



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 8 September 2020

by Jonathon Parsons MSc BSc(Hons) DipTP Cert(Urb) MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 06 October 2020

Appeal Ref: APP/K0425/W/20/3254724

Southfield Farm, Chinnor Road, Bledlow Ridge HP14 4AW

- 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 Stevens against the decision of Buckinghamshire Council - Wycombe Area.
 - The application Ref 20/05492/FUL, dated 12 February 2020, was refused by notice dated 29 April 2020.
 - The development proposed is replacement agricultural buildings.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Main Issue

2. The site is within the Green Belt and so the main issues are:
 - whether the scheme would be inappropriate development for the purposes of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) and the development plan;
 - the openness of the Green Belt;
 - the effect of the proposal on the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB); and
 - if the scheme 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 it.

Reasons

Whether inappropriate development

3. Southfield farm is an existing agricultural unit which has a group of five barns situated off a main vehicular access from Chinnor Road. These existing buildings have planning permission or approval through the prior notification determination process to business uses. The proposal is for one five bay and two three bay replacement barns for agriculture which would equate approximately in size to the existing barns.

4. Paragraph 145 of the Framework establishes that new buildings or development are inappropriate unless they fall within listed exceptions. The exception at dispute is buildings for agriculture. The new buildings would be used for the storage of hay and straw, machinery, and the housing of livestock and therefore, they would meet the exception category under the Framework.
5. However, Policy DM42 of the Wycombe District Local Plan (LP) (2019) defines the exception as development for agriculture only when it is reasonably necessary for an existing agricultural trade or business. In this respect, the existing buildings are within the farm holding and as a result, they are part of the assessment of considering whether the replacement buildings are 'reasonably necessary'.
6. The appellant wishes to proceed with the permissions and approvals for the existing buildings because of the substantial costs and time involved in gaining consents for them, the increase in value of these existing buildings due to local business demand, and the cost and time involved in the current proposal for replacement buildings. However, these considerations do not suggest that these buildings are unsuitable for agricultural use, merely that alternative uses are permitted and are attractive for business use. The Council has stated the barns to be structurally sound and the appellant has not disputed this.
7. Taking all the above factors into account, there is no reason before me why the form, function and location of these existing buildings makes unsuitable for agriculture. Indeed, there were some agricultural storage and livestock housing taking place in some of these buildings at the time of my site visit. Therefore, it has not been demonstrated that the new buildings are reasonably necessary under the LP policy.
8. The proposal would therefore be inappropriate development under local policy but not national policy. However, the LP Policy DM42 explanatory text states that there are instances where clarification of national policy is required in the interests of certainty and consistency. A significant proportion of the LP area is designated as Green Belt and AONB, which this site is located within. The text further indicates that clarification is necessary to ensure the openness of the Green Belt is not harmed by development which might share the outward form and design of agricultural buildings but are not reasonably necessary for agriculture.
9. Such considerations are significant and therefore, the question of whether the proposal is inappropriate development should be tailored to local circumstances. As such, the proposal would be inappropriate development taking into account Policy DM42 of the LP.

Openness of the Green Belt

10. The fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open; the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence. The new buildings would be located close to the existing farmhouse and they would be located in a L-shaped layout within a surrounding landscaped earth bund. There would be a retained hedgerow boundary with substantial trees within it between the buildings and Chinnor Road.

11. Openness also has a spatial as well as visual dimension. The proposed barns would be substantial in size covering approximately 670 m² and a maximum height of approximately 4.5m and would introduce development into an area where there is none. Visually, there is some screening of this space due to the roadside vegetation and additional planting with bunding would take place. However, new planting would take time to establish whilst the established landscaping is largely deciduous exposing the development in winter when vegetation drops its leaves. There is also no guarantee that landscaping would remain in perpetuity. Over time, vegetation may be removed for any number of reasons, such as weather and accidental damage, and replacement planting inevitably takes time to establish. For all these reasons, the development would noticeably extend into an undeveloped area and the openness of the Green Belt would be adversely affected.

Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

12. The development would appear as a continuation of existing development at Southfield Farm. The surrounding countryside comprises fields, hedgerows and trees, as well as woodland. The appeal site lies on a ridge which slopes down away from Chinnor Road into a rolling landscape of valleys and hills. The area has an attractive rural scenic and landscape quality.
13. The development would extend significantly into an open field in a prominent landscape location and proposed landscaping would take time to become established. In the case of the roadside landscaping, much of this vegetation is deciduous further exposing the development in winter. There is no guarantee that landscaping would remain in perpetuity. Wrapping landscaping, including bunding, around buildings would also result in a rather artificial and unnatural boundary, further drawing attention to the development.
14. For all these reasons, the proposal would not conserve and enhance the landscape and scenic beauty of the Chilterns AONB. Paragraph 172 of the Framework states great weight should be given to this consideration and that AONBs have the highest status of protection. Accordingly, the proposal would be contrary to Policy DM30 of the LP and Policy 1 of the Bledlow-cum-Saunderton Neighbourhood Plan (NP) 2016-2033 (2017).

Other considerations

15. The appellant wants to proceed with the permissions/approvals for the conversion of the existing buildings if planning permission is refused for their replacement which would result in the closure of the farm. The appellant has invested significant time and expense in securing permissions/approvals for the existing buildings and the submission of the current proposal. However, the closure of the farm would be a substantial undertaking and there is little evidence to confirm that this is a real prospect. As a result, only small weight can therefore be attached to this consideration.
16. The change of use of the existing buildings to business uses would diversify the Southfield Farm business. Nevertheless, there is no evidence that the diversification is necessary to support and enable the continuation of agriculture at the farm. As such, only small weight can be given to this consideration.

17. A 2018 appeal proposal was dismissed for an agricultural barn at Perry Lane in Bledlow. Unlike the current proposal, the appellant provided no quantifiable details of storage areas and volumes for different items of equipment or animal feed. However, the Inspector mainly considered that the new barn was not 'reasonably necessary' for agriculture because planning permission had not been sought before the conversion of a former agricultural building on the holding. The situation before me is different in that existing barns in agricultural/business use would be replaced by new buildings and this is being considered within the 'reasonably necessary' assessment. This is a material difference between the proposals and demonstrates to me that every proposal must be considered on its particular planning merits.

Conclusion

18. The proposal would be inappropriate development in the Green Belt which is by definition harmful. There is harm to the openness of the Green Belt and the Chilterns AONB. Paragraph 144 of the Framework establishes substantial weight should be given to any harm to the Green Belt. The benefit of farm diversification and the risk of farm closure each attract small weight. However, cumulatively, such considerations would not be substantial. For these reasons, 'Very special circumstances' do not exist as the harm to the Green Belt by reason of inappropriateness, and other harm, are not clearly outweighed by other considerations.
19. There would be conflict with policies of the LP and NP, and the development plan taken as a whole. Whilst the proposal would not be inappropriate development under the Framework, the weight of such a material consideration would be reduced by local circumstances and there would also be significant harm to the AONB's scenic beauty and landscape. Accordingly, there are no material considerations to outweigh the conflict with the development plan. Therefore, for the reasons set out above, this appeal is dismissed.

Jonathon Parsons

INSPECTOR