

Wye Future Group

141-145 Bridge Street, Wye, Ashford, Kent TN25 5DP

17 February 2006

Dear <member of Imperial College Management Board / Council> ,

We are writing to express our concern about Imperial College's plans for a large-scale development around the village of Wye, almost certainly including substantial construction on greenfield sites in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

We want to stress from the outset that we are not opposed to the scientific research the College has in mind, or to the creation of good jobs in the Ashford area. We welcome a thriving academic presence at the College in Wye. But we urge you to consider alternatives with regard to the science park and housing that is currently envisaged to be built on what are now green fields around Wye.

There are a number of considerations that, in our view, the College needs to consider in its planning for this project.

The first is that Wye and the land around it are part of what is rightly classified as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Even beyond the official boundaries of the AONB, the area is one where ancient villages are surrounded by countryside of exceptional beauty. To pour concrete and tarmac over green fields in the Stour valley, and to build a major road across this countryside, would damage irreparably the beauty of the area, denying to our children and their children the natural heritage that we have inherited from generations before. This is not just a local issue. If we on this small island do not preserve what remains of our most beautiful countryside, the children of this land will inherit a more barren place than our grandparents left to us. The College's reputation is unlikely to be enhanced if it presses forward with what many will see as an act of environmental vandalism in an AONB.

The second consideration is that a great many of the people who live in the area are strongly committed to do everything in their power to protect our natural surroundings. We have held the first meetings of a broad based group, called the Wye Future Group. The group contains a wide range of

skills, and many members who are knowledgeable about the legal and planning issues involved. From a planning perspective, we believe we have a very strong case to make. We have already submitted a "letter before action" raising the possibility of judicial review of the Wye Concordat, on the basis that the participation of the Kent and Ashford Councils undermines their role as impartial judges of future planning applications relating to the development. From the College's perspective, there is clearly a risk that a great deal of time and money will be spent on an extended planning battle, in which the College may not succeed.

Third, the selling of greenfield land for housing to fund your share of the project is not a method of fund-raising that is likely to be readily accepted in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Landowners in many scenic areas of this country have similar incentives to sell their land for large sums of money, but the need for funds is not a sufficient reason to inflict permanent damage on our natural heritage.

These problems could be avoided if, on further reflection, Imperial could find methods of funding the project other than by sales of land for development, and other locations for those parts of the project that are currently envisaged on green fields in this beautiful valley.

Against this background, we should welcome Imperial's responses to the following questions:

- Is it really so necessary that the science park should be immediately adjacent to the research centre as to justify paving over a substantial part of the land around Wye? There are other science and business parks existing or planned not far away which are well outside the AONB. We note, for example, that Ashford Borough Council has specifically mentioned that the project could include development not only in Wye but at "new business parks within Ashford such as Eureka Park at Jct 9 of the M20."
- Are there not ways of securing Imperial's £300 million investment from other sources than by selling land around Wye for development?
- Generally, how can the economic benefits from the science development be secured while minimising, and preferably eliminating, damage to the AONB around Wye?

Your plans, and the much larger figures for job creation and associated development included in the Imperial/Ashford Borough Council/Kent County Council Concordat, have as you will know excited both interest and very serious concern in this area; and your responses to this letter will be of similar interest and concern. It therefore seems to us essential that there should be a fully informed public discussion prior to any planning submissions. The challenge for Imperial is to find ways of realising the potential benefits of the scientific developments without the damage to its reputation that is liable to occur if an AONB is seen to be threatened for

reasons merely of financial expediency – as could well be the outcome should there be a hard fought planning battle. We should of course be happy to discuss other alternatives with you.

Yours sincerely,

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