

Neighbourhood plan update: results of our initial public opinion survey (part 1)

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. Here, I will relay our findings across the first three of these, while subsequent updates in the *Messenger* will cover the others.

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.

Village identity

Regardless of our proximity to the City of Cambridge, most survey participants consider themselves to be *village* residents, either of Stapleford or Great Shelford, or of part of a group of South Cambridgeshire villages. We place high value on our village character and community feel, our rural setting and views. It is perhaps not a step too far to suggest that our surrounding greenbelt and green fields help to reinforce our sense of independence from Greater Cambridge – they serve as both a cultural and physical barrier.

That said, the feature that respondents prize most about living in Stapleford and Great Shelford is the villages' proximity to Cambridge and its amenities, be they work or leisure. We are very fortunate to enjoy the 'best of both worlds': city and countryside.

The perceived erosion of the boundary between Greater Cambridge and our villages is a cause for great concern as we think about what Stapleford and Great Shelford could be like over the next 15-20 years. We are very worried about the loss of our greenbelt and village character to development, and the increase in congestion and environmental damage that such development could bring. There is a sense of powerlessness amongst residents over planning strategy and decisions which will have a significant impact on us, something which may partly reflect the engagement of some residents in objecting to large-scale infrastructure projects affecting our area, notably East West Rail and Greater Cambridge Partnership's busway.

Because of all these changes, most of us think that we will describe ourselves as living in Greater Cambridge by 2040. Although our survey did not explore whether this was due to passive tolerance or desire, a feeling of regret attached to this outcome was evident in some free-text comments. In general, people wish to retain the individual and historic character of

our semi-rural villages, with a strong community identity and an interdependence with both the natural and built environment.

Housing needs and design

When our survey went live (April 2022), the draft Greater Cambridge Local Plan had proposed roughly 100 new homes for our area. However, respondents generally feel that more than this will be required to meet housing needs within our villages over the next 15-20 years. These needs arise from rapid economic growth in and around Greater Cambridge, and a lack of affordable housing for local people. With respect to the latter, there is often a mismatch between what is built and what is needed. This leads to overall growth of the villages and exhausts suitable development sites but leaves younger people and those on lower incomes having to look elsewhere for cheaper housing.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the greatest perceived local housing needs are for small and medium sized homes, starter homes and affordable/low-cost accommodation to buy or rent. Unless these needs are satisfied, our villages could become unsustainable, inhabited by increasingly ageing populations and ever more dormant.

Perhaps developers have recognised this trend because recent larger scale building in our area has focused on what are known in planning terms as 'C2' properties, notably residential care homes. It is interesting to observe that only one-quarter of survey respondents feel that retirement or sheltered accommodation is required in our villages. Whether that is because they perceive that the need for this will soon be met or because they don't see it as a particular need locally, is not possible to say.

Although we did not ask any specific questions about the aesthetics of new developments, we received several unprompted concerns that new builds should be sympathetic to the rural vernacular. Might residential development be more welcome in our area if it blended in better with existing housing stock? This is only speculation, but perhaps the aesthetics of large nearby developments which have embraced contemporary architecture (e.g. Ninewells, Trumpington and around Cambridge Biomedical Campus) are making Stapleford and Great Shelford residents concerned about what could be built here. This isn't necessarily a protectionist stance. After all, our survey shows that we are very keen to incorporate progressive clean and green technologies into new developments. We just remain conservative about the design of the buildings which utilise them.

Environment

Summing up responses to questions and free-text comments pertaining to the environment, it is apparent that living surrounded by green spaces makes us feel better. We want to see them; we want better access to them; we would like more of them; and we very definitely want to protect the ones we already have, whether greenbelt agricultural land, meadows, recreation grounds, pockets of woodland, conservation areas or waterways. At a time of rapid economic growth in Greater Cambridge, this inevitably creates tension between residents, who place significant value on our rural setting, and planners and developers.

Stapleford and Great Shelford are surrounded by greenbelt: we lack brownfield sites and infill development can only make a small dent in local unmet housing needs. Where, then,

should development be permitted? Roughly two-thirds of respondents want greenbelt land protected from development, while most of the remainder would support development under very special circumstances, such as meeting specific unmet housing, commercial or transport needs in our villages (e.g. affordable housing). Should any of our surrounding land be removed from greenbelt for development purposes, we would wish to ensure that important visual links between the villages and the landscape are maintained and that planning conditions to protect and enhance wildlife are imposed on developers.

The impact of economic growth worries residents beyond just where development might happen. We are particularly concerned by a loss of biodiversity, carbon emissions, and water and air pollution. One additional feature was not included in our survey but popped up several times in free-text comments: noise pollution concerns associated with increasing traffic and congestion. Many of us take pleasure in living in a relatively quiet corner of South Cambridgeshire but perceive this tranquillity to be under threat.

Jenny Flynn

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