
Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 16 October 2017

by Graham Chamberlain BA (Hons) MSc MRTPI

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

Decision date: 26th October 2017

Appeal Ref: APP/W0530/W/17/3179152

Land north of St. Neots Road, Hardwick, Cambridgeshire CB23 7QL

Easting 535972 Northing 259706

- 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 Rick Parisi against the decision of South Cambridgeshire District Council.
 - The application Ref S/3585/16/FL, dated 17 October 2016, was refused by notice dated 18 April 2017.
 - The development proposed is described as 'self-storage container site, with site administration office, WC block and associated customer parking'.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Main Issue

2. The main issue in this appeal is the effect of the proposed development on the character and appearance of the area.

Reasons

3. The appeal site encompasses part of a larger field and therefore it is currently devoid of natural boundaries to the east or west. Nevertheless, to the south is a well-established hedge row and to the north is the embankment of the A428, which is extensively planted. There is currently no direct vehicular access to the appeal site but there is a field access in the south eastern corner of the larger field within which the appeal site is located.
4. On the southern side of St Neots Road in the vicinity of the appeal site there is sporadic ribbon development. The appeal site is part of a visual buffer between this existing development and the A428. The appeal site is open and undeveloped agricultural land and therefore has the appearance and character of open countryside. As such, it is not identified in the development plan as being located within the Framework of a village or town.
5. The proposal is for the change of use of the land to a self-storage centre. This would involve the construction of a vehicular access to the appeal site from St Neots Road. The site would be surfaced in hardcore topped with tarmac scalplings. Parking, an office and a water closet would be positioned towards the centre of the site. The middle of the site would also be kept free for vehicles to manoeuvre. One hundred and two shipping containers would be positioned around the periphery of the appeal site along its northern, eastern

- and western boundaries. The appellant has confirmed that the portacabins and shipping containers would be around 2.43 metres tall.
6. The proposal would introduce a significant amount of built development onto the appeal site. This would harmfully erode the site's existing contribution to the visual amenity of the area as a buffer between the A428 and the ribbon development on the southern side of St Neots Road. Unlike nearby residential accesses, the proposed site access would be heavily engineered with kerbing and pavements. It would also breach the existing hedgerow. This would injure the visual amenity of St Neots Road. More significantly, the hard surfacing, portacabins and storage containers would harmfully urbanise the appeal site and displace its current character as arable farm land. The proposal would have a drab, functional character that would appear discordant in a rural landscape.
 7. The appeal scheme would have a particularly discordant appearance as it would bisect the large field within which the appeal site is located. This would create an awkward juxtaposition between the remaining sections of the open arable field to the east and west, and the hard urban appearance of the appeal scheme. Painting the shipping containers green would not sufficiently disguise their urbanising impact due to their overall form, number and disposition within the site.
 8. I am not convinced the appeal scheme would be visible from the A428 but it would be prominent in views from St Neots Road through the site access. It would also be possible to see the paraphernalia within the site through and over the existing roadside hedgerow. The containers would be particularly apparent in the winter months when the existing roadside hedge, which is not thick, has shed its leaves. Flood lights would also be erected on poles and connected to the shipping containers. This would heighten the prominence of the site and the perception that it has been developed. As such, the proposal would significantly harm the character and appearance of the countryside.
 9. To address this, the appellant has suggested in their statement that a planning condition could be imposed that required a landscaping scheme to be submitted to, and approved by, the Council. It is suggested that this would screen the proposed development, which would have a low profile, and provide some benefits to landscape character.
 10. Nevertheless, the appeal scheme drawings demonstrate that the shipping containers would be towards the edge of the appeal site so there would be little in the way of space for meaningful landscaping within the red line site area. However, the appellant owns adjoining land so it may be possible to provide landscaping there. Nevertheless, details have not been provided as to the position and extent of the proposed landscaping that the appellant has offered. Consequently, it would be unreasonable to rely on land outside of the red line site area to provide landscaping the scale and extent of which is unclear.
 11. Notwithstanding my reservations in the preceding paragraph, even if substantial landscaping was planted it would take time to mature and consequently there would be extensive short term harm to the visual amenity of the area. Moreover, for the reasons already give, the landscaping may not be effective in winter months and the development would still be visible through the site access.

12. In any event, harmfully discordant development should not be hidden from view by landscaping as the longevity of the planting cannot be relied upon for the life term of the development. The need to hide the development behind extensive landscaping is an indication that it is inherently inappropriate in this context.
13. In coming to the above view I have considered the comments of the Council's Landscape Officer, who did not object to the proposal. However, the absence of an objection was predicated on a 5 metre landscaped buffer being planted. This was neither advanced through the application nor achievable within the appeal site given the layout proposed. In any event, for the reasons already given I am not satisfied that landscaping would amount to sufficient mitigation. As such, the comments of the Council's Landscape Officer are a matter of limited weight in favour of the appeal scheme.
14. A small compound has been constructed to the east of the field within which the appeal site is located, and to the west of the nearby balancing pond. The compound has an access from St Neots Road and a hard surfaced area containing mobile homes, vehicles and other paraphernalia. The compound appears to have been set up in connection with the Cambridge to Huntingdon Road Improvement Scheme. It is unclear whether this use has or requires planning permission and whether it is a permanent installation. Notwithstanding this, the compound, whilst well landscaped, is still evident from St Neots Road and appears incongruous. The presence of this compound serves to reinforce my view that the appeal scheme, which would be larger and more intensively occupied, would significantly harm the character and appearance of the area.
15. It has been suggested that the appeal site cannot be used for agriculture following its use as a compound when the A428 was constructed. Substantive evidence has not been provided to suggest the appeal site is unsuitable for agriculture. Moreover, the entire field, including the appeal site, has been recently ploughed and there appears to be a crop currently growing within it. This would suggest that it may be possible to use the appeal site for agriculture. In any event, even if it was not possible to use the appeal site for agriculture the proposed development would still significantly harm the character and appearance of the area.
16. I therefore conclude that the proposed development would significantly harm the character and appearance of the area. As a result, the proposal would be contrary to Policies DP/2, DP/3 and DP/7 of the South Cambridgeshire District Council Local Development Framework Development Control Policies Development Plan Document 2007, which seek to preserve or enhance the character of local areas and prevent unacceptable adverse impacts to the countryside.
17. Policies DP/2 and DP/3 are broadly consistent with Paragraphs 17 and 58 of the National Planning Policy Framework and can therefore be afforded significant weight. Policy DP/7 is less flexible than the Framework but the provision of Development Frameworks can be a useful local tool in focussing and managing development so as to achieve sustainable development. As such, Policy DP/7 can be afforded moderate weight.

Other Matters

18. The appeal scheme would provide some economic benefits in a rural area including the potential for job creation¹ and for some synergy with three business units to the east of the appeal site. The proposal would also provide a local facility that does not apparently exist at present with some potential for improvements to biodiversity if there is additional planting.
19. However, the job creation would be modest and the business units that have been referred to have not, as I understand, been granted planning permission. Furthermore, it is unclear if there is a notable unmet local demand for the proposed facility and the benefits to biodiversity have not been quantified.
20. Consequently, these are not matters of anything more than limited weight in favour of the appeal scheme and would not outweigh the harm I have identified to the character and appearance of the area and the associated conflict with the development plan. As such, I do not consider the proposal would amount to sustainable economic growth.

Conclusion

21. The appeal scheme would be contrary to the development plan taken as a whole and material considerations do not indicate planning permission should be forthcoming in spite of this. Accordingly, the proposal is not sustainable development and for this reason, the reasons given above, and having regard to all other matters raised, I conclude the appeal should be dismissed.

Graham Chamberlain
INSPECTOR

¹ Two full time and two part time jobs