

## Comment & Letters

### Standard

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### Business case row blurred argument

THE epic council meeting where the Stour Valley Visitor Centre application was rejected was not the end of the saga. Bunting and Sons will appeal, and believes it has a very high chance of success.

If the decision is overturned it could end up costing taxpayers a lot of money.

But, rightly, that was not the planning committee's primary concern.

They were representing residents and if they felt the application was not warranted, they were right to reject it.

The problem is the argument for rejecting the visitor centre became blurred by the fixation of some of the councillors with the scheme's viability.

To be blunt, that was none of their business.

Colchester Council paid consultants to look at the business plan, and officers still recommended councillors approve the application.

Other companies applying for permission to invest in the borough have not been put under such scrutiny.

For example, Williams & Griffin, which successfully applied to expand, was not put under pressure to release its financial case.

Objectors had genuine concerns about the effect the visitor centre would have on Constable Country.

Councillors should have concentrated on these arguments instead of trying to take on a successful family firm on whether it is capable of running a business.

# Horkesley Park decision is balanced and correct

AS a member of the audience at last Friday's planning committee meeting regarding the Horkesley Park application, I was really impressed with the thoroughness, intelligence and seriousness the committee showed throughout the four-hour meeting.

All the councillors were thorough and fair-minded in their deliberations. Theresa Higgins chaired the meeting very competently and professionally, and great thoughtfulness was shown in weighing up the pros and cons of this controversial scheme.

The committee spent much time on several key points and eventually made an informed, conscientious and, in my opinion, correct decision in rejecting the application.

The councillors were correctly persuaded by the arguments that harm would be done to Colchester, Horkesley and the area of outstanding natural beauty of the Dedham Vale if the scheme went ahead – the effects of traffic noise and pollution, the loss of tranquility, the probable unsustainability of the scheme, the lack of vital financial information with regards to funding the scheme.

Visitor numbers of 300,000 were considered very optimistic and even if the more realistic figure of 150,000 was achieved, the committee, quite rightly, considered that, with most visitors coming by car, the impact on the whole area of the Dedham Vale would be harmful.

Watching the debate, my faith in local democracy and government has been strengthened, and a very big WELL DONE goes to the members of the planning committee.

**Jim McMillan**  
Millers Close, Great Horkesley

### Why turn down this wonderful scheme?

THE planning meeting for the Horkesley Park scheme was an embarrassment for Colchester Council.

Why on earth would the councillors think it is a good idea to turn down such a wonderful scheme, which is being provided to the people of Colchester – at no cost whatsoever to council tax payers?

You would have thought that they would have grasped this offer with both hands before the Buntings changed their minds.

Instead, they sat there trying to dream up completely irrelevant reasons to turn down the scheme.

They were guided by their own officers, who were saying they should grant planning permission, but they were in such a world of their own that they could not see the bigger picture at all.

I despair for the future of Colchester if this is the calibre of people who are making such important decisions on our behalf.

**Mike Jonathan**  
Mile End, Colchester



### Valley can stay true to its nature now

CONGRATULATIONS to the councillors on the Colchester Borough Council planning committee for their decision against Horkesley Park.

What was fascinating at the meeting was to see how they attempted to use the blunt tools of planning policy to define the "harm" the Horkesley Park development would do to the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and to the surrounding landscape.

Between them, they worked this out from questions of immediate peace and tranquility, noise pollution, visual impact and traffic, to the impact of sheer numbers of people on the Dedham Vale, and towards an area of meaning: what it would mean for a piece of agricultural land to be re-designated for leisure use.

There's clear and direct planning danger in such a re-designation, but there's another, less tangible kind of harm here. It's one that is perhaps more easily stated in poetry than in any bureaucratic vocabulary: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty."

The essential character of the Stour Valley landscape is that of traditional farmland. Exploit it and make it a leisure product and you take away its truth. The Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty becomes at once less natural and less beautiful. That would be great harm.

**Georgina Harding**  
Old Hall Farm, Little Horkesley

### What drives plan into its 13th year?

WHAT an extraordinary event the planning hearing for Horkesley Park last week turned out to be – full of drama, high tension and controversy.

The most startling point raised by the committee was that the "harm" to the AONB can only be mitigated by reduced visitor numbers, but

that in itself is uncontrollable and in turn renders the scheme even more non-viable.

It is now clear the scheme is unworkable on all levels. No business plan, no proven national or local need, no real jobs, no proof of ownership of any paintings.

One wonders what drives this seemingly doomed project into its 13th year. It has a fractured offering of Suffolk Horses, alongside a Chinese Garden, juxtaposed with a "Constable Gallery" that has no proof of actually owning any paintings – why does the saga of Horkesley Park grind on?

Mr Bunting is not some philanthropic fairground ringmaster with a burning desire to provide a ticketed experience for the benefit of the people of Colchester.

By his own description, he is a businessman who, to date, has spent well over £1million on trying to gain a change of use for his glasshouse site within the AONB – a seemingly impossible task.

I am a taxpayer sick of the council wasting his money on consultants' reports they then ignore.

**Fred Grosch**  
Great Braxted