as farmland.

Kent and much of S.E. England is experiencing population growth and increasing demands on land and natural resources. The UK has, for centuries, relied on imported food supplies, but this is becoming a less secure option and it is imperative that we make best use of the remaining productive farmland - some 85% of the land area of Kent is classified as rural, and according to 70% of residents, the Kent countryside is of very real importance to them, including its 116 sites for nature conservation.

Historically known as ‘the Garden of England’, Kent farmers and growers are not only custodians of its precious landscapes they are also major components of its economy. The two industries employ some 150,000 people, generate a turnover of £500 million and account for two-thirds of the national tree growing fruit production, and a third of its strawberry production. Exports to other EU countries are key, as 60% of UK produce is currently exported to the EU, and much less to other non-EU countries. We should therefore be aiming to create a new model approach to agriculture and horticulture which produces high quality, affordable foods perhaps in a “post Brexit” situation with subsidy focused and directed to achieving shared goals, such as environmental protection, rather than simply supporting outdated methods. The Kent rural economy is ideally placed to be at the forefront of this new agrarian revolution.

New housing in Thanet on greenfield sites (approximately 15,000 houses @33/ha) would require an area of 450ha, of primarily Grade 1 agricultural land. Britain has become heavily dependent on imports to fill the gap in our own agricultural output which continues to decrease with the advance of house building on productive farmland. Approximately 70% of UK land is used for agriculture but we currently import 60% of all our requirements (including 85% of our fresh fruit and vegetables).

The Draft Local Plan records that:

“Thanet has an area of about 40 square miles (103,300ha) and a resident population of about 140,000. Thanet is the fourth most populated district in Kent, and has the second highest population density. About 30% of the district is urban with 95% of the population living in the main urban area around the coast. Outside of the urban area, much of the land is high quality and intensively farmed agricultural land.”

But the Local Plan does not quantify either the quality and area of current agricultural land or the quality and area of the overall land take associated with the proposition of up to 20,000 new dwellings. A plan is attached showing the quality of agricultural land in East Kent, particularly in Thanet. No commentary is offered on the impact on the urbanisation of Thanet of the effects of the potential loss of up to 450ha of agricultural land on the urban character of the area.

Much of these imports are from countries now experiencing substantial economic growth and an increasing proportion of their exported produce will in due course be diverted to home consumption. Some of these countries are also becoming major importers, competing with Britain for a wide range of high value produce: pushing up prices. The acceleration of global food demand has also resulted in increased use of water for irrigation in tropical regions, resulting in the progressive depletion of river and groundwater resources, with corresponding stress on rural communities.

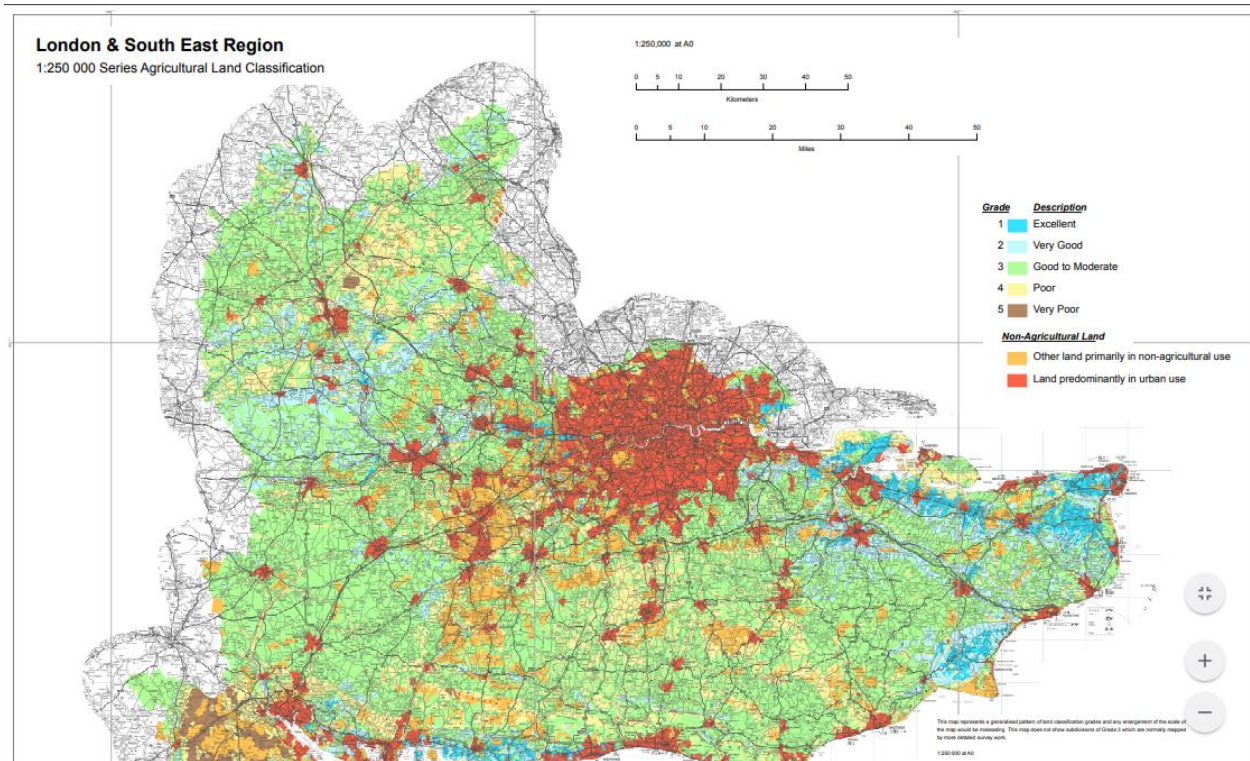
World food production can no longer keep pace with demand and we must expect to see commensurate increases in global prices. The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology Post Note No 589 Nov 2018, dealing with Trends in Agriculture, noted that global agricultural production might have to be doubled within the next 30 years - to meet the increased level of food consumption:

The case would therefore seem to be made for increased home production, but our options in this respect will be limited by the encroachment of housing and general development onto farmland and grazing areas. Kent is particularly vulnerable with a current housing development target of approximately 160,000 households scheduled for the next 20 years. This cannot be achieved if we are to act on the recommendation of the Government's Chief Scientific Advisor in 2009 that UK food production should double by 2040.

If we consider the basis of approximately 33 households per hectare, construction of the target for the whole of Kent of another 168,000 units would require 5000ha across the whole of Kent - the greater part of which is currently in use as farmland. Taking the area of the County of Kent (KCC + Medway) at 392,800 ha, of which farmland accounts for 70%, we have an agricultural land resource of approximately 275,000 ha. The planned housing development requirement for Kent as a whole could therefore approximate to a land requirement of approximately 2% of current agricultural land. A significant loss of the County's natural capital at a time when the demand for produce may well have doubled.

For information a copy of the representations made by the CPRE Kent Environment Committee on the DCO application for Cleve Hill Solar is attached – this details the impact of development on the loss of agricultural land.

Agricultural Land Classification map



David Morrish
CPRE Thanet Chairman

Copy of CPRE Kent Environment Committee comments on Cleve Hill Solar Farm (Swale) attached.