

**PLANNING COMMITTEE
26 MAY 2011**

Present :- Councillor Ray Gamble* (Chairman)
Councillors Christopher Arnold*, Peter Chillingworth*,
Stephen Ford*, Peter Higgins*, Theresa Higgins*,
Jackie Maclean*, Jon Manning* and Philip Oxford

Substitute Members :- Councillor Richard Martin for Councillor John Elliott*
Councillor Pauline Hazell for Councillor Sonia Lewis*
Councillor Bill Frame for Councillor Laura Sykes*

Also in Attendance :- Councillor Lyn Barton
Councillor Mary Blandon
Councillor Mike Hardy
Councillor Marcus Harrington
Councillor Will Quince
Councillor Nick Barlow

(* Committee members who attended the formal site visit.)

Councillor Ray Gamble (in respect of having met Kate Bunting at Rotary Club meetings) declared a personal interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(3)

Councillor Bill Frame (in respect of having met one of the applicant's family at a Rotary Club meeting) declared a personal interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(3)

Councillor Peter Chillingworth (in respect of his membership of CPRESsex which has made representations, but in which he took no part in the decision to do so) declared a personal interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(3)

Councillor Christopher Arnold (in respect of his membership of Great Horkesley Parish Council and the likelihood that he may know a number of people who were making representations, both in favour of and in opposition to the application) declared a personal interest in the following item pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 7(3)

11. 090231 Land and other property north of London Road and west of the A134 including The Chantry, The Chantry Lodge, Hillside and Nursery Site

The Committee considered an application for a change of use and redevelopment of land to form a heritage and conservation centre comprising a 40.89 hectare country park, art gallery and craft studios (The Chantry) public gardens, main building, Suffolk Punch breeding centre, farm barn, underground nature watch building (The Warren), rustic adventure playground and main and overflow car parks. The Committee had

before it a report in which all information was set out, see also Amendment Sheet.

The Committee made a site visit in order to assess the impact of the proposal upon the locality and the suitability of the proposal for the site.

Alistair Day, Principal Planning Officer, attended to assist the Committee in its deliberations. He referred to the location of the site, the main designated areas and the main vehicular accesses into the site. He also referred to the extent of the site falling within the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), trees forming boundaries and groups, the public footpaths crossing the site and nearby listed buildings and the Conservation Areas. He described the proposed development including the Main Building, its dimensions and the uses of each of the zones within this building and the zones within the site but outside the Main Building, and the main and overflow car parks within the site as described in the report. He referred to the proposed highway improvement works including the upgrading of the road junctions, the footways and crossing points, and the proposed enhancements to the footpaths within the site which would be bounded by stock proof fencing and hedging to form a 6 metre wide path. The visitor numbers estimated by the applicant would be 485,000 per year, similar to those for Colchester Zoo.

The Planning Officer explained that the application had been advertised as a departure from the Local Plan and members of the Committee were advised to take account of all development plan policies and other material considerations in their deliberations. Regional Policy C2 related to large scale tourism proposals and permitted such development in the countryside, subject to defined criteria. He advised members of the Committee to consider whether this proposal would qualify as a regional attraction in terms of whether the proposal reflected the criteria for such an attraction, particularly with regard to sustainability and design. He drew attention to the fact that a proposal which provided for economic benefits did not automatically override other Local Plan policies.

He referred to other matters the Committee should take into account when formulating their decision:- sustainability, economic and environmental issues and the significance of the proposal in terms of whether all the elements were suitable for this particular location or whether they should comply with the location requirement as described in PPS4: Planning for Sustainable Economic Growth. They were also advised to consider the following matters:- did the PPS4 elements constitute enabling development and/or were they ancillary to the leisure components; was the design was appropriate for this countryside location; was there any impact on the AONB; the weight to be afforded to job creation; the increase in tourism and the measure to safeguard the Suffolk Punch horse.

The following speakers addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Planning Committee Procedure Rule 8 in opposition to the application:-

Dr John Constable, representing the Dedham Vale Society. He was a great, great, great, grandson of John Constable, the painter, and he referred to the exceptional beauty of the Dedham Vale where he had been brought up. He had become aware of the project some 10 years ago and the applicant had shown him the proposal. He was,

however, unable to support it. He believed some elements were misconceived and would not have wide support from the art world. He believed it was a matter of balancing the proposal against the harm to the area and he was of the view that it contravened planning policies and that the layman would see a retail development which he believed was wrong for this location for reasons such as environmental damage. He asked the Committee to accept the recommendation and refuse the application.

Will Pavry, Chairman of the Stour Valley Action Group. He referred to a document sent to all councillors. His main concern was that the proposal would cause irreparable damage to the Dedham Vale AONB and he considered it should be assessed as a retail outlet rather than a heritage centre. He believed the proposal would not be commercially viable unless the predicted visitor numbers were achieved, but he believed the numbers would be nearer to 275,000, and the 155 additional jobs would not be created. He noted that the Spatial Policy team considered the employment effect was marginal because the council was on track to achieve and surpass its target without this development. He believed the petition in support of the proposal should be disallowed as it employed reply paid cards and he urged the Committee to refuse the application.

Bill Watson, Chairman of Little Horkesley Parish Council. Villagers had thought the site would be protected and questioned how such a large retail operation could be allowed there. He wondered what would prevent other sites along the A134 from becoming tourist sites if this application was granted approval. The applicants claimed they were regenerating a derelict site and that the buildings were sustainable, but they did not mention the emissions from the equivalent of 290,000 cars journeys every year visiting the site in the context of the ambition to halve carbon gases by 2025. He speculated they could sell the enterprise to another company, such as Tesco who own Dobies garden centres. Despite the applicant's reassurances, he believed the proposal would be predominantly retail sales which would not help the town centre. All of the elements had been registered as candidates for the Horkesley Park trade mark.

John Alexander, on behalf of the Nayland with Wissington Conservation Society. The Society had 250 members and was founded in 1974 in order to save a national collection of medieval timber framed buildings in Nayland and to protect the surrounding countryside from development. He believed this was the greatest danger in living memory and he endorsed the recommendation. There had been 200 letters of objection from Nayland and Wissington residents and only seven in support. He believed the application was contrary to local, national and regional guidelines. Many local and national organisations had objected because of the serious environmental and traffic impacts on Nayland. The Nayland altarpiece in the church may also become part of the tourist trail. If approved, the lives of thousands of people would be ruined. He asked the Committee to refuse the application.

Simon Cairns, representing the Suffolk Preservation Society. The Society was not against development and they were no strangers to tourist attractions. This scheme however, would be wholly damaging for this landscape of national importance around the site. The proposal was unjustified in the open countryside and significantly harmful to listed buildings and the AONB. 75% of the 117 acre site was within the AONB and at

odds with the strategies in that document. The Society believed this was an unsustainable location and would promote the use of the private car contrary to national guidance and policy. The large main building was within 150 metres of the listed church and Josselyns. A study found the proposed attraction was not of regional importance and did not satisfy exceptional status of a major development in the countryside. The proposal would harm heritage assets that it purports to support.

Rosemary Knox, representing Nayland and Wissington Parish Council. Hector Bunting sits on the parish council but had not been present when they were discussing this application. The parish council had tried to balance the benefits against the disbenefits. They acknowledged the opportunity for employment, the celebration of Constable country and the enjoyment of the Bunting site. She referred to the wonderful houses in Nayland which would become the gateway to the county from Horkesley Park. However, if there were 480,000 visitors they would overwhelm the narrow streets of Nayland and yet Essex County Council had confirmed there would be no effect on the roads. Local buses did not go into Nayland because of the traffic. Conversely, if the visitor numbers were not achieved the scheme may fail and only the retail development would remain, which would destroy the village shops. They asked the Committee to refuse the application.

Nigel Chapman, on behalf of the Stour Valley Project. The Project believed that evolution not revolution was the most appropriate approach in the AONB; as an organisation the Project were not opposed to business. The countryside did accept change and evolved. However, the harm that revolutionary change may do was hard to undo, and building work outside the AONB was a revolution the Project could not accept. The Project were concerned that the proposal was contrary to all it stood for. He referred to the sheer scale of the proposal which would be inflicted on the whole valley in respect of noise and light pollution, the visual intrusion and negative impact on the AONB. Horkesley Park would be inaccessible in a sustainable way and 25% of visitors would travel on to other locations.

Lesley Watson, local resident, asserted that the economic case for a new tourist development did not depend solely on the additional numbers of visitors to the area. She questioned the assumption that no-one would have driven for more than 30 minutes to visit Horkesley Park and also the basis for the stated proportion of visitors who might only visit the borough to go to Horkesley Park. If that proportion was 50% and not 75% as predicted, the number of extra jobs created by local business would reduce from 180 to 106. Neither she nor the developers knew the correct figure but in any case any estimate was an assumption not based on fact. If the Committee were minded to grant consent on the basis of the economic case they would need to be comfortable with these assumptions.

Roger Drury, speaking as a local resident, declared his interest as a Little Horkesley parish councillor. Sustainability was a key government policy and he was concerned that this proposal was unsustainable, particularly in terms of the target to reduce greenhouse gases by 50% by 2025. The application was not just about the sustainability of the buildings within Horkesley Park, but also the use of the car which should also be taken into account when considering claims of sustainability. The latest estimate was that 400,000 people would arrive by car and he doubted that a family of

four would travel to Colchester by car and then take a bus to Horkesley Park. He was also concerned that the application had not addressed the noise generated by visitors which would roll down the hill causing disturbance to people and wildlife; a single car door closing could be heard right across the valley. He believed the proposal was totally inappropriate and unsustainable and hoped the Committee would reject the proposal.

Georgina Harding, local resident: She and twenty other local farmers object to Horkesley Park, not just because of the traffic obstructing their farming activities, but they had witnessed the greenhouses being taken out of production and replaced by a scheme to generate huge profits out of the countryside. She had heard a claim that the countryside was dead because there were no shops, but there were a number of thriving local farms some selling their own produce, and some would be threatened by the traffic. Small communities wished to grow sustainably proportionate to their size; economy was a crucial argument. It was vital that the three criteria of sustainability be applied:- environmental, economic and social. Few local people stood to benefit from this scheme. Growth had to mean growth for local people not just money in someone's pocket.

David Green, on behalf of the Council for the Protection of Rural Essex. He was concerned about the scheme being unsustainable and its harm to the tranquillity of the Stour Valley area. The wonderful views across the valley can be enjoyed from quiet country lanes. The AONB designation recognises the unspoilt rural character of this landscape, free from the intrusion of modern development and from the pressure of tourism. Notwithstanding the benefits in terms of jobs and tourism, the heritage centre was not compatible with council policies to safeguard landscape and quality enjoyment. A major tourist destination would have a negative impact. The enjoyment of footpaths would be marred. The CPRE supports development in the countryside which supports the rural community with enjoyment for all; this application fails on all counts.

Charles Aldous, QC, Chairman of the Colne-Stour Countryside Association. He referred to Policy DP21 conferred on the AONB which meant it should receive the highest protection and demands that any development which has an adverse impact on the AONB will not be permitted. This development will have an adverse impact. He also referred to Policy DP22 which states that development in an area near an AONB will only be permitted if it maintains a positive contribution and supports objection because of the AONB. The Council's core policies stress the need to protect the countryside - large scale developments should never be allowed in open countryside other than in exceptional circumstances. This scheme was a miscellaneous tourist organisation tacked onto an out of town retail scheme; the development can be achieved on sites elsewhere and does not have to be in the AONB. He believed the development of this site has been put forward because the applicants want to commercialise the land which they happen to own.

Fred Grosch, local resident. He had been involved with Suffolk Punch horses both on a farm and involved with showing. He was always pleased to see new people who wanted to maintain the old breed. However, it did injustice to those past and present involved with cart horses at their own expense to hear Buntings and Sons say that they

are saviours of the Suffolk Punch and try to get people to sign a petition to that effect; it cannot be justified. 75% of Suffolk Punches are born in East Anglia but of those only two were produced from the Horkesley Park stud.

The following speakers addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Planning Committee Procedure Rule 8 in support of the application.

Stephen Bunting, Senior partner of Bunting and Sons. He referred to Bunting and Son being Colchester's oldest business, operated by the same family since 1820 and having been in the borough for 200 years. The partners were the sixth generation and the children would be the seventh generation. They employed a large number of local people and have a variety of apprenticeships. This scheme had evolved over the last 10 years since tomato production had become unprofitable and ceased. He referred to the new building being only 2% of what was being demolished. He explained that they had engaged with the public by holding exhibitions and consultations to seek their views on the scheme which had been redefined. An environmental impact assessment had been undertaken by independent consultants and had confirmed that the proposal would be beneficial to visitors with no adverse effects. Everything submitted can be fully substantiated whereas objectors to the scheme can state whatever they like without a requirement for it to be substantiated.

Sula Rayska, Rayska Heritage, an independent heritage consultant. Consultants had undertaken impartial research and reports including an interpretation plan and a development plan. This plan looked at these proposals by comparing it with other local sites. Horkesley Park would provide information to visitors with an understanding of the past and present rural area with exhibitions centring on food production. The centre would have green approval and would have major benefits. Currently there was nowhere visitors could see an interesting interpretation of the area, nor could they stop and look at the views. They want more people to have access to and enjoy their heritage. This fulfils environmental matters and acts as a bridge between town and country. Horkesley Park approach is long term.

Andy Sykes, Sykes Leisure Projects. A need for such an attraction had been determined as Colchester was under performing and visitor expectations were increasing. Colchester's strengths were local food and drink, attractive countryside and rural heritage. He referred to need for the attraction in terms of the East of England Plan acknowledged a flagship approach would stimulate investment. He also referred to the visitor attraction product in terms of the centre being a resource which would attract visitors through activities, interpretation, cooking, retail events and conferences. The need to generate alternative income streams had led to the concept of a new attraction with a need to appeal to a broader audience. Horkesley Park provided a comprehensive approach designed to appeal to different markets and ages. It was important to note all the elements on offer which provided experience with market appeal and ensured all year round operation. Attendance potential had been assessed according to the standard industry methodology and a viability study had determined that the projected visitor numbers were realistic.

Robert Leng on behalf of the Essex Chambers of Commerce. The Chamber supported the application because it created employment and tourism and revived the

local economy. He referred to this scheme providing additional jobs in a contracting job market and an expanding population. There was a need to look at other growth areas, particularly leisure and tourism. The Council had already recognised the importance of tourism which brought £7.2 billion to Essex and this was an opportunity to enhance Colchester as a tourist destination. He believed that in addition to the 270 direct jobs many more would be created in the surrounding villages. The Essex Chambers of Commerce were happy that the centre would have sales and hospitality areas as did Colchester Zoo and Colchester Castle. He urged the Committee to grant permission.

Luke Regan, Transport Planner. He had worked with the three relevant highway authorities to overcome the major issues of traffic generation and traffic impacts. Significant amounts of assessment work, including the impact on environmentally sensitive lanes in and around the AONB, had been undertaken to determine that the proposals were entirely acceptable. Any objection on the grounds of traffic impact were deemed to have no basis. Environmental assessments including air quality, noise impact and assessment of areas associated with traffic concluded that there was no significant impact from the proposals. In order to ensure the proposals were sustainable the applicants had delivered a substantial package including improvements to public transport, cycle and pedestrian facilities for existing and surrounding communities. The package of transport measures had enabled them to conclude that the destination was accessible by cycle, car or on foot.

Neil Mattinson, LDA Design. He considered it reassuring that the Council's Landscape Officer had accepted the landscape impact would be limited in the long term. Once the new scheme had developed it would have a beneficial effect with the majority of the site remaining undeveloped. The over-arching principle was to develop a scheme based on conservation principles. The proposal was a mosaic of woodlands, copses and hedgerows to strengthen and harmonise with the Stour Valley slopes. Turning arable farmland into wildlife meadows and ponds would enhance and avoid impacts on the AONB. Discussions with landscape officers had resulted in the poplar trees being pollarded and, after additional tree planting had achieved height, the poplars would be removed. Updated ecological surveys had just been completed including those for protected species and he asked that a decision be delayed to allow Natural England to respond.

Emma Owen, Director of Oakleigh Event Management. She spoke about her work with Horkesley Park over the last four years. She referred to the Suffolk Punch horses having been seen by many thousands of people but that they were in serious danger of dying out in the future if nothing is done. There were 300,000 at the start of First World War and now there were only 490 worldwide; the Bunting family have sixteen horses and two mares in foal. They were high on the endangered species category along with the panda. This scheme would bring wider knowledge of the countryside and provide activities for children. They would be able to see horses working in context. In terms of conservation and protection the team was vital but in terms of employment from the local community the organisation has an apprenticeship scheme in place; the team know their stuff and this is an extension of what the team do to inspire education.

John Spooner, local resident. He believed that in the last seven years the Buntings had

done more for the area than anybody else. He referred to the disappearance of most of the village facilities and believed the Buntings should be praised and not criticised. He was of the opinion that a heritage farm was a dream come true. It was good to see fields with rare breed cattle, sheep and the Suffolk Punches working. On behalf of one of the oldest families in England the Bunting family have worked hard.

Todd Powers, local resident. He had joined the job sector alliance. He had applied for many jobs before getting one with Bunting and Sons. The apprenticeship he has at Buntings was at level 2 which was unusual. One of their apprentices was now training with boars and animals. In regard to country fairs, he believed they gave visitors a chance to learn about the countryside. He has to speak to visitors and this has improved his communications skills. He believed that if this scheme went ahead there would be more apprenticeships.

Michael Roberts, Michael Roberts Associates. He had worked with the applicants for 30 years. The applicant's family was at the cutting edge, at the heart of which was an alternative to pesticides for which the company won the Queen's Award for Export Achievement. He believed that the countryside that everybody values only exists when it is a thriving economy in its own right and that all businesses must evolve to survive. The Buntings understood sustainability, land management and animal husbandry, demonstrating that they had made a positive contribution for the area; every member of the next generation was committed to the business. They were world class. They have one hundred years membership of the Chambers of Commerce Essex. He asked the members of the Committee to consider what a rejection says to those who have contributed so much for so long.

Joseph Greenhow, Edward Gittins & Associates. He acknowledged the significant level of local concern and believed that that local opinion should be considered alongside the conclusions of statutory consultees, studies and local policy context. He referred to the most controversial elements as traffic, visual harm and ecological considerations. Technical studies confirmed that no harm would arise from the scheme and Natural England confirmed that the proposal may not be detrimental to the AONB. He confirmed the government expectation to support the growth agenda and this was a material planning consideration, it also provided advice to local authorities that they consider the benefits of proposals including increased consumer choice, more vital communities and robust economies. This scheme would deliver a major boost to local sectors and secure delivery of 270 local jobs through supply chain opportunities.

Edward Gittins, Edward Gittins & Associates. He commented that the officer's report referred to a whole host of policies but they had not been ranked in order of importance which was essential. He referred to a number of planning policies including EC6 Planning for economic development in rural areas, DP10 Tourism, Leisure and Culture, which enables large scale projects to be considered, DP22 Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, SD1 Sustainable Development Locations and ENV1 Environment. He believed the scheme was in close conformity with the policies to which he referred and was in accord with the Development Plan. He referred to the planning officer's statement that these were important policies to prove the scheme was a departure from the Local Plan. He considered the report to be confusing in many

matters and that it was legally unsafe and did not follow the correct process. He also considered the members of the Committee should be provided with a sound explanation of the planning policy underlying the recommendation. He requested that members be given sufficient time to allow the approach to be reviewed in order to avoid an error of process.

Kate Bunting, Bunting and Sons. She referred to the countryside being shaped by agriculture and land use. However, economic factors and land use had changed. She stated that this was an opportunity to reinvigorate the Stour Valley in a way which made sense economically and environmentally. She believed the scheme would provide a unique flagship attraction which was economically viable and appropriate for existing and future demand and would increase overnight stays; it would provide an exciting range of facilities and an extensive programme linked into schools syllabuses to aid the understanding of food production and resources; it would provide a safe traffic free environment alongside sustainable facilities and be accessible for all; it would be an asset to the community giving open access and providing hundreds of jobs. There were benefits across the board with no significant adverse effects. It would be environmentally sustainable helping the borough to become a greener place.

The Spatial Policy Manager referred to the Spatial Policy Team's comments in the report which comprised a summary of seventeen pages demonstrating consideration of the development plan as a whole. She also referred to other policies which Mr Gittins had not mentioned, including Policy SS2 of the Regional Spatial Strategy which states that most strategically significant growth will be directed to the regions major urban areas where strategic networks connect, public transport is best and there is greatest potential to build on existing activities. She confirmed that the report was fair and balanced. The recent submissions by the applicant stated that the scheme was not a scheme promoted in the Local Development Framework because the application was not submitted until 2009. Whereas in fact the proposal had been evolving since 2001 and despite claims that it was a regional scale facility it had not been promoted through the Regional Spatial Strategy.

She referred to the ministerial statement on Planning for Growth. In this case the Council considered the proposal would compromise key sustainable development principles as set out in various national statements. In addition the Government had removed targets on previously developed land but this did not affect a commitment to maintaining the AONB and other environmental destinations.

She further reminded members of the Committee that the Council had a full set of locally adopted Local Development Framework documents which would guide development across the whole Borough. The Horkesley Park development did not comply with the Local Development Framework or national policy. The Council had acted positively by setting out ambitious plans for growth. The ministerial statement continued by referring to the need to have regard to all relevant considerations, ensuring that appropriate weight was given to the need to support economic recovery and that applications that secure sustainable growth were considered favourably (consistent with PPS4: Planning for Sustainable Economic Growth) and that reasons are given. The Spatial Policy Manager stated that the Council's ambitious plans for economic growth were coming to fruition and there was no need to use unallocated

land; she referred to new development at Stanway and the Knowledge Gateway at the University of Essex. In addition the new A12 junction had opened up another area of economic development land adjacent to Cuckoo Farm. The historic town centre and cultural and economic heart of the town were intended to be enhanced through regeneration. The isolated location of Horkesley Park would not support the Council's focussed approach to employment growth in sustainably located central areas. Furthermore to allow an additional proposal would detract from achieving the Council's adopted objectives. In respect of the assertion that retail capacity would help the Borough, she believed that regeneration in the town centre could be compromised by a transfer to an unsustainable location out of town. There was only so much spare retail capacity and this should be directed to allocated sites. The Secretary of State would take the principles of his statement into account when determining applications which come before him.

The Planning Service Manager advised the Committee to think about the merits of the proposal. It was true that Essex County Council and Suffolk County Council and the Highways Agency had not raised objections in this case. Their response to consultation was in regard to highway capacity and highway safety but the Council also has to consider sustainability. He questioned whether this was the right place for a car dominated operation. He acknowledged that bus services would be laid on and transport supplied, but members of the Committee would need to consider whether this was a sustainable location in the terms in which they understood; at the edge of the AONB and with the great regard given to the impact on the AONB. The Landscape Officer was satisfied that in time the development would blend in, but the poplar trees were to be pollarded and this did not form part of the landscape assessment; members of the Committee would need to consider the implications of the visual impact of the development in the short to medium term.

The Committee were advised to look at the scheme and decide whether they considered the retail elements constituted enabling development, and whether the scheme was justified in terms of the applicants aim to save the Suffolk Punch as a breed. He referred to the current sixteen horses which the breeding facility would boost to twenty-one horses. He referred to the key element of tranquillity and what were the key components that made the AONB special; they could be the views and that the area was almost unpopulated. He asked the Committee to consider whether the scheme was acceptable in view of the impact of large numbers of visitors to the site. The Committee should also take into consideration the jobs that the applicant was offering to produce, the built form of the development and the effect of the proposed screening. The existing glasshouses were not attractive but they were acceptable in the countryside.

The Chairman of the Committee referred to a letter from the applicant dated 23 May 2011 asking that the application be deferred on the grounds that the report contained inaccuracies which must be corrected. He stated that the question of invertebrates had been covered in the statement that there was no issue or impact that could not be mitigated. The Planning Service Manager stated that the officer's report covers the issue of protected species and, if additional information was submitted that satisfied the council and Natural England. The council would not seek to defend that reason at an appeal. In terms of inaccuracies the council was satisfied that the process had

been robust. Members of the Committee had received an enormous amount of information from both sides including a full report.

Members of the Committee congratulated all the speakers for their very good presentations. They commented that they had received a great deal of information and considered the report to be very thorough. The application presented an extremely difficult balance.

Several members of the Committee considered that the scheme had potential benefits with a lot of boxes ticked. Mention was made of the potential for increasing employment and the development of the local/rural economy; the provision of apprenticeships and educational opportunities; increasing tourism; and benefits to ecology, conservation and biodiversity. Particular elements of the proposal mentioned were the Warren, the reserves centre and the Suffolk Punch breeding centre. One member referred to the initiative some years ago for farmers to diversify and find other uses for land and buildings but this did not appear to be mentioned in the report. He also made reference to the inward investment and at no cost to the public purse, the provision of new jobs and additional spending gained from visitors to Colchester.

However, members highlighted a number of concerns in respect of the impact on the AONB, the impact of traffic, economic factors, and the size of the main building.

Members were very concerned about the impact on the AONB by the predicted 485,000 visitors a year. The AONB was considered to be very special and particular mention was made of the views and the tranquillity of the area. They referred to the Committee site visit when they walked around much of the site and appreciated the views. They had also driven around the area and had seen the sloping fields from Little Horkesley which, if the proposal went ahead, would have many thousands of people walking about and generating noise. The Committee were aware that the AONB was an outstanding site, and that the Government was committed to protecting and enhancing historic, rural and urban areas. They were concerned that a national and international designation such as this should receive the highest level of protection. Not only was it necessary to demonstrate that there was a need for such a scheme, it was also necessary to demonstrate beyond doubt that the scheme would not harm the AONB. The Committee believed there would be damage to the tranquillity of the AONB and they were also concerned about the damage that would be done to the setting of the of the Grade 1 listed All Saints Church immediately adjacent to the site and which had been there for over 700 years.

The Committee did not believe this was a sustainable development next to an AONB in the countryside because the majority of people would arrive by car. They had noted that traffic issues appeared to be the concern expressed more than any other issue. Whilst there was a view that there were no problems with the ability of the A134 to carry traffic safely, there were concerns about the surrounding lanes which were very small and formed part of the character of the AONB. The Committee had concerns that a significant proportion of the 485,000 visitors would travel to other honey pots or they may want to explore the area around the country park using the lanes and this would constitute a traffic amenity problem for local residents. There were also related concerns about sustainability in terms of the environment if most of the journeys to the

site were undertaken by car.

Members of the Committee did not believe that the case for economic benefits had been made. They were disappointed that a proposal such as this had not been accompanied by a business plan which was considered to be essential. There were also concerns about what might happen in the future if this proposal ceased to be viable, for example if the numbers of tourists did not reach the level predicted; the concern was that other activities or uses might follow. It was noted that the proposal had only been made sustainable by a very burdensome set of requirements from the Highway Authority whereas at another location it could be more sustainable. They referred to comments from the Spatial Policy Manager regarding this proposal detracting from identified regeneration sites.

The size of the main building was an issue of great concern for some members. They believed it would appear as a massive block in the open countryside and although landscape planting was planned, it would be seen from the south because of its height. In respect of the landscaping measures, it was mentioned that some of them would take some years before they would be effective. Other members had issues with the retail elements within the main building and with the 787 covers in the cafes and restaurants in various locations throughout the site.

Members had taken account of the Regional Spatial Strategy which they were required to do. It was believed that the scheme was not of regional significance and was out of proportion within the locality. They recognised that there were some benefits but these did not outweigh the considerable harm that would be the outcome; it would not protect and enhance the countryside. The Council had gone through the process of the Local Development Framework and it was clear from the report that much of this proposal did not comply with the policies. It was considered that it was a departure from the Development Plan. There had been serious objections from statutory bodies and there was a view that the potential benefits did not outweigh the possible damage. Members believed the scale and nature of the application was such that it would permanently change the character of the countryside and having seen the site and heard everything during the week it was considered it would be better if it did not go ahead.

One member remarked that he generally found the report to be very negative and too big and bulky. He believed the policies were a little out of date and needed reviewing. He considered it had been split up into very small parts and to his mind the planning officer had started with a view that it was going to be turned down, he considered it was not a balanced report.

The Planning Service Manager responded to these latter comments. He assured members that over the last two years the planning service had sought to find all benefits and disadvantages, giving the applicant the opportunity to provide further information and clarify issues, and that the report had not been written with the conclusion already in mind. It was a major scheme and can offer much to the borough. The planning service had spent time to ensure that everything was covered and that nothing had escaped their attention.

The Spatial Policy Manager clarified that the local policies, in particular that the

Development Policies Development Plan Document and Site Allocations Development Plan Document had only recently been adopted following the examination in 2010. At that time the Inspector had found the documents appropriate to the circumstances that exist in Colchester. Policy DP8 looked at agricultural diversification and states that development would be supported if it formed part of an otherwise comprehensive scheme, existing buildings were re-used where possible and development was secondary to the main agricultural use of the farm. In this case the development was not a secondary use of the farm and therefore would not comply with the meaning of diversification. Colchester's policies reflected national policy in PPS4 (Sustainable Economic Growth), Policy EC6 sets out the criteria for consideration of proposals, and there are positives and negatives within the policy itself. The first paragraph stated that the countryside should be protected for its intrinsic character and beauty, diversity of landscape etc. and Local Planning Authorities should ensure it may be enjoyed by all. She explained that the process of reviewing policies would start in 2012, and that the Local Development Scheme sets out expected review timescales but did not state that documents would be reviewed every three years.

The Chairman stated that he had chaired a number of meetings with hundreds of people in the hall and he had never known such a courteous audience. He thanked everyone present for being such a considerate audience. He reiterated the proposal for refusal as set out in the report which had been seconded.

RESOLVED (ELEVEN voted FOR, ONE voted AGAINST) that the application be refused for the reasons set out in the report.