

The [RCE Severn](#) network exists to facilitate learning and change towards the [UN Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) through collaborative local and regional partnerships.



RCE Severn is a designated Regional Centre of Expertise in Sustainability Education (RCE) hosted by the University of Gloucestershire and part of the RCE global network co-ordinated by the United Nations University Institute for Advanced Study of Sustainability (UNU-IAS) in Japan. **Contact:** rcesevern@glos.ac.uk

This submission on behalf of the RCE Severn partnership is based on dialogue held at the [RCE Forum event](#) dedicated to the Glos2050 consultation. Specific organisations that are network members have added their names to this submission to indicate their support for the points raised below.

1. Glos2050 Vision, Ambitions and Ideas - Issues and Concerns

1.1 The overall vision statement and 8 ambitions outlined for Glos2050 are well stated. The significant issues that prompted the consultation are recognised and this submission supports the ambitions set out for the future of the county. Some concern was raised that the identification of issues has been based more in problems than opportunity (e.g. more focus on the young working age people leaving the county than the 2/3 of graduates that University data indicates might wish to stay).

1.2 The 8 ambitions all have individual importance, however the goal of sustainability is not accurately reflected in the ambition statement of being 'sustainable'. This communicates a limited view of sustainability geared to efficient resource use and energy management only. Sustainability – or sustainable development – is a meta-level view of the 'triple bottom line' of viability concerns related to economy, society and environment. Therefore 'sustainable' in its proper sense is an ambition that is not separate, but one that connects and balances all the other 7 ambitions.

1.3 The 6 big ideas are more problematic when viewed from the perspective of sustainability and in the concerns of the RCE network members. As an overarching point, the key informants to this submission raised concern about the substantial damage to natural capital that could arise from the infrastructure schemes linked to the 'big ideas'. Specific points raised:

- The ideas do not appear to be based in evidence that they will in fact serve the ambitions. There is noticeable and significant disconnect between the stated ambitions and most of the specific ideas. Key to this is the lack of an impact assessment to gauge both positive and negative outcomes associated with the implementation of new ideas (noted in 3.1).
- There is concern that the ideas have been driven wholly from the position of deficit and problem identification associated with key statistics, rather than coupling this with the development of the vision and ambitions. This contributes to the sense that the problem-solution responses are not coherent and may not achieve the desired results.
- The ideas as they are stated are not technology-led and do not appear to reflect the state of 'smart' functionality that is unfolding rapidly and will guide future developments both rural and urban – as such they appear old fashioned and rather predictable, as might be expected in planning dialogues that pre-date the emergence of digital technology.
- The ideas are all place-based infrastructure projects meaning that there is a focus on single places rather than the links between them. An alternative approach might be to consider county-wide aspirations, such as making the county zero-carbon in terms of emissions, so that all areas and a range of organisations can be involved.

1.4 A number of issues have been identified in relation to specific goals, as key risks to achievement of the ambition to be 'sustainable'. These points highlight where detrimental and unsustainable outcomes are

likely to follow without attention to the underpinning measures and objectives that define their value (e.g. reliance solely on Gross Value Added calculations rather than economic growth models such as doughnut economics that better support sustainable development).

- **Super City** – substantial concerns arise that a SuperCity could result in the generation of few graduate level jobs, but many minimum wage jobs, thus negating its stated purpose in helping to retain and attract graduate talent to the region. The idea brings tensions with effective protection of both natural and cultural assets in the county: for example, the green belt between Cheltenham and Gloucester has very low wildlife value (as a spatial planning designation not a wildlife, landscape or natural environment heritage designation). The Super City idea assumes that urban development would be achieved in ways that are low impact and resource efficient but these considerations would need to be intentionally planned into development proposals. The commitment to the Building with Nature Benchmark for Green Infrastructure would be one way to improve delivery on sustainable development.
- **Cotswold Airport** – strong objections arise in relation to the airport proposition, given the existence of two nearby airports at Birmingham and Bristol, as well as Staverton. An appraisal of need and impact is necessary to gauge how this helps to deliver the vision and ambitions, and should also be carried out in the context of the expansion of Heathrow. Potential damage to other key assets needed to secure the future of the county could be considerable, not to mention the concerns over development of new transport links based in fossil fuels. Without significant improvement to local and regional transport within the county, an airport project could run aground, as incoming people are still unable to move around within the county.
- **Lydney Sharpness** – developing the bridge could be significant but should not be limited to car use and greater connectivity would also be served by ensuring its use by foot, bikes as well as public transport. The design should reflect forecasts about the future of cars and driverless vehicles to assure its suitability and to future-proof any investment in this project. It would also be important to plan any bridge project in ways that do not detrimentally impact upon the ecology of the internationally important Severn estuary.

1.5 The regional parks concept was supported overall and its contribution to sustainable development as well as its overall value to the county was apparent, for example in delivering restoration of wildlife habitat and ecosystem services on a large landscape scale. Recognition of the parks as key to the Nature Recovery Network and delivery of resilience to climate change for wildlife would be an important positive in this proposal. The Water Park was noted as an important area for wildlife with the entire area shortly to be designated as a SSSI. One point raised was that the greater role of the parks could be made clearer, as the initial proposals have positioned them for recreational use by those in urban areas, but these areas also have strong economic growth potential through the food and drink sector as well as manufacturing, creative and high tech sectors.

2. Sustainability Ambition - Alternative Propositions and Priorities

2.1 Gloucestershire has considerable ***potential for positioning sustainability centrally in the region's development agenda*** and as a 'USP' for the county to be harnessed in business and economic development as well as responsible tourism development. This would draw on the natural capital within the Severn region, which is a key factor in attracting high-skill businesses. It also builds on the active networks and range of proactive organisations that have pioneered engagement at local level with the global sustainability agenda. The green economy or 'bioeconomy' is expected to be a key driver in the next 20 years or so and Gloucestershire has the potential to be at the forefront of this. Key would be to expand the existing pool of talent and intentionally support businesses that could help to develop and promote this unique foundation for future development in the region.

2.2 The potential for ***digital technology and Cyber to drive economic development*** within the region is considerable and should be harnessed. However, one caution would be in the potential for economic

opportunity to be drawn away from the region through remote working options, cost of housing and procurement practices that favour larger contractors based outside the county.

2.3 The value of the ***low carbon economy in Gloucestershire is as yet under-explored*** but could be considerable, particularly if linked to development of digital and 'smart' innovation in technology. The county already has a wide range of companies and skills in the area of renewables: some of these relatively small (e.g. Progressive Energy, EcoVision, and NexGen) and many are specialised in certain aspects of renewables (e.g. Renewables First (hydro and wind), Ecotricity (solar and wind) and EDF Energy). In addition there is potential for development of initiatives that aim to secure sustainable energy to help mitigate rising energy costs, such as:

- Use of community energy schemes to tackle fuel poverty and to generate substantial funding for community-led schemes that involve multiple stakeholders. An example would be a single wind turbine delivering £20k into the community reliably for 20 years.
- The Clean Growth Strategy requires public and private sectors to assist in reducing carbon emissions and energy use. To achieve this, smartly energy use is critical and more needs to be generated locally - improvements to energy infrastructure will be needed to facilitate this. This would benefit the prosperity of the county by helping to provide low cost, reliable energy to businesses and public sector and to improve air quality by reducing the use of fossil fuels.
- Promoting the adoption of sustainability into building infrastructure both commercial and residential including the use of solar PV and rainwater harvesting, to advance low carbon technology and encourage efficient resource use with its positive cost consequences.
- Options for energy storage have not been adequately explored but could be significant in supporting economic opportunities, providing a source secure local energy for business parks and major businesses. The caution in relation to enabling innovation effectively, is to protect against economic benefits leaving the county and innovation being brought in from outside.
- Building on our national reputation as a pioneer of Natural Flood Management is critical to the region's prospects and this should be integral to our future approach to building resilience to climate change. It will be important to capitalise on areas of leading practice within the county in relation to sustainable development innovation, such as GI benchmarking.

2.4 The areas of ***economically strong activity within rural areas do not appear to be central*** to the vision and ideas proposed. There is the need for greater consideration of ways to use these existing assets (natural, social and economic) to continue to develop the economy and job opportunities through innovation and entrepreneurship.

2.1 Greater attention is needed to the ***cultural potential of the region that exists in unique local arts venues and heritage centres***. There is potential for further development of small scale and artisan activities, in ways that appeals to younger people and encourages creative talent in the region. The evidence suggests that they are keen for more independence and to develop their own ideas rather than be brought into well established companies.

2.5 One significant proposal is for ***priority action to build public transport infrastructure*** within the region. This is seen as critical to economic and tourism development for the county and an essential foundation to progress any future vision and tackle existing problems. Of note:

- The weaknesses in both inter-county and intra-county public transport, particularly in rural areas and between towns, is limiting economic opportunity and social mobility within the region, preventing people to get to jobs in the county. This issue has been emphasised by young people in comments about what drives them to leave the area.

- The region is currently not sufficiently well connected to ensure that both locals and incoming tourists can access key destinations and events, so as to best support tourism and the arts (e.g. timing of buses to and from cultural events in and out of the county and significant difficulties with access to major centres in Gloucester and Cheltenham).
- The Gloucestershire Moves project under way in the county is an important exemplar project aiming to promote active lifestyles, improve wellbeing outcomes and reduce health care costs. This connected project underlines the need for improved public transport and supports wider efforts to limit negative environmental impact.

2.6 Finally due consideration needs to be given to **restoration and enhancement of Gloucestershire's unique biodiversity and landscapes**, which is key to the tourism potential and attracting people to reside in the area. As one of the most diverse counties in the UK in terms of landscape character types, Gloucestershire also has nationally and internationally important habitats that can help to create its distinctive identity. An enhancement to planning for 2050 would include the proposition to develop and deliver a Nature Recovery Network for Gloucestershire, which would also contribute to addressing wellbeing through provision of green spaces. This aligns with government's 25-year Environment Plan which includes calls for a Nature Recovery Network that creates 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat across the country.

2.7 Wider **consideration of the county's resilience to climate change** should be part of the 2050 vision, including the integration of natural capital into the planning system; provision of greater flood risk protection for the main settlements on the Severn estuary; opportunities for new landscape scale forest across the south of the county; self-sufficiency improvements in terms of water, food and energy; movement towards zero carbon economy and net reduction in private car use.

3. Influence and Implementation – Matters Raised

3.1 Planning processes should be taken forward with greater attention to connected approaches that effectively engage stakeholders at all levels of society, not just at the highest levels of formal governance within the region. Of note:

- The need for longer term planning timelines than the commonplace horizon of 4 years driven by political process in operation at national and local levels. An impact appraisal of the ideas against considerations like resilience, climate change and flood adaptation, healthy lifestyles, wellbeing and happiness, air quality, biodiversity and food production, is critical to test these solutions and better define the optimal legacy for the 2050 project within the region.
- Widening consultation locations and diversifying consultation methods to access those less affluent neighbourhoods who have a huge stake in the future. Inclusivity and participation does not appear to have been achieved in the consultation to date. New economic models need to be considered in order to achieve key objectives such as safety and inclusion.

3.2 Closer involvement of young people is needed to move the Glos2050 ambitions towards ideas that serve the needs and aspirations of young people from diverse class and cultural backgrounds. Their perspectives are not adequately reflected in the current set of ideas. Of note:

- The most important issues arising from consultation with local university students in their decisions to leave the county include the lack of affordable housing, graduate level jobs they want to do, cultural diversity and creative opportunity, and poor internet connection zones.
- Students rank 'healthy and happy' as the most important ambition and also prioritised the need for work-life balance. They see links between this ambition and sustainability issues but did not always recognise the narrow framing of the 'sustainable' ambition in the consultation.

- Greater attention is needed to the ways that young people want to work and the kinds of jobs they wish to do as well as the positive enterprises they would like to develop and how this can be supported. Young people (including students) have articulated the need to enable younger arts producers and collectives, and the links with the use of new technologies and forms of media, as an area of opportunity and innovation for the county that has not been harnessed.
- Young people feel strongly that cultural cohesion is an issue that requires dedicated focus and that distinctive subcultures need to be preserved and encouraged, as part of and alongside the attempt to build international and intercultural diversity. This should not be disconnected from the development of creativity and the arts, as well as the existing urban centres.

3.3 Development decisions are likely to achieve greater future-proofing if viewed through the lens of an integrative goal like sustainability, that forces reconciliation of competing ambitions and the trade-offs they involve. Examples of regions that have more sustainable travel infrastructures have achieved this through at least 20 years of coherent planning (e.g. Finland, Copenhagen).

3.4 Gloucestershire County Council approved Agenda 21 actions in 1993 and these commitments have been restated by UN member states in adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Glos2050 consultation invites review and reconsideration of these commitments as they pertain to the region and in light of new developments in technology and sustainability. The SDGs urge wider consideration of the range of goals that would underpin delivery of the 2050 vision.

3.5 The Gloucestershire Moves project provides an important example of good practice in multi-level and multi-stakeholder methods to drive positive change across a diverse regional landscape and on complex issues. It demonstrates approaches to engagement underpinned by 'whole systems' thinking to ensure effective linking of people and structures that are critical to achieve change.

Named Signatory Organisations and Individuals to this Submission:

Gloucestershire Local Nature Partnership

Vision 21

Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust

Commercial Limited

Molly Scott Cato – Green Party MEP for the South West (in personal capacity)

Royal Agricultural University (RAU)

Environmental Association of Universities and Colleges (EAUC)

Jonathon Porritt (in personal capacity)

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