
Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 31 January 2017

by H Porter BA(Hons) PGDip IHBC

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government

Decision date: 27 February 2017

Appeal Ref: APP/H3320/W/16/3164053

Higher Thornes Farm, Lower Weacombe, Taunton, Somerset TA4 4ED

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 against a refusal to grant planning permission.
 - The appeal is made by Mr Kenneth Bosley against the decision of West Somerset Council.
 - The application Ref 3/28/16/005, dated 1 August 2016, was refused by notice dated 30 September 2016.
 - The development proposed is conversion of existing stable building to a holiday unit.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Application for costs

2. An application for costs was made by Mr Kenneth Bosley against West Somerset Council. This application is the subject of a separate Decision.

Main Issue

3. The main issue is the effect of the proposed development on the character and appearance of the countryside, with special regard to the Quantock Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Reasons

4. Situated well outside any nearby settlement, the appeal site is within the category of open countryside and close to the Quantock Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (the AONB), which is afforded the highest status of protection in relation to its landscape and scenic beauty. The site is nestled within a wider rural landscape of rolling hills and within a cluster of domestic farmhouses, ancillary outbuilding and stables associated with the use of the land for the grazing and keeping of horses. The appeal concerns an L-shaped stable block, which occupies a small portion of the wider landholding associated Higher Thornes Farm. Separated from the main two-storey detached dwelling by an area of hard-standing, the stable block appears to be visually and functionally ancillary to it. Visually unremarkable and utilitarian, the existing structure, with its small yard in front of it is clearly associated with its former use for the purpose of sheltering horses.
 5. The proposal would convert the existing stable block into a two-bedroom holiday unit with an attached covered area to replace the existing fruit cage on
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the rear elevation. Although the overall form of the existing structure would remain, the proposed adaptations for residential use, such as extending the floor area to the eaves line, and the door and window openings, would fundamentally alter the character and appearance of the structure. As a result, the structure would no longer be read as being ancillary to the host dwelling but rather as a stand-alone dwelling with an uncharacteristically suburban appearance.

6. While the small green space to the side of the existing stable block may currently form part of the domestic curtilage of the main farmhouse, it has an informal character and incidental appearance. The proposed covered area and access door suggest that this area would become part of the outdoor amenity space for the proposed holiday unit. As such, this area, the front yard and the associated parking area would all become increasingly domestic in character, with the likely inclusion of additional domestic paraphernalia such as a hot tub, washing line, outdoor seating and plant plots.
7. Overall, in my judgement, the appeal scheme would introduce a domestic formality and level of activity at odds with the setting and adjacent countryside usage, including stabling and grazing. Consequently, even if the proposed holiday unit would not be particularly prominent in the wider context, the area would be increasingly domesticized, to the detriment of its rural character and appearance.
8. For these reasons, I conclude that the proposed development would result in material harm to the character and appearance of the countryside. The development is therefore contrary to Saved Policy H/6 and BD/3 of the West Somerset District Local Plan, 2006 as well Policies SC1 and OC1 of the West Somerset Plan 2032, insofar as they require alterations are in character and appropriate to the building to which they relate; and which only permits holiday accommodation where it would not adversely affect the character of the surrounding countryside.
9. I have considered the proposed use of the development for a holiday cottage. Although, in planning terms, a dwelling house is defined by its ability to afford those who use it the facilities required for day-to-day private domestic existence, it would not lose that characteristic even if occupation for the purposes of holiday letting is restricted by condition¹. Paragraph 55 Framework therefore applies, which seeks to avoid new isolated homes in the countryside unless there are special circumstances. Overall, the proposed design would fall well short of the exceptional quality or enhancement to the immediate setting where redundant buildings are reused sought by paragraph 55; therefore none of the special circumstances under which new isolated homes in the countryside area permitted would be fulfilled.
10. Even if the proposal should be treated more as a rural business that would support tourism and thus a prosperous rural economy, paragraph 28 of the Framework establishes that such businesses should respect the character of the countryside and be in appropriate locations where identified needs are not met. There is no substantive evidence to suggest that the appeal site is appropriately located, other than being within reach of a highway; or that a holiday letting business in this location would be viable. In light of this, I find that there is insubstantial evidence to establish whether the proposed holiday

¹ *Gravesham BC v SSE and O'Brien*, [1983] JPL 307

unit would enhance or maintain the vitality of the rural community. The proposal would therefore also run counter to paragraph 28 of the Framework.

11. While there would be some economic benefit during the construction phase, and possible local employment, this of moderate weight. Any tangible benefit in relation to supporting a prosperous rural economy, and the associated benefit to local services that would arise from just one holiday unit would be relatively small. The lack of objection in relation to highway safety or living conditions is a neutral factor in the overall planning balance. I therefore do not consider that the harm to the character and appearance of the countryside would be sufficiently outweighed by the benefits.

Other matters

12. There are conflicting statements from the Council regarding whether or not the appeal site is situated within the AONB. If it is outside, however, it not disputed that the site is very close to it. Given the scale and form of the proposed development, and the level of screening from the surrounding buildings and fields, I consider that the landscape and scenic beauty of the AONB would be conserved. A lack of harm in this regard, however, does not alter my overall conclusion.
13. I note the appeal decision APP/H3320/W/15/3006586 referred to by the appellant. As already stated, the scale and nature of the development currently under consideration are materially different to those before the previous Inspector. In any event, I have determined the appeal on its own merits. I note the appellant's comments about the manner in which the Council determined the application. However, my role in this matter is confined to a consideration of the appeal proposal on its individual planning merits.

Conclusion

14. For the reasons given above, I conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

H Porter

INSPECTOR