

PROTECTING DATCHET'S CHARACTER

On a series of walks around the village, the Datchet Neighbourhood Plan team has been asking residents what works well and what needs improvement. Alison Crampin reports

In last year's village-wide survey, you told the Datchet Neighbourhood Plan team that you want Datchet to retain its village character, and that growth in the Parish should be sustainable, meeting the needs of residents and businesses without compromising the heritage, friendly atmosphere and community spirit of the whole village.

As a result, the DNP team has been recording the essential elements which make up Datchet's village character. Over the past few months, we've been running a series of Character Assessment walks along Slough Road, Eton Road, Horton Road, Ditton Road, London Road, and through the Conservation Area. We asked you to join us and tell us what you think works well and what needs improvement. Here are some of the topics we discussed and issues you raised.

Local buildings

By looking at the similarities and differences of buildings in Datchet, we now have a clear picture of the elements which contribute to the village's distinctive character; the typical building styles and finishes, and the local traditions in building materials and landscaping. But it's not only how buildings look that's important, it's how they work and the relationship between buildings, spaces and routes. Something as simple as the direction in which a building faces can make a huge difference in creating a sense of community or separation. We've also noted how land is used throughout the village and the effects of, for example, siting residential and commercial areas side by side.

There was a lot of discussion about the extension of existing buildings, and whether extensions were sympathetic to the original design and scale of the house, and in keeping with setting. It was noted that a number of properties had been extended to the full width of their plot leaving little space for dustbins or parking, and no external access to the rear.

Village centre

In the Conservation Area, you told us what you liked most; the village greens, the timbered buildings, the church and the riverside. You shared your thoughts on how to encourage businesses to come to the High Street, and expressed concerns about the proliferation of commercial signage and the appropriateness of the colour palettes used, as well as the lack of provision for waste bins. There were discussions about increased protection for the Conservation Area and possibly extending it to include the MG garage; and also suggestions for safeguarding other historic buildings throughout the parish which are not in the Conservation Area or Listed by Historic England.

Traffic and parking

Traffic is a major issue in Datchet, creating not only congestion but noise and pollution. Comparing different roads allowed us to consider factors which encourage speeding traffic or create problems for other road users. For example, on some roads cars tend to park on one side, providing a clear run for drivers to pass at speed. On busy or narrow roads, cars often park on the kerb to avoid blocking the road but this can block the footpath and damage grass verges. We discussed ways that layout and design might help to make our roads safer, friendlier places. The problems created by the 10-carriage trains and extended closure of the level crossing were also discussed.

Getting around

We asked you how easy it is to get around and looked at the connecting routes between various roads and community facilities, such as shops, schools, the recreation ground, cafes, pubs and restaurants, and the railway station. In some cases, it is evident that the street layout and the lack of pedestrian short cuts or safe cycle paths make us more likely to drive than to cycle or walk. You also told us how some pavements and kerbs are difficult to negotiate with a pram or wheelchair, and some roads are difficult or dangerous to cross.

Streetscape and landscape

We compared the different 'streetscapes'; the elements which contribute to the character of a street, such as the lighting, benches, grass verges, street and pavement surfacing materials, road signage, telephone exchange boxes and boundary treatments. We asked you what works well and could be replicated elsewhere, and what needs improvement.

It was generally agreed that Datchet's greenery, its open spaces and natural features contribute enormously to its village character. Our riverside setting, leafy streets, village greens, verges and flowerbeds make it a pleasant place to live. We discussed which special views are important to preserve, whether some areas would benefit from better landscaping or greater protection, and ways in which the recreation ground and Willowfields might be improved. You thought that some green spaces work better than others; some are well looked after, others less so. For example, some grass verges are damaged by vehicles; and in places roadside shrubbery is overgrown and neglected, with accumulated rubbish, which also seems to encourage fly-tipping.

What next?

The information we've gathered on these Character Assessment walks will be used to create a factual record of what we have in the village and highlight areas which can be improved or protected. This 'evidence' will help us to develop policies in the Neighbourhood Plan which support the conservation and enhancement of Datchet's local character, so that that any new development can be designed sensitively. It will also help to set out criteria for positive change in areas which have been identified as being in need of upgrading or redevelopment, for example green or open spaces which could be enhanced; pedestrian or cycle routes which could be improved, and it could also provide additional protection for the Conservation Area.

For more information about Datchet's Neighbourhood Plan, please visit

www.datchetneighbourhoodplan.org

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((SEPARATE BOX))

DATCHET RECEIVES DESIGN GRANT

To support Datchet's Neighbourhood Plan, the Borough Council (RBWM) has recently secured a grant from the Government's Design Quality Fund to develop a Datchet Design Guide. RBWM is currently writing a borough-wide design guide but this one will be specific to Datchet.

The scope of Datchet's Design Guide has yet to be determined but it represents an opportunity to achieve high-quality design in all new development throughout the village and will give us all an opportunity to have a say in how the village will look in future.

The Datchet Neighbourhood Plan team will be able to share with specialist urban planners the evidence it has collected and explore how good design criteria might resolve some of the issues you've highlighted.

More details will be published, as they become available, on the DNP website:

www.datchetneighbourhoodplan.org

Ends