

Divisions over value to tourism

IN the week Visit Essex announced plans to promote the county as a destination for rural short breaks, what constitutes a tourism attraction was at the centre of the debate about the Horkesley Park proposals.

Supporting the plans, Keith Brown, chief executive of Visit East Anglia, said the proposed centre chimed with consumers' "increasing interest and desire for a greater understanding of the natural world, local communities and food production".

He said: "The visitor centre has been designed by world-class architects and is of extremely high quality.

"We think the business plan is robust and achievable and that the quality of the product certainly meets the current demands of the discerning visitor."

However, Nigel Chapman, chairman of the Dedham Vale AONB Joint Advisory Committee, said he would rather see tourism projects that were "smaller and more sustainable".

He said: "The Dedham Vale is the fourth-smallest AONB in the country and a development of the scale of Horkesley Park would have too much impact."

"We have supported a company that hires bikes out and have encouraged bed and breakfasts in the area. That's the scale we think works."



SHOCK DECISION: Kate Bunting and her cousin Tom Bunting, both partners at Bunting & Sons, stand on the redundant glasshouse site intended for the now-rejected Stour Valley Visitor Centre.

Photo: SU ANDERSON

'NOT SUSTAINABLE'

OPPONENTS of the proposals have given their reaction to the latest decision.

Chairman of the Stour Valley Action Group, Will Pavry, said he was "delighted" and that he had expected the plans to be rejected.

He said: "They go against Colchester Borough Council's planning policies – they are not deliverable or sustainable.

"The Buntings will have to examine the council's document and weigh up the benefits of appealing, as it will be expensive. We will continue to oppose the plans and will stand beside Colchester Borough Council as it will have to defend its decision."

MP for North Essex, Bernard Jenkin, who spoke out against the plans earlier in the week, said the planning committee had "come to the right decision".

He said: "Before the officer's report, I was genuinely open-minded. But the report suggested to me that the officers had given their best view of the proposal.

"There is no knock-out blow in the report and I can't see how they arrived at the recommendation.

"I respect those who voted for it and take on board the argument about the jobs that will be created. But employment in Colchester is growing and I don't think Horkesley is the right place to put a business."

MP demands to know why £25m bid rejected

GREAT HORKESLEY: Sir Bob 'disappointed' by 'negative view'

By Ross Bentley

AN MP last night called on councillors to justify their shock decision to reject plans for a £25million visitor centre on the Essex-Suffolk border.

Colchester MP Sir Bob Russell said he was "disappointed" with the borough council planning committee's rejection of an application to build the 100-acre Stour Valley Visitor Centre, at Great Horkesley.

After a marathon meeting, lasting more than four hours and attended by about 350 people at Colchester's Charter Hall on Thursday evening, members voted 10 to four against the plans.

The decision is the latest twist in a 12-year battle to get permission for the attraction and goes against the recent advice of planning officers, who recommended the proposal be approved less than a fortnight ago.

Yesterday partners at Bunting & Sons, the family-run business that submitted the application, said they intended to appeal against the decision.

Sir Bob said: "I am disappointed the planning committee took such a negative view of the wider benefits. The council should be in the business of promoting tourism, the local economy and local jobs.

"I will support the Bunting family should they go to appeal. The council will be required to justify their negativity against the recommendations of the council's own planning officers."

The plans submitted were a scaled-down version of a previous application which was rejected last May and included proposals for an art gallery, gardens, a Suffolk Punch breeding centre and animal displays. Bunting

officers' advice. She added: "Planning officers have fully evaluated the application over the last nine months. They found the proposals to be robust, bringing a raft of benefits to Colchester and the borough."

But borough councillor Mark Cable, who sat on the planning committee, said he could not agree to a project "he felt in his heart would not work".

He said: "We had to think about whether we could allow something so contentious in such a sensitive area. For me, there was a massive question over whether it would still be running 24 months after it was built.

"I have no confidence that an attraction of that size built around the draw of Suffolk Punch horses would work.

"There is a realistic prospect of it becoming a brownfield site after too long and then units being let out as an out-of-town retail park."

He added: "The planning officers fought tooth and nail to convince us they were right. But it is for us to take their advice and interpret it.

"The officers gave weight to the positive development and job creation and members gave more weight to the value of the AONB. That's fundamentally where things came to a head."

“ Planning officers fought tooth and nail to convince us

Councillor Mark Cable

& Sons say the centre will create up to 200 jobs. About three-quarters of the site is located within the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), but the proposed new buildings would fall outside it.

Councillors rejected the plans due to concerns over the viability of the business plan, traffic fears, the size of the project and the impact on the surrounding area.

Kate Bunting, a partner at Bunting & Sons, said she was "mystified" that committee members had ignored their