

Fight for heritage centre

- Bunting family works on new, smaller scheme for Horkesley Park
- Campaigners pledge to protect Dedham Vale from development

Wendy Brading

ONE of the area's most controversial developments, Horkesley Park, is going back to the drawing board.

Colchester Council threw out a plan for a £25 million heritage and conservation

centre in Great Horkesley in an area of outstanding natural beauty.

Now the firm behind it, Buntings and Sons, has revealed it will not appeal against the decision.

However, it is working on a new, scaled-down version which it hopes to unveil next

year. It will be the fifth version of the scheme – but campaigners said the principle remained the same and pledged to fight to protect the Dedham Vale.

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We'll always fight to protect our peace

Standing firm: Will Pavry, chairman of the Stour Valley Action Group, stands on open land in the Dedham Vale, which could come under renewed threat when the Bunting family submits fresh plans after the rejection of Horkesley Park. Below, Kate, Hector and Stephen Bunting.

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Vow as Buntings prepare scaled-down plan for Dedham Vale

Wendy Brading

NEW plans are being drawn up for a conservation and heritage centre in an area of outstanding natural beauty.

Colchester Council rejected an application by established family firm Bunting and Sons for the £25 million Horkesley Park project earlier this year.

The firm has now announced it would not appeal against the decision.

However, it will be submitting a new application for a "substantially scaled-down version" of the scheme.

The new plans will be the fifth version drawn up by the firm in the past decade.

They will focus on the redevelopment of the nursery site off London Road, Great Horkesley.

Some elements which featured in the previous plan will be left out of the new scheme.

They include the warren – the underground nature watch building – and the Chantry art gallery.

The Chantry, an early 19th century house to the north of the Buntings' redundant greenhouses, was bought by the family, which hoped to transform it into a gallery displaying works by landscape artist John Constable and his contemporaries.

However, dissenters questioned whether important works of art would be featured – and opponents of the scheme included descendants of the artist.

A statement from the Buntings, which was sent to all 60 borough

councillors, said: "In making the acquisition of The Chantry and including it in our proposals, we believed it represented a major benefit for the borough of Colchester."

"However, to reduce the scale of our proposed scheme to a level we understand would be acceptable to the council, The Chantry has been withdrawn from our future plans and will be sold."

The firm is also suggesting reducing the size of the main building to one storey.

It was due to feature a food experience and exhibition space on the ground floor, with a lecture theatre on the first floor.

Kate Bunting, a partner of Bunting and Sons, said which elements would now be kept was under discussion.

Ms Bunting said the company was still working on the detail of the new scheme and it was expected an application would be ready next year.

She said: "The whole project is under discussion. We are looking at everything."

"We consider this to be another stage of the protracted process."

"We have faith that Horkesley Park is a really good scheme which will bring lots of benefits to the area, and we take heart from the enormous support we have had."

"We will put all the information we have gathered so far to good use."

Ms Bunting said it was not possible to say yet how many jobs would be created or how much the project would cost.



'The whole project is under discussion. We are looking at everything'

THE BUNTINGS

A total of 47.4 hectares of land was earmarked for the previous proposals and would have included a 40-hectare country park, gallery and craft studios, Suffolk punch breeding centre and specialist garden centre.

Three-quarters of the site lay within the Dedham Vale area of outstanding natural beauty.

Bunting and Sons claimed it would attract 485,000 visitors a year and create 220 jobs.

The council was inundated with responses both for and against. It recorded 5,513 letters of sup-

port for the initial consultation, including 5,069 postcard replies and 444 letters of support.

It also received 1,285 letters of objection and, in its summary to the planning committee, officers said if only the letters were considered, those objecting to the proposal represented 74.3 per cent of the responses received.

Will Pavry, chairman of the Stour Valley Action Group, which has opposed the four previous schemes, said it would continue to fight to protect the Dedham Vale.

Mr Pavry said: "I am not surprised they are not going to appeal."

"If the new application is scaled down, we would be interested to look at it."

"However, our concern has always been to protect the peace and tranquility of the Dedham Vale area of outstanding natural beauty."

"Any new application would require a new environmental impact assessment and would have to go out to consultation again."

Changes to planning laws are due to be introduced by the Government in March.

However, Mr Pavry said: "Any new national planning policy framework will still give significant protection to areas of outstanding natural beauty, which is encouraging."

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