

Rare newt colony is found near heritage centre site

Calls made for new environment study to assess risk to creatures

Wendy Brading

A COLONY of a protected species of newt could come under threat if a controversial development goes ahead, it has been claimed.

Battle lines are now being drawn up between the two sides for and against plans for a new heritage and conservation centre at Horkesley Park.

Bunting and Sons, which is behind the £25million development, claims the centre would open up parts of the Dedham Vale area of outstanding natural beauty to the public.

The 117 acre park would feature a country park, art gallery, show gardens and specialist nurseries.

But opponents of the scheme said the centre would destroy the tranquility of the area and generate unwelcome traffic on narrow lanes.

Bunting and Sons has predicted the centre will attract 485,000 visitors a year.

Now painter Peter Gaskin, who lives next to the site, fears for the future of a protected species of great crested newt which, he says, migrate between his pond and the ponds at Horkesley Park.

Mr Gaskin, of London Road, first raised concerns about the newts with Natural England two years ago.

Earlier this year, he found a dead great crested newt on the road which runs between the ponds, and wrote again to Natural England.



Evidence: Peter Gaskin with the newt, seen, inset, in close-up. Picture: Steve Brading C043609-02/04

He said: "The newts are known to migrate up to 500m. They are in my pond, which is within 100m of the closest Horkesley Park pond.

"Natural England has requested a further survey and are saying, if one is not done before a decision is made, there would have to be conditions attached if permission is granted.

"It says mitigating measures should be taken before any work starts on the site. That seems to be the wrong way round for people purporting to be conservationists."

Mr Gaskin added: "I am an artist, a painter, I have the utmost reverence for the unique unparalleled beauty of the visual heritage our AONB affords us.

"What this applicant proposes will be a visual abomination, with even the public footpaths turned into six metre walkways, hedged sufficiently to restrain the might of the Suffolk Punch horse.

"How can Natural England even begin to envisage a package of mitigation measures could be drawn up that would adequately compen-

sate for the visual and spiritual loss of our precious, and increasingly rare, tranquil countryside?"

"It is incumbent on Natural England to use every ounce of their legislative influence to oppose this development. To do otherwise would be a dereliction of trust."

An ecology assessment report, carried out in 2009, said: "No evidence of great crested newts was recorded within the ponds and there are considered to be no suitable breeding habitats close to the site, or ecologically

connected with the site. Therefore, great crested newts are not considered to be an issue."

However, Stephen Bunting of Bunting and Sons said another survey would be carried out if consent is granted.

And he said he wanted to develop habitats which encouraged wildlife - including the great crested newt.

He said: "If we find them, it would be wonderful. We are creating habitats for all sorts of wildlife.

"If we were not going ahead with Horkesley Park, the whole lot would be ploughed up and there would be no parkland or grassland.

"The land is our factory floor but the reason it is nice and people want to enjoy it, is because of what we do."

Colchester councillors are due to discuss the application on May 26.

30,000 send comments to council on heritage park plans

NEARLY 30,000 representations have been made to Colchester Council about the proposals for Horkesley Park.

However, more than 22,800 were made in advance of the application by people who support a Suffolk Punch breeding centre.

Among the groups condemning the project are the Dedham Vale AONB and Stour Valley Joint Advisory Committee, Dedham Vale Society and CPRessex, along with John Constable, the great-great-grandson of the world-famous artist.

Letters of objection have also been sent to Colchester Council from Little Horkesley, Great Horkesley, Stoke-by-Nayland, Boxted, Langham, Nayland with Wissington, Leavenheath, Alphamstone and Lamarsh and Eight Ash Green parish councils.

But the development has also received support from groups including the Essex Chambers of Commerce and Suffolk Horse Society. Beverley Hurley, chair of East of England Tourism, has also spoken out in support of the

plans, which this week won the renewed backing of Colchester MP Bob Russell.

In a letter to Colchester Council, Mr Russell said: "Although the site is not in my Colchester parliamentary constituency, it is in the borough of Colchester and thus it has a significance for my constituency (and my constituents) as a potential major tourist attraction which will boost the wider economy of the Colchester area, including job creation.

"Although I do not think it will grow to the size of the Colchester

Zoo, I still believe the proposed Horkesley Park heritage and conservation centre will be a boost for Colchester.

"Claims about inappropriate use of a rural site and of traffic problems, have not proved to be negative in the vicinity of Colchester Zoo.

"So, with the Horkesley project being smaller than the zoo, and with the adjoining A134 being a higher road classification than the B road serving the zoo, I cannot accept that the objections made on these two grounds are valid."