



The countryside charity
Leicestershire

A GREENER ALTERNATIVE

OUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE





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Charity Number: 1164985

Our Mission

The Campaign to Protect Rural England (The Countryside Charity) has a mission. We want to see the countryside not only protected but enhanced for both current and future generations.

We want to see the countryside valued and enjoyed.

And we want the countryside to play its part in tackling the two biggest challenges we face, Climate Change and the degradation of nature.

That does not mean that the countryside cannot move forwards, but it does mean addressing some of the fundamental challenges the countryside faces.

However, these concerns cannot be divorced from what is happening in our towns and cities. Supporting the rejuvenation and regeneration of our urban areas will ensure the countryside only takes the development it needs.

In Leicestershire that countryside is both diverse and beautiful and we think it is something to shout about.

But its quality is not nationally always appreciated and that balance is under increasing threat. Leicestershire's countryside is too easily seen as an empty space that we can use at our will rather than a living, dynamic system, both for nature and for us which we need to nurture and value.

We believe a shift away from 'business as usual' is required, no longer seeing the countryside as simply empty space for new houses and warehouses but a valuable natural resource.

We want to celebrate the two key pillars of our county, its thriving countryside and its towns and villages. So, we are putting our ideas into a Vision. We're setting down six Building Blocks for change.

We will continue to challenge current thinking about the county. We invite you to join us and sign up to a positive future for the countryside of Leicestershire.

Countryside that Matters

Leicestershire is a patchwork of different landscapes, from the lowlands of the south of the county to the ridges and valleys of High Leicestershire, from the unique uplands of Charnwood Forest to the vales, wolds and river valleys across the north and east of the county.



Many of these features have been shaped by ancient and internationally significant geology and by rivers like the beautiful Soar, Wreake and Sence. But it's not just a countryside forged by ancient geology. It has also been shaped by humans, with farmland to the east of the county still bearing the evidence of ridge and furrow dating from the Middle Ages. Other features include the Beacon on Beacon Hill, Foxton Locks on the Grand Union Canal, Swithland Reservoir, Bardon Hill Quarry, Mountsorrel Quarry and, in recent years, the regeneration story that is the National Forest.

Not all its beauty, however, is in openness, there are many stunning local woods, meadows and wildlife corridors. Some are managed by groups like the Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust such as Launde Woods, but many are simply hidden in the countryside.

Leicestershire has a rich historic past, whether it is the stately homes of Belvoir Castle and Stamford Hall, sites such as Burrough Hill Iron Age hill fort, the site of the Battle of Bosworth or, now famously, the last resting place of Richard III.

It is a farmed landscape, which not only provides food for the table, but contributes to the biodiversity of the county, with pastures, trees, hedges and ponds playing a vital role in preserving nature and in carbon capture.

But it is also a countryside crisscrossed by main roads, such as the M1, A46 and A5 and dotted with large-scale distribution centres. Housing estates are encroaching further into these open spaces, pollution has infiltrated both the air and the water and in many places the space for wilderness is diminishing.

Despite the lack of National Park, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) or Green Belt protective designations, we believe Leicestershire's countryside has a beauty and uniqueness that cannot be allowed to disappear.

Not only that, but it also provides vital natural resources such as clean water and clean air, as well as offering the potential to reduce Climate Change through natural processes that reduce and capture carbon emissions.

Along with the production of food, habitats for wildlife and space for recreation, these benefits make up a natural capital and provide 'ecosystem services' from which we all benefit. It is not just empty land to build on.

That is why our Vision for Leicestershire puts nature back in balance, why we put the countryside at the top of the planning agenda.



Towns and Villages which are thriving

The character of Leicestershire is also defined by its towns and villages, many with a long and illustrious history. There is no doubting, for example, what Melton Mowbray is most famous for.

At the centre is Leicester, one of the oldest cities in England with layers of history and now a dynamic and multi-cultural centre which we believe can have a bright future.

There is a patchwork of towns, such as Loughborough, Hinckley and Market Harborough and all around the county smaller villages, many of which have grown organically but now face challenges to keep services open to support the local community.

But parts of Leicestershire have had a tough time, with the loss of traditional industries hitting hard on places like Coalville in the Northwest. While some parts are thriving, it is important that others are not left behind. That is why CPRE wants to see Urban Regeneration at the core of future planning for the county, so that we can provide our communities with the prospects they deserve while enjoying the countryside around them.

We have six building blocks to help achieve our Vision.

Building Block 1: Getting Development Right

The first building block for our Vision is planning future development. But it must be a system which supports the right balance between town and countryside.

Currently planning across the country, and in particular Leicestershire, is driven by top-down housing and economic requirements which drive the allocation of large greenfield development sites.

In the case of Leicester and Leicestershire the Strategic Growth Plan extends these to 2050.

We think this approach is deeply flawed and we have set this out in comments to all the Councils involved. What we have said to them is that it is currently based on out-of-date assumptions about population and housing growth:

- it fails to take account of the dynamic changes in towns and cities which create new opportunities for development,
- it requires local authorities to identify all the land that will be available for developments years before it is needed and this ends up being driven by the sites that developers promote,



- it results increasingly in houses, warehouses and industrial parks being built in locations not well linked to existing services,
- it fails to deliver the affordable housing desperately needed in town and country alike,
- and because it is driven by development interests which show little regard for the concerns of local people who find the planning system hard to navigate and stacked against them.

Instead, CPRE Leicestershire wants to see a more dynamic approach to development. We need to factor in opportunities for regeneration and proactively work to create sustainable communities which support local facilities. We want developments which are well designed and provide the 'Right Housing in the Right Places' for people and for nature, while contributing to climate resilience and carbon capture.

Getting development right means using the limited and finite resources of land, especially countryside and greenfield land, sparingly and sustainably. We need to prioritise the people in most need and put greater weight on the protection of our valuable countryside assets.

Building Block 2: Creating a Transport System that Serves the Community

The second building block underpins the first. Everyone in Leicestershire should have access to good public transport and the choice to use it. New developments should be directed towards places with good public transport.

The current trajectory is going in the wrong direction. Plans to widen our major roads or build major new Expressways through the countryside will not improve travel across Leicestershire. Instead, they will encourage the use of private vehicles for commuting and to access facilities thus increasing and congestion on the local roads that feed Leicester and the other towns in Leicestershire.

We need to redirect investment to support and enhance bus and rail services across the county to give people a genuine alternative to private transport. At the moment that is difficult to achieve both because transport is under-funded and because there are different funding streams for major roads and local transport. Instead of being the Cinderella of transport spending we believe sustainable transport (walking, cycling and public transport,) needs to be at the top of the list for transport investment.

It means asking serious questions about how those without a car, including our poorest rural residents, will access key services, such as hospitals and schools. That means locating those services where they are accessible but also sometimes subsidizing less profitable rural bus services.



We need to think about how we can better organise freight and delivery services. Some freight needs to go by rail, but that should not be an excuse for rail-connected logistics parks which are, in reality, mainly served by road. At a more local level we need to invest in urban freight hubs that can reduce congestion and maximise loads.

Crucially, we need planning and transport decisions to be much more joined up, reducing reliance on the car and ensuring people do not have to travel more than they need to.

Building Block 3: Ensuring the Countryside is Inviting to Visitors

The third building block is to create a Leicestershire countryside which is inviting to the people of the county and beyond. There is so much to offer across the county, but because there is no designated National Park, its treasures are not always as well-known as they should be.

As well as celebrating the countryside we want it actively promoted as somewhere people can get the benefit of access to green space.

We know that enjoying the countryside, even if it is local open space, benefits people's mental and physical health, with long lasting positive effects on people's mood and self-esteem and stress levels, but we also know that there are still barriers to everyone feeling comfortable to enjoy the countryside.

So, we do not need to just maintain our footpaths, manage our woodlands and keep our waterways flowing, we need to look for ways to improve what we can offer to people and at the same time widen access to the countryside so that all parts of the community feel welcome.

Part of that relies on community groups or organised parties, but we also want personal leisure activities to be encouraged. Walking, cycling and nature related activities, such as bird watching, can all help people value their local countryside.

For some people it may mean going further, getting involved in countryside activities, such as tree planting, which contribute to improving the landscape.

To achieve these objectives, we will need to invest in new facilities and to improve physical access to the countryside along footpaths, cycleways and bridleways, with some through newly designated green areas. High-quality green routes need to be constructed to link our existing urban areas to the countryside.

We want all age groups to be welcome from school children to senior citizens. We want people with disabilities to feel they have a say in policies to provide access to the countryside with targeted action to make areas of the countryside more accessible a priority.



Building Block 4: Helping Nature to Win

The fourth building block is Nature itself. Leicestershire has some wonderful natural features and protected reserves which benefit from the work of volunteers who seek to enhance and protect them. However, volunteers alone cannot address the wider loss of natural habitats across the county and the significant declines in species of animals, birds, insects and plants.

Some of the degradation is physical, the result of lost and undervalued habitats, but much is unseen resulting from pollution, pesticides, fly-tipping and other human activity, such as light pollution or farming practices which are harmful to nature.

There are now opportunities to rewild parts of Leicestershire, to encourage landowners to look at how they manage their estates and holdings. It is also time we cleaned up on the pollution from cars and industry, from river outflows and industrial stacks.

Most people don't want to spoil the countryside. Education and incentives can do a lot to limit the loss of natural habitats and landscape features. However, we also need to see rules enforced so that those who deliberately fly-tip, pollute or ignore planning constraints are prosecuted and fined.

Our towns and urban areas also have a role to play in nature's recovery with urban open spaces and gardens playing a key role. We want to see coordinated Nature Recovery Plans, with wildlife corridors and nature-friendly measures in all developments. Protecting and improving our rich biodiversity should be at the heart of planning and development.

Building Block 5: Keeping the Countryside Working.

The fifth building block is integral with all the others. The Leicestershire countryside is not a wilderness, its landscape is as much the result of human industry as natural forces and we believe it is imperative that the countryside continues to provide employment and remains productive.

At the centre of this is farming, forestry and the services that support those industries. We are at a time when farming policy and support for farmers is changing and it needs to change for the better. We need to help farmers to become more sustainable in their practices, to balance nature and production.

At the same time, we need to protect our highest grade and most productive farming land. We need to ensure that the soil is nurtured. Much more weight needs to be given to that in planning decisions. We need to keep good data on how much countryside and farmland is lost to development and what that means for rural industries.

However, the countryside economy is not just about farming. A vibrant rural economy is one that supports the needs of rural communities, provides genuinely affordable housing



and ensures that rural buses and other transport services flourish and offers easy access to health services and education institutions.

We need to support small businesses across the rural economy while protecting the countryside from the intrusion of industrial developments which are not in keeping with the countryside and should be directed to brownfield sites.

One of the biggest pressures on Leicestershire's countryside is the growth of logistics depots and it is not just the land they take, they are characterised by vast warehouses which overwhelm the local landscape, introduce intrusive lighting and rely on 24/7 HGV movements which require major road improvements. We do not believe that planning for such big sites is well enough coordinated across local authorities throughout the Midlands.

Building Block 6: Answering the Climate Change Challenge

The sixth building block underpins all the others. We know one of the greatest challenges facing mankind is Climate Change and Leicestershire needs to play its part in addressing that.

So, all the other five building blocks should be viewed as steps towards the effective management of the implications of Climate Change.

In addition, there are overarching actions we need to adopt to create a green economy and green homes across the county. Some of that is already underway. Local Authorities have declared Climate Emergencies, and we are starting to see initiatives by them to support renewable energy and conservation.

At the same time, the Leicestershire LEP's energy infrastructure study supports wider availability of electric car charging points as well as District Heating, improvements to energy efficiency and other innovative approaches to reducing the carbon impact of the county.

But reaching net-zero carbon emissions requires other interventions. Local Plans need to include policies which direct development where it will have least carbon emissions. Standards need to be raised on new build housing. We need to invest in marshland, plant more trees, and extend hedgerows to counteract the impact of rising carbon dioxide levels and we need to change our transport system, so it is less dependent on the car.

Providing new sources of energy will also help but there is a balance to be struck with food production, biodiversity and landscape.

At the same time the evolving innovative, technology-led and knowledge-based economy in the county needs to be transformed into a sustainable and green economy.

That means growing green business sectors which can innovate to tackle Climate Change and achieve zero carbon while protecting the countryside, nature and our natural capital.



It also means addressing the serious obstacle to answering the Climate Change challenge which is presented by the ever-expanding logistics industry in the county.

All these elements need to knit together into an overall Vision of a greener, cleaner, more beautiful Leicestershire.

This is what we want to see

First, the 'business as usual' approach to development which sees the countryside, climate and nature as secondary concern replaced with a proactive plan which prioritises development on urban brownfield land and uses greenfield land sparingly.

Second, a joined-up approach to planning and transport decisions where walking, cycling and public transport are no longer the Cinderella of transport spending.

Third, more people enabled to enjoy and benefit from access to the countryside, green spaces and nature.

Fourth, stronger emphasis placed on valuing nature, protecting it from the wrong kind of insensitive development, and reversing areas of decline while creating new habitats for wildlife.

Fifth, investment in the rural economy which respects and values the countryside while providing for our needs and supporting local communities.

Finally, and most important, robust plans to harness the countryside's crucial role in tackling both the Climate and Nature emergencies so they are recognized as fundamentally interconnected.

How You Can Get Involved

At the heart of our Vision is the belief that Leicestershire countryside matters and that building up its resources, benefits and services can go hand in hand with regenerating our towns and city.

It is a Vision based on strong principles which we believe will improve Leicestershire for the better. It is not a short-term fix and it will require political will as well as public engagement.

To achieve our Vision we need it to be supported by partners across the county. We need it to become not just CPRE's Vision but a Vision for everyone in Leicestershire.

We will also need greater public engagement in decision making and a more equitable and sensitive approach to local communities and their needs.



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We need education to show that this Vision is both practicable and worth pursuing. We need people to get involved, because the Leicestershire we envisage is one where community action and practical volunteering play as important a role as professional planning.

We are inviting comments because we want to hear what you think. Here are three questions to start the dialogue:

- **Have we got the Vision right?**
- **How can we achieve our goals?**
- **How can you help us?**

If you would like more information:

- Look at our website www.cpreleicestershire.org.uk
- Contact us via email info@cpreleicestershire.org.uk

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