

## HORKESLEY PARK LATEST

# Advisers question viability of park bid

## Issues raised over visitor numbers and commercial feasibility

Wendy Brading

A BATTLE Royal has begun about the virtues – or otherwise – of the controversial Horkesley Park development.

Three reports have been commissioned by Colchester Council about the Stour Valley Visitor Centre in addition to a planning policy document.

One of the reports recommends the council supports the development on 117 acres of land as long as certain criteria are met, but serious concerns have also been raised by each of them.

However, in response, Bunting and Sons, which is applying to Colchester Council for permission for the centre, claims some of the findings are flawed.

Colchester Council this week announced it was putting back the date when councillors will discuss the plans in order to allow everyone to have their say.

The application was due to be heard at Colchester Town Hall on February 14, but has now been delayed by two weeks, until February 28.

Planning officers say they are initially minded to recommend approval – which critics say flies in the face of the reports the council itself commissioned.

However, officers will now release a full report on the matter, outlining their reasoning, by February 18.

A new deadline for comments has also been set and is now January 28.

The proposed visitor centre has generated hundreds of reactions.

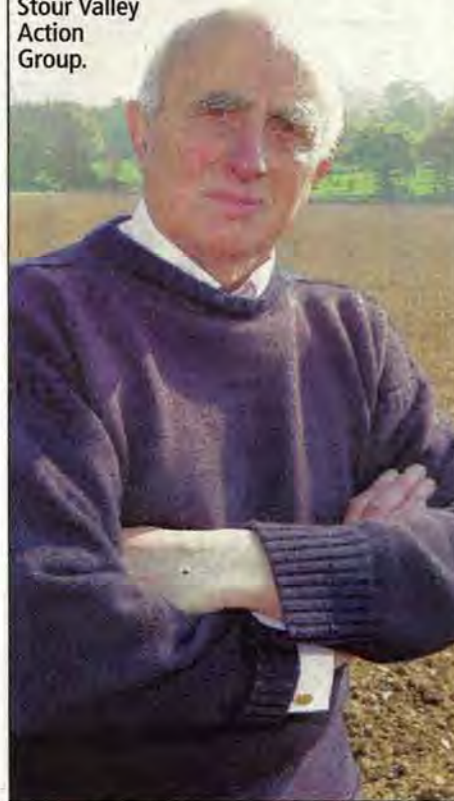
The council had come under fire for not releasing the commissioned reports.

It has now done so, but sensitive commercial information has been blacked out. However, critics claim this makes any such recommendation nonsensical.

The report from London-based consultants Britton McGrath Associates essentially backs the proposed development – but with a number of serious reservations.

It states: "If Horkesley Park is successful, there is no reason why it should not be able to bring benefits to

**Opponent:**  
Will Pavry,  
chairman of  
Stour Valley  
Action  
Group.



## Fifth bid for the project

THE Stour Valley Visitor Centre is the fifth bid by established family firm Bunting and Sons to create a tourist attraction and heritage centre in the Dedham Vale.

It is presented as a centre dedicated to a celebration of the English countryside through the themes of agriculture and food, art and culture and countryside and conservation. The latest application spans more than 117 acres, including a 101-acre country park. Features include sculpture trails, reinstated parkland grazed by Suffolk Punches, a central building with an indoor display ring, demonstration nursery, gardens and wildflower meadows.

Art and craft studios and a fine art gallery are proposed for the Chantry and the application says exhibitions will display works by John Constable and other artists. The new application, on land north of London Road, proposes keeping some of the redundant tomato greenhouses and does not suggest any new buildings in the area of outstanding natural beauty.

The Buntings say the development will create better access to the countryside, as well as generating new jobs.

However, opponents, led by the Stour Valley Action Group, say the development would destroy the peace and tranquility of the Dedham Vale, increase traffic and would be an unsustainable development.

the community and the wider region. However, this brings us neatly to the key assumption of the need for Horkesley Park to succeed as a viable, going concern itself, in order for it to deliver against all these key aims.

"Our analysis would indicate, that, based on the capital investment as currently planned, Horkesley Park's performance is likely to be significantly below that forecast in the Tourism Evaluation Study and Business Plan."

Britton McGrath Associates estimated visitor numbers would be closer to 130,000 – not the 316,000 predicted by Bunting and Sons.

It also questions whether the centre could sustain the proposed adult entry price of £14.95.

As such, it suggests the business model is not viable and says the centre could make an annual loss.

However, the consultants acknowledge Horkesley Park has the potential to become a regional visitor attraction.

Lichfield and Partners said it supported economic growth and rural tourism where it was sustainable. However, it said any development within an area of outstanding natural beauty should undergo special scrutiny.

The report said investment should be made in the Chinese Garden and Buntings should ensure there were "a few" Constable paintings in the gallery.

Consultants Nathaniel

**"In our view, none of the proposed elements at Horkesley Park, in isolation or combined as a whole, have sufficient draw to suggest it will be a tourist attraction of regional significance"**

However, it also said the projected 316,000 tourists would increase traffic to the area, adding the centre's viability was a major concern.

The report by transport planning specialists Vectos said the level of parking provision – at 720 car parking spaces – was above the maximum standard.

The council's planning policy report also raised serious concerns and said the development would be in "considerable conflict" with

## Consultants' verdicts

**Britton McGrath Associates**

says the council should support the project but only if certain criteria are met regarding commercial viability. It also says visitor number projections are too high and questions the sustainability of the adult entry price.

**Consultants Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners**

are concerned about commercial viability and traffic, adding: "In our view, none of the proposed elements at Horkesley Park, in isolation or combined as a whole, have sufficient draw to suggest it will be a tourist attraction of regional significance."

**Transport planning specialists Vectos**

say 720-space parking provision is above the maximum standard.

**The council's planning policy report**

sees a number of benefits, e.g. the creation of a tourist attraction and employment, but based on consultant's report, doubts the commercial viability of the project and therefore if the benefits will be delivered.

national, regional and local policies. The report acknowledges "a number of benefits" could be delivered by the visitor centre, including creating a new tourist attraction which would improve inclusive access to the countryside and employment benefits.

However, the report adds: "These benefits will only be delivered if the proposal is viable and economically sustainable."

"The independent project review prepared for the council by Britton McGrath Associates provides detailed commentary on the viability of the attraction and, therefore, whether the economic benefits will be delivered."

"The report concludes the business, as currently proposed, would be unviable."

"The benefits of the proposed scheme would, therefore, not be delivered."

It says the development would also result in potential harm to the area of outstanding natural beauty and the countryside.

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## HORKESLEY PARK LATEST



**Bidders:**  
Daniel, Stephen,  
Kate and Hector Bunting,  
CO68669-02

## Buntings: reports are 'fundamentally flawed'

THE firm vying to develop the Stour Valley Visitor Centre has reacted strongly to criticisms from council-commissioned consultants.

The applicants for the multi-million pound visitor centre at Horkesley Park said some of the findings were flawed.

In response to criticisms from the Vectos transport report, Bunting and Sons said: "The critical review of Vectos' assessment has shown it to be flawed in a number of areas."

It said the report failed to produce any comparables and had not used up-to-date information and claims the assessment will not assist the council.

In response to Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners report, Bunting and Sons' response state: "Overall, the whole assessment is conceptually flawed and poorly executed even if the approach were correct."

It adds: "NLP's assessment in trying to establish an understanding of regional significance is fundamentally flawed."

"The data used are out of date, where it is actually referenced, and in some cases completely incorrect."

In its response to the report from Britton McGrath Associates, Sykes Leisure Projects accuses the consultants of only carry-

ing out "a superficial and unscientific analysis of certain key factors within its report".

**"The whole assessment is conceptually flawed and poorly executed"**

It adds: "These shortcomings have led to a degree of cherry picking of the facts".

In its conclusion, it says Britton McGrath's recom-

mendations were "based on a subjective, limited and selective analysis."

It also claims the policy analysis was flawed, going on to say: "It is based on consultants' reports which are in themselves flawed."

"The policy analysis is without any rigour or evidence."

Jill Britton, a partner in Britton McGrath Associates, refuted the criticisms.

She said: "We are a company with more than 20 years of experience in both managing visitor attractions and developing feasibility studies on successful new projects."

"Colchester Council came to us because they wanted

an experienced, evidence-based assessment of the project, rather than just accepting the top line assumptions being put forward.

"It is unfortunate, but perhaps predictable, that an applicant would criticise our approach when conclusions differ, but we believe that this response relates to the early stages of our discussions and based on recent meetings, we anticipate that the applicants' views will have changed."

Vectos declined to comment and no response was received from Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners or Colchester Council.

## Public debate could clinch the issue

COLCHESTER Council came under fire for not releasing details of reports it had specially commissioned in relation to Horkesley Park.

The council has now responded saying it had put back the date of the crunch meeting in order to allow everyone to have their say.

Councillor Tim Young, portfolio holder for planning, community safety and culture, said: "I am pleased we have now been able to publish our consultants' reports."

"We have now removed confidential, commercially sensitive information after finally agreeing the

approach with the applicant. "I endorse the planning service's desire to ensure everyone has an opportunity to view as much of the related material as possible and, as such, it is right and proper we have extended the time available for people to comment on the newly published documents."

Vincent Pearce, development services manager with Colchester Council, said officers were minded to recommend approval of the scheme.

He said the officers' report, due out on February 18, would explain how it had reached its recommendation.

Mr Pearce said work on the report was still being carried out.

But he added: "As with all applications, a multiplicity of factors must be weighed up."

"Since the previous proposal was considered by the council, we have the National Planning Policy Framework to consider and its three strands to sustainable development – economic, social and environmental."

"Clearly, the acid test for the council remains, as it always has done, and that is, can the proposal be implemented without causing unacceptable planning harm with appropriate mitigation."

Mr Pearce added: "The proposal is materially different from those that have preceded it and must be judged afresh."

"The public debate on the night will help members to decide how they determine the application and what weight they apply to each consideration."



**More time:**  
Tim Young,  
CO70291-33