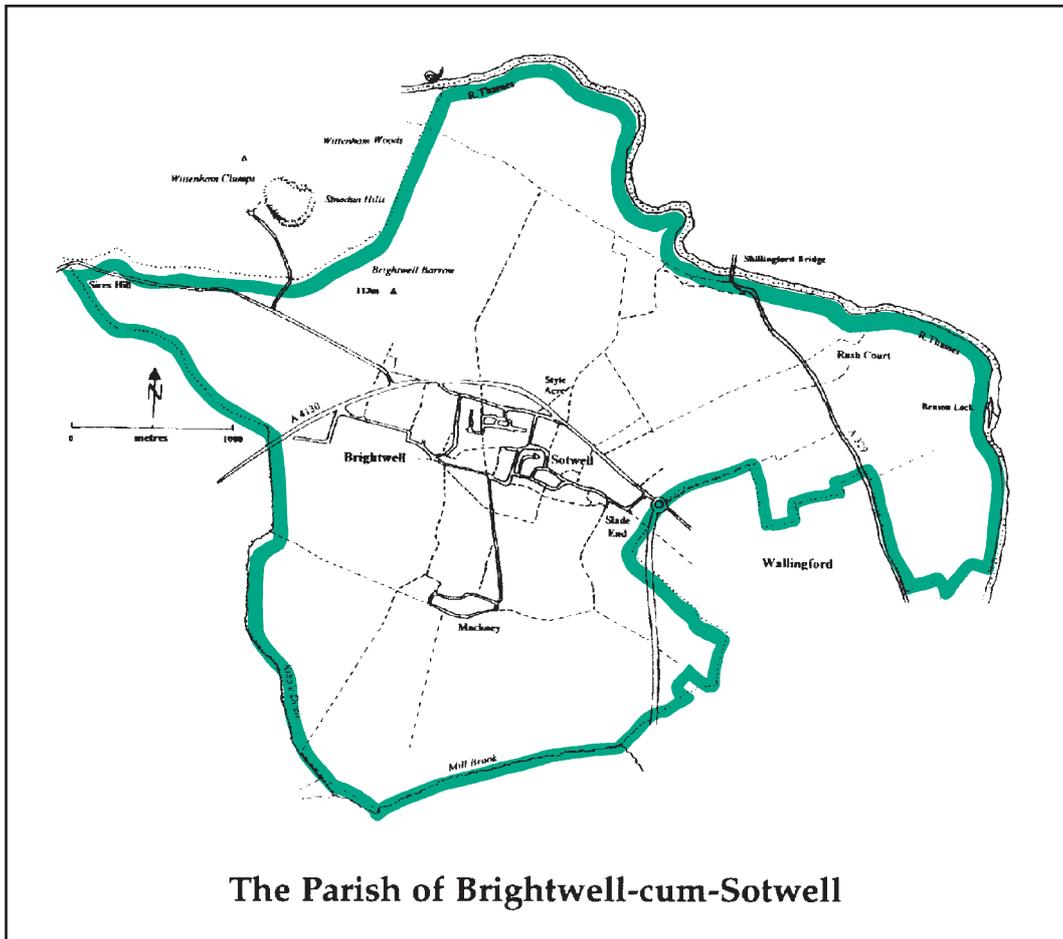


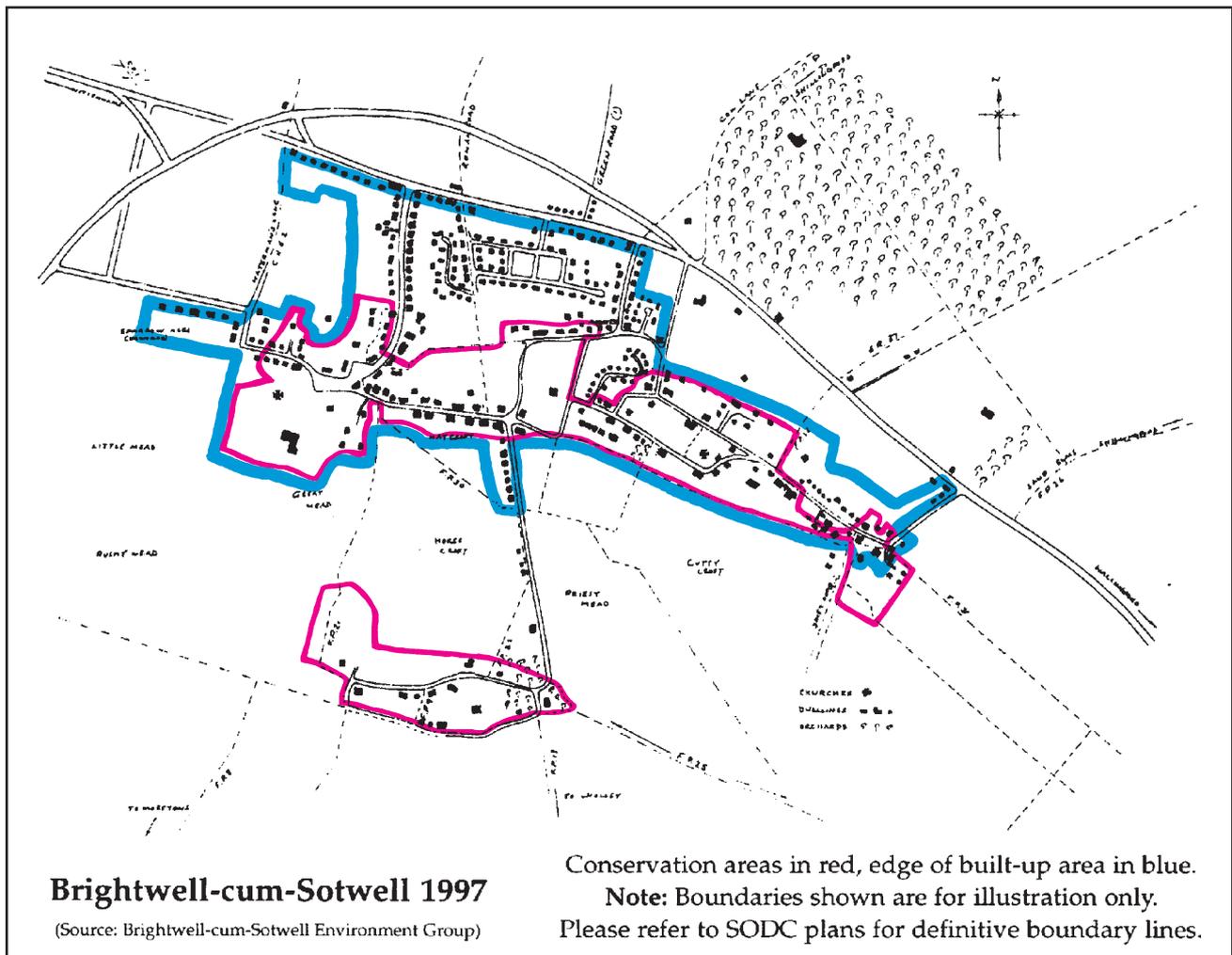
# Brightwell-cum-Sotwell Parish Plan



*Vital Villages:  
Building a Sustainable Community*



**The Parish of Brightwell-cum-Sotwell**



**Brightwell-cum-Sotwell 1997**

(Source: Brightwell-cum-Sotwell Environment Group)

Conservation areas in red, edge of built-up area in blue.

Note: Boundaries shown are for illustration only.

Please refer to SODC plans for definitive boundary lines.

# Brightwell-cum-Sotwell Parish Plan



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**March 2004**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Brightwell-cum-Sotwell is a village of picture postcard prettiness. Nestling in a hollow below Wittenham Clumps, it has at its heart the Red Lion pub, miraculously restored after a near-disastrous fire. Dotted along the narrow village streets are the picturesque black and white thatched cottages that are so typical of South Oxfordshire.

This is an area that has attracted artists, musicians, scientists and visionaries. Visitors come from all over the world to Mount Vernon, home of the celebrated Bach Flower Remedies. Wild flowers grown in the garden of Mount Vernon are still used to make the ‘mother tincture’ of these homoeopathic treatments, and their creator, Dr Edward Bach, is buried in St James’s churchyard.

However, besides its areas of spectacular beauty, the parish has its share of uninspiring modern housing developments, tumbledown eyesores and tatty bits. For people have lived and worked here for over a thousand years – and balancing the demands of conservation with the need to create a sustainable, thriving community has always been a difficult juggling act.

The decision to place a high proportion of the large-scale development in the county at Didcot, just four miles away, has put Brightwell-cum-Sotwell under unprecedented pressure. New building has generally been contained within the village envelope of the 1970s, and the few undeveloped sites that remain within the village have tended to be snapped up by developers for prestigious ‘executive homes’. Families have tended to stay put and build extensions, rather than move. Small homes suitable as starter properties, or for single people and the elderly, have virtually disappeared. Now even medium sized homes are rapidly disappearing.

**Housing is a key factor in ensuring that we continue to have a population that sustains our amenities. At the moment, we are in danger of choking to death internally with properties that don’t suit the needs of the village.**

## **1.1 Vital Villages**

During 2003/4, a series of public consultation exercises was mounted. This was the Vital Villages project, sponsored by the Countryside Agency, Oxfordshire Rural Community Council and Brightwell-cum-Sotwell Parish Council.

Visitors to the Vital Villages stand at the village fete, and to a drop-in morning at the Village Hall, were invited to raise key concerns. Working parties were established on Housing, Amenities and the Environment, and suitable questions devised for a questionnaire that was distributed throughout the parish. Some 430 households completed this – a 73% return rate. An ORCC questionnaire, on Affordable Housing, was distributed at the same time. The full results were on display at a second drop-in morning, attended by 71 people, and a Youth Meeting, and all comments were again carefully recorded.

**All phases of the consultation have been taken into account in writing this Parish Plan, as well as the Action Plan, which is here published as an appendix.**

A few words of explanation might be in order when interpreting the results of the questionnaire. This was distributed at a time when the village had very recently lost its Village Shop and Post Office (although a satellite post office was later established at the Red Lion). Feelings were running very high, and this might partly explain why it loomed so large in written comments.

It should also be borne in mind that not everyone answered all of the questions. This means that percentages should be read particularly carefully. Where there was a particularly high or low response, this has been noted.

Copies of this plan, as well as the full results of the questionnaire, can be seen in the Parish Clerk's office.

## 2. ORIGINS OF BRIGHTWELL-CUM-SOTWELL

This Parish Plan concerns 1,320 hectares, comprising the civil parish of Brightwell-cum-Sotwell in Oxfordshire. Formed by the merger in 1948 of Sotwell and Brightwell, it now includes the adjacent lands of Clapcot. Settlements at Mackney, Shillingford Hill and Sires Hill also fall within the parish, which has been part of South Oxfordshire District Council since the 1974 local government reorganisation. Before that, for 1,000 years, these were Berkshire – historically the northern frontier of the Saxon kingdom of Wessex.

The parish developed around an estate centred on springs at the intersection of two historic trackways, a north-south road connecting the Roman towns of Silchester and Dorchester, and an east-west Saxon road from Wallingford to Abingdon. The main village lies at the foot of the south-facing slope of Sinodun Hills, Brightwell Barrow rising 70m above the Thames floodplain. Bedrock is a chalky marl of the Upper Greensand with a thin capping of Chalk. Settlement is along a narrow east-west gravel terrace, crossed by small streams fed by the springs.

To the south, these settlements look out to the Berkshire Downs. Mackney lies 800m to the south on an ‘island’ rising above ground, which before drainage must have formed extensive marshlands. The presumed line of the Roman road from the Goring Gap passes between Brightwell and Sotwell springs, before climbing over Sinodun Hills towards Dorchester. Land to the west formed the Saxon estates of *Beorhtanwylle* and *Maccanie*, that to the east *Suttanwille* or *Stottanwylle*. Collectively, these formed a single 30-hide estate given in 854 to the Bishop of Winchester. Half this area, Sotwell, transferred to Hyde Abbey by 1066 but some time, probably in the 13th century, part of Sotwell was recovered by the Bishopric, creating a detached area of Brightwell at Slade End.

Clapcot comprises all the lands north of Wallingford between Sotwell and the Thames. In 1066 it was two freehold estates, which remained a private territorial asset held by whoever had the castle and honour of Wallingford. Often referred to as the Liberty of Clapcot, for the past 1,000 years it has essentially been a parish without a church or traditional village. The present day community at Shillingford Hill is centred on the Domesday Manor of Rush Court, 2km north of Wallingford on the A329.

These were agricultural communities, with arable farming on the hill-slopes to the north of the A4130, at Severalls Farm and on Mackney island and with grazing on the surrounding marshland and Thames floodplain. Through medieval and Tudor times, the villages developed as a mosaic of farmsteads and small manor houses, separated by orchards and smallholdings.

### 3. WHO ARE WE?



We are people who live in an ideal location – a ‘sought-after’ village, in estate agent’s jargon. An article in *The Sunday Telegraph* classed us as a perfect village as we have the ‘seven Ps’: pub, primary school, parson, public transport, phone box, petrol station and a post office (now reopened at the Red Lion). This has increased the value of our houses; only once people have moved into the perfect village they may never want to leave.

Over half (56% of replies) have lived in the parish for more than 10 years, and this figure includes 21% who have been here for more than 30 years. Within the 395 households that gave details of the number of people in different age groups there were:

- 57 children aged 0–5.
- 107 children aged 12–18.
- 291 people aged 31–50.
- 153 people aged 66–80.
- 88 children aged 6–11.
- 76 people aged 19–30.
- 226 people aged 51–65
- 46 people over 81.

This makes an average of 2.64 people in each household. Of these, 41% are over 50; 35% 19-50; 24% under 18.

We have 587 households within the Parish, so we can estimate the total population as about 1,550. Interestingly, back in 1891 the population was 726, dropping to 699 in 1921, and then rising to 991 in 1951. It had grown to 1338 by 1961 and 1509 in 1991.

**Contrary to popular preconception, London commuters make up a small minority of the population. 37% work outside the parish but less than 20 miles away; only 14% work more than 20 miles away; 9% work from home, and 6% work inside the parish.**

### **3.1 How Involved Do We Feel?**

At least three quarters of us feel involved in the community for all or some of the time. Several people mentioned the Millennium and Golden Jubilee celebrations as examples of events that brought the community together. Perhaps this should be the cue for village organisations to look at ways of finding excuses to party.

**It is worth noting that only 16% considered the parish as open to new ideas, and 31% thought people were inclined to keep things the way they were, so there is no cause for complacency.**

### **3.2 How Could We Feel More Involved?**

**Re-instating the Village Shop and Post Office topped the list of suggestions. People stressed its importance as a place to meet, find out information and catch up on the local gossip. Other ideas included a welcome pack for newcomers and invitations to the next social event; open days for clubs and societies; more facilities for youth and younger working people; get-to-know-you evenings.**



#### 4. SHOPS AND SERVICES

Is it possible to have a Vital Village without a functioning commercial centre? We still have the Red Lion, but its rivals - the Button and Loop, the Black Duck, the Old Swan Inn and The Bell - have long since gone. Three decades ago, there were two shops and a bakery; now there are none.

No one could realistically expect to return to the days when there was a pub or a shop on every corner. However, the dramatic effect of the loss of the last village shop has been highlighted by the way it featured in written comments on almost every topic on the questionnaire.

When the village also temporarily lost the Red Lion, closed for a year after a near-disastrous fire, the streets were noticeably quieter. There was no excuse to walk down the road for a stamp or a pint, and so opportunities for casual social contact were lost.

Thankfully the Red Lion is now re-opened – and has become home to a satellite Post Office. This is a temporary measure; without it, the village would have lost the right to re-introduce a permanent post office in the future. Parishioners have one last chance to prove that the service is viable. The message is clear: ‘Use it or lose it’.



#### **4.1 Village Shop and Post Office: The Way Forward**

**Over 90% of respondents support the Parish Council sub-committee exploring all options for providing a new shop. The need for a shop and post office is strongly supported by 92% of respondents. This rises to 96% if Shillingford Hill and Sires Hill are excluded; many residents from these areas say they shop elsewhere.**

Twelve written comments underline the importance of the shop as a vital part of community life. Five emphasise its role as a social focus for the elderly and young mothers with families; however, seven suggest that a shop is not viable due to neighbouring supermarkets and a lack of village support.

In the questionnaire, people were invited to tick boxes showing their degree of support for a range of options for a new shop. Preferred solutions (in descending order) are:

- Buy old shop premises at a commercial value (Strongly support – 86%)
- Buy another property for conversion (Strongly support – 76%)
- Negotiate to agree a purchase price for the old premises (Strongly support – 74%)
- Incorporate a shop in existing community premises (Strongly support – 73%)
- Build a new shop (Strongly support – 68%)

**There is a strong preference for the shop to be either in its previous location, or in the centre of the village. Many households comment on how a shop might be run successfully. Key points include flexible opening times, a full range of everyday items with an emphasis on local produce, and responsiveness to villagers' requests. There is a willingness to contribute to local fundraising should that prove necessary.**

**The restoration of the village shop must be a prime objective of our parish plan.**

#### **4.2 Security**

Independent research carried out by Zoe Rice, a university student, has indicated that the informal exchange of information that goes on in a village shop has an important role in making people feel secure.

In the questionnaire, 64% said they were happy with the existing Neighbourhood Watch Scheme. Many people said they would like to see the return of the village bobby. Since this is unlikely to happen, the parish needs to explore what other options are open.

### **5. CHURCH AND COMMUNITY**

The church of St Agatha's has been a focus for worship, education and social care over the centuries. The church of St James, rebuilt in 1884, traditionally provided for the people of Sotwell parish. Brightwell Free Church, in the nonconformist tradition, was established in 1885.

Many of the functions previously carried out by the priest or minister and congregation, such as education and social welfare, have become the responsibility of the state. So how should the church serve the community today?

Questionnaire replies indicate that around 60% of respondents see the church buildings as historic monuments and village landmarks. A similar percentage sees the church as a place for prayer, for spiritual refreshment and a place for milestones in life: baptisms, weddings and funerals. 25% thought the church should or did have a role in social welfare, and only 6% felt the church had no role in the community.

**This indicates a significant degree of support for the church, even though this may not be translated into active participation. Several people expressed a wish for a full-time resident vicar; however, with present-day limits on resources, this is unlikely to be feasible. Alternative solutions have to be found.**

Some areas that the church should investigate are:

- Wider community involvement in the care and cost of maintenance of the buildings and churchyards as historic monuments and village landmarks.
- Ways of encouraging people to come into church for time to reflect and meditate. (St Agatha's is already open during the day for visitors and those who wish to pray.)
- Finding more ways of making worship relevant to today's needs and culture.
- Investigating activities and services that might encourage young people to explore the Christian faith.
- Finding ways for the church and the community to work together to provide pastoral care and support for those who are housebound or chronically ill.

## 6. COMMUNICATIONS

The principal source of local information within the Parish is currently *The Villager* magazine, with 80% of respondents indicating that they got most of their information from the magazine, and only 1% getting none of their information from this source.

Other media are also well used. Word of mouth and leaflets through the door scored equal second (63%), followed by notices on poles (58%), parish notice boards (54%) and the Parish Council Magazine (49%).

Several people mentioned the importance of the village shop as a point of social contact and 'word of mouth' communication.

### 6.1 How Could We Communicate Better?

The volume of responses to this question was fairly low. However among those who did respond, the most popular suggestion was a community or parish web site – suggested by 33% of respondents. A few also suggested an on-line version of *The*

*Villager* – this could potentially be combined with the web site project. Ownership of personal computers within the Parish is high (73% of respondents), and around two-thirds of PC owners indicated that they would make use of a parish web site.

## 6.2 Parish Web Site

**A project group has already been set up to establish terms of reference and investigate the logistics of setting up a parish website. The aim is to complement, rather than to replace, existing publications such as *The Villager*, and to provide a quick and easy ‘way in’ to the parish for newcomers and long-standing residents alike.**

## 6.3 Notice-boards

Among other suggestions, the most frequent were for improvements to notice-boards. Suggested locations for new boards included the school, Greenmere, and the Red Lion (the pub already displays notices in the entrance, but better use could be made of this facility, particularly while the Post Office is operating there).

It is worth noting that currently more people rely on notices on telegraph poles than on the official boards (see above), whereas concern has been expressed elsewhere as to the unsightliness of these notices. In the short term, people could be encouraged to remove out of date notices. In the longer term, perhaps more or more prominent notice-boards would help to resolve this conflict.

There was some concern expressed that outlying areas of the Parish are not receiving all the information circulated in the main village, for example the *Parish Council Magazine*.

## 7. RETIRED PEOPLE

A total of 34% of respondents to the questionnaire are retired – about twice the national average. It is obviously invidious to single out activities that might be considered more ‘suitable’ for retired people. (Apart from anything else, some people retire as early as 50.) However, organisers of the numerous clubs and activities which take place in the Village Hall and Pavilion should be encouraged to make sure their publicity reaches this age group. Age Concern is represented in the parish, and there is a branch of the British Legion.

Services available for those who do not drive, or who have limited mobility, include a free Tesco bus to and from Didcot, mobile library, hairdresser, fish van and milkman.

In answer to the question, ‘What more could be done to help the elderly and less able in the parish?’ almost half mentioned the village shop (103 out of 223 responses). The

second most frequently made suggestion was better public transport. Older people already receive concessionary bus fares. However, timetable improvements and the possibility of linking up with other villages to provide a minibus need to be investigated. More use could also be made of the Way Out minibus.

### **7.1 Volunteer Services**

Volunteer-run events such as the Tuesday Lunch Club in the Village Hall provide a useful meeting place, especially for those who would otherwise have little occasion to leave the house.

**There is a clear need for a higher profile for the various voluntary services on offer. Out of 430 responses to the questionnaire, only 51% were aware of the Wallingford Volunteer Centre; 65% were aware of the prescription service, and 67% of the Wallingford surgery car service. Both of these last two services are free.**

## **8. YOUTH**

Prior to the launch of the Parish Plan project, a group of young people had taken the initiative to collect over 400 signatures on a petition for a skate park in the village. The petition was presented as part of the Youth exhibition at the first drop-in on March 12, 2003, where further signatures were obtained. A youth team was organised to research the views of young people in the parish.

### **8.1 Research**

Suggestions that came from the research were: a skate park, a youth shelter, badminton and social events in school holidays.

The Beaver group carried out their own questionnaire amongst their members. The recreation ground was the play area they all use, with just over half using the Kings Meadow playing field. 69% thought there was enough play equipment. However, new areas and equipment they would like to see included: a tree house, new bridge and castle, bike track, skate park, woods, swimming pool, monkey bars, hut, obstacle course and a climbing frame.

The buildings and places the Beavers feel are important to the village are: garage, school, duck pond, war memorial, roads and footpaths, letterbox, beautiful gardens, pub, tennis court, Wellsprings, streams, farms, Village Hall, Pavilion, graveyard, churches, buses, bins, football field, sweet shop.

In the main questionnaire, 38% of respondents consider there are not enough facilities for under 18s in the parish, with 12% considering there are enough. 50% couldn't say.

## 8.2 Open Youth Meeting

An open Youth meeting was held in February 2004. The idea of a web page for young people on the web site was very popular. The new car park at the recreation ground has provided a safe place for the skateboarders to use; the possibility of hiring a mobile Skate Park periodically was felt to be a good idea if cost prohibited a permanent skate park. The new Pavilion's veranda provides a meeting place, but no seating. If it was not possible to provide seating, it was felt a gazebo on the recreation ground would offer a meeting place. Other things they would like explored are: a band night, junior tennis, a drop-in centre, youth football and rugby, and dance classes.

In answer to the question: 'What is the most important youth amenity missing from the village?' the unanimous answer was: a village shop.

## 8.3 Youth Council

It was proposed to form a Youth Council to meet periodically and to send a representative to Parish Council meetings. Eight interest names for the Youth Council were taken at the meeting.

## 8.4 Conclusion

**There is a need to widen participation in future meetings so that no sex or age group feels disenfranchised. It is clear from the meetings that the young people are very willing and should be involved and valued in all stages of any project development. A Youth Council will be of great assistance in enabling the young people not only to have a voice, but also actively to be involved in any planning and fund raising. Continued dialogue will enable the best use of any resources that are available for youth projects.**

## 9. VILLAGE SCHOOL



Traditionally, the village school has been at the heart of the parish. Once housed in what is now the Village Hall, it now has modern buildings on Greenmere.

The school is thriving, has recently installed a new computer suite, and has an active parents' organisation. It has a new Community and Communications Committee, aimed at raising its profile within and outside the parish.

**84% of respondents say they value the village school – yet only just over half of those with children of primary school age send their children there. This goes against the principle of sustainability, which means using local facilities wherever possible.**

**No one is suggesting that the school is under any immediate threat. However, no small school can ever afford to be complacent, especially given the growing national obsession with economies of scale. The same principle applies as to the village shop and post office: 'Use it or lose it.'**

## 10. SUSTAINABILITY



Sustainable development has been the catch phrase since the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 which coined the phrase 'Think globally, act locally'. The Kyoto agreement and the Oxfordshire Agenda 21 carried this further forward, and we are all being encouraged to look at local ways of reducing our impact on the environment.

In 1998 the Brightwell-cum-Sotwell Environment group published the Parish Conservation Plan which detailed the present status of the village and where we

would like to be in 10 years time. There was a lot of enthusiasm for the projects and much data collected via surveys including home energy saving, use of water, waste re-cycling, gardens and modes of transport.

### 10.1 Farming and Land Use

Modern agricultural techniques have meant that very few people within the parish now work on the land. However, farming continues to have a massive impact on the landscape and the parish is lucky to have farmers who are sensitive to this.

North Farm, with 20 acres of new woods and one and a half miles of new hedges, has won an English Nature Farming Wildlife Award. There is a substantial dairy and arable farm at Mackney.

Buying and growing produce locally is an important element in sustainability. The parish farm shops have fallen victim to the rival attractions of the large supermarkets. However, there is a flourishing pick-your-own soft fruit business, and pesticide-free potatoes and free-range eggs are sold at Highlands Farm.

There has also recently been an encouraging flurry of activity on the Swan Allotments – described by one respondent as ‘the village eyesore’. All the available plots are taken, with several long-disused areas once again being cultivated.

### 10.2 Redundant Buildings

Within the parish there are a number of redundant commercial sites with derelict buildings. The majority, 64% of 399 respondents, supported the regeneration of such sites for appropriate commercial or business use. Few (13%) actively opposed the proposition. Some of these sites featured as suggested locations for Affordable Housing.

### 10.3 Local Services

A high proportion of villagers use the local services and amenities but there is considerable variation across the parish, probably due to its geography.

		Low		High	Overall
Garages	Sires Hill	3 (38%)	Mackney B’well St/ Church Lane	19 (95%) 93 (85%)	301 (70%)
Pub/Hotel	Shillingford Hill	20 (42%)	Mackney S’well St, Bell & Bakers Ln	17 (85%) 96 (74%)	298 (69%)
Garden supplies	Sires Hill	5 (63%)	The Street/ Church Lane	94 (85%)	330 (77%)

## 10.4 Transport

As would be expected in a rural community there is great reliance on the car for most pursuits. 62% of respondents have two or more cars or vans; 33% have only one, and only 5% have none.

To encourage people out of their cars there should be an emphasis on safe, convenient and well-maintained cycle ways and footpaths (see sections 15 and 16), and improved public transport. Almost half (48%) of people who don't use the current bus service said they would consider using an improved service.

## 10.5 A Green Future?

For the Parish to actively pursue the ethos of sustainable development, projects and monitoring need to be undertaken in key areas:

- **Reduce consumption of natural resources e.g. energy efficient homes, reduced car use, improved waste management, water saving.**
- **Set limits on environmental impact by new housing development.**
- **Protect and enhance bio-diversity, using knowledge gained from existing surveys of hedges, garden birds, ponds and waterways.**
- **Buy local produce and grow more on allotments and in gardens.**
- **Use environmentally friendly products in gardens and in public places.**
- **Engage a wider group of parishioners in environmental matters.**





**BRIGHTWELL-CUM-SOTWELL  
PHOTO ALBUM**

*Clockwise from top left:*  
St James's Church; Mackney Lane; River  
Thames near Shillingford; Smalls House,  
Mackney; Mount Vernon (Bach Centre);  
Allotments; Telephone Box; Village Hall;  
(centre) Autumn view towards  
Wittenham Clumps.

## **11. OUR PARISH DESIGN STATEMENT**

**There are key characteristics and features of our environment that help shape the nature of our community. We have documented these and how they appear in 2004. This is a formal record of residents' views, addressing aspects of our landscape and settlements that are central to our identity and our sense of place. We are anxious to see these respected in planning and development matters. They indicate how we would wish to enhance and protect our environment.**

The concept of a design statement as part of the Vital Villages Parish Plan was first presented at the initial Open meeting in April 2003. Suggestions regarding features of significance to the nature and appearance of our built environment were then collected at the 2003 Brightwell-cum-Sotwell Village Fête and incorporated into the Village Questionnaire, which went to every household. From these views a draft Parish Design Statement was prepared and placed on public display in the Village Hall in February 2004. It will be discussed with SODC to ensure it is compatible with the Local Plan and to seek their endorsement. In the unlikely event of conflict between this Design Statement and the South Oxfordshire Building Design Guide, the latter should take precedence.

**The Design Statement is addressed to:**

- **The local planning authority, South Oxfordshire District Council**
- **The Parish Council**
- **Planners, architects, designers, developers and builders**
- **Residents, land owners, farmers and other local business people**
- **Anyone else planning to construct a new building, or thinking of altering an existing building, or charged with re-engineering the parish landscape.**
- **Any other statutory bodies or public authorities concerned with environmental matters.**

## 11.1 Landscape Considerations

The parish is set around a west-east ridge of low hills running from Wittenham Clumps across Brightwell Barrow towards Wallingford. The northern flank forms a most distinctive and well-known backdrop to the River Thames. Six footpaths and bridleways cross the farmland on the hill linking Shillingford Bridge, the central village, and Wallingford with the Northmoor Trust SSSI on Castle Hill. Sensitive farming encourages wildlife, whilst outstanding views from the crest attract many walkers to this part of the parish.



Sotwell and Brightwell are linear villages stretching 2km along the opposite southern flank of the hills. Here the A4130 skirts the settlement on three sides, but from every aspect views of the settlement are mainly of surrounding farmland, with only a few village buildings and mature trees showing. Even at the four entrances into the village off the A4130, the settlements blend so well into the landscape they could easily be missed if it were not for the multitude of road signs. Road safety at these junctions is, however, a serious issue for most villagers and our survey shows 163 households would favour measures such as roundabouts to ease the problem. For 247 other households, the villages and road should remain as inconspicuous as possible with unobtrusive traffic calming measures to protect the rural character of the southern aspect of Wittenham Clumps.

The landscape to the south is unusual and distinctive. Here, the open fields of Mackney (and Cholsey) ‘islands’ are surrounded by areas of smaller fields, enclosed by streams and ditches that once drained marshes filling channels of an ancient river Thames. The principal streams mark edges of Saxon estates still followed by the boundaries of modern parishes. Whilst possessing some intrinsic landscape merit, it has significant amenity value. The area is criss-crossed by well-used footpaths linking the villages of Cholsey, the Astons, North and South

Moreton, Mackney, Brightwell, and Sotwell to one another and to Wallingford. There are fine views in all directions: south to the Berkshire Downs, west to the Moreton ridge separating the basin from Didcot, north to the Clumps, and east to the Chilterns and the Goring Gap.

This is the aspect of our village that creates much of the rural character that our survey showed is so important to many local people. Views through gaps between village properties, and from lanes and footpaths, connect residents with the surrounding countryside. This area, which includes allotments, playground and our recreation ground, is perceived as an integral part of the boundary of the village and not simply an outside agricultural space. In our village survey, this led to observations that our conservation area might be extended in recognition of the importance of these views to the character of the village.

The recent Wallingford bypass crosses the parish here. Our village was separated from the late Saxon town by 1.5km of open countryside. By the early 19th century this had reduced to about 1km; now the closest edge of building is within 200m at Slade End. The bypass has inevitably raised new interests in further westward expansion of Wallingford, so through our village questionnaire, we have examined whether to retain our separate identity or merge as a suburb of Wallingford.

#### **‘We are a rural parish’**

- **The overwhelming perception of our community is that we are a country parish and should strive to remain so. 98% of respondents would not wish to see a merger with Wallingford.**
- **Separation from the built area of Wallingford is central to maintaining our individual rural identity. Villagers believe the remaining fields at Slade End flanking the bypass and A4130 should remain open country.**
- **It is important that our settlements remain well hidden and set inconspicuously within the landscape for 93% of respondents. For the majority of villagers, living surrounded by farmland and near protected open countryside was of significance in choosing to move here. This is of no significance to only nine households.**
- **Safety at the four entrances to the main village from the A4130 is of concern and a growing problem. Any traffic calming measures should respect the rural setting.**
- **233 households, 62% of replies, believe the two Conservation Areas have been adequately protected, with just 7% thinking too much protection has been given. There seems, however, to be a need for a Conservation Area Character Study in Brightwell, Sotwell and Mackney. Many of over 50 written comments have expressed concerns about the character and**

**importance of spaces and associated views around the margins of the existing Conservation Areas.**

## **11.2 Sense of Place**

A major feature that shapes the character of Sotwell, Mackney and Brightwell is that these settlements have been bypassed since medieval times by the old High Road, now in turn replaced by the A4130.

Without the need to have accommodated through traffic for over 500 years, internal movements are still largely via unimproved lanes and old trackways with few pavements. 85% of respondents see these narrow and winding lanes as a distinct advantage. They help create a very strong and special ‘sense of place’.

It is a village that is naturally unfriendly towards vehicular traffic, with an internal network of ancient footpaths that encourages pedestrian movement. For 80% of respondents, village and countryside footpaths are our most important environmental asset. Over 300 families record they walk regularly in a village where cars are otherwise used on average about 95% of the time for work, shopping, and recreation.

- **Every attempt should be given to improving pedestrian movement round the village. An expanded footpath network would be welcomed; enclosed developments with no through routes are undesirable. Where pavements are absolutely necessary these should link to the footpath and bridleway network with dropped kerbs and ramps as appropriate. Pram and wheelchair access should be provided, replacing stiles with gates where safe to do so.**
- **Curving streets flanked by combinations of banks, hedges and walls will maintain the rural character. These should not dominate the building beyond, but be in scale with the property and with the style, period and setting of that location. Open plan frontages to properties are not in keeping.**
- **Views from lanes, bridleways and footpaths across the surrounding farmland and countryside should always be protected.**
- **New roads within the village should be in scale with the rural character of the existing road network. It is important that “highway specification” roads and junctions are avoided. Improvements to historic roads, lanes and trackways should be strongly resisted.**
- **Road safety within our built-up areas has now become an issue with residents. Speed should be restrained by unobtrusive traffic calming measures (such as a 20 mph limit) in sympathy with the rural character.**

- **Off-street parking should be provided as a matter of routine, but garages and car parking should not obscure house fronts. Off-street parking should be encouraged at existing properties lacking such facilities, however visually unobtrusive solutions preserving boundary features should always be sought.**

### 11.3 Design and the Built Environment



There is a very wide range of materials, styles and types of buildings. The height, scale and density of properties vary greatly and change rapidly. Much of the charm of the village is this variation, with well-treed large formal gardens, traces of old farms, and remnants of orchards retaining a very strong and important rural character.

Our main villages are built around a mosaic of old barns and converted farmsteads that began to fall into disuse early in the 19th century. Some of the 41 listed houses preserve timber framed thatched buildings with clay and wattle, or brick. The larger farmsteads were re-roofed beneath tile and slate, retaining good brick chimneys. Barns are weather boarded above local stone, brick and flint walls. A fine freestone Elizabethan house at Mackney merits a Grade I listed status.

There is also a good scattering of Victorian properties, some showing fine ornate brickwork. The area between the Red Lion and Slade End was completely redeveloped, exploiting the southerly views to the Berkshire Downs. By 1910, several large properties had appeared on high ground north of the A4130. However, the main housing expansion was between 1945 and 1990. Two large building developments, Greenmere and Kings Orchard, considerably extended the main

village but were separated from it by an internal green belt around the historic footpath network. Monks Mead and Datchet Green developments infilled within that green core. Elsewhere small clusters of family houses and bungalows appeared, typically one property deep. These flanked the lanes between the older properties, but preserved boundaries of historic enclosures. At Shillingford Hill the post WW II break up of the Rush Court Estate led to the establishment of the residential site and a cluster of private homes around the Elizabeth Finn Trust home.

- **Our village survey reveals nearly half of households believe many 1950-1980s developments of ‘pattern book’ designs did not fit well enough into the character of the village. 313 families, 83% of respondents, think that building designs still need to strive harder to be in keeping with the village setting. Villagers would now like all planning applications to include a statement for local people explaining how proposed works will contribute to the character of the site and reinforce local distinctiveness.**
- **Because there is not a strong characteristic “village style” this is no excuse for the introduction of anonymous or alien architecture. 130 written responses suggest how things might be improved. Most wish to see better use of materials and designs to suit the character of the immediate setting in new works and on extensions. Careful matching of building style to traditional materials and locally distinctive details should be sought far more vigorously.**
- **Eight households felt that the planning process fails to encourage good architecture, and gives poor consideration to density and landscaping of developments. This reflects a much wider and growing village concern that new works are now failing to reflect the proportions of nearby properties, or to be in harmony with the site. Scattered groups of small properties on small sites would complement what we have; large houses on small plots do not.**
- **Brightwell-cum-Sotwell supports the provisions in the Local Plan which restrict development outside the built-up areas of our settlements. We also accept and support the aims, principles and recommendations of the December 2000 South Oxfordshire Design Guide. We received just one reply to our questionnaire suggesting the planning process as applied to our parish was too strict. Inappropriate changes to deposited plans after initial approval is currently of particular concern to villagers.**
- **We see considerable merit in retaining any landscape features, building details or historic enclosure lines that record the agricultural origins of that place. Boundary treatments should be in keeping with traditional rural styles of the vicinity.**

## 12 CONSERVATION – a village between a rock and a hard place

Most households want the rural character of our settlements to be retained. This identity is under threat, and it is clear to many residents that Brightwell and Sotwell are slowly choking to death.

At small settlements such as ours, building development is resisted not just out in the countryside but right up to what is described as the edge of settlement – the village envelope of the 1970s. Inside this, any building is now likely to be approved only for infill housing, affordable housing, extensions, and other non-residential small-scale schemes (SODC South Oxfordshire Design Guide, December 2000). 93% of respondents seem very content with this, and want our built-up areas to remain contained, inconspicuous and well hidden.

Conservation measures are thought by 62% to have adequately protected the historic core, although 11% think not, and 7% feel there has been too much protection. We have problems outside and around the edges of the Conservation Areas. Here, open spaces and gardens within the edge of settlement are under pressure as never before. Opportunities for extensions and building are simply too valuable for developers to expend on anything but large properties. These are seen to be increasingly out of scale relative to plot size and the setting. Enclosed green space associated with gardens and small orchards is central to the appearance of our rural settlement, and this is being irretrievably lost.

Many written responses to the questionnaire draw attention to historic buildings and associated open spaces around the boundaries of what was a very early conservation area designation. In places this omits the full extent of rear plots, ignores views and shows little respect for internal landscape elements. A Conservation Area Character Study, which would have examined these issues, was expected from SODC last year but seems to have been delayed.

### 12.1 Areas of Concern

- 21 written comments point out the landscape value of gardens, orchards and fields adjacent to the footpath network north of the Conservation Area from Watermans Lane to Slade End.
- Eight concern the allotments, playing fields, Mackney Lane and the adjacent fields. This open space is perceived to be an integral part of the boundary of the village.
- Six relate to the remaining fields around the A4130 at Slade End that identify and separate the village from Wallingford.
- Six concern listed properties and their setting in Bakers Lane, Bell Lane and High Road.

We received 15 other written comments on conservation. Six thought no changes were needed; three thought the village should be more proactive and encourage imaginative developments, whilst three proposed allowing building at the derelict nurseries.

There is a proposal to replace the village fountain, to preserve old brick stairs to the river at Shillingford, and to raise a fund to maintain the War Memorial.

### 13. TRAPPED BY PASSING TRAFFIC

**For many residents access in and out of our settlements is now a serious problem. Every household at Sires Hill complains of traffic speeding past their homes. 78 others have access problems on the A329 Shillingford road, whilst 267, nearly 70%, have problems with the A4130 Didcot road. More than half submitted written views on the A4130.**

Opinions are divided; 44% want to change the entrances, 44% do not. There are two quite distinct attitudes:

**(a) ‘Don’t change the entrances.’**

76% of respondents consider the appearance of the entrances to be an important part of the rural character. 247 households said they want them kept largely as they are now; 163 are against any change. The speed and volume of passing traffic is seen to be the problem and access should be improved by a lower speed limit, visually unobtrusive traffic calming measures, and regular cutting of grass on sight lines. 86% of respondents were against any closures; this was seen to encourage congestion and internal traffic movements. More trees and hedges to screen the village from the road and reduce noise pollution would be welcome; most engineering solutions would not.

**(b) ‘Safety is more important than appearance.’**

For 163 households, entrances need to be changed. 12 stated that safety should be paramount, and that using the entrances is now dangerous. Right hand turns into the village at West End and Highlands Farm are especially bad. 14 households consider recent half lane filter road markings should be removed or the roads widened to three full lanes; 35 households propose roundabouts without specifying where; nine favour Slade End, 15 Style Acre, 10 West End and one the Highland Farm entrance. Just five families would go as far as traffic light controls; four propose re-engineering the Slade End entrance without resorting to a new roundabout.

## 14. TRAFFIC IN SOTWELL AND BRIGHTWELL – please slow down

Without a need to accommodate through traffic, internal movement is still via largely unimproved lanes and old trackways. 85% of respondents see our narrow and winding lanes as a distinct advantage. A single pavement flanks parts of the main street and the old high road but not most of the pre-1940s road network. Although the majority of residents at Shillingford Hill and Kings Orchard/Greenmere consider few pavements and no street lighting as a disadvantage, elsewhere 71% find the absence of lighting a distinct advantage and 64% approve of country lanes with few pavements. Street parking is at best difficult, undesirable in many parts, but impossible in places due to the narrow winding lanes.

All this discourages and slows down traffic; it is a village that is naturally **unfriendly towards vehicular traffic**. This contributes very strongly to our ‘sense of place’ and is welcomed by most. However, traffic still speeds through the village and is an issue for 273 households. The main problems are seen to be along Brightwell/Sotwell Street (88 comments), and the High Road (57 comments), but the many other places mentioned suggests that there are problems throughout.

**There are now 292 households, 79% of respondents, willing to support measures to reduce traffic speed.**

## 15. FOOTPATHS – putting the Parish on the map

Our network of footpaths and bridleways are the most important environmental asset for 80% of respondents. More than 300 families regularly walk around the parish and there is great enthusiasm for even more use. Several proposals suggest doing this by outdoor plans showing not just footpaths but also places of interest. This would encourage villagers to make more use of the lesser-known Rights of Way, but would also help growing numbers of visitors enjoy our countryside better.

But thoughts of footpaths are not just for recreation. ‘Give us more and better footpaths, particularly into Wallingford, and we will use our cars less,’ say some 15 of you. At least 10 would-be commuters need better access on the footpath from Slade End to Wallingford for pushchairs and wheelchairs. Residents at Sires Hill don’t have a footpath, and speeding traffic prevents any idea of walking along their road. There is an incomplete footpath along parts of the A329 between Shillingford and Wallingford. Residents at Cross Country Caravans would welcome improvements to what is described as a narrow and dangerous footpath between the park and the bridge. For the stretch from Shillingford Hill past Rush Court to Wallingford, two families suggest that a cycleway rather than a footpath would be well used.

The footpath network in the main village is clearly important to many. Eighteen households wrote commenting how good this was, needing little improvement beyond

a few more litter bins. However, 130 written comments were received on maintenance. More frequent and in places more severe hedge/nettle cutting would be very welcome (57), surface debris is a safety issue particularly in the autumn (28), and there were 34 complaints of dog litter. Several families enjoyed working parties organised by Brightwell-cum-Sotwell Environment Group, and would turn out again if the opportunity arose.

Some accessibility improvements would be welcomed, especially to footpaths focusing on the Recreation Ground, given the excellent new Pavilion. In the opinion of 13 families, the network has not been upgraded sufficiently for wheelchair and pushchair access. The Monks Mead cul-de-sac frustrates others, and a link to Bell/Bakers lane would be very popular. Five other families suggest low level lighting to footpaths between Kings Orchard/Greenmere and the Village Hall/Red Lion. However, for some, the rural character of the village can be spoilt by 'improvements'. Indeed, three families would prefer the stream between Sotwell spring and the Red Lion to remain a wilderness: 'Where else now can children build dams and get muddy?'

Out in the country, stiles are currently in a poor or dangerous condition, according to 13 families. This, it seems, is a by-product of the 2003 long dry summer. One of our local farmers points out that, as well as mending the stiles, he has to replace many fences. Cracking and shrinking soils, hungry livestock and more walkers than usual simply loosened posts.

## 16. CYCLING – with a bit of help we could do so much more

183 families cycle - three at Sires Hill, four at Shillingford Hill, nine at Mackney and 167 in Sotwell and Brightwell. In all, 108 written replies propose measures to promote safer cycling.

**(a) Within the village** – 267 families consider it is safe to cycle, 60 do not, whilst 102 who don't cycle might be persuaded to if it were safer. For 45 households, speeding traffic is the main threat. 27 specifically propose a 20 mph internal speed limit. Four identify parked cars as a problem; two, the lack of street lighting. There is no doubt that the vast majority want our lanes left as they are, but would support some form of unobtrusive traffic calming to encourage cyclists. One family point out that bus stops opposite road junctions on High Road opposite Church Lane, Greenmere and Bell Lane are unnecessarily dangerous and could easily be relocated.

**(b) Around the parish** – Commuting by cycle is seen to be far more hazardous. Only 198 households – around half – are aware of the Sustrans National route connecting Sires Hill and the main village to Wallingford via the Wantage Road. Perhaps this is no surprise, given the 21 written comments that list the dangers of the Wantage Road section, summarised by one as so dangerous: 'it is a joke'. Parked cars, drains and

potholes make cycling in the marked lanes impossible. Overall, 213 households regard this designated cycleway to be Bad to Poor. Just 36 families cycle regularly to Wallingford. 134 cycle occasionally, but 121 who don't cycle say they would if it were made safer. Four families suggest one wider lane with no car parking, or a cycleway on one of the two pavements along the Wantage Road. For seven families, re-routing the cycleway across the fields to Fir Tree and then via off-road footpaths into central Wallingford is in keeping with the Sustrans concept, and easily justified given potential village usage.

Only seven families cycle regularly to Didcot; 21 do so occasionally, and 81 report they might consider it if it were safer. The A4130 is 'quite simply not an option for most commuter cyclists'. Roads from Shillingford Hill to Wallingford along the A329, and from Sires Hill to the A4130, are also considered too hazardous unless dedicated cycleways can be provided.

## 17. HOUSING

A house price survey in September 2003 showed Oxfordshire to be the fourth most expensive county in the UK. The cost of the average house, as assessed by Halifax, had increased by 159% over the previous decade.

First time buyers are finding it increasingly difficult to break into the housing market in Brightwell. We believe only one new small house has been built in the parish during the last 10 years, and many smaller houses have been extended. As one questionnaire respondent put it: 'Too many small houses have become large ones'.

Of the 587 dwellings in the parish, 279 are within the lower part of Council Tax bands and 308 in the upper half. 48 are managed by Housing Association. 61 of the former Council houses were sold to individual private buyers.

The vast majority – 88% of 365 respondents – own their own home. Only 6% rent from housing associations; 5% rent from private owners, and 1% live in tied accommodation.



## 17.1 Building a Vital Village

The vast majority – 394 out of 412 responses to the questionnaire – consider it important that our parish has a population that sustains its amenities, such as school, sports ground, shop, pub, etc. However, people disagree on how to make this happen.

**‘Should there be more houses?’ 40% said ‘Yes’, 38% said ‘No’ and 22% said they didn’t know. It can be seen that opinion on this is very close, and it must be borne in mind that suggestions on what type of development there should be were only invited from those who said ‘Yes’ to more building.**

### (a) ‘No more houses – it will spoil the village.’

Those who opposed the building of any more houses tended to focus on the lack of amenities, the difficulties caused by increased traffic, and the effect on the village character. Typical comments include: ‘It is already very large and will only end up a dormitory of Wallingford.’... ‘Anything done is going to have to be on greenfield sites, which we are against.’... ‘Before you build houses you should get the Shop and Post Office back.’

### (b) ‘Prudent development.’

Among the 159 households who supported more development, the predominant preferences were for:

- Infilling (49%) rather than extending built-up areas alone (8%), although some preferred a combination of both (39%).
- Limiting numbers of new houses to fewer than 5 or 10 houses per year.
- Building smaller developments of mixed sizes of houses.
- Introducing more small houses rather than large executive homes, with a strong preference for 2 & 3 bedroom houses and low cost private to rent properties.
- Development sensitive to the environment.

However, it should be noted that several people in the second round of consultation expressed concerns about too much infilling at the expense of the green ‘lungs’ of the village. As one visitor put it: ‘What would London have been like if the developers had got their way and infilled Hyde Park and St James’s Park?’ Another pointed out that even apparently waste pieces of land were important wildlife habitats, which must be preserved.

## 17.2 ‘If there is development, where should it be?’

99 responses to this question favoured the main village; 63 Shillingford Hill, 60 Sires Hill and 59 Mackney. Several specified no building on green fields between Brightwell and Wallingford, or on the allotments. As one response put it: ‘We would strongly object to building on the allotments, which belong to a charity and were left to the village, giving an excellent amenity and/or wildlife haven.’

### 17.3 ‘What types of houses are needed?’

Of 159 responses, 149 (94 %) favoured mixed sizes in any housing development. Types of property in descending order of importance were:

<b>2 bed</b>	136	<b>4 bed</b>	72
<b>3 bed</b>	130	<b>Private to rent</b>	67
<b>Low cost private to rent</b>	102	<b>Flats</b>	50
<b>Sheltered</b>	92	<b>Maisonettes</b>	46
<b>Rural business/industry</b>	87	<b>Executive</b>	28
<b>1 bed</b>	85	<b>Park homes</b>	18

Typical comments said development should be permitted, but: ‘No more Executive Houses’ and ‘Restrict building to smaller houses, especially suitable for first time buyers’.

### 17.4 ‘How many houses should be built each year?’

Responses were:

<b>Below 5</b>	51 [34%]	<b>10 to 20</b>	19 [13%]
<b>5 to 10</b>	67 [44%]	<b>Above 20</b>	15 [10%]

### 17.5 General Comments

- **In our earlier meetings and in the questionnaire, residents said that the infrastructure must be established *before* rather than *after* development has occurred.**
- **The point was made that the parish currently does not provide adequate facilities for either elderly or young people and this should be taken into account when planning future development.**

## 18. AFFORDABLE HOUSING

A recent search of local estate agents shows prices in Brightwell of £179,950 for a two-bed terraced house, £240,000 for a three-bed detached and £480,000 for a four-bed detached house.

One solution to the price inflation caused by Brightwell’s status as a ‘sought-after’ village is to provide affordable housing for people with a strong local connection. 67% (272 out of 403 responses to the general questionnaire) said they agreed with this type of scheme.

However, several opponents suggested that Wallingford and Didcot were more

suitable locations, as they had better facilities yet were still local. Others felt that market forces should prevail. Some written comments emphasised the need for safeguards to ensure that any affordable houses were not extended or sold on at a profit.

### **18.1 Is There a Need?**

A separate affordable housing survey was distributed with the questionnaire to find out how many local people needed homes. Extra forms were available for people with a local connection, who were in rented accommodation outside the parish – and the results showed a clear housing need.

72% of 397 responses returned to this separate survey were in favour, and 29 households indicated a housing need.

### **18.2 Recommendations**

Suzanne Willers, Oxfordshire Rural Community Council's Rural Housing Enabler, suggested the parish consider building 14 new homes to go halfway towards meeting the perceived need. These did not have to be all on one site, or all built at the same time.

However, during the second round of consultation, several people said they felt 14 houses would be too many. One person expressed a worry about the creation of housing ghettos.

The full results of the separate Affordable Housing Survey can be seen in the Parish Council Office.

## **19. DISTRICT AFFORDABLE HOUSING**

South Oxfordshire District Council has an existing policy of seeking a proportion of affordable housing in new housing developments. This housing is offered through a housing association to any people on the housing register.

A question in the main questionnaire on who should be housed in District Affordable Housing Schemes brought the following response (in descending order):

<b>Keyworkers (e.g. teachers, police, nurses)</b>	283
<b>Young People</b>	257
<b>Elderly People</b>	243
<b>Those needing sheltered housing</b>	154
<b>People with Learning Disabilities</b>	123

## 20. CONCLUSION

‘It won’t take much development to overwhelm the village, change its character and its raison d’être.’ This is just one of the many written comments from people nervous about over-development of our precious green spaces.

The challenge of the 21st century is to find a way of maintaining a balance of population so we can sustain our amenities, while preserving what is unique about our parish. Opinion is equally divided about whether or not we should build more houses. However, the vast majority agree that if there is housing development it should be carefully managed, with the balance in favour of smaller dwellings. There is no space for pattern-book estates, or anonymous ‘executive’ houses. These are as out of place in our small rural community as a Tardis in the land of Lilliput.

We cannot change the past but we now have the opportunity to influence our future through our Action Plans, which are included with this document. Some of the projects are modest, some are far-reaching; all, if successful, will help us to build a vibrant and sustainable community.

The process of producing these plans has done much to open up debate. It has also provided ample proof, if proof were needed, that village life is alive and well and living in the parish of Brightwell-cum-Sotwell. A detailed list of acknowledgements follows, but this is a general thankyou to the many individuals who have given so freely of their talents and time to make this Vital Villages project possible.



*Wellsprings 1904*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Celia Collett (Chair – 835988), Lionel Cooper, Viola Crowe, Tony Debney (Secretary), Carole Dennis, Jane Dix, Eric Dore, Sally Dugan (Editor), Shirley Hayzelden, Tony Hayzelden, Martin Lovering, Trevor Morgan (Treasurer), Maureen Tarry.

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**Photography** – Chris Baines, Eric Dore, Dick Mason and History Group, Sue Robson. *Cover Photo*: Paul Chilton.

**Cover** – Charlotte Morgan

This Parish Plan is the product of over a year's intensive consultation under the Vital Villages Project. It aims to present a snapshot of the parish of Brightwell-cum-Sotwell at the beginning of the 21st century, and provide a blueprint for future development.

To the passer-by, Brightwell-cum-Sotwell is simply a rather odd name on some signs between Didcot and Wallingford. The village itself is well hidden from the road, and may attract little more than a casual glance.

However, to its inhabitants - and to the

many people who visit to enjoy its pub, footpaths, and green open spaces - the parish of Brightwell-cum-Sotwell is special. It is an attempt to define this 'specialness' that is the driving force behind this Parish Plan. For, all too often, people only realise something is special when it has gone.

With the rapid expansion of Didcot, and Wallingford only a field away, Brightwell-cum-Sotwell is already having to fight hard to keep its separate character. We cannot stop change - but we can try and influence it.

