



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 24 October 2017

by S M Holden BSc MSc CEng MICE TPP FCIHT MRTPI

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

Decision date: 31ST October 2017

Appeal Ref: APP/W0340/W/17/3179985

Barn south of Butlers Farm, Back Lane, Beenham RG7 5NG

- 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 Mrs T Palmer against the decision of West Berkshire Council.
 - The application Ref 17/00351/FULD, dated 7 February 2017, was refused by notice dated 13 April 2017.
 - The development proposed is conversion of existing barn into residential dwelling, with ancillary parking and amenity space.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. The application form gave the site address as 'existing barn at Back Lane, Beenham'. However, the Council's decision notice and the appeal form provided a more detailed address, including the post code. I have used this in the header to this appeal for the sake of clarity.
3. Since the application was determined the Council has adopted its Housing Sites Allocations Development Plan Document (HSA DPD). Policies referred to the Council's decision notice from this plan therefore carry full weight in my assessment of the proposal. However, Policy ENV19 of the West Berkshire District Local Plan is no longer relevant to my determination of the appeal.

Main Issues

4. The main issues are:
 - a) Whether or not the barn is genuinely redundant;
 - b) The effect of the conversion on the character and appearance of the area having particular regard to the landscape and scenic beauty of the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB);
 - c) Whether the site is a suitable location for a residential development having regard to its location outside the settlement boundary of Beenham.

Reasons

5. The appeal site is outside the defined settlement boundary of the village of Beenham, a small village within the North Wessex Downs AONB. For the purposes of planning policy the site is in the countryside. The existing barn is a sturdy, modern building of block work with timber cladding and a metal roof. It is in good condition having been rebuilt less than 10 years ago. The proposal seeks to convert the barn into a four-bedroom detached house, with associated garaging and amenity space.

Redundancy of the barn

6. Policy C4 of the recently adopted HSA DPD is supportive of the conversion of existing redundant buildings, subject to a series of criteria. Fundamental to the application of those criteria, it is necessary to demonstrate that the building is genuinely redundant.
7. The appellant has provided a signed declaration that the barn is no longer required for agricultural purposes. It has not been used for the storage of hay for some time and machinery that was previously accommodated on the site has been moved elsewhere on the farm. The barn was originally used to facilitate the sheep farming business run by the appellant and her husband, which has now ceased. The UK Wolf Conservation Trust is operating within a wider landholding, an activity that is incompatible with keeping sheep. The barn is therefore no longer being used for the purpose for which it was rebuilt. However, it does not follow that it is not capable of being used for some other agricultural purposes either now or in the future. Farming practices continue to develop and evolve and the barn could be used in connection with another rural business.
8. Criterion (ii) of Policy C4 states that it is for applicants to prove that the building is genuinely redundant. It is not prescriptive about the type of information that might provide such proof. However, I am not persuaded that a declaration that the barn is no longer being used, and that machinery is being stored in another barn elsewhere, amounts to substantive evidence that the building is genuinely redundant. It seems to me that it would be necessary to demonstrate that significant efforts to re-use it for an agricultural purpose had been both tried and failed. This would be likely to involve a marketing exercise, evidence of which was not presented in this case.
9. I therefore conclude that the barn is not genuinely redundant and its conversion to a residential dwelling would conflict with Policy C4 of the HSA DPD.

Character and appearance

10. The barn is sited beyond the existing development of Beenham and in open countryside to north of the village. Although the barn is not far from other houses, it stands in an isolated position with no visual or functional connection with the surrounding development. Its character and appearance is that of a utilitarian agricultural building which could be expected to be seen within the rural area.
11. There is a distinct change of character between the built-up part of the village on the south side of Back Lane and the fields, trees and scattered rural buildings that lie within the countryside to the north of the road. The development within the village is characterised by a mix of modest two- storey dwellings, bungalows and chalet bungalows. There is no residential development north of Back Lane and no large detached houses in the vicinity of the appeal site. In this context the conversion of the barn into a dwelling would not relate effectively to, or integrate with, the existing development. Instead it would appear both incongruous and out of scale.
12. The conversion would replace large wooden doors with extensive areas of glazing, some which would be seen from Back Lane. These would increase the visibility and prominence of the building from the surrounding area. Additional openings to create first floor windows would further erode its agricultural character. Furthermore, the domestication of the site arising from the creation of a garden, landscaping and the introduction of other items associated with a residential use, would be harmful to the area's rural appearance. Even if the converted building could not be seen from points within the surrounding rural landscape, the character of the building would be fundamentally changed. This would give rise to a harmful encroachment of residential development into the countryside, beyond the existing settlement.

13. The countryside in which the existing barn is located is designated as an AONB, where permitted development rights for barn conversions do not apply. Paragraph 115 of the National Planning Policy Framework advises that AONBs have the highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty and great weight should be given to conserving the quality of these areas. Converting an agricultural building into a large dwelling would erode the rural nature of the surrounding landscape and detract from the open and undeveloped character of this part of the AONB. It would also introduce an additional source of light pollution into this quiet and tranquil area.
14. I conclude that the proposed conversion would be harmful to the character and appearance of the area and would conflict with the Framework's aim of protecting and conserving the landscape and scenic beauty of the AONB. It would also be contrary to Policies ADDP1 and ADDP5 of the West Berkshire Core Strategy (WB CS) and Policies C3 and C4 of the HSA DPD which, amongst other things, require development in the countryside not to adversely affect rural character.

Suitability of location

15. Beenham is a small settlement with a very limited range of services. It is not listed within the settlement hierarchy of Policy ADPP1 of the WB CS. The village is one where the policy advises that only limited infill housing development would be suitable. Outside settlement boundaries any development would need to address identified local needs. The proposed conversion is not an infill development and there was no evidence to suggest that it would address any specific local housing need. Future residents would be largely reliant on private car travel to meet their day-to-day needs, including to access employment.
16. For these reasons I conclude that the appeal site is not a suitable location to permit additional residential development. The proposal would be contrary to the Council's spatial strategy set out in Policy ADDP5 of the WB CS, due to its location beyond the settlement boundary of Beenham and in the countryside.

Conclusions

17. The existing barn is in good condition and could be converted into a dwelling without substantial rebuilding, extension or alteration. I note that there were no objections to the proposal from statutory consultees, including the AONB board and the Parish Council. I have also had regard to an appeal decision for a development of four houses outside Burghfield Common, Ref APP/W/0340/W/15/31051146. However, it is not directly comparable with the appeal proposal, which I have determined on its individual merits in the light of current planning policy.
18. On the basis of the evidence presented, I was not persuaded that the barn is genuinely redundant and therefore incapable of use as part of a rural enterprise. I concluded that the conversion would be harmful to the character and appearance of the area and would fail to protect or enhance the landscape and scenic beauty of the North Wessex Downs AONB. Furthermore, the site's location outside the settlement boundary of Beenham makes it unsuitable for a residential use, which would be contrary to the Council's spatial strategy of locating development according to its settlement hierarchy.
19. The benefits that would accrue from the provision of an additional dwelling would not outweigh the conflict with the development plan and the harms I have identified. For this reason, and having regard to all other relevant matters raised, I conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

Sheila Holden

INSPECTOR