



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 27 August 2019

by J Bowyer BSc(Hons) MSc MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 26th September 2019

Appeal Ref: APP/Y9507/W/19/3228938

Stables to the South of Hesworth Common, Fittleworth, West Sussex

- 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 Precious against the decision of South Downs National Park Authority.
 - The application Ref SDNP/19/00273/FUL, dated 17 January 2019, was refused by notice dated 15 April 2019.
 - The development proposed is the replacement of existing equestrian buildings with a building to be used for stabling and an associated self-contained unit of holiday accommodation.
-

Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Application for Costs

2. An application for costs was made by Mrs Precious against South Downs National Park Authority. This application is the subject of a separate Decision.

Procedural Matters

3. The submitted planning application form did not include a full address for the site, referring to it as 'Stables to the South of Hesworth Common' and including a grid reference. The appeal form refers to the site as 'Stables to the South of Hesworth Common, Fittleworth, West Sussex'. This is consistent with the submitted site location plan and for the sake of clarity and as it best describes the site, I have used this address in the banner heading above.
4. The Authority's decision notice refers to policies of the Chichester District Local Plan First Review (1999) (CDLP) and emerging policies of the South Downs National Park Authority Local Plan (SDLP). Since the application was determined and the appeal lodged, the SDLP was adopted on 2 July 2019, superseding the CDLP policies. Relevant policies of the SDLP as now adopted are referred to within the Authority's appeal statement and the appellant has been able to comment on these. As such, neither party has been prejudiced by this change in policy circumstances and I have determined the appeal having regard to the SDLP policies.
5. The Authority's appeal statement refers to ambiguities in the application information with reference to the project title shown on the submitted plans as 'replacement stables & associated grooms quarters'. However, it is clear that the proposed development was considered by the Authority as a building to be

used for stabling and an associated self-contained unit of holiday accommodation in accordance with the development description on the planning application form. In providing final comments, the appellant has submitted revised drawings to clarify this and to amend the project title on the submitted plans to 'replacement stables and holiday accommodation'. These also confirm that the proposed parking and turning area would have a grass-crete surface. Given the nature of these amendments, which correct conflicting information as identified by the Authority, there is no prejudice to any parties if I take these amended plans into account in determining the appeal.

Main Issues

6. The main issues are (i) the effect of the development on the landscape character and tranquillity of the South Downs National Park and (ii) whether or not the site would provide a suitable location for the proposed development, having regard to opportunities for means of transport other than the private motor vehicle.

Reasons

Landscape Character and Tranquillity

7. The appeal site is located within the South Downs National park (SDNP) on the northern slope of the valley to the River Rother. There is a small cluster of buildings at Lower Fittleworth to the east of the site, with the main village of Fittleworth further to the north of this. Access from Lower Fittleworth is via a single-track lane with few passing places which continues west past the site and then connects to the A283 towards the north west. While surfaced where it passes the site, this lane is unmetalled for much of the distance running east between the site and Lower Fittleworth.
8. The appeal site comprises a grassed paddock which slopes gently down from the road to the River Rother, with a single storey 'L-shaped' stable block in a somewhat dilapidated condition set at the north east of the site with an associated courtyard. Access to the site is via an unmade track through a relatively deep strip of trees and vegetation which line the lane here. There are glimpsed views of the paddock and through the site along the access which is gated at the entrance to the main part of the site, however the majority of the site and stable building are screened from the lane by the vegetation to the boundary.
9. In the wider area, Hesworth Common, an area of heath and woodland with a number of footpaths crossing it, and open agricultural land are found to the north of the lane, with further open fields to the south. Despite a few dispersed buildings set along this lane, including at Hesworth Grange immediately to the east of the appeal site and Fox Glade to the west, the area is largely uninfluenced by built form and has a highly rural and tranquil quality, dominated by the woodland heath of Hesworth Common to the north, and the open landscape towards the south.
10. National Parks such as the SDNP are subject to statutory purposes to (i) conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the area; and (ii) to promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of national parks by the public. The National

Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) confirms that National Parks are a designated rural area and that great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in National Parks which have the highest status of protection.

11. Policies SD1, SD4, SD5 and SD7 of the SDLP reflect these objectives and seek development that conserves and enhances the character of the landscape and the tranquillity of the National Park. Policy SD1 also confirms that where there is a conflict between the two National Park purposes, greater weight will be attached to the first of these. Policy SD23 specifies requirements for proposals for visitor accommodation, including that development does not adversely affect the character, appearance or amenity of the area and that new buildings are sensitive to character and their setting.
12. The proposed stables and holiday accommodation would replace the existing stable block on the site. The submitted plans illustrate that the form and extent of the building would be broadly comparable to that already on the site, although there would be additional openings for doors and windows. The Authority have not objected to the impact of the building itself on the landscape of the SDNP, and I agree that it would sit comfortably within its setting. I also acknowledge the existing building on the site is in poor condition.
13. However, in addition to the new building, the proposal includes a large area for parking and turning, as well as provision of a new aggregate or chipped bark surfacing to the site access. The appellant's Landscape Masterplan also illustrates provision of additional timber post and rail fencelines. Despite the clarification provided by the appellant that the parking and turning area would be a grass-crete grid system, together these associated works would introduce a more formal and domestic appearance to the site. This would result in an encroachment of development into the countryside that would detract from the generally undeveloped and rural appearance of the area. The parking of vehicles associated with the holiday let on the parking and turning areas would be more sustained and take place over longer periods than would be likely in the case of the more intermittent existing use of the site. The use of these areas would further add to the proposal's intrusion to the rural landscape.
14. Views into the site are largely filtered by vegetation and are limited to short distance or glimpsed views. The appellant has also proposed strengthening of the boundaries and landscape features by planting. However, while the building itself may be in keeping with its landscape surroundings, the use proposed and associated activity and development would be particularly apparent from the lane between Lower Fittleworth and the A283. From here it would be appreciated as an unwelcome pocket of urbanising development in the countryside.
15. I note that there are some limited existing residential uses at Hesworth Grange and Fox Glade in the vicinity of the site. However, the notable change to the nature of the appeal site would encroach into the rural setting of these, reducing their appearance as isolated features in the landscape.
16. Whilst they appeared little-used at the time of my visit, I do not have any substantiated evidence before me as to the level of activity associated with the stables currently on the site. Nevertheless I acknowledge that the site as existing could generate some activity and associated comings and goings including those of vehicles. However, while there may be some seasonal

pattern and the development may not be occupied continuously through the year, the creation of a unit of holiday accommodation together with the associated stables would be likely to result in increased levels and duration of activity. These would be associated with guests occupying and arriving and leaving the holiday let, both at the start and end of their stay and as they explore the area and fulfil their day to day needs. They would also include cleaning and other maintenance activities which would accompany such a use. The proposed holiday let would also operate 24 hours a day when in use and would lead to increased activity on the site overnight in comparison to the existing use of the site as stables. This would be the case even for a one-bedroom space as is proposed, and the activity would lead to a considerable intensification of the use of the site and result in much higher levels of noise and disturbance than is currently the case in this quiet and peaceful rural area. This would be to the extent that the tranquillity of the area would be unacceptably reduced, contrary to the requirement within SDLP Policy SD7 that development conserves and enhances tranquillity.

17. In accordance with paragraph 172 of the Framework, I give great weight to conserving and enhancing the landscape and scenic beauty of the SDNP which has the highest status of protection. Taking all of the above factors into account, I find that the development would result in unacceptable harm to the rural character and tranquillity of the area and the intrinsic value and qualities of the local landscape and the SDNP. I therefore conclude on this main issue that the proposal would be harmful to the landscape character, appearance and tranquillity of the SDNP. It would thus conflict with policies SD1, SD4, SD5, SD7 and SD23 of the SDLP and the requirements of the Framework.

Suitability of the Location

18. SDLP Policy SD5 requires that development achieves effective and high quality routes, and Policy SD23 specifies requirements for visitor accommodation, including that the design and location of such development minimises the need for travel by private car and encourages access and/or subsequent travel by sustainable means.
19. The site is located outside of any settlement boundary. While there is a bus stop on the A283 to the north which could be accessed on foot from the appeal site, this would involve walking along a narrow unlit lane. This environment, together with the distance involved would inhibit such journeys particularly at times of darkness and in bad weather. Similarly, while visitors could arrive in the area via Pulborough station, the submitted Planning Statement notes that this is approximately 2.6 miles from the site. This distance would discourage walking for guests (particularly when arriving or leaving with luggage). Such journeys would more likely be by taxi resulting in two-way vehicle movements to the site for each trip.
20. Facilities in Fittleworth and Lower Fittleworth include a village store with café and post office and the Swan Inn. However, although the distance from the site to these is certainly walkable, the route to Lower Fittleworth is along a single-track lane which is unlit and unsurfaced for much of the distance. While existing traffic levels may be low, there are very limited passing places to allow pedestrians to move clear of any passing vehicles. As a consequence, this would not be an attractive route to walk, particularly at night or in poor weather conditions when the lane is likely to be muddy.

21. Furthermore, the facilities at Fittleworth are relatively limited and depending on the length of stay are unlikely to satisfy all guests' requirements for shopping, food and entertainment. They would therefore need to travel further afield, increasing the likelihood of journeys by private motor vehicle.
22. The appellant advises that the development is anticipated to appeal to cyclists and horse riders starting or stopping off on long distance rides and I accept that the site would be likely to be attractive to those making use of the network of public rights of way nearby. Users may access these routes directly from the site by cycling, walking or horseriding and it is additionally suggested that store rooms on the site could be used for cycle storage to further encourage cycling.
23. However, in practice I consider that there is a realistic prospect that the majority of guests would need to rely on a private motor vehicle to reach the site and to meet day-to-day needs while occupying the site. I therefore conclude on this main issue that the site would not provide a suitable location for the proposed development, having regard to opportunities for means of transport other than the private motor vehicle and the proposal would conflict with SDLP Policies SD5 and SD23. Additionally, the development would be contrary to objectives within the Framework at paragraphs 102 and 103 for development to actively manage patterns of growth to support objectives including promoting opportunities for walking, cycling and public transport use.

Other Matters and Planning Balance

24. The appellant refers to other developments in the SDNP area where decisions acknowledged that they would be likely to be accessed by private car but where permission was granted. I do not have full details of the circumstances that led to these proposals being accepted and so cannot be sure that they are comparable to the appeal proposal. In any case, I have determined the appeal on its own merits.
25. I note that ecological enhancements are suggested which would be a benefit of the development, and that the replacement building would enable use of more energy efficient materials. This is a further benefit of the proposal.
26. I also acknowledge the appellant's reference to a number of published documents supporting the provision of visitor accommodation within the SDNP, including specific mention of demand for accommodation providing stabling and pasture for horses. Promoting opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the National Park by the public is one of the statutory purposes of the SDNP, and the provision of visitor accommodation of the nature proposed to meet a demand would contribute to achieving this. These are also benefits of the proposal which count in its favour, although given the single unit scale of the development, the contribution would not be significant. However, I have found that the proposal would result in harm to the SDNP in relation to the first main issue. As highlighted by SDLP Policy SD1, where there is conflict between the two purposes of national parks, greater weight is to be attached to the conservation and enhancement of the area. The Framework is also clear at paragraph 172 that great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing the landscape and scenic beauty in National Parks.

27. Additionally, I have found that the proposal would fail to provide opportunities for means of transport other than the private motor vehicle. This further weighs against it. Although paragraph 84 of the Framework advises that sites to meet business and community needs in rural areas may have to be found in locations that are not well served by public transport, it goes on to advise that it is important to ensure that such development is sensitive to its surroundings.
28. Taking all these factors into account I find that the benefits of the proposal are insufficient to outweigh the harm that would be caused and the conflict with the development plan that would result.

Conclusion

29. For the reasons given above, I conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

J Bowyer

INSPECTOR