**Statement to the Inquiry: Prof John Mansfield**

I live in Wye and worked at Wye College, lecturing and carrying out research for almost 30 years before the site was closed and my group was relocated to Imperial College London. I am a member of the Agricola Club. I was editor in chief of the Wye Neighbourhood Development Plan, working closely with Tony Shoults.

I would like to comment on each of the sites that are the subjects of this Inquiry, covering the planning process, community access to the most important College buildings and the alternative proposal put forward by WyeCRAG. My wife Maggie and I have sent in written comments but I would like to add to these, particularly concerning the historic college buildings.

**PLANNING PROCESS**

The overarching issue that links all of these sites is the need for guidance in the Neighbourhood Plan to be followed. This plan was adopted as policy by ABC before the application for planning permission for Appeal Site A was submitted and incorporated into ABC’s local plan. The recent White paper (Proposal 9) highlights the value of Neighbourhood Plans and their increasing significance for local planning.

When we were preparing the Neighbourhood Plan we had tremendous encouragement and help from members of ABC’s planning department. Indeed one key section of the plan was included specifically after recommendation by Simon Cole (currently head of planning policy*)* and that was that.....

***“Piecemeal development should not come forward for sites within WYE3”***

This statement backs up the Neighbourhood Plan Policy WNP6 for mixed development that emphasises the need for an acceptable Masterplan to be prepared for WYE3 as follows.

**Policy WNP6**  ***Mixed* Development proposals for the WYE3 site should deliver a mix of uses, including education, business, community infrastructure and some housing. Given the scale of the site in relation to the village, such development should be delivered in a phased manner in accordance with a masterplan that has been adopted as a Supplementary Planning Document by Ashford Borough Council.**

This policy confirms that an acceptable Masterplan is essential for the assessment of the overall impact of developments on WYE3.

I am encouraged to see that the current planning officer, Lesley Westphal, has taken full notice of the Neighbourhood Plan when commenting on the ADAS and North of Occupation Rd sites that are part of this Inquiry. Quite rightly, the Planning Officer points out that the proposals for these two sites represent poorly designed over-development in sensitive areas. They also threaten the concept of Wye as a walkable village that was developed in the Neighbourhood Plan and strongly supported by the plan’s Examiner.

Regrettably, the guidance in the Neighbourhood Plan seems to have been ignored when dealing with the Old Campus. The harmful conversion of the most historic elements of this site into residences and its treatment as a piecemeal, individual planning application makes no sense if the Neighbourhood Plan policies carry the weight they are afforded through the NPPF.

It is my opinion that one of the main reasons behind the need for this Inquiry was the Planning Officer’s inaccurate and misleading report as presented to the ABC planning committee when they considered the application for listed building consent in June 2018. There were three critical errors -

1. The Neighbourhood Development Plan was not given its proper status when considering development on WYE3.
2. The lack of genuine consultation with the community over the TT application and also their Masterplan was completely overlooked. In reality, as Tony Shoults has described, there was no attempt to follow, or take account of, the required iterative process. Like other individuals who attended the public exhibition of draft proposals, I registered to be notified by email about further developments. I subsequently received an email link to the first proposals and then notification about the planning application for the Wolfson Lecture Theatre site - since then, no further details, nothing has been received.
3. The planning officer himself appears to have been misled by a very poor report from English Heritage that failed to point out the potential harm to the interior of the historic buildings through the proposed chopping up of historic components of the site. I have read the submissions by Mr Fidgett of Union 4 Planning concerning the importance of linking the Latin School to Unit 18 to maximise Group Listed Value, but this assertion completely ignores the loss of Group Listed Value caused by separating Unit 18 from the Cloister Quad, to which it has been intimately linked for over 570 years and with which it shares Listing Particulars. The Latin School has a completely separate Listing Description.

During preparation of the Neighbourhood Plan we had to respond to all comments received on the early drafts. One comment on the proposals for the Grade I site in the Neighbourhood Plan was received from English Heritage, written by Robert Loyd in 2015, and this wholeheartedly supported the proposals in the Neighbourhood Plan for development of a community centre in part of the campus site. I will quote...

***“We note the requirement of Policy WNP 11 to provide new use for the medieval ... buildings of Wye College, as a community centre. We strongly support the identification of this as an appropriate use that is least likely to result in the internal subdivision of listed buildings, which could potentially result in harm to their significance.******This also helps to ensure that the buildings will continue to be enjoyed as heritage assets by the community, providing a positive strategy for the conservation and enjoyment of the historic environment as supported by the National Planning Policy Framework.”***

I find it hard to understand why Historic England, as it is now, failed to refer to their earlier comments when the listed building consent for the damaging conversions proposed by TT were under discussion.

**COMMUNITY ACCESS and the WyeCRAG proposals**

Like English Heritage in 2015, I am a strong supporter of the alternative, exciting proposals for community use of this site, initially as put forward by the Parish Council in the Neighbourhood Plan and now in more detail by the WyeCRAG group.

While I was working at Wye College, I was privileged to be able to use the Grade I and Grade 2\* listed buildings every day for meetings, seminars and lectures. The College was at the heart of events that included the local community, providing employment and social interactions. The rooms in the College were frequently used by the local community for concerts, dinners, meetings and exhibitions. There was substantial interaction with the village on a daily basis.

Nevertheless, **I have always considered that the Grade I buildings were so exceptional that they provide an unrivalled opportunity to be developed as a study centre,** equivalent to many National Trust properties but adding that extra dimension of continuing education. The evolution of the Wye campus is a fascinating and perhaps unique example of the expansion, change and developing use of an educational site that started life as a Chantry College.

Imagine relocation of the local library to such a historic centre of education; interactive displays in a Museum of Wye located in the Solar and providing exhibition and archive space for organisations like Wye Heritage and the Wye Historical Society, reached by the magnificent Jacobean staircase with its ancient Britons statues; exhibitions in the Cloistered Quad and Old Hall; refreshments in the Wheelroom café and the Latin School gardens, dinners in the Parlours and tasting visits to the medieval wine cellars. There will be opportunities and space for masterclasses, summer schools, and a North Downs Study Centre - all supported by accommodation on site.

Historic buildings can be interesting to look at but become hugely more significant if they are still in use by the community for their original purpose. A Cathedral that does not hold services loses its reason for being there. TT’s plans offer to restructure historic buildings that will just be there to be stared at, but be put to almost no community use. A hugely important staircase that leads according to their plans to – nowhere at all!

This Inquiry has generated the opportunity for the WyeCRAG proposals to be given full consideration. We now have a clear vision of what should be achieved on the historic site with the development of the sustainable Wye College Centre. An opportunity to go beyond the community access that was already dynamic when College was open. An opportunity to create a lasting legacy. **WyeCRAG proposes a College for the community, run by the community.**

Clearly, conversion of the Grade l College buildings to a private residential complex does not achieve any of the goals for the conservation of heritage outlined in the NPPF which places emphasis on...

 *...” the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets, and putting them to viable uses consistent with their conservation”*

In conclusion, this Inquiry is not like a referendum – we will not be able to think again and change our minds in a few years’ time. **Saving the buildings and creating the community centre is a NOW OR NEVER OPPORTUNITY.**

There are significant and obvious errors in the planning process that have led us to this inquiry. Community access and understanding of the Grade l buildings must be increased, not suppressed. Levelling up must be accessible to all – we must not fail future generations by allowing the residential development of the Grade I buildings to go ahead.

**Similarly, we must not allow development on any parts of WYE3 without a proper Masterplan that is accepted by and beneficial to all parties.**



John Mansfield January 2021