



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 21 January 2020

by M Cryan BA(Hons) DipTP MSc MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 26 May 2020

Appeal Ref: APP/P2365/W/19/3239172

Scarth Hill Mission Church, St Helens Road, Ormskirk L39 9ED

- 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 A Wilson against the decision of West Lancashire Borough Council.
 - The application Ref 2019/0133/FUL, dated 4 January 2019, was refused by notice dated 16 April 2019.
 - The development proposed is described as the 'refurbishment and replacement extension of formerly converted Chapel to create 2 bed dwelling house'.
-

Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Main Issues

2. The appeal site lies within the Green Belt, and accordingly the main issues are:
 - Whether the proposal would be inappropriate development within 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;
 - The effect of the proposed extension on the character and appearance of the area and the existing building;
 - Would harm by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm, be clearly outweighed by other considerations, so as to amount to the very special circumstances necessary to justify the proposal.

Reasons

Whether proposal is inappropriate development in the Green Belt

3. 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 specific circumstances. Paragraph 145 of the Framework states that, other than for listed exceptions, the construction of new buildings in the Green Belt should be regarded as inappropriate. Policy GN1 of the 2013 West Lancashire Local Plan Development Plan Document (the WLLP) states that development proposals within the Green Belt will be assessed against national policy and any relevant Local Plan policies.

4. The existing building on site is a vacant 19th Century chapel, which was converted into a dwelling during the 1980s but subsequently, at a date which it is not possible to identify from the information before me, left vacant. The building has suffered from vandalism in the intervening years, including arson which has damaged an extension built as part of the earlier residential conversion. The proposal is to refurbish and extend the original mission hall, adding a large and irregularly shaped two-storey extension at the southern end of the existing building to create additional living space and bedrooms so that the entire property can be used as a two-bedroom dwelling.
5. Paragraph 145 (c) of the Framework allows for the extension or alteration of a building provided that it does not result in disproportionate additions over and above the size of the original building. The 2015 'Development in the Green Belt' Supplementary Planning Document (the GBSPD) indicates that the Council would consider an increase of more than 40% above the volume of the original building to be disproportionate.
6. The figures provided by the appellant indicate that the proposed extension would have a volume of 390.4 cubic metres, while the existing building (including a 1980s extension which would be replaced) has a volume of 494.4 cubic metres. The appellant has provided volume figures for other buildings which previously stood on the site but, regardless of references to the 'original building' in the Framework and the GBSPD, as these are no longer in place it is not appropriate to take their volume into account. While the Council disputes some of the appellant's volume calculations it is not necessary to examine these in detail, as even on the basis of the appellant's figures it is clear that the proposed development would increase the built volume of the building by considerably more than the 40% threshold set out in the GBSPD. The appellant accepts that the proposal does not comply with the advice of the GBSPD in this regard. It would therefore represent a disproportionate addition and so would not be covered by the exception set out in Paragraph 145 (c) of the Framework.
7. I conclude that the proposal would be inappropriate development in the Green Belt. It would conflict with national policy to protect the Green Belt, and with WLLP Policy GN1. The proposal would also fail to comply with advice in the GBSPD, which provides clarification of size thresholds for development in the Green Belt.

Openness

8. A fundamental aim of Green Belt policy, as set out in paragraph 133 of the Framework, is to keep land permanently open. Openness is the absence of development, and it has both a spatial and visual aspect to it.
9. The existing chapel building is secluded by trees to some extent in views from the roads immediately passing the site, and there are several other dwellings of various ages nearby. However, the general character of the surrounding area is rural open countryside, and the fall of the land away to the north west and south west allows long views to and from the site across open fields.
10. The proposed extension would have a similar ground area to the mission hall building and would therefore significantly increase the built footprint on the site. While it would not be quite as tall as the existing building, as has already been described it would lead to there being a substantial increase in the built

volume on the site. As a result the proposal would have a greater impact on spatial openness than the existing building on the site. The large extension would also be seen in views through and across the site. While this would be mitigated to some degree by the positioning of the existing building and the trees and shrubs around the site boundary, it would also result in a loss of visual openness. This loss of spatial and visual openness to the Green Belt would be contrary to national and local policy, something which the appellant acknowledges.

Character and appearance

11. The proposed extension would be only slightly smaller than the existing chapel to which it would be attached. Although the extension would not rise above the lower ridge line of the southern end of the existing building, as I have described above it would represent a sizeable addition to the chapel building. It would therefore result in a considerable increase in the built mass on the site, in an area which is predominantly characterised by openness.
12. The proposed extension would be an irregular polygon in plan, wrapped around the southern corner of the mission hall building. It is intended that the walls and roof would be clad in larch, with an eaves height rising gradually towards the south. The extension would therefore be visually distinct from the existing building. The appellant has sought to demonstrate that the design rationale of the proposal is drawn from the original building, and I accept that it is not always necessary for an extension to mimic the form or detailing of an original building. However, based on the information before me and what I observed during my site visit, in my view the shape, scale and detailing of the proposed extension in combination mean that it would to a large degree subsume and overwhelm the existing building.
13. For these reasons I conclude that the proposed additions would have an unacceptable effect on the character of the area and on the appearance of the host property. The proposal therefore fails to comply with WLLP Policy ENV5, which among other things requires development proposals to have regard to local distinctiveness, and requires extensions to relate to the existing building in terms of design and materials.

Other considerations

14. Paragraph 146 (d) of the Framework indicates that the re-use of buildings in the Green Belt is not inappropriate development provided that they are of permanent and substantial construction. The parties do not dispute that the reuse of the existing mission hall would, taken in isolation, comply with this requirement. However, as I have described above the large extension would lead to a loss of openness, and the proposal would not therefore fall within the exception set out in Paragraph 146 of the Framework.
15. Paragraph 79 of the Framework indicates that the development of isolated homes in the countryside should be avoided except in certain circumstances, including where a development would represent the optimal viable use of a heritage asset, where it would reuse redundant or disused buildings and enhance its immediate setting, or where its design would be of exceptional quality. The repair and reuse of the currently vacant mission hall would, in this context, represent an enhancement of its immediate setting. However, for the reasons I have described above I consider that the proposed design of the

extension, though distinctive, does not demonstrate exceptional quality in this context as it would subsume and overwhelm the existing building which the Council indicates is a Locally Listed Building. The proposal is not therefore supported by the provisions of Paragraph 79 of the Framework in this regard.

16. The proposal would represent a viable use which would support the repair of the chapel and bring the original mission hall back into use as a dwelling. In line with the provisions of Paragraph 79 of the Framework, this is a positive factor of the scheme and in my judgement carries moderate weight in favour of the proposal.

Green Belt Balance

17. The proposal would be inappropriate development in the Green Belt, and would cause harm to the openness of the Green Belt. These are matters to which I attach substantial weight, as required by Paragraph 144 of the Framework. The proposed extension would also be harmful to the character and appearance of the area and the existing building on the site, contrary to WLLP Policy ENV5. Although there would be a benefit arising from the scheme, in that it would bring a redundant building which is a non-designated heritage asset back into use, this does not clearly outweigh the substantial weight I must give to the harm I have identified. As such, the other considerations are not sufficient to demonstrate very special circumstances.

Conclusion

18. I conclude that the proposal would be contrary to the requirements of the Framework and the development plan. The appeal is therefore dismissed.

M Cryan

Inspector