

# 'Support' claims for rural centre attacked

**'MEANINGLESS':** Action group questions results of consultation

By Roddy Ashworth

PROTESTERS against proposals for a £20million rural heritage centre in north Essex have hit back at claims that the scheme has overwhelming public support.

And last night an MP said that as long as conservation groups oppose plans for the Horkesley Park Heritage and Conservation Centre the matter should not be settled locally, but instead be referred to a public inquiry.

Bunting and Sons, the family firm behind the proposals, recently ran a series of exhibitions and roadshows as part of a public consultation on its plans to create an art gallery, Suffolk Punch breeding centre and country park on its redundant tomato nurseries at Great Horkesley.

The 117acre development, which would also comprise retail units, car parks and food outlets, would be adjacent to the designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) which covers Dedham Vale – the subject of many paintings by John Constable.



**'POSITIVE':** Kate Bunting, partner of Bunting and Sons

Following the consultation, Bunting and Sons issued a statement saying that, of the feedback received from those visiting the events, 96% had expressed support for the project or raised no objection.

Kate Bunting, a partner in the firm, said: "We have now had an expression of opinion based on evidence given firsthand.

"This makes clear what the over-

whelming majority wants.

"In many cases people changed their minds once they understood what the proposals truly amount to.

"Such a positive response comes as no surprise except perhaps to those trying to stir up antipathy through emotive and inaccurate predictions of harm."

But yesterday Will Pavry, chairman of the Stour Valley Action Group – an organisation set up to oppose the project – said: "The view we take is that the figure of 96% is really rather meaningless. They were talking to people who went to the exhibitions and they were preaching to the converted.

"The exhibitions they went to did not in any way mention the downside. They didn't say what the impact of the projected 555,000 visitors in the first year alone would have on the small roads and villages of the Dedham Vale."

Mr Pavry, whose house overlooks the Buntings' site, said that the figures released showed that of the 2,000 people who attended the consultation events, only 387 returned questionnaires expressing an opinion. "So it is in fact 96% of around 15% of those who attended who do

not oppose it," he said.

Meanwhile, Bernard Jenkin, MP for North Essex, said he felt that since there was opposition from formal organisations, the plans should not be left to the local planning authority – Colchester Borough Council – to determine.

"My position is absolutely clear: So long as important conservation bodies like the Dedham Vale society remain opposed to this development



They were preaching to the converted

Will Pavry, Stour Valley Action Group chairman

in principle, I regard this as too controversial to be resolved locally and that it can only be settled by a public inquiry," he said.

Bunting and Sons intend to lodge a formal planning application for the heritage centre later in the summer.

roddy.ashworth@eadt.co.uk