

LETTERS to the editor

Critical look at plans of university is needed

FOR A second version of its planning application, the University of Kent is currently taking extra time to rewrite a business case as to why consent should be given for a gigantic development on the south-facing fields below the university to include the destruction of extensive historic hedgerows, public amenity and the setting of the Cathedral.

The financial benefit to the university in transforming the rural land known as Chaucer Fields into building land is quite obvious, and is an asset gain without turning a trowel.

The presentation made so far is that the complex will relieve 217 student houses of multiple occupation (HMOs) and employ, once built, 125 full-time staff.

It will include a hotel and conference centre and also talk about the supposed extra residents coming into former student houses that will pay council tax and contribute to the local economy.

The notion is that this highly debatable

and unproven mix of public benefit justifies cultural, environmental and social destruction in the context of these particular fields.

To construe the proposal as backdoor provision of affordable housing because of student syphonage from the city to more expensive accommodation on campus, and that with no car parking, is mere presumption and highly unlikely – particularly at the level suggested.

David Willetts, the university minister, at a select committee hearing a few weeks ago gave evidence among other things to the effect that university funding would in real terms increase by 10-15% by 2014-2015.

So concern that the University of Kent will be impoverished without the district authority's helping hand in its wilder property ambitions is likewise misplaced.

I asked the minister after the hearing whether his funding projection factored in overseas students and he was quite clear that it did not.

He was also clear that central government did not foresee a further climb in student numbers.

Those of us who support overseas student access and international postgraduate expansion do not want to see this support used to disfigure the slopes and the city's setting on the back of poorly-founded and misleading argument.

Of course the university has aspirations, just as the local authority has strategic quotas to fill in relation to affordable housing (to avoid a permissive planning regime and also to secure government funding).

Development briefs for different parts of Canterbury currently under consideration or just passed could with imagination address the issue of affordable housing in an effective, explicit and also well-designed way.

As for the university, it has allocated land available particularly where its innovation park ambitions now look redundant; in fact it has a number of options and spaces for well-designed buildings.

The new planning policy framework, about which there is a national furore does not illegitimate the rejection of socially and environmentally-damaging proposals or legitimise poor massing and design.

Indeed the framework could facilitate the university opening its land banks, sizeable current farmland holdings, and using that resource in a commercially effective yet social manner.

If the university is persisting with its application for the southern slopes, the revised version of its planning application should receive the most alert, critical and interested attention from everyone.

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