



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 13 June 2017

by Alex Hutson MATP CMLI MArborA

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

Decision date: 28 June 2017

Appeal Ref: APP/X0360/W/17/3169533

Lambs Farm Business Park, Basingstoke Road, Spencers Wood, Reading RG7 1PQ

- 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 J P Winkworth Limited against the decision of Wokingham Borough Council.
 - The application Ref 162594, dated 8 September 2016, was refused by notice dated 12 December 2016.
 - The development proposed is Proposed erection of new business unit for Use Classes B1(b) and (c) (Light Industrial, Research and Development) and B8 (Storage and Distribution) use with ancillary office space as well as car and lorry parking with ancillary works adjoining existing Business Park.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Main issue

2. The main issue is the effect of the proposal on the character and appearance of the area.

Reasons

3. The appeal site comprises Lambs Farm Business Park (LFBP), an established and successful business centre located to the south-east of the settlement of Spencers Wood. It lies outside of any settlement boundary as defined in the Wokingham Borough Adopted Core Strategy Development Plan Document 2010 (Core Strategy) and it therefore lies within the countryside for planning policy purposes. The proposal seeks to erect a new business unit with associated car and lorry parking.
4. Policy CP11 of the Core Strategy allows development in the countryside where, amongst other things, it maintains the quality of the environment and does not lead to excessive encroachment or expansion away from the original buildings. In addition, Policies CP1 and CP3 of the Core Strategy; and Policies CC03 and TB21 of the Wokingham Borough Adopted Managing Development Delivery Local Plan 2014 (Local Plan) require, amongst other things, development to respect the character of the area, to maintain or enhance the quality of the environment and to achieve integration with the countryside.
5. The LFBP has no formally defined limits. However, the layout of the existing business units within it are well contained to the east of its access road which runs from Back Lane. This provides a strong contrast with the large, open areas

of paddock land which lie to the west of the access road, between it and Lamb's Lane. This contrast is noticeable in public views from the junction of the access road and Back Lane. It is also noticeable in views from along Lamb's Lane through gaps in vegetation along this road. The open nature of the paddock land, whilst subject to some urban influences, provides an attractive and spatial setting to the LFBP and contributes positively to the countryside character and appearance of the area.

6. The proposed new business unit with associated car and lorry parking would be sited on an area of paddock land to the west of the access road. I acknowledge that the proposed business unit would reflect the scale and appearance of other units within the LFBP and that these units have a high quality appearance. In addition, its siting would not result in the narrowing of the gap between LFBP and Swallowfield, given that this settlement lies some distance to the south-east.
7. However, the proposal would result in the considerable encroachment of built form and associated parking into an existing open area of countryside. This would erode the spatial and rural qualities of the area by a substantial degree. Moreover, it would appear at considerable odds with the well contained layout of the existing business units within the LFBP and would therefore fail to respect the prevailing pattern of development in the area. Consequently, the proposal would result in an incongruous form of development that would give rise to significant harm to the character and appearance of the area. This is notwithstanding that the area of paddock land is not subject to any formal landscape designations.
8. The submitted Landscape and Visual Assessment sets out a number of mitigation measures including new hedgerow planting along Lamb's Lane and a new linear woodland running in a north-south direction through the open paddock land. Whilst this additional planting might, over time, reduce views towards the proposed unit from along Lamb's Lane, it would do little to screen views from the junction of the access road and Back Lane. Moreover, it would not be sufficient, in my view, to mitigate the inherent harm that would arise to the character and appearance of the area by virtue of the introduction of a large building into an open area of the countryside in a manner at odds with the prevailing pattern of development in the area. In addition, the positioning of the linear woodland would bear little relationship to the existing field pattern and would therefore itself appear as a peculiar and contrived landscape feature at odds with the character and appearance of the area.
9. The proposal would therefore be contrary to the requirements of Policy CP1, CP3 and CP11 of the Core Strategy; and Policies CC03 and TB21 of the MDDL. These policies are consistent with the aims and objectives of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) which seek planning to take account of the different roles and character of different areas and to recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside.

Other matters

10. The Council also cites conflict with Policy CP15 of the Core Strategy. This policy permits development for business, industry and warehousing, including the expansion or intensification of existing employment uses, provided it is within a Core Employment Area (CEA). LFBP is not identified as a CEA within this policy. As such, the principle of the proposal would be contrary to this policy. However, the Framework promotes a strong rural economy and supports the growth and expansion of all types of business and enterprise in rural areas. As such, Policy

CP15 of the Core Strategy is rigid and prescriptive in its approach and is therefore not consistent with the aims and objectives of the Framework. Thus, having regard to Paragraph 215 of the Framework, I afford this policy limited weight. However, this does not alter my view on the main issue.

11. I have been provided with an appeal decision¹ in respect of the erection of a building at LFBP which was allowed by a previous Inspector. However, I note that the site in that case was already used for the parking of vehicles and was sited between existing buildings. In addition, that appeal was considered prior to the adoption of the Core Strategy and Local Plan and predates the introduction of the Framework and was therefore considered under a wholly different planning policy context. As such, the circumstances of that appeal are not helpfully comparable to those of the appeal at hand and do not justify a planning permission.
12. I acknowledge that the Inspector charged with leading the examination of the Core Strategy considered at the time that LFBP could be recognised as having scope for limited addition development. Having regard to the planning history of the appeal site, I note that a number of new buildings have been granted consent and subsequently erected since the adoption of the Core Strategy. On the basis that the appellant suggests that the siting of the proposal is required given the lack of any suitable space within the existing confines of the LFBP, combined with the harm I have identified as a result of the proposal, I consider that the proposal could not reasonably be defined as limited additional development.
13. I have had regard to the letter from the Managing Director of Sourcing-IT Limited. I do not doubt that the proposed business unit would meet the current requirements of this company and could facilitate its future growth. However, I am not persuaded, on the basis of the evidence before me, that it has been fully demonstrated that there are no other appropriate business units within the Borough, or elsewhere, that could adequately cater for the needs of this particular company.
14. The appellant puts forward that the proposal would occupy an accessible location and would make a positive contribution to the range of business units available in the area. Also, that it would provide some ecological enhancements. In addition, I recognise that the proposed business unit would be built to high energy efficiency standards and would benefit from good security. It would generate business rates for the Council and would provide a number of jobs associated with any business that occupied it, in addition to some jobs associated with its construction. It would therefore contribute to a prosperous rural economy. These benefits weigh in favour of the proposal. However, they would not be sufficient, in my view, to outweigh the harm that would arise to the character and appearance of the area.

Conclusion

15. For the reasons set out above and having regard to all other matters, including highway safety, privacy, outlook, noise and disturbance, light pollution and loss of agricultural land, I conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

Alex Hutson INSPECTOR

¹ Appeal Ref APP/X0360/A/06/2021950