

A. Introduction

What is a Parish Plan?

A Parish Plan gives everyone in the community an opportunity to say what they think about the issues affecting the parish and how they would like to see things change in the future.

Producing Parish Plans is part of the national policy of giving more power to parish councils to decide what is best for their own communities. The process of producing this plan has been funded by the Countryside Agency as part of its "Vital Villages" scheme. The Countryside Agency wants all sections of the community to join together to decide what they want to happen locally and then work with the right organisations to get things done.

Parish Plans can cover everything that is relevant for the people who live and work in the community. They set out the improvements people would like to see over the next few years. They have the potential to influence the actions of a wide range of organisations, as well as setting out a programme of future actions by the Parish Council itself.

Why we produced our Parish Plan

The Parish plan sets out in one place all the things that are special about Much Birch and important to parishioners – its history, its landscape and environment, the local services and facilities. We produced the plan to help preserve this distinctive character and to ensure that development and change make a positive contribution to the parish's future.

The Parish Plan will guide the Parish Council when it represents the views of parishioners and states the needs of the parish to external organisations. In particular, we believe that the plan will give Much Birch a voice and influence with Herefordshire Council and the Herefordshire Partnership in the following areas:

- Herefordshire Council produces the Unitary Development Plan and decides individual planning applications. The Council has agreed to the principle of adopting the planning components of Parish Plans as Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) to the (emerging) Unitary Development Plan. This means that, once adopted by Herefordshire Council as SPG, the Parish Plan will influence planning decisions in the parish, including the determination of planning applications.
- The Government is introducing a new local planning system, replacing UDPs with Local Development Frameworks. When Herefordshire Council produces its first Local Development Framework, Parish Plans will provide an important source of local information and opinion.
- The Herefordshire Partnership has drawn up the Community Strategy: The Herefordshire Plan. This provides a framework for local groups to plan their work, a focus for other plans and a reference point for local people to measure progress. It identifies ten ambitions for the services provided by the different public, private and voluntary sector organisations in the area and makes links between them to improve service delivery. Ten Ambition Groups meet to work towards each of the Ambitions.

The Plan will help the Parish Council when it is making decisions about services and developments that will affect the parish. In some cases the Parish Council will be responding to proposals coming from local people or external organisations, but the research and discussion that has taken place during the parish planning process has allowed us to identify things that local people can tackle themselves. We have set these out in the Action Plan, the most important part of our document. We list a number of actions and for each action we explain why it is needed, how it will be carried out, who will be responsible and when it will be taken forward.

The Parish Council itself will be responsible for many of the actions in the Action Plan. It may be possible to involve some voluntary sector organisations such as Herefordshire Voluntary Action and Community First to assist in making progress with some of the activities.

Producing the plan has been a great opportunity for local people to work together contributing views, skills, energy and experience. People who are not usually involved in parish affairs have taken part. Young people have come forward with their thoughts about what is needed. Producing the plan has been a great way of bringing people together; it has helped build community spirit; we aim to keep up the process as we carry out the Action Plan.

How we produced the Plan

The Countryside Agency has for some time been promoting the benefits to Parishes of producing Parish Plans. Much Birch Parish Council recognised the importance of the opportunity and obtained a Parish Plans Grant from the Countryside Agency's "Vital Villages" scheme on March 8th, 2002 towards the cost of drawing up the Parish Plan. The Parish Council held an open meeting on March 13th and established the Parish Plan Steering Group.

The Parish Plan Steering Group was chaired by Dick Brimacombe and five Working Groups were established to identify the issues associated with the following topics: business, education, environment, planning/housing and transport. The groups collected information about each topic, identified the main concerns, discussed ideas and considered the links between the different topics. Regular Steering Group meetings have been held, all of them advertised on notice boards and in the local newsletter, and open to the public.

With the assistance of our Facilitator, Lynda Wilcox from the Herefordshire Association of Local Councils, we organised three methods of consultation – a Planning for Real Event and two questionnaire surveys, one for adults and one for young people.

In September 2003 we sent questionnaires to all households in the parish. 259 residents responded to the questionnaire out of a total adult resident population of the parish at the time of the 2001 Census of 699, a response rate of 37%. The analysis of the information was completed in March 2004 and presented in a report "Much Birch Parish Plan Survey" which is available as a separate supportive document.

The "Ideas Harvest" was held on Saturday October 18th, 2003 at the Much Birch Community Hall. Seventy-eight residents of the parish attended. Information and ideas were collected on 1:1250 maps and on a model of the parish made by Year 6 children at Much Birch School. The model contains personal comments and anecdotes from the children and is now on display on a wall in the Community Hall.

The draft Parish Plan was produced by the Steering Group in the spring of 2004, based on the information provided through the survey research, consultations and community participation. The Parish Plan was formally accepted by the Parish Council at its meeting on September 8th, 2004 and the Parish Plan County Steering Group and Herefordshire Council have been consulted on the plan's content.

Every household in the parish will receive a Parish Plan Summary setting out the main action points. The complete document is available to local residents via the Parish Council.



**The Ideas Harvest
October 2003**

