



Beech Parish Plan 2012

Contents

Executive Summary

Introduction

1. How the Plan was developed
2. The topics addressed
 - Telecommunications
 - Transport, traffic and roads
 - Housing and development
 - Rural environment
 - Community and social life
3. Implications & summary of follow-up action

Acknowledgements & references

Appendix 1: Letter and questionnaire

Appendix 2: Transport, traffic and roads working document

Executive Summary

Beech is a small Parish in the North-East of Hampshire, two miles away from Alton. The Village Design Statement (VDS) published in 2002 provides a well illustrated account of the economy, geography and history of Beech. The purpose of this Plan is to highlight how Beech has changed since the VDS was written, considers broader aspects of village life and describes how villagers wish to see their main concerns addressed in the future. It is based on views expressed by Beech Villagers in a questionnaire, followed by a series of meetings and events. It was presented to Beech Villagers for comment and approval before submission to the Parish Council at its meeting on 21st May 2012. The Plan therefore provides a sound basis for ongoing community development, and informs councillors about local issues. It does not, however, form part of the Development Plan nor can it be used to determine future planning applications. This would require further work to develop a full Neighbourhood Development Plan.

The Plan proposes some specific action in five main areas, summarised in a table in section 3. The five areas are:

Telecommunications

The Telecommunications Group established as part of the planning process should continue to work closely with Hampshire County Council to ensure that it delivers its promises to improve rural broadband speeds. The Group is also tasked with undertaking a survey to establish how many villagers require faster broadband speeds for business purposes.

Transport, Traffic and Roads

This Plan proposes that the working document (Appendix 2) be referred to the Parish Council for further consultation with the relevant Authorities with a view to implementing improvements based on these proposals. This should concentrate on two key aspects:

- the early introduction of a 20mph zone along Medstead Road where street frontage access exists and the road is too narrow for safe use by both pedestrians and vehicles.
- A feasibility design study to develop the more radical changes proposed for Medstead Road which will further improve facilities for pedestrians, cyclists and equestrians. This stage will require expenditure for topographic surveys and consultations with highway design professionals. The study would confirm the viability of any scheme and provide outline costs estimates. Funding for this study will have to be found by the Parish Council.

Housing and development

The Plan proposes that the Parish Council keep a close watching brief on housing and development issues and is mindful of the views. The Parish Council is advised that many villagers wish to see greater diversity of housing within Beech. Whilst there is support for maintaining the principle of the H10 regulation which preserves the rural ‘feel’ of the Village, there is acceptance that suitable sites for

affordable housing will have to be identified and a preference for new developments to contain smaller properties which are attractive to starters and downsizers.

Rural Environment

This Plan proposes that the Parish Council and EHDC consider the clear views of Beech villagers in relation to all planning issues that affect the environment and may impact upon local flora and fauna. The Parish Council should also lobby for the formal designation of a countryside gap between Alton and Beech, and should any question arise in future about ownership of woodlands, an action group should be formed to ensure protection of the village’s historic woodland environment.

Social and Community life

The Beech Village Hall and Recreation Ground Management Committee, and its Social Sub-Committee, is advised to use the many constructive comments provided by Villagers to shape its programme of activity in the future. With the agreement of the Committee, it is proposed to establish a Project group to explore the feasibility and cost of establishing play area(s) for the children and young people of Beech on Village Hall land.

1. Introduction

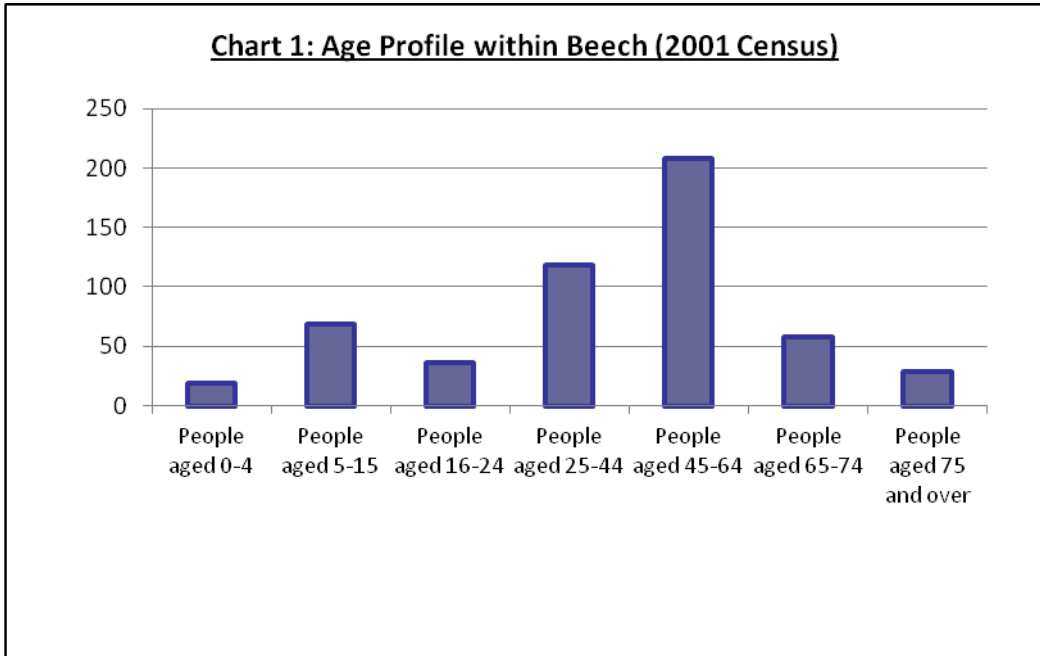
This Plan for the Parish of Beech has been written at a time of transition in local and community planning arrangements. Under the last Government, Parish Plans were community-led plans designed to encourage local people to take more control of their own lives, say what they want done in their neighbourhoods and engage with a variety of organisations to take the necessary action¹. However, since the introduction of the Localism Act by the Coalition Government in late 2011 and the new National Planning Policy Framework, Parish Councils have been given the power to establish local policies for the development and use of land in a neighbourhood and take the lead on preparing a Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP). These plans must be subjected to review by an independent examiner and a ‘community referendum’ before they will be accepted by local councils, but after that they will carry ‘real legal weight’. A Parish Plan such as this one does not have the status that a NDP will have, nor can it be used to determine but it does provide local councillors with a description of people’s views, what they value about their community, or think is missing from their lives.

Beech is a small Parish in the North-East of Hampshire, two miles away from Alton. The Village Design Statement (VDS) published in 2002 provides a well illustrated account of the economy, geography and history of Beech which has not altered and will not be reproduced by this document. However, the purpose of this Plan is to highlight how Beech has changed since the VDS was written, consider broader aspects of village life and describe how villagers wish to see their main concerns addressed in the future. It provides a sound basis for ongoing community development.

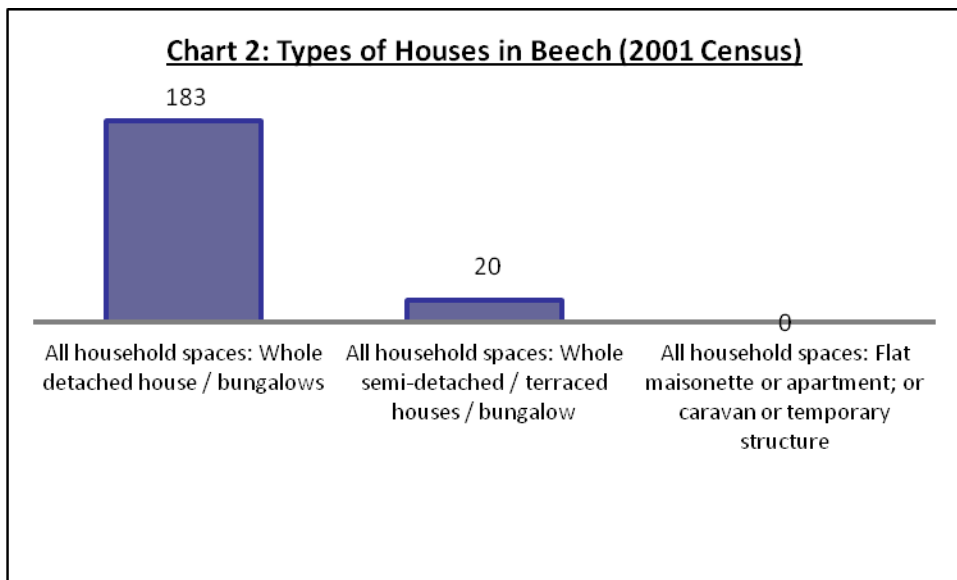
About Beech villagers

At the last Census in 2001 Beech had 535 residents with a nearly even split between males and females. 87 (16%) of Beech’s 535 residents were children under the age of 16, the same percentage as those aged over 65. The mean age of Beech residents is 44. Unfortunately, 2011 Census data is not yet available, so we do not know whether and how this pattern has changed over the past 10 years. But there is no reason to believe that it will be very different when 2011 data becomes available next year. In 2011 the electoral register (only those over the voting age of 18) had 474 names on it. This suggests a slight fall in the adult population since 1999 when there were 493 people on the register.

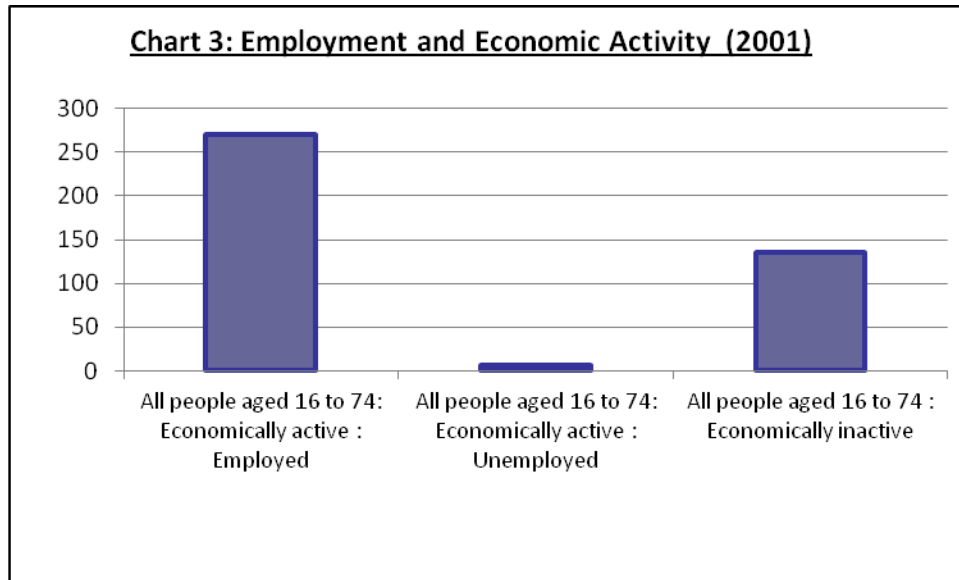
¹ Action with Communities in Rural England, Community Led Planning Toolkit 2006



In 2001 Beech had a total of 197 households, so each household had an average of 2.7 people living in it. There were 21 one-person households, of which 14 were pensioners living alone. The vast majority were home-owners, with only 4% living in rented accommodation, compared with 23% across East Hampshire as a whole. As the chart below illustrates, the majority of homes are detached houses and bungalows, with no flats or apartments in the village. The Village Hall Committee prints and delivers leaflets to 218 houses in Beech, although not all of these are occupied at present.



Of Beech residents aged 16 to 74, 64% were economically active and 32% inactive, with under 1% unemployed in 2001. However, 12% were providing unpaid care to relatives, friends or neighbours. It is possible that 10 years later, this pattern has changed with the economic climate.



In 2001, only 8 households (4%) had no access to a car or a van, and 147 (75%) had access to at least two. The total number of cars & vans in the Parish was 422. 71% of employed people travelled to work by car, van or motorcycle and the average distance they travelled to a fixed place of work was 28 miles.

As soon as 2011 Census data becomes publicly available, it will be possible to update this profile of the population of Beech for planning purposes.

2. How the Plan was developed

Development work leading to this Plan began in March 2011 with the formation of a Parish Planning Group. However, there had already been attempts in 2010 to interest villagers in a Parish Plan, but little enthusiasm had been shown for undertaking a full community planning exercise and few wanted to complete a lengthy questionnaire. There was a sense that considerable effort and energy had gone in to producing the Village Design Statement in 2002, and that little had changed since then to justify extensive further work. However, with the threat of the sale of Bushy Leaze Wood providing a stimulus, a streamlined process was designed by the Group which came together in 2011. This process involved the distribution of a letter explaining that without a Parish Plan, Beech would have limited influence over East Hampshire District Council's planning policy and community strategy, and a simple questionnaire (Appendix 1) was included with plenty of space for people to provide narrative comments. The approach was intended to assess the level of concern about some 'hot issues' such as broadband speeds, traffic speeds, drainage and the countryside gap between Alton and Beech, to find out what residents loved and hated about life in Beech, and to elicit the widest possible range of views from as many people of all ages as possible.

Following a primarily qualitative analysis of the questionnaire responses, the next step was to develop and consult further on a few key issues which had provoked a significant number of comments or concerns. Not all of these were the ones identified initially as 'hot' by the Parish Planning Group. The aim was to translate these concerns into practical action on behalf of the Village, wherever possible. One respondent to the original questionnaire wisely, albeit optimistically in terms of the selection of only one goal, advised the Planning group as follows:

'When you have collated these responses, pick the most contentious issue and make that your 2011/12 challenge - eg broadband. Put all your effort behind that, galvanise the community to a solution. Danger with 4/5 goals in a village this small is that none get the momentum and little progress. Getting this feedback is a brilliant idea, thanks to those who put in the effort.'

The original intention was for this process to be completed as quickly and effectively as possible, and for the draft Plan to be written by Christmas 2011 and consulted on in early 2012. All initially proceeded according to plan, with an impressive number of 270 questionnaires being returned both on paper and electronically via the website. This number represents 52% of Beech's 2001 population aged over 5 years. The process was greatly assisted by the personal efforts of those on the Planning Group, and the offer of £50 prizes for the most interesting response and the best one from a young person. Following analysis of the responses, a Project Team was formed to replace the original Planning Group and to manage the next phase via five smaller topic groups. Each group had a topic leader with the following brief:

- Identify people to form a small sub-group

- Analyse questionnaire data and highlight the key issues
- Decide how to tackle the key issues within the timescale, and what background information is required
- Obtain specialist input/guidance if appropriate
- Get help/support if required from Project Team and discuss any overlapping issues
- Reach conclusions & develop action plan

In addition, attention was drawn to the Plan by a photographic competition on the subject of 'Life in Beech', which attracted 102 entries. Prizes were awarded at the September Social in the Village Hall and several are used to illustrate this plan. Villagers were kept up to date with progress by reports in the Autumn 2011 and Winter 2012 Newsletters, announcements at events in the Village Hall and via a dedicated page on the Village website.

However, before the topic groups had completed their work, the wider planning context changed. The Localism Act was passed in November 2011, and new national planning arrangements began to be implemented which downgrade to status of Parish Plans. The Open Morning on 22nd October, originally planned to discuss social and community life, turned into an opportunity to discuss a possible change of direction for the Parish Plan. Further information was sought about the implications of the new planning arrangements, and at its meeting on 20th February, the Parish Council discussed whether it should replace the Parish Plan with a legally-binding Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP). However, in view of the ongoing uncertainty in the absence of secondary legislation, and the considerable commitment and resource required, the Parish Council decided not to proceed with a NDP, but to ask the Parish Plan Project Team to complete the work undertaken over the past year, and to update the Village Design Statement. This newly-written Parish Plan is therefore intended to lay the foundations for a possible NDP of the future, and to provide local councillors with an 'evidence base' of local issues. It sets out the views of villagers on the five key topic areas, and identify where there is consensus about the action wanted.

This Plan describes the outcome of all the work to date and was presented to Beech Villagers for comment and approval before submission to the Parish Council at its meeting on 21st May 2012.

3. The topics addressed

3.1 Telecommunications



Background

Broadband availability within Beech is very variable. The village is some distance from the two telephone exchanges that serve the village and thus suffers from restrictions due to the line length. Broadband connection speeds less than 800 Kb/sec with frequent drop outs and unreliable connections are experienced by some residents at the furthest points from either exchange. Mobile phone coverage is also patchy within the village. In most locations, 2G connections for voice connections are satisfactory, however 3G with its improved data speeds is not available. This means that using the mobile network as an alternative for broadband is not viable. Thus, for a number of residents, the availability of reliable internet connection for shopping, community services and on line video streaming from services such as iPlayer, is not available. Further, about 15% of residents run their business or telecommute from home, for whom a reliable, broadband service is essential.

What villagers said

The question of broadband was addressed directly in the initial Parish Plan questionnaire, which revealed a clear urgent, requirement for at least a reliable basic broadband (2Mb/s) and a desire for super-fast broadband both for domestic and business users within the village. 84% of villagers who

responded said they wanted vastly improved speeds and only 1% answered a direct ‘no’ to this question. Many added narrative comments such as:

‘Broadband speed is the major failing of the village - effectively no one can work at home’.

‘Lets’ work on broadband - it is truly appalling in Kings Hill. This limits opportunity to work from home and also given increasing educational focus on utilisation of technology, it is less than ideal for children wishing to keep up with peers. Note I am not talking about games or social media, just access to Wikipedia and other reference sources.’

However, eight villagers also added written concerns about mobile phone coverage, for example:

‘(It is) ridiculous that at 45 miles from Hyde Park Corner, the telephone system is so bad that even slow broadband cannot be guaranteed. Similarly mobile phone reception is a disgrace. All solutions should be examined by experts.’

‘Couple this with extremely poor mobile signals and the village looks like a communications blackspot.....(this) has to be addressed as the highest priority.’

Some villagers also commented that Beech is only able to receive London area television, even though it is assigned to Southern.

What has been done

In view of these comments, a topic group was set up to address telecommunications in the broadest sense, and to explore possible solutions. Villagers were consulted by e-mail, and at the Open Morning on 22nd October 2011. Articles in the Beech Newsletter kept villagers updated on ideas as they emerged, and advised that the issue of TV reception was likely to be rectified when local transmitter power is increased in 2012 when the analogue service is switched off. The Group has lobbied for investment from Hampshire County Council for rural broadband development and explored the possibility that mobile phone technology might offer a more immediate solution to both problems of phone signal and broadband speeds. The possibility of erecting a mast in, or very close to, the settlement area of Beech was considered, but the suggestion that this might be placed on the Recreation Ground prompted considerable concern among villagers living close by. However, recent welcome news that the Alton exchange is installing fibre-optic cable may improve the broadband problem for at least part of the Village, whilst creating a division between the ‘haves and ‘have-nots’. Hampshire County Council has also recently announced that it has secured funding to ensure 90% of premises in Hampshire have access to 24Mb/s (Megabits per second) or faster broadband and the remaining 10% have access to a minimum of 2Mb/s by 2015.

Next steps

This Plan proposes that the divisive issue of the mobile phone mast on the Recreation Ground be dropped, but that emerging solutions (eg new 4G technology) to both mobile phone and broadband

problems continue to be explored and progressed by the Telecommunications Group under the auspices of the Parish Council. This Group should continue to work closely with Hampshire County Council to ensure that it delivers its promises as early as possible. In particular, this is required on behalf of those villagers on the Medstead exchange, for which no upgrading is planned in the near future, and who will not benefit from fibre-optic cable. The Group is also tasked with undertaking a survey to establish how many villagers require faster broadband speeds for business purposes.

3.2 Transport, traffic and roads



Background

Roads through Beech are effectively tree-lined 'country lanes' and have few verges, pavements or kerbs, although they have some street lighting. In the absence of footpaths through the village, pedestrians, horse-riders and cyclists have to compete with cars and other vehicles for road space and there have been recent minor accidents. Traffic and road safety issues have been of particular concern to Beech villagers for several years, and appeared as a key section of the Village Design Statement in 2002, when 90% believed that speeding traffic was a problem on Medstead Road. Existing traffic control measures are a 30 miles per hour speed restriction throughout Beech and King's Hill, and 'width reducing' white lining, now largely worn away. Hampshire Constabulary has recently used mobile speed cameras to enforce the speed limit. Surface water drainage has long been a problem, leading to the requirement for regular repairs and the building and maintenance of gulleys and soakaways. In November 2011 the number 28 Stagecoach bus service between Alton and Basingstoke disappeared outside school times following a reduced grant from Hampshire County Council. In September 2011 Alton College introduced a dedicated bus service provided by 'Go' to provide improved services for their students but this only operates in morning and late afternoon to suit college timetables. Beech is not served by a Cango order-a-bus scheme, as are neighbouring villages.

What villagers said

In the initial response form completed as part of the process of developing this Plan, 72% (ie 195 of the people who responded) wanted to have traffic speed reduced in the village, whilst 20% (55) said 'no' they did not want this, and 7% (20) either did not care or did not answer the question. 83% of villagers responding (ie 225 people) also wanted better rainwater drainage on the village roads, whilst only 3% did not want this and 14% did not care or did not answer. The questionnaire also prompted a wide range of narrative comments about transport, traffic and roads, with suggestions for improvements and expressing widely varying views, in particular on whether and how speeding can be controlled. The following are an illustrative sample:

'Issue of traffic speed in Medstead Road is of major concern. No longer a pleasant experience walking along the road because of the speed and attitude of some drivers. Something has to be done soon!'

'Please sort the speeding out !!!!!'

'Further reduction in speed limits is desirable, say to 20mph, throughout the village, with remote monitoring and enforcement.'

'30mph restriction between upper and lower parts of Beech is entirely unnecessary and should have been left at 40mph. Any further reduction in speed limits is not required and will be ignored anyway because they don't make sense. Don't even think about speed bumps - they wreck the suspension.'

'Traffic calming is most important issue for me. Feel there should be speed cameras in Medstead Rd especially at the bottom of Kings Hill where nearly all cars exceed the limit.'

'Would like to see "Deer Crossing" signs to remind drivers that these animals jump into the road. This may stop drivers from speeding.'

'The lack of a pavement in Medstead road discourages walking due to the hazardous traffic conditions. This is a serious drawback, especially for younger children.'

*'Beech is a country village and speeds should be reduced, but absolutely **not** by introducing urban style "traffic calming" features. More imaginative and effective schemes are seen in France and other places, and such measures are now also being introduced in this country – eg cobbled or brick surfaces, and removal of all lines and signs, and introducing features which give the driver the impression of being in a pedestrian's area where speeding would be psychologically difficult for the driver.'*

'The thing I hate is taking the risk of walking through the village at the Medstead Road end where the road squeezes to a dangerous point and you are not seen until the last moment by speeding oncoming traffic. Definitely need some means of slowing the traffic down. The other danger area is at the point on

the bend going into Kings Hill. Again it is dangerous for cars exiting driveways because of drivers going too fast.'

'Reducing the height of the hedges around the Hall/Green might help drivers realise that this is a village and help reinforce the anti-speeding message. Similarly 'gates' at each end of the village on Medstead Road/Kings Hill might help. We definitely need electronic speed signs - and not ones that will disappear to be used in other villages! These signs remind law-abiding motorists about the limit. As for those who don't care, I know from experience (unrelated to my own traffic accident) that reporting dangerous driving to the police can be effective if done immediately and with a registration number. This should be encouraged!'

'The roads through the village are a disgrace and keep being patched up when really they need completely resurfacing, but this time the council need to make sure the job is done properly and the drains are not tarmaced over a previously happened!! The speed limits should be enforced or encouraged more than they are currently.'

'Rainwater drainage problem has been thoroughly researched by the Parish Council and will not improve in Wellhouse Rd until the recommendations from that research are implemented - so please find a way of just doing it.'

Drainage is 'a real problem - my son and friends were waiting for the bus and a car drove through a puddle and soaked them all from head to toe!'



What has been done

In response to the many concerns expressed by villagers, volunteers were sought to join a topic group. Five people were found who committed themselves and met a total of five times to discuss the issues and possible solutions. This Group produced a working document, attached as Appendix 2, which appeared on the village website, and contains proposals for action in the following key areas:

- Road conditions and maintenance
- Verges and footpaths
- Traffic calming and pedestrian safety
- Miscellaneous (signage, lighting, public transport)

Villagers were invited to view the document and contribute their views.

Next steps

This Plan proposes that the working document (Appendix 2) be referred to the Parish Council for further consultation with the relevant Authorities with a view to implementing improvements based on these proposals. This should concentrate on two key aspects:

- the early introduction of a 20mph zone along Medstead Road where street frontage access exists and the road is too narrow for safe use by both pedestrians and vehicles.
- A feasibility design study to develop the more radical changes proposed for Medstead Road which will further improve facilities for pedestrians, cyclists and equestrians. This stage will require expenditure for topographic surveys and consultations with highway design professionals. The study would confirm the viability of any scheme and provide outline costs estimates. Funding for this study will have to be found by the Parish Council.

3.3 Housing and Development



Background

Beech is a largely linear development of housing that follows the pattern of three valleys and provides 'no natural focal point in the village that could have led to the creation of a village centre'². The land between Beech and Alton is farmland and forest land that is in mixed ownership – it is not designated formally as a countryside gap in EHDC's current planning guidance. But Alton is so close that facilities such as shops and pubs in Beech have not been sustainable. However, over the years there has been considerable development in the form of medium to large sized detached houses replacing earlier bungalows, built in garden plots or replacing single properties set in large gardens with multiple units. This continues at the present time, but is controlled by strict planning policies which restrict building outside a settlement boundary and prevent houses being approved in plots of less than half an acre (EH10). Development must conform to East Hampshire District Council's 2006 Plan, which will be replaced at the end of 2012 by a 'Joint Core Strategy' currently in draft form³. All issues related to land use are now subject to the National Planning Policy Framework which was introduced in March 2012 following the 2011 Localism Act.

What villagers said

The Parish Plan questionnaire asked villagers directly about what they loved or hated about living in Beech, and for their opinion on the availability of housing, including retirement housing. Comments showed that the majority of villagers who responded are happy and content with life in Beech, which is loved for its peaceful and quiet rural village feel and close proximity to countryside, yet with convenient access to the facilities of Alton and other towns. There is much support for initiatives that maintain and enhance the village's character and identity, and an overwhelming desire to keep a countryside gap between Beech and Alton (see next section). Five villagers raised the issue of creating a cemetery for Beech, which is already on the agenda of the Parish Council. However, views on whether there should be more or less housing development were diverse. A significant number of responses suggested that there is support for mixed or affordable housing and sustainable developments for starters and downsizers, although questions were raised about the availability of land. Although many did not view Beech as an ideal retirement location, others are keen to stay in the village into their retirement, living in smaller, more appropriate accommodation.

The following are a selection of comments illustrating the range of views:

'This is a village, we don't want to make it into a town. Lets keep it small!'

'I'd like to see Beech stay semi-rural and separate from Alton. I would prefer no further development, but I realise that is impractical, so I would request limited development that pays heed to the character of the area, both visually and environmentally.'

² The Parish of Beech Village Design Statement 2002

³ <http://www.easthants.gov.uk/ehdc/planningpolicy.nsf/webpages/Joint+Core+Strategy+draft>

'If you require retirement housing then Beech is not the place for you. You need to be close to the shops, doctors and transport. The main road is too dangerous for elderly people to walk as well as the hills.'

'By its nature, Beech tends to inhibit lower cost housing for younger people and less well-off older people. Probably many would welcome the chance to continue to live in Beech in old age. Probably too, young couples/families would be an asset.'

'No options for villagers of a certain age to downsize in the village. Is a need for good quality 2/3 bedroom single story houses with smaller gardens.'

'All very expensive. Smaller bungalows being replaced with huge properties. Need some properties that can only be bought by local residents and their relatives.'

'New build dwellings have progressively undermined and destroyed the very real green village that was Beech until 30 years ago. Size, design materials have been appropriate for URBAN outskirts. COTTAGE size and characteristics - traditional exteriors – are required.'

'There is clearly a lack of smaller, but very attractive small housing to suit the families who live here and may wish to retire here without the gardening requirement.'

'Retirement housing may be of interest, however I do not wish to see any further building development within the village - the present situation is bad enough!'

'Keeping Beech as a rural location with "wild" spaces and lowish density of housing is VITAL. Overall number of houses is about right. A better mix of lower cost housing (tastefully discreet!) would be good. I do not want to live in a housing estate.'

'The existing nature of family sized properties in relatively large plots/gardens as protected by the H10 Policy is considered to be part of the attractive nature of Beech. However if smaller less expensive properties were to be made available this would probably increase the population diversity of the village which is considered to be a good thing. However it is difficult to see how this can be achieved without compromising the protection offered by the existing H10 policy serving the large part of Beech.'

'Personally I am disappointed that "modest" houses are continually being replaced by very large mansions. I think we should not encourage over-development or such replacements as it leads to less diversity in the village. We should limit redevelopments to ensure a mix of homes are available in the village.'

'Whilst there are requirements I believe to meet housing quotas lets have more common sense in where, what and how new buildings are approved. Please.'

What has been done

Although a topic group was initially formed to address this issue, it quickly became clear that it would be affected by changes to planning guidance in the form of the National Planning Policy Framework and the introduction of Neighbourhood Development Plans. The emerging policies include a presumption in favour of sustainable development which, though welcomed, is not clearly defined and the way that these will be implemented is far from clear. So work in this topic area was put 'on hold' until more became known. However, it is likely that Beech will come under pressure in the near future to identify land to meet affordable housing targets. This should be found from within the settlement boundary ideally. Enquiries were also made about the countryside gap which established that EHDC feel that formal designation is not necessary as the land between Alton and Beech would never receive planning permission for development, and this has not been included in the proposed Joint Core Strategy.

Next steps

In the absence of a Neighbourhood Development Plan, Beech Parish Council will continue to respond to EHDC requirements in relation to planning initiatives. This Plan proposes that the Parish Council keep a close watching brief on housing and development issues and is mindful of the views of villagers illustrated above. The Parish Council is advised that many villagers wish to see greater diversity of housing within Beech. Whilst there is support for maintaining the principle of the H10 regulation which preserves the rural 'feel' of the Village, there is acceptance that suitable sites for affordable housing will have to be identified and a preference for new developments to contain smaller properties which are attractive to starters and downsizers.

The amount of any affordable housing within Beech will be relatively small and a further survey, including consultation with EHDC, should be undertaken to identify appropriate sites. It is likely that some enabling development may have to be considered to facilitate such works whilst keeping within the development principles currently set out in the Village Design Statement.

All new development will generate more traffic which can only exacerbate the traffic concerns already highlighted in Section 3.2 above. New development should contribute financially to Highway improvements, through developer's contributions, with particular emphasis on improved facilities for pedestrians.

3.4 Rural Environment



Background

Beech is located in three deep wooded valleys, and it is this rural location with its abundant flora and fauna that gives the village its character and is highly valued by residents. Bushy Leaze and Ackender Woods are woodlands which date back to the early nineteenth century to be found mainly in the south and east of the village, and separating it from Alton, whilst to the north and west lies higher park and farmland. Many footpaths and bridleways criss-cross the village and neighbouring countryside making it an excellent area for walking. The Newsletter contains a regular feature about Beech wildlife, which includes many deer and other mammals and birds.

What villagers said

The Parish Plan questionnaire addressed the issue of maintaining the area of woodland and farmland between Beech and Alton. 91% of villagers who responded (ie 246 people) wanted to secure the countryside gap, whilst 3% said 'no' and 6% did not care or did not answer the question. Villagers were also asked in the questionnaire about how they felt about protecting Beech's flora and fauna, and in particular, the woodlands currently managed by the Forestry Commission which had been recently threatened by the proposed sell-off of Forestry Commission land. The protection and maintenance of Beech's rural environment was an issue on which the great majority were agreed, with more specific comments being made about management of the deer population, footpaths and rights of way, dog walking and the prevention of fly-tipping.

The following are a selection of comments illustrating the range of views:

'Although Beech itself is capable of development it should never be conjoined to Alton. If the gap between Beech and Alton is not retained, the village would lose its identity and cease to be a 'village.'

'Very important to protect our local environment and especially the woodland. Important to me for dog walking. Get very cross with those who use entrance to Bushy Leaze wood to dump rubbish when parking there.'

'This was one of the main attractions to us for moving to Beech. I love that I can get access to the woodlands by foot from Kings Hill but also that I can get to the many tracks and paths that lead into the countryside in the direction of Bentworth and Medstead. I personally wouldn't like to imagine Beech without the Woodland as it just wouldn't be the same place. There is so much wildlife in the woods, I've seen many deer and foxes during walks and the woods in my opinion should be protected no matter what.'

'Definitely need to protect the woodlands. I would like to see the deer CULLED. They are a danger on the road as well as destroying gardens.'

'VERY IMPORTANT! The environment was a major factor in our decision to move to Beech. The wild life (including deer & rabbits), both within the village gardens and in Forestry Commission land and adjoining farms are essential to Beech's character. e.g. the banks of daffodils and primroses, carpets of bluebells, or the or the or the snow glistening on the trees during the winter. We're also very fortunate in having some many different types of birds in the village. (I can't name many of them, but I enjoy watching and listening to them nonetheless.)'

'Very important and this is Beech's main attraction to our family. It is paramount to protect the woodlands. It would be great to have some more village walks and bike rides up in the woods on a regular basis. It would also be good to have some walks with talks about some of the wildlife ie bats, dawn chorus, deer etc.'

'It's hugely important. One of the best things about Beech is how easy it is to access the local woodland and surrounding countryside on foot (once you've braved Medstead Road!!). Any reduction in the size of the woodland or the degree to which people are allowed to roam in it would be disastrous. I'm also concerned about the number of large trees that have been cut down recently inside the village envelope. Very important to protect. Beech is fast becoming an "urban sprawl". Woodlands are an important part of the countryside. Trees and hedge around village hall are important and should be protected'

'Very important - we love walking our dog in the woods and surrounding countryside. Our way of relaxation and recreation.'

'Would break my heart to see the forest sold for any reason, but there are some old and dangerous trees that HCC ignore near the roadside.'



What has been done

It was fortunate that the threat to Bushy Leaze Wood was lifted during the period of developing this plan. A topic group was formed to look at other aspects of Beech's rural environment and specifically the following issues:

- Obtaining management plan statement from Forestry Commission and Rights of Way around the village
- Consideration of additional dog bins
- Preventing fly tipping
- Investigating responsibility for maintaining footpaths and consider publishing contact phone number

Next steps

This Plan proposes that the Parish Council and EHDC consider the clear views of Beech villagers in relation to all planning issues that affect the environment and may impact upon local flora and fauna. The Parish Council should maintain ongoing consultation with the Highways Authority to ensure the proper maintenance of verges, hedges and trees and encourage appropriate planting. Individual property owners should be encouraged to value, protect, and enhance roadside vegetation where this falls within their ownership. Additional bins for dog waste should be provided. The Parish Council should also lobby for the formal designation of a countryside gap between Alton and Beech, and should any question arise in future about ownership of woodlands, an action group should be formed to ensure protection of the village's historic woodland environment.

3.5 Social and Community Life

Background

Beech is a village whose identity has been shaped as much by social activity, as by location, history or design. The Village Hall, associated Village Green and the Recreation Ground are owned by a charitable Trust (The Beech Village Hall and Recreation Ground Foundation). In the absence of a village pub or shop, the recently upgraded Village Hall sits at the heart of Beech and provides the focus of village life. Following an extensive programme of fund-raising in Beech over the past few years and the award in late 2008 of additional funding from the Big Lottery Fund, Beech Village Hall has recently been extended and extensively renovated. The new Hall was officially opened on Saturday 6th March 2010, and it is run on behalf of villagers by the Beech Village Hall and Recreation Ground Management Committee. A wide range of clubs and classes are now held in the Hall. A Social Committee organises an annual programme of events, including regular monthly ‘Socials’.



Beech is also served by St Peter’s Church (the “Tin Tabernacle”), which is part of the Parish of The Resurrection which reaches out to the local community of Alton. Services are held every Sunday morning.



Social and community life in Beech is supported by a regularly updated website advertising and reporting on Village events, and an award-winning quarterly Newsletter.

What villagers said

The Parish Plan questionnaire asked villagers whether and how they used the Village facilities, whether the Newsletter and website met their needs, and to provide views about the clubs, societies and classes on offer. Over 200 villagers responding to the questionnaire said they used the Village Hall regularly and of the 63 (23%) that used it rarely or not at all, 13 cited the lack of transport, a footpath, pressure of work, old age or infirmity as the reason. However, some villagers were not aware of the existence of the Recreation Ground which was generally felt to be under-used and lacking in play equipment. The Village Newsletter and website received considerable praise. There were a wide range of comments about clubs and classes on offer, several requesting more for the younger age group and others lamenting the demise of the gardening club. A total of 46 villagers who responded commented on the lack of activities and facilities for the children and young people of Beech.

Some illustrative comments are provided here:

'I like living in Beech due to the strong community feel of which the Village Hall is central. As the Village has no pub or shop it is an important part of what gives the village heart.'

'I do not use the village hall much as I am disabled but on the odd occasions I have been there. I think it is a wonderful resource and seems to be used a lot especially to bring the community together.'

'I think that the newsletter is great and is of the highest standard I've seen. I'm not sure how I would go about contributing to it though. The website is a helpful resource and we have spotted several events through it.'

'The clubs and classes run by the village are good and cover most interests. They cater for my age group but my time is taken up gardening and family.'

'As a family we don't feel part of the local community (our fault). Too busy working and resting to get involved. Play area for younger children would be good.'

'I believe the hall committee should strive harder to be more inclusive. I have the sense that the range is a little narrow. Improvement upon good work. Was disappointed when such a rural community lost its gardening club.'

'Make us feel as though children are welcome in the hall at the majority of events, then I would use it more and so would my family.'

'We have attended childrens' birthday parties at the village hall. It is a fabulous facilitywe went to the Easter Egg Hunt on the recreation ground which was great so thankyou for that. There didn't appear to be any play equipment which is a shame as a local play facility is a very good way for families to get to know each other, particularly as the village is spread out and I assume children in the village go to many different schools.'

'What we really need is something for the kids, some play equipment on the rec. Maybe some youth socials - there are lots of children in Beech we have never met as there is nowhere to meet and nothing to do. Four Marks and Medstead now have fantastic kids play areas - what about Beech?'



What has been done

A topic group was set up to consider all the comments and suggestions made by villagers, which also consulted the Village Hall Social Committee. An Open Morning held on 22nd October was advertised by leaflets to every household, inviting villagers to share their ideas for new clubs or social events. This event was attended by 23 people, and although discussion was dominated by recent news of Neighbourhood Development Plans (see section 1), some specific suggestions were made and

advertised in the Winter 2012 edition of the Newsletter which also carried the news that a Beech Garden Forum would be established in March 2012.

On the subject of facilities for children and young people, the proposal for play area(s) to be built on the Recreation Ground and/or the Village Green has gained considerable support.

Next steps

The Beech Village Hall and Recreation Ground Management Committee, and its Social Sub-Committee, is advised to use the many constructive comments provided by Villagers to shape its programme of activity in the future. With the agreement of the Committee, it is proposed to establish a Project group to explore the feasibility and cost of establishing play area(s) for the children and young people of Beech on Village Hall land.

4. Implications and summary of follow-up action

Following a one-month period of consultation with villagers in April and May 2012, this Plan was presented to the Parish Council and the Village Hall and Recreation Ground Management Committee to guide their future actions and decision-making. It is expected that a number of initiatives which have already begun will be followed through, with the support of these two bodies. However, the Plan constitutes guidance only and is not a Neighbourhood Development Plan under the terms of the new National Planning Policy Framework (see section 2).

The following table summarises the key actions proposed within this Plan.

Issue	Action	Responsibility
Improved broadband speeds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey villagers to establish the number requiring faster broadband speeds for business purposes. • Work with HCC to improve broadband speeds by 2015 • Investigate all possible solutions provided by emerging technology to ensure equity of access throughout the Parish 	Telecommunications Group advising Parish Council
Improved mobile phone signal	Investigate and consult on possible solutions provided by emerging technology to ensure consistency of phone signals throughout the Parish	Telecommunications Group advising Parish Council
Speeding in Medstead Road	Introduce 20mph zone along Medstead Road where road is narrow	Parish Council
Reduced risk for pedestrians, cyclists and equestrians using	Source funding and commission feasibility study for	Parish Council

Beech Parish Plan 2012 – Consultation Draft April 2012

Medstead Road	changes to Medstead Road	
Encourage greater diversity of housing within Beech	Consult on need for smaller and more affordable homes and into land availability for appropriate development to meet this need	Parish Council
Find site(s) for affordable housing	Undertake survey to identify site(s)	Parish Council
Maintenance of verges, hedges and trees	Promote regular maintenance	EHDC, Parish Council, property owners
Dog waste	Provide additional bins	EHDC, Parish Council
Countryside gap and protection of woodlands	Lobby for formal designation and form action group in response to any future threat	Parish Council and concerned villagers
Social activity within the village that appeals to the full range of interests and age groups	Introduce new activities, and revitalise popular ones which have lapsed eg garden club	Village Hall and Recreation Ground Management Committee
Lack of facilities for children and young people	Create play area(s) on Recreation Ground or Village Green	Village Hall and Recreation Ground Management Committee