

# WOODSTOCK



The market town of Woodstock was founded in the 12<sup>th</sup> century – its name meaning ‘place in the woods’. Nine hundred years later, Woodstock has retained its role as a thriving cultural and retail centre for its neighbouring villages and beyond, proud of its close community and still surrounded by meadows, parkland and green spaces.

**Our vision for the future of Woodstock is:**

**A beautiful and safe town set within accessible countryside**

**A thriving economy based on our strengths as an attractive visitor destination**

**A place with outstanding facilities for everyday life as well as for special events**

**A diverse community active in influencing its own future**



## **Executive Summary**

This report comprises a great deal of research and information from many sources. It provides a clear picture of our town, its strengths and weaknesses. It devotes a significant amount of space to the opinions of all of us who have a stake in the town; the residents, visitors and the business community. It also hints at possible directions for the future. The report comes out at a difficult time with a slow emergence from the worst recession since the 1930s. But the report will be of little value beyond that of an intriguing snapshot of the town unless we can map out some clear direction for the longer term future of the town. **This Vision Statement for the Future is framed within the context of the values and concerns that have been clearly expressed by the community and which are set out in the report.**

Our strengths seem to lie in the fact that it's a great place to live and, for visitors, it's a lovely place to visit with a good variety of dining and social opportunities in a historic setting. The town clearly has a good feel about it – “a buzz” as one survey respondent called it. Over recent years the town has established itself as an “arts” destination with the Independent Literary Festival and the Art in Woodstock week firmly putting the town on the map. Other town events like the Mock Mayor celebrations, the retailers “Night of a Thousand Candles” which coincides with the switch-on of the Christmas Lights, the Woodstock Live music event, and the annual Carnival, all help to provide a very positive public relations platform. The town's premier business organisation Wake Up To Woodstock has clearly been a prime mover, along with others, in achieving the general consensus that Woodstock “punches above its weight”.

But maintaining this level of attraction is not easy. Although the town acts as a service centre for a wide hinterland of villages, nevertheless, this population cannot, by itself, sustain such a level of activity and, in the end the town lives or dies by the number of visitors it attracts. Both as an employment and service centre Woodstock is in competition with bigger neighbours such as Kidlington, Witney and Oxford and we are a town whose infrastructure of businesses and services exceeds that which can be supported by its resident population alone. We could grow the population through encouraging residential development, a vision that the town by and large rejects, or we can continue to build on the town's status as a visitor destination.

We have acknowledged that Woodstock is a great place in which to live, with everything being within walking distance, a safe environment, and lots to do. The report also identifies that there is a desire not to see over-development of the town, and a wish to avoid the closure of as many of our utility shops as possible. The influence of Blenheim came up repeatedly in the surveys. Responses were often very positive about the benefits of living next to the World Heritage Site but there were concerns also. The retailers want more of Blenheim's visitors to come into the town and, as always, parking is a major concern.

**The Town Partnership has identified the following linked issues as those which need to be addressed for the prosperity of the town to be sustainable into the future.**

- **The lack of available parking**
- **The loss of utility shops such as hardware, greengrocery etc**
- **The relationship between Blenheim and the town's businesses**
- **The potential conflict between the need to sustain the town's social and economic life with the consensus to limit future development.**

### The Parking Problem

Parking is not impossible in Woodstock but it is difficult at times. There is no doubt that some visitors, as well as residents from neighbouring villages, are put off from coming to Woodstock because of the parking difficulties. The limited results of the neighbouring villages survey said as much. It was the third most quoted concern in our town survey. There is also a conflict between the needs of residents in the town centre and the businesses and their customers. Parking throughout West Oxfordshire is free and demand for spaces is managed by limiting the time vehicles may be left. The District Council manages parking under an agreement with Oxfordshire County Council as highway authority and there is an acknowledgement that a review of the parking regime in the town is overdue. It is therefore opportune to consider what might be done in terms of additional parking space, rationalisation of the parking time limits and the level of enforcement operated. Neither can the solution be laid entirely at the door of the principal authorities. Businesses need to consider how they can help by reducing the amount of staff parking in the town and looking at alternative means of travel to work. **A town-wide working group is proposed to look into:-**

- **Opportunities to increase on-street parking including better empirical evidence of the problems**
- **The potential to work with others to develop under-used land in the town which might offer opportunities for some additional off-street parking.**
- **Examining sustainable travel modes having regard to the unique character and demography of the town in respect of its role as both a service centre for residents and hinterland villages and as a visitor destination.**

### The Loss of “Utility” Shops

When we surveyed the community, the recent loss of a hardware shop, a butcher’s and, going back a few years, a wet fish and greengrocery business, was a major concern. It was the second most quoted concern after traffic volumes on the A44. And yet when we asked people where they did their main shopping, almost 60% revealed that they used the big supermarkets in Witney, Kidlington or Oxford. Would we use a hardware shop if someone were to set one up in Woodstock? When the town’s hardware shop closed in 2009, vacating the Town Council owned property in Market Street, the Council tried, unsuccessfully, to attract another hardware retailer. As the Council is under a legal obligation to secure a market rent for the property it proved impossible to find a tenant with a viable business case to proceed.

Other, often smaller and more isolated villages have been successful in establishing “community shops” run as a not-for-profit social enterprise using voluntary staff. Such a possibility might be available in Woodstock were suitable premises to become vacant. However, history shows that most community stores are, in fact, general grocery stores rather than specialist hardware or other single commodity shops. It remains to be seen whether such a solution would be viable for our town. Nevertheless, such is the strength of feeling locally about the loss of our utility shops that **it is proposed that further research be undertaken to investigate the opportunities that might be possible.** There are many successful models that we can usefully study.

### The Blenheim/Town Relationship

There have been many good initiatives and the coming together of Blenheim Palace and the town, in the main via the auspices of the town’s retail group Wake Up To Woodstock, has been helpful. Nevertheless, the interests of Blenheim often remain contradictory to the interests of some of the town’s businesses (although significantly adding to the value of the town’s hospitality trade). There is a feeling that Blenheim could do more to support what ought to be a synergy between town and palace.

**Clearly the vehicle for resolving these difficulties is primarily the two main parties, Blenheim Palace and Wake Up to Woodstock and the Partnership will seek to encourage such dialogue.**

There could well be opportunities for additional advertising and promotion of both organisations through the publicity materials produced by each of them. It is felt that there are particular opportunities in this direction in respect of Blenheim's highly successful Annual Pass Scheme, which encourages multiple return visits.

### Developmental Pressures

This theme is perhaps the least easily resolved. The pressure for growth in Woodstock is inexorable. The way in which house prices have held despite the recession suggests that there is enormous suppressed demand for housing in the town. And of course it isn't just in Woodstock but in much of Oxfordshire. The Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) was recently awarded £8.4 million from the government's "Growing Places" fund to boost economic growth with the creation of new jobs and infrastructure. The focus for this funding is likely to be on projects that enhance employment opportunities in the Enterprise Partnership's three strategic areas: Bicester, Oxford City and Science Vale UK (in the south of the County). Whilst none of these impinge directly on Woodstock there is bound to be a knock on effect. Woodstock is already an attractive commuter town and future employees of these business districts will be looking for somewhere pleasant to live. Somewhere where their children can be assured of good schooling, with low crime figures and good leisure opportunities. The pressure on the town and its infrastructure will increase. The pressure on housing is already reflected in the lack of affordability of houses for local families wishing to set up home here. Whilst we have seen some new social housing at affordable rates being built in Banbury and Shipton Roads, nevertheless the growth of demand continues to outstrip supply.

And yet the message from residents in the survey was unequivocal – 58% said "there is enough new housing in Woodstock for the time being". Just 10% called for more affordable homes and 13% for more homes of all types. The coalition government has made it clear that in future, under the terms of the new Localism Act, funding for infrastructure projects is likely only to come from the "Community Infrastructure Levy" on builders developing land in the area. Financial support for major new projects such as the town's Youth Club, or a covered roof for the swimming pool or a major new car park may be conditional on accepting further development.

**It is for this reason that the Partnership believes that it is important for this report to be the basis for a Neighbourhood Plan/Town Plan, to be developed by the Town Council, and offered to the District Council as a blueprint for the town's future. A Neighbourhood/Town Plan, will inform future development of the town without undermining the basic aspiration of the residents to retain the present character of the town and to resist intrusive over-development.**

**Colin Carritt – October 2012**