

Whitchurch Village Area Stakeholder Workshop Report

Bath and North East Somerset Council

June 2023

Quality information

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Revision History

Revision	Revision date	Details	Authorized	Name	Position
1 st Draft	24/01/2023		MH	Mark Hughes	Director
2 nd Draft	06/04/2023		MH	Mark Hughes	Director
Final	07/06/2023		MH	Mark Hughes	Director

Distribution List

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 Bath and North East Somerset (B&NES) Council was successful in achieving a funding bid from West of England Combined Authority (WECA) to commission Strategic Planning work to assist in the formulation of its new Local Plan. AECOM has been commissioned to undertake the strategic planning commission for the Whitchurch Village Area.
- 1.2 There are two phases of the studies, the Strategic Place Assessments which are high level and cover a broad area of search looking at character and capacity issues such as ecology, landscape, transport, historic environment, and the development potential of particular locations. The second phase will produce updated or new Strategic Planning Frameworks for identified development areas. These are more detailed and place specific and provide the basis for allocating sites within the Local Plan.
- 1.3 B&NES stakeholder workshops were held in January and February 2023 to inform the Strategic Planning Frameworks for the key study areas.
- 1.4 This Stakeholder Workshop Report will outline the key findings from the workshop, broken down into themes, to ensure all views have been accurately recorded.

2. Methodology

- 2.1 A stakeholder workshop was held on the 1st of February 2023 in Whitchurch Village with various stakeholders including representatives from the Whitchurch Village Council, Whitchurch Village Action Group, and the Whitchurch Ward Councillor.
- 2.2 The purpose of this workshop was;
- Baseline: to outline and validate the teams understanding and assumptions on the context of area.
 - Future: to share and agree on the key priorities that the strategic place assessment should focus on and establish development objectives.
 - Synthesis: to share and agree on the key priorities.
- 2.3 The session started with a welcome and introduction from B&NES, followed by area context and technical analysis
- 2.4 The participants were asked to discuss the following questions: “what do you value about the area?”, ideas on some key questions per placemaking themes (the questions are noted below under each theme heading) and “what are the key priorities for your area?”.
- 2.5 As per B&NES request following the internal workshop, the five placemaking themes were adjusted to separate ‘Thriving, Healthy and Inclusive Homes and Communities’ into ‘Housing and Shared Prosperity’, and ‘Healthy and Inclusive Communities’. Therefore, six placemaking themes were used at the stakeholder’s workshop. Two-three questions were posed per theme:
- Zero Carbon and Climate Resilience;
 - What changes would you like to see to support you to live low carbon lifestyle?
 - What kinds of changes could create green jobs and are there barriers to businesses becoming more sustainable?
 - Moving Around;
 - What would enable you to walk, wheel or cycle and use public transport more?
 - What activities, opportunities and services does your community need to access nearby?
 - Natural Spaces and Biodiversity;
 - Are there any barriers to accessing nature, public space and high-quality green space?
 - How could the natural spaces be improved for people and wildlife in this area?
 - Identity and Belonging;
 - What would the future community be like in the Whitchurch Village area? How do they live?
 - What is the future character and identity of this area?
 - Housing and Shared Prosperity;
 - What is the housing need in this area and how can this be met?
 - What are the strengths of the local economy and what could be the new economic opportunities?
 - How has Covid-19 and the shift to greater levels of homeworking affected your area? Has it affected housing demand and/or local employment?

- Healthy and Inclusive Communities
 - How can communities in the Whitchurch Village area be supported for better health and wellbeing?
 - What would an inclusive and healthy place look and feel like in future?

2.6 The workshop participants gave feedback on their discussions and next steps were discussed.

3. Outcomes

3.1 The workshop structure outlined key themes and questions however sometimes the conversation swayed from these to include wider topics. Naturally, some themes and questions gained more comments and answers than others.

Key Values

3.2 The following list of key values were identified by the workshop participants at the beginning of the workshop:

- The gap created between Bristol and Whitchurch Village gives the village its own identity, it also helps prevent urban sprawl. For those reasons it is highly important to the residents of Whitchurch Village that it be preserved.
- The village status: residents of Whitchurch Village take pride in the fact that they are a village and not a suburb of the city.
- A strong community with passion and commitment towards the village and their priorities.
- Great leisure provisions such as a football and rugby club, equestrian, and cricket clubs.
- Agricultural use of the surrounding land again adding to the identity of the village.
- Many independently run community facilities.

Theme 1: Zero Carbon and Climate Resilience

3.3 Many of the issues brought up by the stakeholders were echoing those within the other five themes. Attendees noted that climate resilience is impacted by a wide variety of factors including transport, housing, and any form of development.

3.4 Being so close to Bristol, developers have identified Whitchurch Village as a good location for new housing. The residents, however, believe that the recent expansion to the village – which has almost doubled in size – is unsustainable, and that they should not have to accept any more housing as they have accommodated their “**fair share**”.

3.5 Attendees noted that the majority of Whitchurch Village is at risk of flooding. The most recent development by HorseWorld took up ground which was prone to flooding. Although the developer offset the flooding in their development, this has since caused worse flooding elsewhere. Steps should be taken by developers, and encouraged by local authorities, to ensure this flood risk is mitigated everywhere.

3.6 It was pointed out that further development would also increase already prominent **traffic issues** and is considered to be in contradiction to the B&NES policy addressing the Climate Emergency and carbon omissions.

3.7 Further to the previous point, it was stated that plans for a strategic Park & Ride for Bristol would increase pollution in the area and would also not align with the B&NES Climate Emergency policies. Policies should be introduced to further emphasise the importance of climate resilience in the area.

Theme 2: Moving Around

- 3.8 Whitchurch Village is strategically positioned as a village just outside of Bristol. It should be well connected to the city centre given its proximity; however, many points were made on the **lack of infrastructure and public transport** connecting the two, as well as connecting the village with the wider B&NES area.
- 3.9 The **A37** running from central Bristol through Somerset brings **heavy traffic to and from the city**, dividing Whitchurch Village almost directly in half.
- 3.10 A major issue with the A37 is that the **Whitchurch Primary School** is located along this road. It therefore causes parking issues, gets very busy during pick-up hours, and there is only one safe crossing near the school. It was suggested within the group that **the school be relocated** to the green belt where it would be clear of the A37, but this idea was met with opposition by others in the group as the school is located centrally to the village, providing equal access for all.
- 3.11 The **road crossing issue** is consistent along the A37 through the village, with the traffic lights outside the school being the only controlled pedestrian crossing, although there are two other crossings along the A37 to the north and centre of the village. It was suggested that the central crossing at the Staunton Lane intersection be turned into a pedestrian crossing as that is the busiest part of the village and cars coming from four directions makes crossing incredibly difficult. There is also no safe crossing near the recently constructed play park in the south of the village, nor are there any pavements providing direct access other than a narrow path on Norton Lane.
- 3.12 Around the village are many typical lanes which are unable to sustain the traffic joining and leaving the A37. Staunton Lane was named as being one of the most congested roads in the area. Although this is an issue, the stakeholders stated that there are considered to be very few “rat runs” in the village, with Maggs Lane and Sleep Lane being named as the only two.
- 3.13 These lanes provide further issue due to their use by cyclists, horse riders, and the many drivers going too fast, especially around corners and near the children’s play park. It was suggested that the speed limits be reviewed and altered. It was also suggested that, to minimise road risk, HGV transport restrictions should be put in place along the A37 through the village.
- 3.14 Whilst the village is close to Bristol and other surrounding towns and villages, it is on a hill and there are very few walkable routes connecting the village to surrounding areas. If someone were to live in the village and commute to work in the city centre, stakeholders considered that they would be completely unable to actively travel due to the difficult walking and cycle routes.
- 3.15 **Cycle Route 3** runs through the village, from Bristol to the Chew Valley, however there are issues, such as **lighting and safety**, hence it would require major investment in order to improve accessibility.
- 3.16 As well as a **lack of active travel routes**, there is also an **inadequate public transport** service which struggles to maintain regular timings and often gets cancelled, leaving residents stranded.
- 3.17 It was a popular suggestion that the buses be improved, and the scheduling be more reliable, however the commercial aspects may limit this as enough people need to use the services for them to remain active
- 3.18 The construction of a road around the village to dissuade traffic from Whitchurch Village, as well as others nearby such as Pensford, would take traffic off the A37 and away from the small lanes.
- 3.19 In order to improve many of these issues, creation of more accessible travel corridors is crucial. This could include, better public transport, widening of footpaths, and the construction of roads or paths connecting Whitchurch Village to surrounding settlements.

Theme 3: Natural Spaces and Biodiversity

- 3.20 Many of the issues made under Theme 1 can be echoed within this theme. The village is at risk of flooding and the amount of new development that is being constructed without the inclusion of green space and adequate sustainable drainage therefore heightens this risk.

- 3.21 Whitchurch Village has almost doubled in size in recent years due to the amount of new development it has accommodated. However, as with development all over the country, many housebuilders do not want to include significant amounts of **green space** in their developments. It was suggested by attendees that the council would have to pay developers if they want to retain any green space in developments.
- 3.22 Attendees do not support Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) **offsetting**, for example recent BNG offsetting proposed by Bristol Airport.
- 3.23 Developers should take steps to include green space and BNG to their best effort, without having to be paid by the council.
- 3.24 The stakeholders were proud to say that their community is surrounded by a rural area, much of it being farmed.
- 3.25 The village is also fairly close to Maes Knoll, the Dundry plateau which is regarded as a significant landscape feature visible from the Chew Valley and overlooking Whitchurch Village. Protection of these views must be ensured.
- 3.26 Residents of Whitchurch Village take pride in their village and like the fact that, although being so close, they are not part of Bristol. The stakeholders were clear in their desire to keep the **green buffer between the city and the village** as that. It must be protected from development and offer a clear boundary between the two settlements.
- 3.27 Given the abundance of green space surrounding the village, there could be many opportunities for amenity, an example given was near the railway path above Saltwell Avenue.
- 3.28 A seemingly popular idea was the enhancement of **local woodland**. Land has recently been bought between Pensford and Whitchurch villages to plant trees; this idea could be mirrored in other local areas.

Theme 4: Identity and Belonging

- 3.29 Residents of Whitchurch Village pride themselves on their village status. However, many felt that they do not get the same protection as towns and cities.
- 3.30 Much of the surrounding area is used for agriculture, this is identified by the village as a key heritage asset, along with its important natural landscape.
- 3.31 Residents do not feel that the newer areas of Whitchurch Village have **integrated well with the historic village**. There has been a lot of piecemeal development as 'add ons' to the existing village.
- 3.32 There is an older demographic in the area with a lot of people who have been there for a long time. New development brings in younger residents and families.
- 3.33 A seemingly big issue is the fear that an orbital connection would encapsulate the village into Bristol, this would then form the edge of housing and all the green fields inside it would be opened up for development, and they would no longer be a village distinct and separate to Bristol.
- 3.34 The village identity is clearly very important to the residents.

Theme 5: Housing and Shared Prosperity

- 3.35 Whitchurch Village is strategically located in a position which may seem ideal for commuters who work in Bristol but want the village lifestyle. However, many residents are unhappy with the amount of new development built in the village over the past 10-15 years.
- 3.36 According to the stakeholders, due to large housing developments across recent years, the village has practically doubled in size.

- 3.37 Since 2019 the number of dwellings in the village, including infill, has increased from 585 to 798, with no infrastructure changes or additions. This has therefore put pressure on the existing infrastructure including the local road network.
- 3.38 Many felt that the development in the village is purely piecemeal. Examples were given of when buildings or sites could be redeveloped into much needed amenities such as a community hub, school or doctor, but was instead turned into houses.
- 3.39 Questions were raised asking if there was need for more housing. It was stated that lots of houses in the village are up for sale, many of which are up so long that they require price reductions; this then raises concerns over affordability in the area. New development should provide greater levels of **affordable housing** than recent permissions have delivered.
- 3.40 Given the amount of development they have accepted, the residents believe they have “done their bit” and would like to see policies ensuring that only appropriately scaled development is approved.
- 3.41 Specifically, at the Horse World site, there are concerns that this development is not well-related to the historic village due to the separation between this and the older parts. This separation may limit **community cohesion**.
- 3.42 It was also said that residents are **yet to experience the benefits of development** (for example, affordable housing and infrastructure provision) that many developers promised when delivering new sites. Any future benefits must be committed to and not just hoped for.
- 3.43 If more development were to be proposed, residents would like to see **affordable housing and homes fit for downsizing and single people**. However, they know that many developers don't want to build bungalows.
- 3.44 Given the proximity to Bristol, communication with the adjoining local authority should be clear and is crucial to ensuring development is located and delivered appropriately. The stakeholders were curious to understand why Bristol cannot take more development and hence nearby settlements are under pressure to accommodate it.
- 3.45 The Green Belt and Duty to Cooperate rules have been consulted on being altered, and should this be enacted, B&NES policies and advice must be clear about how this will affect the village and if it will benefit from and become stronger in terms of development.
- 3.46 Many questions were about the Green Belt and its place within the WECA review and the B&NES Development Plan. The residents would benefit from easily accessible information provided to them.

Theme 6: Healthy and Inclusive Communities

- 3.47 As with many of the study areas, the residents of the village take huge pride in their community and what they provide.
- 3.48 Following earlier identified issues surrounding the amount of development, another major issue is the **lack of infrastructure correlating to such development**. Whilst many new houses have been built, the centre of the village remains small with very limited retail offers. A question was asked whether new development is needed to afford more infrastructure.
- 3.49 The village has practically no local economy nor employment, besides the incredibly limited high street along the A37 Bristol Road. Most residents have to travel into Bristol or across to Keynsham for work, if not further. Chew Magna was highlighted as a village with not as many residents, but a thriving economy with pubs, bars, and shops, among other things.
- 3.50 Many felt that the village, thanks to the road and the new development as well as lack of infrastructure, is not a sensible or safe place for young people and families.
- 3.51 Economic development would be desirable for the residents, even if this were to just include a **café or other local retail**. **Start-ups and local hubs** seemed popular; however, they do not want to see factories or warehouses as it may ruin the character and agricultural nature of the village.

- 3.52 The residents have already rallied for a **village shop**; however to date this aspiration has not been delivered.
- 3.53 Start-up and community hubs could provide the space for community office working spaces, and new homes should provide a space suitable for home working.
- 3.54 Whilst they have a limited local economy, the village has no shortfall of community facilities such as a rugby club, football club, and equestrian club. There are concerns that these are the only flat areas in the locality, and may be desirable for developers; if so, would they lose these clubs as there is no other flat land for them to relocate to.
- 3.55 The village falls between many providers normal catchment areas and it therefore **lacks much needed infrastructure such as GP services and dentists**. With the abundance of new development, these services struggle even more.
- 3.56 Before new development is accepted, essential infrastructure must be provided.
- 3.57 Money was recently spent on the creation of a new play area for the village; the creation of more social elements and community green spaces would further improve the environment for residents.

Priorities

3.58 The following list of priorities were identified from the workshops:

- Green Belt is valued and protects the village from urban sprawl. A buffer between the village and the city is a priority.
- The importance of preserving Whitchurch as a village.
- Dissuasion of heavy traffic travelling through the village to make it safer and reduce congestion.
- Review of the speed limits, or potential speed reduction measures, on the lanes in and out of the village, in particular Norton Lane which is popular with walkers, cyclists and horse riders.
- The bus schedule and reliability of the service should be improved.
- Infrastructure improvements and benefits of new developments (such as affordable housing and open space) must be planned for and written in, not just an ambition.
- Flexible working spaces with hot desking and internet could be useful with the increase of home working.
- Any further development in B&NES needs to be sustainable, add to the economy of B&NES, avoid urban sprawl and be sympathetic to the natural heritage.

