

Whitchurch-on-Thames Village Plan

Report of the Housing and Environment Study Group

Introduction

The Housing and Environment study group consisted of Jill Bradon, Susan Lee, John Southey, Anne Tuckwell and Peter Smith (Chairman).

Although few questions on the questionnaire were directly related to issues of housing and the environment, the group was able to consider a number of responses and comments from residents of Whitchurch. On this basis, it seemed to us that the village of Whitchurch is regarded as an attractive environment, and responses of residents to the questionnaire are overwhelmingly in favour of minor improvements to the existing situation rather than for radical change. It seemed important to the group that we should maintain a reasonable degree of rural ambience, rather than to become further urbanised. The commentary which follows reflects this need to conserve.

Principal Recommendations

1. That the flood plain should be protected as undeveloped land.
2. That the provision of surface drainage be reviewed in the expectation of increasing likelihood of extreme weather.
3. That there should be no change to the definition of the Conservation area or to the listed buildings.
4. That there should be no “design statement” for the wider village, but that garden infilling and extensions should be subject to careful scrutiny on an individual basis, in particular to ensure that all developments are sympathetic to the vernacular architecture, the settlement character and the local landscape.
5. That there should be no new building development on green field sites within or adjacent to the village.
6. That street furniture throughout the village should be improved and standardised to a quality appropriate for a conservation area village in an area of outstanding natural beauty.
7. That, where appropriate, open spaces within the village should be maintained in a tidy and attractive state either by local householders (as at present) or, where necessary, by a planned intervention.
8. That a “trodden” footpath should be made from Boze Down farm to the West Lodge of the Hardwick estate along the north side of the Hardwick Road.
9. That the Jubilee path should be cleared and its surface improved.

The Flood Plain and the Flood Risk

There are two distinct elements to the flood risk at Whitchurch.

First, there is the risk posed by intermittently high levels of the Thames and the associated water table. The Environment Agency is the proper body to oversee this risk. The flood plain is an integral part of the village's flood protection, and the Village Plan should regard the preservation of the flood plain as undeveloped land as a key target. (In this context, it is clear that the present flood risk maps circulated by the Environment Agency are extremely broad-brush, and it would be appropriate for the village to support any attempt to ensure greater precision.)

Secondly, there is the risk posed by surface water when extreme weather leads to flash flooding. This is a risk which the Village Plan ought to address. In particular, there needs to be a concerted effort to ensure that local drainage is effective and that new development or paved areas are not going to add to local problems. Areas of concern noted by the group include the Eastfield Lane/High Street/Greyhound area and also the road outside the Primary School (indeed, in winter months, the area outside the school is probably the least attractive and worst maintained part of the village). Other vulnerable areas need to be identified. Vulnerable households need to be given appropriate emergency advice.

The Built environment

The Conservation area

The core of the village, on either side of the High Street between the Bridge and the Hardwick Road junction, is a conservation area containing a number of listed buildings. The area is appropriately defined, as are the listed buildings, and we recommend no change either to the definition of the area or to the planning rules affecting the conservation area or the listed buildings.

The wider built environment

The development of the village beyond the conservation area has been largely random and unstructured, but the overall effect is pleasing. We do not believe that a design statement would be appropriate since there is no predominant building style to preserve, but we do consider that our situation in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty justifies a very strict standard of planning both with regard to design and to building density. Designs for both new houses and extensions should be sensitive to the size of plot and should respect the vernacular architecture, settlement character and local landscape both with regard to design and to building materials. This will require developers to do more than to use standard suburban designs. Planning conditions should seek to promote best practice in the use of traditional sustainable materials, namely timber, flint, brick and roofing materials. (The Chilterns Conservation Board has published very helpful guidelines on this matter, and we recommend adherence to these principles.) Applications for house building within gardens should be dealt with strictly on their merits, with local opinion given more consideration than has sometimes seemed to be the case recently. Business activity within the village is at the moment concordant with our pleasant village environment, but we urge continued vigilance in this respect.

Street furniture

We recommend that the presentation of the village roads, in terms of signage and street furniture, should be made consonant with the development standards expected of a conservation area. If home-owners are expected to conform to certain standards of planning, then we believe that all public areas should be presented to a similarly high standard, and this is patently not the case at present. A full report on this issue is attached, and we regard

the improvement of street furniture throughout the village as a most important part of our proposals.

Future development

Opportunities for future development in the village are limited by the flood plain to the south and the steep slope of the Chilterns to the north, but we would expect there to be pressure for future development in the narrow strip between. We do not recommend support for further development on the available sites adjacent to the village, and we also urge resistance to any prospect of ribbon development along either the Hardwick Road or the Bridle path. We note that residents' support for further development in the village is very limited. Similarly, we do not believe that there is opportunity to extend either affordable or social housing in the village.

The Hardwick estate

The Hardwick estate contains a number of listed buildings (as well as an outstanding rural area). We believe that the estate is a significant asset to the village and that its conservation is important.

Open spaces within the built environment

Within the village there are various open spaces, some with as yet unknown ownership. A complete schedule of these areas is given in an attached spreadsheet, together with some suggestions for further action. Properly maintained these areas are assets to the village.

We note the questionnaire responses in favour of planting more trees, shrubs and wild flowers. The group's view is that there is scope for this, but we are conscious that many of these spaces are currently maintained through the goodwill of local householders, and we would not wish to jeopardise this goodwill by imposing a centrally directed regime. We are attracted in principle to the idea of "guerrilla gardening" whereby groups of residents take responsibility for uncared-for open spaces, and we suggest that, where untended areas can be identified, an appropriate planting and maintenance scheme is adopted. Such examples might include the banks of the road up the hill towards the War Memorial and "the triangle" at the top of the High Street. The important issue is that these areas should be pleasant and attractive rather than sculpted and cultivated, as befits a rural environment rather than a suburban one.

We note the wish of some residents for more river access. Currently there is limited access at the Slipway, the public footpath at Mill Cottages, and at Sheepwash Lane. If further access were provided on any significant scale, it could lead to environmental considerations like traffic, parking, litter, toilets and maintenance. The view of the group is that, with the close proximity of excellent access at Pangbourne, further access on the Whitchurch side should not be considered a high priority.

The Rural environment

The local rural environment is an enormous asset to the village, and the preservation of access and rights of way should remain a high priority. The provision of permissive paths on the Hardwick estate is particularly to be valued, and it illustrates how important benevolent ownership is to the provision of rural assets. We recommend the construction of a proper (trodden) footpath from the end of the Jubilee path to the West Lodge of the Hardwick estate along the north side of the Hardwick Road (as exemplified by the path recently created alongside the road from Whitchurch Hill to Crays Pond). This would be greatly beneficial to all pedestrians (but especially to families) in separating pedestrians from traffic. If space allowed, there would be merit in creating a bridle path on the opposite side of the road. We note that the Hardwick Road between Boze Down Farm and the West

Lodge is becoming damaged and ill-defined by cars parking on verges and the development of informal passing places, and we suggest the need for vigilance in this area (particularly perhaps in view of the Bridge closure causing increased use at some future point). It is not clear whether maintenance of paths, verges, hedges and rights of way is in accordance with recommended best practice, or, indeed, who is responsible for supervising such practice. It is apparent that the Jubilee path will shortly need clearance and maintenance. We also recommend continued vigilance in respect of street furniture, particularly signposts, on rural roads in the parish.

Conservation and Ecology

The parish has a wide variety of subsoils with consequently a range of habitats giving a wide diversity of flora and fauna. There are six designated County Wildlife sites in the parish providing species-rich habitats. The Village Plan should recognise this fortunate state of affairs and should pledge support to the activities of WoTHabs in promoting and preserving this position.

Recycling

Recycling is for the most part a bigger issue than one which can be addressed by a mere village plan. However, we note that there are some local initiatives based upon specific products. These are well publicised in the Bulletin, and we commend these initiatives and urge further expansion and increased access wherever appropriate.

Points from the Questionnaire

Noise

We note that there were a number of comments about noise pollution caused by small aircraft. We understand that local airfields and flying clubs have addressed this problem and have restricted aerobatic exercises to a maximum of 20 minutes in any one location. In comparison with other forms of noise pollution – civil aviation, helicopters (including military ones), rail traffic, and motor traffic – we do not believe that small aircraft constitute an overwhelming problem, irritating though they may be on a few occasions.

Litter bins

We do not believe that litter bins would of themselves provide a complete solution to the litter problem, which is caused by thoughtless pedestrians and passing motorists. Clearly it is sensible to provide litter bins at appropriate places.

Dog fouling

Most dog owners act very responsibly by clearing up after their dogs. Those who do not would be unlikely to use dog bins either. We suggest a number of discreet notices, combined with perhaps a single dog bin (to be located in consultation with dog owners) might be the best way forward, but such a bin would itself be aesthetically unpleasing and would need constant clearing and cleaning.

Lighting

We note the wish of some residents for improved lighting in certain areas, particularly the High Street close to the Toll Bridge, and The Cut. There is a need to strike a balance between personal safety on the one hand and minimising light pollution on the other. The group feels that overall there is reasonable balance at the moment and that requests for improved lighting should be considered on a localised, ad hoc basis.

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