
Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 21 March 2017

by Michael J Hetherington BSc(Hons) MA MRTPI MCIEEM

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

Decision date: 23 March 2017

Appeal Ref: APP/Y3615/W/16/3162431

Rad Farm, Rad Lane, Abinger Hammer, RH5 6RA

- 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 J Bishopp against the decision of Guildford Borough Council.
 - The application ref. 16/P/01213, dated 8 June 2016, was refused by notice dated 2 September 2016.
 - The development proposed is: demolition of a redundant agricultural building and erection of a building for use as a holiday let.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Main Issues

2. The Council confirms that the scheme would conserve and protect the special landscape character of the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and Area of Great Landscape Value (AGLV) in which the appeal site is located. I have no reason to take a different view.
3. The appeal proposes the construction of a new building in the Metropolitan Green Belt. It is common ground that the proposal would not satisfy any of the exceptions set out in policy RE2 of the Guildford Borough Local Plan 2003 (LP) or paragraphs 89 and 90 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework). As such, the scheme would represent inappropriate development in the Green Belt. Accordingly, the main issues in this appeal are:
 - (a) the effect of the proposal on the openness of the Green Belt; and
 - (b) whether the harm by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm, is clearly outweighed by other considerations, so as to amount to the very special circumstances required to justify the development.

Reasons

4. The appeal site lies within a group of farm buildings occupying a countryside setting south of the village of Abinger Hammer. The site is in two parts. The first is occupied by a low barn that adjoins a field containing horses at the time of my visit. It is proposed to demolish this building and erect a holiday let unit. The second part of the site comprises a parking area in front of Rad Farm. It is proposed that two parking spaces for the unit would be provided in this area.
 5. The Council's concern relates to the intended replacement of the agricultural building by the proposed holiday unit. It alleges that the new building would
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have a greater material impact on the openness of the Green Belt than the existing barn. The appellant states that the volume of the proposed holiday let (some 236 cubic metres) would be 14% less than that of the existing agricultural building (some 275 cubic metres). I have no reason to doubt these figures. However, the new building would be higher than the existing structure and would have projecting terraces with wooden railings to both the front and rear. These elements would add to the prominence of the structure, an effect that would be amplified by its contrasting appearance to the nearby agricultural buildings which are of a generally functional design.

6. Therefore, although a reduction in overall built volume would take place, the greater prominence of the new structure would reduce the resulting benefit to Green Belt openness. My conclusion on this issue is that the proposal would result in a small reduction in the openness of the Green Belt. This represents a positive factor in favour of the scheme, albeit a limited one.
7. Paragraph 87 of the Framework states that inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances. Paragraph 88 requires that substantial weight is given to any harm to the Green Belt. 'Very special circumstances' will not exist unless the potential harm to the Green Belt by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm, is clearly outweighed by other considerations.
8. The appellant sets out a number of factors that he considers amount to very special circumstances sufficient to clearly outweigh such harm. However, the absence of acknowledged harm in respect of the AONB and AGLV is a neutral matter that does not provide positive support for the development. While the scheme would replace a building of little architectural merit with a new build structure, the new building would still be seen in the context of an existing group of largely utilitarian farm buildings – notably the much larger adjoining barn that does not form part of the appeal site. To my mind, the proposed holiday let would not therefore result in a significant improvement to the overall appearance of the site and its surroundings. As described above, the intended reduction in built volume within the site would result in only a small reduction in the openness of the Green Belt.
9. The Council queries whether the proposed unit could be reasonably controlled as a holiday let. I share the appellant's view that, were matters otherwise acceptable, holiday occupation of the unit could be secured through the imposition of an appropriate planning condition. I therefore agree with the appellant that the appeal scheme would support tourism in the area. The site is well-related to walking and cycling routes and lies near to a number of bus routes, although there would be nothing to preclude the unit's occupation by car-borne visitors. Indeed, on-site parking is proposed. However, the modest scale of the scheme would make only a limited contribution to visitor numbers in the area.
10. The appellant also suggests that the scheme would amount to farm diversification that would boost the rural economy. In principle, proposals to diversify the range of economic activities on a farm are permitted by LP policy RE8. However, this sets out a number of specific criteria, including the requirement that the proposal is complementary to the agricultural operations on the farm and is operated as part of the farm holding. The supporting text suggests that such schemes should, where appropriate, be supported by a

Farm Plan. Detailed justification along these lines has not been submitted. Furthermore, LP policy RE8 states that proposals should re-use or adapt appropriate farm buildings which are available, adding that new buildings will only be considered exceptionally. To my mind, the case for the erection of a new building as part of a farm diversification scheme in line with LP policy RE8 has not been demonstrated.

11. The Council accepts that it cannot demonstrate a five year supply of land for housing. However, given that the appeal scheme is specifically intended to provide visitor accommodation, it would not assist in meeting the identified shortfall. In any event, national Planning Practice Guidance says that unmet housing need is unlikely to outweigh the harm to the Green Belt and other harm to constitute the 'very special circumstances' justifying inappropriate development on a site within the Green Belt¹. This matter does not weigh in favour of the proposal.
12. I draw these matters together as follows. I accept that some, but not all, of the factors that the appellant has cited provide support for the scheme. However, for the reasons set out above, I consider that none of these matters, either individually or cumulatively, are of sufficient significance to clearly outweigh the substantial weight that national policy gives to Green Belt harm. I therefore conclude that the other considerations in this case do not clearly outweigh the harm that I have identified. Consequently, the very special circumstances necessary to justify the development do not exist. The proposal would conflict with LP policy RE2, and with national policy in the Framework.
13. The appellant states that the LP fails to provide for holiday accommodation in the Green Belt, adding that its silence on this matter – along with the out-of-date nature of relevant policies for the supply of housing – means that the presumption in favour of sustainable development set out in the Framework should be applied. I do not agree. The LP's policy on development in the Green Belt is both clear and broadly consistent with national policy in the Framework. Furthermore, application of the relevant bullet point of paragraph 14 of the Framework (in which the references to silent plans and out-of-date policies are contained) is qualified by its provision that permission should be granted unless specific policies in the Framework indicate that development should be restricted. The footnote to that paragraph includes 'land designated as Green Belt' within a list of such policies. For the reasons set out above, I have concluded that the scheme would conflict with national policy in the Framework as well as with LP. It would not therefore amount to sustainable development in the terms of the Framework.
14. I have considered all the other matters raised, but none change my overall conclusion that, for the reasons set out above, the appeal should not succeed.

M J Hetherington

INSPECTOR

¹ Planning Practice Guidance ref. ID: 3-034-20141006.