

WOODSTOCK 2050: TOWARDS A VISION

Woodstock is an ancient town, much beloved of its residents and of its many visitors, both for its long and rich history and for its own beauty and rural setting. It shares with its neighbour over three centuries, Blenheim Palace and Park, a precious inheritance treasured alike by its small local community and globally by all nations celebrating Blenheim as a world heritage site.

It is the task of each generation to pass on this legacy undiminished and, if possible, enhanced. To do that we need a vision of what makes it special and of how it can change without losing its character; and this vision needs to embrace our necessary partnership with Blenheim.

The town as we have it today is the result of at least eight and a half centuries of evolution, gradual, organic and directed by no single or over-arching master-plan. In this it is very English and accidental, higgledy-piggledy and full of interest.

For people who live in and around Woodstock it is their home. For visitors from across the world it is both a spectacle of rare natural and man-made beauty and a place that has seen over a thousand years of recorded history.

All of this comes together in what both visitors and residents recognise as 'character'. All plans for change and for our future need to start from and conform to that essence of the place, the soul of Woodstock.

Components in this are:-

- the look of the place, its many architectural styles, its rural setting and its active market-town life;
- Blenheim, its palace and park;
- other open spaces like the water meadows, the recreation ground and the Old Woodstock Line (OWL) nature reserve; and
- a varied programme of special events throughout the year organised both by the community within and for the town and its hinterland and by Blenheim for visitors from near and far.

To this unique character is added the wherewithal of modern living, schools, shops, pubs, clubs, bus services, doctors, dentist, bank, churches, library, museum, cycle-ways and walkable paths.

But Woodstock, like almost everywhere else, has struggled to reconcile all of this with the age of the car in an era when such convenient personal mobility is seen as the norm and the birth right of every citizen. Any vision for the future needs to address this conflict.

From these premises certain initial conclusions can be drawn about the principles which should guide future change:-

1. Change should continue to be gradual and evolutionary
2. Change should respect the existing character of the town, its architecture, its rural setting and its market town role

3. Development should focus on better use of existing sites no longer required in their former uses, only invading green fields as a last resort
4. New housing should be designed, priced and financed to be affordable by those who need it and policy should discourage speculative 'executive' and/or 'second home' ventures which contribute no social value
5. Woodstock should strive to be a community which provides for, accommodates and supports all citizens without discrimination and becomes a diverse and socially cohesive community
6. The vitality of the town centre as a varied and useful retail cluster and as a convenient location for professional services supporting the town and its surrounding villages should be actively nurtured as critical to their health. We will need to protect our shopping centre from pressures to turn shops into houses
7. We need, too, to resolve the parking debate (see below)
8. We can, however, build on the existing vibrancy of the town's nightlife, especially at weekends, of the social events at the Social Club, the County Museum and the Parish Church, and on the international diversity of our restaurants
9. Future development needs to be aligned with the parallel and timely enhancement of both 'hard' and 'soft' infrastructure to support the growth of population. This requires both transport networks – road, rail, 'buses, cycle routes, etc - and social investment – schools, health centres, old-age care, youth facilities
10. The town and Blenheim are autonomous independent entities locked together by geography and many forms of mutual dependence. This requires neighbourliness and collaboration, acknowledging that interests will not always coincide and that, until the Woodstock East project has been approved or rejected, there can be no agreement on that matter. But the new machinery for Town/Palace Dialogue offers useful scope for aligning perceptions of the longer term in the interests of both communities
11. The car cannot be un-invented and so it must be accommodated, while reasonable efforts are also made to encourage other and more sustainable modes of travel, not least public transport, cycling and walking. The town's parking needs are as keenly felt as the fear that controls will make life impossible for residents and visitors. The town needs a comprehensive long-term solution based on the best analysis and thorough consultation; and
12. Consultation should also be a permanent feature of the town's future evolution with suitable machinery, both by traditional means and 'online', for open and continuing dialogue between citizens, property-owners, developers, planners and elected representatives.

Armed with such principles the town will be better placed to confront and manage the challenges which change and even gradual growth will continuously throw at it.