

Whitchurch-on-Thames

Introduction

Whitchurch-on-Thames is a picturesque village on the southern border of Oxfordshire. Lying within the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, most of the village is designated as a Conservation Area. An ancient church, a thriving primary school and two welcoming pubs service a population of about 785. Across the River Thames, reached by a 100-year-old toll bridge, are the shops and train station of Pangbourne, Berkshire.

The village has a rich history which begins with the Saxon Hwiticurke, a flint and rubble church, from which the village took its name. After centuries of contention, a Charter of 844AD declared its sovereignty over land on both sides of the Thames. Whitchurch has had jurisdiction over the full width of the river ever since and on some lands on the further bank until recent years. Whitchurch had an even greater medieval heyday, with an inland port and royal manor with its residence near to the present church gate, from which twenty of King Edward II's state proclamations were made.



The Process

With support from Oxfordshire Rural Community Council (ORCC) the committee at Whitchurch organised a family-friendly New Year Party to launch their plan in January 2008. With entertainment for young people being held in the same hall as the

consultation they were able to attract 150 adults and children from the village.

The purpose of the plan was explained and an open-ended invitation gave everyone the opportunity, both verbally and by means of Post-it notes, to express their concerns, needs and ambitions for the village.

The information gained, together with other events throughout the year, enabled the committee to compose a questionnaire to seek the views of every household. There was an outstanding return of 80% of the questionnaires due to the enthusiasm of residents and the efforts of the 27 volunteers who distributed and collected the completed documents. Youngsters aged 8-15 were given a separate junior questionnaire to complete.

Having set up the initial phases, the Steering Committee structured itself around four Study Groups:

- ▶ Traffic, Roads & Pavements
- ▶ Village Hall
- ▶ Environment
- ▶ Community



Key Facts

County:	Oxfordshire
District:	South Oxon
Population:	785
Plan Complete:	2009

What is a Community Led Plan?

A Community Led Plan is a process that underpins a community's vision for itself across all aspects of social, environmental and economic life. It celebrates positive features and activities, highlights local needs and contains a detailed action plan to help meet those needs.

These plans are produced by and for communities, based on a detailed survey and consultation which is widely inclusive, prompts action and influences others. Good plans use the Community Led Planning Toolkit framework, are supported by external facilitators from the Rural Community Action Network and include a robust evaluation process that ensures their quality.

The Process (cont)

Each group comprised two committee members and three or four additional residents, bringing specific experience and expertise to each area of interest.

The results of the survey were scanned and analysed by South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC) and supplied to the four



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Study Groups as a factual basis for their deliberations and subsequent reports.

A well-attended public meeting in November 2008 provided further feedback on the groups' conclusions and proposals.

A draft plan was then prepared for discussion with the Whitchurch Parish Council, SODC and Oxfordshire County Council, prior to the publication of the final Plan and its eventual formal submission to the local authorities.

Achievements to date

► Acquisition of the Cricket Field by the community now safeguards the facility for all sports including football and other activities

► Acquisition of the Village hall from the district council and subsequent refurbishment, with assistance from Lynne Newin, ORCC's Village Halls adviser

► Development of a new village website that now has regular updates and news with support from a dedicated team of volunteers

► Restructuring of the Parish Council to reflect the themes identified in the plan and to better implement and monitor actions

► Improvement of street furniture and road signs to fit in better with the character of the village

► New street lighting installed to improve pedestrian safety after crossing the bridge



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In the Works...

- ▶ The creation of a new management structure to oversee the upkeep and usage of the newly acquired community recreation field.
- ▶ The adaptation of road side verges as a soft pedestrian walk-way.

Community Benefits

One of the proudest days for the village was when the District Council Planning Committee agreed permission to build a house outside the village envelope that saw the community take ownership of their recreation ground. The cricket field, as it is known locally, had previously been in private hands and the owners had allowed village usage for 90 years. 84% of respondents to the questionnaire considered the acquisition of the field for the community desirable. The owners agreed to give the field to the village if support for the building of one house was given. The planning officers, constrained by planning law, refused permission and referred the final decision on to the District Councillors.

In September 2010 the planning committee room was packed with supporters from the village, including young cricketers and footballers in sports gear, many of whom had come the 9 miles by a specially chartered bus. The Councillors, overwhelmed with the support from the village, could clearly see the benefits to the community and approved the application.

This level of support from the village was possible through the empowerment achieved by the community-led planning process and the hard work of the village plan steering committee.

Local Authority Engagement

The Parish Council initially set up an independent steering committee to oversee the process of creating a village plan. This committee was chaired by and consisted of mostly non-parish council members.

The Parish Council authorised the Chair of the Village Plan, Stephen Trinder, to ensure the progression of the agreed Actions in the Plan. This has helped to create good working relationships with District and County Council officers and has already paid dividends in cutting through any red tape that may have previously been a barrier.

The four study groups have also been empowered to talk to the local authority officers direct.

Going Forward

The new website team now reports daily on any news in the village, keeping everyone in touch with what is happening.



The plan has encouraged the formation of new village groups whose regular reports are published in the village newsletter.

The team effort has been really important for the village with success resulting in many more active people wanting to be involved in community life.

Lessons Learned

- ▶ It is definitely worth following the nine step process and creating a community led plan.
- ▶ The team effort was really important for the community. Getting things done is a great deal easier now.
- ▶ It has been a force for change which has strengthened the role of the Parish Council.

Key Advice for Others

“Get on with it”!

For a year before Whitchurch started the plan people in the village said, “Oh forget it - nothing will happen”.

It can be hard to get going but don't give up. Find a good leader who can break down the jobs and delegate to others.

“

Our plan and the process we went through to create it has given the whole village a sense of common purpose and a vested interest in its success

Stephen Trinder (Village Plan Chair)

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This case study forms part of a series evaluating the impacts and benefits of Community Led Plans across the South East. It has been funded and produced by the South East Rural Community Councils (SERCC) in partnership with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council (ORCC). Both are members of the national Rural Community Action Network. www.acre.org.uk



Further Information

www.whitchurchonthames.com

www.oxonrcc.org.uk

www.sercc.org.uk

