

The Heart Beats On

This month's report responds to some questions about the Heart of the Village Project that have been raised in the Newsletter and elsewhere.

The growing 'gap'

The first of these relates to the so-called 'Strategic' or 'Green' Gap. As David Robertson explained last month, Strategic Gaps are usually parcels of land between separate towns or villages whose inhabitants wish to stop them 'coalescing'. In Cradley's case, the term was adopted by the Parish Council in the 1990s to prevent housing development on what has been called the 'beanfield' which lies between Cradley Brook and what's known as 'bumpy lane'.

Since David's article appeared, the Council has published the first draft of its Neighbourhood Development Plan - an important document that will determine where, and how many, new homes can be built in our village.

The draft plan proposes to extend the 'gap' massively, so that it will embrace not just the beanfield but virtually all the land between the eastern and western parts of Cradley. In fact the suggested new 'gap' is almost as big as the constituent parts of the village itself and includes private homes and gardens as well as open country.

More importantly, the plan says not only that houses should not be built anywhere in this large area but that it should be 'protected from all development except that which may be required to mitigate flood risk'. We take this to mean that our community shop and café could not be built on Morgan's Field.

Unlike other proposals for new shops in Cradley, the Heart of the Village project does not depend on building new houses. And since Morgan's Field will be owned by the Community Benefit Society in perpetuity due to a covenant in the transfer of the land from the Morgans, there is no risk that it could ever be developed for housing or that the shop could be sold as a house: all assets remain 'locked' for community use at all times.

Our project has strong local support - 84 per cent of those who responded to our own survey welcomed HoV - and we don't think it should be stopped in its tracks by this radical new policy. The obvious answer would be for the Council to allow a community project like HoV in the 'gap' but prevent houses from being built there. However the planning consultant hired by the NDP group says it would be very hard to frame such a policy.

We have therefore asked those who support the project to respond to the Council's request for comment on the draft plan by saying Morgan's Field should be excluded from the 'gap' altogether.

Under water ?

We naturally share the Council's wish to limit the impact of flooding anywhere in our village. The lower parts of Morgan's Field do occasionally flood. We needed to

know whether building a shop and café in the field could make such flooding worse and whether the building itself might ever be at risk. Accordingly, we commissioned a specialist company called Hydro-Logic Services of Bromyard to conduct a detailed flood risk assessment of the site for us.

Their main conclusions are that while the north west part of the site is at risk of flooding from the Cradley Brook, the south east part is at low risk and that the area on which we propose to build our shop and café 'falls outside the 1:1,000 year flood event on the Cradley Brook and shouldn't be affected by flooding'.

An infiltration test was also conducted to monitor the way the soil responds to water and the consultants also recommended that we build an 'attenuation pond' to manage surface water runoff and prevent any increase in flood risk downstream - and we will include these measures in our planning application.

Money matters

You may have seen articles in recent Newsletters which seemed to suggest that the Heart of the Village project was being undertaken without any financial planning or analysis. This isn't, of course, the case - and we certainly would not be attracting grant and other funding if we had not done our homework.

The 17-page plan on which the business case for the HoV project is based appears on our website [<http://www.heartofthevillage.co.uk/pdfs/businessplan.pdf>]. It's been written with the help of experienced accounts and business managers and reflects, among many other inputs, detailed discussions with similar projects in other rural areas.

Our work has led us to believe that the project will be financially viable - not least because the bulk of its staff will be volunteers rather than paid employees. But please read the document for yourself and tell us if you think we've got our sums wrong or have overlooked anything vital.

Planning ahead

Meanwhile we will continue to discuss the project with Herefordshire Council and others in the hope of submitting our planning application in the very near future.

Alan Eldridge - 07813 543492
Wynne Harries - 01886 880976
Sarah Herriot - 01886 880146
Tracey Iwanczuk - 07834 455773
Michael Plant - 07881 304800
Holly Welford - 07468 359333
Kevin Welford - 01886 880664