



VILLAGERS affected by a scheme for a £1 billion research and development centre have questioned whether two councils should have given enthusiastic support for the project.

They say the scheme flies in the face of local authority development pledges.

Imperial College London wants to develop a "world-class science research and manufacturing facility" with associated housing in Wye, a village of just 2,500 people in the North Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Ashford Borough Council and Kent County Council signed a "concordat" with Imperial College announcing the project.

Paul Carter, leader of KCC, said Imperial's plans for Wye were "enormously important to Kent and its economy" and Paul Clokie, leader of Ashford Borough Council, said the authority was "delighted to be associated with such an inspiring vision for the future of the Wye campus".

The village's website journal said last week that the community was "in shock" after the "bombshell" announcement.

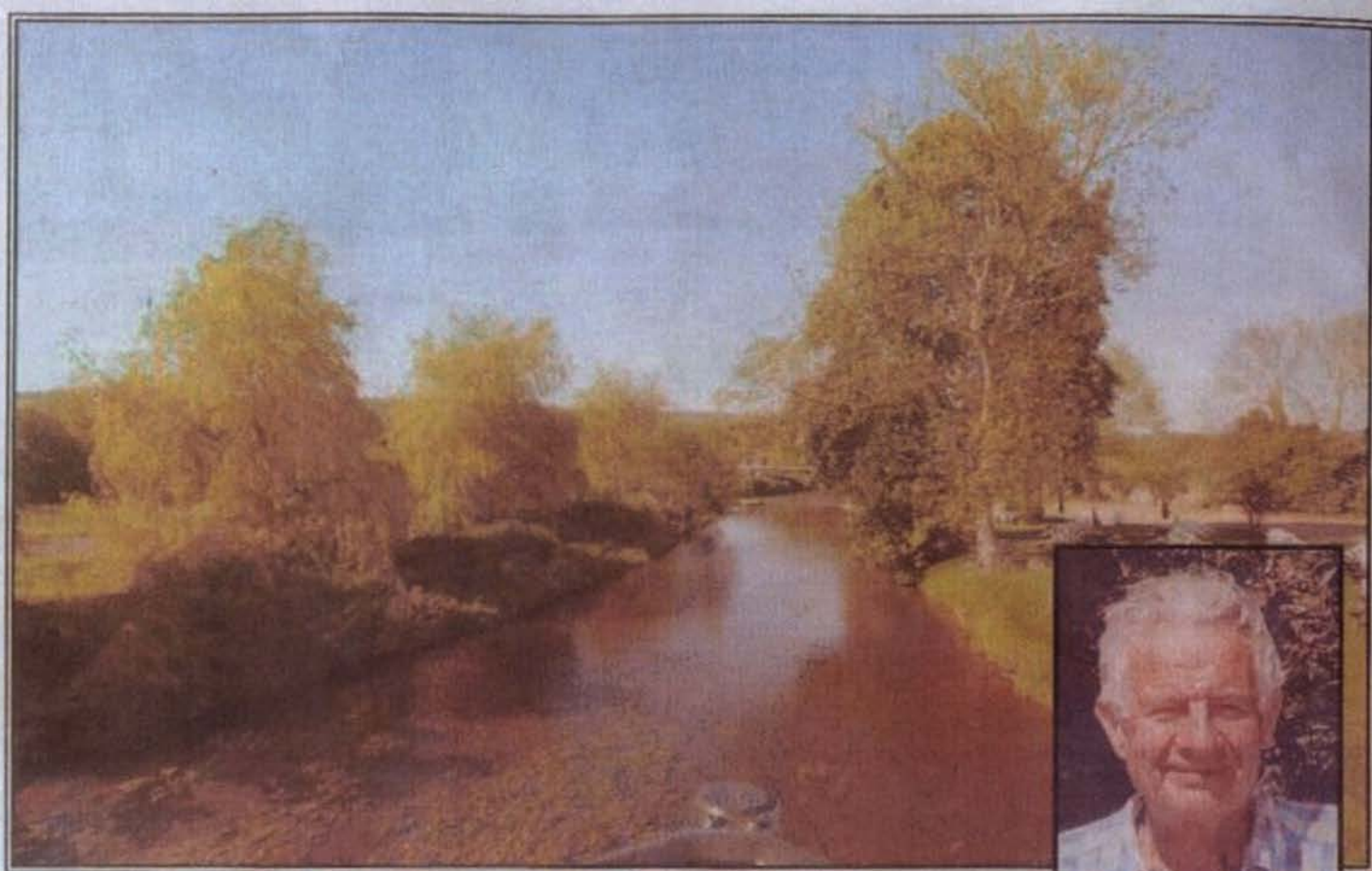
Wye Parish Council chairman John Hodder and the Kent branch of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) have both questioned whether Ashford Borough Council, the local planning authority, and KCC should have lauded the Imperial College proposal before seeing any detailed plans.

Balanced

Asked how the proposal could get a balanced hearing after the councils gave such enthusiastic support to the proposal in the concordat, Mr Hodder told Kent on Sunday: "That is a very big question: how indeed?"

"I just can't understand it. To go to this level of concordat I would have thought they would have made some secondary statement about how this complies with the overall plans for the area, because that is what they are charged with discharging," said Mr Hodder.

Questioning the legality of the councils' proclaimed stance on the science park proposal, Mr Hodder said: "In the development framework, Tenterden and the surrounding villages,



HEADING INTO TROUBLED WATERS: The tranquility of Wye could be shattered by a huge science park. 'A billion-pound development is going to crush the life out of a village,' said Dr Paul Burnham (right).



as they are called, are only due to take 250 houses up to 2011 and 500 up to 2023, spread across the lot, not just Wye."

He added: "What are you doing, KCC? What are you doing, Ashford Borough Council? How can you have the two signing up to this knowing that planning policy doesn't allow it. How can you do that? That's the question."

Jim Little, campaigns officer of the Kent branch of the CPRE, echoed Mr Hodder's concerns, saying: "What chance have we got of stopping some of the worst excesses of this when so many people with so much power have publicly declared that they are on board."

"I would like to question the democratic integrity of what they are doing. It seems questionable that the deciding authority, Ashford Borough Council, has publicly declared its support for the project.

"It seems to me that rigorous planning judgement needs to be disinterested and Ashford Borough Council has fundamentally, publicly declared that it is in fact interested and that it supports the project and wants it to succeed."

Ashford Borough Council's chief executive, David Hill, responding to the concerns of the parish council and the CPRE, said: "The concordat is a general statement of commitment to work together in shaping the emerging proposals to see whether they can meet the interests of all concerned. It explicitly reserves the council's position as planning authority."

"Any proposals for development at Wye will need to go through exactly the same procedures as any other planning application, including extensive testing and community engagement and if necessary a full inquiry."

Imperial College said: "Imperial College has undertaken to consult and engage with stakeholders to shape the emerging proposals."

"This is the start of a long process and we will keep residents updated on progress, beginning with a meeting in January."

Mr Hill said Ashford council had "for some time been at the forefront of engaging the community in planning".

A KCC spokesman said: "Under the Local Government Act we have a duty to look after the social, economic and environmental well-being of the county."

"Our plans for the future have always been to find high-quality jobs for East Kent. If this became a world centre of the kind envisaged it would attract very high-quality jobs for the local area. The alternative is that Wye at the moment is low on students and who knows

what the future could be there? The planning application would be determined by Ashford, we would be a consultee.

"We realise that there would have to be extreme care taken with it and are fully aware of the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty at Wye.

"Our record on protection of the environment stands the test."

But village resident Dr Paul Burnham, who lectured in soil science at Wye College for 35 years, told KoS: "A billion-pound development is, *ipso facto*, going to crush the life out of a village of 2,500 and its attractive environment.

"We have a carefully considered zoning policy in place; we have an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty; there's a local plan, a village envelope and allocations of land for educational development, but essentially none for industry. These things were carefully thought out in a dispassionate way before this proposal came along and ought to be adhered to, in my view.

"The much better-sited Trinity College science park [in Ashford] showed what really happens when a developer is a geographically remote academic establishment. The link becomes purely financial and the components industrial and commercial units, which could just as well be sited elsewhere and are not at all appropriate to Wye.

"We shouldn't be dazzled by the eminence of the developer, which seems to be happening. After all, Trinity College is very prestigious, with scientific credentials going back to Sir Isaac Newton, but we have before our eyes what happened when they developed their bit of farmland as a science park, so we shouldn't be starry-eyed."

Passionate

Ann Sutherland, who chairs the Wye Business Association, said: "We have had three presentations here in Wye by Ashford Borough Council regarding the Ashford Greater Plan.

One of them was held at the college. "We were allowed to ask questions, we saw wonderful designs and on all three occasions the question was asked 'Are there any plans for development to go on this side of Ashford?' and three times the representatives of Ashford Borough Council said 'No'."

Mrs Sutherland added: "Jobs are needed, but at the same time we need countryside. We have a restless and disturbed society and they need places to go to find a bit of serenity and peace. That is equally important.

"As an artist I get really passionate about the countryside, but you have only got to look at the other side of Ashford to see what a mess they have made of it."

She also claimed that a possible outcome would be new housing but no science park.



DOES THE BELL TOLL FOR WYE? Life in the village could become very different

"If they sell off the land to build houses, which fits nicely into John Prescott's plan, what guarantee have we got that they are going to go forward with the science park? We haven't. The concordat is not a legal document - it is purely a gentlemen's agreement between the three parties."

Asked if the sale of land for housing would be the major source of finance for the science park scheme, an Imperial College spokesman said: "It's too early to tell. We would of course seek funding from government sources (both UK and Europe), research endowments and commercial income.

"Imperial has a strong track record in spinning out companies from its research and licensing its inventions to gain a return on its intellectual activities."

David Hill said it was "too early to say exactly how many jobs will be created or where they will go".

"It has never been envisaged that all of the jobs would be located in Wye itself. Indeed, that would be most unlikely. Instead they will be spread across the borough and neighbouring districts."