



The countryside charity
Gloucestershire

STRATEGIC PLANNING IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE

A view from CPRE Gloucestershire, The Countryside Charity

This statement draws on CPRE Gloucestershire's response to the consultation on the Gloucestershire 2050 Vision¹, our Statement on Climate Change², and our response to the consultation on the draft Local Industrial Strategy³. Whilst it was largely drafted before the impact of the current pandemic, the principles and priorities that it sets out remain central to our vision of the right future for Gloucestershire. The future will not be the same as the past. We need to learn the lessons that the pandemic has taught. It is clear that we need to protect the countryside that has proved so valuable to personal well-being during the crisis. And it is more clear than ever before that we need to ensure a future for our County that is sustainable – environmentally and economically.

Strategic Planning – some key principles for sustainable development

Development plans should provide for objectively assessed needs for housing, employment and infrastructure. This is not the same as simply responding to demand or unrealistic aspirations from government or elsewhere which do not properly reflect the local situation.

The focus should be on making the best use of previously developed land and transport infrastructure in existing urban areas.

Major new housing provision must go hand in hand with the provision of local employment opportunities to reduce the scale of need for out-commuting for work.

Housing needs should be assessed to ensure appropriate provision for the local population whilst not adding to unsustainable patterns of commuting to major employment locations.

The priority for housing provision should be to address fully the acute demand for more affordable and social housing both in urban and rural areas to support economic growth by ensuring an adequate supply and range of housing types in sustainable locations, coupled with high design standards.

A significant modal shift from use of private cars to sustainable transport options is needed, not just to solve the increasing problem of congestion but also to contribute to the global efforts to mitigate climate change.

New construction, alterations to existing buildings and retrofitting buildings to make them more energy efficient must meet zero carbon standards which relate not just to emissions from the building itself but also to the construction of the building.

There should be generous provision of green infrastructure in new development.

Retention of farmland, and particularly Best and Most Versatile Land, should be a high priority to “feed the nation” and increase self-sufficiency in produce that can be grown in the UK.

Major new development and infrastructure should be avoided in areas identified and designated for their landscape, biodiversity, historic and cultural significance. In addition to their intrinsic qualities, the natural and historic environment is a key attraction of the county and a driver of economic growth.

Economic growth should be encouraged in those businesses which can operate sustainably. CPRE Gloucestershire has welcomed the overall intention in the draft Gloucestershire Local Industrial Strategy which puts clean growth at the heart of the strategies for business growth and in the approach to infrastructure investment; commits to protecting, restoring and promoting the county’s green assets and natural environment; and to strive to reduce carbon emissions to net zero by 2050 and at a faster pace if possible.

The City Region (Cheltenham, Gloucester and Tewkesbury)

CPRE Gloucestershire supported the overall direction of thinking of the Joint Core Strategy (JCS) with its focus of new housing and employment opportunities within Gloucester and Cheltenham and in extensions to the urban areas, despite the need to take some land out of the Green Belt. We had concluded that this was the most sustainable approach to development: but we were concerned that the housing numbers proposed were excessive as they assumed a 4.8% annual growth in GVA in the area which we concluded was unrealistic.

On the Gloucestershire 2050 Vision consultation, we absolutely rejected 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, we said that 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 proposed a scale of growth that we concluded was both impractical and unnecessary. ONS projections had indicated an increase in population of + 52,000 by 2041 in the JCS area, a challenging but manageable rate of growth of 15%. The Gloucestershire 2050 Super City proposals would have added a further 166,000 people over the period by 2050 which would almost double the population over 30 years.

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

We are engaging in the JCS review and are supporting the proposal for the new garden community at Ashchurch as the best way of meeting much of the additional housing need in the JCS area in the longer term.

Resolving transport issues in the City Region is an imperative. We have largely welcomed the thinking in the draft Local Transport Plan which aims to achieve a significant modal shift from use of private cars to use of public transport and more active travel (cycling and walking). However, we do not think the proposed actions in the plan follow through on this vision with sufficient energy, incisiveness or early commitment of funds.

The county's market towns and other larger settlements

To meet the principles of sustainable development, a dispersed pattern of new development should be avoided. Outside of the City Region, new development should focus on meeting local needs and be directed to the county's market towns and larger settlements – locations where there is currently the best access to services, facilities, jobs and infrastructure.

Gloucestershire's market towns are a distinct feature of the county each with its own character and identity. Modest high-quality development, more affordable housing, better transport links and improved broadband connectivity would help ensure that they prosper and thrive and realise their full economic potential.

Where development needs cannot be met in the market towns and existing larger settlements, the creation of new 'garden communities' should be considered. However, the development must be in a sustainable location and avoid the risk of

simply providing housing for commuters travelling out of the area, mainly by private car.

Rural Gloucestershire

Gloucestershire is a predominantly rural county with some of the most outstanding countryside in Britain including parts of the Cotswolds, Wye Valley and Malvern Hills AONBs, nationally designated in recognition of their special qualities; the Forest of Dean – a long standing candidate for AONB status; and the Severn Vale. These areas are not only beautiful, but they provide significant benefits (ecosystem services) for Gloucestershire’s residents and its economy. Planning strategies should include a presumption against major development in designated areas and everywhere promote the retention of local character and distinctiveness, and biodiversity net-gain from development.

Farming and the associated agri-food supply chain is a cornerstone of the rural economy in Gloucestershire and land management has shaped the landscape and will continue to do so. Changes in the way farming is supported as we withdraw from the European Common Agricultural Policy and the changes in farm practices which will be needed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the sector will be highly challenging.

In addressing climate change, innovation in the farming sector will be essential. We have welcomed the emphasis on innovation and developing “agri-tech” in the Gloucestershire Local Industrial Strategy.

For the wider rural economy, we believe that the route to a sustainable and prosperous future lies in the creation of quality jobs in rural businesses which draw on and benefit from a location in a distinctive settlement in a high-quality landscape. We will support further farm diversification initiatives and new enterprises appropriate in scale to their surroundings where these follow sustainable development principles including addressing climate change. Gloucestershire’s outstanding environment is also the basis of a successful tourism sector with clear potential for further growth.

For rural villages, existing services (such as shops, schools and post offices) and small businesses need to be sustained in order to improve the accessibility of services, maintain local employment and reduce the need to travel, supported by new investment in jobs and affordable housing. More home working should be encouraged, supported by better broadband connectivity.

Assessing the impact of the COVID – 19 pandemic

The immediate impact of the COVID 19 pandemic has been to dramatically reduce economic output and radically alter travel patterns as more people work from home. It is difficult to predict how the economy will recover and the implications for future economic growth. Economic growth forecasts and the associated housing targets in development plans should be carefully reassessed when the pandemic is over, together with the investment priorities in the Local Transport Plan.

Improvements in digital connectivity have enabled many office workers and others to work very successfully from home, at least for part of the time, augmented by the success of video conferencing. This trend seems popular with those who have been able to work from home and is likely to continue, reducing the need for a daily commute to work and many face to face business meetings. One consequence is likely to be reduced city centre activity and some downsizing in office space requirements, while the move to more on-line retailing seems inevitable. Conversely, local shops and services seem likely to benefit. Improvements to air quality, largely as a result of reduced traffic movements, have been welcomed, as has the campaign to promote active travel (cycling and walking). The importance attached by the public to access to quality green space and nature is also noteworthy.

There have been some positives from the COVID-19 pandemic. They must not be lost in the imperative to rebuild the economy. In short, we need to prioritise the appreciation of our countryside and green spaces, enhance opportunities for cyclists and walkers, promote public transport and do everything we can to support the growth of the green economy.

June 2020

1. CPRE Gloucestershire's response to the consultation on the Gloucestershire 2050 Vision – <https://www.cpreglos.org.uk/what-we-care-about/our-vision-for-gloucestershire/>
2. CPRE Gloucestershire Statement on Climate Change – <https://www.cpreglos.org.uk/resources/climate-emergency/>
3. CPRE Gloucestershire's response to the consultation on the draft Local Industrial Strategy – <https://www.cpreglos.org.uk/resources/cpre-gloucestershire-consultation-response-on-the-local-industrial-strategy/>