

# LETTERS to the editor

## Facts needed on Chaucer Fields plan

YOUR readers may have wondered what has happened to the University of Kent's Chaucer Fields proposals to build a hotel, conference centre, and seven accommodation blocks on the southern slopes of the university.

These proposals have been met with massive opposition from local people concerned at the loss of a uniquely-valuable open space with its historic heritage, abundant wildlife and wonderful views of the city and World Heritage Site.

The application was due to be considered by the council's planning committee in June, but at the last minute the university requested deferment of its application, saying that it needed more time to strengthen its case.

The application has still not been resubmitted.

It seems even after 18 months of working on the application and spending large sums of money on it, the scheme is so controversial that it is proving difficult to get right.

We gather the university thinks it needs to strengthen its business case, so members of the Save Chaucer Fields campaign group have been looking at the case as it stands. The university claims the development will bring an economic benefit to the district because of the business it will generate with the hotel and conference centre, but its economic assessment also contains this worrying admission: "However, in calculating the net direct affects of the conference centre there is likely to be significant displacement activity given the large number of hotels and accommodation providers already present in Canterbury.

"Occupancy in the accommodation provider market will decline as a result of the new hotel.

"The conference centre hotel is estimated to reduce occupancy levels across the Canterbury accommodation market from 83% in

2010 to 46.5% in 2014".

In other words, rather than benefiting the local economy, the development is expected to actually take business away from hotels and guest houses.

The passage quoted comes from the economic assessment prepared by a London-based planning and cost consultancy called GVA commissioned by the university, and it uses data from another report commissioned by the university called the King Sturge Market Led Business Plan.

It would seem that the King Sturge report may contain a more realistic estimate of the economic effects of the development, and it therefore ought to be publicly available so that we can all know the facts.

However, the university has refused to release it, despite a request under the Freedom of Information Act, and an appeal against that decision has met with a further refusal.

So it appears that local people are to be kept in the dark about the economic calculations underpinning the proposed Chaucer Fields development.

Ever since the university's PR company held its public consultation in January, we have been getting mixed and contradictory messages about the real intended use of this proposed development.

Is its main purpose to increase student accommodation on campus, or is it primarily a business venture? Is it intended to bring economic benefit to the district, or is it calculated to suck business out of the existing hotel market and reduce occupancy rates from 83% to 46.5%?

Surely the city council and residents are entitled to be given all the facts from the university about its true intentions for this development proposal, and the economic calculations behind it.

There can be no full and proper assessment of the proposal unless the university's 'supporting evidence' is available for scrutiny.

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