

## 6 Background to the Village Appraisal and Details of Operation

The Parish Plan steering committee agreed that the only way to get effective feedback on the wide range of issues required was to administer a questionnaire which would be answered by as many individual residents within the village as was practically possible. The ultimate success of this, with a return rate of some 80%, was important in having a statistically significant result which adds major weight to discussions on implementation of actions resulting from the findings of the appraisal.

The main events on the timeline for the appraisal were:

- December 00. Simple pre-questionnaire in 'Contact'.
- January 01 to July 01. Design of the questionnaire.
- March 01. Meeting with key stakeholders.
- August 01. Distribution of the questionnaire
- September 01. Collection of the questionnaire.
- October / November 01. Data entry.
- December 01 / January 02. Statistical analysis.
- February 02. Publication of results of appraisal.
- March 02. Public meeting to disseminate results and to form the steering groups for the writing of the Parish Plan.

Some general notes regarding the appraisal:

- The simple pre-questionnaire <sup>1</sup> in 'Contact' asked respondents to say in a few words what they liked about the village; what they disliked; and what they would like to change. Responses were collected via boxes in the post office, surgery, library, and newsagents. The responses <sup>2</sup> were published in Contact and formed a useful basis for framing the questionnaires in the mail appraisal form.
- The key stakeholders meeting <sup>3</sup> was not well attended and it was hard to get buy-in from the larger bodies such as the Village College or Surgery at that early stage of the process. In contrast the public meeting at the end of the process, in March 02, was very well attended, filling the village hall on a dark wet cold evening with good participation and feedback.
- The design of the questionnaire <sup>4</sup> was a complex process in terms of trying to get exactly the right questions to cover all relevant subject areas, whilst not having too many questions so that they would be daunting. It was agreed that almost all questions should be multiple choice, to increase the chance of return (and also to make the results easier to analyse), with free text used for those few where further amplification was required. A complete free text sheet was also provided for additional comments people chose to make.

- The questionnaire was designed to go as one to every house in the village. The first section was to be completed by one person on behalf of that house with details that pertained to the household as a whole. The majority of the questionnaire then had to be filled in separately by every individual member within the household – up to 6 people. (Households with more than 6 people were offered additional forms).
- Software was obtained from ACRE which had been specifically written to assist with village appraisals and from which questions could be chosen; questionnaire printed; data entered; and analysis done. This software turned out to be buggy and inflexible and would probably not be recommended again. However, it did form a useful basis for thinking about appropriate questions, even though they were modified considerably and went through many iterations.
- The questionnaire was tested on a small sample cohort before being refined. It then went to the publishers (Mission Computers) for graphic design and layout. Layout and appearance were important for getting good responses and well filled in forms.
- The timing of the distribution and collection was considered critical and it was done towards the end of the summer holiday period when most people would be back at home and yet when it was light enough in the evening for people to go round and collect forms without any fear by the more elderly.
- An incentive was provided for people to fill in the forms and return them in the form of 3 prizes that they could win in a draw (a cash prize of £50; a meal for 2 at the Three Horseshoes; a bottle of sparkling wine from the Spar) and this proved to be a useful mechanism with the draw being a good community occasion.
- At the same time as the questionnaire went out it was accompanied by another form (as appended) which offered assistance from the village help scheme to those who might need, and also asked for volunteers from those who might be able to assist<sup>5</sup>.
- The questionnaires were distributed and collected by a large team of volunteers, comprising those who normally distributed the village magazine, plus Parish Councillors, and a few additional volunteers. This meant that most volunteers had only to deal with 20 to 25 houses (there being about 850 houses in the village) which they could then be very persistent with. A copy of the instruction sheet is appended<sup>6</sup>. Collectors were provided with notices<sup>7</sup> to distribute to houses a week in advance of the questionnaire to say what was due to happen. An advertisement was also placed in Contact<sup>8</sup>. A week later they distributed the questionnaires; and a week or two after that they started the collection process. If people were out at collection the distributors left a pre-printed reminder leaflet<sup>9</sup> with which they had been provided. All distributors also had a tick sheet<sup>10</sup> indicating 'their' houses and which leaflets had been distributed and whether there had been a response. This could then be cross checked against the number of returned forms at the end of the exercise.

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- One person was in charge of all central logistics and distributed blank questionnaires and collected the completed ones from the individual volunteer distributors.
  - Secrecy was maintained throughout the exercise so that all questionnaires could be returned anonymously. Questionnaires were sent out with a numbered blank white A4 envelope in which the filled form could be returned sealed, with the prize draw and help scheme forms (which necessarily had to contain addresses) returned separately and kept away from the envelope at source. The questionnaire did not ask for names or addresses at any point.
  - Data entry was professionally undertaken (LGS Services) although was not made easy by the software, but was properly verified. This took slightly longer than expected due to the high return rate but still was far quicker than would have been done with volunteers.
  - The statistical analysis was undertaken professionally by a recently graduated student from the village before he started work. Whilst basic analysis could be provided from the village appraisal software used this was not expansive, and thus the whole database was exported to a spreadsheet which was used to provide not only the standard analysis but also cross-tabulations (after the required ones had been defined by the steering committee) and graphs. As an additional exercise the same student was asked to analyse the free text responses as much as was possible by looking for common areas of concern and prioritising them.
  - Resulting statistics (published in Section 7 Outline Results to the Survey) were published in full in the Library and kept for the record. They were also put on the village website.
  - A summary of all the findings, along with plans for what was to happen next, was drawn up and published and distributed as a supplement to Contact. This also attracted people to the public meeting <sup>12</sup> where a full presentation of findings was made using PowerPoint (published in Section 7 Outline Results to the Survey).
  - A detailed budget supported the administration and operation of the process throughout and assisted gaining grant funding <sup>14</sup>.



- <sup>1</sup> What Do You Think About Our Village...? Mini questionnaire
- <sup>2</sup> The Village Action Plan            Thank you / results of mini questionnaire
- <sup>3</sup> Stakeholders Meeting            Invitation and Information
- <sup>4</sup> Comberton Village Appraisal Questionnaire
- <sup>5</sup> Prize Draw Information Sheet
- <sup>6</sup> Comberton Village Appraisal : Instructions to Questionnaire Collectors
- <sup>7</sup> Notice delivered to each home one week before the questionnaire
- <sup>8</sup> Comberton Village Action Plan advertisement
- <sup>9</sup> Reminder Leaflet
- <sup>10</sup> Delivery Areas                      Example of Delivery / Collection Sheet
- <sup>11</sup> Summary of Questionnaire Findings February 2002
- <sup>12</sup> Public Meeting                      Advertisement
- <sup>13</sup> Proposed Budget : Comberton Parish Plan
- <sup>14</sup> Proposed Structure of Comberton Parish Plan

