

COMBE VILLAGE DESIGN STATEMENT (VDS)

VILLAGE CONSULTATION AND QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY FINDINGS



Steering group:

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1. INTRODUCTION

Why do we need a Village Design Statement?

Given potential threats to Combe from increasing development in West Oxfordshire, the Parish Council decided to embark upon writing a Village Design Statement (VDS). A VDS is a community-led planning document that seeks to protect and enhance the visual character of a village and its surroundings. This is achieved by devising a set of design principles that will guide future planning decisions. A VDS aims to reflect the views of all local residents.

This report

The first step in this process has been to consult widely with residents to find out what they feel about the character of Combe, what makes it special, and what priorities people have for the future. This report gives a summary of the findings from a six-month period of consultation over the summer and autumn of 2019.

The consultation began with informal discussions and activities across the village, and ended with a household questionnaire survey. Over half (53 per cent) of the households in Combe responded to the survey, giving us a total of 169 questionnaires. We heard from people across different age-groups living in all areas of Combe.

What's next?

The VDS Steering Group is working with West Oxfordshire District Council planners to come up with planning design principles that reflect the values and priorities of Combe residents based on these findings. These principles will be incorporated into a formal planning document.

Acknowledgements

A big thank you to everyone who participated in the consultation process. We enjoyed talking to people of all ages at the cricket match barbeques held at the recreation ground, to children at Combe School, and to those walking the parish boundaries of Combe - thank you to Jonathan Ford for leading the walks and to David O'Brien for a photographic display in the Reading Room. We are also very grateful to everyone who completed the household survey and to the team of volunteers who helped to distribute and collect the questionnaires.

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2. CAPTURING THE ESSENCE OF COMBE



What words did residents use to describe Combe in the questionnaire?

peaceful

unspoilt

quintessential Cotswold village

picturesque

open spaces

outstanding natural beauty

beautiful

delightful

pretty

bucolic

charming

a gem

How would residents describe Combe to someone who didn't know it?

The best of English country living. Friendly, maintained with love and pride, beautiful, sleepy (on the surface), quiet.

[Combe is] high above the Evenlode valley, so there are lovely views – rural, fields. Many walks towards Blenheim. Lovely river and river views. Quiet, dark and peaceful. Not too big a village.

Rural village in Cotswold stone, around a village green. Steep sided river valley with flat meadows to the south of the parish. Intensive arable large fields to north of parish.

Beautiful small Cotswold village..... set in beautiful countryside surrounded by well managed farm land and woodland.

Small old English Cotswold village with a medieval church and cricket grounds in the centre and quaint cottages surrounded by farmland and countryside.

It is a real English village wrapped inside beautiful scenery.

What do people feel contributes most to the appearance and character of Combe?

The village green, the playfield/sports ground, the Cock Inn, the Reading Room, the way most homeowners take pride in the appearance of their homes and gardens, the spaciousness of the village (not built up), the history of the village with its old houses and buildings, the fact that it's so close to Blenheim.

The mixture of houses, old and new, and how they seem to fit together. The open airy feel of the village. Hearing the trains in the distance, the planes flying overhead, the church clock and bells, the cricket in the summer, and the football in the winter.

What did young people say about Combe?

The fields are lovely. It wouldn't be Combe without footpaths and endless fields. The wildlife in Combe plays a big role in its friendly and caring reputation ... [age 13]

Combe is nice, but I don't want them to build all over it. [age 12]

I love the surrounding unspoilt countryside, traditional buildings and the field in the middle (Alma Grove). [age 18]

3. FINDINGS - WHAT DO PEOPLE VALUE ABOUT COMBE?

The people of Combe told us that they value the following aspects of Combe's character and appearance, and would like to see them preserved and/or enhanced.

LANDSCAPE SETTING

Rural vistas

There was a strong desire to retain and preserve the rural integrity of the village and the surrounding landscape, with its open, uninterrupted views across the countryside. Views across the fields towards Blenheim and Long Hanborough, and across the Evenlode Valley, were particularly valued. This is captured in a quote from one survey respondent:

[I like] the views across the playing field towards the church clock tower, with the green of the countryside beyond, together with the wide endless view of the sky.

Approaches to the village

The wooded approaches to the village, together with the surrounding fields, were highlighted as important to the rural feel of the village and its special character. One participant during our informal consultations described the approaches as a '*portal into paradise*' and another referred to them as '*setting the scene*' for the village.

Settlement pattern

People would like to minimise settlement expansion in order to preserve the separate rural identity of Combe. Recurring comments highlighted the fate of surrounding villages (e.g. Stonesfield, Long Hanborough and Church Hanborough) that have succumbed to rapid development.

Survey respondents commented:

It would be nice if Combe could avoid becoming part of the extended conurbation around Oxford - a fate rapidly overtaking places like Church Hanborough.

Combe is a beautiful village, largely unchanged in visual character over many decades, yet still very much a living village. The most important thing is that it doesn't lose the glorious ring of rolling fields and woodlands that surround it. And that it does not succumb to the urban/suburban creep that is changing the nature of so many surrounding villages.

River and river walks

The river, river valley walks and historic water meadows were valued by all age-groups.

Landscape and wildlife/biodiversity

There was an interest in retaining and managing copses, hedgerows and field margins, using native species. This was valued for appearance and biodiversity (see section on biodiversity).

Footpaths through the surrounding countryside

People wanted to preserve, maintain and, where possible, extend the network of footpaths.

Dark night skies

With very few exceptions, people appreciated the dark skies of Combe and did not wish to see street lighting.

Proximity to Blenheim estate

Residents of Combe value, and are sensitive to, the role of the Blenheim estate in the surrounding landscape. The management of the estate and farmland within the parish has implications for Combe in terms of landscape appearance, traffic flows, the preservation and enhancement of biodiversity, and potential future housing development.

VILLAGE CHARACTER AND APPEARANCE***Old village heart, with village green***

The heart of the village is highly prized for its history, tranquility and spaciousness, and traditional features (e.g. stone cottages, village pumps, stone trough etc.). This historic heart is regarded as generally well-maintained and the key feature contributing to the appearance and character of Combe.

92 per cent of survey respondents (Table 1, appendix) thought that it was 'very important' to preserve the village green in the future. The Green was commonly described as the '*heart of the village*' and is spoken of with affection by many residents. Respondents told us that:

Protecting the village green and other open spaces is central to the character of the village.

[The village green is] essential to the character of the village - a precious resource.

It is a space for community events and celebrations. This helps to build relationships, unity and a sense of belonging and identity. It also brings all generations together.

Rurality of the village

Combe was described as a traditional, largely unspoilt, well-kept Cotswold village, comfortably integrated into its surrounding rural landscape. One person described it as '*nestling in the landscape*'. Another commented: '*It looks like it belongs in its landscape*'.

Green open spaces within the village

There is a widely held desire to preserve green spaces, such as the two village greens, Alma Grove field, the recreation ground, private gardens, allotments and the few remaining orchards within the village. People valued the proximity of grazing animals to the heart of the village (especially on Alma Grove field). Children emphasised the importance of nearby woods and open green spaces for the freedom to roam and play.

In answer to the question ‘What do you like best about the appearance of Combe?’, several respondents captured wider sentiments when they referred to:

The beautiful green open spaces in the very heart of the village; the Green, Alma Grove field and the playing field. They are like green lungs.

The scattered nature of the village with fields, orchards and trees interspersed between groups of buildings.

The open, rural aspect at the centre of the village, with its large, usually animal occupied field, village green, playing fields and the undulating countryside beyond.

Density of building

The emphasis on the importance of green spaces within the village is consistent with the traditional character of Combe as a dispersed village settlement. The importance of this characteristic is captured in the following comment:

It is important that in small villages such as Combe, infilling is really limited. The spaces that exist between areas of residential development are just as important as the buildings themselves in their contribution to the overall character of the village. They allow glimpses between spaces, views in and out of the village and enable the countryside and large trees to penetrate into the centre of the village. Areas such as the remnants of orchards, the village pound and allotments are all part of the historical character of the village and deserve to be retained.

This, and other comments, indicate support for maintaining low densities of building. For example, one person commented:

Combe is the perfect balance between old buildings and newer built ones in the traditional style. It is not over dense, with green spaces and the preservation of the ‘building line’ along the main roads, avoiding a ‘closed-in’ feeling.

Iconic views within the village

Respondents cited a wide range of favourite views, both within the village and across the surrounding countryside. Iconic views (in order of popularity) were:

- the view across the recreation ground towards the church (54 per cent of respondents mentioned this);
- the view from Akeman Street, across Alma Grove field, towards the church;
- views in all directions across the village green;
- the view along Church Walk.

Iconic buildings

The church and church yard, the Reading Room, the pub, the Cotswold stone cottages, Church Walk cottages, buildings clustered around the historic village green, and other historic buildings (e.g. the old chapel/Hub, the old school building, Old Vicarage and Combe House) were singled out for their contribution to the distinctive character of Combe.

Boundaries - dry stone walls and hedges

The preservation of traditional boundary walls and hedges was seen as integral to the distinctive character of the parish. Table 1 (see appendix) indicates that 75 percent of survey respondents think that it is 'very important' to preserve Combe's stone walls for the future and a similar proportion (74 per cent) regard hedgerows as 'very important'.

One respondent described the special character of the boundaries:

[I like] the mixture of stonewalls, hedges and boundaries and the different degree of colour they give through the seasons.

Tree cover

Trees, especially the oaks in the centre of the village, are regarded as an important visual component of Combe's landscape. The cedar tree in the grounds of the Old Vicarage is greatly admired and is felt to be integral to the landscape of the historic village centre. Nearly three-quarters (74 per cent) of respondents regarded protecting trees as 'very important' for Combe's appearance (Table 1) and for wildlife. As one respondent observed:

Trees and hedgerows help keep our wildlife and add to the beauty of Combe.

ARCHITECTURE AND MATERIALS

Traditional vernacular buildings

The Cotswold stone cottages and other historic vernacular buildings in the centre of Combe are highly valued for their contribution to what makes Combe special. Some people also appreciated the good mix of old and newer housing in the village, although there were some examples of newer housing developments that were less well received.

Materials

Use of materials that complement existing buildings was favoured. Table 1 indicates that 65 percent of survey respondents think that it is 'very important' to build with traditional, or similar, building materials in the future. Only 6 per cent thought it was 'unimportant'. Some people were happy to see the use of more modern materials, if of high quality.

Views on new development

People were realistic about the need for more housing, but stressed the importance of affordability and sympathetic scale and design. It was felt that any future housing development should be:

- in character/sympathetic to the existing mix of housing and historical legacy of the village;
- of modest scale, to protect the rural appearance and feel of the village.

One recent development in particular was frequently cited for its inappropriate scale and style, whilst three new houses on Akeman Street were appreciated for their sensitive design.

Tables 2 and 3 (see appendix) indicate that two-thirds of the survey respondents felt that it was 'very important' that the scale and design of any new developments should blend in with the surrounding buildings, particularly in the case of 'in-filling'. It should also be noted that, given the above comments on the importance of green spaces and low-density building, the idea of 'in-filling' in Combe is unlikely to be popular.

Comments by one respondent summed up the feelings of many people on development:

Villages such as Combe should be treated with sensitivity so as to keep that character, not as museum pieces, but as living villages that grow and expand in a sympathetic way, so that in years to come they still represent the history of our countryside and people.

HIGHWAYS

Traffic

Many people had observed an increase in the volume and speed of traffic in recent years. Just over half of the survey respondents (52 per cent) supported additional traffic calming measures, although there was ambivalence about the addition of more street furniture.

Verges

These were regarded as important for the visual appearance of Combe and as green spaces for wildlife. 62 per cent of survey respondents felt that it was 'very important' to preserve verges (Table 1).

Parking

Parking presents many challenges in the village, especially in its historic centre, where there is little off-street parking. This drew many adverse comments about the effect of parked cars on the appearance of the village and the destruction of grass verges in particular.

Pavements and footpaths

Just over one third (35 per cent) of respondents would like to see more designated pavements and footpaths. There were particular concerns about the absence of a safe path to Combe Halt. Others would like to see existing pavements and paths better maintained.

BIODIVERSITY

Although no specific questions were asked about biodiversity during the public consultations, several biodiversity-related themes emerged during informal discussions and in the questionnaire survey responses. People expressed a wish to:

Preserve open spaces for biodiversity

This was seen to be important both within the village and in the surrounding countryside areas (see comments on verges above).

Protect the countryside

References were made to the importance of trees, meadows, the river, field margins and hedgerows as eco-systems for biodiversity. Three-quarters of the questionnaire respondents thought it was 'very important' to preserve hedgerows and trees, both for the village's appearance and wildlife. Hedgerows were described '*as wildlife corridors*' and '*living barriers [that] provide home and protection and food to a diverse amount of wildlife*'.

Looking to the future, one survey respondent commented:

It will be important to retain the green and semi-wild spaces in order to maintain the range of wildlife (birds and mammals) that are so much a part of the magic of the village.

Younger residents showed particular concern for Combe's environmental wellbeing in their comments:

The fields are lovely. It wouldn't be Combe without footpaths and endless fields. The wildlife in Combe plays a big role in its friendly and caring reputation. It would be nice to add information boards in the woods to explain the wildlife and what grows. [age 13]

The environment of Combe is of unrivalled importance in this modern age of climate change. [age 15]

Enhance the river and river walks

There was some concern over the loss of water quality in the Evenlode river following adverse media reports, and a desire to enhance both the quality of the river and river walks.

Restore lost habitats

There was regret over certain habitat losses, particularly in areas of surrounding farmland. A few people favoured a policy of 'rewilding' and minimal trimming of verges.

Reduce lighting at night

Although many praised Combe's dark night skies, there were some who would like to see lighting levels reduced further, both for reasons of appearance and nocturnal wildlife. The light pollution from LED lighting at Combe Halt was singled out for particular criticism, and some would also like to see people's domestic external lighting arrangements moderated.

In summary, these concerns fit with Blenheim Estate's stated policy commitment to enhancing the area's 'natural capital' (i.e. nature, with its social, economic and cultural benefits) and biodiversity. This is encapsulated in Blenheim's 'Land Strategy' (launched in 2019), which has implications for the evolving landscape in and around Combe.

CONCLUSION – WHAT WERE THE MAIN MESSAGES?

People told us that they loved the wide-open views across the countryside, the wooded approaches to the village, river walks, the dark night skies, and the generally well-kept appearance of Combe. The church, the stone cottages, the village green with its oak trees, and the traditional Cotswold buildings at the heart of the village stood out as particularly special.

One of the clearest messages from the findings was how much people value, and wish to protect, green open spaces within the village. This included not only the larger green areas, such as the village greens, Alma Grove field, the recreation ground, the church yard etc., but also the smaller spaces and verges that make up the open character of our village and provide a haven for wildlife. This links closely with people's growing concerns about protecting the countryside, the river and green spaces for the preservation and enhancement of biodiversity.

Residents were less happy with the impact of traffic and parked cars on the village's appearance. Overall, there was support for traffic calming measures. Respondents were realistic about the possibility of future housing development, but if this happens, most people would prefer affordable housing, built on a small scale, and in sympathy with the existing character of the village. The preservation of hedges and traditional dry-stone walls was seen as integral to the distinctive character of the parish.

APPENDIX

Table 1 Looking to the future, how important do you think it is to

	Very important	Important	Quite important	Not important	Unsure
Protect verges	62%	21%	12%	4%	1%
Protect the village green	92%	6%	2%	<1%	-
Preserve traditional stone walls	75%	19%	4%	1%	<1%
Protect hedgerows	74%	20%	5%	1%	<1%
Protect existing trees	74%	20%	5%	1%	<1%
Build with traditional, or similar, building materials	65%	19%	9%	6%	1%

Which of these, if any, is the most important?

95 respondents picked out one of the above as particularly important to them, as follows:

Verges	9
Village green	48 - commonly described as the 'heart of the village'
Stone walls	2
Hedgerows	8
Existing trees	14
Traditional materials	14

Table 2 Where new housing is built between existing houses (so called in-filling), how important do you feel it is that the new housing blends in with the surrounding houses in terms of (i) design and (ii) scale?

	Very important	Important	Quite important	Not important	Unsure
(i) Design	66%	20%	9%	4%	<1%
(ii) Scale	63%	22%	11%	4%	<1%

Table 3 Where new housing is built at the edge of the village (so called linear development), how important do you feel it is that the new housing blends in with the surrounding houses in terms of (i) design and (ii) scale?

	Very important	Important	Quite important	Not important	Unsure
(i) Design	66%	20%	9%	4%	<1%
(ii) Scale	60%	22%	11%	5%	1%