
Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 10 September 2019

by Benjamin Webb BA(Hons) MA MA MSc PGDip(UD) MRTPI IHBC

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 08 October 2019

Appeal Ref: APP/Q3305/W/19/3228992

Croft Farm, Roughmoor Lane, Westbury-sub-Mendip, Wells BA5 1HQ

- 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 and Mrs B King against the decision of Mendip District Council.
 - The application Ref 2018/2262/FUL, dated 10 September 2018, was refused by notice dated 19 November 2018.
 - The development proposed is described as conversion and extension of barns to form 5 no. new dwellings, including removal of ancillary barns, associated structures and slurry lagoon at Croft Farm.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Procedural Matters

2. A revised layout plan has been submitted as part of the appeal. The Council has confirmed that this addresses its third reason for refusal, which relates to loss of amenity space for the existing farmhouse. As such, and given that I shall determine the appeal on the basis of the revised layout, it will not be necessary to consider this matter any further.

Main Issue

3. The main issue is whether the site is a suitable location for the proposed development, with particular regard to its effect on the character and appearance of the area.

Reasons

4. Saved Core Policy 1 of the Mendip District Local Plan Part 1: Strategy and Policies 2006-2029 – Adopted 15th December 2014 (the Local Plan) sets out the Council's spatial strategy. This directs development to locations identified on the basis of settlement boundaries. Part (2) of saved Policy DP22 of the Local Plan nonetheless allows for the residential conversion and reuse of buildings within countryside locations lying outside these boundaries, with a principal consideration being whether the development would lead to an enhancement to the immediate setting. In this regard the Council's main concern is the effect that the development would have on the character and appearance of the area.

5. The site is located close to the edge of Westbury-sub-Mendip. Falling ground levels, and open agricultural land within the immediate setting provides the site with a moderate degree of visual exposure within the surrounding landscape.
6. The site contains a number of different agricultural buildings. Those which are subject of the scheme are for the most part laid out around a central yard, and are largely constructed from a palette of traditional materials. These include stonework and timber framed cladding. Some external walls are nonetheless constructed from concrete block, whilst the dairy and store are contained within a cement rendered structure. Larger steel framed agricultural sheds and a slurry pit have also been built within the immediate setting. These modern features and structures detract from the external appearance of the site within the surrounding landscape.
7. The scheme would involve a combination of the removal and/or replacement of modern buildings and structural elements, and the conversion and/or extension of the traditional buildings on site. This would entail the introduction of a large number of new or contemporary styled window openings within retained or rebuilt elements.
8. New openings would be inserted within walls which currently lack them. Some would furthermore be of a size, position, form and detailed design which would not obviously relate to, or reinforce the distinctive agricultural character, or functional identity of the buildings in question. This would be most apparent in the re-exposed south-west elevation, within which 2 large openings would be inserted well above ground level. In combination with a new staircase, and other new openings, this would provide the elevation with a somewhat incongruous, domesticated appearance, which would be appreciable from within the broader landscape setting. The visual harm caused would be further accentuated by the provision of substantial 'contemporary' styled windows in the end gable of the reconstructed dairy and store. The form and size of these windows would indeed be wholly at odds with the traditional agricultural character of the building group. The overall level of domestication would have a suburbanising effect on the building group viewed within the surrounding countryside.
9. The scheme would also see the substantial extension of the 2 smallest buildings on site. Though the extensions would be similar in form to the host buildings, this would nonetheless be at odds with, and harm their modest functional character, scale and massing. I acknowledge that the Council has approved extensions of agricultural buildings elsewhere. However, whilst I have been provided little detail of the cases cited, I have considered the scheme on its own planning merits.
10. The scale and massing of other buildings, both retained or replaced, would remain little changed, if at all. The overall number of buildings on site would in fact be substantially reduced. Furthermore, removal of both the steel framed sheds and slurry pit would bring visual enhancement. This would also be true of the replacement of concrete block and rendered walls in traditional materials. These points in combination would not however outweigh the harm that would be caused to the character, identity and distinctiveness of the building group for the reasons outlined above.
11. Part (1)(d) of saved Policy DP22 of the Local Plan requires that conversions should not require major or complete reconstruction of the buildings in

question. In this regard the extension and strengthening of existing structures, introduction of wall linings, and renewal of roof coverings can't reasonably be considered to constitute reconstruction. Though the replacement of blockwork walls and the dairy and store building however clearly does, neither appears to be strictly essential in this case. In view of my reasons above, and the specific enhancement objective set out in part (2) of saved Policy DP22 however, sound justification for these works nonetheless exists. As such, but for the degree of harm that would be caused to the character and appearance of the area by other aspects of the scheme, the level and nature of reconstruction proposed would not be fundamentally at odds with saved Policy DP22 read as a whole.

12. The Council quoted paragraph 79 of the National Planning Policy Framework in its decision notice. This states that decisions should avoid the development of isolated homes in the countryside. Notwithstanding separation by a small amount of open space however, the gap between the site and the developed edge of Westbury-sub-Mendip is easily and directly walked in a matter of minutes. A good level of inter-visibility also exists between the site and dwellings which lie at the edge. There is therefore little perception on the ground that the site is isolated in either a spatial or visual sense. Whilst paragraph 79 of the Framework is not therefore applicable, this finding does not itself lend any weight in favour of the scheme.
13. In view of my reasons above, I conclude that the development would cause unacceptable harm to the character and appearance of the area, and on this basis that the location for the proposed development is inappropriate. The proposal thus conflicts with saved Policy DP22 of the Local Plan which requires development involving re-use and conversion of redundant or disused rural buildings in the countryside to enhance the immediate setting; saved Policy DP1 of the Local Plan, which amongst other things requires that all development proposals contribute positively to the maintenance and enhancement of local identity and distinctiveness; and saved Core Policy CP 1 of the Local Plan, insofar as the scheme would conflict with saved Policy DP22.

Other Matters

14. Saved Policy DP22 of the Local Plan contains a range of criteria in addition to those considered in my reasons above. Some of these were the subject of representations by interested parties. However, as these are not cited or otherwise referenced in the decision notice, and I am dismissing the appeal for other reasons, I need not consider them further.
15. The appellants draw attention to the accessibility of the site, the economic benefits of the development, the benefits of housing provision, and the high standard to which the dwellings could be finished in terms of energy efficiency. These collective benefits would not however outweigh the harm that would be caused to the character and appearance of the area.

Conclusion

16. For the reasons set out above, and having regard to all other matters raised, I conclude that the appeal should be dismissed

Benjamin Webb

INSPECTOR