
Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 17 August 2020

by S A Schinaia MSc EngD FGS

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 22 December 2020

Appeal Ref: APP/L2630/W/20/3253649

Stevens Breakers Yard, Barford Road, Topcroft NR35 2BB

- 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 Stuart Hall against the decision of South Norfolk District Council.
 - The application Ref 2019/2082, dated 17 October 2019, was refused by notice dated 9 December 2019.
 - The development proposed is the conversion of World War II Barracks into a single dwelling with a link block.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Procedural Matters

2. On request, the appellant submitted a plan¹ following comments made that he had considered revising the scheme. However, the appeal process should not be used to evolve a scheme and it is important that what is considered by an Inspector is essentially what was considered by the local planning authority, and on which interested people's views were sought. With that plan providing no obvious resolution of all of the issues relevant in this case, I have considered the appeal on the basis of the plans submitted to the Council.

Main Issues

3. The main issues are:
 - whether the proposed development represents appropriate development having regard to policies which address the conversion or re-use of countryside buildings;
 - the effect of the proposed development on the character and appearance of the area, including its effect on trees.
 - the effect on protected species.

Reasons

Conversion

4. The appeal site is a plot of land in Topcroft, formerly part of the airfield of Hardwick and owned by the RAF during the World War II. The site comprises

¹ Drawings as in REF BYAP2020@A4

two buildings surrounded by grass and a variety of vegetation and trees, mainly along its boundaries. The site is further surrounded by woodland and farmland, including agricultural fields, and, although not completely isolated, the character is that of a remote rural area.

5. The two buildings were reported to have been part of a breakers yard that was last used several years ago until the retirement of the owner of the commercial business. Since the appeal site is outside the development boundary of the main settlement, in planning terms it is an employment site within a countryside location.
6. The proposal involves the conversion of the two barracks into a single residential dwelling with a link building. The development plan for the area includes Policy DM2.10 of the South Norfolk Local Plan Development Management Policies (2015) (SNLP) on the conversion and re-use of buildings in the countryside for non-agricultural use. It sets out criteria that any development for the conversion of buildings into residential use in the countryside is assessed against.
7. The appellant has provided plans for the new dwelling showing a large extension that links the two buildings, up to 40% more than the original footprint. While I note the appellant's acceptance that the link building could be reduced in scale, on the basis of what was before the Council, this would represent a major extension sufficient to lead to harm to the character and appearance of the area.
8. Furthermore, the appellant has not provided a structural survey to assess the capability of the barracks to be converted. Taking account of the construction and condition of the existing buildings, this should have been provided together with the application and, in my view, cannot be secured afterwards with a condition.
9. As the owner of the property, the appellant has stated that he would prefer to convert the buildings to a residential use for the family rather than a commercial one for a number of reasons, including the viability of a commercial use. However, very limited evidence has been submitted to demonstrate that a commercial use or any other employment use is not viable, including the costs of renovation for an employment use or in relation to rental returns. In absence of this, a sequentially preferential use for employment purposes has not been ruled out, and accordingly, the appropriate conversion to residential use has not been demonstrated.
10. It is common ground that the buildings have historic value and significance due to their past association with the airfield. The conversion of such historic buildings could be supported by policy, and I note the appellant's argument that the residential conversion would support their retention. However, no robust heritage information has been submitted in support of the application to assess the impact of the conversion of the buildings to residential use on the site.
11. The buildings are made of brickwork within a metallic frame and are asymmetrical in shape and in terms of relative position to the property frontage. The plans suggest that the design would be that of a clad barn with no evident brickwork and, as such, I consider that the proposed development would alter and affect the significance of the heritage asset and

fail to preserve the external character of the buildings. Again, a structural survey would help to clarify whether the buildings are capable of conversion as they are, and this should have been addressed as part of the application, prior to any approaches that could be considered for formal recording of the assets.

12. Therefore, I consider that the proposal has failed to address potential employment use of the site and would harm the historic character of the buildings and the character and appearance of the area. It would not comply with the requirements of Policy DM2.10 of the SNLP, and its criteria which include that a building should be capable of conversion without major extension or a change in appearance to its rural characteristics, that practical and viable employment use cannot be found and that the proposal would enhance the historic or traditional character of the building.

Character and Appearance, Trees

13. The site is pleasantly surrounded by trees and the ash trees and oak along the eastern boundary of the appeal site are highly visible within the landscape both within and outside of the site due to their considerable height. It is reported that none of the trees would be removed although it is suggested that the hedge on the eastern side is to be reduced by the adjoining landowner.
14. Nonetheless, the eastern part of the site is significantly overshadowed by trees, including the oak and ash trees which overhang the eastern building. I consider that the trees would significantly overshadow and dominate the outlook from the dwelling, particularly the bedrooms with only a single outlook facing the trees.
15. Ultimately, due to their proximity to the buildings, their height, the shading effect, the littering of leaves and branch shedding, and the spread of their roots around the structures of the buildings, I consider that there may be material pressure to remove the trees, leading in turn to the detriment to the character and the appearance of the area. The change of use to a dwelling would create actual and perceived conflicts between the safety and amenity of future occupiers and the trees.
16. While I note there has been a preliminary arboricultural impact assessment, dated 15 October 2019, this has not sufficiently addressed the pressures that may arise from the proximity of these trees. In absence of this and a tree protection plan and arboricultural method statement, I conclude that the proposal may result in the unjustified risk of removal or reduction of trees, including category B trees, and consequential harm to the character and appearance of the area. As such, the proposed development would not comply with the requirements of Policy DM4.8 of the SNLP, which seeks that all development fully consider the existing trees both within and adjacent to the site, and Policy DM3.13 of the SNLP, which requires development to ensure a reasonable standard of living conditions, in terms of impacts on the loss of day light and overshadowing on future occupants, while reflecting the character of the local area.

Protected Species

17. The application was submitted with a preliminary ecological report, dated 11 October 2019, which clearly recommended the need for further surveys regarding bats and great crested newts. In absence of these additional surveys

it is not possible to assess the impact of the proposed scheme on those protected species as required by both Policy 1 of the Joint Core Strategy (JCS) (2014) and the extant Government circular 06/2005 on planning and biodiversity, as well as the policies of the Framework on habitat and biodiversity. The surveys pertain to both the appeal site, including the buildings, and the surrounding area and should be submitted in support of the application, as they cannot be secured by conditions.

18. Therefore, I conclude that the proposal would be contrary to Policy 1 of the JCS and Policy DM4.4 of the SNLP. Policy 1 of the JCS requires the development to both have regard to and protect the biodiversity and ecological interests of the site and contribute to providing a multi-functional green infrastructure network. Policy DM4.4 seeks for new development sites to safeguard the ecological interests of the site and to contribute to ecological and biodiversity enhancements.

Planning Balance and Conclusions.

19. The proposed development would result in a very modest addition to the Council's housing supply and, consequently, would create a limited support to the local community in terms of the economic and social dimensions of sustainability. However, the proposed scheme would fail to comply with the development plan or with the policies of the Framework related to the historic environment and biodiversity.

20. For the above reasons, I conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

S A Schinaia

INSPECTOR