

Woodcote Parish Plan: Responses to Questions relating to the Natural Environment

1. The Village setting

In landscape terms, Woodcote is very much a ‘borderline’ village, straddling two typical but very different examples of South Oxfordshire countryside. Enter the village from Long Toll, and you will have climbed up through the Chiltern beechwoods. Leave it along South Stoke Road, and you find yourself in a landscape of arable fields dropping away to the Thames and beyond. (To get some sense of the altitude of Woodcote in the other direction you will need to take the public footpath across the Oratory playing fields or walk down the lane beside the Black Lion, and see how the woodlands roll away into the distance.) Woodcote is also in its origins a distinctively ‘open’ village: a settlement dotted with green spaces and with no obvious centre. The village proper is located in the higher part of the actual Parish of Woodcote: indeed, the houses at the top of Greenmore (or ‘Greenmoor’ or ‘Grimmer’, to give it its full range of variant spellings) are some of the highest habitations in the county. There is a drop in altitude of some 30 metres from Greenmore to the lower edges of the village proper on Beech Lane and South Stoke Road, and from there on down to the lowest point of the overall Parish of Woodcote on Icknield Lane is a further descent of 95 metres. In other words, from the Greenmore reservoir to the road in front of Icknield Farm there is a difference in altitude of some 410 feet.

This range of landscapes, altitudes, and habitats makes for a singularly rich natural environment. The Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre has designated no fewer than seventeen locations in the village area as ‘County Wildlife Sites’, and the Greenmore Ponds site in particular – which belongs to the Parish Council – is a habitat of national significance. Moreover, the village is located in the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, a designation that gives Woodcote statutory protection in matters relating to development of the area.

2. Questionnaire responses

If one thing is clear from the 2006 Parish Plan questionnaire returns, it is that the people of Woodcote are particularly attached to this natural environment – both outside and inside the village – and are determined that it should be protected and preserved. These sentiments are of long standing: the three previous Village Appraisals of 1983, 1990, and 1999 all showed almost unanimous appreciation of Woodcote’s open spaces and rural surroundings. By 2006 the proportion of respondents saying they wanted to protect the countryside around the village and the natural features within it had actually risen by one percentage point over the two previous Appraisals – from 98% to almost 99%! Not surprisingly, this figure represents by far the highest positive response to any question asked in the whole survey. (Admittedly, 12 people said ‘No’ when asked if the countryside around Woodcote was important to them and worth protecting, but then they were considerably outnumbered by the 1,311 who said ‘Yes’. It must also be noted that appreciation of the natural environment among young people, though still impressively high, is somewhat lower than among adults, with 88% of respondents to the Youth questionnaire answering ‘Yes’ to both the relevant questions.) Another question asked what aspects of the village people would like to see protected from development: here, the largest proportion of respondents (80%) ticked the box labelled ‘Fields/woods surrounding village’; this was followed by 73% for ‘All recreational areas’, and 52% for ‘All open spaces’.

It is accordingly no surprise that the general high rating for the natural environment was reflected in answers to other questions. For instance, when households were asked 'Why does your family unit live in Woodcote?', 31% of respondents ticked the box labelled 'Country area', putting it well ahead of the next most frequently-cited reasons, 'Village community' and 'Job location' (17% each). And in the Personal Questionnaire, when people were asked what they particularly liked about living in Woodcote, 49% ticked the 'Rural surroundings' box, with the other two options ('Convenient location' and 'Community spirit') attracting 25% and 20% respectively.

The impressively high degree of support for our natural environment is matched by another striking statistic, and that is the very large number of gardens that we have in the village, with just under 98% of respondents saying that their house had one. Of these, around a third said that they grew fruit and vegetables in their garden, and one garden in five had a pond – a figure that is higher than the estimated national average of one in seven. In addition, just under 56% of respondents said that they 'actively encourage wildlife' in their garden.

Active use and enjoyment of the countryside around Woodcote is high, with 80% of adult respondents saying they used the footpaths and bridleways around the village. Interestingly, less than a quarter (23%) of these were dog-walkers, while nearly two-thirds (65%) said they used the paths for 'walking' in general, and nearly 3% used the bridleways for horse-riding. Several respondents also mentioned other uses that they made of the paths and bridleways: out of a total of 1,285 responses to the relevant question, 88 people said they used them for cycling (five of these were careful to specify that they did this only on the bridleways!), and 15 said they used them for running. Other uses included 'walking to the shops', and 'delivering the Correspondent'. Such figures make it clear that our local rights-of-way are enjoyed not only as a practical facility but also as an important recreational one by a substantial majority of people in the village.

The statistics and comments for cycling show a rather more mixed picture, and have to be seen in the context of the various other forms of transport that people use in the village. In the Personal Questionnaire, people were asked how they got around the village for three specific purposes: to visit shops, to visit village facilities, and to visit friends. The responses were fairly consistent in all three cases, with just over half the respondents saying they walked, and between 36% and 40% saying they went by car (the higher figure relating to shopping). Those who said they went by bicycle represented around nine percent of respondents: 9.3% for visiting the shops, 9.6% for visiting village facilities, and 8.5% for visiting friends.

In actual numbers, this suggests that we have at the very least two hundred adult residents in Woodcote who regularly use their bicycles as a means of transport. (Unfortunately we do not have figures for the presumably larger overall number of bicycle *owners* – including, in other words, those who use bicycles for leisure purposes.) The question 'Do you feel Woodcote is a "bicycle-friendly" village?' elicited a range of responses: just over half of respondents (51%) thought it was in 'most places', but a substantial minority (37%) said there were 'few places' where the village could be described as 'bicycle-friendly', and 12% said that there was 'nowhere' in Woodcote that merited this description. Feelings on this matter were clearly strong, as no fewer than 218 respondents offered cycling-related comments. These could be broken down into two main categories: comments critical of cyclists' behaviour, and comments critical of the lack of facilities for cyclists in the village, but there were also comments that bridged these two by attributing cyclists' misdemeanours to the very fact that proper facilities were lacking ('Youngsters cycle on pavements as no cycleways', as one respondent put it).

Comments critical of cyclists' behaviour referred in particular to the use of pavements by cyclists, riding at night without lights, and the churning up of the local woodland paths (though a number of

comments in this latter category in fact referred to motorcycles rather than bicycles). As far as problems encountered by cyclists themselves were concerned, speeding cars (especially on Goring Road) were regularly mentioned, as were parked cars on the roads, and poorly maintained road surfaces, and a number of people reported that they or their children had been knocked off their bikes. Positive suggestions about improving matters focused overwhelmingly on two issues: the lack of dedicated cycle-ways and/or cycle lanes, and the lack of cycle racks in Woodcote. Proposals for cycle racks came up time and again. As one respondent put it, 'Does Woodcote even recognise the existence of cyclists?? Why no cycle racks at Health Centre, Somerfield, Londis??', while other locations mentioned for cycle racks included the Post Office and the Village Hall. Some noted that even the existing racks (all three of them in fact confined to one small corner of the village in the Library / Primary School / Playground area) were poorly designed, insecure, and inadequate.

Not surprisingly, young people (and their parents) were especially concerned about dangers to cyclists and the lack of facilities for them in Woodcote. Over a third of respondents to the Youth Questionnaire's question about cycle racks said they would welcome them outside Somerfield and the Village Hall, and in their further comments young people also concurred with adults' feelings about the need for racks elsewhere in the village. Something specific to young people were suggestions for racks by the Village Greens and at Langtree School. A recurrent regret among young people was the fact that they could not cycle to Langtree school – a problem that is perhaps reflected in questions from the Household Questionnaire which suggest that well over a quarter (29%) of secondary-school children in Woodcote are taken to school by car.

Two other environmental areas that elicited strong feelings were the problems of litter and dog-fouling: half (50%) of adult respondents expressed concern about the former, and well over a third (37%) about the latter. Several respondents noted that dog-fouling was a problem not only within the confines of the village, but also in the woodland round about. Comments on these matters were among the most forceful made by respondents, and although adults repeatedly blamed young people for leaving litter (especially around Langtree School), responses to the Youth Questionnaire suggested that young people also feel very strongly about litter and dog-fouling (the latter not least because they – quite literally – come into contact with it more often than adults, as some of their comments made very clear). Indeed, on both counts, young people showed an even greater concern than adults, with 59% saying they thought litter was a problem in the village, and 41% dog-fouling. Suggestions for improving matters included more bins, more fines, and instilling attitudes of civic responsibility – which, as some suggested, might be actively expressed in 'litter-picking days' around the village.

Noise and light pollution are also clearly matters of concern to a lot of people. Noise sources mentioned included traffic – both within the village and on the A4074 –, loud music, barking dogs, and light aircraft performing aerobatics over the village. Attitudes to artificial lighting were divided: while a number of people complained about over-bright security lights, a question about street lighting in the village showed that more than two-thirds thought the present amount was about right. However, nine percent of respondents felt that light pollution from street lights was a problem in Woodcote, and there were suggestions that the lights could be turned off in the night, or at least masked in order to prevent 'spill-over'. One further problem relating to the natural environment that several respondents mentioned was the erosion of road verges by passing vehicles. Over 12% said that this was a matter of concern to them, and a number specifically mentioned damage done by heavy-goods vehicles on narrow village lanes.

One of the action points arising out of the 1999 Village Appraisal was the establishment of the Woodcote Conservation Group (see www.woodcotecg.org.uk for details of the group), and in the Parish Plan questionnaire people were invited to comment on the WCG's activities. The great majority of the 206 responses to this question were positive: by far the commonest comment was

'They do a good job', while other observations included 'They are great', 'They do a brilliant job and deserve our support', 'A great asset to the village', 'Keep up the good work!', 'Take my hat off to them', and 'Bravo!'. Some commended the public talks organised by the WCG, but by far the greatest number of comments on more specific WCG activities referred to the Greenmore Ponds. The Lower Pond was in a particularly sorry state at the time of the questionnaire exercise, and this was reflected in the comments, some of which expressed admiration for the Group's efforts to restore the water level, whilst others were more critical, being based on a conviction that the Group was itself *responsible* for what had happened to the Lower Pond. (In fact, extensive hydrological surveys and expensive trenching work – all organised and coordinated by the Group – finally came to fruition shortly after the questionnaires were filled in, with the result that by early 2007 the pond was at last brim-full again.) One can only assume that both those respondents who blamed the WCG for problems that were not of its making, as well as those who indicated that they had never heard of the Group, were not readers of the *Woodcote Correspondent*, where the Group has a regular column.

A question that bridged the natural and built environments asked people if they would support the creation of a Conservation Area in the village: here, 45% of respondents said they 'definitely' would, and a further 42% said 'perhaps'. (Interestingly, this broad support for a Conservation Area is not matched by the fact that only 10% of respondents ticked the 'Buildings' box in the question that asked what aspects of the village they would like to see 'protected from development'.)

3. Action points

The Parish Plan booklet (download [here](#)) details the proposals drawn up by the Natural Environment Working Group. In summary these are:

- i. Conduct a Village Environmental Audit
- ii. Create a cleaner and more environmentally-friendly Woodcote
- iii. Encourage cycling, in particular by creating more cycle racks and safe cycle routes
- iv. Maintain and encourage use of local footpaths.

John Sandford
for the Natural Environment Working Group