

Comment & Letters

Visitor centre decision is a complex balancing act

AS Portfolio Holder for Planning, I am pleased to respond to Chas Bazeley's letter published in the County Standard (January 11) because he raises some interesting points which deserve an explanation.

I accept that the planning process revolves around communities and it often has to weigh local interests against not just one other, but also the interests of the wider borough and all of its people.

I work with a range of communities – rural communities, minority communities, business communities, common interest communities and many others.

Each community has its own needs, sometimes shared with others, but often conflicting, and the planning process recognises this balancing act.

Sometimes we have to make difficult decisions that benefit the wider community, but which we know will cause anxiety in some parts of the local community.

The AONB is a treasure in our borough and its protection will be an important factor in our consideration of the proposal. However, it is only one of the many relevant considerations.

The report that will be considered by the Planning Committee will look at each aspect and set out the positives and negatives of the Horkeley Park proposal.

Whilst reference to policy is the starting point for decision-making, it is not the end in itself.

The council is required to identify significant planning harm that cannot be mitigated if it is to successfully resist development. Therein lies the reason why the report will be complex and detailed and the recommendation finely balanced against all considerations.

It also explains how the council's Spatial Policy Team's views, and those of our consultants, have been considered as one element of the Planning Service's wider deliberations.

That said, Mr Bazeley is not correct when he states that the council has not heeded the advice of its own consultants, as the specialist who is advising us on the significance of Horkeley Park as a "visitor attraction" has suggested that the proposal is supportable from an economic viewpoint, subject to certain controls.

In line with the National Planning Policy Framework, we shall be balancing the three key strands of sustainable development – environmental, economic and social impacts.

Opinions will differ as to the weight that should be given to these factors, but the fact that the council is openly sharing its thinking demonstrates a genuine desire to ensure that any decision made is based on a thorough understanding of the facts and issues and has

allowed all of our various communities a chance to be included.

Clr Tim Young
Portfolio Holder for Planning,
Community Safety & Culture
Colchester Borough Council
Mascot Square, Colchester

They can't possibly approve the park

WITH reference to your article in the County Standard of January 11, I feel that I must have missed something.

Since when has the applicant been allowed to censor the council's reports? To quote Councillor Young: "We have now removed confidential, commercially sensitive information after finally agreeing the approach with the applicant".

Furthermore, Buntings state that the council's reports are "fundamentally flawed".

Surely, this must mean that the council must re-do all of the reports to the applicant's satisfaction, with all that this would mean in terms of time and rate-payers' money? If the council does not do this, it must therefore presumably accept the findings of the reports (which are virtually all adverse to the applicant)?

Most importantly, the Planning Policy reports make it clear that the application is contrary to policy at national and local levels. I fail to see how the planning officers can possibly recommend approval.

Rufina Emo
Wetherby Place, London

The plot thickens in Buntings case

HORKESLEY Park plot developments are interesting. Consider this scenario, as supported by material finally posted on Colchester Borough Council's (CBC) website on January 7.

CBC has commissioned independent consultants' reports, which are critical of the application. They keep these quiet, and on

December 11 there is a meeting between CBC, Buntings, Buntings' advisers, Sykes Leisure and their agent Mr Tony Collins, and Britton McGrath Associates, whose report was the most damning. BMA are asked to write a supplementary report, which includes an account of the meeting.

This report is completed on December 18. It says there was initially "much disagreement" (page 3). Then Kate and Hector Bunting gave an impressive verbal presentation of their project. Then there's a curious paragraph on page 4:

"It was made clear by the Bunting and Sons agent, Mr Tony Collins, that if CBC were not able to confirm their support by the end of play on Thursday, December 20, they would, subject to instruction by their client, lodge an appeal."

The BMA supplementary report reaches a somewhat more open conclusion.

On December 21, CBC senior planning officer Vincent Pearce announces a date for the planning meeting and states his officers' intention to make their recommendation in favour of the application.

Councillor Tim Young is subsequently reported as saying "we have to be careful if the council refuses it and an appeal takes place because it's the council that picks up the bill."

Is someone being bullied here?
Georgina Harding
Old Hall Farm, Little Horkeley

How will they get the Constables?

THE London-based consultants Britton McGrath Associates, commissioned by Colchester Council to report on the viability of the Stour Valley Visitor Centre, suggest that the business model is not viable.

However, they acknowledge that it has the potential to achieve the necessary regional status, provided that the applicants can ensure the acquisition of "a few" Constable paintings to house in the proposed Chantry Fine Art Gallery.

Last year, John Constable's

painting "The Lock", owned by Baroness Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza and housed in Madrid's Bornemisza Museum, was auctioned by Christies. It sold for £22.4million.

Are the applicants seriously asking planning officers to accept that the proposed Chantry Fine Art Gallery will be able to acquire the quality Constable paintings necessary to create a significant attraction on a par even with those available free to the public and housed just a few miles away at Christchurch Mansion in Ipswich?

The question is begged – where on earth will these paintings come from?

If they hope to just borrow Constable paintings, it will be nigh on impossible.

National, public and most other museums are simply not allowed to lend art from their collections to non-museums or commercial organisations. They would not qualify for Government indemnity and the huge amounts demanded for commercial insurance (in the unlikely event they were able to find private collectors willing to lend their extremely valuable Constable paintings to an unknown, untried unestablished start-up gallery), would make the proposition even less viable than their business model.

What genuine credentials or qualifications do the applicants have with regard to establishing a fine art gallery and its highly specialised needs in terms of art world professionalism? Established centres of excellence like, for example, Gainsborough House in Sudbury, have taken many years to evolve.

The applicants are naive to think it can be achieved on the back of a planning application.

Peter Gaskin
London Road, Great Horkeley

Green light would undo all our work

BETWEEN 1999 and 2009 I was actively involved, as an individual and on behalf of my parish council, in the consultation which led to the Local Development Framework (LDF).

We, the people of Colchester, were told this consultation would determine the shape and structure of the town in which we, our children and grandchildren would live, and on that basis we attended innumerable meetings and responded to countless consultations.

The resulting LDF, approved by the Planning Inspectorate, the full council and the Government, provided a basis in planning law for the development of our community and has been respected as a model for the rest of the county and, indeed, country.

Key elements were the protection of the countryside and the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding

Natural Beauty and the identification of specific areas for development. At no stage in the process was I aware of Bunting & Sons applying for Horkeley Park as a development site.

The current application should be decided on the basis of the planning law enshrined in the LDF and this is the argument being made forcibly by the council's Planning Policy Unit. However, the council is proposing to approve the application in spite of these objections based on planning law which they have approved.

One can speculate why – perhaps the financial pressure in the current environment could be a deciding issue, but surely not in such a divisive case.

If the application is approved, it will be a betrayal of the people of Colchester, who gave freely of their time to develop the LDF. One can only hope that the councillors on the Planning Committee will be allowed to decide the issue on its merits, not under a three-line whip to save the council embarrassment, and the views of the Planning Policy Unit are allowed to be voiced.

Roger Drury
Workhouse Cottage
Little Horkeley

Refusal the only credible option

COLCHESTER Council has spent a great deal of time and money on independent reports relating to the Horkeley Park planning application, which conclude it is non-viable, unsustainable and in the wrong location.

This position is confirmed within the council's own Planning Policy Report, which, on almost every page, gives substantive and major reasons why the application should be refused.

There should be no need for further deliberation, other than the application be recommended for refusal and on February 28 confirmed by councillors that this is the case.

Russell Whitehair
Hillway, Great Horkeley

The project has my full support

I'VE spent my life working and living in the countryside and am now retired.

Regarding the Great Horkeley debate, the acid test should be: will it create new jobs, assist tourism and be a place for those to visit who live in new houses with limited gardens, which are now being built wherever you go?

I believe it will and so the project has my full support – we should be looking at the positives and not always the negatives.

Mr Smith
Myland, Colchester