



The countryside charity
Gloucestershire

‘THERE IS A BETTER WAY’ GLOUCESTERSHIRE 2050 AN ALTERNATIVE VISION FROM CPRE GLOUCESTERSHIRE

This paper is the CPRE Gloucestershire response to the consultation on ‘Gloucestershire 2050’. In it:

- we comment on the case for change
- we comment on the key challenges
- we give our view on the six big ideas
- we propose an alternative vision

The Case for Change

We agree that a long-term strategy is needed to provide the conditions whereby the economy can continue to grow, supported by an adequate and suitably skilled working age population.

The consultation rightly recognises that “Gloucestershire is a fantastic place to live with bustling towns, a historic city, innovative businesses and beautiful countryside.”

This demands a strategy that puts safeguarding what’s best about the County at its heart. A carefully measured and proportionate approach to development is needed that works in harmony with the environment both natural and built.

The key challenges

We see six key challenges:

- Growing the local economy, and with it additional employment opportunities, particularly in those sectors where Gloucestershire is strong. The aim should be steady growth in the economy and in productivity with more businesses starting up which can be sustained without putting the county’s environment at risk.

- Addressing fully the acute demand for more affordable and social housing both in our urban and rural areas to support economic growth by ensuring an adequate supply and range of housing types in sustainable locations.
- Providing appropriate training and skills development; and encouraging research and innovation.
- Ensuring that our communities, both urban and rural, are attractive and vibrant places to live and work where people are proud of their area and enjoy a high quality of life and well-being.
- Recognising the importance of Gloucestershire as one of the nation's key food growing areas, and the need to retain and if possible enhance that capability, while at the same time maintaining and enhancing landscape and biodiversity.
- Achieving all of the above while meeting global imperatives to address climate change including moving to a low carbon economy, reducing resource use and generally moving towards more sustainable lifestyles.

Our view of the six big ideas

Super City

We absolutely reject the idea of a 'super city' based on Gloucester and Cheltenham and particularly the unprecedented rate and scale of growth envisaged. Each is a distinct major town with a very different history and individual character. While the two urban areas do need to work more closely together and be better connected, their separate identities and diversity should be rigorously protected and promoted as a strength and not a weakness to the county's prosperity.

Gloucestershire 2050 proposes a scale of growth that is both impractical and unnecessary. The latest ONS projections indicate an increase in population of + 52,000 by 2041 in the combined area of Gloucester City, Cheltenham Borough and Tewkesbury Borough. This represents a challenging but manageable rate of growth of 15%.

Remarkably, the suggested growth rate discussed in Gloucestershire 2050 adds an extra 166,000 people over the period by 2050. This would almost double the population over 30 years for the towns which have taken centuries to reach their current level of development. Milton Keynes, designated as a New Town 50 years ago, has only just managed to add 200,000 residents and that was with the benefit of a dedicated Development Corporation.

A thriving economy into the long term is vital for Gloucestershire. However the economic growth forecasts in Gloucestershire 2050 are unrealistic and would not support the rate of population growth postulated.

Other counties also have ambitious growth aspirations and will be in direct competition for the same investment and the same labour force. To merely seek to compete against other counties to create a large number of mass market jobs is misguided.

A much better way forward would differentiate Gloucestershire as a place where the focus is on improving the living standards of working people by increasing the added value of existing jobs. This form of economic growth comes from clusters of businesses whose success attracts other businesses and creates a momentum for growth, sustained by long term programs of training in real added value skills. This would prove to be a much more potent attraction to retaining and bringing back young people who will look forward to worthwhile employment and opportunities to expand their horizons rather than the depressing spiral of static wages in low grade jobs which is now contributing to them leaving Gloucestershire.

The issues identified should be capable of resolution with much lower rates of growth focussed mainly on Gloucester and Cheltenham (maintaining the core Green Belt between the two) whilst additionally realising the full potential of our market towns and the rural economy.

Therefore to base the whole Gloucestershire 2050 Vision upon an unviable premise of creating a Super City is not just misleading but potentially highly damaging to the very quality and character of the County recognised above.

Cyber Park

The ambition is welcomed. The current Joint Core Strategy for Gloucester, Cheltenham and Tewkesbury (the JCS) has made extensive provision for the growth of cyber security related investment. This fits well with the USP of the County and particularly with the Cheltenham area.

However, other parts of the UK would equally benefit from such investment and job creation, and we note that in April 2018 GCHQ announced that it is to create a new focus of activity in Manchester. Therefore competition in this area will be particularly fierce and our County's aspirations must be practically based.

Regional Parks

We endorse the aspiration to create a "Regional Park" or equivalent for parts of the Severn Vale recognising its special landscape character, importance for wildlife and potential for enhanced recreational and tourist opportunities. It is noted that the Green Infrastructure Strategy in the JCS references the local authorities' aspirations for a Regional Park for the Severn Estuary and its washlands. Such a park would require a strategy for environmental protection and improvement – both requiring funding.

In relation to the Forest of Dean, the public forest estate in the Dean is already recognised as a National Forest Park, the first in England set up as long ago as 1938. The wider intentions for a Regional Park would be achieved if the long "unfinished business" of AONB status for the Forest of Dean were progressed.

The review of National Parks and AONBs announced on 27th May, which is a Government commitment included in the 25 Year Plan for the Environment, provides the opportunity to press the case for AONB status for the Forest of Dean. Designation as an AONB would bring significant economic benefits to the area as well as greater protection and care for its environmental attributes.

A Lydney Sharpness river crossing

This is a long standing aspiration. It has some merit if the scale of ambition is confined to local growth and the crossing is feasible and affordable. Any proposal would need to be supported by a thorough impact assessment and cost benefit analysis. We would have concerns if the crossing were promoted as a major highway designed to deliver strategic growth.

A Cotswolds Airport

CPRE is totally opposed to any idea of a Cotswold Airport capable of handling long haul flights. It would be environmentally highly damaging. The Cotswolds appear as ‘tranquil’ on the CPRE Tranquillity Map and the interests of most would be best served by keeping the area that way.

Even a simple level of knowledge of the complex air traffic issues in the south of England makes this proposal a non-starter. It is a totally impractical idea. Gloucestershire is surrounded by major international airports within reasonable travel distance: Bristol International, Cardiff, Birmingham International and London Heathrow. A further complication is the proximity of RAF Brize Norton and RAF Fairford.

What is needed is not an additional international airport but better access to the existing airports, particularly Heathrow where we note that a proposal for direct rail access from the west is currently under development for early implementation: this would greatly benefit Gloucestershire. Expansion and access improvements are also planned at Bristol International and Birmingham International airports.

Cotswold Water Park

The Water Park area is extensive covering over 40 square miles in the upper reaches of the Thames Valley mainly in Gloucestershire but partly in Wiltshire and with a small area in West Oxfordshire. There are currently 150 lakes concentrated in two areas – between South Cerney and Ashton Keynes and around Fairford with further gravel bearing land in between which has yet to be worked. A Master Plan for the Water Park was published in 2008 but needs reinvigorating and a Cotswold Water Park Trust (a charitable body) has been set up to champion the area, manage land assets vested in the Trust by the local authorities and to maintain the special character of the area.

The Cotswold Water Park is already a significant tourism destination and has the potential to provide more tourism and varied recreational opportunities as further gravel extraction takes place. But the area is far more than that. In particular the Water Park contains areas of considerable wildlife importance and is designated a Nature Improvement Area, and there are villages within the park boundary. We do not support the idea of a major large hotel and a focus primarily on tourism and leisure activities.

An alternative vision

Below, we sketch out an alternative Vision for Gloucestershire, a Vision which can be delivered incrementally and is firmly built on the principles of sustainable development with the three legs of economy, community and environment. It is also a Vision that recognises and has responded to the urgent need to address climate change, reduce resource use and move towards more sustainable life styles.

The Government's National Planning Policy Framework provides the context for our Vision. Therefore it is practically based rather merely aspirational. Specifically, it works to achieve:

- a strong, responsive and competitive economy;
- strong, healthy and vibrant communities with appropriate housing, a high quality built environment, and accessible local services that reflect community needs and support health, social and cultural well-being;
- and not least, a natural, built and historic environment that is protected and enhanced, where natural resources are used prudently, waste and pollution is minimised, and measures to mitigate and adapt to climate change are in place, including achieving a low carbon economy.

OUR VISION

By 2050:

Gloucestershire's two main urban areas – Gloucester and Cheltenham – will have seen modest growth in population in all age categories, increased prosperity and a better quality of life for all and be realising their full potential as distinct, attractive, diverse areas with a separate history, identity and character. Both will have become exemplars of urban living. Connectivity between the two areas will have been improved, particularly in terms of good public transport and safe cycling opportunities, and there will be more joint ventures while the two urban areas will remain separate and distinct.

Any further major development in the central Severn Vale area will have been focused on the Tewkesbury/Ashchurch location and, if necessary, to the south of Gloucester but separate from it, possibly in the form of a compact new settlement. Any new settlement will have included both housing and employment opportunities, avoiding it becoming simply

a dormitory area, and will have been designed to fit in the landscape. While south of Gloucester it will have been located to the north of the River Frome.

The core of the Gloucester and Cheltenham Green Belt will have been retained in line with Government policy to avoid a sprawl of continuous development all the way from Quedgeley in the south to Bishops Cleeve to the north of Cheltenham, nearly 15 miles. Measures will have been taken to enhance its landscape value, biodiversity and public access role. Additionally, the Green Belt will have been extended to the south of Gloucester to maintain a strategic gap between Gloucester and Stonehouse/Eastington.

Importantly, but so far ignored by Gloucestershire 2050, our market towns and smaller settlements will be thriving and not simply dormitories for people working elsewhere or places for people to retire to. The provision of reliable superfast broadband to all areas of the County means home working has increased to record levels. With large numbers of people working solely from home they are free to choose where they live without the restraint imposed by commuting. The attraction of smaller settlements, particularly market towns, with local facilities makes them popular places to live.

Gloucestershire's countryside will be economically vibrant providing high quality food, fibre and timber for the nation, and diversified small businesses appropriate in rural areas. This will have been achieved whilst maintaining the diverse character of the landscape, restoring and enhancing biodiversity and providing opportunities for access and recreation. Areas of Best and Most Versatile land will have been protected as a strategic resource to assist the UK's food security.

Areas of special countryside importance will have been specifically recognised and planned and managed to promote landscape and wildlife conservation, public access and recreation, while at the same time supporting the economic and social needs of their local communities. These areas include:

The Cotswolds, where a National Park will have been created building on the achievements of the Cotswolds AONB Conservation Board bringing enhanced benefits for the protection and management of the area and for local businesses and the economy, including tourism.

The Forest of Dean, where the long standing aspiration for AONB status will have been achieved, as originally proposed as one of the series of AONBs in England to be created under the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act. It will have brought benefits for the protection and management of the area and for local businesses, including tourism. Its afforested and agricultural areas will still be actively managed, and the general economy of the Forest of Dean which had struggled following the decline of the traditional employment will be thriving. AONB designation will have provided a strong lead in creating a prosperous local economy based on the history, qualities and beauty of the area.

The Severn Estuary and its washlands, where a Regional Park or equivalent will have been created, directly supporting the ambitions set out in the Severn Vision – a Vision for the Severn Estuary for 2040 developed by an alliance of organisations representing wildlife and landscape interests. Published in 2016 the Vision is for a Severn Estuary that is restored as a

healthy functioning ecosystem that provides more benefits for people, local communities and the economy, and where development is proposed it is carefully planned so that it sustains and enhances the estuary's resources.

The Cotswold Water Park, where a new Master Plan for the area will have guided the development of the Park providing further supplies of gravel, increasing tourism and recreation opportunities in a measured way but also delivering the ambitions of the Nature Improvement Area, enhancing the landscape and supporting the needs of the local communities.

Across the county sufficient housing will be available in a range of sizes to meet the needs of the resident population, including sufficient genuinely affordable and social housing for those households with low incomes.

The challenges of an ageing population will have been met with expanded, joined up quality health care services and a range of suitable housing and community support facilities readily available. Housing will have been built with the long term needs of older people in mind, allowing easy adaptation.

For younger people and the young at heart our town centres will be vibrant places with a successful evening economy.

The County will be better connected with easier journeys within the County and beyond. This will have been achieved through selective improvements to the existing highways network, the achievement of a significant modal shift to public transport in the major centres and for longer distance journeys including the opening of a number of new railway stations, and through more "active transport" – walking and cycling. Equally important, the need for travel will have been reduced through co-location of housing, jobs and services and through more home working, now possible through universal broadband coverage.

The built environment in Gloucestershire will demonstrate a high quality of design, a close reflection of local character, and energy efficiency. Good design will minimise the use of water and maximise the quality of the public realm and open spaces. Well maintained green infrastructure will be at heart of all new development.

All of the above will protect the essential attractiveness of Gloucestershire for employers and employees alike by maintaining a balance between town and country.

Gloucestershire has the potential to be a leading area for sustainable economic growth and human wellbeing. We can and we must protect its unique rural and urban character whilst meeting global environmental challenges

Our Vision for 2050 shows how this can be achieved