

Election issues in Cornwall

With the election in full swing and a few days to go before the vote on 6th May, it is timely to examine the issues facing Cornwall that should be addressed by candidates. There are of course those major UK policy areas which will impact upon Cornwall – future economic policy particularly in relation to public spending and tax. There are however a range of issues which are of particular importance in a Cornish context.

Population

The big issue is undoubtedly that of population increase. Under current trends it is quite likely that by the end of this century Cornwall will have a population of between 1.2 and 1.3 million. In other words, for every person now living in Cornwall there will be 2.5 times that number. A population of that size would have very significant impacts upon the Cornish environment – loss of land to development, increased traffic, higher levels of carbon output, a reduced quality of life. The UK already has some of the smallest new dwellings. It would not only undermine any attempts to reposition Cornwall in terms of sustainability, it would effectively make it impossible. Quality of life would also diminish, as would Cornwall's biodiversity. And there is the question – what would be the point?

So the question for all candidates is, do they support the population increasing to this level and if so why?

Even if Cornwall's population were to stabilise there would be major issues to address, on the economy, housing, transport, planning, environment and governance. Looking at these in turn.

Economy – no change or realign?

Our economy has become lop sided with over dependence on the financial sector and population related growth. Housing is regarded as an investment, not somewhere to live. Cornwall is seen as a land to rip apart, a developers paradise.

So is it business as usual or a new departure?

Housing

Two main issues, one is the pressure arising from continued population growth, and the other is affordability, which is to some extent linked to the former. The current dependence on private developer led affordable housing provision is fundamentally flawed. Rising house prices, which limit affordability, are needed by developers to provide the affordable element! Simply building houses does not solve housing need. An example of market failure.

Simply stating 'we need more affordable/local' housing is not sufficient.

Do candidates want to continue with the current approach or are more radical measures needed? These might include – more public funding for affordables, changing the planning system to restrict investment and second homes?

Transport

The establishment parties all support the roads to prosperity discourse and an increasing reliance on air, despite little evidence that the former assists prosperity or solves congestion problems, while the latter imposes increasing environmental costs.

To meet sustainability targets, reduce dependence on oil and create a better environment dramatic changes are required - policies to discourage excessive car use and switching investment to public transport, managing traffic demand by road pricing and introducing car parking charges for retail and leisure use.

How many candidates would support alternative policies? If not, how can they reconcile support for more roads with the rhetoric of sustainability?

Planning

Here the main issue is the Regional Spatial Strategy with its unsustainable housing targets for Cornwall. Although some candidates have objected to the targets, no alternative numbers have been proposed.

So what would candidates suggest are realistic and sustainable targets?

The planning system is heavily biased towards developers. If a developer does not succeed on the first attempt, others can be made. If a developer goes to appeal and wins the local council can be penalised. Small wonder that authorities are reluctant to reject proposals which they either deem inappropriate or lack community consent.

Do candidates support reform to rebalance the system?

Environment

Climate change has disappeared off the radar. You would not know it was a problem let alone an issue. Various political parties claim to be green, yet support more development, more traffic, and more flights. There is opposition to road charging and other means of reducing car use.

So what really green measures would candidates support?

Governance – reform and renewal

Electoral reform has returned as an issue as the Lib Dem share of support has risen and a balanced parliament appears possible.

How many candidates would support the change to a proportional system and if not how can they justify continuation of an antiquated anti-democratic voting system?

Cornish Assembly

A Cornish Assembly would provide resources and accountability to enable Cornwall to achieve the goals of sustainability, prosperity and community cohesion.

What do candidates think about an Assembly and if they reject it, why?