

'Looking to the Future'

2015 – 2020

A report from the Swalcliffe Parish Plan Steering Group

*"People come to the area for their holidays; we live here"
(A quote from the Parish Survey April 2015)*

90% of respondents to the Parish survey think Swalcliffe is an excellent or good place to live and people value most the landscape, tranquillity and friendly neighbours. Most people think there is a strong community spirit and there is a desire to strengthen it.

We have some very good public services but limited amenities and many would like to see a few more, relevant to a village of our size and nature. The main and growing concerns shared by just about everyone are poor digital connectivity and its prospects for the future. Speeding traffic and parking limitations are felt to be a problem by quite a few and are likely to get more problematic in the next few years.

There are mixed views about longer-term development, with about half wanting no change at all whilst others would like more amenities, and/ or some small-scale development to help the Parish thrive in the future.

1. Introduction

The Parish Planning Steering Groups was established in 2104 through the sponsorship of Swalcliffe Parish Council. There was an initial public meeting in October at which the proposal was discussed and villagers had an opportunity to express their opinions about a number of aspects of the Parish (see Appendix 3), to 'kick start' the process.

The Steering Group had its first meeting in November 2014 and has met regularly since then. Its initial focus in early 2015 was to engage the Parish with the concept of 'community – led planning'; this was followed by designing and conducting a comprehensive household survey; and finally analysing, interpreting and publicising the results of the survey. Then in the summer the focus shifted to interpretation of the survey results and discussing Parish priorities and potential actions. Our recommendations and suggested priorities and actions then formed the basis of a well-attended Parish meeting organised in September (40 plus people participated).

2. Objectives, time frame and scope of the Parish Plan

Early in our discussions we agreed that 2020 was an appropriate planning horizon since it is difficult to see further into the future than this and most of our issues and opportunities seem to be short to medium term in nature.

As our discussions developed and with the help of the survey findings we were able to agree the following as the vision for the village over the next few years:

'To protect what we value whilst adapting to the changing expectations of our evolving community'

This report aims to capture the outcomes from the work undertaken over the last year and sets out the priority actions for the Parish over the next few years, as we see them. We don't think it is useful to have a definitive plan 'set in stone' (in a world that is changing so rapidly and unpredictably) but we do believe our work creates a useful roadmap for the next five years or so, and objectively records the hopes and expectations of our residents at a point in time.

3. Summary of key findings and Actions

The Parish Plan Steering Group believe that there are high levels of satisfaction currently with life in the village with people being primarily attracted to it because of its natural rural landscape, tranquillity and also its sociable communal culture.

Many residents travel some distance daily for work or education and also with the 'full-on' nature of family life today our lives take us much more frequently beyond the confines of a small village (both physically and via the internet) than in previous generations. In this sense people rely less on village life to fulfil their needs than in previous times, nevertheless people are clear about some of the improvements we can make. There are also some threatening clouds on the horizon that we should be aware of.

Improvements we can make ourselves in the short term:

- The village hosts a number of very successful social events during the year and also supports a village pub and village hall. Additionally many residents have shown interest in having a wider range of interest/social groups and four of these have already been successfully set up as a result. We have also been able to breathe some new life into a few voluntary activities.
- Villagers are clear about which additional amenities they would prioritise and these are now being progressed, namely - dog waste bins; a defibrillator; childrens play area.

Medium to longer - term challenges:

- The main concern currently facing the village is its ability to keep pace with the 'digital age'. Broadband and mobile phone reception is inadequate and could well get worse because of the lack of commitment to infrastructure investment by service providers. This issue is likely to have a detrimental impact on the attractiveness of the village to newcomers and small or home based businesses in the future, if not effectively resolved.
- Though, not everyone agrees that the traffic through the village and parking are a major problem now, many do, and these problems are only likely to continue to get worse over the next few years. Potential solutions are neither obvious nor cheap but this is not a good reason to ignore them. Related to these two problems is the plea to have adequate footpaths through the village , at least along the main road
- Looking to the longer term, a small majority of villagers would like the village to stay unchanged 'just as it is': for others, whilst they also want to retain the 'essence' of the village as is, they would also support some small - scale housing or small business development, to help sustain the village into the future, and to help first - time buyers.

Taking all these into account The Parish Plan Steering Group:

- *Supports the adoption of new amenities in the form of a defibrillator; dog waste bins.*
- *Supports the work of the play area working group in creating a children's woodland/ natural play area (that can be used by families too) and ideally suggests that the proposed footpath to the play area should be extended to link Park Lane with the rest of the village.*
- *Organised the creation of a number of new social clubs/groups it has helped to set up – Film, Book, Walking, and Art Clubs in the first instance.*
- *Suggests that we set up of a 'Digital Connectivity' action group, if volunteers can be found, to support the work of the PC in pursuing better broadband and mobile phone reception.*
- *Suggests we create a 'traffic/parking/pedestrian working group to consider the options we have to improve these aspects of our village life.*
- *Has set up a working group to provide newcomers and visitors to the village with useful information to be published on the village website (contacts, history, walks etc).*

- *Believes the PC and others should do all in their power to preserve the essence of the village as it is, whilst also having an open –mind to suitable (architectural and environmental considerations in particular) small scale development if it helps the village to thrive in the future and provide some affordable housing for first-time buyers.*
- *Has passed on to the relevant people the names of those who have volunteered to help keep the Church yard and Common land tidy.*

Main Body of the Report

3. The Parish Context and Culture

3.1 Demographic trends

The Swalcliffe Society conducted village surveys in 1988 and 2000 and there was an original survey as far back as 1938 too; so we are very fortunate to be able to position our 2015 survey in this context. The methodology for each of these surveys varies and the response rates range from about 62% to about 85%, so the figures below are best estimates only:

Number of households – Has increased slightly from 81 in 1988; 92 in 2000 and then to about 95 today.

Population – Estimated at around 138 in 1938 to around 215 today (plus about 40 boys, resident at Swalcliffe Park School).

Average household size – Has fallen fairly consistently over the years from 3.28 in 1938 to about 2.2 today.

Number of children (0-18 years)- Has fallen from typically around 47 last century, to around 38-40 in the first part of this century.

Types of occupation – The big change was between 1938 and 88 when employment switched from being primarily village based to mainly professional and managerial.

Commuting – In 1938 29 people worked in the village but by 2000 this had dropped to 15. Surprisingly with the growth of the School the figure is now around 100! Banbury reached its zenith as an employment destination in the late 20th century and has been overtaken by longer distance commuting; so by 2000 10 commuted to London and 3 worked overseas. Today about 30 people commute over 21 miles each day.

Retired – In 1988 pensioners represented 20% of the population; then falling to about 15% in 2000 before rising back to 20% again today.

Car ownership – There were 5 cars in the Parish in 1938 and now there are 160; and the number has risen by 36 since 2000. So if the trend continues it will be about 175 by 2020; are we reaching saturation point around the key ‘pinch points’?

Mobile phone ownership – has risen from 71% in 2000 to over 90% today

How long lived in the village – Between 1938 and today typically about 30 to 40% of residents had moved here within the last 5 years. The main change is a decline in those living here for many years or all their life (from 27% living here over 20 years in the last century to about 21% today)

3.2 Swalcliffe Culture

Swalcliffe is a small village (only just larger than a hamlet) with a population of about 215 people. It straddles a fairly busy main road (B4035) just under 7 miles west of Banbury and between the two larger villages of Tadmarton and the Sibfords.

The village has about 95 houses (87% owner-occupied; with only 6% being second homes) the majority of which are attractive old cottages, with a smattering of newer houses and about a dozen larger detached homes. Three working farms, and an equestrian centre border the village.

Despite its small size (or perhaps because of it) many villagers describe a strong sense of village identity. It seems to consist of a mix of pride in the beautiful landscape; a belief that it is a very sociable place; relaxed attitudes to the diversity of modern life; and one with its fair share of village characters! It is unquestionably surrounded by beautiful and largely unspoilt countryside (and is in an area of outstanding natural beauty). Whilst the Cotswolds National Park is nearby it has we have our own distinct feel and we don't experience high the levels of tourism or ‘celebrity-type’ immigration that the Park does.

In recent years the village has attracted a good number of new people into it, so it now is very much a mixed village with a fair proportion of young families and working age people, as well as retirees. (70% working full or part time and 21% retired). Unlike many other attractive country villages that have become known as ‘pensioner pockets’ or ‘weekender’ retreats in recent years, we are lucky to have a mixed and changing community, with no one type of resident dominating.

About two – thirds of village residents live in small households of one or two people. The great majority of us rely on private transport to get around and between us we own at least 160 cars! Despite this, and the dense nature of the village, only 27 people think parking is a frequent problem (also co-incidentally, or perhaps not, 27 people park their car on the road). There is a daily but

infrequent bus service between Banbury, Shipston On Stour and Stratford On Avon but only 5% of us use it more than once a week, and 59% never at all.

The large and beautiful Parish Church of St. Peter and St. Paul dominates the village physically being located in a prominent position looking over the centre of the village on the northern side of the main road; to the south across on the Square is the village pub 'The Stags Head'. There is no village shop, the nearest being the post office in Sibford Ferris about a mile away. The great majority of houses are located on one of six roads – Bakers Lane; The Square; the Main Road; Green Lane; Brick Row and Park Lane.

The village is relatively quiet during the daytime on weekdays because many people commute for work or education. 47 people travel up to 20 miles daily, whilst 22 travel over 50 miles with a handful of intrepid people commute to London. 22 also work from home.

Easily the largest employer in the village is Swalcliffe Park School, which is a charitable trust offering residential care, education and development for about 40 boys with autism. The school, which is located close to the heart of the village employs about 80 staff, and has a national reputation for its work, and earlier this year achieved an 'Outstanding' assessment by OFSTED. The main school building is a converted country house surrounded by a number of newer buildings set in attractive wooded parkland of 22 acres. Whilst it has a relatively 'open' policy the level of support and supervision for the boys means that any behavioural issues in the village are very rare. The school management has liaised closely with the village in recent years in order to build and maintain harmonious relationships.

For such a small community we are lucky to have the benefit of a recently renovated village hall; a traditional pub that manages to survive commercially; and a historic church that most villagers are keen to preserve, even if congregation sizes are normally modest. The village has a local reputation as a very sociable community, which is illustrated, by the number of well-supported set piece events each year and any number of less formal get-togethers (Appendix 1 Q9/B4).

4. Opportunities and Issues for the Village

4.1. Development

"The village is not a museum - it is a place of residence and work for some. It must continue to thrive as a community with change"

"Maybe those who want lots of amenities are missing the point of living here"

Formal planning policies and processes are strictly speaking beyond the remit of this committee. Also Swalcliffe is not designated for any major development as such, so we don't feel the same pressure as some neighbouring communities. The

main residential part of the village is quite densely contained in six small lanes/roads/streets with very limited scope for development (other than a small amount of possible in-fill) and surrounded by prime agricultural land.

Nevertheless we thought it useful to survey residents on their attitudes to development since this has become such a key issue with the chronic national and regional shortage of affordable housing on the one hand, and a strong desire to conserve rural environments on the other.

The detailed responses can be seen in Appendix 1 (Tables Q34/C21 to Q36/C23) and illustrate not surprisingly a wide range of views. Roughly one third of villagers want no change at all – *'things are just right as they are'*, and 48% want no additional housing. On the other hand around 40% would prefer some additional amenities and a similar number would like to see the attractive aspects of the village promoted a bit more to encourage a few more visitors. Just over a quarter would be in favour of some small- scale development, preferably a few affordable or small houses or even some small business development, mainly in order to help the village to 'thrive in the future'.

4.2. Services and Amenities

Externally provided services

Villagers are generally satisfied with many of the public services provided namely – electricity supply; phone landlines; waste collection; water/drainage and especially the postal delivery (See Appendix 1 Table Q39/D1).

The main areas of frustration and concerns are:

Broadband connectivity, especially speed – 95% of village household have broadband with 78% of them using BT as their service provider. 53% of villagers think the service they receive is either poor or very poor. There have been rumours and apparent promises about the impending installation of high-speed fibre optic cable in the last couple of years but despite Tadmarton, a mile or so away being connected this summer, there is no certain connection date for Swalcliffe. An Additional concern is the poor quality copper wire network connecting houses to the exchange; there are apparently no plans to replace these. (Appendix 1 Q40/D2 to Q43/D5)

Mobile phone reception – The situation is arguably even worse than for Broadband with 85% of users (92% of the village attempt to use mobile phones in the village) reporting that their reception is either poor or very poor. However this is partly due to the thick ironstone walls most houses are constructed of, and with no obvious solution to this problem. Some residents have found that a mobile phone booster has helped improve their reception

Taking these two issues together the village is clearly in danger of falling behind the 'digital world' with potential consequences for its longer term attractiveness

and convenience for contemporary family life and for people/small businesses working from home who depend on reliable and speedy connectivity.

Presently the Chair of the PC has taken a personal leadership role in pursuing the broadband issue with the relevant bodies but perhaps, in addition, some form of action group working on these digital issues might add more weight and be able to explore other possible options (for example a 4G wireless mast delivering wireless broadband and enhanced mobile reception). (Appendix1 Q15/C2 to Q17/C4). Concern about digital connectivity was also the major issue expressed in the survey question about 'what the one thing you would like to see changed' with over 25% of open-ended responses raising this point.

Frequency of the bus service – which is likely to deteriorate further due to impending withdrawal of public subsidies from OCC. Whilst 71% of respondents (most of whom don't actually use the service) say the service is good or very good, this is probably not the case for the small number of people who rely on it. The indication from the survey responses suggests more people would use the service if the frequency were to be increased. (Appendix1 Q18/C5 to Q19/C6).

Locally delivered services and amenities

Whilst the PC is keen to improve amenities in the village, in reality it has very limited resources and has to prioritise very carefully. The survey clearly indicated a pecking order of preferences (Appendix 1 Q37/C24):

Dog waste bins – 57%. The PC actioning this item

Woodland Play area – 50%. A voluntary working group is progressing the proposal to convert part of the wooded area into a natural play area in front of Swalcliffe Park School (kindly donated on a long-term lease basis by the Trustees).

More parking – 41%. This is no doubt a problem for some village residents and also a constraining factor for the Village Hall, Pub and Church. So far no one has come up with a creative solution!

Defibrillator – 41%. The PC has agreed to install this.

More speed warning signs – 25%.

"Speed of a few drivers is a problem rather than density"

Whilst between 30-40% of residents think traffic speed and density are not a problem through the village over 50% think it is dangerous either all the time or at peak times. The core issue is the speed of the traffic, rather than density and the blind bends and adverse camber in the middle of the village. There is a range of views as to how to deal with this but there appear to be few practical options. A chicane is ruled out because it's a main road; 20mph restrictions were voted against by the people attending a recent PC meeting; relocating or adding to the

speed warning signs might be the preferred option but would be a major expense for the village. A Speedwatch group has recently been re- formed and it would be useful if we could establish a working group to explore the issue further, if enough people are interested in joining.

Bus shelter – 24%. This would be a very positive amenity for the few users of the service but unfortunately they represent a small minority and the cost of buying and installing a shelter is very significant.

Within the April 2015 Survey where specific questions about the Village Hall, Pub and Church. Many useful comments were collected which have been fed back to the relevant organisations.

4.3.Social activities

“Could be more 'thinking' activities i.e. not all social”

The village prides itself on its sociability and sense of community and this is borne out by the statistics that show that between 40 and 60% of villagers attend the main annual social events.

There is a very active social and fund raising group (The Swalcliffe Village Fund), which organises most of these annual events and introduces new ones from time to time (The ‘Last Night at The Proms’ and a Halloween event for children are two new events this year). The committee was originally established to raise funds to renovate the Church Tower, which required about £250,000 of repair work. The work was undertaken between 2008 and 2010 and although typical congregations at Church services are low (often around 10 worshippers) villagers raised just over £100,000 from their own efforts and successful grant applications.

One of the main findings from the survey was the widespread interest in establishing a broader range of social and interest groups to add to the existing community activities (See Table Q10/B5 in Appendix1). At the village meeting in September we were able to discuss and take the first steps towards launching a number of new clubs/ groups with initial organisers for each club agreed. Since then first meetings of some of these have been taking place during November with encouraging attendance levels:

Film Club – 15

Book Club – 9

Walking Group – 11

Art Group – 6

Assuming these clubs are able to be self – sustaining, they will not only make a real contribution to enhancing our sense of community but also bring useful additional revenues to the pub and Village Hall.

There are also possibilities of establishing a Tennis and Bridge Club, and a choir.

4.4. Volunteering

As part of our consultation process we have had about 60 offers to volunteer for a range of different community activities. As a result:

- Names of additional people willing to keep the church yard tidy have been forwarded to the Parochial Church Council
- We have a new group of people and an organiser to help clear the Common fuel allotments starting in early 2016
- A new Speedwatch group has been set up
- We have a group of people willing to visit older people but to date no action has been instigated
- We have the potential to set up a baby sitting circle but we are looking for an organiser

4.5. Surrounding environment

Whilst the surrounding countryside is the ‘jewel in the crown’ for people living in the Parish there are nevertheless some relatively minor improvements that people would like to see:

Roads and pavements –

“Pavements along main road are very narrow and feel dangerous when walking with children.”

70% of survey respondents think the pavements are OK. The main suggestion would be to extend pavements further through the village. (Appendix 1 Table Q20/C7). If we are able to go ahead with the proposed woodland play area on the land at the front of the School this would, in principle be an opportunity to provide a path between the top end of Park Lane along the School front wall to opposite the Tithe Barn.

Footpaths and bridleways – A very high number of villagers use these for walking or running (70%) whilst half these exercise their dogs too – meaning there must be at least 60 dogs living in the village! A much smaller number use

them for riding bikes or horses. There were minor issues noted about mud and maintenance, mainly as a result of horse usage, by 9 people; and 5 people raised concerns about accessibility/passability. (Appendix 1 Q25/C12 to Q26/C13)

Common land (Fuel allotments) – The village owns a piece of land in trust (size?), at the very furthest end of the village, beyond Grange Farm, originally for use of the villagers to collect wood. Until recently parts of the area was cleared each spring by a small group of volunteers to make it easier to access, but this practice has fallen into abeyance in the last couple of years. The survey showed that people think this should be re-instated and a meeting to re-establish it from 2016 has now taken place.

Woodland play area –

“Essential if we are not to become a retirement village”

“We are so lucky to be surrounded by beautiful, natural countryside. Why do we need to manufacture one.”

Because of the unusual physical layout of the village it suffers, to a degree, from having very few outdoor places where people can naturally meet informally. Also young children have few areas to let of steam within easy walking distance of the heart of the village. An appropriately rustic children’s play area could go a long way to mitigating this.

Swalcliffe Park School Trustees have kindly offered a piece of woodland at the front of the school on a long term lease for this purpose and a working group is presently drawing up detailed plans to share with the village and to apply for planning permission. In the survey 74% of respondents were in favour of this, though a minority have concerns about its use or misuse. The project will require fund raising too but we would hope for it to be opened within the next couple of years. It should offer an attractive new village amenity, especially for parents and grandparents of small children, and generally encourage more informal social exchange too.

Leisure and tourism – the village has a long and interesting history and has a number of interesting landmarks such as the:

- Parish Church
- 15th century Tithe Barn
- Site of Roman settlement, Saltway, and original village
- Site of ancient British fort
- Attractive old cottages, especially around Bakers Lane.

Additionally there are some beautiful walks starting from the village and together with its history these provide an interesting place for visitors to enjoy. The survey results indicated that a majority of villagers would be in favour of installing some helpful information for visitors/walkers, probably on the village website.

4.6. Energy conservation

The survey results indicate that only a small number of households have invested in energy conservation schemes (Appendix 1 Table Q44/D6) so we are in the very early stages the uptake of these types of initiative. So far no interest has been shown in setting up a village-working group to look at ways the village might work together to encourage this.

Appendices

- 1. Survey - main results**
- 2. Summary of survey open- ended responses**
- 3. Initial Parish meeting - participants 'post it pad' expectations/fears**