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Eastgate development receives backing with plans for new residential centre

New centre offers jobs boost for local people

The County Durham businessman behind a successful residential education centre in France has given his backing to a ground-breaking, eco-friendly development in Weardale with plans to create a similar scheme on part of the Lafarge Cement UK land holding at Eastgate.

Peter Smith, the director of Chateau Beaumont, the Stanhope-based company which owns and operates an outdoor education and activity centre in Normandy, has outlined proposals for a new residential education centre at the proposed Eastgate Renewable Energy Village (www.weardale-works.co.uk).

Chateau Beaumont's plans could see children from across the UK coming to the region every year as part of their National Curriculum studies, including renewable energy and the opportunity to learn more about local history and experience it first hand.

Peter Smith said: "Weardale would be a good geographical location and the proposed Eastgate scheme offers an exciting opportunity to link the National Curriculum to renewable energy, conservation and rural activities.

"The North East region, with its attractions and history, also offers wonderful opportunities for students and teachers to pursue and enhance their curriculum studies beyond the confines of the classroom.

"School children would also be able to enjoy a range of fun outdoor activities during their visit, offering a more rounded education and learning experience.

"These include climbing, orienteering, initiative tasks, mountain biking, archery, fencing, zip wire, quad bikes, football and others."

Chateau Beaumont is a residential centre in Normandy, France providing a blend of French language, culture and citizenship study opportunities for British school children. School groups from across the UK stay at the facility for up to four nights to participate in classroom and field-based study courses linked to the UK National Curriculum.



Now Peter Smith believes that the Eastgate site offers the ideal location to launch his plans for a second residential centre located in the North East and run along similar lines.

He has added his backing to the eco-village scheme, which experts believe will create at least 350 sustainable jobs, including opportunities for other new and existing businesses.

Peter Smith's plans for a new centre include dormitory blocks to accommodate up to 250 visitors, administration offices, classrooms, IT suite, kitchen and dining room, much of which can be accommodated within existing buildings and the planned visitor and education centre.

And he expects the scheme could create several new managerial, clerical, teaching, catering, cleaning and maintenance jobs, with positions being filled by local people.

An important aspect of the courses offered by the Eastgate centre will be that they are based on the requirements of the National Curriculum, covering history, geography, field study sciences, environmental studies, renewable energy and conservation, social studies among others.

Initial estimates by Peter Smith suggest that 50% of visitors to the centre are expected to come from schools within the region while the remaining would be drawn from all over the UK.

"The unique eco-village concept would be a particularly strong draw," added Peter Smith, "offering a much broader national appeal to schools."

The Weardale Task Force - made up of representatives from Wear Valley District Council, Durham County Council, One NorthEast and Lafarge Cement UK - is the driving force behind the scheme.

John Holmes, director of regeneration at One NorthEast, said: "Peter's support and plans for an education centre are very welcome - a private sector buy-in to the Eastgate site adds an exciting new dimension to the project.

"The overall Eastgate project has the potential to create hundreds of sustainable jobs for local people helping regenerate the economy in an area that was once the core of activity.



“The aim is to restore the buzz that once surrounded the old cement works and create a unique visitor attraction in the process to the benefit of people of Weardale and the wider region.”

John Topliss, on behalf of the Weardale Task Force, said: “We are setting out to create something special - a living, working, learning and leisure environment to provide much needed economic regeneration and sustainable jobs.

“The Task Force is committed to achieving this and the proposed redevelopment of the Eastgate site as well as Peter’s new centre would provide many benefits as well as secure a significant and wide variety of jobs for local people.”

The overall concept for the regeneration project is to benefit the people of Weardale and be a national exemplar project at the forefront of energy-efficiency.

The site will utilise five forms of land-based renewable energy available in the UK: geothermal, hydro, wind, solar and biomass. Some of the other features of the proposed development include:

- A geo-thermally heated public hot springs spa (one of only two in the UK alongside Bath)
- Residential and business space accommodation
- Hotel, Hostel and Holiday lets
- Visitor Centre and education facilities
- A range of leisure activities including extensive mountain bike trails.

Photo caption

Chateau Beaumont’s Peter Smith (left on image 008 and right on 022) with Weardale Taskforce’s John Topliss on the Eastgate site where plans for a new residential education centre have been put forward.

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About Eastgate Renewable Energy Village

Eastgate Renewable Energy Village is a regeneration project on the site of the former Lafarge Blue Circle cement works. It will maximise the potential of the site to provide an eco-friendly living, working and learning environment and visitor attraction for the benefit of people of Weardale.



It will demonstrate best practice in sustainability by utilising all five forms of land-based renewable energy available in the UK, which are wind, solar, hydro, biomass and geothermal - a unique concept in this country.

The project will enhance the lives and prosperity of the existing population of the Dale by creating sustainable jobs, homes and recreational facilities for local people within a development that is at the forefront of eco-friendly living. It will also provide opportunities for links with other businesses and leisure facilities in the Dale.

The new eco-village will provide one of only two public hot springs in the UK utilising geothermal hot water, and a centre for education for residents and visitors to learn about renewable energy, sustainable living, life in the Dale and the surrounding North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

It is estimated at this stage that a planning application will be submitted in October 2007*, with planning permission hoped for during 2008.

Regeneration projects on this scale can take more than a decade to complete due to their complexity. As an example, Bluewater shopping and leisure development in Kent, also on the site of a former cement works and quarry, took over 11 years from concept to completion.

*Previous reported timings of a planning application submission have been superseded due to ongoing viability studies, essential to meeting planning requirements. An environmental study into the affect on local birds will continue until the end of winter 2006/07 so that seasonal observations can be made.

About Weardale Task Force

Weardale Task Force is the body responsible for overseeing the formulation of a 'masterplan' for the proposed Renewable Energy Village and is made up of members from One NorthEast, Wear Valley District Council, Durham County Council and Lafarge Cement UK.

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Weardale Task Force

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