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Your ref: DCBW/ch/1400802hb

Our ref: J4558/PGWD/RAK

30 October 2002

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Dear Nigel

Wye Campus, Ashford, Kent

I have looked into the planning potential of the Imperial College campus at Wye College. The campus is a large site adjoining the village of Wye of approximately 300Ha. The site comprises two sections: the main campus stretching from the High Street out to the north-east of the village and the farmland to the east of the village.

The current local plan for the area is the Ashford Borough Local Plan, adopted in June 2000. I enclose an extract from the local plan proposals maps showing your site. The buildings adjoining the High Street are within the Wye Conservation Area. The buildings on the east side of Olantigh Road comprise an area identified as development site S70 in the local plan, where development in connection with Wye College will generally be permitted, but other development will not. The whole campus, including the farmland, is located within the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and is defined as rural area. In general, major development within the AONB will not be permitted unless a national need is proven and no alternative sites are available.

Policy HG5 of the local plan allows for 'windfall' sites in certain villages (including Wye) to be developed for housing. One of the qualifications to this policy is that such development does not result in the displacement of employment or other facilities for which there is a need in the area. The development must also be within the confines of the village. Unusually, the local plan does not define the village confines on the proposals map, but defines them as 'the limits of continuous development forming the existing built-up area of the settlement'. There is therefore a case for arguing that the whole of the main campus is within the village confines. What will be significantly more difficult is proving that the loss of the college would not constitute the displacement of employment. One possible solution is to produce a redevelopment scheme that includes some employment uses. Policy RE3 does allow for new employment buildings and uses within the confines of the village where *"the character of the settlement is not damaged significantly by the form of development proposed in terms of its layout, building design and scale; the level or type of activity it generates and the functional and visual relationship it has with adjoining uses"*. This could allow for a redevelopment of the main campus area with residential development, accompanied by employment uses to mitigate the loss of the college.

Ashford has been identified in RPG 9 (2001) as a potential growth area. Consequently, Ashford Borough is involved in the 'Ashford Future Study', which will influence the review of the local plan. Whilst any increase in jobs in this area may increase demand for other forms of development, the guidance is clear that the development should be plan-led and in a compact urban form immediately adjoining the existing built up area of Ashford. It is unlikely that the expansion of Ashford would encompass Wye.

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The site contains a number of agricultural buildings in the farmland to the east of Wye. Local plan policy discourages residential conversion of such buildings, unless they have architectural or historic value such that their retention is more important than their use (policy RE6). Non-residential uses that do not have an adverse impact on the countryside will generally be permitted under policy RE5, but one of the stipulations of this policy is that buildings outside villages must be capable of conversion without major or complete re-construction.

Conclusion

In the light of the relevant planning policies, it is my view that there is some scope for the redevelopment of that part of the campus within the confines of Wye. Those buildings on the west side of Olantigh Road (i.e. not within the area defined as site s70) may be re-used or redeveloped for housing and employment, provided the employment provided is sufficient to mitigate the loss of the college's employment, without being so much as to lead to significant commuting into the village, which would be considered detrimental.

The site s70 is more problematic, as there is a presumption against development not associated with Wye College on this site. In order to overcome this, it will be necessary to demonstrate material considerations that mean the policy should be over-ruled. The closure or significant reduction of the College may be such a consideration, but given the long association of the College with Wye (since the middle of the 15th century) the Council will probably be reluctant to lose the College. With regard to the farmland, any buildings of historic or architectural importance may be re-usable for housing, but the farmland itself will have to remain as farmland.

In terms of timing, given the extent of the site, it is best to consider the potential for the site in both the short to medium term and the longer term. In the short to medium term, as stated above, modest development may be appropriate. In the longer term there may be an opportunity to influence planning policy at all levels, but this will require direct action, putting forward your case for development.

I trust this advice is of use to you. I will contact you in the next few days to confirm what needs to be done to take it forward.

Yours sincerely



Peter Dines
Partner