



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 4 February 2020

by Sarah Manchester BSc MSc PhD MEnvSc

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 20th March 2020

Appeal Ref: APP/P2935/W/19/3241211

Land east of Furrow Grove, Station Road, Stannington, Northumberland

- 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 B Holbrook against the decision of Northumberland County Council.
 - The application Ref 18/04170/FUL, dated 14 November 2018, was refused by notice dated 30 July 2019.
 - The development proposed is described as construction of 6 dwellings comprising of: 3 x five bedroom, two storey units, 1 x 4 bedroom, two storey unit, 1 x 4 bedroom, one and half storey unit, 1 x 3 bedroom, one storey unit together with associated landscaping.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Procedural Matter

2. The site address in the application form is given as 'Site at Stannington Station Road, Stannington Station Road, Stannington, Morpeth'. This does not precisely locate the appeal site. Therefore, in the interests of clarity I have adopted the site address from the decision notice and the appeal form in the banner heading above.
3. One of the reasons for refusal related to insufficient information to enable an assessment of the effects of the proposal on archaeological assets. In its evidence, the Council confirms that the additional information submitted with the appeal is sufficient to overcome its concerns in this regard, subject to a programme of archaeological work being secured by planning condition. Having reviewed the evidence, I see no reason to disagree.

Main Issues

4. Therefore, the main issues are:
 - i) Whether the appeal site is within the broad extent of the Green Belt;
 - ii) If so, whether the proposal would be inappropriate development in the Green Belt, having regard to the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) and any relevant development plan policies;
 - iii) The effect on the openness of the Green Belt;
 - iv) Whether the location is suitable for new residential development;

- v) The effect of the proposal on the character and appearance of the area; and
- vi) If the proposal is inappropriate development, whether the harm by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm, would be clearly outweighed by other considerations so as to amount to the very special circumstances necessary to justify the proposed development.

Reasons

Whether the appeal site is within the extent of the Green Belt

5. The appeal site is not within the Green Belt boundary defined in the Castle Morpeth District Local Plan 1991-2006 Adopted February 2003 (the CMDLP). However, saved Policy S5 of the Northumberland and National Park Joint Structure Plan First Alteration (February 2005) (the JSP) sets out broad areas to be included in a Green Belt extension around Morpeth. Based on the evidence before me, I am satisfied that the appeal site is within the Green Belt extension area.
6. Although it identified the general extent, Policy S5 of the JSP set out that the precise boundaries of the extension to the Green Belt, including around settlements, would be defined in Local Plans. In this respect, the appeal site is within the Green Belt for the purposes of the emerging Northumberland County Council Local Plan Publication Draft (Regulation 19) January 2019 (the NCCLP). However, the NCCLP has not yet been adopted and there may be unresolved objections and amendments to the proposed Green Belt boundary in this location.
7. In a recent appeal decision¹, the Inspector considered that, in the absence of a precisely defined boundary, a site within the extension area could not be considered to be within the Green Belt. However, other appeal decisions² have established that the absence of a precise boundary is not sufficient justification to exclude sites within the broad extension area. In those cases, the Inspectors considered the contribution of the site to the 5 purposes of the Green Belt as set out in Paragraph 134 of the Framework.
8. The first, second and fourth of the Green Belt purposes relate to built up areas and towns. The rural appeal site does not contribute to these purposes. The third purpose is to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment. In this case, the appeal site is part of a large field that is visually, functionally and physically related to the wider countryside. Therefore, the appeal site contributes to the third Green Belt purpose.
9. The fifth Green Belt purpose is to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and urban land. The inclusion of the appeal site in the Green Belt would direct development to other areas, including urban land within larger settlements. As a result, the appeal site contributes to the fifth Green Belt purpose.
10. Therefore, having regard to the above, I consider that the appeal site is within the Green Belt for the purposes of relevant planning policy.

¹ Ref APP/P2935/W/19/3232589

² Including ref APP/P2935/W/17/3167263

Whether the proposal would be inappropriate development in the Green Belt

11. The appeal site is part of a large field that wraps around 30 and 32 Station Road. It is a wide gap between No 30 and the residential properties on Furrow Grove. Stannington Station Road is a dispersed rural settlement with clusters of buildings and dwellings separated by agricultural fields.
12. Paragraph 143 of the Framework states that inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances.
13. Policy C17 of the CMDLP sets out that the construction of new buildings in the Green Belt will not be permitted except for a limited number of purposes, one of which is limited infilling in existing villages inset within the Green Belt. In this respect, Policy C17 is consistent with the Framework, which states that new buildings are inappropriate in the Green Belt unless they meet one of the specific exceptions, including 145 e) limited infilling in villages.
14. Although Stannington Station Road is not a defined settlement for the purposes of the CMDLP, it does have some limited services and facilities and access to public transport. In this respect, it does appear to function as a village. At the time of my visit, I saw evidence of recent residential development in the area, most obviously to the east of the railway line. I am also aware that permission has been granted, including on appeal, for dwellings in closer proximity to the appeal site. Nevertheless, the appeal site is part of the undeveloped countryside. It is not within the built village envelope and it is not visually or functionally part of a village for the purposes of my assessment.
15. The Framework does not provide a definition of limited infilling in villages. However, the glossary to the CMDLP defines infilling in terms of small gaps within an otherwise continuously built up frontage. The emerging NCCLP defines infill development as building on a relatively small site between existing buildings.
16. Not only is the appeal site part of the countryside outside of the built up envelope of the settlement, it is also a very wide gap between the properties to either side. Notwithstanding that it is between existing buildings, the appeal site is not therefore a small or modest gap in a continuously built up frontage. Moreover, the proposal is for 6 substantial detached dwellings, most of which would have double garages, resulting in a significant ribbon of development. Consequently, the proposal would not be limited infilling.
17. The nearby planning permission and the allowed appeal³ both addressed the issue of infilling in villages. In the appeal, the Inspector noted that it is not solely a question of the size of the gap but whether the site has the characteristics normally associated with infill development. However, those schemes differ from the appeal scheme including in terms of the size of the gap, the number of dwellings and the relationship of the site to the surrounding built and rural environment. They are not directly comparable to the appeal site and they do not therefore provide a justification for the appeal scheme, which must be considered on its own merits.
18. Therefore, the proposal would not be limited infilling in villages. Consequently, it would be inappropriate development in the Green Belt and it would conflict

³ Respectively refs 18/01044/FUL, APP/P2935/W/19/3231462

with saved Policy C17 of the CMDLP and the policies in the Framework that protect the Green Belt.

The openness of the Green Belt

19. Paragraph 133 of the Framework states that the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence. The assessment of openness requires a consideration of both spatial and visual impacts.
20. The appeal site is part of a large undeveloped field, separated from the road by a sparse hedge. The proposal would introduce 6 detached dwellings with garages, vehicular access, parking and manoeuvring areas and associated domestic paraphernalia. Consequently, there would be a significant permanent footprint of built development which would diminish the open character and appearance of the area, resulting in a spatial loss of openness.
21. Notwithstanding the proposed hedgerows and planting to the frontage, the proposal would be conspicuous from locations in the surrounding area. By virtue of the substantial bulk of built development, there would be a significant visual impact in this location and a harmful loss of openness of the Green Belt.
22. The combined spatial and visual impacts would result in a significant loss of openness of the Green Belt in this locality. This would conflict with the local and national policies that protect the Green Belt.

Whether the appeal site is a suitable location for new residential development

23. Policy C1 of the CMDLP sets out that beyond the settlement boundaries, development will not be permitted except where it is essential to the needs of agriculture or forestry or is permitted by other policies in the Plan. Policy H16 sets out the detailed exceptions for new houses in the countryside.
24. In this case, the appeal site is not within a settlement identified for housing growth and it is in the open countryside for planning purposes. The proposed market dwellings are not essential to the needs of agriculture or forestry. However, the proposal would not result in the development of isolated homes in the countryside, which the Framework seeks to avoid.
25. Notwithstanding the petrol station, restaurant/ takeaway and farm shop/ café, the settlement does not have the range of services and facilities necessary to meet the reasonable daily needs of future occupiers. Future occupiers would be likely to contribute to supporting local businesses. However, the need to travel would not be minimised in this location. There are footways along the road which, together with the nearby bus stops, offer opportunities for travel by sustainable modes of transport. Nevertheless, given the scale of the proposal and the distance to the larger settlements, there would be a significant increase in journeys made by private vehicles.
26. Other Inspectors have concluded that new housing in the area would contribute to the rural development aims of the Framework. However, there is little before me to demonstrate that ever more housing in this location would deliver any noticeable benefits in terms of the vitality of the rural community or support for local services in settlements elsewhere. Therefore, in this case, I am not persuaded that the countryside location weighs in favour the proposal.

27. I therefore find that the site is not in a suitable location for new residential development. It would conflict with policies C1 and H16 of the CMDLP.

Character and appearance

28. The Stannington Parish Neighbourhood Plan Adopted September 2018 (the SPNP) characterises Stannington Station as a dispersed rural settlement, with the open views of the countryside important in retaining the agricultural feel of the settlement.
29. The appeal site has a wide road frontage and the field of which it is part extends away from the settlement. It forms part of the wider countryside and it allows long uninterrupted views over the undeveloped rural landscape. Therefore, the appeal site makes a positive contribution to the historic settlement pattern and the rural character of the area.
30. Notwithstanding that development elsewhere has eroded the traditional settlement pattern, the area that includes the appeal site is characterised by sporadic and widely spaced development with intervening farmed land. The scheme would encroach into the open countryside and it would significantly increase the quantum of densely built and continuous residential ribbon development along the road. It would have an urbanising effect in this location and, in combination with development elsewhere, there would be cumulative adverse effects on the character and appearance of the area.
31. Therefore, the proposal would result in significant harm to the rural character and appearance of the countryside in this location. It would conflict with Policy P10 of the SPNP and Policy H15 of the CMDLP. These require, among other things, that development respects the surrounding rural character and context and that it is compatible with any distinctive vernacular character. It would also conflict with the policies in the Framework that require development to be sympathetic to the surrounding built environment and landscape setting and to contribute to a strong sense of place.

Other Considerations

32. The appellant considers that Policy H16 of the CMDLP is out of date, not fully in accordance with the Framework and should not be given full weight. However, the Framework is clear that existing policies should not be considered out-of-date simply because they were adopted prior to the publication of the Framework. Moreover, Policy H16 is consistent with policies in the Framework that seek to avoid the development of isolated homes in the countryside, that promote sustainable rural development and that require development to be sympathetic to local character and landscape setting. Therefore, the perceived conflict between Policy H16 and the rural development aims of the Framework does not weigh in favour of the scheme.
33. The accessibility of, and support for, the limited local services and facilities would be a small benefit of the scheme. However, the proposal would not minimise the need to travel and there would be a significant increase in private car journeys from this location. This is a harm that weighs against the scheme to a moderate degree.
34. The Council is able to demonstrate in excess of a 5 year housing land supply. Although this does not prevent further residential development from coming forward, the provision of new dwellings in an unsuitable location is not a

benefit of the scheme. The housing contribution is therefore a neutral factor in my assessment. There would be small economic benefits, both during the construction and occupation phase of the development. However, given the size of the settlement, its dispersed nature, and the apparent absence of community facilities, the social benefits of the scheme would be limited.

35. The proposal would not result in harm to biodiversity, the safe operation of the highway or to the living conditions of future occupiers or neighbouring residential occupiers. Matters relating to archaeological assets and drainage could be addressed by planning condition. However, these are requirements of the development plan and they do not weigh in favour of the proposal.

Green belt balance

36. I have concluded that the proposal would be inappropriate development in the Green Belt which is, by definition, harmful. It would result in a significant loss of openness of the Green Belt. The Framework advises that substantial weight must be given to any harm to the Green Belt. The conflict with the development plan policies for rural housing would result in modest harm. There would be moderate harm to the character and appearance of the countryside and the settlement. On the other hand, there would be limited to small economic and social benefits.
37. In this case, there are no other considerations that would clearly outweigh the harm to the Green Belt by reason of inappropriateness, loss of openness and any other harm. Consequently, the very special circumstances necessary to justify the proposal do not exist.

Conclusion

38. For the reasons set out above, the appeal should therefore be dismissed.

Sarah Manchester

INSPECTOR