

# **Community First: a Parish Plan for Swarland and Newton on the Moor, March 2011**

## **Time for a review and update, ten years on**

- 1) **Purpose of this paper:** between 2008 and 2011, the community in our parish undertook a series of consultations and surveys, to compile a Parish Plan which covered a wide range of topics of relevance to community life. Now, ten years after its publication, the Parish Council is reviewing the Plan in order to recognise its successes and disappointments, and to identify opportunities for further work and for new initiatives.
- 2) **About the Plan:** The Plan was titled 'Community First', and was published in 2011. It was based on the outcomes from two consultative social events (one in Swarland and one in Newton on the Moor), plus a household questionnaire distributed in April 2008. Local businesses were also surveyed. The purpose was to identify key issues and priorities and construct an action plan for the parish.

It is interesting to note that many of the priorities identified at this time are still of concern today, especially lack of adequate public transport, the physical state of roads in the parish, general road safety concerns and lack of affordable housing. Also notable were the lack of facilities for the 13-18 year age group, a need for more social events and people needing some form of help from the community. Looking ahead, there was anxiety around imminent loss of the Arriva bus service following withdrawal of funding, concern that the post office would close and a recognition that the role of parish councils would change with the reorganisation of local government in Northumberland into a unitary authority.

After a summary of the findings (reproduced as an appendix in this paper), there was background information on parish demographics, history and facilities and on planning policy at the time. This is useful and it would be good to include an updated version in the new plan. Information on the role/responsibilities of parish councils would also be helpful, plus powers and limitations in what PCs can do. The 2011 plan suggested that residents knew how to get in touch with parish councillors, but many did not understand the PC system and that communication between the PC and community was not perceived as good. Recent correspondence would suggest this is an issue currently as well.

### **3) What has happened since.**

Many of the issues considered in the Plan are still current, and the following is just a selective commentary of some highlights:

- Public transport: Arriva buses withdrawn from both Swarland and Newton, some other services put in place that were unsustainable leaving only the weekly NEED bus. Current renewed interest in bus provision coming from government (Transport North-East Bus Project).

- Physical state of roads: unadopted roads still a major cause for concern but acknowledge surfacing of half of Kenmore Rd and pavement along the Avenue between Kenmore Rd and the bus stop and resurfacing in Hazon.
- General road safety: speeding and increased traffic are likely to be perceived as even worse now than in 2008. However, speed limit in Newton has been reduced. The proposed traffic calming work at the Swarland school crossroads may mitigate this. (It was noteworthy that even in 2008, people were asking for a pavement on Leamington Lane.)
- Closure of Swarland village shop some years back, but partly replaced with limited supplies from the Club and Nelson's, and peripatetic post office. Is this adequate?
- Expansion of village through new housing.
- Concerns about Percy Wood caravans but also the needs of residents there.
- Positive changes: recent major improvements in Vyner Park, Nelson's, Bari Bar, variety of takeaway services, lots of new activities (singing, writing group, ukulele playing, Pilates etc. facilitated by village Facebook page).
- Regarding the pandemic, the volunteer scheme is relevant to people requiring support, plus people may be working from home more subsequently with implications for broadband speed.
- In 2008 Broadband speed was a major concern, before 'superfast' broadband came to the villages subsequently.
- Increased and probably continuing use of delivery services and online shopping may have reduced private traffic in the villages but increased the number of delivery vehicles.
- Regarding climate change, this is relevant to improving public transport, but also domestic power may be an issue. In the 2011 plan, there was support for bringing a gas supply to the village. A new gas installation would presumably not be supported now, but heat pumps and solar power – is this considered at the planning stage for new builds? There may also be a demand for electric vehicle charging points in the village, if not now then maybe in the future.

**4) A way forward:** the Parish Council wishes to undertake a 'refreshment' of the Parish Plan, but without requiring a repetition of the amount of work (and the 3-year timescale) which was involved in 2008-2011. We encourage the wider community to acquaint (or re-acquaint) themselves with the Plan, and to invite comments, new ideas and proposals.. To set the ball rolling, we suggest that the following issues are worthy of early consideration, while not excluding further issues raised by the wider community:

- Public transport: with reasonable access for our two main villages

- Affordable housing: low-cost, primarily for rent
- Provision for teenagers: needs further exploration to understand what is needed, wanted, and realistically feasible
- 'Good neighbour' scheme: to build on the system which has emerged within the Covid pandemic
- Climate change, energy efficiency, renewable energy and nature recovery: both through community self-help, and by influencing policies and decision-making
- Unadopted roads in Swarland: to pursue a solution
- Parish council: to develop further our communication and engagement with our community

**5) Next steps:** we welcome comments on this paper, especially on the suggested priorities. We will subsequently determine how to take-forward each of these actions/ideas, involving a variety of community groups and interests, as appropriate.

**Newton on the Moor and Swarland PC October 2021**

## **Appendix: summary of findings (extract from the Parish Plan)**

In this first part of the Parish Plan, the findings from each section have been summarised and the main themes identified. The action / recommendation plan summarises key areas for development, and when possible identifies the agency best placed to lead the action.

### **3.2. Key priorities for the people of Newton on the Moor and Swarland**

Throughout the whole Parish Plan process it was apparent that a number of issues cut across the individual subject areas. These were:

- a) The lack of facilities for the 13-18 year age group.
- b) The desire for more social events and activities to bring people together.
- c) The need for better communication between the community and the Parish Council.
- d) The lack of adequate public transport facilities.
- e) Better access to front-line health services now and in the future.
- f) The need by a significant number in the community for some form of help.
- g) Traffic and the physical state of the roads within the parish.
- h) The natural environment.

### **3.3. Survey of local business**

Issues highlighted by local businesses included the lack of buses, poor broadband provision, inadequate signage from the A1 and lack of affordable housing.

### **3.4. Amenities and facilities**

The facilities in the parish including the Post Office, village shop, village halls, the club, pub and golf club, were well used, but there were indications of need for: improvements to Swarland Village Hall, a wider range of social events to bring people together, provision for teenagers' needs, more buses, and a welcome pack for new residents.

### **3.5. Housing**

Despite previous affordable housing studies, the need for such housing within the parish has not yet been resolved. The lack of a suitable location for such development may be a limiting factor.

### **3.6. Natural Environment**

Concern about the local Red Squirrel population ranked high, along with the possibility of improving Vyner Park and access to other amenities (such as Swarland Woods) within the parish. A significant number of people are interested in taking part in heritage activities.

### **3.7. Energy and infrastructure**

There is strong support for sustainable energy resources in the parish, the provision of mains gas throughout the parish, and improvements to recycling facilities.

### **3.8. Traffic**

The condition of parish roads and speeding contribute to making a number of people feel unsafe on the local roads. The need for pavements on Leamington Lane and Park Road were specifically mentioned. Anecdotal evidence also indicated that excess speed on the narrow roads within Swarland village and to the south of The Avenue were also a problem.

In Newton on the Moor there were specific problems with heavy goods vehicles and latterly large farm vehicles.

A majority of respondents desired the use of traffic calming measures.

### **3.9. Transport**

Lack of public transport is a key issue for both the younger members of the community and those older residents who do not have access to private transport. This in turn limits their ability to make use of other services. Much additional effort and research has been directed at the provision of bus services since the questionnaire was completed. The issue continues to develop with further reductions in main-stream provision expected early 2011. At this stage however it is clear that if the community wants to retain a regular bus service, it is a case of "use it or lose it".

There will be a need in future for the community to consider other means of having their public transport needs met.

### **3.10. Community Links**

The survey would seem to indicate that around 37 people felt they needed some form of help within the community. A significant number felt the recreational and social needs of young people were not being met. Around half of the respondents also felt the needs of older residents and those with hearing and mobility difficulties were unmet.

### **3.11. Health and Social Care**

About 8% of respondents considered themselves to be carers, a quarter of whom felt that they did not have proper support, particularly with respite care.

Accessing frontline health care services from the parish using public transport is not possible.

These issues will become even more important in the future as we see an overall increase in the retired population.

### **3.12 Education**

Swarland County First School is an essential part of the community and also helps to link the community with Longframlington Parish. Provision of pre- and after-school facilities were found adequate with only a very small number of respondents indicating dissatisfaction. Recent additional measures taken by Chester Bears have met those concerns.

The 13-18 year age group indicated their particular interest in after- school provision. This echoed suggestions made at the initial public launch events relating to some form of youth club.

There would appear to be a strong demand for adult education classes in the parish, particularly language and computer classes.

The existence of the dormant Strothers Charitable Trust is of interest in this context and needs to be further investigated.

### **3.13. Employment**

The majority of those who work commute outside the parish to do so. However, a relatively high number work from home, a trend that is likely to increase in the future for certain areas of activity, as Information Technology provides the means to do it. There is also a clear desire by those in work to be able to work within or closer to the parish. A significant proportion of residents are retired.

High quality broadband provision is one important factor allowing individuals to work from home.

Lack of public transport limits the younger age groups' ability to travel to work or further education.

### **3.14. Local Democracy**

Generally there is a good level of awareness of who our parish councillors are and how to contact them. However about half the respondents do not understand the Parish Council system, a baseline from which to encourage improvements.

Comments from respondents focussed on the need to improve a) the understanding of the Parish Council system, particularly among the younger age groups within the community, and b) communication between the community and the Parish Council.

As a result of the recent reorganisation of local government in Northumberland into a unitary authority, and emerging policy signals from the new central government on "localism" and the "Big Society", much more emphasis, risk and responsibility will be placed on parish councils. It is crucial that the way our Parish Council works evolves to meet the challenge to represent the views and needs of the local community.