



## FAMILY SILENCED IN INQUIRY INTO £25M VISITOR CENTRE

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### APPEAL HEARING OPENS INTO £25MILLION VISITOR CENTRE



Family – Kate, Hector and Stephen Bunting at the inquiry into their proposed visitor centre *Picture: STEVE ARGENT CO85551\_24*

# Buntings' expert told to keep quiet

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## INQUIRY WILL LAST 3 DAYS

THE time set aside for the appeal hearing has been substantially cut since Bunting and Sons decided not to be represented.

Instead of a three-week hearing, the appeal will now last just three and a half days and is due to finish at lunchtime on Friday.

Today, objectors from a number of countryside organisations will submit evidence.

Tomorrow, Mr Ball will conduct a site visit and on Friday developer contributions will be discussed before closing submissions are made.

AN expert hired by affluent businessman Stephen Bunting had to watch in silence as a planning inspector opened an appeal into a visitor centre in the heart of the Dedham Vale.

Bunting and Sons wants to build the £25million visitor centre in a bid to attract more than 300,000 visitors a year.

Permission was refused by Colchester Council in February and their appeal began yesterday.

Last week, just days before the hearing, the family announced it would not be represented by a lawyer at the inquiry and would take no active part in it.

Yesterday, the family's plan-

ning agent, Tony Collins, clashed with planning inspector Colin Ball when he challenged Susan Dodwell, a landscape expert speaking in 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.

The family, who run their business from Welshwood Park, in Great Horkelesley, said they took the decision not to be represented because funding for this phase of their plans had been "exhausted".

They have emphasised extra money will be released to build the centre if the appeal is allowed.

The family is relying on written submissions used in the original planning application, which was recommended for approval by Colchester Council planning officers.

## 'An enormous change'

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 outstanding 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.

## Proposal 'is 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 accessible by these modes."