

Response to letter received from resident objecting to VPAG survey questionnaire

Dear X and Y

Thank you for your comments relating to the survey being carried out by the Village Plan Action Group (VPAG). The group will consider them along with all the other comments made, both for and against, when it makes its decision on how to proceed. You have made many points in your letter so, as Chair, I'd like to respond on the Group's behalf to reassure you that our single intention is to respond dispassionately to the request of some residents, as expressed in the Village Plan, to investigate the possibility of creating a village centre and/or green. As I believe you were a member of the group that drew up the Village Plan you are no doubt familiar with the way it was done, so I will address your numbered points, as far as I understand them, in order.

Point 4: I don't understand how the survey paper contradicted itself in the way it asked the simple question about whether or not residents supported the idea of carrying out a feasibility study. However, I appreciate it is peoples' perception that matters, so I am sorry if it was not clear what we were asking. Please accept my assurance that there was much discussion about the wording because we neither wanted it to be too complicated, nor too simple. There was no intention to mislead.

Point 5: The issue of the need for a village green and its ownership has been considered, along with the existing recreation ground and the use of any building that may or may not be constructed. We are not attempting to justify any aspect or any site for a green, or the use of any building. This would be fully explored in the feasibility study, the results of which would be made available for discussion with the whole village before residents' agreement could be sought to continue – or not, if that were the decision of the whole village. (see Para 3, Page 2 of the leaflet).

Point 6: Members of VPAG are fully aware of the proposal put forward some twenty-five years ago. I attended the meetings myself and voted against it. Not only is this *not the same proposal*, but also many things have changed since then. Many residents are new, the school has more than doubled in size and commuter traffic through the village has greatly increased. As stated on Page 2 of the leaflet, any concrete proposals for a village centre or green would be presented to the village at a public meeting. As yet, there are no concrete proposals to present or vote upon.

Point 7: You are correct to say the group is unelected. All members are volunteers giving up their time to further the aims of the Village Plan to which all villagers were invited to contribute. As you were part of the group that drew up the plan you will appreciate that the whole process was voluntary and it continues to be so for those involved. It is difficult to make a voluntary group accountable and, sadly, invitations to join us do not get much response. Any resident who feels strongly about the direction the group is taking is welcome to join the group and persuade members otherwise.

We are not proposing any major changes to the village; we are simply asking if residents think we should look into the possibility of change (as was proposed in the Village Plan). We are not supplanting the function or power of any appropriate authority – we are simply seeking residents' opinions.

Point 8: The group are **not** nominees of the Parish Council. Indeed, for a Village Plan drawn up by residents (as this was) to have any impact on planning matters *it must be independent of the Parish Council*. We are entirely independent of the Parish Council but acknowledge that we need to secure its support, as well as that of residents, if we are to realise the objectives set out in the Village Plan.

We do not claim to have any expertise in planning or highways matters. That is why we are proposing a feasibility study from professionally qualified people who have. We fully understand that any resulting proposals would need to be fully discussed with the appropriate authorities and, especially, with village residents.

I hope that after reading my full response you will appreciate that your allegations in 8.1 and 8.2 are misguidedly based on speculation, not fact.

The Group has considered the issue of a contributor to the cost of the study having a financial interest. The money secured so far is from VPAG's own budget, provided by the Parish Council to further the aims of the Village Plan, and the availability of a KCC grant offered by Cllr Stockell. Any offer of financial help for the study will be carefully considered to ensure there is no potential benefit for the donor.

Point 9: Several people have commented that the group has not communicated its activities to the public – and they include my own wife! I agree this is something that we should have done more effectively, and we now have a page set up on the East Farleigh Community Network website with meeting minutes and details of published documents. Where possible, links to actual documents are provided. You will also find VPAG's report to this year's Annual Parish Meeting in May. This report was also referred to in the Parish Council minutes, along with details of a report I made in person, on another occasion, to the Council on progress being made. As you know, Parish Council minutes are also summarised in the KM and Downs Mail. Details of the Group's membership (all village residents) are now also provided on the site. I hope Grapevine will publish details of the site address <http://www.eastfarleigh.net/Home.php> in its next issue so that all residents will be aware of it.

I think Glyn has offered to provide you with another copy of the Village Plan Update that was delivered to all homes in July 2010, and hopefully a copy will shortly be available on the website for all to refer to. You will see that there certainly has been action since January 2009. But if my own wife, who even helped proof-read the Update, didn't remember it until I showed it to her again this week, it is not surprising that others don't remember it either. We will try to communicate our activity more effectively in future.

It is true that we have not specifically invited members of the public to attend meetings. However, all are welcome to attend and all (but one) of our meetings have been held in either The Bull or The White House. We are not a local authority and so, as far as I am aware, the law and practice relating to local authorities does not apply to a volunteer group of village residents. If you are aware of any law we are breaking, please let me know.

We carefully considered the length of time for villagers to make a response and felt that seven days was sufficient. Any longer and some people would forget to respond or lose the form, as was indeed the case at many houses I called at. There was no attempt to curtail discussion – hence the invitation to post or deliver a response. You chose to do this and your response will be counted and considered along with all others.

Point 10: The Group is aware of Maidstone Borough Council's proposed plans and relevant restrictions. However, professional advice has been sought from a qualified town planner and local planning officials, and also Cllr Paulina Stockell. All were of the opinion that planning permission for any building would be unlikely, unless a clear case could be made that any development would result in improvement to village amenities and/or nature conservation and/or improvement to road safety. Hence the need for a feasibility study to explore all these options while seeking a solution to the traffic problems in Vicarage Lane.

Point 11: This is precisely what we intended.

Point 12: We acknowledge your point of view re. traffic problems in Vicarage Lane but we disagree. The Group considers it is appropriate to investigate a possible solution as part of a feasibility study. As I have already pointed out, no planning proposal has been put forward. Any future proposal would be subject to full discussion by all concerned.

Point 11: Again, the Group acknowledges your point of view, but disagrees that highway works are irrelevant to a feasibility study. Any study, and any resulting proposal, would be subject to full consultation with, and support from, the appropriate local authority.

I hope this response answers the specific points you made in your letter. VPAG members appreciate that any possibility of change is unsettling for most people and a cause of anxiety for some. If the manner of our work to date has caused you, or anyone else, anxiety then I apologise for this. However, I hope I have reassured you that we are simply seeking to carry out what residents requested two years ago. No decisions have been made on any proposal for change; indeed, at the moment there is no proposal for change. We are simply canvassing residents' opinion on whether or not a change should be considered. Everyone's views will be taken into account before any decision on a feasibility study, let alone a concrete proposal, is taken.

Please don't hesitate to contact me again if you would like to discuss the matter further.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ray Morris". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke underneath the name.

Ray Morris
Chair, East Farleigh Village Plan Action Group

CC. Glyn Charlton, Chair, East Farleigh Parish Council