

FINCHAMPSTEAD PARISH COUNCIL

FORWARD PLAN 2005 - 2010

November 2005

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INTRODUCTION

Late in 1997 Finchampstead Parish Council undertook an exercise in forward planning with the intention of identifying areas that provided opportunities for the Parish Council to improve life in Finchampstead for its parishioners. The process continues on an annual basis to incorporate any new opportunities or threats that may arise in Finchampstead, and periodically the long term plan is reviewed. This document forms that review.

The Parish Council has limited powers in Local Government matters and is constrained in funding projects, but it is able to attempt to move those other authorities to follow the direction that the Council believes is right for Finchampstead.

The result of a survey of the Parish Councillors was used. This set out matters that they considered should be included for consideration. The committee members who were concerned with the particular activity then considered these ideas. Each committee then agreed which of the items would be sent forward for inclusion in the final plan.

A summary of all the matters discussed was then given to the full Parish Council and finally incorporated in this document. This document represents the results of that survey and the initial plan prepared from those results.

At present the Parish Council is undertaking two major projects, namely the Finchampstead Design Statement and Finchampstead 2006+. These projects will take months to complete and will require questionnaires to be completed by the Finchampstead residents. The results of these surveys may well influence aspects of this plan and will be considered by each committee and the main council as they arise.

We do not consider this document to be final and complete, but it represents a snapshot of things seen today and the Parish Council will be updating and changing the plan as events evolve.

This plan sets out the intentions of the Finchampstead Parish Council during the period 2005 - 2010. This will involve other stakeholders including Wokingham District Council, local land owners and representatives and users of local Rights of Ways such as The Ramblers and the BHS.

BACKGROUND TO THE PARISH

This page will be updated with current stats and output from various projects when completed.

Size and population

Finchampstead lies in the south-east corner of Wokingham District. It covers an area of approximately 19.35 square Kilometres, or 7.47 square miles, and has a population estimated at 12,000.

Population change over the past years showed a high point in 1996 but figures by Wokingham District Council (WDC) estimate that by 2006 the population will be back to the 1991 numbers. The figures from the District Council are as follows:

1991	11,772
1996	12,122
2000	11,854 projected
2006	11,672 projected

Housing

House building has been increasing due to the desirability of Finchampstead as a residential area. Figures obtained from the annual publication "Planning Commitments for Housing" (WDC) show the following position after taking gains and losses into account:

Year	Completed	Under Construction	Outstanding consents
1995/96	23	7	43
1996/97	21	8	66
1997/98	16	14	84

Average house prices in Finchampstead reflect the high demand for homes in the parish and coupled with the national increase in house prices, have meant that the price of houses in the parish have considerably increased. Figures obtained from a local estate agent show that after a fall of around 28% between 1988 and 1993 an average home on the Fernlea development has since risen in value by almost 50%.

High prices obtained for new homes and the difficulty of obtaining land for development encourages developers to build higher priced properties in order to maximise profit for each plot. The result is that starter homes or smaller two and even three bedroom houses are rarely built. Information contained in "Planning Commitments for Housing" show that four bedroom or higher completions were as high as 88%.

Community structure

Finchampstead divides between the North and South wards of the parish. The "Village" is the centre of the southern area. This area is less closely developed and has an abundance of open spaces such as Finchampstead Ridges and Simons Wood, both owned by the National Trust, and the Memorial Park. The northern area, although more intensively developed, has open areas such as the California Country Park and the playing fields around the Rides Community Centre, but is generally a less rural area than the South Ward of the parish.

Roads

Many residents live, but do not work in the parish. Commuting is by car or by car and train from surrounding railway stations. Bus services are few and infrequent and do not operate at night. This means that few households are without a car which is used for travel to work, school, shopping and social occasions. Roads in the parish are predominantly country standard, with traffic patterns that tend to become heavy during the morning and evening rush hours, so some roads become very congested. Many roads in the parish are unsuitable for larger vehicles that service the Hogwood Industrial area and supermarkets, or have to pass through Finchampstead to reach destinations outside the parish.

Schools

There are five schools located within the parish. These are:

Finchampstead CE Primary School
Nine Mile Ride Primary School
Gorse Ride Infant School
Gorse Ride Junior School
Waverley School

No secondary school exists in the parish.

Recreational, sporting and community facilities

Finchampstead is blessed with several large areas of National Trust land where it is possible to walk and ride. In addition California Country Park provides scope for family outings and has a children's paddling pool which is extensively used in the summer months.

The Memorial Park has cricket and football pitches of a relatively high standard (cricket at minor county level has been played) and a flourishing sports club exists. Football pitches and a cricket pitch are available at the Rides Community Centre and football pitches at Waverley School. Despite these facilities a need for further pitches exists.

There are three community halls in the parish. The Memorial Hall in the Village, the California (Ratepayers) Hall at California cross-roads, and the Rides Community Centre in Gorse Ride. Waverley School is also available for some sporting and community facilities.

PLANNING

Need to retain green areas to keep semi-rural status

The number of new houses built in Finchampstead over the past 25 years has been without increase in the local infrastructure, which means that local doctors and schools are all full. This once green and leafy rural parish is increasingly becoming urbanised and any small patch of land that does not currently have planning permission is under threat by developers. The parish is losing the individuality which brought residents to it in the first place, and the Parish Council will take a firm stand to resist any further encroachment into Greenfield sites and maintain the green gaps and wedges between settlements.

Tree Preservation Orders will be sought wherever appropriate to maintain the character of an area of the parish.

The Parish Council's policy is to object to all planning applications where development is sited in front of the existing building line. If this were to be allowed generally the whole nature of the road would change to a much more urban aspect and this should be resisted.

Where a development in the parish has been given permission with the developer making a Section 106 payment to the District Council, the Parish Council should be involved in any decision where it will be spent. The Parish Council will endeavour to ensure that the money is spent in Finchampstead and that regular dialogue is maintained with the Chief Executive on certain planning issues to include Section 106 monies.

The Parish Council will continue to report planning violations to the District Council. While it notes that the legislation currently in force concerning Enforcement Action takes far too long for any contraventions to be removed, it will continue to monitor such sites and try to ensure that a satisfactory outcome is achieved.

Type of housing to be built in Finchampstead

The overwhelming majority of new houses built in Finchampstead have a minimum of four bedrooms, with an increasing tendency to five bedrooms. This has meant that there is very little in the price range of local young people who therefore have to move away to live. This will eventually result in Finchampstead lacking the full range of age groups, with a resulting loss of identity and the likelihood that it will turn into a 'dormitory' area, with local residents travelling away to work and with no interest in the parish as a whole. The Parish Council will bring pressure to bear on the District Council to ensure that developers must be encouraged to provide starter homes in the parish in sustainable locations, in line with the guidelines already laid down by the District Council. Such homes must be in keeping with the surrounding properties, and applications to build flats on sites previously occupied by houses will be resisted.

In addition there is the need to consider housing for elderly people who live in homes which are too big for their needs and are unable to find smaller accommodation in the parish. Developers should be encouraged to build a greater mix of housing to meet the requirements of all local residents.

The Planning Committee will monitor the number of houses actually built in comparison with those given permission.

Any new development must be aesthetically in keeping with other properties in the area.

Industrial and Business Development

Any industrial development should solely be within the confines of the existing estate at Hogwood, although the Parish Council would be completely opposed to any attempt to increase the current size of the Hogwood estate unless the access to that site is improved. With the financial collapse of many marginal farms, in future attempts may

be made to turn these properties into semi-industrial enterprises (e.g. car repairs) or small estates where workshop accommodation is available for rent. The Parish Council policy in such instances is to consider each case on its merits and whether it is in keeping with the rural nature of the Parish.

The Parish Council is committed to retaining the shops and post offices currently located in the Parish and to expanding their provision wherever possible.

Telecommunications Masts

We will object to any masts proposed to be built in a settlement area close to properties and schools.

Conclusion

The Planning Committee will take note and incorporate into its Five Year Plan any recommendations made by the Finchampstead Design Statement.

EDUCATION

Secondary school in Finchampstead

With the tremendous growth in population in Finchampstead, it is extraordinary that there is no local secondary school. One was originally promised to be built once the gravel had been extracted from the area now known as Sand Martins, but this is now a golf course, and undoubtedly such a promise added to the attractions of the parish bringing in so many new residents.

The result of the failure of the secondary school to be built has been the huge increase in traffic taking children to the secondary schools that they attend. In addition to the numbers of school buses that have had to be provided, many parents drive their children to school, either those who live just within the three mile limit or those with children who do not attend the 'catchment' school for their area. This heavy traffic adds considerably to the length of the school day for these children, and they also lose out on after school activities because they have to catch school buses at set times.

A secondary school in Finchampstead is not only vital but long overdue. This should be in addition to the existing secondary schools, not as a replacement for any of them, as this would mean that school buses were on the roads *importing* pupils into the area rather than *exporting* them.

AMENITIES

We support local organisations, maintain and improve facilities and keep in touch with the community.

We have identified the following areas that we currently support and have set out our plans for them over the next five years.

California Country Park

The Committee works with WDC to improve safety, comfort and leisure. WDC have installed walkways through the bog area at considerable expense, refurbished the paddling pool and a café is now open. We support WDC by making generous annual donations towards maintenance of the paddling pool and there is no doubt that the Park is more attractive than when the previous plan was prepared.

We are looking at developing this forgotten jewel. WDC are considering a new building to house the Scouts and other activities and there is the possibility of building some tennis courts as well. The Park really has lots of potential and we will support further improvements.

Parish Library

We were successful in persuading WDC to let us have use of the container library for two days per week on a trial basis, and public support has largely proved the case for a permanent library. We must press WDC to ensure that as a minimum requirement the container library is accepted as a permanent feature, and we believe there is a strong case for a permanent library.

Youth and Children's Projects

We support the Youth facilities at the Rides Hall, although we accept they are inadequate. We need to apply pressure to WDC to bring them up to the same standard as other youth facilities in the Wokingham district. The whole area needs major improvements and we are investigating whether funding may be available to assist us in our aim.

The children's play area in the Memorial Park is being refurbished and a teenager's area has been created by the Finch Kidz project. There are children's play areas in Finchampstead that need improvement, the one at the Rides being in poor condition at the moment. Hopefully, this can be rolled into a general upgrading of the Rides area, but if this does not happen we should consider taking action on the children's area alone.

Keeping in touch with the community

We stay in touch by means of the Annual Gathering, our Parish Newsletter, and a monthly report of our activities in the Parish Magazine and agendas of future Parish Council

Meetings are posted on notice boards throughout Finchampstead. The public are always welcome to attend our Parish Council and committee meetings.

Our website provides local news and history, minutes of meetings, pictures and Parish Council information and has the facility for parishioners to contact us by email. We expect to make further additions to the website as technology develops.

We do not believe there is sufficient demand for a Parish surgery.

Public Transport

We actively support local transport schemes for the elderly and disabled and will support WDC's plans to develop the local bus service.

Sport

We do not directly promote sport in the community, although we support bodies that do. We should consider whether this is our function and if demands are not being met, encourage local agencies to meet those demands.

Funding

We will need to identify and raise funds from sources that will provide funds for Parish projects, such as the new building at California Country Park.

Environmental Enhancements

We provide flower baskets, provision of waste skips, prevention of graffiti and litter clearing. We took litter cleaning a step forward by appointing our Litter Warden two years ago and few would argue with this decision. We intend to improve dull bare concrete roundabouts, provide hanging baskets and seats on footpaths.

The future

We hope that other projects will be identified through the development of Finchampstead 2006+.

There is no doubt that the most significant development in Finchampstead would be the new Secondary School. This should enable us to have a permanent library and provide facilities for a proper Youth Centre and hopefully a more suitable parish office. We will ensure that WDC is aware of our views.

ROADS AND ROAD SAFETY

This plan sets out a series of projects which the Finchampstead Parish Council Roads and Road Safety Committee wish to promote during the period 2005 - 2010. This will also involve other stakeholders including Wokingham District Council, Thames Valley Police, the Thames Valley Safety Camera Partnership and local schools.

California Crossroads/Avery Corner

The alignment of the 2 mini roundabouts is poor leading to traffic passing on the "wrong" side. Congestion resulting from drivers being unable to get into the main car park results in traffic backing up and blocking the mini roundabouts at peak periods. LGV's travelling from the village find the turn into the western section of Nine Mile Ride very challenging. There is no effective control over vehicles entering and leaving via the multiple access points to the shops and garage. All of these factors combine to make the junction congested and hazardous.

We need to work with WDC to plan an appropriate solution, which could involve signalling the junction or alterations to the roundabouts. Any solution will need to demonstrate tangible benefits to both safety and traffic flow and not impact unduly on the adjacent shops and garage.

Safer Routes to School

The SRTS schemes for Gorse Ride Infant Gorse Ride Junior and Nine Mile Ride Schools have now been completed. Consultation with parents and residents has also been undertaken in preparation for a SRTS scheme for Finchampstead C of E School to aim to reduce localised congestion and improve road safety. We will work with WDC to ensure that the resultant scheme is implemented by 2006 and brings benefits to school users and local residents as well as through traffic using the B3348.

Speed

Excessive traffic speed remains a significant concern for many Finchampstead residents. This can be detrimental to road safety and noise levels and impacts on the willingness of residents to walk or cycle on local journeys because speeding traffic makes them feel unsafe.

Most of the major routes through Finchampstead are now restricted to speeds of 40mph or less, with new limits having been introduced over the last few years.

These are examples of roads which currently have a 60mph or 50mph limit which we have identified as being appropriate for a speed reduction:

Fleet Hill B3348
Wellingtonia Avenue B3348
The Ridges B3348
Jubilee Road, Spring Gardens and Finchampstead Road B3016
Sandhurst Road A321

We intend to campaign in conjunction with local residents during 2005-06 to get WDC to implement appropriate reductions during the period of this plan, which will improve road safety for drivers, cyclists, pedestrians and horse riders.

Many roads are currently subject to both 40mph and 30 mph speed limits in quite short stretches. This causes confusion for drivers who are frequently unsure as to which limit prevails. We will encourage WDC to keep this issue under review.

To monitor issues of speed, we will encourage WDC to increase the frequency and location of traffic speed monitoring using data loggers. During 2005 we will investigate purchase of our own data logger to undertake our own research, to substantiate and complement WDC data to strengthen our case.

VAS - Vehicle Activated Signs

5 such signs are now installed in the Parish (Finchampstead Road and Nine Mile Ride). In conjunction with WDC we will monitor their effectiveness and providing benefits can be identified, we will name future locations and campaign for further signs (a total of 10 by 2010). However, our strong preference is for de-mountable VAS signs which can be moved to different locations in the parish. This will have the benefit of spreading the safety message, whilst avoiding the risk of drivers ignoring the signs because they become too used to the message and location.

SID - Speed Indication Device

This has been successfully used on many of the busier roads in Finchampstead to educate drivers and enforce the prevailing speed limits. We will continue to request its deployment by WDC, particularly in response to residents concerns.

Speed Enforcement

When there is evidence that SID and VAS are not addressing speeding problems we will request Thames Valley Police use mobile speed cameras to discourage excessive speeding.

We currently have two fixed speed cameras in Barkham Ride, which were installed because of several injuries and one fatality in that location. Under current regulations, we do not have other locations which qualify for fixed speed cameras. This will be kept under review so that if several injury accidents occur or if the current criteria change, we will lobby for additional fixed cameras.

Accident Database

In 2005 the R&RS Committee introduced a simple database to record all known traffic accidents in the parish. Over the duration of this plan this will provide us with detailed statistics which will enable us to propose road safety improvements to WDC, who only record injury accidents. The compiling of this database is reliant on input from councillors and local residents and a facility to submit this data now features on the FPC website.

Hogwood Industrial Estate

Additional signs have been installed to try and direct commercial traffic to Hogwood. Should any large scale development occur in the Finchampstead, Barkham or Arborfield area we will campaign for a link road from Hogwood to the A327 funded by Section 106 money.

Road Maintenance

Although WDC undertakes regular road inspections, many minor roads in Finchampstead are only inspected every six months. As a committee we submit regular defect notices to WDC to ensure prompt remedial action. All members of the committee are encouraged to promptly report dangerous defects to WDC

Footways

During the period of this plan we will strive to get a footway installed along The Ridges between Dell Road and Rhododendron Corner by 2007. The lack of a footway between the War Memorial and Spring Gardens is also mentioned by local residents. This committee will try to identify a practical solution to this.

Road Signs

During 2006 we will focus on reviewing all road signs (warning, directional street name etc.) in the parish. They need to be clean, appropriately located and not obscured. We will identify requirements for new signs and review whether any signs are superfluous and need removing.

Quiet Routes

In 2001 WDC introduced the legislation which allows it to designate Quiet Routes. This legislation was intended to identify certain lanes as being heavily used by non-vehicular traffic and would involve the introduction of a 30mph limit and appropriate signage to alert motorists to the likely presence of walkers, cyclists and horse riders. There are several such lanes in Finchampstead, particularly those that link up with Public Footpaths and Bridleways.

In 2006 we will focus on this issue and strive to get such routes designated.

Horse Riding

Many parts of the Parish are popular with horse riders. Despite this, there are no signs warning drivers of locations where they are likely to find horse riders. We aim to have standard warning signs alerting drivers to the presence of horse riders wherever a bridleway intersects with a road.

FOOTPATHS AND RECREATIONAL AREAS

Finchampstead has an excellent network of more than 20 miles of footpaths and bridleways and they are generally in very good condition. We employ a part-time Footpath Warden who strives to maintain the paths to a high standard and to keep them clear of restrictive vegetation.

Footpaths and bridleways are all clearly signed and numbered and we currently have no obstructions or disputes so the entire network is fully accessible. Over recent years many stiles have been replaced by kissing gates and, where appropriate, disabled access kissing gates. We believe our network to be the most extensive, accessible and well maintained Public Rights of Way network in the WDC area.

Looking ahead, the following projects are envisaged:

Bridleway 34

Despite being recently diverted and extended, this path terminates in a dead end. The intervening land is in private ownership, but we will try to get this important link established between Bridleway 34 and Bridleway 26 (Goose Green). This would significantly improve the riding opportunities for local horse riders. We should involve the BHS in our efforts to establish this missing link by 2010.

Wick Hill - track from Spring Gardens to Goose Green.

Although regularly used by walkers and horse riders, this track has not yet been formally designated as a Bridleway. The landowner raises no objections but the formal designation as a bridleway seems to be held up within Legal Services at WDC. We aim to achieve official designation by 2006.

New Permissive Path

As part of the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, a totally new permissive path is to be created across Manor Farm land. This 700m path will run north/south from beside the Old Rectory (now Tallius) through the fields to Lower Sandhurst Road at a point adjacent to The Hawthornes. We anticipate having this permissive path in use during 2006.

Cemex/Manor Farm land

Cemex (formerly RMC), are obliged to create a number of new footpaths on the land south of Lower Sandhurst Road, as they gradually complete the restoration of their gravel quarrying operations. Although the site is not scheduled to be fully restored until 2013, we will work with Cemex, WDC and Moor Green Lake Reserve to ensure that most of the new footpaths are supplemented by parallel bridleways (as with 17a and 49 at Moor Green).

Footpaths Map

The popular Finchampstead footpaths map produced by WDC and the Countryside Agency is now out of print. We will, if necessary at our expense, reprint this useful guide by the end of 2005.

Blackwater Valley Footpath

This long distance path crosses the southern boundary of the parish. Although it is currently designated as a footpath, we support the possible long-term reclassification of this path as a bridleway or as a parallel footpath and bridleway as this would open up this scenic route to cyclists and horse riders. We will liaise with the Blackwater Valley Countryside Partnership and also the Blackwater Valley User Group to achieve this aim.

FINANCE

Parish Financial Structure

The relatively recent structure where the Amenities, Roads and Footpaths Committees compile and monitor their own budgets has resulted in greater control and has proved beneficial. The Finance committee continues to exercise overall control, particularly at the Precept meeting.

The Finance Committee remains responsible for budgeting and controlling the general administration and various financial commitments including support for Youth Activities, Village Halls, Schools, Churches and local charities.

Apart from renaming the Finance Committee the Finance and General Purposes Committee no structure changes are thus proposed in the next 5 year period.

Parish Administration

The recent recruitment of an Assistant to the Parish Clerk to cover for holidays, to man the office on Mondays and Fridays, and in particular to take over the Planning Committee's clerical work should overcome the current staffing limitations and should suffice for the next five years.

However the office accommodation provided by the courtesy of Finchampstead Park Management Committee is inadequate and larger premises in a more central place should be sought in the coming year.

Risk Assessment

The Risk Assessment sub committee is now composed of three members of the Finance Committee. Terms of Reference need to be defined to ensure it meets at least twice a year and that its recommendations are recorded and progressed at Finance Committee meetings.

Financial Control

The existing system of approving all cheques at the monthly Parish Council meetings and reviewing quarterly balanced accounts at the Finance Committee meetings appears adequate and has met with the Internal Auditors approval, and thus no change is proposed.

The proposal to computerise the accounting system has advantages for payroll, VAT and presentation purposes and will be implemented in tandem with the current manual system during the 2005/6 accounting period, subject to the Clerks programme and approval of the proposed SAGE computerised system.

Current banking arrangements are convenient and achieving maximum interest income and are continually monitored to maintain this situation.

The Financial Regulations of the Parish were updated in 2004 and will be reviewed again in 2007.

Parish Expenditure

Due to relatively limited Parish Council commitments the Parish Precept has consistently been among the lowest of the 17 parishes of the District. Expenditure has increased in recent years partly due to expenditure by Parish Committees and this has achieved a better public service at an acceptable precept increase.

Expenditure has increased on functions for which the District is primarily responsible and this now amounts to about 20% of our Precept. However this expenditure is wholly for the benefit of the Parish and is in addition to that provided by the District. This expenditure will be closely monitored.

Expenditure on Parish Administration will continue at current levels except for Parish Office accommodation which will be dependent on what can be made available for a larger and more central facility.

Expenditure on Schools, Churches, local Community Centres and local Charities has stabilised over the past 5 years and will continue on the same level in the foreseeable future. Exceptional requests will continue to be considered on their merits.

Expenditure on Youth facilities is primarily a District function and currently attracts a £5,000 annual parish contribution. There is a need for a more effective facility and a project involving greater use of the Rides Community Centre could require substantial financial assistance. This project should be strongly supported and lottery/SEEDA/etc. funding will be progressed in conjunction with the District Youth Service.

Requests from local charities for loans to meet exceptional circumstances have been made in recent years. Such requests will continue to be considered on their merits.

Thus our policy for the next 5 years is, in the main, to continue with our current approach, and to ensure that at all times we achieve good value for money. We appreciate our funds come from our parishioners and require due prudence.

Parish Income

Our income comes almost entirely from our Precept and interest on our bank deposits. Revenue from any Parish sponsored projects, e.g. Parish Map, are planned to cover costs.

Revenue is available from Lottery and other Funds to meet specific projects targeted particularly at the young, the elderly and sporting/educational facilities.

Our knowledge and expertise in this field is limited and our 5 year plan is to redress this situation possibly with a sub-committee of the Finance Committee composed of the chairs of the other committees.

One current specific fund source is the SEEDA project with a potential £40k grant for a Parish project following a wide survey of parishioners and local bodies. The scheme demands a similar £40k from other sources and this could possibly come from Parish funds. Thus this project should be given all support from the Finance Committee.

Parish Reserves

Parish reserves are maintained to ensure funds exist to meet planned annual expenditure, and to even out expenditure over high spending years. Reserves have risen to over £50,000 partly due to reduced commitments to a parish library facility, and to a delay in a loan to the local scouts.

Future potential demands on our reserves could come from:

- a) A new Parish Office
- b) An effective Youth Facility at the Rides
- c) Supporting costs of a PBSO in Finchampstead
- d) SEEDA project shortfall

No decisions have been made on these items but their costs could be significant and warrant the continuation of the current level of over £50,000.