



19 October 2016

Mrs Tina Kelly
Programme Officer
Development Management
Telford & Wrekin Council
PO Box 457
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Dear Mrs Kelly

Telford & Wrekin Local Plan: Inspector's Matters, Issues & Questions (MIQs)

Harper Adams University considers the Telford & Wrekin Local Plan to be sound, in general, and has already made some suggestions to help improve the document. These have been incorporated into the Submission Version of the Local Plan (June 2016). The University supports the Local Plan on this basis. However, the University wishes to make additional comments on two of the matters that the Inspector will consider.

Matter 4 – Economy & Community

4.1 Q: Is the Council's assessment of the additional employment land required during the Local Plan period (76 hectares, as stated in policy EC1) sufficiently justified in line with the Framework, most particularly paragraph 22, and national Planning Practice Guidance (PPG)?

Harper Adams University supports policy EC1 broadly and the Employment Site Allocation E27 (land south of A518, Newport) in particular.

The University has the only Department of Agricultural Engineering in the UK higher education system. The Department is integral to its work in connecting the rapid development of advanced technologies in engineering with developments in crop and livestock science, and with the protection of the agricultural environment. Several years ago the University identified a move towards 'smart-system' engineering applications in agriculture and created the National Centre for Precision Farming. Latterly, the University has secured funds to create an Engineering and Precision Farming hub of a Centre for Innovation under the Government's Strategy for Agricultural Technologies. The Centre for Innovation is a collaborative venture between 3 universities and over 70 companies and organisations already working in the field of agricultural technologies, or with expertise and products capable of being translated, at some point, into agricultural practice. Nearly £6m of Government capital investment has been brought to the Newport area in support of the Centre for Innovation project.

The University, through its Department, the National Centre for Precision Farming initiative and the Government-funded Centre for Innovation has connections with many large and small businesses across the local and regional economy (as well as elsewhere in the UK and internationally) and is leading the development of new autonomous systems, such as small scale robots and drones, to improve agricultural efficiency and productivity and reduce energy inputs into food production. The University has established an international reputation for its work in this field, and has attracted overseas Government sponsorship for postgraduate education in advanced engineering as well as significant collaborations in research and knowledge transfer.



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The University has long seen the need to extend these activities to the wider economy. Its current facilities, and the new Centre for Innovation hub, due for completion in early 2017, are intended to provide space for companies to work with the University on joint R&D projects. However, precision agriculture is such a rapidly expanding field that the opportunity exists to think more radically about the creation of 'spin-out' companies and to foster an environment where inward investment could be encouraged. To achieve these objectives land for employment needs to be designated close to the University to help support collaborative links between companies working in this new field and the University's unique group of academic experts. The Local Authority has identified a site to the south of Newport, the home town of the University, where such a development would ideally be located.

Newport has seen rapid housing development over the last few years which we believe will support the Local Authority's ambitions to support employment opportunities in the local area. Furthermore, Newport has three high quality secondary schools that will prove attractive to businesses, and their employees, wishing to locate in the local area. By providing local employment land, the likelihood of Newport being increasingly seen as a dormitory town for employment in Telford, with related problems of traffic movements and lack of support for the immediate economy in Newport, will be reduced. The focus of the employment land on high-tech businesses will support the University's ambitions to create an ecosystem for advanced agricultural engineering that will be of direct benefit to the local and regional economy. Part of this new field involves the development of software and techniques for 'big data' analysis, so we expect the employment land to create high-value jobs that can support the R&D activities of the University and, in turn, help retain highly qualified individuals produced by the University in the local economy.

The Science and Innovation Audit, recently conducted in support of the Midlands Engine initiative, has identified 'future food processing' as a key theme to be developed across the Midlands economy. Newport is uniquely placed, with the support of the University, to generate a 'cluster' in the newly forming advanced engineering/software design field of precision farming. We therefore believe that it is wholly justified, and very timely, for the Local Authority to make an allocation for employment land in Newport in support of this emerging industry sector and we fully support this allocation.

Matter 8 - Site Allocations

8.1 Are the allocated sites appropriate and deliverable, having regard to the provision of the necessary infrastructure and facilities, and taking account of environmental constraints?

Harper Adams University wishes to make representations in connection with Employment Site Allocation E27 (land south of A518, Newport). The University has worked for several years with the Local Authority, and the Marches Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), to establish the case for employment land to be designated in the Newport area to support economic development associated with the emerging field of precision farming.

The Marches LEP's Strategic Economic Plan places considerable importance on creating and maintaining prosperous agri-food and agri-tech sectors because of the critical role that the food and farming sectors play in the Marches LEP economy. These sectors are therefore amongst the key themes in the LEP's strategy. At the same time, Harper Adams University has competed successfully to win Government investment in agri-tech infrastructure to create the necessary R&D resources to support a 'cluster' of businesses operating in this field.

The Local Authority, with the support of the University, has obtained funding to provide the infrastructure for access to the site in question, and has worked with the University to begin the process of attracting inward investment by businesses that could contribute to the agri-tech cluster. The Local Authority has also worked with the University to bid for central Government funding to provide facilities for the employment site. The outcome of the bid is

awaited. The University has sought ESIF (ERDF) funding to appoint a knowledge transfer team that will 'bridge' the work of the university and agri-tech businesses in the local area (including at this employment site) with the farming and food sectors, so as to encourage a greater understanding, and uptake, of new technologies. To the same end, the University, with the support of a major charity, is funding a new Chair in Precision Farming Economics, to supplement its work in agricultural science and advanced engineering and to contribute to a better understanding of the routes (and barriers) to agri-technology adoption. This appointment will be a UK first, that will help the process of connecting businesses in this field with their customer base, and will act as a further resource to encourage employment location and growth at the proposed site.

The University has engaged with local representatives, such as the Town Council and the Newport Regeneration Partnership, to ensure that the concept of linking the University's research and innovation activities in this field with economic development in the local area is supported and can be fostered by the provision of employment opportunities near to the University's campus.

The engagement of the Local Authority with the University has seen a partnership approach being taken to the development of site options which has been greatly valued by the University. The site is not yet formally designated, but we anticipate that it will be delivered well within the period of the Local Plan, not least because of the rapid growth of this aspect of agriculture; the reliance that will be placed on science and innovation as part of the post-Brexit domestic farming policy; and the benefit of businesses locating in the vicinity of the University on a site that will be attractive for business development, in terms of local housing, schooling, access to local services and ease of access. The site is well placed for transport connections, as evidenced by nearby businesses working in time-critical logistics (such as fresh produce distribution). Furthermore, the development of an 'innovation park' approach at the fringes of the town will be important in reflecting the fact that the businesses we wish to attract, and see develop, will be working, and selling their products, within a rural context. The connection with the smaller scale settlement of Newport will therefore be sector specific, and more appropriate to the businesses in question than a larger scale urban environment.

In working with the Local Authority we are aware that other sites have been considered for employment development in the Newport area. For a variety of reasons, including access, site viability and reasonable proximity to the University, Allocation E27 appears to be the most suitable option for the type of employment envisaged for agri-tech related business activities that we wish to foster during the lifetime of the Local Plan. We therefore believe that the allocation is appropriate and sound, and it has the full support of the University.

We trust that the above comments will make a helpful contribution to the Inspector's deliberations. The University would, of course, be happy to attend the examination in public to answer any questions the Inspector has on this statement.

Yours sincerely



Dr David Llewellyn
Vice-Chancellor