

Report into tourist attraction delayed

GREAT HORKESLEY: Additional legal advice being sought

By Amie Keeley

A REPORT setting out recommendations for a multi-million pound visitor attraction in the north Essex countryside has been delayed.

Officers at Colchester Borough Council were due to publish the report for Horkesley Park last week ahead of the planning committee meeting on February 28.

However the council says it is taking "additional legal advice on a number of interesting procedural points" in relation to the application.

Bunting & Sons has submitted plans to build the Horkesley Park Heritage and Conservation Centre which is estimated to cost up to £25million.

But the Stour Valley Action Group (SVAG) strongly opposes the move, claiming it will ruin an area of outstanding natural beauty.

The group has appointed a lawyer to challenge the application, in particular those elements which have not been made public.

It follows the announcement just before Christmas when a senior officer at the council indicated its planning service's recommendation "would be favourable" towards the proposal.

Chairman of SVAG, Will Pavry, said: "The council received a number of documents from consultants which were reviewed with the applicant before being made public. The council then reached a decision to recommend for approval.

"Our QC said the council may have been unlawful in how they reached this decision and has not consulted properly.

"I am quite sure the council is wondering what to do because it's casting doubt on procedures within the planning office. I am disappointed they have delayed the report to councillors because this will give us less time to review it before the meeting."

The council's planning chief, Tim Young, confirmed the delay was caused by a difference of opinions between the lawyers representing the council and the action group.

"There is a conflict between one

counsel's view and another. We'd rather get it right than rush it out, so we agreed with officers to wait."

He said under planning rules, the report can be published any time up to five days before it is due to be considered by the planning committee.

"I am keen for this application to go to that next meeting on the 28th," he added. "Officers are confident they will have it ready within the time scale."

Bunting & Sons appointed UK architect of the year Sir Michael Hopkins to redesign a scaled-down version of the development after it was refused planning permission last May. It includes a demonstration nursery, an art gallery and a display ring.

Kate Bunting, a partner of Bunting & Sons, said: "We understand five days in advance is the statutory period for releasing the committee report and this is a matter of procedure. We welcome Colchester Borough Council being thorough and look forward to reading the report in due course."