

posal, the meeting had been arranged with the minimum of delay so that everyone could be alerted to the plans. It was also a way to demonstrate to the decision makers, the District Council, the strength of opposition to the idea.

Since the meeting, Nigel Gibbons has sent us further information about the various stages of the Local Plan process. The next stage will be for the District Council to consider all the material received in response to the 2019 consultation, along with other evidence, and decide on a preferred option or options taking into account a number of key issues, by way of sustainability appraisals and transport studies. All land identified for development will need to be shown to be able to be developed without unacceptable adverse impacts. These include impact on nature conservation, on flooding and flood risk, on traffic and travel. All sites will need to be accompanied by evidence that they can be satisfactorily developed, are viable, and that infrastructure can be provided.

Although all sites will need to be tested at an appropriate level, larger sites where there are major potential impacts, will require extensive study. Some impacts may be able to be mitigated, but others may render particular options or sites unable to proceed.

The Council will be asked to approve a strategy and that will be subject to a further consultation exercise probably in the early summer. Following this the Local Plan will continue to be prepared using the approved strategy as a guide but adding more detail and accumulating much additional evidence in support of the policies and proposals.

The resultant Draft Plan will be subject to further extensive consultation and the responses and any additional evidence

will be used to prepare a version of the Local Plan which will be submitted to the Secretary of State for public examination. This presents a further opportunity to make representations, in the form of objections to or support for particular sites or strategies, and the Secretary of State (represented by a Planning Inspector) tests the plan for its overall "soundness". At each stage the requirement for supporting material will increase.

If anyone cares to look at Ridge and Partners website, they will see that they have offices in nine other major cities and towns throughout England and one in Cardiff. They claim to be "Proactive and creative. We don't wait to be asked, we think ahead and act with foresight." Another claim is that they "always aim to respect the needs of our people, our clients, the local community, local economic development/initiatives and the environment." We shall see!

A report by the National Audit Office says that although local authorities may be fined for failing to build enough homes to meet government targets, this "is not fully within local authorities' control." With an almost 40% real-terms cut in spending on planners since 2010, the report concludes that the planning system in England is "not working well" and that, if a council fails to demonstrate that it has an adequate supply of land for housing, it gives developers greater freedom, leaving swaths of the country vulnerable to either housing shortages or situations where the wrong homes are built in the wrong places. Let's just hope that one of those places is not Westbury-on-Severn.

*Di Landon*

## "Eco-village" report Feb 2020

The packed meeting at the Parish Hall began with Parish Council Chairman, Simon Phelps, introducing the chief forward planning officer of the Forest of Dean District



Council, Nigel Gibbons, who gave some background to the submission of the plan for a housing development of around 5000 houses, largely in Westbury parish. He explained that all planning authorities have to produce a Local Plan, which guides future development and sets out the policies against which planning applications will be considered. The current Local Plan sets out the strategy up to 2026, but the new Local Plan will set out how the Forest of Dean will develop over the next 20 years. The plan is to provide for the future needs of local communities by allocating land for new housing and employment but it also has to safeguard the environmental assets that we value. The Local Plan sets limits to the extent to which towns and villages can grow into the surrounding countryside and provides strategies on how to protect the places we care about, such as historical buildings. It also guides

the design of new development so that they are pleasant and respond to local needs.

A consultation about this Local Plan was held in September and October 2019, in the form of an Issues and Options Paper. This is intended as a way of starting a conversation about the issues which need to be addressed in the Plan, and the available options. These included how to address climate change as well as considerations as to what sort of new development the Plan should promote, in view of the likely need for a substantial amount of new development up to 2041. The Issues and Options Paper also sought proposals, and the plans for the so-called 'eco-village' were submitted by developers Ridge and Partners of Cheltenham in response to this consultation, apparently without having consulted anyone who might be affected.

However, Chris McFarling, the Cabinet Member for Planning Policy has reassured us that "this is not a planning application, it is an idea" and Mr Gibbons made it clear that, other than acknowledging the Ridge and Partners representation, and recognising that the Local Plan will need to evaluate options for new settlement(s), the FoDDC have made no decision in respect of this or any other representation.

The concept of the Ridge plan is a "sustainable community" of 5000 houses connected to Gloucester by rail, which offers "the opportunity

to provide residents with jobs, education, health facilities, shops and community infrastructure close to home.” The “need to travel to other local centres” will be reduced as will be “the impact of development on the transport network and thus the environment.” The new town, which would be built on farmland, would have its own railway station and park and ride facility. Plans of the proposed development were on display in the Parish Hall.

Nigel Gibbons explained that, following the consultation, district councillors look at the various issues facing the area and what changes may be needed, before feedback is sought from the population in general. The large audience was invited to ask questions and express opinions on the plan and the first to speak was Felix Bihlmeier, representing the interests of Walmore Common, which is recognised as a biological Site of Special Scientific Interest and also as a wetland area of international importance. The Common, designated as a Ramsar site, would border the proposed development, which is why Felix called for the plan to be “strangled at birth” – a call which was loudly applauded by the audience.

Another speaker from Huntley, a parish which would also be affected by the proposal, pointed out that a rail link to Gloucester would not meet the needs of many commuters as Gloucester station is not near the majority of businesses. Should the residents prefer to drive into Gloucester, the already congested road network would become a complete nightmare - a point raised by

several other speakers. The plan included an eco village spine road which would join the A40 at Solomons Tump and the A48 at the Diney, thus adding to the congestion on both the A40 and the A48. One speaker later suggested that there should be no more housing development in the Forest of Dean until people were able to get out of the area by road. It was also pointed out that the development would need to be supported by a proper infrastructure and, while a primary school may be included in the plan, there seemed to be no mention of a secondary school or GP practice.

Nigel Gibbons replied to this, citing the theory that large developments are more likely to generate infrastructure than piecemeal plans, but a speaker countered this, citing the experience of the Kingsway development in Gloucester which had to wait over 10 years before Kingsway surgery opened.

Roger Blowey, Chairman of Minsterworth Parish Council, questioned the accuracy of the housing figures, and Nigel Gibbons explained that Government figures show that around 371 new houses a year are needed in the area, but that the current rate of building is 100 houses below that figure. Viv Hargreaves asked that more information about the plans should be widely circulated and that this proposal should be withdrawn as soon as possible.

Simon Murray, representing the Campaign to Protect Rural England, asked about other development proposals sent in during the consultation and it appears that, although

this was the largest single site, there were other smaller proposals. Other questions concerned whether land could be compulsorily purchased, which Mr Gibbons said that it could be, in theory, but that this was very open to question. Simon Phelps pointed out that he had spoken to all the owners of land included in the proposed development and they had all been horrified at the proposal. Another suggestion was that it would be better if it was the District Council that chose suitable development sites rather than leaving the choice to a money-making developer. Mr Gibbons was also asked who would make the final decision on the proposal, and explained that the Secretary of State would have to validate any decision made and can, and nearly always does, ask for modifications. Another speaker expressed the concern that district councillors representing parishes that would not be affected by the proposal might vote in favour of it in order to spare their own communities.

Storm Dennis had lent support to the speaker who pointed out how



the area of the proposed development was prone to flooding, as much of the area was under water at the time of the meet-

ing.

Why such a site was being considered, when there were brownfield sites available and so many empty

properties in the area, was the subject of another question. Mr Gibbons said that the Council will be considering brownfield sites, which could include Beachley Camp which is due to close by 2027, and is also looking at ways to encourage property owners to let empty houses. The development of small sites produces around 74 homes per year towards the target figure of 371.

For another speaker, the proposal brought back memories of an equally shocking scheme - the WARD scheme - which had been proposed in 1995. Thankfully that was permanently quashed, but it took considerable effort and vocal opposition to do so.

Pip Woodman asked how we can keep up to date with what is happening with this proposal and Simon Phelps asked that all present leave their contact details so that they can be kept informed. He added that the Parish Council will be following this matter very closely. The view was also expressed that Ridge and Partners should have been at the meeting to answer questions and, at the Parish Council meeting that followed, it was agreed that they should be invited to attend another public meeting in the near future.

Simon Phelps concluded the meeting with thanks to Nigel Gibbons for coming to answer our questions and a request for a show of hands, which demonstrated the overwhelming opposition to this proposal.

Although some were disappointed that no-one from Ridge and Partners was present to explain their proposal