

Advice to the Parish Council from the Neighbourhood Plan Working Group

The Neighbourhood Plan Working Group (NPWG) offer the following commentary on the letter to the Parish Council (PC) from the Church Commissioners (dated 13 April 2023) and on documents on pre-application discussions with Mendip planners - now made available through freedom of information requests.

The Church Commissioners' Letter

The NPWG are still pushing for a commitment from the Church Commissioners to engage in meaningful partnership with the Westbury sub Mendip community. This collaborative approach that we have been seeking reflects statements they have made in their various strategic documents.

The Church Commissioners have offered some land on the brownfield site for a community hall as an alternative to a location on the greenfield area. It is difficult for the PC to respond to this offer because:

1. The village community need time to decide if a community hall is the priority- there are other options for use of community space.
2. The brownfield land in question is contaminated with asbestos that has been allowed to deteriorate, the costs of cleaning the site are unknown and may be the responsibility of the landowners or the current tenant to fund.
3. Provision of public and community parking is an important need within the community and the current proposals remove the current Mortar Pits location without redress (insufficient as it is).
4. There is not sufficient clarity on the impact of any development on the brownfield site on the listed buildings – which will need to be acceptable to the planners for any permission to be issued.

The NPWG make the following comments on the technical matters section highlighted in the Church Commissioners letter as follows:

Road safety – the community would reasonably expect the Church Commissioners to be more committed to honouring the statement in the Mendip Plan (WM1) that development needs to provide safe pedestrian access to the core of the village. A 20mph zone may be welcomed but is only part of what is required. If pedestrian safety cannot be provided the development should not go ahead.

Green Corridor – Ecologists and Community feedback advises a 12-15m buffer is needed (not 8m)

Public Rights of Way – The need for connectivity of Rights of Way (RoW) was brought to the attention of the Commissioners and their agents over a year ago – why has this not already been explored?

Building Heights – given the rural settlement character, the landscape setting and the housing need there is no justification for 2.5 storey houses. These

should be removed from the plan and there should be some single storey properties to cater for older and/or lower mobility residents

Housing density – The proposal does not respect the historic and rural settlement character of Westbury sub Mendip nor its position as a gateway to the Mendip Hills AONB.

Pre-Application report (Lichfields meeting with Mendip Planners)

The pre-application report issued by Mendip planners following a meeting held with Lichfields and Church Commissioners has been made available following a freedom of information request.

We note that the planners are not happy with a number of aspects of the proposal and have similar views to the community on issues of overdevelopment. However, we believe they need to be more robust with their response on placing attenuation ponds outside the development area (which then allows for more housing); a much stronger response is needed to ensure provision for safe pedestrian access; a stronger response is needed on layout and design that reflects the rural nature of the village.

Next steps

The NPWG are meeting local planners for a pre-application discussion this week (3rd May) to understand their views and advice on critical issues. We are focussed on highway safety; over- development (protecting nature of rural settlement); how the Court Farm building site should best be used and developed. We will also be asking about drainage, phosphates and sewerage.

Quotes have been received for technical reports including a settlement character report which will define the key features of the village that can then be highlighted for protection and enhancement and a transport safety report or series of reports that will be designed to make it crystal clear why provision of safe pedestrian and vehicle access is a fundamental requirement that needs meeting before any development can be considered - as stated in the local plan policy WM1. The Parish Council have now decided to commission these reports as quoted and to fund the costs of this work from parish funds. Some help with data, photos and history will be required from local people.

We are also asking various experienced people within the village to prepare responses to drainage matters - how best to argue that the surface water drainage and storage should be held within the development area (currently this is located outside the development area and so allows more housing within), to clarify what improvements would be required for the sewage works in Westbury and get answers to on why the sewage works is referred to by some as being outside the phosphate protection area (nutrient neutrality zone)