

HORKESLEY PARK

After 12 years, Horkesley Park

The background

TWELVE years ago, the Bunting family first put forward proposals to build a Visitor Centre at Horkesley Park. Part of the site, in beautiful Constable country, is in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The centre would boast everything from a Chinese

garden, apparently funded with the backing of a major Chinese corporation, an art experience boasting Constable paintings, gift shops, countryside experiences and exhibitions, and a centre for rare Suffolk punch horses. They claim it would bring a vital economic boost to the local economy, creating more than 140 jobs and drawing in hundreds of thousands of visitors. However, their plans have been vigorously opposed by a large

section of the local community which has rallied organised opposition to its schemes at every turn. They claim it would destroy the tranquillity of the area. This is the fifth version of the scheme to be put forward. Two were withdrawn before they went before planners at Colchester Council. The others were refused by the council. It rejected the latest bid, despite its own officers advising

Day one:

THE inquiry started with a major surprise.

Despite the scheme having been years in the making, it was announced the whole investigation would be over in just three days.

Instead of the three-week hearing which was first envisaged, planning inspector Colin Ball said the whole process would be over in just three and a half days due to the Buntings not being represented during proceedings.

There was then a second surprise, for the Buntings at least, when they were told their sole expert present, planning agent Tony Collins, would have to watch in silence.

Mr Collins clashed with planning inspector Colin Ball when he challenged Susan Dodwell, a landscape expert speaking in



Against: Will Pavry

favour of the council's decision to refuse the plan.

Mr Collins attempted to contest a point made by Mrs Dodwell about the proposed development's visual impact.

But Mr Ball warned: "You have chosen to take no active part in this planning inquiry."

"I cannot let you take part in some parts of the inquiry and

not in others."

Seeking confirmation, Mr Collins said: "So you are saying I cannot challenge any points made by the council, even if it is contrary to something we have already agreed?"

Mr Ball replied: "Yes, that is exactly what I am saying."

"You cannot comment on any part of this inquiry. That is your choice."

The exchange was greeted by laughter from the 100-strong audience, most of whom were opposed to the plans.

'Enormous affect'

THE proposed multi-million pound tourist attraction visitor centre would have an "enormous" effect on the Dedham Vale, according to experts.

About three-quarters of the land which the Stour Valley Visitor Centre would be built on lies in an area of outstand-

and millions of pounds, inquiry gets underway

HORKESLEY PARK

it for approval. The Buntings appealed the decision leading to the current planning inquiry. However, only last week the family dropped the proverbial 'bombshell' when they announced they would not be legally represented at the enquiry, saying they were "not in a position" to employ expensive lawyers. They said should the scheme be approved, money is available to

take the project to the next stage. Instead, they said they would rely on the experts' written testimony they had submitted to the council in the latest application. On Tuesday, all parties met at Langham Community Centre before government planning inspector Colin Ball who will have the final say.

RYAN JENNINGS reports



Hopeful: Kate, Hector and Stephen Bunting at the enquiry at Langham Community Centre.

'Just not viable'

EXPERTS have claimed plans for the Stour Valley Visitor Centre are not viable.

Consultants acting for Colchester Council told the planning inquiry a travel plan put forward for getting to the attraction was flawed and visitor numbers had been vastly overestimated.

Jill Britton, from planning consultants Britton McGrath Associates, said, despite Bunting and Sons' projection of 316,000 visitors a year, the number would actually be between 100,000 and 150,000.

That scenario would cut income from the centre from a projected £3,321,836 to between £715,000 and £1,019,000.

The expert's report also said entry to the proposed centre would have to be priced at about £9, rather than £14.95 as stated in the Buntings' business case and

the family's projection of creating 146 jobs was unrealistic.

Transport expert Christopher Hargreaves said: "The appeal site is poorly served by the more

sustainable modes of transport of walking, cycling and public transport and cannot be considered to be accessible by these modes."

ing natural beauty (AONB).

Susan Dodwell, an expert in landscape and visual amenity, told the planning inquiry the proposed development would create "an enormous change in the tranquillity experience" and would also have "an enormous urbanising effect on the AONB".

She added: "As the appeal site lies predominantly within the AONB, the appeal proposals should be regarded as development in the Dedham Vale AONB."

She added: "In my judgment, the proposals would result in a fundamental and detrimental change in the landscape character."

North Essex MP Bernard Jenkin has also submitted written evidence to the inquiry.

He warned Essex County Council had failed to recognise the impact the development would have on roads in the area.

'Development essential for area's tourist trade'

AN EXPERT told day two of the hearing the proposed centre is essential for the area's economy.

But Robert Leng, president of Essex Chambers of Commerce, told the planning inquiry it must allow the "substantial investment to the local economy" to be built.

He said: "It is one of few developments which will actively preserve the nature of the area for the foreseeable future."

"The jobs terrain in the town has changed radically over the last 20 to 30 years with large employers such as Paxmans and Royal London having shrunk or gone entirely, so a development such as this is essential."

He added: "The Horkesley Park centre will generate employment when it is open to some 150 jobs on site. In addition to the jobs on site, many more will be generated in other areas."

"Far from leading to the demise of local shops, garden centres and restaurants, they will all benefit from the spin off from the visitor centre."

Mr Leng also said the centre would be an asset to the town's ail-

Day two:

ing tourist industry.

He said latest figures, for 2010/11, show 4.7million visitors came to Colchester, but only 225,000 stayed overnight.

He said: "The area is firing well below its potential. These figures reveal not only an external perception that Colchester is not a major tourist destination in its own right, but also an enormous potential market could be tapped."

No road fears

TRANSPORT expert, Martin Hislop, chairman of the European Roads Committee, added although he understood residents are concerned about the traffic impact, the majority of tourists will travel to the attraction using only main roads.

He said: "This is a fantastic opportunity for tourism and the vast majority of tourists want to use main roads which get them somewhere quicker and they will



For: Robert Leng

come off at junction 28 on the A12, use the new Northern Approach road, which is just three miles from the appeal site."

'Enormous affect'

COUNTRYSIDE campaigners have warned if the centre is allowed to be built, areas of outstanding natural beauty across the country would be at risk.

Will Pavry, a lead objector for the Stour Valley Action Group,

told the inquiry: "We contend that if the appeal was to be upheld, it would set a precedent for inappropriate development in and adjacent to AONBs across the country."

"Government planning guidelines state planning permission should be refused for major developments in AONBs except in exceptional circumstances and where it can be demonstrated they are in the public interest."

"No such demonstration of public interest has been established."

He added Bunting and Sons has not shown any benefits outweigh the harm the visitor centre would cause

MPs divided

TWO North Essex MPs are divided over the issue.

Colchester MP Sir Bob Russell supports the plans saying they meet planning rules and could economically boost the area.

Bernard Jenkin MP opposes the plans saying the centre and the number of visitors would have an adverse impact on the peace and tranquility of the area



Vehement: Campaigners from Stour Valley Action Group make their feelings known.

PLANNING inspector Colin Ball yesterday conducted an extensive site visit, including where the core visitor centre development would be built, on land where redundant glass houses are currently situated.

He also visited the Chantry and a block of land set aside for a controversial Chinese garden.

Today, Tim Yeo, MP for South Suffolk, was scheduled to speak.

Mr Yeo has opposed the

Day three.. and longer ahead:

plans, on the grounds it will cause an increase in traffic, especially with motorists travelling from Ipswich.

He has claimed rather than using the A12, visitors from Suffolk will use short cuts through Stoke by Nayland and Higham.

The MP also has worries about how much retail space will be included.

Detailed discussions will also take place today over what contributions or improvements to the area Bunting and Sons are prepared to make should the appeal be allowed.

A set of planning conditions will also be agreed in the event of the appeal being allowed.

A final decision is expected early in 2014.