

# Little Horkesley Parish Council

Parish Clerk J R Drury

Workhouse Cottage,  
Workhouse Road,  
Little Horkesley,  
Colchester CO6 4DS  
12 July 2012

Colchester Borough Council,  
Environment & Protective Services  
(Attn: Sue Jackson),  
Rowan House,  
33 Sheepen Road,  
Colchester CO3 3WG

Dear Ms Jackson,

**Application No: 120965**

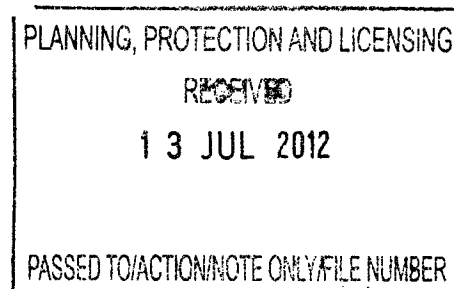
**Location: Stour Valley Visitor Centre at Horkesley Park**

Please find attached the response of the Little Horkesley Parish Council to the above application.

Yours sincerely,



Roger Drury  
Parish Clerk



**Executive Summary of Little Horkesley Parish Council submission on:**

**Application No: 120965**

**Location: Stour Valley Visitor Centre at Horkesley Park**

- 1. The East of England Plan cannot be used as justification for this application.**
- 2. Under the NPPF para 115, a large development can not be compatible with a location in, or near to, the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.**
- 3. Under the terms of the Colchester Local Development Framework (LDF) Core Policy ENV 2 this is an inappropriate development which will damage the Dedham Vale AONB.**
- 4. This application could only be approved if the whole of the LDF for the Horkesley was re-opened and subject to full public scrutiny.**
- 5. Under Development Policy 9, the creation of 100+ Full Time Equivalent Jobs and attracting 316,000 visitors to a small sector of the AONB cannot be regarded as small scale.**
- 6. Under Development Policy 10, this location again is not small scale, is not served by adequate public transport and "urban Colchester should be the focus for larger scale tourist, leisure and cultural activities.**
- 7. There is no established tourism need for the Stour Valley Visitor Centre.**
- 8. Seasonal, part time and low paid jobs in the leisure sector are not the basis for a successful and prosperous Colchester.**
- 9. This application provides a "greenwash" of sustainability, which is totally undermined by the estimated 92% of visitors that will arrive in their personal cars.**
- 10. The information on retail activity provided is inadequate to allow a proper public debate.**
- 11. The Traffic Assessment is flawed because no consideration has been given to the impact on rural lanes in the Dedham Vale AONB and no attention has been given to LDF-Development Policies DP21, 17 and 18.**
- 12. The whole financial viability of the project is based on estimated forecasts backed by no statistical analysis and, therefore, cannot be regarded as credible.**
- 13. The countryside is freely accessible, and well used by the people of Colchester and it is unacceptable to charge for entry.**

**Please reject this totally inappropriate application for the Stour Valley Visitor Centre.**

**Application No: 120965**

**Stour Valley Visitor Centre at Horkesley Park**

**East of England**

Much of the justification for the application appears to be based on the East of England Plan and particularly those sections of it dealing with Tourism.

When the Coalition Government came to power one of the first things announced was a scrapping of Regional Government and they have the legislation in place to do this. There is a delay whilst a series of Strategic Environmental Assessments are carried out but these are nearing completion after which Regional Government will be consigned to the dustbin of history.

Over recent months there have been a number of appeals against planning decisions made by Borough/District Councils on the basis of local plans. In these appeals Developers have attempted to prove that Regional Government plans take precedence over local plans – these appeals have been unsuccessful.

The East of England Plan cannot be used as justification for this application.

**National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)**

Although much of the NPPF seems to be advice to local councils on the creation of local plans, it is still the prime document on which planning decisions will be made in the years ahead.

**Para 115 states:**

**“Great weight should be given to conserving landscape and scenic beauty in National Parks, the Broads and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which have the highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty”**

In paras 123 and 125 the NPPF discusses the impact on health and quality of life of noise and light pollution and the need to minimise these in areas of tranquillity and where there is an intrinsically dark landscape – both are relevant to this application as it is within an AONB.

Much is made in the application on the fact that the new build will be on the Nursery Site (10.38 acres) which is outside the AONB – later reference will be made to Colchester Borough Council's Development Policy 22 which requires this site to be regarded as part of the AONB.

The Public will have access to the Chantry Art Gallery and Gardens (5.3 acres) and the Park and Farmland (101.04 acres) with the result that 91% of the Visitor Centre area will be within the AONB and the guidance contained in the NPPF should be strictly observed.

One of the essential elements of the Dedham Vale is open countryside with wide vista views from the many footpaths criss-crossing the area. In order to maintain secure boundaries to ensure collection of entrance fees, it is intended to fence/hedge all the public footpaths crossing the site thus destroying the much prized vistas.

This is not compatible with the whole concept of an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Under the NPPF para 115, a large development cannot be compatible with a location in, or near to, the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

## **Colchester Borough Council – Local Development Framework**

### **Core Strategy**

**ENV2 – Rural Communities states:**

**“Outside village boundaries, the council will consider small-scale rural business, leisure and tourism schemes that are appropriate to local employment needs, minimise negative impacts and harmonise with the local character and surrounding natural environment.”**

**This development:**

- Is outside the village boundary;
- Is certainly not small-scale, any project which seeks to bring 316,000 visitors to a single location cannot be so classified;
- The unemployment rate in the immediate area is low and the number of staff projected means that personnel will have to be bussed in thus undermining the sustainability claims of the application;
- Its location in, or near, to the Dedham Vale AONB will certainly have a negative environmental impact because of noise, light pollution, vehicular movements etc ;
- The buildings however well designed, will not harmonise with AONB and surrounding natural environment.

**Under the terms of the Colchester Local Development Framework (LDF) Core Policy ENV 2 this is an inappropriate development which will damage the Dedham Vale AONB.**

### **Site Allocations**

The Site Allocations contained in the LDF were arrived at after considerable public debate and discussion and aimed at identifying specific allocations in line with overall strategy set by the Core Strategy.

This is a major development but not included in the Site Allocations envisaged in the LDF.

The application does not demonstrate that the development needs to be at this site or has a meaningful link to the site:

- Life and Times of Constable – there is no record of John Constable ever having painted or visited the site;
- Suffolk Punches were used right across East Anglian and are not specifically linked to Horkesley Park – there are several places across the region where well established breeding centres exist.
- Animal Encounters – there are many centres providing this sort of contact for children; notably Colchester Zoo;
- Nature Watch – well provided for in the various nature reserves across the area;
- Farming through the Ages – there is no link to this site which has been in horticultural use for several decades etc etc.

There is no intrinsic link between the proposed development and its former use – it is an attempt to package together money making activities which are generally better provided elsewhere.

This application could only be approved if the whole LDF for the Horkesley area were to be re-opened and subject to full public scrutiny.

## **Development Policies**

### **Policy DP 22: Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty**

**Development will only be supported in or near to the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) that:**

- (i) Makes a positive contribution to the special landscape and qualities of the AONB;**
- (ii) Does not adversely affect the character, quality of views and distinctiveness of the AONB or threaten public enjoyment of these areas, including increased vehicle movements,**
- (iii) Supports the wider environmental, social and economic objectives as set out in the Dedham Vale AONB & Stour Valley Management Plan.**

The key phrase in this policy is “in, or near to”. Much is made in the application of the fact that the main buildings are on the nursery site which is outside the AONB but DP22 means that the whole development should be regarded as being covered by these protections to the AONB.

It is also true that 91% of the areas open to the public are within the AONB.

Tranquillity is a key component of any AONB and that would be seriously impacted by several thousand people on the hills overlooking Nayland, a community of great historical significance. The AONB is an intrinsically dark landscape and in an age of increasing light pollution this must be protected.

There appears to be no reference in the application to discussion with the Dedham Vale & Stour Valley Project on how the plans for the Stour Valley Visitor Centre integrate with their management plan which is required by DP22.

The Management Plan, with its Lottery backing, is playing a key role in improving public access to the countryside across the Dedham Vale and Stour Valley and any development which is orientated to the leisure projects in the area should surely be conducted in close harmony with their plans.

### **Development Policy 9: Employment Uses in the Countryside states:**

**“The proposed use should be of a small scale that does not harm the rural character of the area....”**

Under DP 9 the creation of 100+ Full Time Equivalent Jobs and attracting 316,000 visitors to a small sector of the AONB cannot be regarded as small scale.

### **Development Policy 10: Tourism, Leisure and Culture states:**

**“It is recognised that not all rural locations are readily accessible by public transport. Where accessibility is poor, proposals should be small scale .....”** and

**“Urban areas of Colchester will be the focus for larger scale tourist, leisure and culture facilities...”**

The transport services to the Horkesley Park site do not exist now and quite rightly the recently published Supplementary Planning Document on Colchester Town Centre focuses all these activities within the central area.

Under DP10 this location again is not small scale, is not served by adequate public transport and "urban Colchester should be the focus for larger scale tourist, leisure and cultural facilities."

### **Need**

In order to overcome the planning barriers in the way of this application, the Developers have to demonstrate an exceptional need. They have attempted to do this by calling on the East of England plan for tourism but, as discussed earlier, this plan has little relevance going forward.

There are a huge range of activities both cultural and oriented to the countryside across East Anglia and the need for another one, which seems to add little to the mix and is effectively in an AONB, is highly questionable.

Additionally Colchester Borough Council is determined, as stated above, to develop tourism with a wide range of attractions within Colchester itself and as part of its efforts to regenerate the town centre.

There is no established tourism need for the Stour Valley Visitor Centre.

### **Job Creation**

As previously stated, the application promises some 100+ Full Time Equivalent jobs but this aspiration needs examination.

A CPRE Survey of some years ago demonstrated a significant shortfall between jobs promised by Developers and those actually delivered and, of course, would be entirely dependent upon the optimistic numbers of visitors projected.

The Visitor Centre, of its very nature, would be seasonal – many of the promised jobs, therefore, would be seasonal, part time and being in the horticultural sector, paid at the national minimum wage.

The promise of additional jobs in the surrounding area only indicates that the Developer sees visitors moving out into the countryside and, thereby, having a damaging impact on the AONB.

Seasonal, part time and low paid Jobs in the leisure sector are not the basis for a successful and prosperous Colchester.

### **Sustainability**

Much of the NPPF is concerned with direction on sustainable development which is broadly defined as being the reduction of carbon emissions. The guidance covers not only the design of new developments but also the transport arrangements.

There can be no doubt that the buildings associated with the Stour Valley Visitors Centre will be designed and built to the highest possible sustainable standards.

However, the problem is that based on the numbers projected, 316,000, and the target area from which they will be drawn, the east of England and London, implies a considerable amount of travel to Horkesley Park.

This is a family orientated attraction and it is fair to assume that many of the visitors will be family groups. Public transport is both expensive and time consuming as any one who has travelled from say Cambridge to Colchester will know. A family of two adults + two children will not travel by public transport but use the car in the family garage.

The proposed Transport Plan with buses from Colchester to Horkesley Park merely provides a fig leaf of respectability – the vast majority of visitors will not use it.

As this is primarily claimed to be a regional centre, the cost in carbon emissions will be considerable.

This application provides a “greenwash” of sustainability, which is totally undermined by the estimated 92% of visitors that will arrive in their personal cars.

### **Retail Activity**

The application claims that the space devoted to retail activities is very considerably reduced. However, no information will be provided to the public on which an assessment can be made – all financial information is to be held as “commercially sensitive” between the Developer and the Council.

It is difficult to believe that, in this age of openness, the NPPF allows total secrecy over the disclosure of information.

Two key points on retail activity are:

- Why is space allocated to an operation the sole determinate of turnover,
- The buildings projected are flexible e.g. the horse arena could in the future be used for other activities.

Given the emphasis in the NPPF “Ensuring the vitality of town centres” it would be a strange decision to allow the development of an out of town retail operation.

A concern in the community to the north of Colchester has always been that should this venture fail, it could be sold on, with its then existing retail permissions, and subsequently become a major out of town centre.

The information on retail activity provided is inadequate to allow a proper public debate.

### **Traffic Assessment**

With the previous application ECC Highways Authority raised no objections to the traffic issues that had been raised.

There are two explanations for this report:

- ECC Highways Authority only covers the A roads, in this case the A12 and the A134,
- The assumption that all traffic would travel down/up the A12 and then the A134 to reach the Visitor Centre.

That the A roads have the capacity to take the projected load has never been an issue. What is unknown is the behaviour of the great British Public most of whom will arrive in private cars – will

people choose to travel cross country exiting the A12 north and south of Colchester and after their day out will they wish to further explore the Dedham Vale?

In both of these cases, cars will spread from Horkesley Park throughout the Dedham Vale where many of the side lanes are single track and totally unsuitable for increased traffic volumes.

The Developer is seeking to extract maximum value from the location in the Dedham Vale. The "Life and Times of Constable" exhibition will encourage people to explore further the Vale after the average time spent at the attraction, 4 hours 1 minute (!) by visiting Stoke by Nayland, Dedham and Flatford. Additionally a Hopper Bus service is to be provided but the majority (92%) who arrive by car will choose to use their own vehicle to explore further.

#### **Development Policy 21: Nature Conservation and Protected Lanes**

This policy offers protection to those nominated "protected lanes" including "material increase in the amount of traffic using them".

Little Horkesley, the village most affected by the proposed development, has three "Protected Lanes", Fishponds Hill, Workhouse Road and Holt Road where the Council are committed to ensuring no increase in vehicular traffic.

Fishponds Hill is within a few hundred yards of the entrance to the Visitor Centre and most at threat.

The Developer has shown no satisfactory intent to protect these lanes.

#### **Development Policy 17: Accessibility and Access**

This policy seeks to encourage alternative forms of transport, walking, cycling etc and encourage the use of public transport. As the application admits that 92% of visitors will arrive in private cars, it is clear that it does not meet the obligations of DP17 purely because it is a rural location seeking regional attraction.

#### **Development Policy 18: Transport infrastructure Proposals**

This policy seeks to "change in car mileage". How can a development which provides many hundreds of car park spaces, attracts 92% of its visitors via private car and is based in the countryside 5miles from the nearest population centre support this policy?

The Traffic Assessment is flawed because no consideration has been given to the impact on rural lanes in the Dedham Vale AONB and no attention has been given to LDF Development Policies DP21, 17 and 18.

#### **Visitor Numbers**

The projected visitor numbers are the key to the financial viability of the project but also vital in determining the impact the facility would have on the surrounding area and particularly the AONB.

Over the last ten years, during which a number of applications have been lodged, the visitor numbers started at 785,000 and declined to the current forecast of 316,000. At no time has a statistically sound method by which these numbers have been arrived at been included in any application.

These numbers do not bear comparison with similar attractions across East Anglia and the current estimate appears to suggest that, in the first year of operation, the Stour Valley Visitor Centre will be as popular as Colchester Zoo. This is barely creditable!



**The whole financial viability of the project is based on estimated forecasts backed by no statistical analysis and, therefore, cannot be regarded as credible.**

### **Access to the Countryside**

One of the selling points of the application is improved access to the countryside for the general public which many of us living in the countryside would question.

The area to the north of Colchester is well served with footpaths, bridleways and quiet country lanes and these are well used by the people of Colchester for walking, horse riding, cycling etc and at weekends the countryside is well used.

It could be argued that the level of traffic on the rural lanes in the area could destroy the country idyll we, the people of Colchester, enjoy to-day.

Additionally, the prime driving force of the Dedham Vale AONB & Stour Valley Project is to improve access right across the area and with the help of Lottery Funding of over £1m have done much to help people not only to enjoy the countryside but learn valuable skills.

Access to the Countryside at the Stour Valley Visitor Centre will come at a cost - £14.95/adult and £9.45/child.

It is difficult to see in these recessionary times that the typical family of four will pay almost £50/family for a visit when they can go to Nayland, Dedham or Flatford Mill for free.

**The countryside is freely accessible, and well used by the people of Colchester, and it is unacceptable to charge for entry.**

### **The Greenhouses Site**

There is no doubt that the greenhouses site is an eyesore and as one approaches the Dedham Vale AONB an unfortunate introduction to the area – some thing should be done about this.

The greenhouses were built some 40 years ago and have not been used for their prime purpose, horticultural, since 2000 and are not unnaturally showing their age.

There is a strong consensus in the local community that:

- They should be returned to the use planning permission was granted, horticulture;
- If not so used, the land in its very sensitive location returned to agricultural use.

Both alternatives are the responsibility of the current owners.

**Please reject this totally inappropriate application for the Stour Valley Visitor Centre.**