

Questions over site's financial viability

GREAT HORKESLEY: Bunting & Sons hit back at claims

By Amie Keeley

A CAMPAIGN group claims a controversial visitor attraction will not be financially viable if it is given planning permission.

Bunting & Sons hope to build the Stour Valley Visitor Centre at Horkesley Park – a £25million attraction which includes a demonstration nursery and gardens, indoor display ring and production kitchen.

It was refused planning permission by Colchester Borough Council last year but the new blueprints have removed all buildings from the AONB and the retail space has been cut by 80%. Long-term opponents to the centre, the Stour Valley Action Group (SVAG), have now formally submitted their objections to the council.

A campaign spokesman said: "Buntings have not included a business plan in their public submission but do include details on expected visitor numbers, entry fees and expenditure per capita. A projection has been carried out by highly-qualified financial analysts which shows the project would probably make a loss before tax of close to £2.5m in its first year of operation.

"A report by Pomery Planning Consultants concludes the application is also in conflict with many policies at national, regional and local levels. Specifically it does not accord with the provisions in the new National Planning Policy Framework designed to protect AONBs. Most of the proposed development falls within the Dedham Vale AONB."

But Kate Bunting, Partner of Bunting & Sons, defended the plans.

"The Horkesley Park scheme has been vigorously tested by independent experts to establish the level of visitor numbers using nationally-derived figures from other visitor attractions throughout the UK," she said.

"The proposals are in accordance with the Development Plan and National Planning Policy. It is unfortunate the objectors to the scheme choose to ignore policies of the regional plan which deal with regional visitor attractions.

"A business plan has been submitted and shows the scheme is viable in the short and long term.

"The information is commercially sensitive and therefore not in the public domain but it will be assessed as part of the planning application by the council."