

HERMITAGE PARISH PLAN

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This document should be read in conjunction with the Village Design Statement, available on the Parish Council's website (see Appendix B). Approved by Kennet & Pang Valley Planning Forum of West Berkshire Council, Feb 2006.

1.0 What is a Parish Plan?

It is part of an initiative by the Countryside Agency, known as the Vital Villages Programme, aimed at helping small, rural communities take stock of their village; to identify what they need to preserve it ; to ensure local people have a voice in their future ; and to provide support to enable each village to implement some of the improvements needed locally. A Parish Plan is a comprehensive vision of how the community sees itself developing over the next few years and the action needed to ensure this.

This plan has been informed by a two-year assessment of the local environment in all its aspects including;-

A consultation questionnaire to all households (updated a year later).
An analysis of what people value most and their main concerns
Three public parish meetings
Investigations by a Working Group representing all areas of the village.
The advice of a professional planning consultant concerning the implications of two major housing developments in the village and ways in which the local community might gain from these.

Some of the issues identified by the Parish Council and discussed with the local community have been tabled in the Hermitage Village Design Statement. This was printed and published in 2004 after being adopted by West Berkshire Council as Supplementary Planning Guidance, and a copy was delivered to all householders at that time; (also on the Hermitage website - see Appendix B). It was decided to compile the parish plan as a separate document, but not to publish it in printed form for the following reasons:-

It is a working document which is subject to change at regular intervals. Hermitage is in the early stages of two major housing developments which, during the next few years, could have significant effects on the infrastructure and village environment.

The statutory planning system is undergoing major changes designed to increase local community involvement.

We want to avoid spending money unnecessarily. We originally informed ratepayers we would obtain promised funding from the Countryside Agency for help with production costs, but this was refused on the grounds that funding "cannot be provided for specific actions". (We had already started planning and local consultation). The Village Plan is available to all on the Parish Council's website www.hermitage.org.uk.

1.1 Background and Public Consultation

Hermitage Parish Council carried out a consultation questionnaire and survey involving all households and some local businesses in 2000. An analysis of the results was presented at a public meeting in 2001 and a short summary made generally available. (Appendix A). The object was to help identify the rural characteristics of the village which are considered important by the local community and which should be preserved or improved for the future; also to identify areas in which the village was thought to be lacking or were a source of concern.

Early in 2002 all households were again contacted inviting further comment and/or their attendance at a public meeting to hear a short presentation on a proposed Parish Plan and Village Design Statement..

Some 60 people attended and there were lengthy discussions on pedestrian safety which had now become a major area of concern, along with over-development, lack of playing fields and other leisure facilities, affordable housing, traffic congestion and facilities for young people.

Public nominations were invited for a consultation and working group to assist the Parish Council independently with further investigations, planning policies and long-term strategies. This group evolved with one person to represent each area of the parish. The group played a valuable role in helping to assess particular concerns e.g. - educational capacities, infrastructure problems, housing, security, pedestrian safety, traffic speeds, public transport, lack of recreational space, environmental issues and village meeting place limitations. Some individual members of the planning group had direct connections with

local special interest groups e.g. the School, the Church, the Youth Club, Village Hall Committee.

The draft plan has been submitted to a wider scrutiny, which included the Countryside Agency, the Community Council for Berkshire, the Planning Dept. of West Berkshire Council and our District Councillors, also a planning consultant. It was then the subject of a newsletter to residents prior to being presented for discussion at a Parish Public Meeting (2004).

1.2 Local Employment

Thanks to its location about one mile from the junction of the M4 (east-west) and the A34 trunk road (north-south) Hermitage is well placed for road links with many important places such as West London, Heathrow, the Midlands and the South Coast ports. This is obviously a benefit to many of the small businesses located on various small industrial estates close by the village. In the past the village has benefited from local employment at the Cementation Site which lies well screened to the northeast corner of the settlement and the Arena site on the more visible southern edge. The former, having been included in the West Berkshire Local Plan as a site for 165 houses plus some light commercial units, is now in the final stages of detail planning and construction of 209 dwellings. Meanwhile, at the Arena site - now renamed as Hermitage Green - construction of 70 dwellings is well under way. These two developments have resulted in the loss of some 160 jobs from the village.

However, a number of local people continue to be employed at three other nearby sites; these are the Hilliers Garden Centre, the Royal Engineers Base and the Red Shute Hill Industrial Estate (originally the village saw mill in the 1930s - a fencing and timber business still operates there).

1.3 Amenities

Among the present-day amenities important to the village are the Post Office Stores, the butcher's shop, the Parish Church with meeting room, the (separate) parish burial ground, the Village Hall (which hosts a pre-school play group and many regular leisure activities), the village school, the children's playground, the scout hut, youth club and two public houses. We are fortunate in having an excellent village shop and post office. Like many other rural businesses the shop has to balance on a "tightrope" between success and failure. It needs more business yet the existing premises are not suited to this.

Both the village hall and the school are operating at maximum capacity and will be quite unable to cope with the demands created by a projected 50% increase in population over the next few years. The school will need extra facilities and the village hall will have to be extended or relocated. Our public consultations have highlighted the lack of playing fields and other leisure facilities.

The churchyard, war memorial and nearby burial ground has been well maintained, with support from the Parish Council, and with assistance from

local volunteers. The brick retaining walls at the cemetery entrance were renewed, the access path resurfaced and an avenue of native trees planted. Both these sites include areas where grass is allowed to grow long at certain times of the year; this results from professional environmental advice intended to improve the habitat for wildlife.

2.0 ACTION PLAN

The following is, of necessity, a long-term plan which will need to be monitored, reviewed and amended from time to time by the Parish Council with consultation through the Working Group.

Our vision is that , despite development pressures, Hermitage will not become "urbanised", but will remain a well-maintained, attractive rural village, with improved leisure amenities and facilities . We envisage a village where valued local features and a quality environment are preserved and protected for the enjoyment of future generations.

2.1 Infrastructure

The new developments now taking place will result in an increase in housing stock of around 50%. Such a large, "sudden" increase in a small rural village is unusual. In the recent past there have been problems with drinking water supplies while during very wet weather the main sewer has proved unable to cope with the amount of surface water entering the system. There is a need to ensure that the local infrastructure does not become inadequate for the additional demands placed on it by the huge increase in housing stock already planned. (A diminishing quality of village life through over-development was a major concern recorded in the consultation questionnaire.)

West Berkshire Council has already secured planning conditions in respect of the Arena and Cementation sites to ensure that essential services are upgraded or developed where necessary. This includes educational capacity, traffic management and sewerage capacity while the normal reservations concerning landscaping, tree preservation and protection of the environment have been applied.

Action:

Oppose any further proposals for major housing development in, or close to, Hermitage (even on Brownfield sites).

Resist infill development when it is in an unsuitable space, out of scale with surroundings or damaging to the visual amenity of the AONB.

2.2 Leisure Activities

Unfortunately, the S106 funding negotiated from the developers was not sufficient to cover the installation of sports facilities such as a football/cricket pitch and changing rooms. However, the Cementation site plan did incorporate a designated piece of land as a sports field;

This will need developing, ideally with the addition of changing facilities etc.

The equipment at the existing Children's Playground at Pinewood has been upgraded and made safer with the aid of sponsorship funds obtained through the efforts of one of our parish councillors.

Action:

The Parish Council will attempt to secure some financial support for development of sports facilities .It will also initiate direct discussions with developers to ensure that they are aware of the amenities in which the village is lacking. We will continue to make regular grants to the Youth Club if required, and encourage them to look for like-for- like funding to install a roller blade/skateboard track in a suitable location away from traffic and housing. We will continue to support the local Cub-Scout movement.

2.3 Meeting Hall

It is vital to ensure that the local community continues to have a village hall large enough to accommodate the exceptional increase in population. Unfortunately, S106 allocations, while providing a site for a sports field, gave only very limited financial support for the essential increase in capacity for our main meeting place, the Village Hall. (Even at present people have to be turned away from some events). The options are to expand on the present site or rebuild on a new site which may not be such a central location.

Action:

HPC will support the Village Hall Committee in developing a strategy to enlarge the existing premises or build elsewhere to cope with an enlarged local community. A public meeting has already been held and a working group formed to organise a feasibility study. Some additional outside funding will be sought, since it is unreasonable to expect existing local ratepayers to fund developments which are largely for the benefit of an increased future population.

2.4 Traffic

The local Highways Dept. has already made proposals to reduce traffic speeds through the village and improve pedestrian safety. Our Village Design

Statement has drawn attention to the importance of any traffic calming measures being in harmony with the character of a rural village within the AONB. In our view (and that of the local community), "tidal flow" chicanes /barriers, as originally proposed, with their attendant priority signs, bollards, lighting etc, could introduce a marked urban character to the village which should be avoided. We feel the two mini-roundabouts proposed (Priors Court Rd junction and at the opposite end of the village near the school), together with improved signage should be adequate, but if this proves not be the case then some build-out of the footway , to produce highway narrowing, could be added at far less cost.

We would like to see a system of joined up footpaths, of adequate width, to ensure safe pedestrian routes to the shops and school. This will involve entirely new pavements in some places (e.g. Yattendon Rd) and widening in others to allow safe passage for pushchairs. When the two new housing sites are fully developed it would be logical for them to incorporate some cycle routes and footpaths which could provide a link to the parish paths nearby.

Action:

HPC will initiate liaison to ensure that pedestrian safety requirements (including safer routes to school) are taken forward at the appropriate time and in a manner which does not impose an urban character on the village.

2.5 Education

It is planned to increase the capacity and resources of the school as necessary before the large housing increase takes place. All major developers are required by regulation to part-fund this.

Action:

We are confident that the School Governors and Staff are dealing direct with this matter. The Governors also have representation on the Parish Council.

2.6 Affordable Housing

A 30% proportion of affordable housing is planned for the two major developments. When this becomes available there may be a lack of accurate information as to local needs. We would not like to see this housing offered mainly to people on the housing list from other parts of West Berkshire and it is felt that the needs of local people should be considered first for an initial period.

Action:

We have already alerted local householders (by newsletter in April 2004) of the need to make contact with the District Council's housing list , should their families have urgent requirements in this area. We have also contacted

the Housing Committee direct to ask them to give consideration to this matter.

2.7 Parish Paths

Hermitage is fortunate to be surrounded by much beautiful and well-wooded countryside. The extensive network of parish footpaths and bridle roads are valued highly by the local community.

HPC will be keen to continue its Parish Paths Partnership agreement with the District Council , whereby we help monitor the condition of paths and occasionally provide some voluntary assistance. All our parish paths - but especially those which start within the village itself - should be dutifully preserved and maintained. Any unsightly structures (such as additional radio masts) which impact on the visual amenities of the AONB should be resisted.

Action:

The Parish Council will each year nominate a footpaths representative to liaise with the District Council's Countryside Dept which, in recent years, has provided excellent assistance in maintaining and improving our paths. In some locations we are aware of a need to upgrade high stiles to small gates.

2.8 Public Transport

Over recent years public transport links have slowly improved , though many people have pointed out that there is a lack of a late evening return service from Newbury to Hermitage and beyond..

Action:

HPC will ensure that there are weatherproof bus shelters, which are cleaned on a regular basis.

We would like to see a review of bus services when the housing developments are complete, if not before.

2.9 Other Parish Council Policies

We agree with Government policy to encourage employment opportunities in rural areas. We will oppose any further housing development on Brownfield Sites which destroys local jobs or exerts further pressure on the village infrastructure. So far as Hermitage is concerned, we will oppose the long-range housing strategy proposed by the South East Regional Assembly which suggests that it may be necessary to impose a blanket allocation of 100 new houses each year (for the next 20 years) on rural settlements in West Berkshire.

We will be supportive of any attempt to re-locate the village stores and Post Office, or otherwise expand its business.

We will continue to give financial support, when appropriate, to provision of facilities for young people, e.g. Scouts and Guides.

We will support planning applications for the restoration/rebuilding and re-use of old buildings provided this is carried out in a way that is sympathetic to the surrounding environment.

We will object to any infilling developments which are significantly out of scale or detrimental to the space between buildings.

We will object to proposals for new radio/telephone masts which impact on the amenities of the AONB or local residents.

We remain opposed to the introduction of continuous street lighting .Where additional lighting is necessary for safety reasons we would like to avoid obtrusive street furniture and seek to reduce light levels and pollution as much as possible.

We will continue to provide feedback to the local community by :-

- Regular use of notice boards.

- Use of the parish (Church) magazine.

- Encouraging people to attend an annual parish assembly by hand-delivery of a newsletter and agenda to all households .

- Maintaining a village website.

- Including a "Villagers' Open Forum" in the agenda for the monthly Parish Council meetings.*

Acknowledgements:

Hermitage Parish Council would like to acknowledge with thanks the following sources of helpful reference-

The Planning and Transport Strategy Dept. of West Berkshire Council, also the Countryside Officer.

The historical booklet Hermitage 2000.

The Working Group members:- Hans Overeynder (Chairman), Kay Willis, Pat Phipps, Terry Rogers, John Lawler, John Watkinson, Jack Burgess, Charles Gilchrist, Kevin Gover, Roy Barlow (part).

APPENDIX A

HERMITAGE PARISH COUNCIL

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION QUESTIONNAIRE - RESPONSE ANALYSIS

Background

A questionnaire was hand-delivered to some 450 households. The object was to invite views/comments to help identify those rural characteristics of the village which are considered important by the local community and which, if possible, should be preserved or improved during future planned development. The document did not request any name or " address so that replies could be guaranteed anonymity and a "Freepost" return address was provided. At the time of writing this report, the number of returns was approaching 100 which would be 22%; even by commercial standards this is a good response rate providing a useful indication of local opinions. Certain key questions were unprompted, (e.g. "Have you any particular concerns?")and these resulted in some clear patterns of opinion/anxieties about the future. The replies also produced some interesting statistics such as age profile, car and cycle ownership etc. though obviously these cannot be extrapolated for the village as a whole from this sample.

Summary

A strong pattern of replies indicated that people were most concerned about the following :-

Over development (new housing estates) ; 34% were worried about this.
Pedestrian safety was the second most-mentioned concern (30%); notably speed and volume of traffic and lack of paved footpath in places.
45% of respondents would like to see improved leisure facilities within the village.
10% suggested there should be some degree of street lighting (e.g. at dangerous comers) though 3% said they would not like it introduced. [No direct question on this].

Positive Factors

Qualities which people appreciated most about Hermitage were its countryside location, its village- sized community and a close proximity to local woodlands with their network of public paths. Unprompted by the question, a large number of people mentioned the village shop and Post Office high on their list of plus factors - not only as a local resource but also as an information centre and meeting point. The village school, church, village hall and pubs were also well appreciated. Other "mentions" included good access to Newbury and Motorways, and the availability of special interest groups e.g. Scouts & Cubs, Youth Group, Pre-school Playgroup.

About the Respondents

Although 390/0 of respondents were over the age of 65, this was well balanced by the fact that 22% of households included children under five while 21% had children in the age group 6 - 17 years. All except two households were car owners and a sizeable 34% had a second car. Some thought that parking was becoming a problem and would be much more so with the proposed big housing increase. A substantial number of households (35%) had one or more cycles but most thought that conditions for cycling in and around the village were poor to dangerous.; several suggested a cycle track on the short stretch of the B4009 linking Hermitage to Curridge. The speed of through traffic was a constant worry to both cyclists and pedestrians but many people stated they did not want road humps or chicanes/pinch-points as it would change the character of the village from rural to urban.

Housing

On the question of Other Concerns, the rate of growth of new housing was most mentioned subject -

"We don't want to turn into a second Thatcham "was one comment. It was obvious that people had given much thought to housing development e.g.

"Too many infill applications are being approved"

"We shouldn't extend the housing without improving the amenities". . "New housing should include suitable accommodation for the elderly.

"Lack of modest housing to rent houses makes for an unbalanced community".

"We are completely opposed to housing development at the south end of the village". " - "Major new housing development will overwhelm the village with traffic" - "As well as houses we need new small businesses"

Leisure Facilities

The lack of a sports field and attendant facilities was frequently mentioned e.g. tennis, bowls etc. Some were concerned that there were not sufficient safe play areas for young people. One interesting suggestion was that funds should be obtained to enclose the school swimming pool then make it available for general use evenings and weekends on a self-financing basis.

Local Businesses

There were six returns from local businesses who were asked additional questions. The respondents did not include the Garden Centre and the Royal Engineers' Army Base both of which are important to Hermitage but are outside the parish boundary. Four of the businesses who responded were based on a light industrial site and two elsewhere.; four required the use of HGVs for deliveries/supplies. Between them the six enterprises employed a total of 62 people, 18 of whom were part-time staff. Half of this workforce lived in or close to Hermitage. None of these businesses planned to move or close down during the next few years and none of them reported any particular local problems which could hinder their business.

APPENDIX B

Contacts -

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