



Campaign to Protect  
Rural England  
HEREFORDSHIRE

## PROTECTING HEREFORDSHIRE'S COUNTRYSIDE: SEVEN QUESTIONS FOR CANDIDATES

On 5th May Herefordshire elects a new Council. This Council will inherit critical planning powers and face big decisions that will affect the environment of everyone in the county. So it is important that all the candidates are aware of the issues that concern us and that we know what their approach to those issues would be. The Campaign to Protect Rural England sees seven key issues for the Herefordshire countryside. Here are seven questions you could ask your candidates to find out what they think about them.

### TRANSPARENCY IN PLANNING

**Will you change the rules to ensure that controversial planning applications are decided openly in the Planning Committee rather than delegated to officers and ward councillors?**

Last year Herefordshire Council changed its Constitution to reduce the number of planning applications decided by councillors. Now nearly all applications can be decided by officers and it is mainly left to the chief planning officer to judge which applications should be referred to the Planning Committee. Officers must notify the relevant ward councillors of each application, but there is no requirement to accept their views, or even requests to refer cases to the Planning Committee (but, since there is no requirement to record those views either, this can give ward councillors special, and unaccountable, influence). The avowed aim is to reduce bureaucracy and speed up decisions, but it means that important or controversial cases may no longer even be debated in public, let alone decided in public by elected councillors.

*CPRE thinks that there should be a clear and consistent mechanism to ensure that important or controversial planning applications go to the Planning Committee. For example, cases should go to the Committee if the relevant parish council or a specified number of parishioners object. And where ward councillors, or any other councillors or officers, express a view about an application to the planning officer, that view should be recorded and placed on the public file.*

### EXPANSION OF HEREFORD

**Will you oppose excessive and unaffordable expansion of Hereford City into the surrounding countryside?**

The previous government required Herefordshire Council to plan for the expansion of Hereford City by about 8,500 new dwellings by 2026. This would increase the population of the city by about a third. The Council accepted this target, apparently because it would help to pay for a new ring road and attract major retailers to the Edgar Street Grid. However, such rapid expansion would eat up much-valued (and high-quality) green fields around the city, place its infrastructure of roads, hospitals etc under great pressure, and add to competition for jobs. The Council's own study shows that, even if a new ring road and river crossing were built, traffic congestion would be worse than it is now. The new government is abolishing the target, yet the Council remains committed to it.

*CPRE thinks that the Council should set a smaller, more realistic target for new homes in Hereford, concentrating on sites within the current city boundaries. Traffic congestion should be tackled by improvements to the existing roads and by encouraging a shift to public transport. Only if that proves insufficient should limited new road-building such as a river crossing be considered. In any event a complete new ring road will not be necessary or affordable.*

## AGRICULTURAL LAND

### **Will you recognise the economic and environmental importance of Herefordshire's best agricultural land and protect it from redevelopment?**

Herefordshire has a higher proportion of high-quality agricultural land than most rural counties in England. This is a national resource, and an economic and environmental advantage for the county. With rising global demand for food and for renewable energy from crops, productive agricultural land has never been more important. Yet the Council makes almost no effort to protect this land. For example, around Hereford and Leominster such land has been earmarked for housing.

*CPRE thinks that the top grades of agricultural land in Herefordshire should normally be protected from non-agricultural development. The Council should encourage the good stewardship of agricultural land and the prosperity of the businesses that work it.*

## AREAS OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY

### **Will you support designating the western hills of Herefordshire as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty?**

The best landscapes in England are supposed to be protected by designation as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs). Herefordshire is one of the most beautiful counties in England, yet very little of it is designated – just two slivers of land around the Malvern Hills and the Wye Valley on the eastern edges of the county. Much more of Herefordshire is worthy of designation, especially the western hills bordering Wales. Indeed, under a Sustainable Communities Act initiative the Black Mountains were recently proposed for designation as an 'AONB'. Natural England make the final decision about this, but it is up to Herefordshire Council to promote it.

*CPRE thinks that the Council should promote the designation of Herefordshire's best landscapes, such as the western hills including the Black Mountains, as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It also should introduce local planning policies to protect all valued local landscapes from inappropriate development.*

## POLYTUNNELS

### **Will you oppose obtrusive polytunnel schemes in Herefordshire's beauty spots?**

Polytunnels have a valuable role in small numbers and when carefully sited, but large areas of polytunnels sited on prominent slopes can be a blight on beautiful landscape. Cheap out-of-season soft fruit tended by seasonal migrant labour is not a food priority and brings very limited economic benefit to the county. There are concerns about the impact on the health of the soil. Tourism may suffer. There are more benign uses, both economically and visually, for Herefordshire's valuable farmland. Yet the Council has permitted extensive polytunnel development in some of the most beautiful landscapes in the county, even inside the nationally designated Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

*CPRE thinks that extensive polytunnel development should not be permitted in prominent positions in beautiful landscape, where adequate mitigation is not feasible, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty especially should be protected from these large-scale developments.*

## WIND FARMS

### **Will you oppose giant commercial wind farms on Herefordshire's most beautiful hilltops?**

Wind turbines, when of limited size and number, can sit happily in the landscape and provide a useful source of renewable energy for local businesses and residents. Giant commercial wind farms are another matter. The latest commercial turbines can be over 120 metres (400 feet) tall. The size, number and moving blades of a typical commercial wind farm would overwhelm most landscapes in the county. Yet a recent energy study commissioned by Herefordshire Council identified sites for 174 such turbines. If built, there would hardly be a view in the county not disrupted by these rotating monsters.

*CPRE thinks that small-scale wind energy should be encouraged – as should renewable energy from other sources, especially from energy crops, taking advantage of the county's extensive farmland. But giant commercial turbines should not be permitted in the best landscapes in the county.*

## QUALITY HOUSING

### **Will you insist that new homes are good-quality and sustainable?**

Herefordshire Council has required developers to meet only minimum building standards. Unlike most local authorities it has not applied Building for Life assessments to new developments (Building for Life is the national standard for well-designed homes and neighbourhoods. It provides a method of assessing new housing against twenty criteria that embody a vision of functional, attractive and sustainable housing.) Thus many of the recently built private sector homes for sale on the open market provide meagre internal and external space, are of relatively poor construction so that their long-term durability is doubtful, and contribute little to environmental sustainability targets.

*CPRE thinks that Herefordshire Council should apply the Building for Life assessment method to all planning applications for residential development of ten or more dwellings.*