

BATTLE LINES OVER HORKESLEY PARK BID

'Council has failed'

■ Campaigners call in London lawyer to investigate officers

CAMPAIGNERS fighting plans for the visitor centre in the Dedham Vale have employed a London lawyer to investigate whether Colchester Council officers have acted unlawfully.

The Stour Valley Action Group (SVAG) has campaigned against development at Horkesley Park for more than a decade.

Now it has taken on Mark Lowe QC to fight their cause.

Chairman Will Pavry said: "He is analysing the process used by the planning officers."

"We believe they have failed in the way they have handled the documents."

"Officers from the planning department said they were minded to recommend approval for the project in December - prior to releasing consultation reports into the public domain."

"They should have put out the reports, asked for comments and then reached a recommendation."

The council commissioned three independent consultants to look at issues including sustainability, viability and predicted popularity of the centre.

One of the consultants, Britton McGrath, produced a supplementary review last week after attending workshops with applicants Bunting and Sons and Colchester Council.

Battle lines have been drawn for a crucial meeting to decide Colchester's most controversial planning application. Hundreds of people have

commented on application 120965 for the Stour Valley Visitor Centre, with opinions being voiced vociferously both for and against the development.

On Thursday, Colchester Council's planning committee will vote on the application. Our reporter WENDY BRADING reports.

THE APPLICATION

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 across more than 117 acres, including a 101-acre country park. Features include sculpture trails,

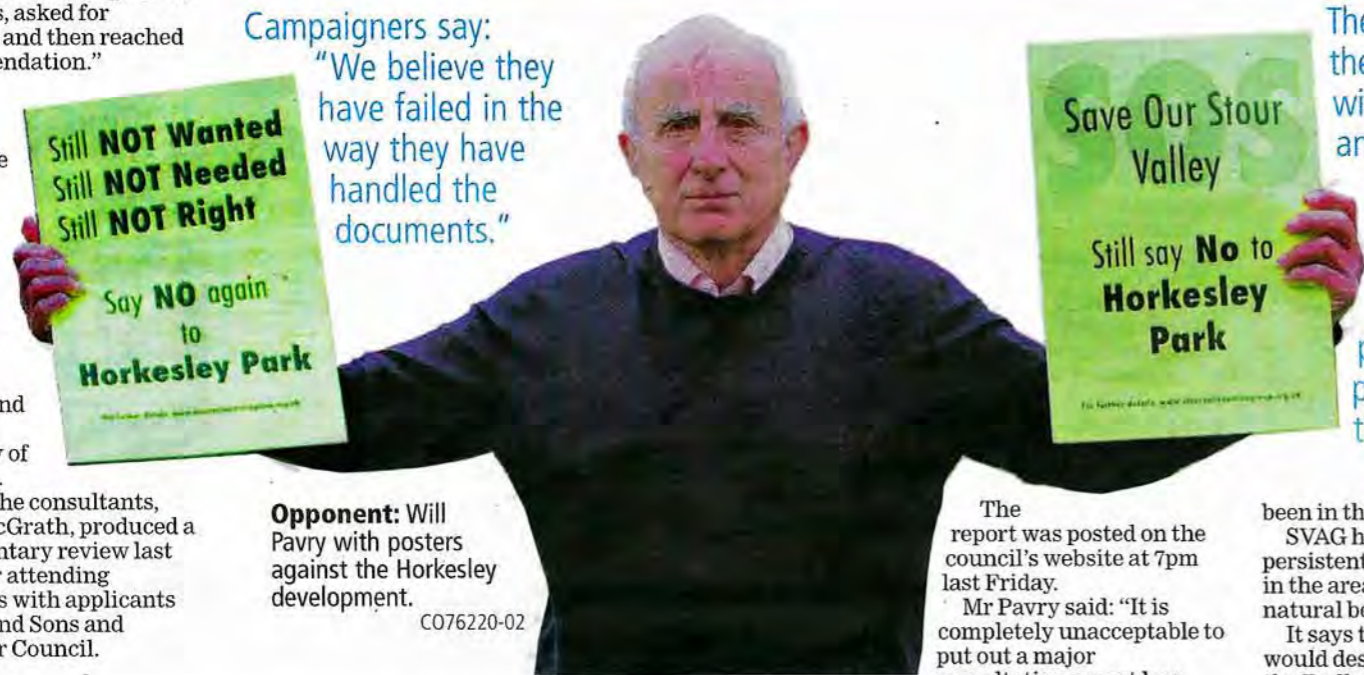


Grand plans: Kate and Hector Bunting show their new plans for Horkesley Park last year. C057766

reinstated parkland grazed by Suffolk Punches, a central building with an indoor display ring, demonstration nursery and 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 world-famous artist John Constable. 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.

Campaigners say: "We believe they have failed in the way they have handled the documents."

The council says the meeting with applicants and the consultants "was a regular meeting as part of the process with the applicants"



Opponent: Will Pavry with posters against the Horkesley development. C076220-02

The report was posted on the council's website at 7pm last Friday. Mr Pavry said: "It is completely unacceptable to put out a major consultation report less than two weeks before the meeting."

He also questioned whether the council's independence had been compromised.

Mr Pavry said he was hopeful councillors would throw out the application - but he said the fight would go on even if they backed it.

"It has to go to the Secretary of State and we will do all we can to ensure he has a public inquiry."

"If that doesn't happen, we and the other major opponents, including the Dedham Vale Society and the CPRE, will look to go to judicial review."

"For this there has to have been an abuse of process, which we believe there has

been in this case." SVAG has been a persistent opponent to plans in the area of outstanding natural beauty.

It says the development would destroy the peace of the Dedham Vale and lead to a dramatic increase in traffic on the narrow country roads. It also questions whether the centre will be viable.

Colchester Council has defended meeting with the applicants and the consultants.

A spokesman for the council said: "This was a regular meeting as part of the process with the applicants."

"The council invited its independent consultants to the meeting in order to clarify a number of points they had been asked to advise on."

"Planning services officers were present in the meeting at all times, so independence was not lost."

wendy.brading@nqe.com

BATTLE LINES OVER HORKESLEY PARK BID

'We have listened'

■ Buntings optimistic ahead of planners' vote on Thursday

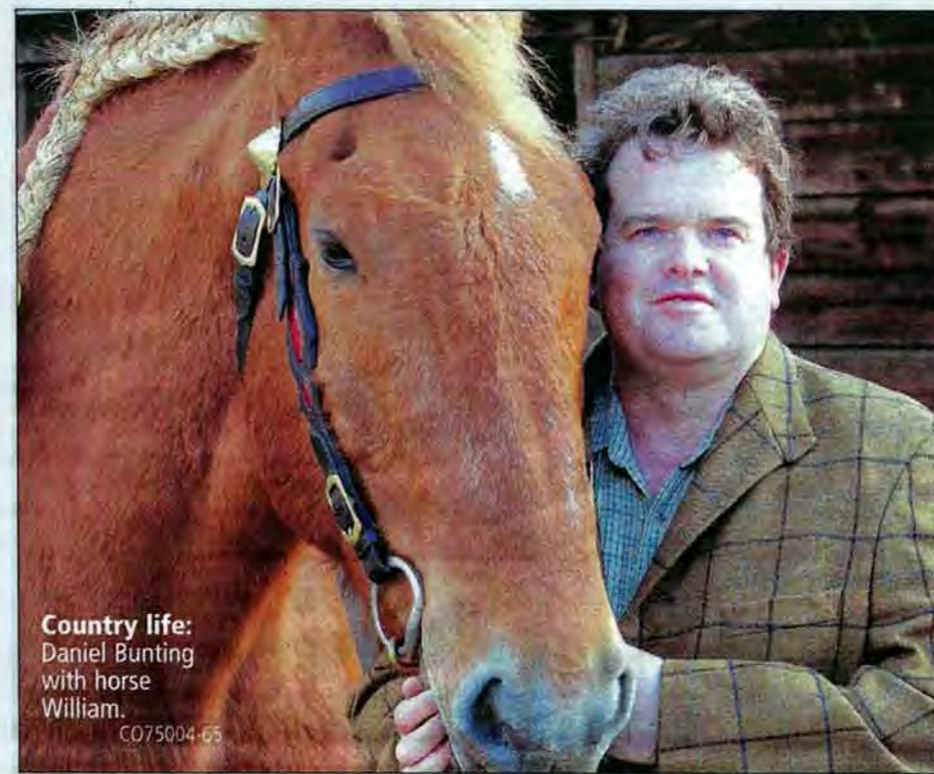
THE firm behind the multi-million pound visitor centre says it will be an asset to the area.

The application is the fifth version to be drawn up, but the first to be considered by a planning committee.

Kate Bunting, partner of Bunting and Sons, said she was optimistic of success after getting support from Colchester Council's planning officers.

She said: "The planning officers have thoroughly reviewed the application and have appreciated the benefits that Horkesley Park will deliver. We hope this stands us in good stead at the planning committee meeting and are looking forward to a favourable response."

She added: "We have truly listened and responded to feedback on the earlier application and have made significant



Country life: Daniel Bunting with horse William. C075004-65

changes to the proposals."

Her brother, Hector, also a partner of the firm, added: "Horkesley Park will be an asset for the community, an amenity for local people and a draw for tourists, giving open access to the countryside, benefiting bio-diversity and habitats and providing a large number of jobs."

The family was adamant the scheme was viable and said its business plan had been "vigorously tested" by independent experts.

It said it would have original Constables - despite the scepticism of their opponents.

If the plans get approval, Bunting and Sons hope to start work on the visitor centre as soon as possible and hope to have it open for business by spring 2015.

Debate does not end here

IF the council backs the scheme, it will not be the end of the debate.

The application is a departure from the adopted development plan. Therefore, if the council chooses to support it, the plans must be deferred to allow them to be referred to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Eric Pickles.

He will then decide whether he wishes to call in the application. This would prompt a public inquiry.

If the planning committee refuses the application, it will be down to the applicants to decide if they want to appeal or submit a new application.

Officers say...

COLCHESTER Council's planning officers have recommended the plans are approved. They had hoped to release the report ten days before the meeting, but had to seek legal advice. The 345-page report was published on Wednesday.

A statement said: "After full consideration of, and having regard to, all material submitted and representations made, including those received up to February 19, the recommendation from the planning service is to grant planning permission subject to the prior completion of a S106 Agreement and subject to conditions."

The three consultants say...

THREE consultants were commissioned by the council to prepare reports on the application - Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners, Vectos and Britton McGrath Associates.

Nathaniel Lichfield raised concerns over commercial viability and traffic, while Vectos found problems with parking provision, which was above the maximum standard.

Britton McGrath's initial report advised the council to support the project only if certain criteria were met.

The consultants produced a supplementary report after attending a workshop with the Buntings and the council, which was posted on the council's website last Friday.

In its new review, Britton

McGrath gave more support to the scheme, but still insisted it was dependent on "the promised programme of events being forthcoming".

It also questioned whether 310,000 visitors would be attracted to the centre, as predicted by the Buntings, estimating the number to be closer to 150,000 - and only if the entry price is dropped from £14.95 to about £10 per adult.

It also says it believes 50 or 60 full-time jobs would be created - nearly half the estimated 106 positions.

In its summary, it says the Chinese garden, which is due to get an investment in excess of £1.5million, would be a major draw, as would authentic Constable paintings.

A meeting that will make history

The application is making history by being the first ever to be discussed in Charter Hall at Colchester Leisure World. The change of location from Colchester Town Hall is to accommodate the anticipated audience of hundreds of people.

The meeting, which starts at 6pm, will be chaired by veteran Colchester councillor Theresa Higgins.

Members of the public will be allowed to speak for three minutes each. Under special arrangements,

WHO WILL VOTE

COLCHESTER councillors who will vote on the application are: Nick Barlow (Lib Dem, Castle); Mark Cable (Con Dedham and Langham); Peter Chillingworth (Con, Great Tey); Barrie Cook (Lib Dem, St Anne's); John Elliott (Con, Tiptree); Mike Lilley (Labour, East Donyland) chairman Theresa

Higgins (Lib Dem, New Town); Marcus Harrington (Con, West Bergholt and Eight Ash Green); Cyril Liddy (Labour, Wivenhoe Quay); Jackie Maclean (Con, Copford and West Stanway); Jon Manning (Lib Dem, Wivenhoe Cross); Nigel Offen (Lib Dem, Shrub End); Gerard Oxford (Highwoods Group, Highwoods); Laura Sykes (Lib Dem, Stanway).

each side of the debate will be allowed a total of 36 minutes - 72 minutes in total.

■ For live updates from the

meeting, see our website essexcountystandard.co.uk or follow our sister paper, the Gazette's twitter feed on @TheGazette