

POLICY STATEMENT

DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Summary of policy position

CPRE is concerned that Gloucestershire's villages and smaller towns are in danger of becoming increasingly unbalanced towards the commuting executive, retirees and second home owners, and that steps are needed to enable more younger people to live and work in such communities.

We welcome the approach of community-led planning and the development of Neighbourhood Plans.

Such plans should take an integrated approach which:

- *promotes suitable new employment opportunities;*
- *supports the retention of community services and the provision of new services;*
- *encourages the provision of affordable housing to meet local needs.*

The Issue

While Gloucestershire has two medium sized urban areas (Gloucester and Cheltenham) and about 20 market towns, it is still one of the most rural counties in England. Office for National Statistics (ONS) data classifies 78% of Gloucestershire's total area as comprising village, hamlet or isolated dwellings. However, only 20% of the county's population resides in this area.

CPRE is concerned that the county's villages and smaller towns are in danger of becoming increasingly unbalanced towards the commuting executive, retirees and second home owners. The average age of village populations tends to be higher than in the rest of Gloucestershire. While older people and retirees can and do play important roles in maintaining village life, it is important that villages and small towns include a reasonable proportion of younger people who work in the area. With the decline in employment in agriculture there has been a steady drift of young people away from rural areas. Lack of employment opportunities, loss of services and the rising cost of housing deters them from returning.

We believe that living and working communities care about their environment and are the best foundation for protecting it.

CPRE's view

Through the 2011 Localism Act the government has enabled local communities to have a greater say in decisions on how their area will develop. While we have some reservations about aspects of the legislation, the principle of greater opportunities for local communities to shape their future is one we warmly welcome. The legislation provides new rights and powers for communities including a community right to bid (for assets of community value), neighbourhood planning, and a community right to build.

Many rural communities have already engaged in planning for the future of their area through Village Design Statements, Parish Plans and other non-statutory processes. The Localism Act provides for a statutory Neighbourhood Plan the preparation of which is led largely by the community. Research undertaken for CPRE has assessed the value of the many approaches to producing a plan for a community. There is no one approach which fits all situations but rather there will be one approach which best fits the needs and aspirations of a particular community. To help communities understand this range of choice and to decide which is best for them we have published a guide – *Planning and Localism: Choices and Choosing*¹.

We encourage communities to engage in a community planning activity. Where the appropriate choice is to create a statutory Neighbourhood Plan, we suggest that such plans should not just focus on housing but take an integrated approach which:

- promotes suitable new employment opportunities in the countryside;
- supports the retention of community services and the provision of new services;
- encourages the type of proposals for affordable housing (based on local need) which we outline in our Policy on Affordable Housing.

Fostering employment opportunities requires high speed broadband to facilitate more working from home and to serve newly created small business units. These might be in redundant farm buildings or be purpose built in appropriate locations preferably within, and certainly in easy reach of, the village, provided that the local roads can reasonably take the increased traffic which the activities would generate.

While village communities are created by the people who live there, there is much evidence that the existence of good rural services such as a primary school, local shops, pubs, sport and leisure facilities and good local transport fosters community cohesion and interaction.

In relation to housing, we would strongly oppose plans which envisage a large increase in market housing on the basis that such an increase would be disproportionate to the size of the existing community and would fail to safeguard local facilities. There is no evidence to support this linkage and housing growth which has not been carefully planned to meet local need is likely to be very damaging.

We also welcome the opportunity for a level playing field for local communities to bid for community facilities which would otherwise be closed. A particular example of this might be a local primary school. While the issues of economics from falling school roles, matching places to needs, denominational preferences and educational standards are not our area of expertise, we will remind educational authorities wherever and whenever appropriate, that primary schools lie at the heart of communities and their removal could have much wider implications for those communities and the countryside generally. Where a decision to close is inevitable and the school building is both architecturally and historically important then CPRE will support village communities that wish to use the provisions of the Localism Act to mount a bid for the building for community use.

1. *Planning and Localism: Choices and Choosing*. The guide may be viewed and downloaded from the CPRE Gloucestershire Branch website: cpreghos.org.uk

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CPRE Gloucestershire Policy Statements are regularly reviewed and updated as necessary. They should be read as a set