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## Report from SNJ: a look at both sides of the debate over Ecotricity's controversial £100m 'Eco Park'



(l-r clockwise) Ecotricity founder and Forest Green owner Dale Vince, Westend resident Mark Campbell, Labour county councillor for Stonehouse Lesley Williams and Conservative district councillor for Eastington and Standish, Stephen Davies

**AT first glance it seems like your classic story – a hugely successful energy company against the determined people of a small village community.**

But the growing battle over the proposed £100 million Eco Park near Eastington is a far more nuanced and complicated than that.

As the fight between Ecotricity and Eastington residents continues, *SNJ* reporter Jamie Wiseman examines the arguments on either side in greater depth.

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Everybody in Stroud knows Ecotricity. The green energy giant is the second biggest employer in the district and a pioneer in clean, renewable energy.

Like it or not, the company has woven itself into the modern history of Stroud. It is now almost as big a part of the area's identity as the common's cows or the farmer's market.

Since starting out as the world's first green energy company, it has grown to have several offices in the district which are home to more than 800 jobs.

Although Ecotricity has put forward some pretty sizable projects in the area before, nothing quite compares to its latest plan in terms of both scale and ambition.

It has launched an extensive planning application to build a massive £100 million sports and business centre near Stroud.

This colossal development, dubbed Eco Park, would be built on either side of the A419 near Junction 13 of the M5, just half a mile from the village of Eastington.



At a whopping 100-acres, it stretches from the motorway down to the edge of Eastington, past Churchend and the service station and right up to the hamlet of Westend.

On the southern side of the A419 are the five green fields allocated for the sports complex. This huge area includes plans for a 5000 all-seater stadium for **Forest Green Rovers** (FGR) – the football club owned by Ecotricity boss Dale Vince.

This **new ground** is undeniably the centrepiece of the boss' vision, and is emblematic of the club's growing ambitions.

While the final design for this stadium is still being decided between two celebrated finalists, Mr Vince has hinted this new stadium will be “unlike anything seen before” and will put Stroud on the map as a key football hub in Gloucestershire.

Equipped with a possibly world-class ground, he is also hoping the Nailsworth-based team will be propelled into the Football League – something they came so narrowly close to doing last season.



The club's vice chairman David Drew has said he hopes the relocation will usher in a “new era of success” for the National League side.

And with the stadium being built specifically with the ability to be expanded to a 10,000 seater, you can see the lofty heights the club is hoping to soar to.

This ambition is something the majority of fans, players and indeed the new manager Mark Cooper are revelling in as the season begins.

They club say that the relocation will allow for greater ease for supporters, less traffic clogging up Nailsworth, the ability to attract better players to FGR and that it fits in perfectly with the team's fresh hopes of promotion.

**FGR's commercial manager Paula Brown** says that with attendances at games having grown 73 per cent over the last four seasons, the move is necessary to “meet the club growth and training aspirations”.

Among many other issues, she argues the new location would provide better transport links and car parking and facilities for the fans, allowing for a natural growth in support over the next few years.

On top of that, the club maintains that the move would allow it to “operate sustainably in a financial sense” and grow its youth, academy and ladies teams.

Meanwhile, FGR's current home, the New Lawn stadium in Nailsworth would be turned into low carbon housing, with some affordable housing.

Alongside the new stadium, the plans also earmark space for state-of-the-arts sporting facilities, training fields, 4G pitches and a sports science hub.

This would be a “centre of excellence” in the South West for sports medicine, rehabilitation, fitness and health, and would work with local health and education providers.

It would also provide a vast range of facilities for football, disability sports, cricket, swimming, squash, canoeing and archery to name just a few – all of which would be open to the community.

These commitments to “public access” have been warmly welcomed by SDC’s Sport and Health Development Service and many of the sports clubs in the area.



From its location at junction 13, it is hoped the sports park would attract people from three directions; eastwards from Stroud itself and from the north and south on the M5.

The company says it wants to create around 300 new jobs at this sports complex.

Then on the other half of the A419 you have what they are calling The Green Technology Hub – which would act as an “enabling development” to the stadium.

The proposal aims to make this area the home for thousands of highly-skilled professional, scientific and technical jobs, both existing and new.

Mr Vince says it will be “a place where green businesses and technology companies come together and share ideas,” and “a real focal point of creativity and innovation for the area.”

It would also be made available for the expansion of Ecotricity for a further 350 jobs. But it has also stressed that its main offices will not be relocating and that it is “fully committed to maintaining a strong long-term presence in the town”.

When these two pieces of the puzzle fit together, the aim is for Eco Park to host a whopping 4,000 jobs.

A report commissioned by Ecotricity have found this could bring a shed load of money into the county's economy - £288 million a year to be exact – if Eco Park operates at full steam and with full employment.

That runs alongside further commissioned research that found it could raise around £2.7million worth of business rates annually.

This figure was something Ecotricity were quick to point out would almost plug the entire £3million funding hole in [Stroud District Council](#)'s finances by 2020.



This boost to job figures in the county have been welcomed by a number of businesses, including BPE Solicitors.

Their Stroud managing partner Cheryl Leigh has described it as “a highly exciting and innovative” project which she says is “representative of the brilliant work that’s going on in the Five Valleys.”

Mrs Leigh said the green business space will “foster collaboration, create jobs and bring in significant investment to put Gloucestershire at the heart of the green economy.”

Another who has welcomed the jobs figures is Stroud MP Neil Carmichael, who said issues of employment and investment should “underpin” the council’s decision.

And there are even more deal-sweeteners in the planning application – including a small nature reserve on the other side of the M5 near to the River Frome.

Ecotricity’s resident ecologist Simon Pickering says he wants to make this five hectare area a “shining example of ecological development”.

Plans include creating new habitats on the wetland area, as well as ‘corridors’ to allow for the migration of some 10 local bat species – one particular idea that has been welcomed by Slimbridge WWT.

On top of that, Mr Vince has also expressed a desire to work with the Cotswold Canals Trust in their efforts to open up part of the “missing mile” of the Stroudwater Navigation.

The Trust are aspiring to reopen this section of the historic canal so it passes under the M5, allowing for the connection of Stonehouse and Saul and a link to the Gloucester Sharpness Canal.

Plus, in an effort to cope with increased traffic, there would also be a reworked dual carriageway from the M5 to Chipmans Platt roundabout on the A419, with a signalised junction and new pedestrian crossings.



Together with a possible Park and Ride into the town and a pedestrian cycle way, Ecotricity’s aim is to actually lower traffic times along the busy main road to the motorway and “improve transport links to Stroud and beyond”.

This transport hub will include space for large car parks for cars, coaches, taxi ranks and drop-off points. And the improved cycle paths will be made accessible with bike sheds and showers.

All in all, this plan is monumentally big. Yet despite the huge scale of the development, the Mr Vince has continually stressed the “green” credentials of the proposals.

He has painted a picture of further jobs in green industries, a super-eco stadium and has put emphasis on a park-like design with “green spaces and sustainable buildings”.

[\*\*Alison Williamson, environmental planner for Ecotricity\*\*](#), has also described it as a “truly green development” built with on-site renewable energy sources such a solar panels.

She has said the buildings would be created with “sustainable principles in the construction, operation and the design” and that the aim is to “attract as many green businesses as possible to create one of the biggest environmental business hubs in the area”.

Ecotricity stress the “preference” for this Green Technology Hub is for the buildings to be “occupied by companies from the ‘green economy’, either directly involved with manufacturing, supplying or developing sustainable products and services”.

A special **'Eco' report** from the company also sets out plans for the inside of the development to be “largely traffic-free”, with circular footpaths for walkers and cyclists.

It says it will plant some 2,000 metres of new hedgerows across the site, which is aimed at “providing biodiversity” and “promoting greater species richness and diversity”.



This will be matched by newly created ponds for amphibians that will also form part of the SuDS flood prevention tactics in the area.

An orchard on the north of the land would also be replanted with apple and pear trees to help provide habitats for birds, bats and bees, with the fruit harvested for “local use”.

While the planting of Oak, Field Maple and Ash around Eco Park will be aimed at adding to what Ecotricity call the “parkland feel” of the site.

Since putting in the planning application, the company say they have seen a lot of support for the idea from people at the consultation events and fans of Forest Green.

On top of this there has also been a good deal of support on the council’s planning website from members of the public.

Mark Jefferies from Rodborough is one of those who supports the idea. He said: “Ecotricity has revitalised the economy in Stroud.

“I believe their approach is made with the best interests towards the environment and that this development should be celebrated as the leading UK hub for innovative, renewable energy development.”

Ianto Doyle also backed the plan, commenting: “An inspiring application which is a model development for the future. I am impressed with how well thought out it is, containing a good balance of social benefit, industry and nature.”

In addition to the public a number of nearby parish councils, sports clubs and organisations have written in support of the plan.

When you add of those pieces together it forms a pretty striking, imposing and ambitious case.

**And yet while the arguments in favour of creating Eco Park are huge, varying and wide-ranging – so are those against it.**

Since its very conception the plan has faced stern and staunch criticism from a large and growing contingent of people in Eastington and the wider community in Stroud.

Indeed for every comment of support on the council's website, there is one against it. And when you add that to a petition of some 600 people who oppose Eco Park, you are left with a pretty sizable segment of the community.

While these groups undoubtedly have a sizeable task on their hands if they want to stop the development encroaching on their community, they are certainly not shying away from the challenge and are determined to stop this giant masterplan in its tracks.

They have raised a raft of issues that the development would bring with it, ranging from congestion and traffic to infrastructure, and most importantly - that Eco Park sticks out like a sore thumb against the recently adopted [Stroud District Local Plan](#).

Mark Campbell is a geologist who lives at Grove Farm in Westend. His land borders the fields Eco Park would be built on to its northern edge.



“After a decade of wrangling, we finally have a Local Plan in place which sets guidelines for growth, jobs and development in the district,” he said.

“This has taken years to put in place and sets out areas we are going to build right up until 2031.

“Eco Park is fundamentally and inherently at odds with this plan. It doesn’t comply with the blueprint for how our people and our council decided they wanted the district to look.

“If it were to go ahead we’d have to tear up the Local Plan and start again after just one year. It’s madness.

“What’s the point in even having a plan if we are going to disregard it as soon as someone with a lot of money comes along and says they want to build something huge and expensive?

“The Local Plan was created precisely to stop this kind of knee jerk planning application happening. That’s the irony of it all.”

Mr Campbell, who helped sculpt the Eastington’s local plan, continued: “Ecotricity play the ‘green’ card here, but the truth is that Eco Park is completely unsustainable.

“Despite the rhetoric about ‘sustainably built offices’, the bottom line is that it will obliterate nine pristine green fields in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. What could be less green than that? Calling it ‘Eco’ is a smokescreen.

“Plus, in terms of the roads, transport links and even the economic viability of the football stadium, this plan is unsustainable. Not to mention the infrastructure in the village and the surrounding hamlets.

“Eastington has one butcher, one pub, one hairdresser and one shop. Imagine what will happen when thousands of people come pouring in at lunchtime or on match day. It will be completely overwhelmed – and that’s without mentioning the parking.

“It really do think it will have a devastating effect on the village. I’m worried it will end up as just another Quedgeley by the motorway. Is that really what we want?”

He went on to criticise what he sees at the lack of proper consultation that Ecotricity had carried out with the people that would be affected most.

“At no point have they really consulted us. They held one or two drop in sessions. But at no point has there been an actual discussion,” he said.

“Consultation is a two way process. Ecotricity’s refusal to consider any form of compromise shows they have no consideration for the people who live here.

“They know that at the end of the day the parish council is no barrier for them and they think the community is ultimately irrelevant in their plans. They’ve decided this is where they want Eco Park to be, and that’s the end of it as far as they’re concerned.”



The area’s Conservative district councillor Stephen Davies is also strongly opposed to the plans.

As the representative of the people of Eastington and Standish, he’s determined to make sure the community’s voice is heard at Ebley Mill.

“Let’s make this clear, the people of my constituency are overwhelmingly against this proposal,” he said.

“I and the parish council have gone door to door and over 80 per cent of residents oppose the idea.

“We have already had the West-of-Stonehouse development forced on us. We fought that battle and lost. It was a huge blow to the community.

“Since then we’ve come a long way and the parish council is working to embrace it fully. So to have another huge and unwanted development forced upon is devastating.

“A lot of Eastington residents feel very let down. And they have good reason to be.

He continued: “The idea that the Stroud district needs more employment is a myth. Unemployment is below five per cent. And plans for boosting employment are set out in the Local Plan.

“These jobs will do little do benefit the people of Stroud itself. The people who fill them will come from up and down the M5.

“We must understand that Eco Park’s business centre is not some altruistic development for the community and the district, it is a business venture aimed at making profit. It must be seen as a property development like any other.”

Another who is strongly opposed to Eco Park is Tom Lowe, a member of community campaign group Keep Eastington Rural and chairman of the Eastington Community Orchards Group.



“Don’t be fooled, there is very little that is actually ‘Eco’ about this plan,” he said. “All this is doing is obliterating green fields and very old hedgerows.

“Eastington is already being encroached upon by all sides. We’ve sacrificed enough already with the 1300 home West of Stonehouse development. Enough is enough.

“But it isn’t just our village that will suffer. If Eco Park goes ahead it will send ripples across the district by ripping up the Local Plan.

“Employment planning across Stroud would have to be completely rethought. Rather than being carefully dispersed around the district, so many of the jobs would be concentrated in one place. And most of them wouldn’t be filled by people from Stroud.

“This would mean jobs, offices and factories that are planned for areas like Dursley would dry up.

“Money for regeneration efforts that are years in the making, such as Brimscombe Port, will be rethought. It will actually stop growth in other parts of the district.

“So it isn’t just Eastington that would be damaged by this, it’s communities across the Five Valleys.”

Eastington resident and parish councillor Alex Bomberg is also leading the charge against the plans.

He argues Eco Park is not about being ‘green’ or providing sporting facilities for the community. He says it’s about two things: football and making money.

“This business park will not be about job creation - we are talking about established firms moving to this location,” he said.

“Plus, Ecotricity cannot guarantee it will be occupied by green businesses. It is just another trading estate. Built unlike others, it’s being built on valuable green field land.

“There are plenty of brownfield sites available elsewhere in the district that would be far more suitable.

“There simply isn’t any requirement for this. The area doesn’t need a football stadium, it doesn’t need the sporting facilities and it doesn’t even need more jobs.

“Stroud district does not have a job problem. And even if you created 4000 jobs then we would need to build more and more homes. When you drill down and start to ask questions about this proposal you see it’s completely unnecessary.

“The irony is that Forest Green can’t even fill the seats at their stadium at the moment. They are only reaching average attendances of 1,400.

“Even if there were promoted twice the New Lawn would have a big enough capacity. Their current facilities are adequate for the league they are in and the support they have.”



This issue is one that the Berkley Vale Branch of the Campaign to Protect Rural England touched upon in their formal opposition to the plans.

In a dense rebuttal to Ecotricity’s proposals, it said FGR’s relocation away from its historic birthplace could lead to a “reduction” in support, rather than the other way round.

“Nailsworth is by some way the smallest town supporting a club in the National League, the fifth tier of English football,” it said.

“The very fact of Nailsworth’s size casts some doubt on the club’s ability to secure a continuous increase in attendance in the future to match that of the recent past.”

It continued: “On match days, the main East Stand and South Stand are seldom full, and the West Stand is rarely used.

“There is therefore scope for an increase in attendance without moving, and indeed there is a danger of a reduction in support if the club is removed from the community in which it is based.

“The club’s support in the town and its immediate environs is currently able to travel to the ground by sustainable means despite the steepness of the terrain.

“In contrast, the site of the proposed development lies outside any recognised community and virtually everyone would travel thereby motorised transport of some kind.

“The club’s link with the local community would be weakened if not broken by its relocation.”

As you can imagine, one of the biggest groups opposing the plans is Eastington Parish Council itself.

It is deeply concerned about the impact traffic around the motorway junction and the road into Stroud will have to the village.

“The figures supplied by Ecotricity show that the traffic on A419 east of Chipman’s Platt will be at 109 per cent saturation during the afternoon peak times,” it said.

“This will lead to queuing traffic and raises the possibility of significant ‘rat-running’ through Eastington, Frocester and Kings Stanley.

“There are no proposals to provide regular public bus services to the site; we consider that this to be a serious omission and without public transport makes the proposed site unsustainable.”

And it’s not just the parish council that are opposed. So too is the area’s Labour county councillor Lesley Williams.



“Traffic is going to be one of the biggest issues Ecotricity have to deal with. The roads there are woefully unequipped to cope with that increase of thousands of cars,” she said.

“The A419 is already a log-jam at rush hours. And when you factor in the new West of Stonehouse development, which is going to add thousands more journeys, the picture gets even grimmer.

“Eco Park is going to tip the traffic over the edge and create serious problems. There are just so many unknown areas at the moment. We need a lot more information to get a clear picture.

“One thing we do know is that Ecotricity’s plans have big, big holes in them.”

Her fears are backed up by independent traffic reports commissioned by Eastington Parish Council.

The research carried out by Helix Transport Consultants describes the current proposals to deal with increased traffic around the site as “unreliable and uncertain” and slams Eco Park for a lack of “clearly defined commitment” to provide bus access.

It says the company’s assessments are “unachievable” and will only result in even worse queueing and delays on the A419 – especially at peak hours.

Under the current proposals, Helix’s surveys expected the increased traffic to cause delays of up to an hour along Bath Road at rush hour.

In summary it calls the site an “inherently unsuitable location” for such a huge development.

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**Similarly to the case *for* Eco Park then, when stacked up on top of each other the case *against* the plans also looks pretty strong. Each side of the debate has its numerous pros and cons.**

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The opinion of councillors, businesses, fans, organisations, campaigners and the public seems to be fairly evenly, and strongly, divided.

In the end however, it will be up to Stroud District Council’s 12-strong Development Control Committee to decide which of these arguments outweighs the other.

And with the decision not likely to be made until late autumn, the battle between Ecotricity and Eastington residents is sure to rumble on over the next few months.

While it’s becoming increasingly impossible to call the result, one thing you can be sure of is that this fight will go on right to the very end.

**To view and comment on the planning application for yourself visit [www.stroud.gov.uk/apps/planning](http://www.stroud.gov.uk/apps/planning) and search *S.16/0043/OUT*.**