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# SONNING COMMON OXFORDSHIRE

A placemaking strategy to enhance a village centre under pressure from traffic



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**For Sonning Common Parish Council**



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## Introduction

The author and journalist Tom Fort writes of his home village that “the only remarkable thing about Sonning Common is how deeply unremarkable it is”. Indeed, there is very little that is historically or architecturally noteworthy about the unusually fragmented and formless village. There are no landmarks that stick in the memory, no conventional village centre that the visitor would instantly recognize, no clear village boundaries or places of distinction. It is an extraordinarily ordinary settlement.

And yet Sonning Common provides a very pleasant home for its population of around 3,800. Somewhat to the surprise of the first-time visitor, there is a decent range of shops, a café, takeaways, a health and dental centre, three or four scattered pubs, two schools and a busy village hall. With these it supports a large rural area. Above all, it has all the elements of a thriving community, including a well-organised and energetic parish council keen to maintain and enhance the quality of life of its residents.

One manifestation of such energy has been the production and acceptance of a Neighbourhood Plan, an exercise that requires heroic amounts of work and dedication to achieve the necessary local consensus. Establishing such a plan is especially important for villages facing the impact of intensive development in the surroundings of South Oxfordshire, and especially from the expansion of Reading, five miles to the south.

As in almost all villages, the increasing impact of traffic is central to the concerns identified in the Neighbourhood Plan. Sonning Common is particularly vulnerable to traffic speeds and the gradual erosion of the public realm to highways and their disruptive effects. The driver on the B481, passing through Sonning Common, is scarcely aware of the presence of the village. Other minor routes suffer from fast, cut-through traffic, reducing the informal connectivity, walking and bicycling essential to village cohesion.

For these reasons, the Parish Council has commissioned this study to explore how a long-term strategy and more immediate measures might ameliorate such pressure from traffic, re-balance the emphasis of its streets, and protect the ordinary public spaces that serve the village so well.



*Sonning Common from the north, with Reading in the distance*



*Sonning Common from the south*



*Peppard Road, the B481, divides the east and west of the village*



## The background and context

Sonning Common's Neighbourhood Development Plan was published in 2012, following extensive engagement with, and input from, local residents and traders. Whilst the Plan rightly focused on development sites, and especially housing needs, local discussions highlighted concerns about the impact of traffic and traffic speeds on the quality of life in the village. A Traffic Task Force was set up to address the traffic issues arising from the Plan, and an interim report was prepared and included in November 2012. Amongst many specific issues relating to transport, the report summarised the need to:

- engender a community culture responsible for the use of highways
- maintain and enhance the quality of the village centre, and
- reclaim the village from dominance by car drivers and to create a more pedestrian and cycle friendly village.

In order to address these objectives, an initial visit and presentation was held in September 2013, with a brief follow up report on initial findings and recommendations.

These discussions centred on the growing understanding of the importance of street design to the behaviour, expectations and speed of drivers, and the importance of informal landmarks and placemaking to reinforce the essential slow-speed environment of the village. Experience drawn from elsewhere in the UK and mainland Europe on ways to reverse the creeping dominance of highway characteristics, and its resulting speed, discomfort and village fragmentation, offered an opportunity to address some of the critical concerns.

The changing emphasis on placemaking and low speeds set out in guidance such as *Manual for Streets 2*, and the principles set out by Dorset's *Traffic in Villages - A toolkit for communities*, set a framework for a fresh examination of traffic issues in Sonning Common. Following a further discussion with the Parish Council in March 2017, this study was commissioned in July 2017, building on a brief and proposal submitted earlier in the year.



The village pond - one of the scattered and disconnected landmarks



Heavy, fast and dominant traffic on Peppard Road



Wood Lane



Kennylands Road



## Sonning Common - initial observations

Sonning Common is unlikely to enter the tourist guides as a show village. Yet despite its modesty and lack of pretensions, the village has two major assets.

The first is its location. Although set in a low-lying dry valley in unremarkable countryside, the village lies close to the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. There are numerous attractive woods of oak and beech surrounding Sonning Common interwoven with footpaths and sunken lanes. Access to the countryside is valued as a major asset in such a heavily developed part of the country. Sonning Common is also potentially well located for access to Reading and to Henley as nearby urban centres.



The second asset consists of the range of its local services and facilities, and the social capital of its community. Few villages retain a post office, library, two schools, shops, businesses, pubs and local facilities. It is these essential, if mundane elements that give Sonning Common its special charm as a place worth cherishing and caring for.





## Sonning Common - initial observations

Neither of these two assets are well served by the village's plan and layout, or by the character and form of its streets. The highway scale and characteristics of the B481 bisecting the village discourages both pedestrian and cycling, and such forms of movement appear surprisingly low for such an extended village. The speed of traffic also limits easy access to the countryside, especially for cyclists, children, and more vulnerable pedestrians. Speed also increases car dependency and contributes to parking pressure by making the key routes less safe or comfortable for cyclists.

The community facilities suffer from the fragmented and disjointed character of the village centre. Wood Lane's shops, village hall and businesses share no sense of place or identity that is normally associated with high streets or squares. The village centre has no legible connection or visual link to Peppard Road, or to the rest of the settlement. The busy Kennylands Road and Peppard Road are uncomfortable pedestrian and cycle routes for the south of the village, helped only by minimally marked footpaths. Internal village connections rely heavily on trafficked streets - streets where the speed and volume of traffic discourages informal movement and activities.



*Peppard Road (South) - an important pedestrian route to the village*

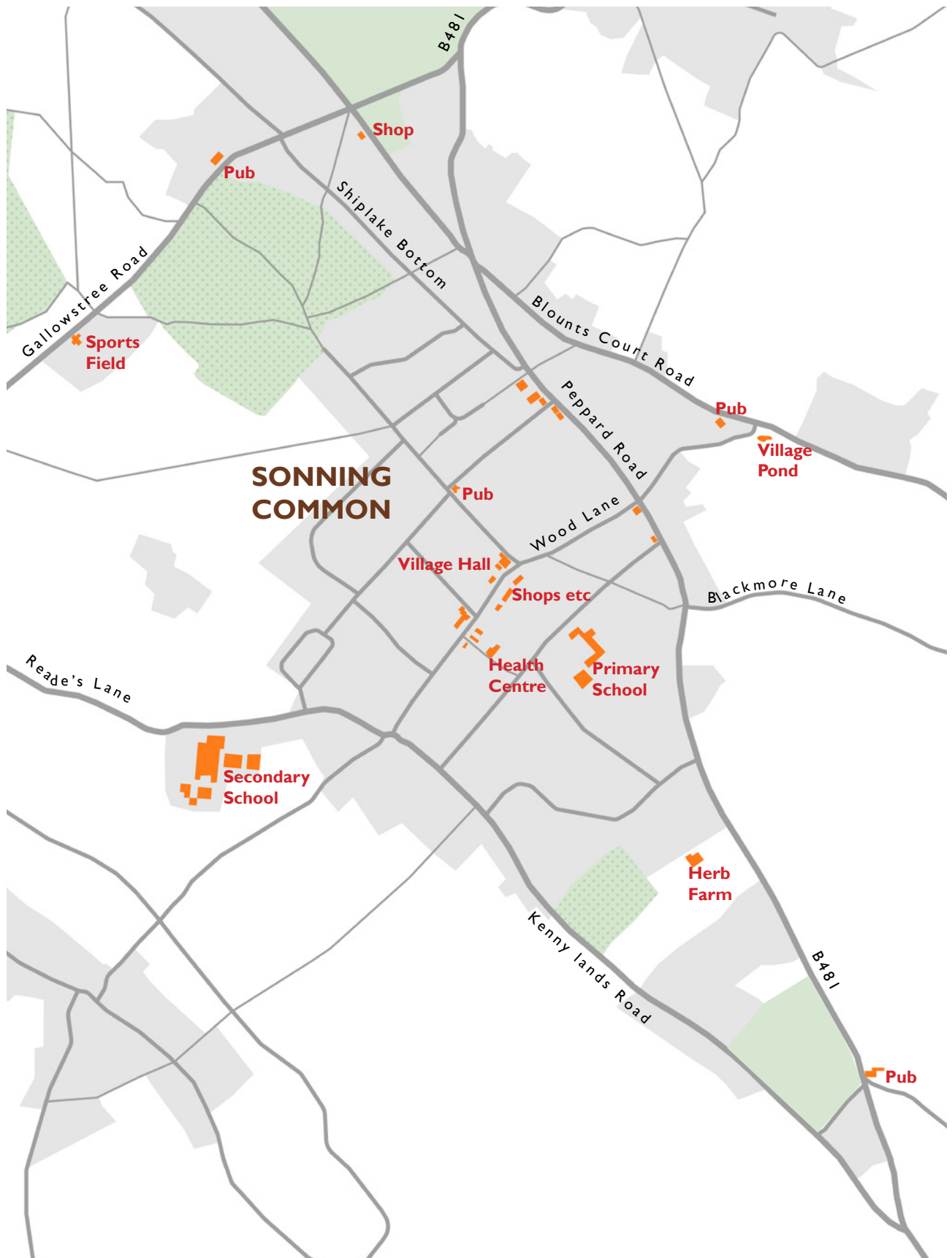


*The lack of any visual link from Peppard Road to the village centre*





## Sonning Common's extensive and scattered assets



## The village and its traffic

Any initiative to enhance Sonning Common, maintain its qualities and support its long-term vitality has to start from understanding the realities of traffic. A parish council, regardless of how energetic and effective, has to focus on those measures that can make a real difference. Traffic volumes, and the related problems of speed, danger, noise, declining air quality, congestion, and the barrier effect of busy roads are problems common to every community, especially in the crowded and prosperous south of England. The erosion of the quality of village streets and public space resulting from traffic is universal.

But Sonning Common is unusual in many ways that leaves it especially vulnerable to the impact of traffic. Positioned on an increasingly busy north-south route, the B481, carries around 8,000 vehicles per day. A third Thames bridge could add significant numbers. The village is also under pressure from growing volumes cutting through Kennylands Road and the narrow Reade's Lane, past Chiltern Edge Secondary School. The extensive shops, schools and facilities in Sonning Common, a mark of its success and popularity, also generate significant traffic.

Most of Sonning Common's development is relatively recent. As a result, the streets, laid out to modern widths and highway geometries, provide few of the natural constraints of older historic towns. There is little to distinguish the streets, surrounding lanes and junctions from the rest of the highway network. It is quite possible to drive through Sonning Common and be entirely unaware of the village context. Such modesty and understatement extends to the village centre, which fails to differentiate its presence from its surroundings, and thus lacks the cues and signals that influence the expectations, behaviour and speed of drivers.

But the location and layout of the village is not going to change. Infill and adjoining development will continue. Traffic volumes are unlikely to decline in the near future. Demand for parking will remain intense. These pressures have to be accepted. But there are measures that can be taken to influence the awareness, expectations and, above all, speed of drivers, and it is around these changes that any strategy should be built.

## The scope for change

A strategy for Sonning Common cannot be built solely around traffic measures. Cars and vehicles will remain an integral part of rural life for many decades. Indeed such movement and flows support the essential vitality of the village. There are no simple magic bullets that can "do something about the traffic". At a time of shrinking roles and resources, the highway authority is not likely to ride to the rescue!

Likewise parking provision is unlikely to change. There are no immediate opportunities for additional off-street parking, and the existing on-road spaces are already heavily used. Increasing the supply of spaces is not a realistic option. Even if it were, the limitless demand for parking could not be met. Reducing such demand, and limiting the damaging effects of inappropriate parking, are the only opportunities for change.

Where local action CAN be effective is through introducing measures and characteristics that change driver expectations about a village centre. These include expectations about presence of people and activity, expectations about the ability to drive without delays, expectations about parking, provision and location, and above all the expectations that give rise to higher speeds.

Speed determines the relationship between traffic and the streets and spaces that make up the public realm. If there are few indications of human activity, speeds increase. As speeds increase, life retreats from streets. Children play elsewhere, or are driven around. People spend less time in public areas. So speed increases. This vicious cycle gradually erodes the vitality and coherence of a village. Reversing this damaging trend requires change to the perceived nature of the village centre and its surroundings.

Our recommendations focus on measures that can make such changes based on the principle of making **places** out of ordinary highways. Placemaking in the village centre, and subsequently in the junctions and spaces around the centre, offers the best opportunity to change perceptions and expectations. Above all, placemaking offers the opportunity for local activity and expression to establish a recognizably distinctive centre around which a village can thrive.



## Design principles

The revitalisation of Sonning Common’s centre can be built on a combination of measures that help to transform bland and featureless highways into animated, people-dominated spaces.

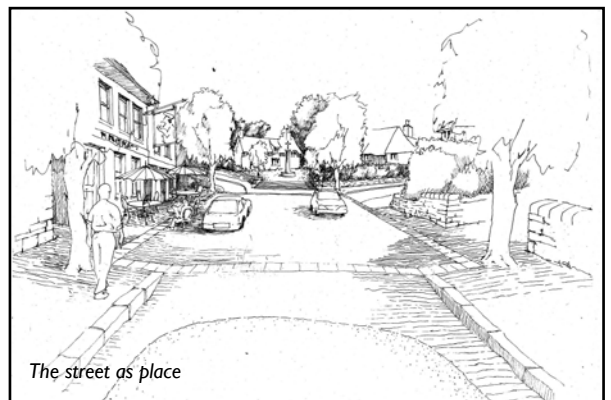
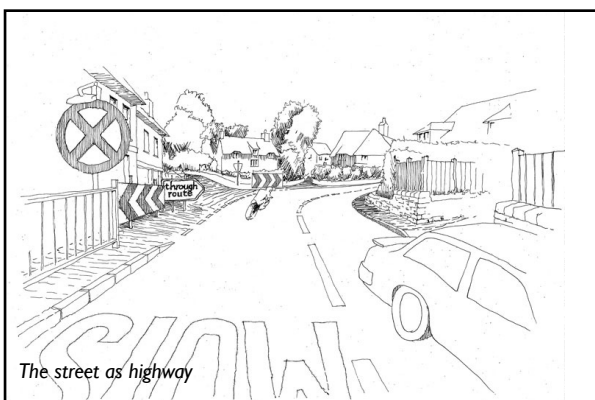
The first essential measure is to find ways to convert highways from being linear corridors to consisting of a sequence of distinctive spaces. The more varied and distinctive such spaces become, the greater the contrast to usual highways and streets. Ambiguity, wit, surprise and a degree of uncertainty can be usefully employed in place of the normal reassurance and certainty enjoyed by traffic elsewhere.

Secondly it is helpful to design streets and spaces that do not appear easy to drive through. Such measures engage the driver to the surrounding context, and challenge normal expectations. One important element is to reduce the apparent or perceived width of the carriageway. Although actual widths may not change, the visual width can. If on-street parking bays, for example, are set out in contrasting colour or texture, they are no longer read as part of the overall street width, and drivers reassess their speeds accordingly.

Introducing vertical elements, such as trees, sculptural objects or lighting columns often helps to frame and define places, and to create so-called “edge friction” in the periphery of drivers’ views.

Similarly, illumination that supplements and contrasts with standard highway lighting can be a critical component in placemaking. Secondary lighting at lower heights than conventional lamp columns can be employed to emphasise a pedestrian environment and to animate the essential qualities that make a place. LED technology has brought the possibilities for secondary lighting in public areas within reach of local communities, allowing places to retain a distinctive character after nightfall.

Finally, changes in the type and quality of materials, particularly paving finishes, can dramatically transform a bland length of highway into a distinctive place. Such changes need not require large-scale and expensive repaving, but can be achieved with applied textures and simple road paints and temporary coverings. The more a place looks and feels different, the less it is treated as highway with the attendant traffic dominance.



## The village centre - Wood Lane

Despite some shortcomings in layout and location, it is important to stress that the village centre in Wood Lane continues to serve its purpose. Parking is in short supply - the 24 spaces of the Village Hall car-park provide the only off-street parking, apart from those associated with the health centre, and some limited spaces by the Post Office. The lighting and street furniture is undistinguished and tired. And yet the shopping centre muddles along, coping as best it can with its inherent shortcomings. Buses find their way through the occasional congestion, school children and shoppers cross the road between the disparate parts of the centre, and the place reflects the undistinguished, friendly characteristics of Sonning Common.

Many options have already been explored. These have included pedestrianisation, finding extra off-street parking, one-way systems and wholesale relocation of the centre. Such options all appear to be either impractical, unrealistic or undesirable. Changes to the existing traffic flows, such as one-way systems and closures, rarely succeed in increasing accessibility or parking supply. Large-scale local authority input, either

for major redevelopment, or for day-to-day local management, is unlikely to be available in the foreseeable future.

So the challenge for Sonning Common is to find a combination of small scale measures and initiatives to make the best of what it has and to address the most important shortcomings. The measures need to be appropriate to both highway as well as privately-owned land. Several factors prevent Wood Lane from creating a village centre. Firstly, numerous barriers divide the shops and facilities one from another. Some are physical barriers, such as the guardrails outside the Co-op, the forest of bollards outside the village halls, and the large-scale planting beds fronting two sets of shop fronts. Secondly, the shop fronts are obscured by cars and the planted beds, reducing the visual connections. Thirdly, there is little to enclose or link the various parts of the centre into a coherent whole. The shops and businesses at the western end effectively form secondary centres. Finally, the poor lighting in the spaces between and around the shops results in the centre losing any sense of coherence and place after dark.



Wood Lane wide carriageway lacks definition as a place



Interconnections screened by cars and planting



Barriers divide the centre and reduce coherence



Poor night-time definition



## The village centre - an approach to placemaking

The long term strategy for the village centre aims to create a sequence of interlinked squares or clear spaces facing each group of shops. The first of these should front the Village Hall to form the centrepiece. Further measures could be introduced in phases, working westward along Wood Lane, eventually extending to all of the shops and businesses. Lighting, new trees and relocated planting anchor these spaces and keep the shop fronts clear.

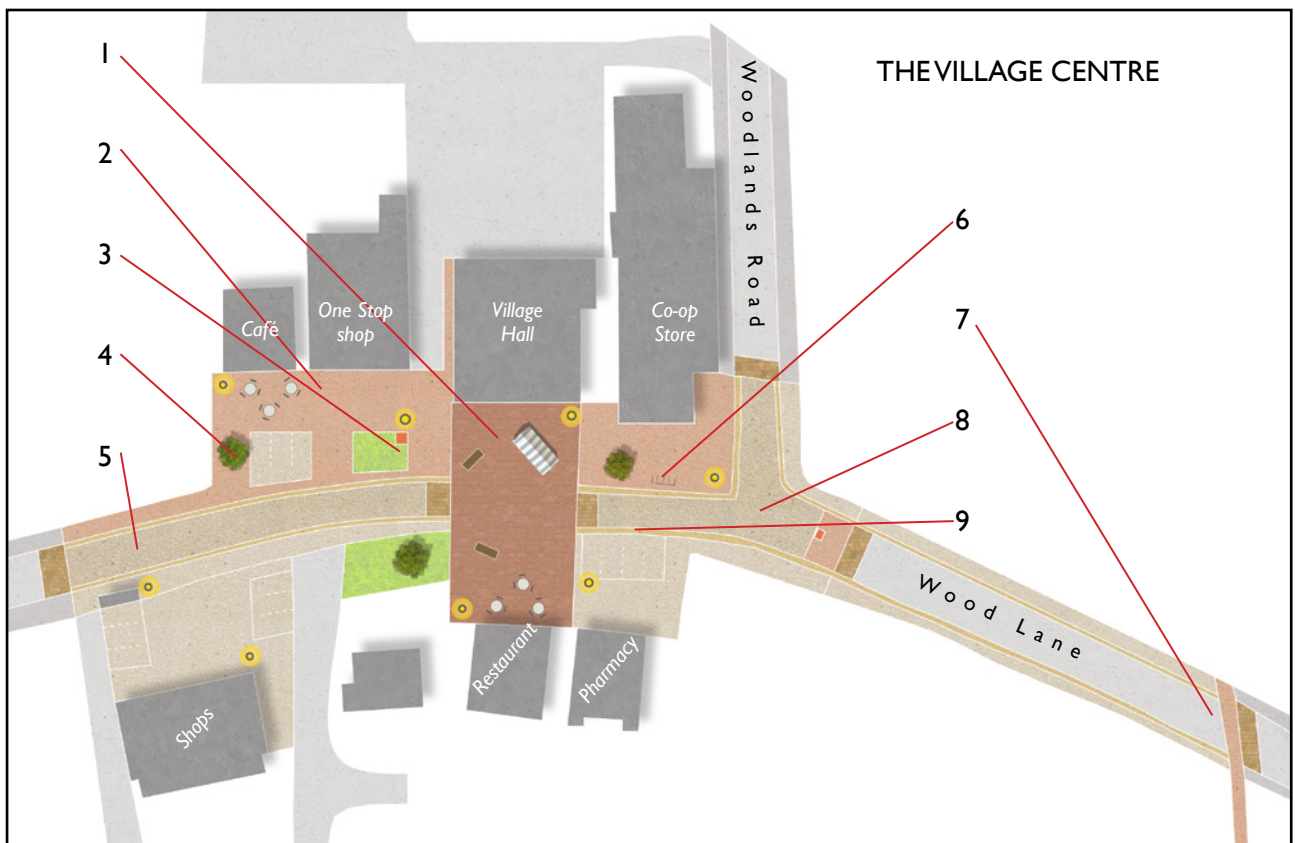
The vehicular path is maintained, but visually narrowed by the surface treatment and by contrasting surfacing for parking/delivery bays and bus stops. The roadway is secondary to the squares. A clear starting point to the centre is established at the junction with Woodlands Road.

Parking is moved away from the shop fronts. The paving and widths discourage anything but very short-term stopping within the squares.

The telephone box stays, but other railings and clutter is removed from footways to achieve maximum continuity linking the squares. The entry route to the car park remains, but is paved to form an integral part of the public area.

The key measures to aim for include:

1. A new square fronting the Village Hall extending across the carriageway, protected from parking and distinctively lit.
2. Spill-out activity encouraged outside café and post office in a car-free unified space.
3. Red classic telephone box installed. Other barriers and clutter removed.
4. Trees (semi-mature) are carefully located in illuminated tree pits, extending along Wood Lane over time as resources allow
5. Buses able to stop anywhere in western third of the centre, to give max flexibility
6. Remove barriers and protect forecourt with tree, light, bench and bicycle parking.
7. Mouth of footpath highlighted to indicate approach of, and link to, the Centre
8. Minor realignment to Woodlands Road junction to define entry to village centre
9. Carriageway visually narrowed and undefined across main Village Hall square



## The village centre - a vision for change

The sketch impression of the centre is intended to distil the principles of a vision for the village centre. The details will change and different elements will combine in many ways - all contributing to establishing a welcoming low-speed space fronting the Village Hall.

Secondary low-level LED lighting is becoming cheaper and more robust for external areas. It should play a vital role in defining and animating the squares, and providing a welcoming point of arrival. The sketch illustrates 3-4 new lamps to frame the square. In addition, up-lighters to trees, tiny lights set into paving, or strung between buildings and trees can be added over time, and increase the appeal of the centre during winter evenings and into night-time.

A long-term programme of tree planting, preferably in tree pits rather than planters (depending on the constraints of underground services) could extend along Wood Lane to link

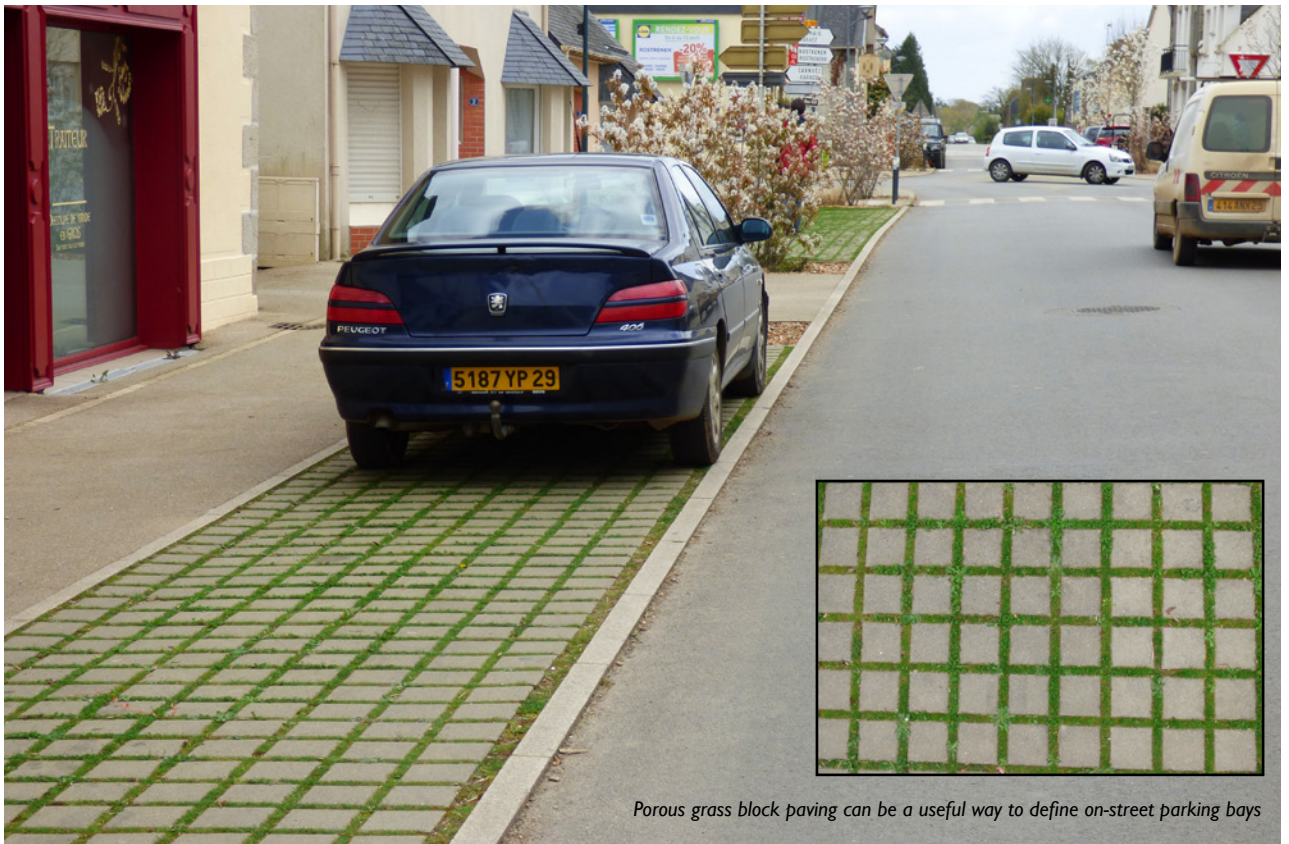
the squares and to define the carriageway. The trees can help to frame and define parking bays, and serve as focal points for each of the areas.

The changes in surface treatment are an essential component to achieve the change in emphasis to establish Wood Lane as a place and focal point. Initial trials with surface textures and colours can be upgraded over time with more permanent block paving, especially where level changes occur.





## The village centre - material examples





## The village centre - changing perceptions

Streets are expensive to change. Change is also always controversial. The process invariably takes time, persuasion and dogged determination. To build a clear consensus for change requires understanding and acceptance of the essential ingredients. The most important principle is to reclaim as much public space as possible to become part of an animated and populated centre.

The most difficult aspect of such change involves parking. Few subjects are more sensitive and difficult. But it is important to establish that village centres rarely thrive if their key spaces are occupied by vehicles. The recommendation to discourage on-street parking and to keep the linked squares largely free of cars is important. Although it is initially difficult to remove spaces, experience suggests that shoppers and visitors cope with the changed circumstances, and adapt accordingly. There will never be enough parking, but the best policy for upgrading a village centre is not to allow the issue to dominate discussions and to focus on spaces for public interaction.

Creating an animated, lively and attractive village centre is not solely about design or physical changes. Places thrive when they generate activity. All sorts of initiatives, some of them ephemeral, can do much to lift a place.

The more that people and activity fill the centre, the better. Overcoming deference to vehicles by crossing wherever and whenever possible is surprisingly effective in shifting the balance. Do not be concerned about apparent “chaos” - it is essential for a lively village centre. Encourage painting in the carriageway - set up a cinema viewing with a screen on one side, and the shops and café serving drinks and snacks on the other, intriguing drivers as they come through. Organise events and temporary installations, shared collage projects, dramatic performances - anything that changes the centre from a bland road into a place. For a parish council with limited resources, creative and imaginative initiatives can bring as much positive change as permanent physical measures.



Creating a notional street living room



“Festival of the lost and missing socks” - Oxford





## Wood Lane - defining a village centre

Although the village centre, as defined by its shops and facilities, only stretches along the central portion of Wood Lane, there is a need to create distinctive places of the junctions at both ends of the street. These contribute to identifying Wood Lane as somewhere special.

The first of these “bookends” is where Kennylands Road currently sweeps around a bend to enter Wood Lane. Highway chevrons assist drivers to maintain speeds around the corner. A handsome house stands on the inside of the corner, opposite the volunteering centre and wide, sweeping entrance to Reade’s Lane. There is nothing to indicate the heart of the village.

We would recommend forming a distinctive place at this point, perhaps defined by a central paved feature. The turning into Wood Lane and Reade’s Lane could be visually narrowed, and differentiated from the normal street arrangement through different paving, dimensions and levels. Additional trees in the verge could help frame the end of Kennylands Lane. The combined measures would help slow speeds and reduce the tendency for traffic to cut through Reade’s Lane.





## Kennylands Road

Speed and volumes of traffic on Kennylands Road are serious and growing problems. The discomfort for pedestrians (and cyclists) is accentuated by the lack of continuous pavement, the lack of reference to the village, and the sweeping junctions at either end. The familiar vicious cycle occurs, whereby drivers anticipate little human activity and so increase their speed.

The village needs to take every opportunity, as part of any maintenance or development, to complete the footway on the east side of Kennylands. Although extending the kerb is unlikely to be viable, several other measures could help to shift the balance back towards a village lane environment. Firstly, the wide sweeping mouth of the junction from the B481 should be reduced and softened to become a rural lane. Secondly, a perceived narrowing could be achieved through a surface treatment parallel to the kerb. Thirdly, every incident, such as a junction, footpath crossing, or bus stop could be highlighted and emphasized as a distinct place.





## Defining the village centre - Peppard Road

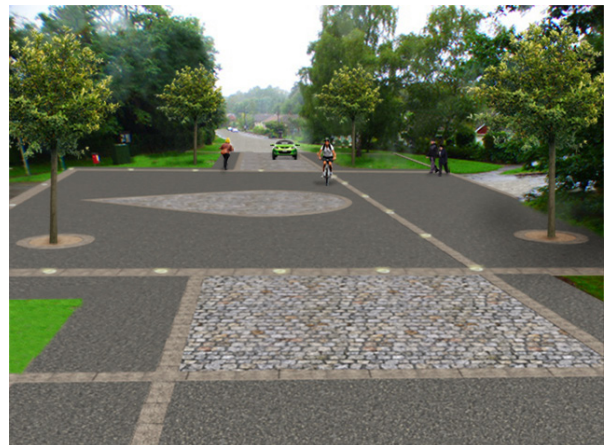
The eastern end of Wood Lane and the approach to the centre present a major challenge, but it is vital in the longer term to both address speeds on Peppard Road, and to signal the presence of Sonning Common to passing traffic. At present the crossroads at the bottom of the slope to Wood Lane is surrounded by a feature-less expanse of underused space, through which Peppard Road passes without recognition. A speed camera, and a signal-controlled crossing (away from the direct pedestrian route) are the only concessions to the village context.

The junction could be adapted to serve as a clear entry lobby for the village centre, without having to significantly interrupt slow, steady traffic flows on the B481. The space could be defined and framed with trees and/or additional paving and (preferably) lighting to give greater visual and psychological emphasis to Wood Lane. A notional square could enhance the trading position of the established butcher's shop and off-licence at this end of the centre, whilst alerting and engaging drivers on Peppard Road, and helping to link the village across both sides of the main road.

The conventional highway approach would be to introduce a mini-roundabout at this location. However, experience from places such as Poynton (below) indicates that a standard (and expensive) piece of hard traffic engineering should not be required at this location. Indeed, informal and less standard arrangement, with perhaps a notional "roundel" with a directional emphasis towards the village centre, could add a critical element of intrigue, ambiguity and distinctiveness.



*Peppard Road sweeps past Wood Lane, indifferent to the village centre*



*The informal roundel marking the busy crossroads in Poynton, Cheshire*

An intervention of this kind would represent a start to a much longer-term engagement with Oxfordshire County Council about changes to the character and speed profile of Peppard Road and the B481 in Sonning Common. Reducing speeds and changing driver expectations is vital if the village is remain connected, businesses survive, and people are able to cross the road safely.

## A slower speed environment on Peppard Road

Sonning Common has few distinct boundaries. Unlike most villages, there are no obvious places to north and south to define the settlement edge. To the east and west, the Butcher's Arms on Blounts Court Road, and the forecourt of Chiltern Edge School (see below) are clear candidates. By contrast on the B481, the village merges into Rotherfield and Peppard to the north. To the south, the narrow wedge of the village converges at the junction with Kennylands Road, but here there is little to indicate the boundary. It is not until the raw new development by the Herb Farm, or the junction with Blackmore Lane that the driver has any sense of being close to a village. The absence of any clear "front doors" contributes to the character of Peppard Road as something of a bypass, lacking any notion of place. Higher speeds result from such absence of features and interest.

Despite the lack of obvious entry points, there are relatively simple measures that could be adopted for Peppard Road to bring its character closer to that of a settlement and to slow speeds. The simplest of these is to remove the centre lines, and to reduce the apparent widths of the carriageway by inserting generous "edge strips" along both kerbs. In effect they can serve as informal cycle lanes.

Deciding where these interventions might start is difficult. The linked junction of Stoke Road and Blounts Court Road with Peppard Road presents a huge sweeping area of asphalt at the head of Gravel Hill. But the steep-sided slope cuts off the village until Gravel Hill emerges at the junction with Shiplake Bottom. Here a potentially important footpath crosses the road, a footpath entirely undetectable from the road. Peppard Road then continues south past a few scattered shops before the main crossroads at Wood Lane.

Our recommendation would be to introduce a change of scale at the Shiplake Bottom Junction, and to combine it with a treatment to emphasize and highlight the footpath crossing. Although well within the parish boundary, it is here that the secondary commercial street and the sequence of residential side streets begin.

The southern approach presents a similar dilemma. Whilst parts of the village appear sporadically to the west of Peppard Road from the sweeping junction with Kennylands Lane, it is not until the Blackmore Lane junction that an opportunity arises to establish a distinctive place. Here again an important footpath runs towards the centre. Originally the path connected Blackmore Lane to the village, but there is no hint of the crossing, and little to indicate the footpath entrance.

We would recommend a long-term programme to change the character of Peppard Road at this point, to help inform drivers of the change in scale and slow traffic on the approach to Grove Road and Wood Lane. Such a programme could be carried out in phases with Oxfordshire Highways to co-ordinate with the planned maintenance and resurfacing schedules,



*A clear change in the speed profile and character needed from this point*



*Note the lack of visibility and driver awareness of the footpath opposite*



## A slower speed environment on Peppard Road



Above - the junction of Peppard Road with Blackmore Lane. The footpath to the centre leads off from here as the central core of the village begins

Below - a sketch of the basic principles to slow traffic, reduce the apparent width, and create a safer environment more appropriate to the village context





## Grove Road

The long, straight form of Grove Road is prone to higher speeds than is appropriate for its residential use, and especially for the location of the library and primary school. The street also serves as a backland for the Wood Lane centre, and is crossed by two important (but largely invisible) footpaths. One of these serves pedestrians from Lea Road and the housing around Westleigh Close, and the other connects diagonally to the Blackmore Lane junction on Peppard Road, allowing access for those walking from the southern end of the village.

In common with many such quiet suburban streets, parking has built up in a haphazard way, predominately along the northern side. This has tended to increase the “rifle barrel” effect of the remaining carriageway, and pushed parking into narrow footways.

Current parking creates a useful chicane effect to reduce speeds. But Grove Road is also an example where short blocks of well-defined spaces in contrasting surfacing could reduce inappropriate parking and reduce speeds, especially if the blocks alternate from one side to the other. Short passing points are then created for opposing traffic on the crossover areas and where gaps are created by front garden parking.

Special attention is necessary where the footpaths and pedestrian routes cross Grove Road. At present these are all but invisible to passing drivers, and their importance and status should be highlighted and emphasised. This could be achieved through a combination of paving and/or road paint, combined with some low-level secondary lighting.

The area fronting the library and school merits particular attention to highlight this as an important gathering place. Rather than merely the conventional zig-zag parking prohibition, these vital village facilities could be highlighted with a distinctive paving treatment, framed by small street trees. Although remaining open to traffic, drivers should be aware, through the paving and framing of the forecourt, of a break in the continuity of the street. Additional manifestations of the school (bikes, bunting etc) can be deployed within the resulting forecourt to highlight the presence of both the school and library.



*Cars encroach onto the narrow footways*



*The key space fronting the school and library*



*The location and continuity of the footpaths could be clearly marked*



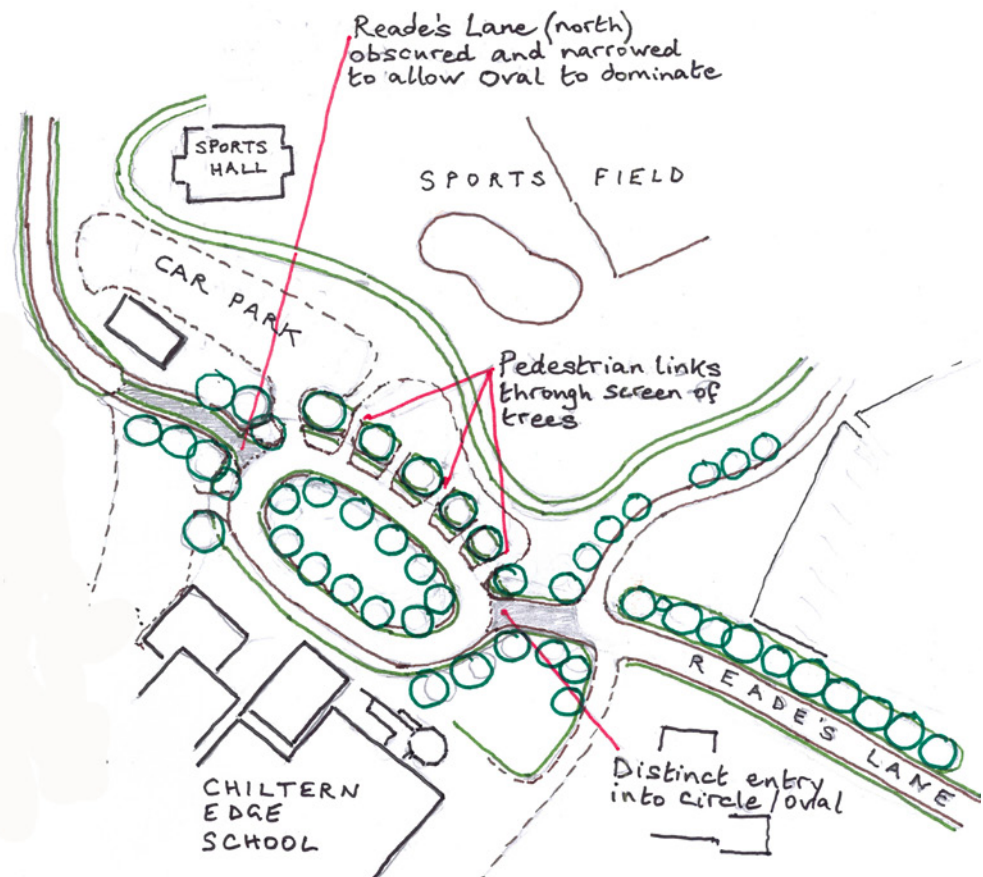


## Chiltern Edge Place, Reade's Lane

The regeneration and potential expansion of Chiltern Edge School, together with the development of the site to the north for sports and leisure (SON3), provide a significant opportunity to address a growing traffic problem and to create a new asset for Sonning Common.

At present, the continuity of Reade's Lane is uninterrupted by the school's frontage, continuing past the site of the Memorial Hall into a narrow rural link to Gallowstree. The speed and volume of through traffic are a growing source of concern. School buses need to manoeuvre in front of the school, along with the usual delivery and pick-up space and general pedestrian activity.

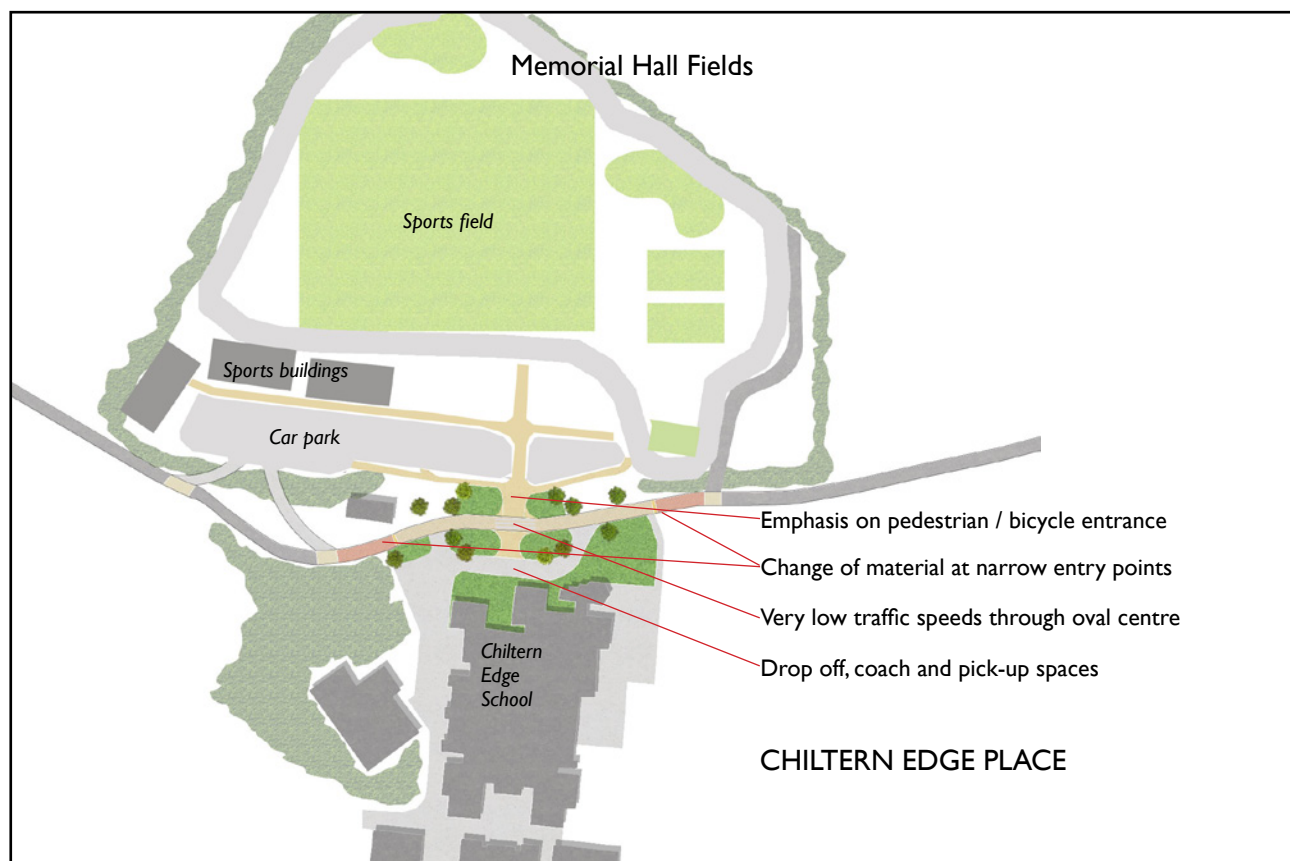
The initial sports field development proposals present an opportunity to co-ordinate with the school to create a distinct oval framed by trees, providing a forecourt for both. Our initial sketch below imagines the space as means to interrupt Reade's Lane with a pedestrian-focused gathering place, with the entry points throttled down to reduce speeds and accentuate the place. The car parks and drop-off bays would all be served by the oval.



A modified alternative is illustrated below. In this arrangement, Reade's Lane is slightly realigned to bisect the oval forecourt, with a very strong pedestrian link between school and sports field. The arrangement of car parks and buildings may change, but the key principle is that the pedestrian and bicycle connection remains the principle axis.

The buildings could face the school and entrance, but the critical element remains the oval, framed by trees, and by the school and new sports field. The dominant element should always remain the space itself, and the pedestrian routes across it, rather than the carriageway of Reade's Lane.

The suggested space could provide a positive element in the proposed expansion of Sonning Common to the west, and maximise the benefit from such development for Chiltern Edge School and for Reade's Lane, giving it a modified role in the highway network. The new public space could also serve as a clear and distinctive boundary point for the western edge of the village.





## Building a network of places

The implementation of the Neighbourhood Development Plan provides the village community with an opportunity to begin a gradual and incremental process of adapting the character of Sonning Common. Its form and layout to date has been defined to a great extent by standard highway engineering and piecemeal, disconnected development. There is a notable absence of landmarks or points to break the dominant continuity of wide carriageways and asphalt.

This can change. All future developments and highway modifications should aim to allow the village to evolve gradually to become a network of places; places linked by quiet streets with slower traffic speeds, places more encouraging for the growing potential for walking and cycling.

Opportunities exist to establish such places outside schools, shops and other important landmarks. By relating streets to buildings and to the activities they generate, and reducing emphasis on the linearity associated with traffic, the village gradually modifies its character to suit the objectives described in the Neighbourhood Plan.

One example could be the the forecourt of the Hare and Hounds pub. This landmark stands on the wide junction of Sedgewell and Baskerville Roads with Woodlands Road. The geometry of the standard sweeping highway kerb lines could be tightened, which in turn would reduce speeds. It would be possible to significantly extend the forecourt of the pub to occupy a much more generous area of this junction, creating a large external space for the pub to catch afternoon sunshine. The pub sign could be repositioned to define the extended edge of the forecourt. This crossroad also serves as an important landmark for pedestrian traffic approaching the village centre to its south. Continuing pavement paving across the mouth of the side roads can be a means to modify the dominance of traffic.



*The wide, featureless junction outside the Hare & Hounds*



## Implementation and next steps

The modification of Sonning Common's streetscapes to mitigate the effects of traffic and parking will take time, and can appear a daunting prospect. However, establishing the principles underpinning low-speed street design, and the notion of place-making, can structure a long-term strategy to inform any highway developments and associated modifications over coming years.

The role of larger highway authorities is changing. The decline of resources available for the management and modification of the highway network is shifting responsibilities towards local communities. This shift also reflects a gradual move away from traffic movement as the primary purpose of streets and highways within villages, towards a more balanced approach between transport and placemaking. Town and parish councils with established neighbourhood plans are increasingly well placed to have much greater influence, to take advantage of this change, and to initiate schemes, assemble funds and commission improvements.

In the short term, the focus should remain on the village centre. Establishing a general consensus to the placemaking approach would provide the opportunity to work up details with a landscape architect and prepare a first phase based on existing budgets. Subsequent stages can follow as resources allow.

At the same time, the principles such as illustrated for Chiltern Edge Place can be incorporated into development proposals as they arise, and form part of specific site planning briefs associated with any investment in Sonning Common. With a clear principle established for placemaking as part of any new site, developers benefit from clarity and certainty about their requirements.

Measures to adapt Peppard Road and transform the stretch of the route through Sonning Common to become a more integral part of the village will take more time. But a vision for long-term change, backed by an evident local consensus, will clarify and guide engineers to transform the highway into a low speed village environment with a clear and legible relationship between residential streets and the village centre.

Sonning Common does not require major surgery. It would be a mistake to embark on major rebuilding (even if it could be afforded) without testing options and observing the results. This approach should be the starting point for changing perceptions of the Village Centre.

Such testing needs to start with temporary measures, removal of barriers, and generating ideas for events. A small, creative group could be established. Building owners and tenants need to be brought onboard. A store, perhaps in the Village Hall, needs to be found where paint, lighting equipment, rain shelters, traffic cones, straw bales, mobile planters and trees, and all the various elements that help colonise street spaces can be gathered.

Clear the space. Inform Oxfordshire Highways and remove the railings. The large planting beds might survive a year or two, but should be removed when consensus is reached. Set up posts and poles to support bunting, banners and 12-volt lighting. Talk with the bus companies. When the sun shines, cone off half the space, and pick volunteers to cheerfully direct traffic through narrowed channels. Set a small group of mischief-makers to devise a remarkable paint scheme. Engage as many children as possible!

Whilst such fun-and-games are going on, observations made and experience gained about the centre, more serious work is required to arrange a detailed topographic survey, clarify ownership, map out service runs, investigate ground conditions and engage a good local paving contractor. Start to set up a boundary frame around the first of the proposed squares.

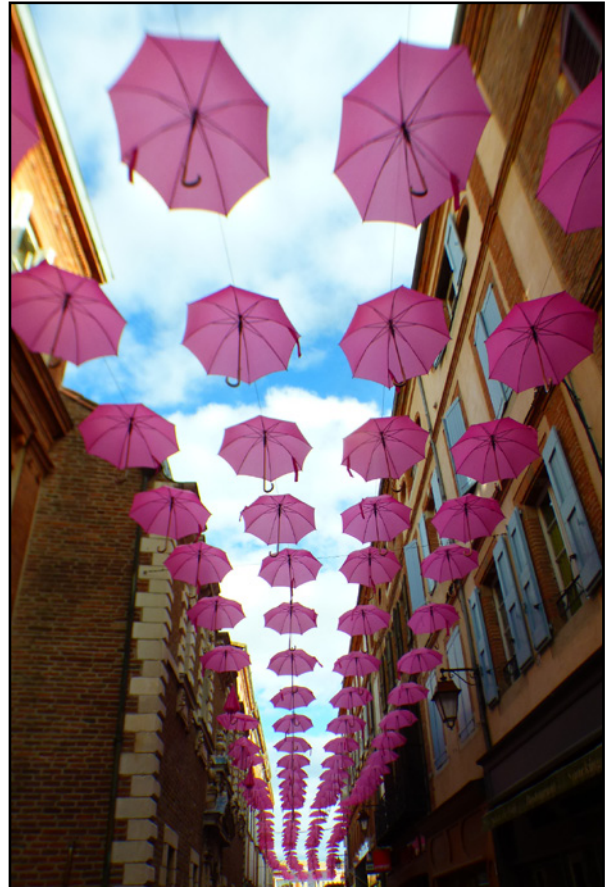
When the community feels confident in going further, the outline scheme will require working up and more formal consultation carried out. A landscape architect will be needed, and a costed programme prepared. A fund-assembly team will help maintain momentum to firm up more permanent materials and installations. Good publicity and press relations will be required, and news about photogenic events and construction will help attract funding. And throughout, clear parish council leadership will need to cope with the grumbles and keep the initiatives moving.



## Low-cost streetlife initiatives



Anything that can surprise, intrigue or entertain is valuable in changing driver expectations - art, lighting, and activity of any sort. Pavement lighting can help frame the space, whilst other more temporary and whimsical installations can be deployed both in the air and on the ground.



Most successful initiatives to revitalise and humanise spaces start not from dry urban design plans, but from festivals, gatherings and events that begin to change public perceptions about the purpose and possibilities of spaces. Allowing cars and vehicles to slowly negotiate such space keeps the street operating but shifts the balance.



*Image courtesy of Sustrans Ltd*



## Low-cost streetlife initiatives



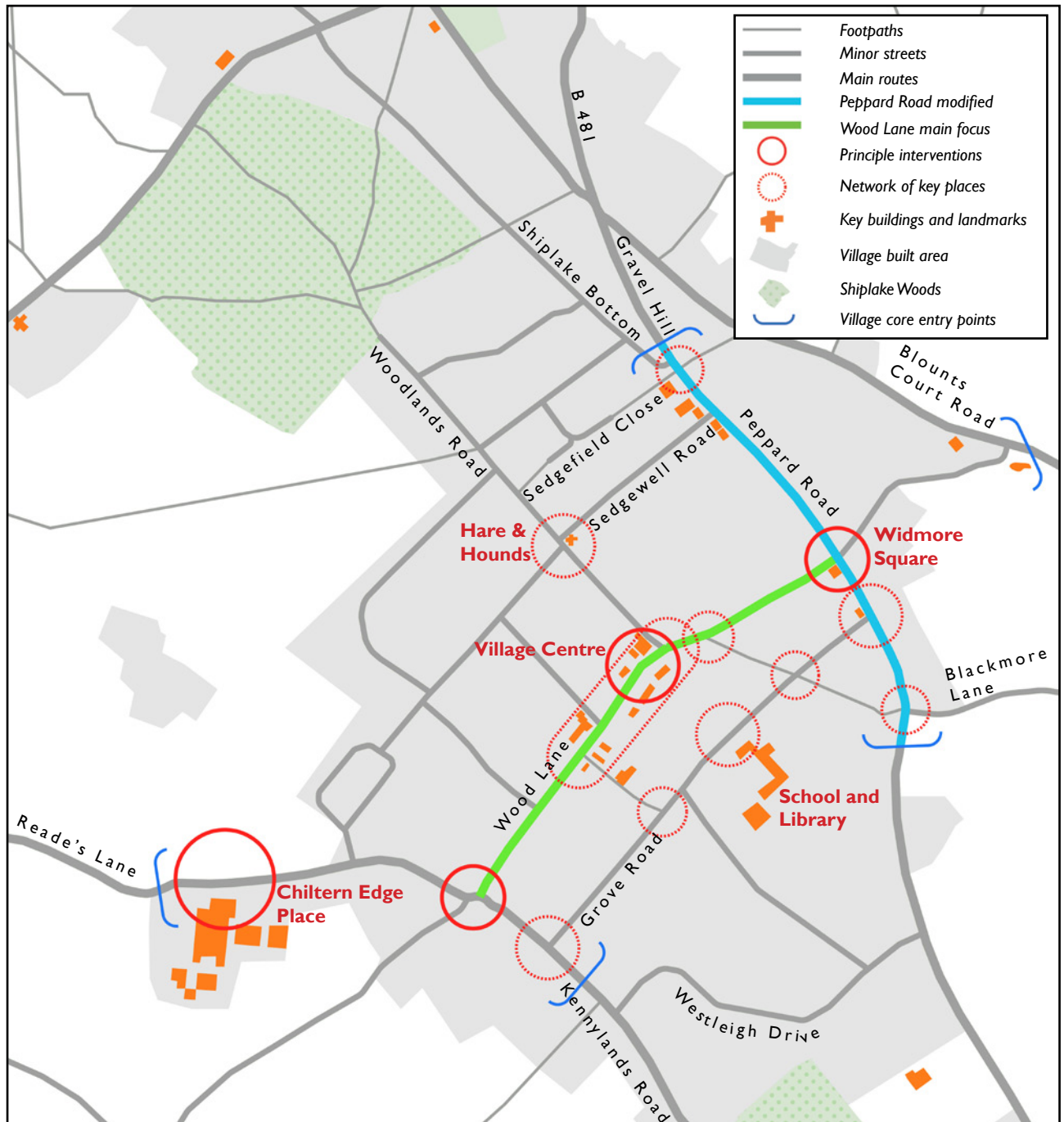
These examples of “street kits” are designed and tested by Sustrans Ltd., and can be endlessly adapted to suit circumstances. The kits can be set up on a temporary or semi-permanent basis



*Images courtesy of Sustrans Ltd*



## A strategy for placemaking and connections



In summary, a strategy for Sonning Common aims to establish a stronger and more attractive centre for the village, with priority given to Wood Lane, and specifically the space surrounding the Village Hall and adjacent shops. The status of Wood Lane is strengthened by placemaking at both Peppard Road and Kennylands Road. Development proposals allow a distinctive place to be created outside Chiltern Edge School.

The longer term would include small-scale placemaking measures to create a network of places surrounding the centre, highlighting changes to a low speed context, as well as buildings and intersections of particular importance. The approach can be extended to the more outlying places, but these should not be allowed to dilute the focus from measures to build a clearer and more distinctive village core.

## Concluding summary

Sonning Common's history, or its relative lack of history, makes it an unusual village to adapt to the pressures of traffic. No walls, bridges or obvious landscape features define its boundaries. The low-rise 20th century development offers little framing to its streets and spaces. No vertical spire or church tower marks out its centre, and there is nothing that might resemble a market square or gathering space. For more historic villages, reinforcing and emphasising these defining characteristics are essential components in changing driver expectations and speeds, and establishing a balance between places, people and traffic.

Sonning Common has to take a somewhat different approach. Initiatives for change have to be planned at different levels, and for different timescales. At one level, a highways strategy, especially for the B481, has to adapt the character of the principle roads through a different approach to the use of centre lines, the design of kerbs and verges, and the measures to allow the village to be more visible from behind the windscreen. Places and junctions that punctuate the highway to interrupt the continuity of traffic are essential, and can gradually be added to over time. The sketches for the Wood Lane junction on Peppard Road, and for the junction with Kennylands, Reade's Lane and the pub provide examples, but there could be many others.

At another level, it is essential to introduce developers and investors in the village to the concept of placemaking. In contrast to so much recent housing development, the need to create distinctive lobby spaces or gathering points at the

transition between the street network and new buildings. The Reade's Lane development is but one example.

The revitalisation of Wood Lane as a village centre requires a strong long-term strategy to redefine its relationship with traffic and the nature of its streetscapes. An approach based on the creation of a sequence of notional squares relating to each group of shops suggests a starting point. Car parking should not be allowed to define or overwhelm the centre, although the reality and necessity of cars, buses and delivery vans has to be accepted. The most essential principle is to encourage and ensure that shoppers, pedestrians and cyclists are not scared by traffic, and to start to reverse the long-established imbalance in the priority granted, and deference shown, to cars.

Finally, physical changes on their own are not enough, although such changes can serve as effective catalysts for changing village environments. Parish councils, working at a time of austerity and difficult priorities for the State at local and national level, are unlikely to be able to effect major changes in the highway infrastructure in their communities. For this reason, the strategy for Sonning Common is focused on the building of small scale measures to win back, and animate, public space as a contrast to high-speed, vehicle dominated highways. Every individual emboldened to walk in the road, pause to have a conversation, set up a stall outside a shop, or just take to the village's streetscapes on foot or on a bicycle will contribute to the protection of the village and to the quality of its public realm.

