

Neighbourhood plan update: results of our initial public opinion survey (part 2)

In September, the neighbourhood plan steering group published a report on the outcomes of its initial public opinion survey. Conducted between April and June 2022, the survey sought to understand what matters to local people about issues over which a neighbourhood plan may have some influence. The detail of our findings can be read online at www.greatshelfordparishcouncil.gov.uk/sgsnplan and a hard copy of the report is available to view at Great Shelford Library.

The report paints a generalised picture of residents' views across five broad categories: (1) village identity (2) housing needs and design (3) environment (4) travel and transport (5) amenities. Last month's copy of the *Messenger* focused on the first three of these, so here I will relay our findings across the remaining two categories.

Putting a story around our data can help to make it more digestible and, in some instances, it is worth going beyond the bounds of the survey to interpret why people might hold certain opinions. I have tried to make it clear, even if only implicitly, where I have done this.

Travel and transport

Perhaps it's just me, but conversations with residents frequently touch upon the challenges of local parking, roadworks or congestion. Maybe this is no great surprise, given neighbourhood plan survey results suggest that almost half of us make our most common weekly journeys (e.g. work commute, shopping, school run) by private car or motorbike. We justify this because of the distances involved and the convenience it offers over public transport, cycling or walking. However, such convenience comes at a price, with noted congestion flashpoints outside Great and Little Shelford CofE Primary School and shops on Woollards Lane, comments about compromised pedestrian and cyclist safety, and complaints about speeding and traffic noise. With such issues already causing headaches, we are understandably concerned about the impact that additional traffic from future residential expansion will have on our roads. There is a sense that the current public transport network needs significant improvements (to routes and reliability) if it is to persuade people out of their cars.

According to Cambridge City Council, as a compact and flat city, Cambridge has the highest level of cycling in the country, with one in three residents cycling to work. The proportion of our survey's respondents who make their most common weekly journey by bike is a little lower than this (although we don't know the specific purpose of this journey) at around one-quarter, with health and environmental benefits being cited as the main reasons for adopting this travel mode. In Stapleford and Great Shelford, walking is nearly as popular as cycling.

Amenities – shops

Survey results convey a sense that Great Shelford's commercial amenities are fading. Residents could be encouraged to use our local shops more if there was a wider range of

outlets, less traffic congestion (presumably on Woollards Lane, since that is the main location of shops and the target of other comments about congestion) and improved local banking/cashpoint facilities. Free-text comments raised demand for more and better eating experiences – both cafes and restaurants – in Great Shelford. If our villages offered more commercial, accessible and attractive shopping provision, would this reduce the need for travel to other commercial destinations? Might Great Shelford become a destination in itself, rather than just for local convenience shopping?

Amenities – countryside access

Given our rural setting, access to this land for leisure purposes may be considered an amenity in its own right. Some survey respondents were critical of the relative lack of paths and interconnected off-road routes. It should be noted that much of our greenbelt and green fields are private land and, where paths do exist, they are often permissive and not public rights way, so the public do not have a legal right to use them. That said, the National Planning Policy Framework (2012; Section 13, para. 145) notes that: “Once Green Belts have been defined, local planning authorities should plan positively to enhance their beneficial use, such as looking for opportunities to provide access; to provide opportunities for outdoor sport and recreation; to retain and enhance landscapes, visual amenity and biodiversity; or to improve damaged and derelict land”. Although largely outside the scope of neighbourhood planning, there is an opportunity here for change.

What this might mean for what we do next

Survey results are being used to inform the steering group’s and Parish Councils’ deliberations. There is certainly a trade-off to be made between what our neighbourhood plan covers and how quickly it can be produced, such that it has utility in the near-term. There is little point in having an all-singing, all-dancing neighbourhood plan if it takes several years to produce and is unavailable until the current period of high growth is over. This would truly be a missed opportunity to influence planning decisions effecting Stapleford and Great Shelford. However, neighbourhood plans can be expanded over time (and in any case need updating), so just because some issues are deprioritised now does not mean that they cannot be addressed in the future.

Some policies in our neighbourhood plan may, therefore, focus on:

- an appropriate mix of housing types, based on local housing needs (absolute numbers are set by the Local Plan)
- parameters for new development design, providing a set of simple requirements for the physical development of a site or area. This would give us greater certainty about the quality and design of a development and its environmental responsiveness
- identifying landscapes and views which make our area unique, then protecting and enhancing their special qualities and distinctive characteristics.

By the time you read this, the steering group will have started debating our neighbourhood plan’s policies and the objectives they are intended to meet, with the support of planning expertise from Cambridgeshire ACRE. We will continue to share our work with you as it proceeds and there will be further engagement opportunities for residents.

Jenny Flynn

Chair of the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group; Vice-Chair Stapleford Parish Council