



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 24 February 2020

by Diane Cragg DipTP MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 2 April 2020

Appeal Ref: APP/P2935/W/19/3242837

Strathmore, St Mary's Hospital Drive, Stannington NE61 6AP

- 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 Pam Marfitt-Smith against the decision of Northumberland County Council.
 - The application Ref 18/04097/FUL, dated 30 October 2018, was refused by notice dated 10 July 2019.
 - The development proposed is construction of three dwellings.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Procedural Matters

2. The emerging Northumberland Local Plan (NLP) is at an advanced stage of preparation. The emerging plan has been referred to in the Council's report and the appellant's statement, although the policies have not been relied upon in the reasons for refusal and I have not been provided with evidence of the extent to which policies in the emerging plan are subject to objection. I therefore afford the policies in the NLP limited weight as material planning considerations in the determination of this appeal.
3. The appeal site is not within the Green Belt boundary 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) (JSP) sets out the broad areas to be included in an extension of the Green Belt around Morpeth. Although the precise boundaries of the Green Belt extension are not set by Policy S5, on the evidence before me, including in the Stannington Parish Neighbourhood Plan (NP), made on the 11 September 2018, and the various appeal decisions referenced by the parties, I am satisfied that the appeal site is within the Green Belt extension. I have therefore determined the appeal on that basis.
4. The Council confirm that they have in excess of a 5-year housing land supply. Northumberland Council has also achieved 239% delivery (2019 figure) against its minimum housing requirement for the past three years, in accordance with the housing delivery test.
5. The appeal site is a former psychiatric hospital. It is clear from my site visit that there has been extensive development within its grounds. I have not been provided with the circumstances under which planning permission for the

development of the grounds was accepted and I must consider the appeal proposals based on the evidence before me.

Main Issues

6. The main issues are:

- 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;
- the effect of the proposal on the openness of the Green Belt;
- whether the site is in a suitable location for housing development having regard to local and national policies;
- if the proposal is inappropriate development, whether harm by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm, is clearly outweighed by other considerations so as to amount to the very special circumstances necessary to justify the development.

Reasons

Whether inappropriate development

7. The appeal site is part of an area known as St Mary's Park, Stannington. St Mary's Park was a former Psychiatric Hospital that has been redeveloped as a housing site. The appeal site was the former Deputy Medical Superintendent's house and garden. The house is a relatively modern house set within a large rectangular plot with extensive landscaping to the boundaries.
8. The Framework outlines that the construction of new buildings, other than in connection with a limited number of specific exceptions, should be regarded as inappropriate in the Green Belt (paragraph 145). Inappropriate development according to the Framework is harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances. One of the exceptions is limited infilling in villages (Paragraph 145e).
9. Saved 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 broadly consistent with Paragraph 145 of the Framework.
10. The appellant points out that the Framework does not provide a definition of either what constitutes a "village" or "limited infilling". Policy C17 provides guidance in as much as it states that villages inset within the green belt are those suitable for limited infill. The NP acknowledges that Stannington, under the CMDLP has a defined settlement boundary but no other part of the NP area has.
11. St Marys Park has a village hall and a public house as well as a local bus service. It is essentially a new area of housing within the grounds, and based around, the original buildings associated with the former hospital site. The NP recognises the area as a separate settlement to Stannington, but this does not mean that it is a village. With the limited range of facilities available I consider

the area to be more akin to a hamlet. The appeal site is not therefore in a village.

12. Strathmore is a large detached house with a detached garage set back from the road frontage in a substantial area of land which is enclosed by mature trees and planting. The proposed development is for three houses, two within the front garden set at right angles to the main house and one located on a similar building line to the side of the existing house. The appeal site is next to an area of woodland to the rear, which extends up to Catraw Burn, beyond which is open farm and pastureland. New houses have been built adjacent to the appeal site and woodland. Broadly to the east is an area of recreation space and a group of mainly semi-detached housing which pre-date the more recent estate development.
13. The CMDLP defines infill as the infilling of small gaps within an otherwise continuously built up frontage. Strathmore's immediate surroundings provide areas of open undeveloped land in the form of the woodland to the rear and recreation ground to the east. In addition, beyond the site's front boundary there is an open aspect towards the village Hall and St Marys Inn. The appeal site is not therefore a small gap in an otherwise built up frontage. Consequently, I do not consider that the site represents limited infilling.
14. My attention has been drawn to new dwellings elsewhere in the area that have been approved by the Council and at appeal. Full details of these developments are not before me and I cannot therefore be certain that they are directly comparable to the appeal scheme. However, I note that the appellant acknowledges that it is for the decision maker to determine the definition of limited infill and whilst having regard to the evidence submitted, I have considered the proposed development on its own merits in this regard.
15. The Framework identifies that the fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. Paragraph 134 sets out the five purposes of Green Belt. In this case the appellant considers that the site does not serve any of these purposes. However, by limiting development on the appeal site the Green Belt aim of encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land and safeguarding the countryside from encroachment would be supported.
16. Overall, I consider that the proposed development does not represent limited infilling in a village. Therefore, the development would be inappropriate development within the Green Belt, and it would conflict with saved Policy C17 of the CMDLP and the policies in the Framework that protect the Green Belt.

Openness

17. The Framework advises that openness and permanence are the essential characteristics of the Green Belt. Openness is the absence of development and it has both spatial and visual aspects.
18. The site for the three dwellings forms the garden area of the existing property. There are no buildings on the land although there is a small area of hard landscaping within the front garden. The proposed development would

introduce a significant quantum of permanent development in terms of both footprint and form.

19. There would be moderate visual impacts resulting from the construction of three dwellings, access and parking and associated separation of the land between plots. Whilst the site is well screened, and the visual impacts would be limited, more of the land would be developed and openness would therefore be reduced.
20. Consequently, there would be a moderate loss of openness of the Green Belt in this location.

Whether the development is suitable for housing

21. The appeal site is outside of the settlement boundary for Stannington and it is in the countryside for the purposes of the CMDLP. Policy C1 states that development in the open countryside will not be permitted unless it is essential to the needs of agriculture or forestry or it is permitted by other policies, including Policy H16 which sets out detailed criteria for new houses in the countryside. In this case, the dwellings are not proposed to meet the needs of a key worker and it does not meet any of the listed policy exceptions.
22. The CMDLP pre-dates the publication of the Framework and there has been substantial development within the immediate environs of the appeal site. Nevertheless, the NP was made in September 2018 and acknowledges that Stannington Village is the only part of the NP area that has a settlement boundary and therefore the site is currently outside of any settlement limit and within open countryside. This is consistent with the approach in Policy C1.
23. Policies in the Framework support housing in rural areas that reflect local needs. It promotes sustainable development in rural areas by locating housing where it will enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities.
24. Although there is a village Hall and St Marys Inn close to the appeal site, the appellant identifies that key employment is at Morpeth and Newcastle and schools are located in Stannington and Morpeth. There is limited evidence before me that the development of three houses at this site would support specific rural housing needs and the Council can identify a sufficient supply of housing land.
25. Therefore, there is no basis to support development that is outside any defined settlement boundary within open countryside and I find that the development conflicts with Policy C1 of the CMDLP and the Framework.

Other considerations

26. The grounds surrounding the St Mary's Hospital, Stannington, including the appeal site, are a grade II Historic Park and Garden. The Council and the Gardens Trust have advised me that the housing development already approved within the grounds of the former hospital site has seriously compromised the historic site. As a result, no objections were raised to the proposed development. I have not been provided with any evidence that identifies harm to the grade II park and garden. As I have already identified

substantive harm to the Green Belt, such that the appeal should be dismissed, there is no need to consider this matter further.

27. I acknowledge that the Council has a 5-year housing land supply. Nevertheless, the Framework seeks to significantly boost the supply of housing therefore I attach a small amount of weight to the provision of housing at the site.

Other Matters

28. The Ecological Impact Assessment¹ identifies the site as being 9.5km from coastal designated sites at the Blyth estuary. This is within the 10km buffer for potential recreational impacts on coastal sites. The Council do not refer to this designation in their evidence. Given my conclusions on the main issues there is no need to consider this matter further.

Green Belt Balance

29. I have concluded that the proposed dwelling would be inappropriate development in the Green Belt which is, by definition, harmful. It would result in a harmful loss of openness of the Green Belt and harm to the purposes of Green Belt. The Framework advises that substantial weight must be given to any harm to the Green Belt. Furthermore, the site is not a suitable location for new housing, having regard to the development plan.
30. Although I attach some very limited weight to the contribution the appeal site would make to boosting the supply of housing this other consideration would not clearly outweigh the harm to the Green Belt by reason of inappropriateness, loss of openness and other harm. Consequently, the very special circumstances necessary to justify the proposed development do not exist.

Conclusion

31. For the reasons set out above, the appeal is dismissed.

Diane Cragg

INSPECTOR

¹ Ecological Impact Assessment March 2019 issue