



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 15 July 2019

by Graham Chamberlain BA (Hons) MSc MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 25 July 2019

Appeal Ref: APP/M2270/W/18/3214290

The Barn, Pix Hall Farm, High Street, Hawkhurst, Cranbrook TN18 4PS

- 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 Masters against the decision of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council.
 - The application Ref 18/00589/FULL, dated 19 February 2018, was refused by notice dated 23 April 2018.
 - The development proposed is described as 'conversion of steel framed agricultural barn into two dwellings with associated change of use of land to gardens and parking, tuning areas and landscaping'.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Main Issue

2. The main issue in this appeal is whether the proposed development would conserve or enhance the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Reasons

3. The appeal site encompasses a modern portal framed agricultural barn with and open sided lean-to, the external finish comprises of light grey sheet cladding. It has a utilitarian appearance due to the pallet of materials and its simple, solid form, with a weathered and settled appearance. It does not have the character or appearance of a historic farmstead. The barn is positioned at the end of a track that leads north from Slip Mill Road. At the entrance to the track is a small green around which is clustered several period properties, the rear elevations of which are distantly visible from the appeal site. The barn is therefore an isolated structure in the countryside.
4. The appellant's Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) justifiably concludes that the barn has a limited visual envelope. However, it is very prominent in views from the public footpath to the east of the appeal site, which is partly on lower ground. The building is exposed in this view because the hedge to the south of the appeal building does not continue behind the structure and a row of poplar trees that apparently provided a green backdrop have been felled. Therefore, the building breaks the sky line in some views and does not sit comfortably in the landscape in local vantage points.

5. The external materials and bulky form results in the building having a generally unattractive appearance even though it is the type of building one would expect to see in the countryside. A residential conversion of what is currently an unused rural building would introduce a domestic use and additional activity into the landscape, but if done sensitively there is an opportunity for some enhancement of the building's setting and its relationship to the landscape.
6. The proposed conversion would require internal subdivision and the insertion of a first floor to create the two homes. To facilitate this, large floor to ceiling windows would be inserted into three elevations and the existing translucent roof lights replaced with clear glazed domestic ones. Recessed floor to ceiling windows hint at the internal volume of the building and are often used in barn conversions. In this instance, they would be complemented by vertical timber panels that would have an appearance similar to barn doors. However, the glazing would be extensive, with large windows on three elevations. This would harmfully erode the solid appearance of the structure and result in the risk of disproportionate light spillage and reflection. Thus, the building would be over fenestrated resulting in an overtly domestic appearance.
7. The barn as converted would have a fibre cement slate roof and grey boarding to the walls. The boarding would be a more appropriate rural material when compared to the existing sheet cladding, and the roof and walls would have a darker more recessive appearance in the landscape. However, substantive evidence has not been provided to demonstrate these material finishes would reflect the rural agricultural vernacular of the High Weald. From what I observed, slate and grey boarding would be a more domestic finish that would compound the explicit domestication of the building and dilute the sense of it being a converted barn.
8. The appeal building currently has no curtilage to speak of save for an area of hardstanding and therefore the countryside rolls up to it. Two gardens would be provided as part of the conversion doubling up on paraphernalia, some of which could not be controlled by planning condition, such as washing lines and play equipment. It would also be unreasonable to resist the erection of sheds as the drawings show no other means of external storage. This would compound the appearance of the scheme as an overt, rather than subtle, residential incursion into the landscape.
9. Moreover, two driveways and a turning head would be constructed. The latter slightly encroaching into the neighbouring field. This would result in vehicles being evident around the building compounding the sense of domestic use and activity. The removal of the existing, little used and over grown concrete hard standing would not mitigate for this. The inclusion of the open sided lean-to as habitable accommodation prevents its use as a covered area for parking and storage out of view of the footpath.
10. Landscaping comprising of a post and rail fence, field gates and native species hedge planting would provide a rural character. However, the planting would do little to mitigate the short-term impact of the conversion, but over time it could soften and anchor it in the landscape. However, the landscaping would have a formal layout and include the extensive removal of scrub planting. Moreover, future occupants would likely keep the hedge low to take in the view and allow light into the modest gardens. This could result in a tidy, manicured

and suburban appearance, rather than a more organic and comprehensive planting scheme that would feather the site into the countryside.

11. The landscaping would do little to break up the silhouette of the building, reduce its prominence or the way it breaks the sky line when viewed from the east. Accordingly, the landscaping would not be extensive enough to provide determinative mitigation or a 'neutral' overall impact, as concluded in the LVIA and reaffirmed in a subsequent Landscape Statement lodged with the appeal by the appellant. The cob plat would be an interesting landscape feature, but it is unclear how it would be managed to ensure its longevity, as it appears to be part of one of the proposed gardens.
12. The proposal would amount to an isolated and overt domestic intrusion into the rural landscape of the High Weald. This impact cannot be reasonably mitigated through the imposition of planning conditions. Overall, there would not be an enhancement of the immediate setting of the building. This would be at odds with The High Weald AONB Management Plan, which identifies suburbanisation and the conversion of agricultural buildings as some of the 'top issues' facing the landscape. There would also be some conflict with the Council's landscape strategy contained in its Landscape Character Assessment Supplementary Planning Document 2017, which is to control development which could adversely affect the rural character of the landscape.
13. I therefore conclude that the proposed development would result in localised harm to the visual amenity and scenic beauty of the AONB, which it would fail to conserve or enhance. In so doing it would be contrary to Policies 4 and 14 of the Core Strategy Development Plan Document 2010, Policies H13 and EN25 of the Tunbridge Wells Borough Local Plan 2006 and Policies LP2 and HD4 of the Hawkhurst Neighbourhood Development Plan (NP). The aims of these policies are to protect the landscape of the AONB and secure sensitive designs. They are consistent with the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework'), which affords AONBs the highest status of protection in relation to landscape issues.
14. The Council also referred to Policy LP1 of the NP but this relates to the landscape setting and key views of the village, which would not be harmed by the proposal.

Other Matters

15. Various concerns have been raised by interested parties including reservations regarding the impact on highway safety, wildlife and built heritage, which I have noted. However, given my findings above it has not been necessary for me to address these matters further as the appeal has failed on the main issue.
16. The appellant has referred to several approved schemes, one permitted following an appeal¹, where housing and barn conversions were permitted in the AONB. The precise details are not before me but in all instances no harm was identified to the landscape. As such, these are not directly comparable to the appeal scheme under consideration, as harm to the landscape has been identified.

¹ APP/M2270/W/17/3178178

Planning Balance

17. The proposal would result in benefits to the construction industry and future residents may spend locally. However, the contribution to the construction industry would be modest and short lived and I have seen nothing to suggest the 'spend' from two additional households would have a notable effect on the viability of nearby facilities or significantly enhance the vitality of the rural community. For example, substantive evidence has not been provided to suggest local facilities are suffering for lack of patronage. As such, the likely economic benefits of the proposal carry modest weight. The additional planting and the installation of bird and bat boxes may provide a net benefit to biodiversity, but this would be modest in scale and thus a matter of limited weight in favour of the proposal.
18. The Council are currently unable to demonstrate a five-year housing land supply as required to by the Framework. The housing supply stands at 4.69 years. The provision of two homes, which could be delivered reasonably quickly, would assist in addressing this shortfall at a district level and provide homes in the Hawkhurst NP area. The dwellings would also be four-bedroom properties, for which there is an apparent need². However, two homes would not be a notable contribution, so this would be a benefit of moderate weight.
19. The proposal would harm the landscape of the High Weald, an impact that would be at odds with the development plan. In addition, Paragraph 172 of the Framework states that great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing the landscape and scenic beauty of AONBs and that the scale and extent of development in these areas should be limited. In this context, the adverse impacts of the proposal would outweigh the benefits.
20. In situations where the Council cannot demonstrate a five-year housing land supply, Paragraph 11 of the Framework states that planning permission should be granted unless the application of policies in the Framework that protect areas or assets of particular importance, such as AONBs, provide clear reasons for refusing the development proposed. Given my findings above, the policies in the Framework, Paragraph 172 in particular, provide a clear reason for refusing the appeal scheme. Consequently, it is unnecessary to consider whether the adverse impacts of the proposal would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits when assessed against the policies in the Framework taken as a whole.

Conclusion

21. The proposed development would not accord with the development plan and there are no other considerations which outweigh this finding. Accordingly, for the reasons given, the appeal should not succeed.

Graham Chamberlain
INSPECTOR

² As demonstrated by the Sevenoaks and Tunbridge Wells Strategic Housing Market Assessment