



The countryside charity
Gloucestershire

Change is inevitable: it should be for the better

POLICY STATEMENT

SUPPORTING RURAL COMMUNITIES AND THE RURAL ECONOMY

Summary

This Statement brings together in one place information about the key attributes of rural communities and the rural economy and the problems and challenges they face, information about recent initiatives to address problems, and CPRE Gloucestershire's current policy positions on priority needs.

Our aim is to ensure that our rural communities thrive and that the rural economy prospers, both in a sustainable way.

Our Mission

CPRE Gloucestershire's mission is 'To protect, promote and enhance the distinctiveness, sustainability and vibrancy of rural Gloucestershire for future generations.' To this end we subscribe to a vision for a living and working countryside.

Rural England

In 2017 it was estimated that 9.5 million people lived in rural areas in England (17% of the population) and that the rural economy contributes 15.8% of England's Gross Value Added (GVA) worth £246 billion in 2017. In 2016/17 there were 547,000 businesses registered in rural areas, accounting for 24% of all registered businesses in England. These businesses employed 3.5 million people, accounting for 13% of all those employed by registered businesses in England but earnings tended to be lower with median earnings of £21,400 in predominantly rural areas compared to £22,900 in predominantly urban areas. Importantly, the rural economy is now as diverse as the urban economy - 15% agriculture, forestry and fishing, 15% professional services, 11.5% construction, 12.9% retail, wholesale, motor repair etc. (figures from House of Lords report¹)

Rural Gloucestershire

While Gloucestershire includes the major population centres of Cheltenham and Gloucester, it remains a predominantly rural county. 42% of the population lives in market towns, rural villages and hamlets, and rural Gloucestershire accounts for 30% of all jobs in the county. (figures from Gloucestershire Local Nature Partnership²)

Key Problems facing rural areas

The key problems facing rural areas are well known but have proved very difficult to address. They include: the unaffordability of much of the housing; an ageing population with the implications for health provision and social isolation; the loss of basic services including banks, post offices and local shops, and steadily reducing rural bus services; inadequate digital connectivity; and major fluctuations in the profitability of agriculture.

Farming practices and economics have a special significance from CPRE's perspective because of their dominant influence on landscape and on habitats and wildlife. Farming economics are influenced by market forces, Government policy and, critically in many sectors, by the weather. Different sectors of agriculture have their specific economic issues and operational considerations. Defining what constitutes 'sustainable agriculture' is complex and needs rigorous objective analysis. It is important to recognise UK farming's key food production role and to avoid unfair competition in the context of the 'global economy'.

To these problems must be added the imperative for rural communities and the rural economy to evolve in a way which maximises their contribution to mitigating climate change and adapting to it³.

The challenge

The challenge is to ensure that our rural communities are not left behind compared with their urban counterparts; that the rural economy thrives, filling its full potential but sustainably and in a way that retains the essential character and distinctiveness of the countryside; and that the imperative to respond to the challenge of climate change is addressed comprehensively.

The future prosperity and vitality of rural communities will be closely linked to the evolution of the rural economy. The recent House of Lords select committee report¹ identifies a successful rural economy as:

- one that provides for the needs of rural residents, businesses and visitors while also making the fullest possible contribution to national wellbeing, fulfilling the economic potential of the countryside;
- one that does not unreasonably disadvantage rural dwellers with regard to quality of life, the provision of goods and services, and employment opportunities;
- one that so far as possible enables people to make the choice to stay in or relocate to rural areas as they prefer, and avoids the need for people to leave rural areas involuntarily;
- one that supports the growth and development necessary to sustain itself while preserving those elements that make the countryside distinctive and attractive;
- one that responds positively and dynamically to trends in the wider economy and in society and ensures that rural areas are not left behind.

CPRE Gloucestershire agrees with this analysis, but notes that it does not reflect the imperative to address the challenge of climate change.

Recent Initiatives

A Rural Coalition

12 national organisations with many shared values are seeking to be more influential by working together around four principles which they argue should underpin policy making, and four policy priorities. They have come together as the Rural Coalition. CPRE national is a member. See footnote 4 for the full membership.

The principles are:

- Brexit discussions must recognise 'rural' is more than agriculture and the natural environment
- All Brexit negotiations and post-Brexit policies must be rural proofed
- Policies and funding must deliver a fair deal for rural communities
- Decision-making, funding and delivery must be devolved and involve rural communities.

The policy priorities are:

- A meaningful increase in the delivery of affordable housing in villages and small towns
- Proper recognition of rural service challenges and services designed to meet rural needs
- Long term support for social action to help communities become more resilient
- Business support and infrastructure which reaches rural areas, so the rural economy can grow and create quality jobs.

A Gloucestershire Rural Coalition

The Gloucestershire Rural Community Council (GRCC) has convened discussions between a similar grouping of organisations to improve collaboration and a shared understanding on local issues of common concern. An inaugural meeting was held on 20 May 2019 and a follow up on 29 July.

Gloucestershire Local Industrial Strategy

In 2018 the government required Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) to adopt a single mission, namely to promote productivity by delivering Local Industrial Strategies. GFirst LEP is working on an industrial strategy for Gloucestershire and has called for evidence to inform what the strategy will contain.

It is important that the rural dimension is properly reflected in the strategy. GFirst LEP supports a number of business groups “made up of industry leaders who keep us on track and help to make sure we spend our funding in the areas that need them most.” In partnership with the Royal Agricultural University there is an Agri-Food and Rural Group. CPRE Gloucestershire is now a member of this group.

The Gloucestershire Local Nature Partnership (LNP) has made a comprehensive input to the call for evidence consultation demonstrating the importance of the county’s environment to the rural economy². CPRE Gloucestershire provided material to feed into the evidence and helped draft the response. It argues that as a county Gloucestershire can lead the way as “Rural Pioneers” to champion a natural capital-based growth agenda with the Local Industrial Strategy putting long term value on enhancing Gloucestershire’s landscape to deliver sustainable economic growth, increased productivity and regional distinctiveness, and supporting the ambitious targets of a number of our Gloucestershire local authorities to become carbon-neutral by 2030.

Gloucestershire Vision 2050

In 2018 an extensive consultation took place on “Gloucestershire Vision 2050”, a vision for the county by the middle of the century jointly developed by Gloucestershire County Council, GFirst LEP and the University of Gloucestershire. CPRE Gloucestershire was highly critical of many of the ideas it contained and we published an alternative version “There is a better way”⁵. Of particular concern was the lack of recognition of the importance of the rural dimension of our county, including the need to avoid our rural communities becoming simply commuter dormitories with employment elsewhere.

Following analysis of the responses to the consultation, Leadership Gloucestershire issued a concordat indicating how it would take the Vision forward⁶ This reflects a number of our concerns with the proposal to establish a Rural Ambitions Board which “should be looking for a positive vision of a vibrant rural economy, which allows market towns and villages, communities and business to be as proud of their contribution to Gloucestershire as they are already proud of the landscape.” It will be important for CPRE to develop a relationship with this Board going forward.

CPRE national Strategic Plan 2020 – 2026

This topic area sits at the heart of the new CPRE national Strategic Plan launched on 26 June 2019.

Aim 2 of the Strategy is “Promote rural life” and the objectives are for:

- “A shared vision for a sustainable rural economy in which all communities can thrive;
- Rural infrastructure and services that meet the needs of their communities and secure a healthy environment;
- New and sustainable models of farming and better environmental land management;
- A low carbon countryside that mitigates and adapts to the impacts of the climate emergency.”

CPRE Gloucestershire views on priority needs: Policy positions:

Overarching

We support the case made in the House of Lords report for an England-wide Rural Strategy which would be a high level document developed at central government level setting out the government's aims for the rural economy and rural communities and would provide the basis for more consistent rural proofing of policies. We share the disappointment of the Rural Services Network that the Government has rejected this key recommendation but note a commitment to set out cross-departmental measures to ensure that rural areas can thrive⁷.

We note that a case is also made in the House of Lords report for local rural strategies.

Housing

A priority is to secure more genuinely affordable housing in rural areas focusing on the needs of exiting rural communities and the working population. To this end:

- We would support the suspension in rural areas of a tenant's Right to Buy their Council home or Housing Association home (as is already now the case in Scotland and Wales)
- Subject to identified housing needs, suitable locations and good design, we support small scale developments in villages and smaller towns
- We argue that local authorities should be permitted to require a proportion of affordable housing in all new market housing schemes comprising three homes or more. At present developments of 10 homes or less (5 homes in designated areas) are exempt from this requirement which has severely limited the provision of new rural affordable housing in villages where development sites are mainly small
- We support greater use of rural exception sites and the case being made for taxation reforms to incentivise landowners to make such sites available
- We argue that government funding for affordable housing in rural areas through Homes England should be increased
- We support the approach of community-led planning and the development of Neighbourhood Plans. Such plans should take an integrated approach which:
 - Encourages the provision of affordable housing to meet local needs, but also
 - promotes suitable new employment opportunities;
 - supports the retention of community services and the provision of new services.
- We encourage a wide range of community approaches to providing affordable housing including through Community Land Trusts and self-build co-operatives.

Rural Services

While vibrant local 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, post office, pubs, sport and leisure facilities and good local transport fosters community cohesion and interaction.

We support measures to help sustain existing services in rural areas, improving the accessibility of these services, maintaining local employment and reducing the need to travel for rural communities.

On travel, the need is to minimise the effects of local authority cuts in funding on the frequency, quality and responsiveness of rural public bus services and to restore cuts where possible. To this end we support innovative approaches to bus services to contain costs, such as Community Transport Services and use of subsidised taxis, and support campaigns to increase use of public transport, emphasising the point “use it or lose it”

Rural Economy

CPRE recognizes the vital contribution of farming in Gloucestershire and of the associated agri-food supply chain. It is a cornerstone of the rural economy and land management has shaped the landscape and will continue to do so. Changes in the way farming is funded 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. We will wish to support the industry going forward.

For the wider rural economy, we believe that the route to a 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 the basis of a successful tourism sector with clear potential for further growth.

Encouraging employment opportunities requires reliable 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 town or village, provided that the local roads can reasonably take the increased traffic which the activities would generate.

As noted above, we endorse the aspirations of the Gloucestershire LNP for the county to lead the way as “Rural Pioneers” in delivering sustainable economic growth and regional distinctiveness supporting Gloucestershire becoming carbon-neutral by 2030.

Action

This statement has set out the views of CPRE Gloucestershire on actions needed to ensure that our rural communities thrive and that the rural economy prospers, both in a sustainable way. The views will be used to inform our advocacy in these areas and in the development of our own forward work plan.

Footnotes

1. A House of Lords select committee has published a comprehensive report on the rural economy. Titled 'Time for a Strategy for the Rural Economy', it was published on 27 April 2019
2. Local Industrial Strategy 'Call for Evidence' Response by the Gloucester Local Nature Partnership, 31 May 2019
3. In June 2019 the Government committed the UK in legislation to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. CPRE national is campaigning for a more ambitious net zero target of 2045, while a number of Gloucestershire's local authorities have gone even further with a target of 2030
4. Members of the Rural Coalition are: Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE), CPRE, Country Land and Business Association, The Arthur Rank Centre, National Association of Local Councils, NFU, National Housing Federation, Plunkett Foundation, Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, Royal Town Planning Institute, Rural Services Network, Town and Country Planning Association
5. "There is a better way" – Gloucestershire 2050: An alternative vision from CPRE Gloucestershire, July 2018
6. Gloucestershire Vision 2050: Concordat, published 22 October 2018 by Leadership Gloucestershire
7. The Government's response to the report of the House of Lords Select Committee was published on 8 July 2019

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