

£25m heritage centre plan 'not justified' says report

A DAMNING report has criticised a proposal for a £25 million heritage centre in an area of outstanding natural beauty.

An independent appraisal was commissioned by Colchester Council on the Horkesley Park heritage and conservation centre scheme.

Bunting and Sons wants to develop the centre on 117 acres of land, off London Road, Great Horkesley, of which 101 acres would be a country park.

The project includes new buildings on the site of old greenhouses, an art gallery, show gardens and nurseries.

An assessment of the scheme was carried out by planning experts Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners.

It concluded the application did not have sufficient regional significance to justify a major development in the countryside.

The report added the retail element was excessive and there was no guarantee the tourist attractions would be delivered.

However, Buntings said they believed the findings to be flawed.

The plans, submitted in January last year, have generated a storm of reaction – both for and against.

More than 31,000 representations have been submitted to Colchester Council, including a petition of 22,839 signatures collected by Bunting and Sons before the application was lodged.

The Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners report said it believed elements of

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the proposed tourist attraction, such as the Suffolk Punch breeding centre and the Warren nature watch, required a countryside location.

However, it said the benefits of the tourist elements did not outweigh the disadvantages caused by a major development in the countryside.

Concerns were also raised about the long-term viability of the tourism attraction, and the report said the projected figures of 485,000 visitors a year might only be realised if the scheme was to function as a major shopping centre.

It said: "The development needs to attract 422,000 visitors per annum to break even.

"If visitors numbers fall significantly short of the 485,000 projection, then some or all of the tourist elements of the development could close, or the employment costs would need to be significantly reduced and the development would not deliver 226 new jobs as suggested.

"The worst-case scenario would be the tourist attractions close and there would be pressure to find an alternative use for the new buildings."

The findings were welcomed by Will Pavry, chairman of the Stour Valley Action Group, which has campaigned against the development.

Mr Pavry said: "The conclusions are

not surprising, but are very damning.

"We think it will be hard for the application to proceed with the recommendations of Nathaniel Lichfield, which are so clearly against the proposal on the grounds that it does not conform to planning regulations.

"There is no need for the Horkesley Park development, the job numbers are suspect and the financial prognosis are optimistic. The recommendations are quite clear that the council should not approve it.

"The experts have concluded this is effectively a retail development.

"We are delighted Nathaniel Lichfield have come up with the conclusions we came to a long time ago."

However, Kate Bunting, of Bunting and Sons, said the appraisal only looked at certain elements of the proposed development.

She said: "We believe the contents and conclusions of the appraisal are seriously flawed.

"This is due to the appraisal being restricted to consideration of only some aspects of the scheme, selective representation of it, incorrect application of relevant policies and overwhelming inaccuracies.

"The Horkesley Park consultants, a team of independent national specialist firms, have provided a combined response to the appraisal and this response, including advice and opinion on planning policy, and legal matters from a top QC, has been sub-

mitted to Colchester Council.

"Horkesley Park will be an asset for the community, an amenity for local people and a draw for tourism, improving access to the countryside and providing hundreds of much-needed jobs."