

It's Our County is a brand new political party just for Herefordshire, and this document is our Manifesto for the May 2011 local elections.

Being a new local party has huge advantages. We are all deeply committed to Herefordshire. There is no national party doctrine to get in the way, so we can be truly creative in our search for innovative approaches to the problems faced by the county.

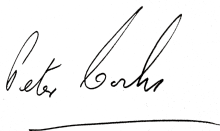
We quickly realised, after our launch in October 2010, that we would not have the time to develop an entirely comprehensive manifesto on every area of Council responsibility. So we have chosen four key topics to demonstrate our approach: Economic Development, Transport, Housing and Governance.

We hope that by reading these you will gain an understanding about what sort of things are important to everyone involved with It's Our County - sustaining our communities, playing to our county's natural strengths and maintaining services.

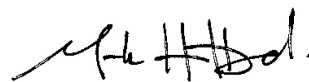
We are currently working on two further important items, Education and Social Care. With huge budgets, these areas pose particular difficulties in a rural county. Small rural schools are at the heart of our communities, and should be governed by a policy that values this role and gives them every support to stay open. Social care is a growing issue that will probably face all of us at some time in our lives.

We hope everyone can find something in the pages that follow that will inspire them to enter the debate about our council and its services, about what sort of place Herefordshire should be in 15 years time, and how we collectively are going to get there,

It's OUR Manifesto - and we hope it will become yours too.



Peter Cocks,
Chairman, It's Our County



Mark Hubbard
Leader, It's Our County



It's Our County has developed these manifesto policies by drawing on as many sources as possible.

The input we've received has been assessed against three important principles: resilience, inclusivity and distinctiveness.

Resilience means building a strong and sustainable local economy, that can withstand whatever challenges the future may have in store, whether these are social, economic or environmental.

This needs to be done fairly: **inclusivity** means doing all we can to ensure that no-one in this county suffers exclusion or discrimination because of circumstances beyond their control.

Last but not least, **distinctiveness** means making the most of everything that defines Herefordshire: the landscapes, communities and ways of life that make it such a special place to live. We believe that these three principles work well together. The way to build strong communities and a healthy local economy is not to make everywhere the same by imposing big ideas from elsewhere, but to work with the grain, listening to people and nurturing what's already growing.

Our Manifesto

It's Our County is a new kind of political party.

We are based in Herefordshire and have no affiliation to any national party. This means we understand local issues and local solutions. It also means we can work with whoever we need to in order to get the best deal for our county. Our policies are driven by local needs, not London politics.

As a party of local government, It's Our County will work within the basic structures of national policy, but break the hidden links between national party agendas and local decision making. By tapping into the wealth of energy, skills and local understanding within our communities, we can create a healthier and more effective local democracy. Successful local government depends on ongoing conversation between communities and the people that represent them. It's Our County is built to be participative and responsive, and developing this conversation will be a cornerstone of our work.

Overcoming the disengagement and cynicism which so many people currently feel towards 'the Council' will require big changes in how local politics is often done. We think those changes are long overdue. That's why we promise to stick to our core values:

Honesty – being truthful and acknowledging all the evidence, even if that means reconsidering our position.

Clarity – being open about what we believe in, using clear language, and avoiding jargon.

Transparency – no hidden deals, no vested interests, and a commitment that public consultation will be genuine, not manipulated to get a particular response.



Real Localism

We believe in fixing the things that are broken, not the things that aren't.

Herefordshire is a deeply rural county with relatively low unemployment, where quality of life is preferred to the unthinking pursuit of profit and growth. This gentler, more sustainable way of life is a strength, not a weakness. It means we are well placed to face the economic and environmental challenges of our uncertain age. However there is work to be done – we want to make sure that the relatively high standard of living in the county is maintained, and is shared by everyone.

Locally-owned small to medium-sized businesses are a speciality here in Herefordshire, where people are good at doing small things well. Regeneration policies for the county should focus on this strength, rather than seeing the character of the county as a weakness. By applying home grown solutions to deliver the services and infrastructure we need, we can build a successful local economy without inappropriate overdevelopment.

Our focus on preserving local character doesn't mean we're afraid of innovation. Technology, appropriately used, will be an important part of securing a sustainable future for rural areas such as ours, not least by helping deliver the high quality public services we need for our communities to work.

Nor do we see local policy-making as second best to national. An It's Our County run council would draw on the best available expertise - much of which, happily, is available very close to home. Herefordshire has a long history of self-reliance and creative entrepreneurial spirit. Together, we can make sure our county embodies our three key principles:

Resilient. People need sustainable livelihoods, whether they live in the market towns, in rural areas or in Hereford city. This means nurturing a vibrant local economy where profits stay in the county and local needs are met, wherever possible, by local production. An economy like this can withstand economic and environmental shocks, both now and in the future. It can grow organically from the roots upwards.

Inclusive. We want all sections of the community to enjoy Herefordshire's famously high quality of life. This means prioritising a well balanced economy, affordable housing, high quality transport solutions, and the protection of our public services.

Distinctive. We want to keep and grow what's best about Herefordshire. We promise to respect the character and quality of both the natural and the built environment.

Economic Development

Application of principles

These are tough times - but the prospects for Herefordshire are still bright. Our beautiful county is full of resourceful people and businesses, with plenty of opportunities for growth in areas such as tourism, creative industries and the green economy. More traditional sectors such as manufacturing and retail, which together account for over a third of jobs in the county, need better support from the council.

Resilient

- Pursuing policies which help money to circulate within the local economy, rather than seeing profits 'exported' out of the county.

Inclusive

- Representing the interests of the county on the new Local Enterprise Partnership, ensuring that it works for all the people of Herefordshire.

Distinctive

- Building on existing strengths and skills, while encouraging fresh thinking and encouraging the growth of new enterprises.

Where we are now

Herefordshire Council has produced many fine words, but spectacularly failed to deliver. In Hereford city, years of unrealistic grandiose schemes have resulted only in crippling uncertainty and worsening traffic chaos. The misguided attempt to impose an inappropriate growth agenda will be bad for businesses and bad for communities. Each of our market towns has a distinctly different character, with their own challenges and assets that have remained unrealised in the council's vision for the future. Our rural areas are hampered by patchy access to broadband and mobile phone coverage, but despite this have a wealth of small locally owned businesses and resourceful self-employed people.

The county as a whole has huge tourism potential with its emerging food & drink sector, a wealth of heritage assets, a vibrant arts & crafts offer and a strong agricultural base. Yet once again, council policies have failed to fully realise this.

Where we want to be

IOC promises to listen to the economic priorities of local people and businesses, to make the most of our resources, and to concentrate on creating the critical building blocks for economic success:

- A more balanced economy, with good employment opportunities across all sectors
- Sustainable regeneration driven by the local business community, without imposition of unrealistic growth targets

- Reduced congestion in Hereford City (see Transport section)
- A viable long term vision for the Edgar Street Grid, with less emphasis on new retail and a clearer vision of how to manage the area in the short term
- A focused plan to attract more and diverse businesses to the county
- Accelerated broadband improvements across the county.

We want to level the playing field for small and medium sized local businesses, helping them compete better with bigger firms, safeguarding distinctiveness and keeping profits within the county wherever possible. This means creating a better business environment for financial stability, creativity and innovation. We would work closely with groups such as the Federation of Small Businesses, identify start up units for small businesses established locally, and design a package of support measures for businesses in their first 5 years.

An IOC council would work with independent retailers in Hereford and other market towns boost our economy and encourage local shopping by ensuring an attractive retail offer. This does not need a new retail centre on the Edgar Street Grid. We believe that the existing amount of retail space in the city of Hereford is adequate for a thriving economy, but this will require development of the St Owen Street area, as well as a comprehensive regeneration programme for the Berrington Quarter (the 8 acre site behind the Green Dragon Hotel). We also want to build on our heritage as a county of market towns, and develop a county-wide market strategy showcasing artisan producers of all kinds.

All council spending proposals should have the full support of the people they affect, be driven by genuine consultation, and be prioritised once the community is fully on board. Big spending departments need to focus first on centres of economic growth for the county. For instance, the highways budget should prioritise congestion reduction for Hereford, our largest economic centre.

Rather than wasting time and money on fantasy bypass schemes, small cheap sustainable solutions to transport problems should be implemented without delay, to ease congestion and help people get to work on time.

Balancing ecology, business, and tourism, IOC would seek to make the most of our key natural asset, the River Wye. We can also improve the county's tourism offer by better tying pubs, accommodation providers and tourist attractions in with the local food economy. We would also revise council procurement policies, helping the local economy by buying local produce, products and services wherever possible. Rural regeneration can be driven through supporting tourism and agriculture, but also by encouraging home- or web- based craft and creative businesses. This means promoting Herefordshire as an inspiring place for creativity, as well as working with partners to prioritise fast broadband for all.

We will work to minimise damage from spending cuts, seeking appropriate new funding where possible, and making creative use of our limited resources. We will seek to end PFI initiatives, which funnel money and jobs away from the County. Buying local services and trades, rather than letting PFI contracts to national consortia, can benefit local trades, services and producers across the board from accountants to plumbers.

Key policy commitments

We will:

- Draw up an alternative 20 year development plan for the Edgar Street Grid, prepared with proper consultation and based on civic and leisure themes.
- Identify start up units for small local businesses.
- Design a package of support measures for local businesses in their first 5 years.
- Strengthen the council's local procurement policies.
- Establish a county-wide markets strategy.
- Investigate making better use of the navigational potential of the River Wye.
- Investigate the establishment of a county-wide Heritage, Environment and Regeneration Trust.

Transport

Application of principles

Herefordshire has never had a proper integrated transport policy. IOC believes we can use resources better in order to offer people a wider and better range of travel choices. We are committed to easing urban congestion, ensuring rural areas have access to affordable transport, and ensuring a fairer share between Hereford, the market towns and the county's rural wards. This is essential to ensure the economic vitality of our county. We believe there are cheaper and more effective solutions available.

Resilient

- Keeping the local economy flowing and businesses thriving.
- Reducing carbon emissions and exposure to uncertainties around future oil prices.
- Improving public health and safety.

Inclusive

- Combating the isolation of rural communities.
- Ensuring that non-drivers such as lower income groups, the young, and the elderly can be mobile and play a full role in the community.
- Making our streets safe for children and other pedestrians.

Distinctive

- Maintaining relationships between the county's historic network of market towns and villages.
- Protecting both the city and the countryside from inappropriate roadbuilding.
- Making Herefordshire a leader in sustainable transport.

Where we are now

Many of the county's bus services will be scaled back or removed altogether under the current Council's budget-cutting proposals. The Comprehensive Spending Review projects reducing subsidies to bus services by 20% and the Council currently has no strategy to maintain or improve bus services. This is a serious threat to the vitality of the market towns and rural areas.

Meanwhile in Hereford, current proposals for a "relief road" are set to squander millions on making matters worse, not better. Documents produced by the existing Council misrepresent the real situation. Any proposed bypass scheme would be likely to be defeated at public enquiry. The environmental impacts of all routes have been seriously underestimated, while overall traffic would increase, and projected benefits are negligible: a maximum of 2 minutes saved per car journey.

No version of the road is ever likely to be funded by central government. The proposal to fund it by house-building would be catastrophic (see our housing policy pages), and

has never been properly costed. We believe it's an irresponsible waste of public money to continue promoting this idea.

Where we want to be

An IOC council would focus on integrated, small-scale solutions, better targeted at meeting real local needs.

Thirty percent of Herefordshire households do not own a car, and many of those that do would happily use it less if alternatives were available. Herefordshire should be increasing bus services across the county, not cutting them. We will re-allocate funding to try and achieve this, looking creatively at how best to use bus subsidies, and also working to identify opportunities for local businesses and other groups to contribute.

This does not mean we are anti-car. We recognise that in our rural county private cars are often essential. But we want to offer everyone real choice about how to make their journeys. A properly integrated transport strategy would bring better travel experiences for drivers and non-drivers alike. In Hereford and the market towns, we will develop a package of measures aimed at reducing car journeys by 10-20 percent, reducing congestion and providing space for alternative modes of transport. We want a county in which:

- All modes of transport are properly considered.
- Cycling and walking are safe, inviting, and efficient, with well-designed dedicated routes.
- Residential areas have 20 mph speed limits wherever possible.
- Car sharing and car pooling are promoted and rewarded.
- Car parking charges and systems work to encourage sustainable travel patterns.
- Park and ride services are extended, and integrated with walking and cycling routes as well as bus services.
- Technology such as mobile phone based timetable information is promoted.
- Community transport schemes supplement public transport where necessary, helping to cover low density areas.
- Home working is encouraged where appropriate and feasible, with the council leading by example and working to ensure that fast broadband becomes available to all.

Key policy commitments

We will:

- Base all our transport policies on solid evidence of genuine local need.
- Cancel expenditure and (where possible) contracts related to the 'Hereford Relief Road', since the Council's own statistics show that it will not provide any relief.
- Do our best to protect existing bus services, prioritising funding for at least an hourly service to each of the market towns, and frequent integrated bus services to and from all rail stations.
- Work to improve traffic conditions for all road users, by reviewing signage, signaling and car parking.
- Put pressure on central government and train operators to protect and improve our rail links, including twin tracking the line between Hereford and Ledbury, reopening Pontrilas station, and establishing a Quality Rail Partnership for the county.
- Ensure that cycling and walking are fully 'designed in' to all the county's transport and infrastructure planning.
- Work with schools in urban areas to implement realistic green travel plans.

Housing

Application of principles

It's Our County stands for democratically led development, not developer led democracy. Houses are for people, and we believe that the scale and location of new house building should be determined by the needs of communities. New homes should not be built to low standards and treated as 'cash generators' for unrelated transport or retail developments. So there's plenty to do. Here's how our core principles apply in this area:

Resilient

- Keeping communities alive by making sure young people can afford to live in them, and so have the option to stay in or return to the county.
- Getting our homes - old and new - fit for the future, by using local skills to make them warm, energy-efficient and genuinely affordable to heat and power.
- Not overdeveloping the county and putting unaffordable strain on the county's services and basic infrastructure.

Inclusive

- Ensuring a supply of good quality affordable homes in the right places, both to buy and to rent, suitable for young people, families and older people.
- Allowing flexibility by promoting diverse models of house building, including self-build and Community Land Trusts

Distinctive

- Protecting our natural and built heritage by building only where needed.
- Using national and international best practice to inform Herefordshire's future development of communal low carbon heat and power supplies, without compromising the county's unique natural and historical heritage.
- Keeping our craft building traditions alive, while embracing new design and construction techniques and providing the training and support to up-skill and stimulate the county's building industry.

Where we are now

Herefordshire is a desirable place to live, but has a low average income so it suffers particularly badly from the national problem of property prices outstripping incomes. The problem is especially acute in market towns and rural areas. Meanwhile across the county, much of our housing stock is of low quality and poor energy performance.

All this calls for creative schemes aimed at providing high quality affordable home in response to complex patterns of local needs. The Council, as the planning authority, is best placed to drive this. Herefordshire has never featured in the national sustainable housing awards.

But rather than responding to real needs, the existing council/developer partnership proposes to build between 8,500 and 12,000 new houses in and around Hereford City. Whilst planning permissions have already been granted for some of the stock, these are the actual totals identified in the Local Development Framework reports. These housing developments would generate income for associated infrastructure, all of which the existing council plans to spend on the 'Hereford Relief Road' , leaving no funds to build the extra facilities required by so many new households. Furthermore, most of the housing (around three-quarters) is expected to be filled by in-migration from London and the South-East.

The houses will be built many years before the proposed 'traffic alleviating bypass' is completed. When the bypass is completed, possibly by 2020, it is predicted that traffic congestion will return to current levels. The same mistakes have been made before, in cities and towns around the UK. Let's not repeat them here.

Where we want to be

Encouraging speculative housing development risks making our current problems worse, and is not a sensible way to grow the local economy. An IOC council will abandon the nonsensical housing targets now being voluntarily adopted, and work closely with Herefordshire communities to develop a sensible housing strategy which delivers homes where they are needed.

This work will be based on community led plans and further, genuine consultation. We will also seek out socially responsible delivery partners for new housing, in order to ensure that new development enhances existing communities or, where necessary, creates sensitively integrated and socially sustainable new communities.

Community Land Trusts offer an ideal legal framework for identifying potential housing sites, and for developing them to a high standard at low cost. A county-wide CLT could enable the county to provide the access to cheap housing, both for purchase and to rent, that our local young people need so badly. It could potentially also offer serviced plots for sale to self builders.

Key policy commitments

We will:

- Meet with Herefordshire communities to define the extent, nature and location of new housing needed, then work to get it provided.
- Put on hold the implementation of the current LDF (the Local Development Framework, including retail, housing and road building proposals), to allow full and open consideration of alternative proposals.
- Protect decisions relating to the provision of new housing from the non-democratic influence of property developers. Specifically, we will de-link the County's strategy for providing new housing from Hereford Futures' current city wide economic development proposals.
- Carry out a thorough open review of the Council/Hereford Futures' development plans for Hereford city, including the nature of the financial arrangements linking housing development with retail and road building proposals.
- Investigate the creation of a county-wide Community Land Trust.
- Pioneer innovative localised arrangements to deliver the Government's 'New Green Deal', in order to keep skills and profits from this huge new programme of work in Herefordshire.

Governance

Application of principles

We should all be able to feel proud of our council, and trust that it's run by people who are really committed to Herefordshire. Council policy can and should reflect the priorities of local people. Democratic governance is one of the most important areas which IOC can effect positive change - this change need not cost money, but can transform people's relationships with the council whose actions affect so many areas of their lives.

Resilient

- Responding to local needs.
- Finding creative and lasting solutions to local problems.

Inclusive

- Encouraging people of varied ages and backgrounds to become councillors.
- Listening, consulting and making policy which reflects the priorities of all residents of the county.

Distinctive

- Using structures and working practices that work here. Local not national agendas.

Where we are now

A unitary authority with a district council mentality.

Herefordshire Council became a unitary authority in 1998, but too often still acts like a district council. A unitary authority requires a much greater degree of strategic thinking. But this means working with the unique strengths of the county, not imposing an inappropriate "off the peg" growth agenda.

Outdated practices

Councillors often serve too many consecutive terms of office, risking the concentration of power in the hands of people who have lost touch with those they represent. Council meetings are open to the public, but they happen during office hours, effectively excluding anyone who is working and connected to the real world. Higher levels of the council sometimes seem to have a secretive 'insider' culture which is undemocratic, inefficient and unresponsive to both employees and the public.

Cabinet and scrutiny

Under the present system all cabinet posts go to a single party, even though in a county as small as Herefordshire, one party is unlikely to have enough suitable people to fill them adequately. The problems of a one-party cabinet are compounded by the shortcomings of the current scrutiny system. Too often, the cabinet decide what is going to happen and announce it in the papers before referring back to other

councillors. Effective scrutiny relies on active committee chairs taking the lead in developing policy. Cabinet should not be able to announce a strategic new direction until a scrutiny committee has looked at all of the potential options first.

Where we want to be

Allowing national parties to run local government leads to bad decisions, and also discourages people from coming forward for public service. We want to remove the party political dominance in Herefordshire, making the council more representative and creating a much higher proportion of ordinary people becoming councillors. IOC wants to develop a more consensual way of running the county than the existing cabinet system, and would investigate the possibility of returning to a committee system, which involves wider discussion and draws on greater expertise. Meanwhile, an IOC council would allocate cabinet posts not by political allegiance but by choosing the best person for the job, based on interview and cv experience.

We would also revise scrutiny procedures, to ensure all relevant information is brought to the table, not just that which supports the cabinet's approach. The overall aim is to open up the system to constructive challenge. Care must be taken to select fair and neutral chairs of scrutiny committees. Individual councillors should always have the opportunity to see decisions coming, research them, and effect change if they need to. Scrutiny should also involve external witnesses where appropriate, and interested members of the public. We will explore ways of bringing in expert advice without wasting money on exorbitant consultancy fees, and of ensuring proper public representation at scrutiny meetings. Summary reports of meetings should be publicly and promptly available, as well as full and accurate official minutes.

Creating a culture of openness

We believe that the Council needs to develop a culture of openness, to replace the present atmosphere of hierarchy, secretiveness and long closed meetings. Creative contributions will be encouraged from all quarters, making the most of the experience and expertise of all council employees. Meeting times will be minimised, giving officers more time to serve the public effectively and directly. Information requested by members of the public will be provided as quickly as possible, where possible within 14 days of the request being made.

Consultation procedures need to be overhauled, to reflect best practice and make sure that people's voices are properly heard. This is not about numbers but about quality of consultation and a willingness to change policy to reflect the responses received. Parish councils and other local bodies are also important, and will become more so as the new Neighbourhood Planning system comes into force. Their views need to be more demonstrably taken into account. Finally, the council should speak only about things for which it is responsible - and when it does, it should only produce statements that are clearly verifiable.

Key policy commitments

We will:

- Make the council more representative by encouraging a wider variety of people to become councillors. Revise working practices to make this possible.
- Actively encourage policy formation from a diverse cross section of the community, ensuring that policy formation is robust, representative and sustainable.
- Ensure that best practice consultation procedures are always followed, and that policy is genuinely guided by the responses gained.
- Improve communication with the public about council processes and decision making, and introduce a presumption in favour of openness.
- Support and empower parish councils and 'third sector' bodies to make 'localism' a reality. Encourage and assist community led development.