

DEDHAM VALE SOCIETY

President: Robert Erith, TD, DL. Chairman: Charles Clover

Registered Charity No.: 246007

Mr Vincent Pearce
Development Services Manager
Colchester Borough Council
Rowan House,
33 Sheepen Road,
Colchester CO3 3WG

Monday, January 21, 2013

Dear Mr Pearce,

Application No: 120965 Stour Valley Visitor Centre at Horkesley Park

This application is for a large-scale development with a significant impact on the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty – as 91% of the land in this application falls within it. The proposed visitor centre would involve major earth-moving and building works, including the building of a large car park on a hill within the AONB, with all the noise and light pollution resulting from that. It would involve a transformation of the setting of Great Horkesley church and the quiet valley running down to Nayland. The proposal is essentially for a tourist “honeypot,” or theme park, on a considerable scale and as such would increase noise, light, traffic and visitor pressure in this location to a degree unacceptable in a nationally protected landscape. The retail element also threatens to impact the viability of Colchester town centre.

Through its 75-year history the Dedham Vale Society (DVS) has sought to protect the Dedham Vale from unsuitable development. It was instrumental in having the Dedham Vale AONB, and the AONB designation generally, enshrined in the 1968 Countryside Act. The DVS, which currently has around 900 members, considers that this proposal runs strongly counter to the letter and spirit of the AONB for all the reasons stated above. That happens also to be the view of the other body charged with the stewardship of the AONB, the Dedham Vale and Stour Valley Project. These shared views deserve to be influential. The Dedham Vale is one of the smallest AONBs in the country, sandwiched between two major conurbations and its tranquillity and rural views are fragile and extremely vulnerable to development pressure. Government exhortations to create

economic growth clearly do not apply to developments that would adversely affect the landscape or tranquillity of AONBs and ministers have made this abundantly clear.

For this reason, it is our understanding that the application runs counter to national, regional and local planning law. Specifically, the overriding need to protect the AONB is reflected in the National Planning Policy Framework. Paragraphs 115 and 116 of the NPPF contain strong protection for AONBs and comments on the importance of sustainable development when it comes to selecting sites near to transport infrastructure and the need to secure the long-term future of town centres. The Colchester Local Development Framework - approved by the planning inspectorate, the full Colchester council and the government - contains in Development Policy 22 specific protection for the AONB. Further policies seek to protect the countryside by permitting only small-scale business initiatives, protection of the town centre from out-of-town development and by focusing tourist attractions within the urban centre of Colchester.

Your own Planning Policy Unit has assessed the proposal as failing on all the above counts and the council's independent advisors have assessed it as unsustainable by virtue of its location and the fact that 90% of the visitors will arrive by car. We would therefore like to register our dismay that the recommendation going to the Planning Committee is not based on planning law.

A key element in the decision is whether the proposal is commercially viable. The report from Britton McGarth Associates, consultants hired by the Council, gives reason seriously to question the proposal's viability. If it fails as a commercial venture, it could be sold on with its existing planning and retail permissions and become an out-of-town shopping facility or slip into other unsuitable uses including conference centres, amusement parks or themed wedding venues. The most likely of these, an out-of-town shopping facility, would run counter to the Council's aim of rejuvenating the centre of Colchester.

The application states that a "key driver" in ensuring the commercial success of Horkesley Park as a regional attraction is its association with the artist John Constable and "Constable Country". However, there are no connections between the Horkesley area and the paintings of John Constable, nor, we are informed, is there any realistic prospect of any public gallery loaning Constables for a worthwhile exhibition. Private owners would require hefty investment in atmospheric controls, security and insurance likely to make such exhibitions unrealistic. Comparison with the visitor numbers going to Dedham/Flatford, where Constable painted many of his most famous works is inappropriate – the landscape he painted is there and access is free.

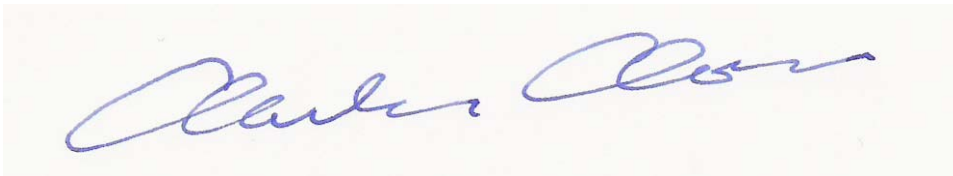
The idea of creating a Chinese garden within such a celebrated English landscape would also seem to be in conflict with the kind of landscapes the AONB was created to protect, as would the proposal to charge for admission.

So we have an application which in our view is manifestly against national planning law, unsustainable and probably not commercially viable. We struggle to understand why the

council's officers are recommending approval, unless a motivating factor is the cost of an appeal. We believe that the officers should reflect on the long-term importance of the protected landscapes of the AONB as an asset for the residents of Colchester and the surrounding area and conclude that opposing a development which will damage that asset represents good value for taxpayers' money.

The Dedham Vale Society urges the officers to reconsider their recommendation and urges elected members of the planning committee to reject this application. The council's only honourable option is refusal.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Charles Clover', is centered on a light-colored rectangular background.

Charles Clover, Chairman.
On behalf of the Dedham Vale Society.