

Wickham Bishops Parish Council Meeting 3rd September 2013

Report of Exhibition held on 19th & 20th July 2013

1. First off I have to say that the response form was organised by Essex Rural Housing and most of the replies went to them, letters & forms that were received by the Parish council were forwarded on the ERC and they compiled the statistics.

The exhibition went well there were 137 people signed in over the 2 days. Lots of questions were asked & answered. We had expected that the main objections would be from the residents who live on Snows Corner & Tiptree Rd and we weren't wrong. A lot of good suggestions as to alterations that could possibly be made were put forward and these will be put to the architects, one was to move the Tiptree Rd entrance slightly nearer to the corner so that it's not directly opposite the entrance to the house on the other side of the road. We are still trying to change one or two of the houses to bungalows but we are not that hopeful. Up to the 29th August there were 86 written responses from W/B residents. 36 of which were signed template letters of objection 18 of these were duplicates of objections already received and they were not counted twice. Of the 68 "original" letters just over 25% of the respondents were opposed to the proposal (if the template letters are included this figure rises to just over 40%). With 18 "original" responses and 18 template responses, a total of 36 named WB residents have made their views known as opposed so far. Although this is a significant number it is worth bearing in mind that this is only 2% of the population of WB.

About two-thirds of all respondents mentioned Highways issues as one of their key concerns and this is an area that is being very carefully looked at to see whether improvements are possible to existing roads, footpaths, and traffic management. We are hopeful that a Highways consultant will be appointed (fees to be paid by the landowner) to examine possible options. Around a third mentioned loss of open space and around a third mentioned school capacity. I will cover these points later on.

2. I would like to answer some of the objections with FACTS.

- a) No Planning application has been submitted as yet.
- b) When the Village Hall was built 3.25 acres, not 4 acres was used for houses which left just over 2 acres, but the village gained 16.75 acres of land that was previously in private ownership that can and is now used by everyone, 16 football teams, over 200 members of the Tennis club and by Cricketers as well as being used for the Summer Fete & the Parish Picnic, (attended by some 100 residents including children), and a dog walking field (Rainbow Field).
- c) The villagers are not losing 10 acres of land as suggested because it is in private hands, the only residents that have a view of it are the residents that live on its boundary. There are only 4.936 acres there any way and nobody else has access to it. The proposal means that the villagers will have the opportunity to own one of the properties.
- d) No design has been decided on, if the scheme goes ahead that will come about by negotiation.

The question of over development does not stand up; the proposal is for 5.47 dwellings per Acre. In comparison the application in Kelvedon Rd is for 4 large houses on .6427 acres which gives 6.22 houses per acre. The Maltings Lane development is for a density of about 12½ per acre. This density would give approx 60 houses on the Snows Corner site.

Government guidelines suggest that green field sites outside development boundaries should be considered favourably for development provided they are sustainable, particularly where there is no District Plan in force and no 5 year land supply. This site is highly sustainable (utilities, bus route, pavements, close to Village Hall, shops, surgery, school etc.). The site therefore is highly vulnerable and at risk. A Community Led Development would be much preferable than Developer Led. It is important to note that Developer Led development would require 30% affordable units anyway and these could not be reserved for local people but offered all over the District and even beyond. The emerging District Plan which is currently out for consultation suggests that 345 dwellings will be allocated to the rural Villages within the District.

Nick Boles, the government planning minister last week issued updated planning guidance designed to encourage developers to build thousands of bungalows that will be “solely for older people” who want to downsize after family have left home. Critics have warned that planning rules are forcing developers to build at least 30 dwellings per hectare. Mr Boles planning guidance tells developers of and I quote “the need to provide housing for older people is critical” & “we must build more suitable accommodation for older people if we are to avoid problems further down the line”. Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government is also a supporter of this.

There was also scepticism (10% of responses) at the desire to make sure the residents of the affordable properties come from the Wickham Bishops area first and then from the surrounding villages or that it will always be under the control of The Essex Rural Housing. Well we can never say never but as far as it can be done legally mechanisms will be put in place to ensure that qualifying people with verified WB connections are given priority for all homes in the control of English Rural Housing Association. This will apply not only to first time occupation but all also subsequently. The housing needs of applicants will be assessed by the housing association and MDC; the role of the PC will be to verify claimed local connection criteria). We want to avoid the mistakes made from the Finches Bungalows project. The legal agreement will include an agreed list of “reserve parishes” adjacent to WB – so that in the event that at some time in future there is no qualifying WB resident for a vacant home, then a qualifying person from an adjacent parish will be housed (rather than a home standing empty). At its next sale or letting, WB residents will again have priority for the property.

English Rural have around 1,200 homes in management, all in villages, all with legal agreements governing who can live there. To date English Rural confirm that not one property has been lost to the open market through right-to-buy or anything else.

- e) The question of Gt Totham School will be addressed by Essex Education authority and ECC.
- f) The question of traffic in Witham Rd and Tiptree Rd will be addressed by ECC Highways Dept. As a thought it might give us a bit more leverage with Highways in our request for more traffic calming measures i.e. a mini roundabout at Snows Corner!!
- g) The accusation that we have not sought traffic calming measures for the village, is not true, we have re-introduced the speed watch initiative which has been running for the last few weeks, and we have been awarded £22,000 by ECC for further measures.

I was made aware of the 5 points that were going to be raised tonight by members of the public so I have tried to answer them here.

The need for housing identified within the Village Design Statement is no longer valid given the current buoyant housing market (currently 50 bungalows for sale within 3 miles of the village and 250 potential starter homes) and 5 major developments amounting to over 4,000 new homes, that are planned to be built in the next 5 - 15 years, in close proximity to this village.

Not True, there has not been any “Affordable Housing” built in this village since the ones at the Mitre. As far as I am aware over many years there have only been 2 bungalows built, in the village which are those at the entrance to Holt Drive.

The 5 affordable /social / council housing units identified by RCCE in the housing survey as being needed, which are the key driver for this development, do not need to be delivered in this way or even within this village and there can be no justification for their fulfilment requiring a housing estate of 27 dwellings, the loss of a green field site in the centre of the village and the breaking of the village settlement boundary.

The outcome of the Wickham Bishops Village Design Statement was that they are needed in this village. The VDS is what its name suggests a document for Wickham Bishops not anywhere else in the district. The 5 affordable houses mentioned have been updated by MDC to 20 needed in Wickham Bishops.

The Parish Council should stay focused on representing the views of the majority of residents, as set out in the Village Design Statement, who have stated that they want the villages green spaces to be maintained and 80% of them, expressly stating that future development be restricted to Brownfield sites.

As far as I am aware there are no brown field sites available in the village that would be suitable for an affordable housing project.

The Snows Corner site selected was considered for possible development in 2012 by Maldon District Council and discounted as not being viable as it is both outside of the village settlement boundary and has a number of issues that make it unsuitable for development now or in the future. These include the very high water table making the land unsuitable for housing, poor access routes onto narrow main roads with poor sight lines and no pavements. What were the other sites looked at for development, why were they discounted and were land surveys carried out at all locations and if so what were the results?

That didn't appear to be the view of the Housing officers from MDC who attended the exhibition. The question of the other sites that were looked at falls under the heading of being "Commercially sensitive" and will not be disclosed. The land owners concerned were not made aware that their property was being looked at.

Maldon District Council have specified within their development plan that Wickham Bishops is not an appropriate village for further development due to infrastructure constraints that would be difficult to overcome. In particular there are highway issues over the Blue Mills crossing, the primary school at Gt. Totham is already at full capacity and the sewage plant at Witham would need to be upgraded.

MDC has to produce 345 dwellings from around the villages, this is over and above the 3000 odd at present identified. 4000 plus is the number that central government has told MDC to find over the next 15 years

It is interesting to note that of all the posts/comments on Face Book I could only find 5 on which the poster had the courage to add their name as far as I could tell all the others were anonymous including one that raged on about “backhanders” (although I could not find it today) I would like to make it very clear that any such accusation of this type levelled at any Councillor involved with this proposal will be met with the full force of the legal system, it will not be tolerated at all.

I should inform you that the Parish Council will not be party to the planning application if and when it is put in, that will be a joint application by English Rural Housing & the land Owner. I should also tell you that we will have no control over whether the landowner puts in his own application.

What Next? Well at this point I would ask the councillors if they wish us to continue discussions with Essex Rural Housing, RCCE, MDC and the Landowner on the same lines as we have been doing, this might include another exhibition/consultation. The outcome of these discussions will determine what comes after. But rest assured that we will make the relevant information available to all residents via the PC notice board and the Parish Magazine.

The planning committee is recommending that we continue as we have been doing.

Finally

We would like to thank all those who attended the exhibition and the experts from MDC Housing Dept, Moira Groberg from the RCCE and James Taylor and his team from Essex Rural Housing.