

WHY CRADLEY NEEDS A NEW HEART OF THE VILLAGE

Alan Aldridge

Picture an idyllic English village – in your mind's eye it probably has a village green, with a duck pond, a church, a local pub and a village store. In your imagination they are probably situated close together and offer a present-day focal point for the local community and visitors.

We are lucky to live in Cradley but our communal buildings and facilities do not fit neatly into this picture. We have our village hall, church and chapel, the doctors' surgery, the Red Lion on the main road, our school, the British Legion, the scout hut and the Butchery; but none provide an easily accessible daily meeting point for the whole of our village.

In fact, Cradley is almost two distinct villages - east and west with a large area of inaccessible farmland splitting us in two. We also have numerous successful community groups in the village that work well separately but - they are not accessible to everyone, all the time, every day. A new Heart will help establish our village as a supportive community and this will go a long way to combating loneliness and isolation that can seep into the lives of young and old people living in any village.

In 1963 the village population was 340. It is now around 1300 and the entire parish's population, including Storridge and outlying areas, is heading towards 2000. Since the early '60s we have lost two pubs, the village stores and the central old primary school. We have gained a new school on the north-eastern outskirts of the village and several new housing estates built mostly on Cradley's west side.

There is now a strong feeling amongst a lot of people that we need to have a community facility open to all. In *my* mind's eye, indoor and outdoor spaces would work in harmony with each other and local people would bring family, friends and colleagues to enjoy The Heart. Ideally it would offer shop and café facilities in a central location. People would meet in a pleasant and relaxed setting and get to know each other rather more. This is why a 'Heart of the Village' at Kingsbridge could benefit us all. But we have to be realistic - the idea needs a significant amount of support if it is going to happen and flourish.

An enthusiastic and energetic team is already in place to form the basis of what would need to be a much larger working group to move things forward. A Community Benefit Society is being set up ready to manage 'Morgan's Field' on behalf of the village. And in the meantime, the Heart of the Village team has been speaking to businesses and residents that might be directly affected by a new Heart. As with any major change there have been people 'for and against' and many are extremely positive about the potential of a new Heart. For example, having had time to consider the principle, Pete and Lynne Hodgkiss at The Butchery have indicated that they can see ways of working together with a new shop rather than in competition with it.

Government policy dictates that Cradley must have 58 new houses by 2031 but no-one knows if this figure will be exceeded. A growing village needs planned facilities that support both our current and new residents and businesses. We have an opportunity to get ahead of the game and take control. Our Heart idea came from the depressing closure of our Village Stores – we now have the chance to create something positive we can all be proud of.

To find out the very latest information check www.heartofthevillage.co.uk or facebook.com/cradleyHoV. You can also talk to any one of the Heart of the Village Team – but please remember we are all volunteers and would be very grateful if you have specific expertise you too can offer this project:

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