

Public inquiry should decide heritage park plan, says MP

CALLS have been made for the controversial Horkesley Park development plans to be decided through a public inquiry.

Colchester Council is to consider the application for the £20 million proposed heritage and conservation centre in the Dedham Vale some time this year.

Now North Essex MP Bernard Jenkin has asked for the application to be heard through a public inquiry led by a Government inspector.

He has written to Hazel Blears, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, asking for the inquiry because he said there are a number of significant factors.

In his letter, he states: "The application is highly controversial with strong views being expressed by both sides.

"It contravenes Colchester Council's strategic plan and meets criteria for calling in."

If the heritage centre is approved, it would be set in 117 acres of parkland in an area of outstanding natural beauty and is expected to attract an estimated 485,000 visitors a year.

However, Mr Jenkin said the project was a "departure application" because it lies outside the council's current planning policies.

The council's core development strategy features clauses which specifically protect the Dedham Vale area of outstanding natural beauty and bans development which could have an adverse effect on the area.

Mr Jenkin said the application was also potentially in conflict with a number of national planning policies

especially those which state landscapes, such as the Dedham Vale with national or international designations, should be protected.

While Colchester MP Bob Russell has spoken in favour of the scheme, South Suffolk MP Tim Yeo has opposed it.

The scheme this week won support from Shadow international trade and development minister Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

He visited Great Horkesley and said: "This is a prime example of a really well-integrated, new initiative that could play a huge part in putting Essex on the tourism map."

However, Mr Jenkin criticised his comments. He said: "My colleague Mr Clifton-Brown doesn't know anything about Essex or about how controversial this development is.

"I will fight to protect rural Essex against Conservative ministers just as I would against Labour ministers."

■ A bus driver hopes to cause an upset by standing on a "No to Horkesley Park" ticket in the county council elections.

Independent candidate Bruno Hickman will fight the Constable division seat in the county council polls by declaring himself the right choice for opponents of the planned heritage centre.

Conservative candidate Anne Brown has also declared she is not in favour of the scheme.

Other candidates for the division are Roger Bamforth (Green), James Butler (BNP), George Curtis (UK Independence), David Hough (Lab) and Barry Woodward (Lib Dem).