

Comment & Letters

Beware failure in duty of AONB care

I WRITE in support of last weeks letter "Details for park plan kept secret", by Simon Taylor, who responded to your article of December 28, entitled Stour Valley Visitor Centre wins backing of planners.

Readers may be aware of the planning reform furore raging throughout 2012, which has seen the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) replacing more than 1,300 pages of guidance and policy with little more than 50 pages. On January 3 this year, the East of England Regional Strategy (EEP) was also revoked.

These sweeping changes have been introduced primarily to help build homes. They should not be exploited under a cloak of secrecy to effect changes of use to Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

The NPPF is very clear that AONBs must be conserved, they continue to enjoy the highest status of planning protection, which cannot be overridden by the new presumption in favour of development. This fact has been repeatedly reinforced by both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor.

Notwithstanding this, consultants acting for the Horkelesley Park applicants have tried to argue that planning reforms have resulted in an exploitable policy vacuum. Clearly, in view of the foregoing, there is no such vacuum.

Furthermore, whilst planning policy may have changed, the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 has not.

Part 1V of the Act, in respect of AONBs, section 84, subsection 4, makes clear that a local planning authority whose area includes the whole, or any part of, an AONB has the power to take all such action as appears to them expedient in order to accomplish its protection.

This essential protection will not be achieved if planning officers allow the Change of Use this application demands.

Granting approval will constitute a gross failure of duty of care towards our AONB and its many supporters and custodians, which include the Dedham Vale AONB and Stour Valley Project, the Dedham Vale Society, the Colne Stour Countryside Association, CPRE Essex, Nayland with Wisington Conservation Society, Little Horkelesley and many other surrounding Parish Council's.

Peter Gaskin

**Little Acre, London Road
Great Horkelesley**

Council's handling of park bid wrong

COLCHESTER Council's handling of the Horkelesley Park application appears wrong on so many levels, it is hard to know where to begin.

Firstly, Colchester Borough Council's (CBC) Spatial Policy Unit, backed by three independent consultants, unequivocally condemned the scheme, yet CBC's Planning Services recommended approval, which raises the following questions:

1) How is it possible for two departments of the same organisation, working to the same rules and with the same data, to reach diametrically opposite conclusions?

2) If the findings of the three consultants were not to be heeded, why did CBC waste ratepayers' money commissioning them?

3) Why are CBC wasting money on maintaining two separate planning groups when the work of one negates the work of the other?

Secondly, the applicant has proved himself more than capable of protecting his interests.

The purpose of a planning department is to protect the interests of the community, yet in defiance of every principle of public service, CBC have shared and discussed information with the applicant whilst initially withholding it from those they are paid to represent.

Thirdly, CBC seems intent on rushing the application to committee before the public has even had a chance to study the facts, let alone discuss them.

This is not merely an issue of local interest. The Dedham Vale is the international jewel in the borough's crown. There may well be a morally acceptable reason for CBC's behaviour but, until CBC's "open and transparent" cabinet member for planning, Tim Young, provides one, I fear the world will continue to draw their own conclusions.

Chas Bazeley

Boxted Hall, Colchester

Authority fails to serve the people

SADLY for Councillor Tim Young and Vincent Pearce (Development Services Manager), the last time Horkelesley Park came before the Planning Department of CBC 'things' were done very differently.

Led by Alastair Day, they set the benchmark for open, fair and intellectually rigorous scrutiny of the scheme. This is most certainly not the case this time round.

With the reduction in visitor numbers to 315,000 (where do they get these numbers from?), viability is even more doubtful and yet the council initially allowed the business plan to be kept from the public, the very people whose council tax is yet again being used to assess this ill conceived project.

The reason they give? Commercial confidentiality.

As there's not a single attraction for many miles around that can match it for its vastness and grandiosity - or for its potential damage to the unique and precious AONB, the surrounding villages, their communities and small networks of local roads and lanes - this is truly shameful conduct by the council.

An accusation can now justly be levelled by the 700 or more people who have lodged their objections, along with the ten or so august bodies which have also recorded opposition, that the council is avouring the continued enrichment of a wealthy family over the lives of ordinary people who live and work in the Stour Valley.

This is utterly shameful and I would venture to remind them that they are elected by the people to serve the people and should stay neutral over such a controversial scheme and yet again allow open debate and thorough scrutiny of the facts.

**Fred Grolsch
Great Horkelesley**