Kentish Wine Vault
Planning application MC/21/2328 Medway Council

Let me start with a simple quotation, from this council's City Status bid.

We take pride in working in partnership with land managers in Medway to protect the large areas of countryside, wildlife sites, nature reserves, ancient woodlands, urban greenspaces, marshes, mudflats and saltmarshes that are part of Medway. We are responsive to the needs of our communities and understand how important it is that we all work together to tackle the climate crisis.

With this in mind, we come to the application for the Kentish Wine Vault. It does not qualify as permitted development in the Green Belt. The AONB Unit is totally opposed to it and has stated its reasons clearly. It is not on land identified for development in our own Local Plan, nor our Strategic Land Availability Assessment. Gravesham Council dismissed a similar scheme, with similar issues, totally, pre-application. In short, this application seeks to subvert all these protections, plans and guidelines.

Part of our council has enshrined it as a defined part of our City Status Bid, prior to any planning procedures or determination, thereby apparently overlooking the planning process.

This application is inexplicable when the applicant claims that the visitor element of the building is such a small part of their scheme, yet is totally adamant that without this 'tiny part' it won't happen. The truth is, of course, that the visitor element is a major part of this building in terms of design and its intended purpose.

Is the building impressive? Certainly, yes, but its size alone makes it totally out of keeping in an area characterised by small buildings, with no infrastructure, no facilities, no utilities, along a single road in a residential village already burdened with severe access and egress problems and an impossible junction with the A228.

The application is bristling with mitigations, which do not address the fact that Bush Valley is designated **nationally** for its quiet, undeveloped, and secluded character and that such land is rare, precious and dwindling in Medway. Once it is exploited commercially, it will never be natural again. It is likely that, if successful in this application, the company will want to expand, presenting us with another bid to consider, and the potential for further degradation of unspoilt countryside. People in Cuxton and the rest of Medway only seek to prevent that, and to keep some precious green land.

There can be no disguising the effects of the proposed building's unrelenting working hours of 6am to 12pm, 365 days a year, on the residents of Cuxton, and of Upper Bush in the peaceful Conservation Area. Leaving aside the applicant's visitor plans, other people will flock to see Norman Foster's status symbol and, without paying for wine-tasting, café or restaurant, will park willy-nilly in Cuxton and Upper Bush. This contributes to residents' thinking that it is preferable to have inconvenience on the roads at harvest time, leaving the village in peace for the rest of the year, rather than a constant new volume of traffic each day.

As to Section 106 traffic survey money – it is worthless when the Highway Authority will not allow changes to the junction with the A228 (indeed, Cuxton already has unused and inaccessible traffic mitigation money). Changes to footpaths threaten the local network by becoming part of the winery experience, with the rural character of Tomlins Lane urbanised. This is an area of walking boots, not high heels.

The applicant talks of improving soil, yet chalk grassland flourishes only on soil deficient of nutrients; they plan to insert a small lake into a valley designated specifically as a dry valley; they will create vast areas of monoculture yet offer only a tiny new area of meadow grassland, when elsewhere on their local estate they have destroyed established meadows which ecologically would have been much better to retain; and they overlook the badger sett inconveniently in the way of the proposed pedestrian access to the whole site. In one small area of 330 vines by 306, with each vine wrapped in a plastic protector 60cm by 40cm, there are 100,980 pieces of plastic each measuring 0.24m², making 24,252.2m² of plastic.

This is also a development which will place a huge strain on a water authority already not coping with supply and disposal and warning that the South East is 'in serious water stress'. In prolonged drought, will the residents' need for water be subsumed to the winery's?

Just before I end, I'd like to offer you a contrast.
The slick presentation of this application, backed by a multi-million-pound company and its battery of consultants, is typified by a veneer of smooth prose – an example being 'gently lifting the land and inserting the building.'

The people of Cuxton speak more plainly – about the clawing out of one and a half football pitches of soil and chalk, 36 feet into the Downs, and spreading the 100,000m³ of spoil over the natural valley – or shipping it out if necessary. The building's green roof is a place where no badger or mole will burrow, no skylark nest. We should not forget the social and physical benefit of open space, trees and fresh air, the mental benefits of green areas and tranquillity, and yes – the economic benefits that this physical and mental health provide.

Page 79 of tonight's meeting papers suggests that additional legal advice has been taken, stating that the application:

'…. *was considered balanced, however due to the provision of the visitor centre and café/restaurant which would measure more than 1,000m². it was considered that the proposed development would constitute inappropriate development in the Green Belt and therefore accordance with The Town and Country Planning (Consultation) (England) Direction 2021, if the Planning Committee is minded to grant planning permission, the authority shall consult the Secretary of State*'.

From the outset we have not argued against the vines but against a commercial building on land within the Green Belt and AONB. As such, Bush Valley is afforded the same level of protection as the National Parks, the second highest level of protection in this country. As a major development we believe the application falls foul of paragraph 177 of the NPPF and is not in the public interest.

There may well be some small benefits to the wider Medway community in tourism and limited employment but these in no way offset the high cost paid with the intrusion into and damage to an AONB. There is more that is detrimental, to the local community, with the promise of more traffic and increased air, noise and light pollution.

Finally, so that you are under no misapprehensions, the people of Cuxton overwhelmingly oppose this application, by a factor of 15:1. People in Medway as a whole oppose it, by a factor of 3:1. The people do not want it, and it is our responsibility to represent them. Please turn this application down.