

Do we need to review the Parish Plan?

The Parish Plan is now 13 years old. It was agreed at the last PC meeting that it would be beneficial to discuss whether it requires a formal review, and if so how detailed such a review should be? Accordingly, I have consulted all parish councillors to establish their initial thoughts and I have prepared this statement, which includes a number of discussion points for the Parish Council meeting on the 20th November.

Background

The Localism Act 2011 aimed to devolve some government decision-making to the local community level. Policies derived from neighbourhood plans for example can be incorporated into a local authority development plan for an area following formal public consultation and an independent expert examination. Parish plans differ in that there is no public examination process and they do not generally contain policies that can be incorporated formally into a local plan in the same way policies from a neighbourhood plan. They can however still be used as an evidence base to inform parish responses to local planning applications - providing of course that the parish plan is based on effective community involvement (as was the case in Dunchideock). A parish plan can also provide a useful structured means of gauging community opinion on a wide range of issues - for example on the need for more local housing development, tourism, health and transport - and can help in flagging up priorities for local action by parish councils as well as other local groups. This function alone makes them important local documents.

The Dunchideock Parish Plan

Our parish plan, which had an indicative life span of around 10 years, was based on the results of a well supported questionnaire and a public consultation event. A period of analysis followed and the plan was published in 2005. It set out several key themes - for example housing, transport, employment and environment - listed key concerns from villagers and set out a broad programme of priority tasks for the parish council and volunteer groups to take forward via an appended 'action plan'.

Headline outcomes

- There was widespread opposition to further housing development in the village. The plan was published not long after development of Belvedere Park and Thornes Meadow, and it was concluded that any future development in the parish should be resisted unless it answered definite local need and was of infill-type only.
- The plan stated that some small-scale tourism might potentially be supported, but largescale tourism would be inappropriate and should not be encouraged.
- The local community felt that local businesses did not provide much direct employment for villagers and there was no local employment need identified that might justify additional commercial development in the area.
- There was a desire for a pub and shop as well as activities for young children. A children's club was reportedly planned for summer 2005 and there was an action point in the plan for an investigation into the possibility of a children's playground. A lack of social events for adults was also identified and it was suggested that more use should be made of the Village Hall, with additional parking being suggested.
- It was clear that the local community police officer was not widely known by villagers.
- There was concern about maintenance of local roads, of speeding traffic and of delivery traffic using narrow local lanes to access the Lord Haldon Hotel.

- A majority of villagers were in favour of litter removal and there was a desire for better signposting / maintenance of footpaths.
- A majority of villagers (75%) supported the idea of new nature reserves / orchards and 15 villagers volunteered to help move this forward.
- There was a feeling that Parish Councillors should be better known in the community – for example via notice boards, Country News and the website. An additional notice board was requested at Tower Court.

Delivery

In terms of action, it was envisaged that the parish council (who were the only organisation / group specifically mentioned in terms of delivery) would coordinate roll-out of key plan elements and a series of groups run by local volunteers would be set up to explore and coordinate many of the suggested action points.

There have been a number of very positive initiatives since 2005 – many of which appear to have been triggered by the parish plan and were actioned by the parish council. For example:

- A Transport Action Group (TAG) was set up and a detailed traffic survey was subsequently undertaken by Devon Highways to determine traffic speeds / volumes and assess the need for measures such as signage etc. The TAG also explored an identified need for new passing places on the road to Underdown, but this was not supported by Devon Highways following the traffic survey.
- A new website was developed.
- Internet access was significantly improved (with the advent of broadband).
- The film night events were initiated following a clear desire in the parish plan for more social events, in particular at the village hall.
- An extension to the village hall parking area was explored in detail. The site was surveyed, plans were drawn up and quotes for work were obtained. It was however ultimately concluded that the minimal additional space which would have been gained was offset by the high cost of extending into the adjacent steeply sloping field; the initiative was therefore not pursued further.
- The potential for a child's play area was explored but this was not pursued due to lack of a suitable location being available.

Recently, a villager-led initiative has resulted in good numbers of parishioners meeting for drinks at the Tower Bar in the Lord Haldon Hotel on the first Friday of each month. Whilst this was not an action point outcome of the parish plan, the need for a local pub was identified in the plan and the initiative merits mention here.

Leaving aside unachievable aspirations (such as burying power cables underground to improve local views) there have been a few missed opportunities – possibly in part because of a lack of volunteer support. For example the children's club - which was reportedly planned to start in summer 2005 - did not materialise and it did not prove possible to take the children's playground initiative forward. The proposal for a new notice board at Tower Court was not taken forward. Also, and perhaps understandably, litter picks were discontinued by the parish council because of H&S and insurance concerns.

Relevant parish plan points that could be quickly addressed

- We have a new community police officer (Martyn Beck) who should be invited to the next PC meeting and to forthcoming community events

- There is now grant funding available from DCC for refurbishing footpaths and Councillor Bean is leading on this for the PC. New community litter picks are planned.
- A community orchard has been suggested by a parishioner and the feasibility of this is being explored.
- Regarding nature conservation, there have been sightings of hedgehogs recently in School Lane and since this species is under threat nationally and is vulnerable to road traffic, it may be possible to seek grant funding to erect hedgehog signs in order to raise awareness of this species locally. Other nature and landscape-based initiatives could include tree planting (in particular to replace the felled lime tree at the bottom of School Lane) and flower planting. These are being examined by the parish council currently.
- In respect to the desire for improved information flow from the parish council to the local community, the PC is now producing monthly newsletters for Country News and councillor profiles will be included in CN and on the website in coming months. The website has recently been refreshed and is continuing to expand in scope and content.

Potential next steps

Levels of local tourism have changed considerably since 2005; in particular ongoing development of Haldon Forest as a tourist hub brings a great deal of additional car and cycle traffic from Haldon Hill down through the village, and there appears to be a continued need for new passing places on the road from Underdown. It may therefore be worth exploring the possibility for an updated traffic survey with Devon Highways.

Access to Broadband is now widespread in the village. Whilst the majority of villagers were on dial-up internet access at the time of publication, changes in internet use and technology since 2005 are likely to have influenced the way many parishioners access village-related information. For example there was a desire expressed in the 2005 plan to have an additional noticeboard at Tower Court, but this need may now have changed and at the very least the PC should canvass opinion at Tower Court and more widely regarding the need for another noticeboard here.

The Parish Council has an obligation to take the views of the local community (as expressed in the parish plan) into account when responding to planning applications and I feel there is a need to re-consult on at least some areas of likely local concern. However, in my opinion, there would be no merit in repeating the full and formal process of consulting on and preparing an updated Parish plan. Whilst the demography of the village appears to have changed somewhat, it is still dominated by older people who I suspect are likely to hold broadly similar views to those expressed in 2005. Also - and importantly - there seem to be relatively few villagers who have the time to commit to the extensive work required to coordinate and produce an updated plan or to help deliver on the actions that might be set out in such a plan.

I do think it would be well worthwhile sending out a carefully targeted questionnaire (which could be both paper and web-based) in order that we might determine key achievable aspirations that the Parish Council could deliver on in the next 3-5 years.