

ASHFORD PARISH COUNCIL
NORTH DEVON



Our village, our future

Ashford Neighbourhood Plan
Report of Main Consultation Stage 1
The Conversation of the Community

Prepared for Ashford Parish Council
by
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Section	Page
Executive Summary	3
Context	3
Background	3
Consultation Process	3
Report	4
Residents' and Working Party Members' Views Compared	4
Some Residents' Criticisms	10
Introduction	11
Context	11
Background	11
Consultation Process	12
Neighbourhood Plans	12
Drop-in Sessions and Submissions	14
Report	15
Quotations and Perceptions	16
Working Party Members	16
Map of Ashford Parish	16
Residents' Views	17
Part 1: Drop-ins	17
Introduction	17
Priority Issues	17
Tarka Holiday Park	25
Part 2: Email Submissions	26
Introduction	26
Criticisms of the Working Party	26
Two Further Submissions	29
Working Party Members' Views	32
Introduction	32
Summary	32
Environment	33
Development and Housing	34
Rural Economy	38
Transport, Traffic and Parking	38
Services and Amenities	42
Tarka Holiday Park	43

Executive Summary

Context

1. Following his resignation from the Neighbourhood Plan Working Party on issues of principle, Dale Hall was invited to write this report independently for Ashford Parish Council (APC) (at its meeting on April 19th, 2018). Dale is working pro bono for the APC in his capacity as the chairman of ORS, a specialist social research company that specialises in complex statutory consultations while complying fully with the latest data protection legislation. He has written three previous reports for Ashford. As a resident of the village he declares a 'personal interest' in these matters.
2. The report covers three drop-in events and six email submissions; but the landowners' consultation could not be included because it has been delayed (though it will be reported at a later stage). The report is lengthy and detailed because it forms an important foundation for any NP for Ashford. This executive summary is an accessible guide to the issues, but it is not a substitute for reading all the many ideas in the full document.

Background

3. After a Feasibility Study by a Working Party (WP) of ten members, Ashford Parish Council (at its meeting on October 19th, 2017) approved an application for grant funding to assist with the preparation of a Neighbourhood Plan (NP). The WP commenced work in October 2017 and grants were awarded on 22nd December, 2017, and 18th January, 2018.

Consultation Process

4. The drop-in events and email consultation reported here (together with the landowners' consultation and the household survey) form the most important of three main stages of consultation for the NP – because its scope was so wide ranging and because its outcomes will lead directly to the first draft of a NP for Ashford.
5. The WP members devoted considerable time and energy to publicising the NP in circulars and to organising three successful drop-in events (which were highly appreciated by the participants) while also inviting written submissions on any matters.
6. The drop-ins were held in the Church Hall on Wednesday 14th March (6.00pm to 8.00pm), Sunday 18th March (10.00am to 12.00 noon) and Saturday 24th March (2.00pm to 4.00pm). The sessions were welcoming and friendly community events with displays to encourage people to think about and comment on a wide range of topics.
7. The drop-in events were more than satisfactory in terms of the numbers and range of people attending: 68 residents attended (including 6 children/young people aged 9-14); 43 Ashford households were represented; 4 non-residents attended; 92 comment labels were completed; and 25 people were interviewed – including some couples and 3 children/young people
8. The circulars and meetings were well designed and informative, but unfortunately the WP did not disclose full information to residents or landowners about the legal powers of NPs to increase but not reduce local housing allocations. The primary reasons for the non-disclosure were that most WP members felt the information would prompt landowners to submit unwelcome planning applications and/or "alarm" residents. The non-disclosure was one of the important issues of principle on which the author resigned from the WP.

Report

9. This report is a lengthy and detailed document. While the executive summary is a brief and good guide to the issues, it cannot substitute for reading the whole document in which many ideas are profiled. The detail is important because the report is a foundation for any NP for Ashford.
10. The main chapters of the report profile residents' and WP members' views separately because otherwise the WP's longer and more detailed submissions would have unduly influenced the residents' chapter, and because the WP should be open and transparent about neighbourhood planning. In the executive summary, though, the two groups of views are brought together and compared.
11. The author of the report does not draw overall conclusions from the consultation about "What Ashford needs" or "What the NP should include" but has sought only to profile the range of opinions in the village on many important matters.
12. Yet the preparation of a NP will eventually require potentially controversial conclusions to be drawn from this and other material. Such conclusions will not please everyone (for such is the diversity of opinion). In this context, the WP and the APC should consider how best fairly to reflect the diversity of views in the village to avoid the NP becoming a divisive document. It will be important, for example, to ensure diverse representation on the WP and that information is widely shared.

Residents' and Working Party Members' Views Compared

Introduction

13. The residents' views reported below are derived from 92 drop-in comment labels supplemented with 25 interviews and six email submissions (some of which were very detailed). The WP's views are derived from a total of nine email submissions from its ten members.
14. Following the comparison of residents' and WP members' views, six email submissions are summarised. Four were critical of aspects of the NP or WP. While they are minority opinions, they deserve to be considered carefully since they raise important issues, and there has been no consultation specifically about whether Ashford should have a NP.

Development and Housing

Residents

15. Issues to do with housing and development were not the most important matters for residents, who mainly prioritised community activities, a proper village hall, recreation space and parking.
16. Overall, no residents proposed that Ashford should have large-scale housing developments, but there were divergent views about housing, from those against any new homes whatsoever to those believing that some appropriate new market housing could benefit Ashford. There were also differences about what form of housing would be most appropriate.
17. The main reasons cited by residents against further development in Ashford (including affordable housing) were to: protect the conservation area; preserve the distinctive rural character of the village; and Ashford is already too congested with traffic. As well as the opinions registered in the drop-ins, two lengthy email submissions were emphatically against any new housing of any kind in Ashford.
18. Some of the comments about the threat of large-scale development suggest that not everyone knows that Ashford is already highly protected as a rural settlement.

19. The main reasons cited by residents who were more accepting or supportive of limited development were: development brings social and financial benefits; limited development is inevitable or necessary; there are parts of Ashford with space for more housing; and Ashford is an elderly community that needs the younger families that more housing can bring.
20. Broadly, those in favour of a limited supply of new housing wanted applications to be judged 'on their merits'. There was some support for affordable homes and small homes, but overall there was as much opposition as support for affordable housing.

Working Party

21. There were ten members on the WP. Housing and development issues were higher on their agenda than they were for most residents. The WP members' views on housing may be summarised as follows (numbered individually from 1 to 10):
 1. There is a requirement for properties for residents wishing to downsize and remain in the village
 2. Future developments in Ashford should be based solely upon building suitable properties for the elderly
 3. If housing is to be built here, we need smaller dwellings rather than large family housing
 4. Properties with large gardens could provide additional housing, including smaller units; some large homes could be converted into apartments
 5. Infilling is preferable to green-field sites; smaller houses are needed, including starter homes in courtyard or terrace-type developments
 6. Housing and development should be focussed on what Ashford needs
 7. Numerically any new housing must be in proportion to the number of existing homes in Ashford; new development should prioritise smaller houses; the location of new houses should be assessed on a case-by-case basis
 8. No one wants large-scale development, but housing is needed for the growing population; Ashford cannot expect a privileged 'no build' position; new housing should cater for younger families as well as the elderly
 9. As a rural settlement, Ashford is very protected from large-scale development; it would certainly be reasonable for the village to grow by one new market home per year (about 1% per annum)
 10. (One WP member did not submit their views).
22. No one on the WP suggested that affordable housing would be appropriate in Ashford.
23. Rather strikingly, numbers 1 and 2 above would mean that only a limited supply of small bungalows for the elderly or those wishing to downsize would be built in Ashford over the 20-year planning period. Those restrictive opinions are influential and prominent on the WP, whereas numbers 8 and 9 (favouring more diverse market housing) are minority positions within the WP.
24. Unfortunately, consideration of these issues by the whole community was been circumscribed because important information about the legal powers of NPs was not been disclosed by the WP to either residents or landowners.

Conservation Area

Residents

25. Some residents felt the current conservation area designation is anachronistic in covering too large an area, while others felt it should be strongly protected.

Working Party

26. The WP was as divided as the residents about the size of the conservation area: some said it is larger than could be justified while others felt it should be retained at all costs as a bulwark against development.

Hypothetical Brownfield Site

Residents

27. There was support for the provision of housing on any new, large brownfield site (if one became available) as the best use of the land and as yielding valuable S106 funds for community purposes. They wanted the NP to plan sensibly for such a possibility.

Working Party

28. Like the residents, those WP members who considered the possibility of a large brownfield site in their submissions favoured housing as the best option to provide benefits to the village. There were differences of emphasis on the properties that might be appropriate on a former brownfield site. Some WP members preferred smaller properties for older/retired people, or as starter homes for young families; but another said that larger market housing would mean a less dense development with more tree cover, while also yielding higher precept payments to NDC, DCC and Ashford parish.
29. The WP was agreed that the NP should prioritise current options for the use of S106 funds in the village while also formulating a more systematic and open process for updating the priorities and deciding between competing uses.

Rural Economy

30. The need for a sustainable rural economy and facilities to promote effective home-working were not raised by residents or the WP in general, but a visitor the drop-ins highlighted that such issues were likely to be important in a NP. It was suggested that garage and barn conversions to provide appropriate work should be encouraged providing they are not likely to cause a direct nuisance.

Community Activities and Church/Village Halls

Residents

31. Four connected issues that collectively had the highest priority for residents were (in order of importance): more community events; recreational site – for use as a playground, exercise and social gatherings; larger village hall; and adequate car parking for the village hall or church hall. Of course, a much wider range of village activities depends on having a larger hall with adequate parking. Likewise a proper recreation site is dependent on land availability and parking facilities. It is possible that those attending the drop-ins are more oriented towards community events than those who stayed at home.

Working Party

32. Like the many residents, WP members appreciate the growing sense of community in the village and believe that the trend towards more village activities should be encouraged.

33. The way the church hall contributes to village life by providing a venue for a wide range of activities with reasonable hire charges was appreciated; but it was also recognised that the building needs modernisation.
34. The prospect of a new carpark within easy reach of the current church hall was welcomed by most of the WP, but there was a determination that any such feature should not open the way to the development of the associated field.

Strand and Adder Lanes

Residents

35. Strand Lane was the second highest priority for residents (including children and young people), with high levels of agreement that pedestrians and cyclists need a pathway through the village in order to be protected from intimidating traffic. There were very differing views on whether the lane should be widened with passing-places, but on balance more were opposed to this approach than favoured it.

Working Party

36. Like many residents, the WP felt that lanes in the village are under pressure from agricultural vehicles, waste disposal vehicles, trade vans and a general lack of parking space outside people's homes. While no one said that Strand Lane and the other roads are 'always busy' or 'typically congested', WP members were concerned to make them less intimidating and safer by a range of possible measures, including for example: a 20mph speed limit; a dedicated cycle and pedestrian route alongside the lower section of Strand Lane; and parish lanes to be designated as shared 'Quiet Lanes'.
37. There was no support for chicanes or speed bumps; in fact, there was some decided opposition on the WP.
38. Similarly, there was no support for formal passing-places on Strand Lane. Those specifically opposing them said the construction of passing-places would require the destruction of sections of hedgerows.

Pedestrian Route

39. One member proposed that a safe, walking/cycle /pushchair pathway should be created on the lower section of Strand Lane (from Ashfield Close to the property 'Higher Strand, near the A361) by using S106 funds to purchase a strip of land on the field-side of the existing right-hand-side hedge (as one looks down Strand Lane).
40. They also said that if land was available the existing pathway (from the A361 past the telephone box) could be extended up-hill to the 'Higher Strand' property on the corner of Strand Lane.
41. It was also pointed out that these solutions would provide safe passage for pedestrians (and cyclists) without destroying large sections of the hedges on Strand Lane or widening the road in any way.

Hedgerows

Residents

42. Residents said that hedgerows should be protected in the village, a point that chimes with comments made about the rural village not wanting passing places on Strand Lane.

Working Party

43. WP members also value the hedgerows and earnestly want to protect them as part of Ashford's rural character.

Footpaths

Residents

44. There were many comments from residents about access to footpaths in the village. The priorities were for them to be cleared, protected, given better signage, mapped (so that residents and visitors can find and follow them) and for some benches to be provided.

Working Party

45. This issue was not specifically addressed by the WP.

Light Pollution and Street Lighting

Residents

46. No one suggested Ashford needs more street lighting. There were repeated comments opposing street lighting and arguing that light emission from nearby sites should be reduced.

Working Party

47. Like many residents, the WP members have a strong preference for minimising light pollution in and around Ashford because they agree with a 'dark skies' philosophy for rural areas such as this. Overall, the WP felt that the NP should include policies for approaching businesses and householders if their lighting seems unduly to pollute the night skies in Ashford.

A361 Highway

Residents

48. There were comments on the dangers and difficulties for vehicles when turning right from Strand Lane onto the A361, leading some to advocate a roundabout or traffic lights. Others strongly disagreed with the prospect of a roundabout and thought other approaches should be used to stop U-turns to the car boot sales.
49. There were some vivid accounts of the dangers of the current uncontrolled pedestrian crossing point with its small central island, especially for cyclists and the young. Many would appreciate a traffic-light controlled crossing point for greater safety.

Working Party

50. The WP members were concerned about ad hoc ribbon development along the A361 which, they said, threatened eventually 'merge' Ashford with the outskirts of Barnstaple.
51. Some WP members proposed the introduction of traffic bollards or a yellow hatched box on the A361 at the bottom of Strand Lane to discourage or preferably dangerous U-turns.
52. Where they mentioned the topic, the WP members supported a safer form of pedestrian and cycle crossing for the A361 at the bottom of Strand Lane. The option that WP members favoured for highlighting in the NP, and as the basis for a campaign to Devon County Council, was for a pelican crossing with pedestrian controlled traffic lights to give clear warnings to approaching vehicles and guaranteed crossing times for pedestrians and cyclists.

Church Hall Parking

Residents

53. Several residents mentioned the importance of ensuring public access to the two parking spaces at the church hall. Evidently, many people are unaware that the spaces hall are not privately owned, and so they remain unused by the public even when empty. Those raising the issue wanted the opportunity for public parking rather than disabled spaces.

Working Party

54. One WP member proposed that signs should indicate that the public are free to use the two parking spaces beside the church hall.

Questionnaire

Residents

55. Some aspects of the questionnaire design were highlighted by one person – in particular, that it is a ‘household survey’ rather than a ‘residents’ survey’ (so not everyone in each household can complete a questionnaire).

Working Party

At an early stage the WP opted for a household survey and has not changed that position.

Tarka Holiday Park

Residents

56. There is no evidence that Ashford’s strong opposition to the proposed Tarka Holiday Park expansion, expressed in a consultation less than a year ago, has lessened.

Working Party

57. The whole WP remains firmly opposed to the further expansion of the caravan park.

Some Residents' Criticisms of the Working Party's Approach

58. In summary, the four critics who sent email submissions believe that:

The WP is too homogeneous in its membership and anti-housing/development opinions

NDC planning policies are already very strict in relation to Ashford, as an unidentified rural settlement, but the WP wishes to restrict planning applications even further

It is ironic that many WP members who would restrict housing in Ashford live in homes that would not have been allowed had their policies applied at the time

The NP has been 'sold' to residents partly on the basis of exaggerated predictions of development threats to the village, and partly by giving the impression that it can improve many matters that are actually beyond its control

An NP is unnecessary for Ashford and will not achieve very much in practice since it cannot propose less development than is envisaged in the planning authority's local plan

The APC has lost control of the WP, so that the latter is no longer accountable to the former: the APC should take a more active role in approving the household questionnaire and other initiatives and documents

The church hall parking spaces should be designated for public use.

Introduction

Context

59. The WP's contract with the planning consultant it has appointed on behalf of Ashford Parish Council (APC) specifies that the APC is responsible for conducting and reporting all consultation activities.
60. This report of the first stage of consultation was begun while the author, Dale Hall, was a member of the Ashford Neighbourhood Plan (NP) Working Party (WP) – but, following his resignation from the WP on issues of principle, the author was invited to complete the report independently on behalf of the Ashford Parish Council (APC) (at its meeting on April 19th, 2018). Therefore, Dale is working *pro bono* for the APC in his capacity as the chairman of ORS, a specialist social research company that complies fully with the latest data protection legislation. He has written three previous reports for Ashford. As a resident of the village he declares a 'personal interest' in these matters.
61. Originally, it was intended that the report would cover three main forms of elements:
- Three drop-in events
 - Email submissions
 - Landowners' questionnaire or letter of invitation to respond.
62. In fact, this report covers only the first two parts because the landowners' questionnaire/letter of invitation has been considerably delayed by disagreements on how they should be consulted.

Background

63. Ashford is a small North Devon rural parish with about 113 dwellings over 359 acres on the north bank of the river Taw, about two miles west of Barnstaple.
64. At its meeting on June 15th, 2017, Ashford Parish Council (APC) decided to investigate the feasibility of Ashford developing a neighbourhood plan by appointing a Working Party (WP) to examine the issues and undertake initial background work. After a detailed four-month examination, the WP's Feasibility Study reported that a neighbourhood plan is both feasible and desirable for Ashford; and at its meeting on October 19th, 2017, the APC decided to apply for government grant funding to assist with the preparation of an appropriate and well-researched plan. Work commenced in October 2017 and grants were awarded on December 22nd and January 18th, 2018.
65. The report of the Feasibility Study outlined the main priorities for future (first stage) consultation in the preparation of the NP – including all the following elements:
- Public and stakeholder engagement, via:
 - Drop-in sessions with residents
 - Village (public) meetings – perhaps to present this first stage consultation report
 - Invitations to respond via email or letter
 - Household survey
 - Engagement with businesses and landowners
 - In-depth interviews by phone or in person
 - Invitations to respond via email or letter.

66. Since October 2017 the WP has done considerable work in obtaining the grant funding and has undertaken the first of at least three rounds of consultation with residents, by publicising the issues through two village circulars and by holding three drop-in sessions for residents (of about two-and-a-half hours each) while also inviting written submissions.

Consultation Process

Important First Stage of Consultation

67. The feasibility study in the late summer and early autumn of 2017 included some engagement events to inform the report, but that was only a preliminary stage.
68. The consultation reported here (together with the landowners' consultation and the household survey) is the first and arguably the most important of three main stages of consultation. It is probably the most important stage because its scope is so wide-ranging, and its outcomes will lead directly to the first draft of a NP for Ashford. Subsequent consultation stages will focus on successive drafts of the NP derived from this first consultation stage.

Working Party (WP) Efforts

69. Since the Feasibility Study was adopted by APC in October 2019, the WP has held many lengthy meetings (often of about three hours each) and worked hard. All the WP members devoted considerable time and energy to publicising the NP and to organising three successful drop-in events while also inviting written submissions. No one should under-estimate their commitment or the efforts they took to promote and run the drop-in events, all complete with exhibition boards, decorative bunting and refreshments. Certainly, the atmosphere and response at each of the meetings was very positive and many attendees said they appreciated the sessions.

Information Not Shared with Residents

70. In many ways, then, the consultation process was excellent; but there were other respects in which (in the judgement of the author) it fell short of good practice. The circulars and meetings were informative, but for various reasons the WP chose not to disclose certain information about the legal powers of NPs to residents and landowners. Because the information has not been shared it may briefly be reviewed here.

Neighbourhood Plans

Legal Powers of NPs

71. The Localism Act of 2011 reformed the planning system to give communities more rights to shape the development of the areas in which they live through NPs that (once adopted) are part of official planning policy (alongside local plans) against which planning applications are assessed.
72. In this context, the important points not disclosed by the WP to residents or landowners are that in paragraph 7.23 the North Devon and Torrington Emerging Local Plan (ELP) says (with emphasis added) that the local authority will:

...[W]ork positively with Parish Councils and other local community organisations to support the delivery of neighbourhood plans where these would positively support the provision of additional affordable housing to meet community needs.

73. And paragraphs 9.2 and 9.3 say (with emphasis added) that:

Communities can use neighbourhood planning to influence the type, design and location of new development by shaping it rather than blocking the building of new homes and businesses. It can be prepared by a Parish Council...and may propose more development but not less...

...The Councils recognise that some communities wish to have a greater say in where development is located and the type of development built and may wish for additional development to help deliver a new facility. Neighbourhood Plans provide a means to achieve this...

74. In other words, if North Devon Council made a zero allocation to Ashford, the NP could in principle increase it within sensible limits.

Reasons for Non-disclosure

75. So why did the WP not want to disclose this information to residents and landowners? There were two main reasons:

Some felt that the information that NPs can increase housing allocations would prompt landowners to submit unwelcome planning applications

Others felt that the information would “alarm” residents.

76. Two other reasons cited by WP members were that:

Landowners are only being informed, not consulted, so the information is “unnecessary”

Information on legal powers is unimportant in the context of the other information about NPs in the Emerging Local Plan.

77. In the opinion of the author, none of these four ‘justifications’ for non-disclosure is legitimate or cogent. To win the trust of all the villagers the WP should be open and transparent in all cases.

No Large-scale Development

78. Neither the WP nor residents should be concerned that the powers for NPs will threaten Ashford with unwelcome large-scale development. As a rural settlement, Ashford will be well protected in the final Local Plan; and the NP will be within the control of the village through the adoption process.

Adoption Process

79. Before a neighbourhood plan is formally adopted by the relevant local authority there are several key stages to be completed:

A draft evidence-based plan with appropriate local policies must be developed with due process for all relevant interests

Several stages of inclusive consultation must be conducted with residents, business and stakeholders in the parish about the draft plan

The local planning authority must approve the draft and confirm that it does not conflict with the local plan

The draft plan must be subject to an independent examination by an Inspector appointed by the local authority

Finally, to be adopted, the plan must be approved in a formal referendum of the electorate of the parish, in which an absolute majority of those voting approve the plan.

Drop-in Sessions and Submissions

80. The three drop-in sessions were publicised well in advance: residents were notified by:
- Hand-delivered flyers to every home in the parish
 - Residents' email system
 - Posters in the Parish Council noticeboard, the library telephone box and other key locations
 - Banners on Strand Lane.
81. To enable as many people as possible to attend, the drop-ins were held in the Church Hall on Wednesday 14th March (6.00pm to 8.00pm), Sunday 18th March (10.00am to 12.00 noon) and Saturday 24th March (2.00pm to 4.00pm).
82. The sessions were designed to be welcoming and friendly community events, with bunting, balloons, flowers, and plentiful cakes and hot drinks. There were a number of displays to inform people about NPs and to encourage them to think about, and comment on, a wide range of topics, such as the environment, housing and development, the conservation area, traffic and transport, and access to services. People attending were offered various ways to give their comments, including writing on labels, one-to-one interviews and email contributions.
83. There is no doubt that as 'village events' the drop-in sessions were very successful and the some of the interviewees were complimentary – for example:
- This is all very nice! Thanks to the whole team who have put all this together*
 - I'm very impressed with all this display*
 - The preview of the questionnaire was very useful, too; I'll go and think about it*
84. The drop-in events were also deemed to have been more than satisfactory in terms of the numbers and range of people attending, and the data are as follows:
- 68 residents attended (including 6 children/young people aged 9-14)
 - 43 Ashford households were represented
 - 4 non-residents attended
 - 92 comment labels were completed
 - 25 people were interviewed – including some couples and 3 children/young people
85. The total of 43 households that attended the drop-ins is slightly less than the aggregate of those recorded at each meeting because in a very few cases members of the same household attended different meetings. The figures above do not include any of the ten WP members, for the WP decided that its members should not seem to 'lead' the drop-ins by making their comments during the meetings.

Report

86. The detail in this report is important because it will contribute directly to the first draft of a NP for Ashford. The main chapters profile residents' and WP members' views separately because otherwise the WP's longer and more detailed submissions would have unduly influenced the residents' chapter, and because the WP should be open and transparent about neighbourhood planning.

87. The author of the report does not make overall recommendations about “What Ashford needs” or “What the NP should include” but has sought only to profile the range of opinions in the village on many important matters. Yet, for the preparation of a NP, conclusions will have to be drawn that are bound to displease some (whatever the conclusions are), for such is the diversity of opinion).
88. In this context, the WP and the APC should consider how best fairly to reflect the diversity of views in the village to avoid the NP becoming a divisive document. It will be important, for example, to ensure diverse representation on the WP and that information is widely shared.

Quotations and Perceptions

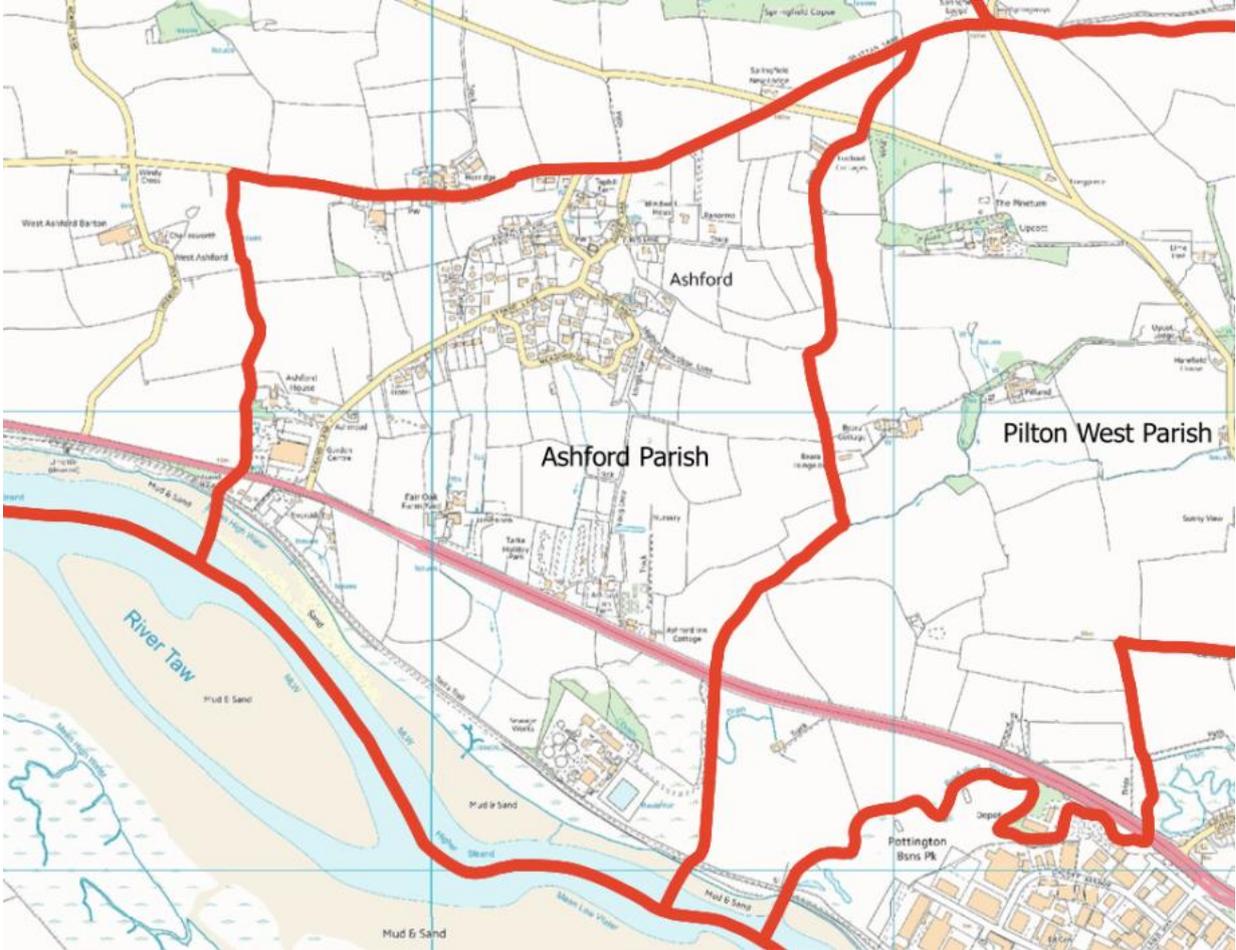
89. Where possible, this report uses verbatim quotations to illustrate key points of view, not because the author agrees with them, but because they highlight recurrent opinions or explain less familiar issues or give an arresting exposition or statement of a matter of interest. The chapter dealing with email submissions contains many quotations in which those with different perspectives to speak in their own voices, to have due consideration.
90. The aim throughout is to portray the range of opinions and perceptions that need to be acknowledged and understood if Ashford’s NP is to be as inclusive and fair as possible to different interest groups. This report neither endorses nor rejects the many points of view it features: they are all part of the manifold ‘conversation of the community’ – there is no single topic, no all-dominant voice, no one agenda; some whisper hesitantly while others shout loudly; but all should be heard.

Working Party Members

91. The WP comprised two parish councillors and eight residents. In alphabetical order, the members of the WP were:

John Bleach (Ashford Parish Councillor and Deputy Chair)
Morag Evans
Dale Hall (report author and ex-member)
Ashley Johnson
Martin Knight
Sandra Knight
Derek Martin
Jane Moss
Mike Moss
Jan Szymankiewicz (Ashford Parish Councillor and Chair).

Ashford Parish Boundary Map



Residents' Views: Part One

Drop-in Sessions

Introduction

92. During the drop-in sessions, residents were invited to write their comments on 'luggage labels' (92 were completed) and 25 interviews were also conducted by the author, who was present at all three events. In the following sections the 'luggage label' contributions are reported primarily, while quotations from the interviews are used mainly for further illustration of key points.

93. The 92 luggage label contributions were coded carefully by the author. It is important to distinguish between the 68 residents who attended and the 92 comment labels because:

Not everyone completed a label

Some people completed more than one label

Many labels recorded several different points (on different topics)

Even single comments were sometimes relevant to several topics.

94. For example, a single label, with the following single comment was classified (coded) under three different headings, namely: "New Village Hall"; "Community Activities"; and "Parking":

It would be nice to have a much bigger Village Hall with ample parking – so we can have such things as yoga classes, village fete and etc, which would bring the community together.

95. In other words, the above 'single comment' is properly interpreted as being relevant to three topics or issues. Therefore, when properly analysed, the number of comments is much larger than the number of labels completed – and so, based on the above methods, there was a total of 156 comments across 92 labels.

96. The process of coding or classifying some contributions can also be ambiguous. For example, the following comment was classified by the author as "Some development is inevitable" (for, while recognising that other interpretations are possible, he believes this is the most plausible meaning):

I can remember fields where Meadowside, and the old Glebe Field and hedges that have now gone. These things happen and it's called progress.

97. Fortunately, very few contributions had such ambiguities.

98. Finally, the drop-ins obviously did not yield a random sample of the village population, for the attendees were self-selecting. Nonetheless, the meetings were well-publicised and a wide range of people attended, including a couple of landowners and one member of the APC. Therefore, this report provides the best evidence available about Ashford residents' views on NP priorities.

Priority Issues

Community Activities

99. For each of the issues below, the number of comments (or 'mentions') is given in brackets, but in all cases bear in mind that the number of comments or mentions is not the same as the number of people, for the latter will typically be fewer than the former for reasons already explained.

100. Interestingly, the four issues that received most comments and had the highest levels of agreement were, in order of priority, the need for:

More community events (13)

Recreational site – for use as a playground, exercise and social gatherings (10)

Larger village hall (9)

Adequate car parking for the village hall or church all (8).

101. Of course, these issues are not separate since a much wider range of village activities is dependent on having a larger hall with adequate parking. Likewise a proper recreation site is dependent on land availability and parking facilities. Some typical label comments were:

Keep on with the community events and acquire a car park to give easier access for these

Build a village hall with a green and a playground

I love the close village community and would like to see more help for the elderly

I would also like to see a larger hall for community use. [The current church hall is too small for community events and is, at present, the only inadequate community space

Ashford would benefit from a purpose built village hall/community centre and a playing field, centrally located with adequate parking facilities. It would bring people together and give a sense of cohesion to the village

To avoid the Parish council having to make random decisions about any 106 money we should have a 'big plan' that we can achieve as money comes in, This should be to buy a piece of land in the village to create a village green, with a plan to build a village hall, have some seating, barbecues, play and exercise equipment, village orchard and some parking spaces. This would create a centre to the village where people would meet up

We need S106 money to pay for these things – so we need a 'few' building projects to fund these things.

102. The drop-in interviews found the same enthusiasm for a wider range of village activities:

We have young children, so we want a play area [to] encourage more young families. We have no proper community hub to bring people together whereas other small villages have community shops and so on

We need a children's and adults' playground with suitable exercise machines to encourage exercise/mobility for all – including the aged!

A wildlife sanctuary for birds and etc would be helpful – perhaps with nest boxes and a place to feed them.

The interviews also showed that many people would welcome a new, larger, modern and fit-for-purpose village hall with parking to cater for a wider range of events:

The Church Hall needs replacing badly with something bigger and more accessible so more people can do more activities there – that would do a lot for the village!

If money is available, a larger village hall would be good for the village if it had parking

Fullabrook should be asked about funding for a village hall.

103. Finally, it should be recognised that it is possible (likely?) that those attending the drop-ins are more oriented towards community events than those who stayed at home, so it is not necessarily the case that their sentiments are representative of the ‘average’ Ashford resident (many of whom do not attend village events).

Strand Lane

104. Strand Lane had the second highest number of comments and also high levels of agreement that pedestrians and cyclists need a pathway through the village in order to be protected from intimidating and even dangerous traffic. The main issues identified were:

Footpath/cycle track needed (12)

Passing-places should be provided (4)

Passing-places are undesirable (3)

Reduce speed limit to 20 mph (2)

Install “No HGV” signs (1)

Install speed ramps (1).

105. The main differences in the responses was about whether or not there should be formal new passing places on Strand Lane – for example:

Given the importance of Strand Lane as the main road into the village from A361, we should really have fully adopted pull-ins/passing points, rather than rely on the good nature of certain people to allow cars to pull in to their drive

[W]idening the roads through Ashford is not practical and would [endanger] hedges...Were it possible to put footpaths in to avoid the roads this would be brilliant

I'd like a pedestrian/cycle way down Strand Lane from Ashfield Close – on the other side of the hedge. [We] don't want the road widened – traffic will just go faster!

106. The interviews had varying points of view, but overall they were against formal road widening – for example:

Strand Lane hedge banks should be preserved and any footpath should go on the other side of the hedge

We need a better footpath down to the Tarka Trail. We keep driving down due to the difficulties as a pedestrian. We could develop the pathway that goes down via the caravan park so that it is more usable.

Children and Young People’s Views on Strand Lane

107. The interviews with children and young people confirmed that the lanes can be intimidating at times:

Adder and Strand Lane can be awkward to see the cars coming quite quickly!

108. There were also interesting insights about the school bus route – which comes down Adder Lane before making a sharp right-turn to return up Stand Lane.

It can be awkward [for the bus] when cars park in [lower] Adder Lane, especially just below the church, outside the small gate to the house – [because] any obstruction at that bend is very difficult!

109. Apparently, eight children/young people catch the bus near Adder/Strand Lane junction – and they would like a bus shelter for when it frequently rains:

We need a bus shelter by the church for when we're going to school in the rain – it could go where the bench is – it could go next to that without cutting off the sunshine in the summer.

Footpaths in general

110. There were 11 comments about access to footpaths in the village. The priorities were for them to be cleared, protected, given better signage, mapped (so that residents and visitors can find and follow them) and for some benches to be provided – for example:

[We need] clearer access to public footpath routes (for walkers/dog owners)

Some paths are inaccessible (eg the one down Long Lane towards the nursery).

Conservation Area, Development and Housing

111. The conservation area was mentioned infrequently by interviewees at the drop-ins, though its importance was highlighted in the luggage label responses. The two specific interview comments were that the current designation is somewhat anachronistic:

The Conservation Area is being reviewed but it has almost outdone its original purpose since it failed to protect the open spaces in the village with the building of Strand Close

The current conservation area is too big – it should be adjusted to exclude the new houses that have been built.

112. Development and housing were frequently mentioned in the luggage labels, but there was a very wide range of views, from those wanting to prevent any further development to those believing that some further development would benefit Ashford.

113. In terms of reasons against any further development in Ashford, the following were mentioned:

Preserve and protect the conservation area (6)

Ashford is already too congested with traffic (6)

Preserve the rural character of the village (4).

114. From these labels, two typical label comments were:

I do not want to see any new homes built. Ashford does not need this. It's within a conservation area

The unique environment of Ashford needs to be preserved for future generations.

115. The interviews also showed opposition to development in Ashford and some typical comments were:

We want the village to remain as it is with lanes as they are. It would be totally inappropriate to build 25 houses off Ashfield Close – and the field should remain agricultural

There is no need to spoil the village with all the housing that's going on in the wider area. I'd prefer not to see any more housing – it seems to be going up everywhere!

The village should remain as it is: we like the rural setting and I don't want a big housing estate

Basically, I don't want much change: Ashford's rural and should stay that way

We don't want new houses put up just anywhere in the village, for that's not relevant to local needs

The concept of local needs can be very ambiguous and 'unreal' in that there is no specific reason for children to stay in the village when there are other affordable places to live nearby.

116. There was also opposition to affordable housing:

We don't want affordable housing here and, in any case, some affordable housing is not protected in subsequent sales

We shouldn't have more affordable or starter homes – we don't want a housing estate! This is not suitable for affordable housing.

117. Some of the comments above, about the threat of large-scale development, suggest that not everyone knows that Ashford is already highly protected as an unidentified rural settlement.

118. Comments that were more accepting or supportive of limited development included the following reasons:

Development brings social benefits (7)

Limited development is inevitable or necessary (5)

We should focus on where housing is most suitable (1)

There is space for more housing on the Top Road (1).

119. From these labels, some typical label comments were:

[I] fully approve of the...neighbourhood plan – more housing is inevitable [and] this gives the village the opportunity to influence how it happens

I can remember fields where Meadowside, and the old Glebe Field and hedges that have now gone. These things happen and it's called progress

We need S106 money to pay for things, so we need a 'few' building projects to fund these things.

[The] SHLAA areas that are already designated for Ashford should be made use of and considered first...AND the density levels and retirement homes should be carefully considered and addressed on these two areas. Maybe [in] just one of the fields.

I think that we were short sighted with regard to development of two fields in Ashford. Maybe one of the fields would be a good idea as the passing of cars in the small lane would be better for all of us [with a wider turn-in].

120. The interviews also mentioned some positive aspects to more housing:

It is good to encourage more younger families because Ashford is getting to be very elderly

We'd like to have more children in the village – it would make it more friendly

Housing is a good thing for an area like this – to give more choice and options for people

Ashford hasn't changed much in 45 years; the new building has been very reasonable overall

We don't mind in-filling houses in Ashford: that's better than having affordable housing imposed on us

We don't oppose in-filling and small scale building or renovations for local people in the village – that can be done without spoiling the village.

Any development should be in proportion to the size of the village – not too big!

121. There was some support for affordable homes and small homes – and some comments were:

Housing should be more affordable as there is a lack of such housing in the village for younger families

If there is housing to be built, it would be better to have affordable houses for young families or seniors who would like to downsize

If we are to have more houses in Ashford I feel they should be smaller homes so that current residents could downsize without moving to another area

Ashford...need[s]...a number of dwellings suitable for local people to downsize to – flats perhaps.

122. There was as much opposition as there was support for affordable housing.

Hypothetical Brownfield Site

123. The interviews showed support for the development of any large brownfield site (if one became available) that could provide S106 funds for community purposes, and they wanted the NP to plan sensibly for such a possibility:

Brownfield should be preferred to greenfield and new expansions – for obvious reason

Housing [on a brownfield site] would be positive and better than the alternatives [that might go there], and it could sort out the lower road junction and provide for a village hall – while also giving parking for access to the Tarka Trail

If further housing...is inevitable...brownfield...would be preferable as [it] would then not change extensively the rural character of the village

The NP should consider what should be done IF any brownfield site came up in Ashford. For example, it should seek to influence what goes there, including a proper village hall, parking and appropriate housing which would all benefit Ashford. The NP needs to be proactive and consider how desirable features can be brought together on the site to make it acceptable and beneficial for Ashford.

Light Pollution and Street Lighting

124. There were seven label comments on light pollution, with the key priorities being not to introduce street lighting in Ashford and to reduce light emission from nearby sites – for example:

I think the lighting on Meadowside should be changed to the lighting used on the A361 – [it would have] less glare and [be] cheaper.

We like NOT having street lighting – it is good to be dark in the country!

We should keep Ashford dark at night and avoid light pollution generally

There is some very bright lighting in the Supported Living Home that should be dimmed more effectively to cut down on light pollution.

A361/Strand Lane Junction

125. There were five luggage label comments on the dangers and difficulties of turning right from Strand Lane onto the A361 – leading some to advocate a roundabout or traffic lights – for example:

A roundabout at the bottom of the village is needed. It would alleviate problems of access, and slow traffic. If a controlled crossing was added it would give safer pedestrian route to the Tarka Trail and the bus stop.

126. Others, though, strongly disagreed with the prospect of a roundabout and thought other alternatives could help:

We don't want a roundabout at the bottom of Strand Lane because that would be more intensive and urban and lead to more traffic in the village

U-turns to the car boot sales are dangerous and undesirable!

The road at the bottom of Ashford is dangerous due to summertime U-turns to the car boot sales – so yellow hatchings would be helpful to prohibit the turns.

A361 Pedestrian Crossing

127. Some interviews focused on the dangers of the current uncontrolled pedestrian crossing point, especially for cyclists and the young:

The A361 crossing point is straight which helps, but there's a lot of fast traffic so it can be hard to get across [and] it is bad at night. We need lighting there. Motor cyclists particularly are likely to go very fast

A zebra crossing would be good, particularly for cyclists [because] it's very hard if there are more than two trying to cross at once. Drivers are not always aware of it [and] the central part is too narrow to use effectively as an island for bikes crossing

It's a much busier crossing than one would imagine in the country – we need better lighting and wider central and side waiting areas to cross from

I want the children to be self-sufficient in their transport in their teens, so they can get about themselves and use the bike track safely.

Hedgerows

128. There were five comments that hedgerows should be protected in the village, and this point chimes with other comments made about the rural village not wanting passing places on Strand Lane.

Church Hall Parking

129. The importance of ensuring public access to the two parking spaces at the church hall got a total of five mentions on the luggage labels – for example:

We need public parking signs on the spaces at the village green

I would like to be able to park outside the village hall or invite friends as it's the only public car park area as far as I know in the village.

130. The interviews at the drop-ins showed that many people are unaware that the two parking spaces beside the church hall are not privately owned, and so they are normally unused by the public even when empty. Consequently, there were comments that:

Parking for the church is a big issue for elderly people, but we don't want just disabled parking

Parking is difficult near the church hall so I have to walk up and I'm lacking in mobility so it's very hard

We badly need a carpark for the church and hall, because access is so difficult.

Miscellaneous Label Comments

131. There was a wide range of labels on other matters and the following all got two comments:

Repair potholes

Improve road drainage, including clearing ditches

Ashford needs a small shop for food and other supplies

Ashford does not need a shop because people value the rural quiet and can get supplies elsewhere

Meadowside land and hedges need tidying.

Reduce amount of farming mud on the roads

Encourage litter picks.

132. The following all got one label mention:

Ashford needs more buses

Reduce amount of farming mud on the roads

Ashford should have a Facebook page

Section 106 priorities plan is needed

The questionnaire needs some revisions

The traffic monitoring on Strand Lane should be done in the summer months.

133. In the interviews, technical aspects of the questionnaire were highlighted by one person:

The questionnaire should allow everyone in each household to record their views – it should not be just for the 'household head'! There's quite a lot of 16-18 year-old people (the hidden households) so we need at least to have questions on hidden households and preferably for all adults over 16 because people can have different opinions

The sequence of questions is currently about the household but not the needs of the persons within it...

Do we need questions about relatives of those here who might want to come here or come back here? Is that local need?

The questionnaire also needs a map of the areas for potential housing – so people can see what is being talked about

Some questions have open boxes (conservation) but others have lists of options to nominate – eg where should housing go – but you need to be consistent in your approach

You need to say why the information is being collected.

Tarka Holiday Park

134. The proposed Tarka Holiday Park expansion was not dealt with in the WP's drop-in meetings because the issue was thoroughly dealt with in an earlier dedicated consultation, as reported by Dale Hall in an ORS report in June 2017, with the following overall conclusion:

[T]he proposed expansion of the current caravan site is categorically opposed by the great majority of Ashford residents, for a wide range of specific reasons. Above all, though, the residents believe that in relation to the conservation area of Ashford the development is fundamentally inappropriate, unduly intrusive, and harmful to the rural community's amenity, quality of life and environment.

135. There is no evidence since then that village opposition has lessened and the large number of residents who submitted formal objections to the planning application continue to wait the long-delayed NDC decision. There is no doubt, then, that issues relating to the caravan park's future should be included within the NP – particularly in relation to:

- Opposition to its further expansion
- Regrettable felling of so many trees
- Light and noise pollution
- Eyesore advertising along the A361 frontage.

Residents' Views: Part Two

Email Submissions

Introduction

136. Some people did not attend the drop-in sessions because of their reservations about the need for and usefulness of a NP; others will have stayed away because they were unavailable or not interested or content with the way things are moving. In any case, four critical submissions were received from residents who did not attend the drop-in meetings, and two others were received from people who had attended.
137. The four critical emails all objected to the NP and to the way in which the WP is operating. While their views are not typical of village opinion they are important because there has been no other consultation opportunity for villagers to consider whether a NP is necessary and desirable (the initial engagement phase was based only upon, What do you like or dislike about living in Ashford?), and because the critics raise important issues that deserve to be considered.
138. Two other emails were also received, both of which emphasised that further housing and development in Ashford should be severely restricted or even stopped altogether.

Criticisms by Four Residents

139. In summary, the four critics believe that:

The WP is too homogeneous in its membership and opinions

NDC planning policies are already very strict in relation to Ashford, as an unidentified rural settlement, but the WP wishes to restrict planning applications even further

It is ironic that that many WP members who would restrict housing in Ashford live in homes that would not have been allowed had their policies applied at the time

The NP has been 'sold' to residents partly on the basis of exaggerated predictions of development threats to the village, and partly by giving the impression that it can improve many matters that are actually beyond its control

An NP is unnecessary for Ashford and will not achieve very much in practice since it cannot propose less development than its envisaged in the planning authority's Local Plan

The APC has lost control of the WP, so that the latter is no longer accountable to the former: they would prefer for the APC to take a more active role in approving the household questionnaire and other initiatives and documents

Parking spaces outside the church hall should be for public use.

Quotations

140. These points are illustrated in the quotations that follow. The author has condensed the critics' words and combined contributions from different respondents under the same headings where appropriate. The author has added sub-headings in order to 'signpost' the different points while also marking his excisions as "... " and insertions as "[and]".

Working party neither neutral nor balanced

The WP should have a neutral view on how a NP should develop not begin with their own agenda

Most discussions and publicity about the NP have emphasised the risk to Ashford of development, [but] there is no particular risk to quote Graham Townsend

[Originally] a NP was deemed unsuitable or unnecessary for Ashford, [but] Ashford has two councillors who are alienated from the rest of the parish council. They...have their own agenda

They are determined to resist development in the village [and] have surrounded themselves with like-minded residents to form the working party...[who] have been responsible for many of the letters of objection submitted to planning applications in the last few years.

Residents misled

Residents who have taken an interest, yet know little of planning/local politics or the status of a NP, are falsely being led to think that by suggesting items they may happen, yet the NP has no power to deliver their suggestions

The WP has circulated leaflets which explain that many other areas are developing NPs. These include Bideford and South Molton. All parishes mentioned are infinitely larger than Ashford. There is a reason for this. Bigger areas recognise the need for development of all types and have the space to determine where that can happen. They also recognise the need for change and the benefits that housing for all ages and skills brings.

Legal status of NPs

A NP cannot contradict local or national planning guidelines. They must be positive or more supportive of development, not negative. Therefore, if an application was received for houses in the conservation area, the NP cannot have clauses to stop the possibility of this being approved.

Past development in Ashford

Ashfield Close (10 homes), Meadowside (22 homes) and Strand Close (3 homes) were [once] fields, and when all those homes were built we welcomed newcomers to the village, not expecting to keep the area to ourselves – a very different reaction to that of some residents now!

While none of us wants to see the village swamped with development and traffic, most of us live in houses which were part of 'development' in their day.

Traffic issues

The traffic surveys are presumably to demonstrate the high volume of traffic and therefore unsuitability of Ashford for development; the photos and width measurements at the drop-ins were intended to emphasise the same... [But], should the results show this, will the WP be advocating a widening of Strand Lane and perhaps a roundabout at its junction with the A361? [The implication here is (I think) that the WP will not be consistent in reaching this conclusion because of its 'own agenda' – report author]

There is some feeling that Ashford and Strand Lane in particular are too busy and difficult to negotiate...[but] the reality is that there are busy periods, especially if an incident takes place on A361, but most of the time Strand Lane is relatively quiet. It is unreasonable to think you can live a mile from 35,000 people and be within 150 yards of a major A road and expect the traffic volume to be akin to the middle of Exmoor.

Parish Council role

At present the PC seems to have little control of anything to do with the NP and in fact has little idea of what is taking place. Yet the NP is in the PC's name.

Questionnaire

[The] questionnaire...is...extremely detailed and very invasive. Is the PC aware of this and will they have any control as to the personal nature of the questions?

Timescale and costs

Some parishes have taken five years for a NP to be adopted. Does the WP have the staying power to survive many reverses? How will costs be managed if negotiations extend over years and how will the PC react?

NP Ineffective

The WP wish to build a wall around Ashford, [but]...go forward ten years and with a NP in place, there will be little achieved that could not have been done within the present PC framework...[The] NP is a waste of time and public money.

Effects of the NP process

I'm not convinced of the need for a Neighbourhood Plan...and feel it is...a waste of public money...I'm very sad about all the scaremongering, rumours, exaggerating and even lies with regard to planning issues...and a Neighbourhood Plan only tends to encourage such extreme responses

I am quite happy that there should be a Neighbourhood Plan for Ashford, if this is what people want, but am concerned that the process of setting one up seems to have engendered aggression and misrepresentation.

Drop-in attendance

...[I]t would seem unlikely that more than a third of the village attended [the drop-ins]...Therefore, at least two-thirds of the village are uninterested. Should [the] PC take their opinions into account?

Church Hall parking

I'm not sure about the suggestion of a disabled parking space as I don't think we have anyone with a disabled badge in the village that would use it, therefore it would remain empty. The various elderly residents who need to drive to the hall as they are not able to walk up the hill do not have a disabled badge so would not be able to park in a disabled space.

Church hall parking is for the public.

Two Further Email Submissions

141. Two other emails were received, both of which emphasised that there should be no more new housing of any kind built in Ashford. In opposing all development whatsoever, the two emails alike; but their arguments are different – so they are summarised separately.

Email One Summary

142. In summary, the submission said:

It is residents' "lifestyle choice" to enjoy the benefits and character of a rural settlement, knowing certain urban benefits will be missing. Little account should therefore be taken of minority requests for "urbanising" changes which would impair its essential nature and character

No further development should be permitted along the A361 Barnstaple-Wrafton corridor because continuing ribbon coalescence will destroy the unique and irreplaceable, estuarine, rural valley setting and amenity enjoyed by the residents

The conservation area should be protected at all costs

The lack of street lighting is a key attribute of the village

Narrow lanes defined by Devon banks, hedges and historic walls are a valued and distinctive part of village character and life; and informal passing places work fine

Any road widening would facilitate increased traffic volumes of non-residents and should be discouraged by placing "**No thoroughfare – Access to Residents Only**" signs (or similar) at the Top Farm, Adder Lane and westerly Strand Lane gateways to the village

There is no planning requirement for Ashford to provide new housing: it is detrimental and unnecessary to offer any

As a residential settlement, Ashford is not a significant workplace and affordable homes are available nearby in Barnstaple

Further infilling with market value homes will densify the structure, eventually converting the village into another housing estate – whereas the spacious, informal patchwork of homes separated by green open spaces is key to its character and should therefore be preserved.

Email One Quotations

It is a "lifestyle choice" of residents to live in a small, rural settlement such as Ashford...It follows that some services and facilities are not available...People are free to move to [other] areas if they prioritise the importance of such benefits...Therefore I feel that little account should be taken in this process of requests for...developments or facilities that would impair or destroy the innate character...and attributes of the settlement

It follows that any development that impairs the beauty and enjoyment of [Ashford]...and the choice made to live in it, in my view, is most unwelcome

All ribbon development along the A361 between...Barnstaple gateway and Wrafton...should cease absolutely, regardless of whether it is commercial or residential. Such beautiful estuary settings as this are "not being made any more". It is...of rare value, cannot be

replaced and, in my view, is at the tipping point so that, if further damaged, would progressively be beyond recovery

The narrow lanes, often defined by lovely Devon banks, trees, hedges and historic walls and buildings in the conservation area are a distinctive part of village character and life

It would be a foolish, retrograde and destructive step to even contemplate widening the lanes or seeking to provide easier access. To do that is simply to invite an increase in traffic from non-residents...Very quickly it would create a further deterioration in the quiet, character of the village where local residents can still, at the quieter times of the day, enjoy a walk up through the village to the church, the post box, a neighbour's house or an event at the village hall, enjoying the views without being overwhelmed by passing vehicles

Rather, access should be actively discouraged by placing "No thoroughfare – Access to Residents Only" signs (or similar) at the Top farm, Adder Lane and westerly Strand lane gateways to the village

The conservation area is a lovely remnant of old Ashford, the Ashford of yester-year, a different age...with lovely examples of the built environment of historic, rural, Devonshire. It should be protected at all costs

There is no requirement for the Ashford parish to provide new housing under the local plan. None should be offered in my view

Ashford is not a workplace...other than maybe...one or two establishments located on the A361 for whom a...frequent bus service is available...[so] there is...no significant requirement for affordable homes...in the parish

Further development of higher cost homes should be avoided since it will increasingly change the nature and character of the village as well as put pressure on infrastructure. There are many areas in the North Devon locality that are available for new builds to be constructed. I do not accept that there should be further "infill" development in the settlement. Its beauty is largely attributable to the fact that it is NOT a high density residential area and does NOT have a uniform structure but has gently evolved, wandering over the hillside in a "patchwork" of homes separated by sporadic fields supporting livestock or crops, large gardens, lanes with hedges, trees and other open spaces. Further infill will convert a naturally spacious rural settlement into yet another housing estate.

Email Two Summary

Too many new houses are being built in Ashford!

The village roads were not built for so much traffic; any additional houses would mean total congestion; and getting onto the main road from Strand Lane would be impossible

Any additional population will overwhelm local medical and hospital services, while also creating acute congestion on main roads in the summer months

Closure of the local hospital would mean that people have to travel to Exeter or Taunton hospitals

The Tarka Caravan site threatens to encroach further on the village

Email Two Quotations

Our concern is the amount of houses that are being built in the area [and] the roads were not built for this amount of traffic

Any extra houses within Ashford would mean total congestion, and trying to get out onto the main road from Strand Lane would be impossible. Holiday traffic during school holidays already stretches our roads to the limit of their capacity; add the extra traffic resulting from the house building in the area and the roads will be at a complete standstill during the summer months

The North Devon Hospital cannot cope with the volume of patients now! What will the situation be like when all these houses are built, and if they are all bought...how many unnecessary lives will be lost?!

If the hospital can't cope or closes we'll have to travel to either Exeter or Taunton hospitals, which inevitably means travelling along the...A361 – this road is a death trap...and is frequently closed

Now The Tarka Caravan site wants to encroach on our village; having already expanded, it wants to expand it even more, coming right up to the village, with footpaths through the fields where cows and sheep graze.

Working Party Members' Views

Introduction

143. Nine of the ten WP members submitted their ideas by email, but there were big variations in length: one was four pages (and several were two or three pages) while one consisted of just four brief bullet points. On the whole, this level of participation was more than satisfactory and, for the author, the issues raised, and the detailed arguments presented, have been both educational and interesting. It is hoped that sharing the ideas expressed will take the WP forwards, towards the consideration of many policy issues.

Summary

144. Housing and development issues were higher on the agenda of most WP members than they were for most residents (albeit with two exceptions in the residents' email submissions).
145. The WP members' views on new housing in Ashford may be summarised as follows (numbered individually from 1 to 10):
1. There is a requirement for properties for residents wishing to downsize and remain in the village
 2. Future developments in Ashford should be based solely upon building suitable properties for the elderly
 3. If housing is to be built here, we need smaller dwellings rather than large family housing
 4. Properties with large gardens could provide additional housing, including smaller units; large homes could be converted into apartments
 5. Infilling is preferable to green-field sites; smaller houses are needed, including starter homes in courtyard or terrace-type developments
 6. Housing and development should be focussed on what Ashford needs
 7. Numerically any new housing must be in proportion to the number of existing homes in Ashford; new development should priorities smaller houses; the location of new houses should be assessed on a case-by-case basis
 8. No one wants large-scale development, but housing is needed for the growing population; Ashford cannot expect a privileged 'no build' position; new housing should cater for younger families as well as the elderly
 9. As a rural settlement, Ashford is very protected from large-scale development; it would certainly be reasonable for the village to grow by one new market home per year (about 1% per annum)
 10. (One WP member did not submit their views).
146. No one on the WP suggested that affordable housing would be appropriate in Ashford.

147. Rather strikingly, numbers 1 and 2 above would mean that only a limited supply of small bungalows for the elderly or those wishing to downsize would be built in Ashford over the 20-year planning period. Those restrictive opinions are influential and prominent on the WP, whereas numbers 8 and 9 (favouring more diverse market housing) are minority positions within the WP.
148. Unfortunately, consideration of these issues by the whole community was been circumscribed because important information about the legal powers of NPs was not been disclosed by the WP to either residents or landowners.

Environment

Ashford's Character

149. One WP member gave a detailed statement of Ashford's character, as follows:
- Rural nature (with fields, animals grazing, wildlife, narrow streets, cob houses, high and historic hedge banks, and a traditional parish church)
 - Small-scale intimate sense of community (in which neighbours know and care about each other while sharing events and clubs)
 - Dark skies (with street lighting only in Meadowside, the caravan park and the A361)
 - Close proximity to the tidal River Taw with coastal views to Hartland Point.
150. In this context, the same WP member would like more protection for the farming landscape – perhaps with the following:
- The parish being designated as an AONB
 - The conservation area being re-affirmed by NDC
 - Strand and Adder lanes being designated as 'Quiet Lanes'.
151. However, at least two WP members felt that the aspiration to be an ANOB is unrealistic and that we should not idealise Ashford as an unspoilt and picturesque village, for it is really a straddle of houses on the hillside, not beautiful overall in itself, but enjoying a lovely setting and outlook.
152. No one said Ashford is a picturesque village, but many said its setting and the quiet rural ambience should be preserved, particularly the green fields, hedge-banks, trees (especially around the caravan park and on Long Lane (footpath 8) called Watery Lane) and wildlife corridors. A typical quotation summing up these views was:

I cannot see how Ashford would qualify as an ANOB designated area. While we may enjoy and value the local environment...it's nothing special in this region of the country. That said, I do think it's important that trees, hedges and waterways in the parish be carefully managed and protected in years to come. These offer wildlife corridors among the existing housing in the village.

Conservation Area

153. Some felt that the current conservation area is larger than could be justified, while others felt it should be retained. No one said the designation should be removed altogether.

Dark Skies

154. The WP members have a strong preference for minimising light pollution in Ashford because they agree with a 'dark skies' philosophy for rural areas such as this. Their objection to the light pollution from the Tarka Holiday Park has already been referred to, but it was also pointed out that the Supported Living Units on the A361 below Ashford also have very bright lights at the rear.
155. Overall, the WP felt that the NP should include policies for approaching businesses and householders if their lighting seems to unduly pollute the night skies in Ashford.

Environmental Surveys

156. One WP member suggested two environmental studies for Ashford, namely:
- Analysis of where the streams, springs and watercourses run – with the corollary suggestion that proposed developments should be required to assess land drainage issues and the potential impact on neighbouring properties and public roads
 - Detailed study of our 'natural heritage and habitat' assets in order to identify what is worthy of being conserved and protected.
157. Another member agreed:
- [F]lora and fauna habitats should be surveyed, even though this is not a requirement imposed on us by NDC.*

Development

Large-scale Development

158. While there are differences in their views, none of the WP members want to see large-scale housing or other developments within Ashford village, and the most categorical of the ten members summed the position up like this:
- [A]ny major development of residential housing, retail business or caravan parks in the parish would impact...negatively [on the whole village]...[So] this stunning environment needs to be...preserved for [future] generations...I am opposed to wide scale housing development that would destroy the intrinsic nature of the parish.*
159. Another member advocated what they saw as a more nuanced approach:
- I certainly do not want to see large scale housing or industrial developments...but I am not opposed to development per se. We have to be realistic that further housing, and places for people to earn a living, will be needed for the growing population of our islands and Ashford cannot expect a privileged 'no build' position.*
160. At least two members of the WP appreciated the irony that some critics referred to in the last chapter – and one of them wrote:
- Many of us in the WP also need to acknowledge that we live in homes that were part of past expansion of the village over the last 40 or 50 years. Without that past expansion, some of us wouldn't be living here now!*

Hypothetical Brownfield Site

161. During the preparation for the drop-ins the hypothetical (what if?) possibility of a brownfield site becoming available was raised (though some stressed that there was no particular site that could be mentioned). The WP members who considered this possibility in their submissions felt that the NP should include policies for this contingency. Rather than face uncongenial commercial or semi-industrial developments on such a site, they felt housing would be the best option that could also provide for positive benefits to the village in the form of:

Bigger village or community hall

Convenient parking

Tree planting and landscaping

Playing or sports area.

162. One WP member felt that a brownfield site could accommodate at least some of these facilities while being developed as a valuable 'windfall' housing opportunity for NDC. Not surprisingly, perhaps, there were some differences of emphasis in the WP's responses in terms of the properties that might appropriately be developed on a brownfield site. For example:

One WP member preferred smaller properties – suitable for older/retired people or as starter homes for young families (with restrictive covenants to ensure they remain available for the target groups).

Another member observed that large size executive-style housing would mean a less dense (less urban) development with more tree cover possible, while also yielding higher precept payments to NDC, DCC and (of course) to Ashford's parish council (valuable additional income for the parish). They also observed that there are many elderly people in Ashford already (!) and executive homes for working families would invigorate the village and stimulate activities in a new community hall.

163. All the WP members agreed that appropriate housing would be far preferable to any other kind of development on a brownfield site.

Specific Suggestions for Housing Development and the Conservation Area

164. WP members made various specific comments about what they think is acceptable/unacceptable or desirable/undesirable for Ashford. There was no consensus, but at least one person suggested each of the following points (or raised a related question) for consideration (some of which are contrary):

The current conservation area should be preserved and afforded further protection from development

The current conservation area exceeds the core 'historical' area and includes parts that have no general heritage value

Infilling is preferable to the development of greenfield sites (even in the core of the village)

Properties with large gardens in the central core of the village could provide additional homes

Development should take place on the periphery of the village rather than at its core – for example, via the hypothetical brownfield site or via infilling and small scale developments on Top Road

Some larger properties could be converted into flats to provide smaller units and lower purchase prices

The design of new houses should reflect Ashford’s rural character and harmonise with existing properties; their size should be moderate and their number in proportion to the housing that already exists

Ashford needs more good quality smaller houses (two- or three-bedrooms) for down-sizing households

Is there any evidence of households wishing to down-size within Ashford? (Those that have done so recently have moved to Braunton or elsewhere to be closer to key services.)

The village also needs more compact ‘courtyard-based’ or terraced housing and large executive homes of four- and five-bedrooms are not needed/not appropriate

Larger homes are potentially valuable to the village in yielding valuable council tax and parish precept income

Large homes are typically less densely ‘packed’ and allow for a more rural character

The location of new houses should be assessed on a case-by-case basis

New housing should be for only local (that is, parish-based) needs

Future housing developments in Ashford should be restricted to “building suitable properties for elderly people” – that is bungalows with double garages, off-road parking for two cars, and communal gardens

Does not Ashford have enough elderly people? What is the best way to diversify the population with appropriate housing?

165. Interestingly in the context of the ELP’s focus on local needs and affordable housing, no one on the WP suggested that affordable housing would be appropriate in Ashford; and whereas some supported smaller homes others clearly did not.

166. For example, the shortest submission of only four bullet points said (in one of its bullets) that:

There is a requirement for properties that meet the needs of residents wishing to downsize and remain in the village.

167. Since this was the only potential housing requirement referred to in the submission, the implication would seem to be that the no other kind of housing other than, say, bungalows for the elderly and single people in Ashford wanting smaller homes should be provided over the 20-year planning period.

168. But, in the opinion of some WP members, this approach would be far too restrictive. Both believe that instead of being limited to only small houses for down-sizers, the NP should encourage all kinds of homes and a wide range of households. One WP member summed up in two paragraphs like this:

I think it...important that any new housing tends to attract families rather than offering smaller homes to single elderly people. I don’t buy-in to the perceived wave of need for

suitable down-sizing housing for the elderly. Many of the WP members could be [called] elderly [but] for various reasons have chosen to buy larger houses.

We have to be realistic that further housing, and places for people to earn a living, will be needed for the growing population of our islands and Ashford cannot expect a privileged 'no build' position.

169. Based on the growing national population and associated housing need, there was also a related argument from one WP member that for the next 20 years Ashford should not be restricted only to 'local needs and affordable housing' (as seems likely from the ELP); instead, it should accept its proportional share of national housing needs. Even this approach would mean only a 1% annual rate of growth over 20 years – equivalent in Ashford's case to about one property per year.
170. While the 1% approach would be feasible and sustainable, would contribute to national need, would allow Ashford to benefit from new residents, and would contribute significantly to Ashford parish's finances through the annual precept, it is an option totally unknown to the vast majority of Ashford residents because they have not been told by the WP that, while they cannot reduce local housing allocations, NPs may increase them. In the opinion of one WP member this is a major failing in relation to the 1985 Gunning Principles that consultation should give sufficient information for the public to make informed judgements.

A361 Highway

171. Several WP members agreed with the written comment of one, which said that:
- Strip or ribbon development along the A361 must be avoided.*
172. They were all concerned that continued ad hoc ribbon development along the A361 would eventually 'merge' Ashford with the outskirts of Barnstaple; while everyone recognised that Barnstaple is the major local town, there was general agreement that the green space between was valuable and should not be eroded. Two other contributions said:

I fear the encroachment of Barnstaple and Braunton along the A361 corridor to create one long linear development such as evidenced along the Bickington, Fremington, Yelland, Instow road. [We need] an Ashford 'greenbelt'

I join those that wish to avoid development growing along the A361 (or Top Road) which would merge Ashford into Barnstaple or Braunton (or both).

Section 106 Funds

173. The WP was agreed that the NP should prioritise current options for the use of S106 funds in the village while also formulating a more systematic and open process for updating the priorities and deciding between competing uses. There should be a Parish Improvement List where ideas are proposed by residents and published on the parish website are reviewed before the parish council makes its decisions. There was general agreement that future development of the parish, including spending Section 106 funds, should ensure the natural environment is protected and if possible enhanced.

Enforcement Action

174. At least two WP members felt that the continued expansion of an unauthorised 'caravan site' at a private dwelling on Top Road was being allowed to continue for far too long; they wanted both the parish council to monitor the site more actively and to urge the planning authority to take effective action more promptly.

Rural Economy

Sustainable Enterprise

175. During one of the drop-in events one of the WP members conversed with a visitor from the Cotswolds who had very recent experience of a NP being adopted. Apparently, three key areas of focus in that plan were:

- The need for fast broadband
- Encouragement for homeworking
- The importance of rural enterprises.

176. The need for fast internet access is perhaps self-evident, but on the basis of what was said one WP member proposed that planning policies should look very favourable on any applications designed to promote homeworking or appropriate rural enterprises. For example, garage and barn conversions to provide appropriate work or employment facilities should be encouraged providing they are not likely to cause a direct nuisance. In this context, the balance would favour the promotion of sustainably local economic activity, while the onus of proving nuisance would be with the objector.

Transport, Traffic and Parking

General

177. It was pointed out the Ashford's lanes were obviously not designed for either current traffic volumes or the ever-growing size of vehicles, including family cars. Moreover, the increasing use of online shopping is inevitably leading to a growth in the number of delivery vehicles using the roads as well.

Strand Lane and Adder Lane

178. It was pointed out that Strand Lane, the main route through the parish and the village, is single-track-only in places, with high hedgebanks and no pavements. While the conservation area and the tight bends around Woolstone Corner, St Peter's Church and the Old Post Office restrict wide vehicles passing through the village, the lane is under pressure from agricultural vehicles, waste disposal vehicles, trade vans and a general lack of parking space outside people's homes.

179. While no one said that Strand Lane and the other roads are 'always busy' or 'typically congested', many WP members were concerned to make them less intimidating and safer for pedestrians, cyclists, runners, horses (on the Top Road) and vehicles by a range of possible measures, including for example:

- 20 mph speed limit on the whole of Strand Lane
- Purpose-built 'passing places' on Strand Lane
- Dedicated cycle and pedestrian route along parts of Strand Lane
- Designating the routes through the parish as shared 'Quiet Lanes'.

180. These and other road safety matters are reviewed in more detail below.

Traffic Calming Measures

181. There was considerable support for a 20mph speed limit on Strand Lane. However, one submission said:

[If a 20 mph speed limit] is...considered, it should be for the whole village rather than just Strand Lane...It would illogical to apply 20 mph to just Strand Lane...[when] traffic could then accelerate to 30 mph as it moves into Meadowside or Adder Lane!

182. There was no support for chicanes or speed bumps; in fact, there was some decided opposition on the WP.

Passing Places

183. Some WP members had strong reservations about constructing formal passing places on Strand and Adder lanes, on the grounds that current Health and Safety requirements would entail the intrusive and unsightly demolition of large sections of hedgerows. They said the effect would be potentially devastating to the hedgerows and would erode the rural character of the lane.

Quiet Lanes

184. The CPRE's Guide to 'Quiet Lanes' was quoted by one WP member as follows:

Quiet Lanes are designated minor rural roads intended to pay special attention to the needs of walkers, cyclists, horse riders and the mobility impaired. They are designed to enable users to enjoy country lanes in greater safety and encourage car drivers to respect more vulnerable road users...[They] are a key way of widening transport choice...by encouraging local journeys to be made on foot or bicycle, and for recreation. While cars are not banned and use of these roads is shared, lower speed limits and discrete road signs can encourage drivers to slow down and help to promote a more tranquil rural environment...Quiet Lanes work best when they are part of a network...[linking] residents to...shop[s], school[s]...nearby villages...[They] are about appreciating the beauty and tranquillity of country lanes rather than travelling...as quickly as possible in a car. By helping to protect the character and tranquillity of the countryside from traffic, reducing the intimidating effects of traffic on rural roads, building community links and encouraging healthy, recreational activities, Quiet Lanes play a valuable role in improving people's quality of life.

Pedestrian Route

185. One member proposed that a safe, walking/cycle /pushchair pathway should be created on the lower section of Strand Lane (from Ashfield Close to the property 'Higher Strand, near the A361) by using S106 funds to purchase a strip of land on the field-side of the existing right-hand-side hedge (as one looks down Strand Lane).

186. They also said that if land was available the existing pathway (from the A361 past the telephone box) could be extended up-hill to the 'Higher Strand' property on the corner of Strand Lane.

187. It was also pointed out that these solutions would provide safe passage for pedestrians (and cyclists) without destroying large sections of the hedges on Strand Lane or widening the road in any way.

A361 Manoeuvres

188. Some WP members proposed the introduction of traffic bollards or a yellow hatched box on the A361 at the bottom of Strand Lane to discourage dangerous U-turns. One person summed up the issue thus:

I...want to ban...U-turns at the bottom end of Strand Lane. I have observed many near-miss-accidents at this junction since living here, and most of these have been associated with people doing U-turns.

A361 Crossing between the Tarka Trail and Ashford

189. The majority of WP members support a safer form of pedestrian and cycle crossing for the A361 at the bottom of Strand Lane. Currently, there is no traffic or pedestrian control at the crossing (but there is a very small central 'island') and those using it often face intense traffic flows and relatively high speeds since the 40mph limit is frequently exceeded.
190. No one supported either a pedestrian/cyclist bridges or underpass, and a zebra crossing was deemed to be dangerous since vehicles might slow down without warning for pedestrians crossing. However, the option that WP members favoured for highlighting in the NP and as the basis for a campaign to DCC was for a pelican crossing with pedestrian controlled traffic lights to give clear warnings to approaching vehicles and guaranteed crossing times for pedestrians and cyclists.
191. How things are now and how they might be are illustrated on the next page.



Top Road to Heanton Punchardon

192. The so-called Top Road in Ashford comes last in this review of road safety issues, but one WP member said it was certainly important in the overall picture. They observed that if traffic can be intimidating on Strand Lane it can be positively dangerous on the Top Road due to higher traffic volumes and speeds. There is a 30mph limit, but it is widely disregarded, so reducing the limit to 20 mph would almost certainly be futile. No specific 'solutions' were proposed, but the problem should be acknowledged as a subject of for the NP. It might be worthwhile considering the introduction of a limited number of speed bumps at each end of the Strand Lane to Adder Lane section (just before the lane junctions in each case). That measure would affect few local journeys but would help to control many people using the Top Road as a fast 'rat run'.

Services and Amenities

General

193. The WP acknowledged that travel to most services (such as doctors, dentists, chiropodists, physiotherapists, supermarkets, opticians, post offices and the local hospital) is by car, bus or taxi to Barnstaple (two miles) or Braunton (three miles). An occasional daily bus service stops on the A361 (close to the Garden Centre) or at Meadowside. Ashford parish itself has few services and amenities other than the parish church and the rather small and unmodernised church hall, though these provide important and well used venues for Christian worship and community events – so they should be supported and enhanced where possible. Many WP members appreciate the growing sense of community in the village and would want future development to be planned such that it continues to enhance the feeling of togetherness.

Church and Church Hall

194. There was a clear feeling that the trend towards more village activities should be encouraged, with more pop-up pubs, cinemas, dining and etc.
195. There was considerable appreciation for the way in which the church hall contributes to village life by providing a venue for a wide range of activities with very reasonable hire charges; but it was also recognised that the building should, ideally, be modernised in various ways. Not all of these might be affordable or feasible within the current structure, but it was felt that the NP should include the main priorities for improvement – while also, perhaps, exploring how these might be funded (perhaps from grants or from subsidy from the APC). The priorities listed in the feedback were:

Better access and parking spaces – with various suggestions to make access fairer (see below)

High quality toilet cubicle with facilities for the disabled

New kitchen

General refurbishment and repairs, including to the electrical wiring.

Car Parking and Recreation Area

196. One WP member said that most people are unaware that the two parking spaces beside the church hall are not privately owned, and so the spaces are normally unused (by the public) even when empty. It was suggested that the two parking spaces should be clearly signed as available for public and church hall use.
197. The prospect of a new carpark within easy reach of the current church hall was welcomed by most of the WP and there were suggestions of what might be done, including how a new parking area could benefit the village without leading to the development of the associated field. The key ideas from one WP member were that the land purchased for the carpark should be:

Protected by covenants prohibiting the carpark from giving access to the lower field (to protect from housing development in conservation area)

Large enough to accommodate a village amenity or recreational space, with a playground area, exercise equipment for all ages, benches and BBQ facility

Off-limits to dogs

Subject to a height restriction to exclude camper van parking

For the sole use of residents

The grass area proposed behind the parking area should be restricted to use by children and adults and off limits to dogs.

Bus Users

198. One member suggested that there should be safe gravelled footpath from somewhere near the junction of Meadowside and Strand Lane, to give access to the bus stops on the A361.

Tarka Holiday Park

199. The WP indicated that there had been no change in their or residents' views since the large residents' meeting opposing the enlargement of the site. They said that there is continuing opposition to the further growth of this highly intrusive site that (they said) blights the landscape along the A361 and spoils the views of the village from the near-bank of the riverside Tarka Trail. One typical WP comment was:

In common with the majority [of residents], I'm opposed to any further expansion of the park. I'm also very annoyed by the amount of trees that have been removed from the site as this has just made the existing place more of an eyesore.

200. Some WP members said the recently enlarged site is already too large in relation to Ashford; and they regretted that the application for the last enlargement had got planning permission unnoticed and unopposed by the village.

201. In their current planning application to enlarge the site substantially, the owners of Tarka Park (in a document written by Enzygo) have referred to the proposed development and change of use from a fruit farm to a holiday Park as a form of "subtle urbanisation". In contrast to this rather idealised and partial view, the WP members consider its current appearance to be vulgar, brash and completely out of keeping with its location. WP members are disappointed that so many trees have been cut down around the caravan park and they were keen to preserve those left. In summary, the WP members said that the NP should set out systematically the community's views that the site should:

Not expand further

Preserve existing trees while improving tree cover and screening

Reduce the brashness of its roadside advertising and create a frontage that better blends with the rural riverside setting

Reduce its light pollution

Minimise its periodic noise pollution.

202. Therefore, WP members were resolved that the NP should include a robust statement of opposition to any further growth of the caravan park, while also seeking to influence council policies about the visual impact, light pollution and noise from the site. A typical comment was:

There should be no further expansion of the Tarka Holiday Caravan Park and...it must respect and not have an adverse impact on the quiet rural nature of Ashford.