



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 12 January 2021

by J Bowyer BSc(Hons) MSc MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 20th January 2021

Appeal Ref: APP/P0240/W/20/3259870

Land Adjacent 85 Astwick Road, Stotfold, Bedfordshire SG5 4BQ

- 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 and Mrs Chahal against the decision of Central Bedfordshire Council.
 - The application Ref CB/20/01951/FULL, dated 11 June 2020, was refused by notice dated 27 August 2020.
 - The development proposed is 'erection of single dwellinghouse, with car parking and landscaping and crossover to front'.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Procedural Matters

2. I have taken the description of the development from the planning application form, although I note that it is expressed differently on other documents.
3. I have been referred to policies within the emerging Central Bedfordshire Local Plan 2015-2035. The emerging plan was submitted to the Secretary of State in 2018, but is yet to be adopted and so is subject to change. In addition, I have not been provided with details of unresolved objections to the plan, and therefore the weight that these policies carry in my decision is limited.

Main Issue

4. The main issue is whether or not the site is a suitable location for housing, having regard to its position within the countryside and access to services.

Reasons

5. The appeal site is within a small group of buildings between the village of Astwick and the settlement envelope of Stotfold which is identified as a 'Minor Service Centre' by Policy CS1 of the Central Bedfordshire Core Strategy and Development Management Policies 2009 (CSDMP). As a consequence, the site is within the countryside for the purposes of planning policy.
6. The proposed dwelling would be located close to Astwick, but the very limited services here would not address the day-to-day needs of future occupiers. Stotfold offers a much wider range of facilities, as well as access to bus services providing links to other settlements including some with train stations. The distance between the site and the edge of the Stotfold settlement envelope is not excessive. However, I saw that the main services and facilities, as well as the closest bus stop, are located some way into the settlement. As a result,

total distances to reach these would be much greater, and would exceed the desirable walking distances suggested within guidance highlighted by the appellant¹. While within reasonable cycling distance, this would not be an option for all occupiers.

7. In addition, for a fairly significant proportion of the route along Astwick Road to the Stotfold settlement edge, there is no footway or street lighting, and I observed that use of the verges by pedestrians as a refuge or path would be hindered by their often narrow or uneven nature. This part of Astwick Road is also subject to the national speed limit, and although traffic volumes were not great at the time of my visit, my impression was that vehicles were travelling at significant speeds, some approaching this limit. In daylight there would be good visibility along the relatively straight road, and I accept that the distance without a footpath is not great. Nevertheless, the above factors would in my view result in a notable deterrent to walking or cycling, particularly for the elderly, those with a disability or with children; and at times of darkness. In combination with the total distance to actually reach facilities within Stotfold rather than just the settlement edge, I consider it unlikely that occupiers would consider these realistic options or undertake such journeys regularly.
8. Accordingly, I find that opportunities to access services and facilities by means other than the private vehicle would be very limited. The appellant has drawn my attention to ongoing development sites outside of the Stotfold settlement envelope nearby. However, given their closer proximity to the settlement edge and available footway connections, I do not find that their circumstances are directly comparable to the appeal before me. Moreover, that occupiers elsewhere may also be partly reliant on use of private vehicles is not in itself a compelling reason to support development within an unsuitable location.
9. Given the relationship with adjacent buildings, I do not consider that the proposal would create an isolated home in the countryside which paragraph 79 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) seeks to avoid. Nevertheless, the development strategy at CSDMP Policy CS1 outlines that development in the rural part of the district will be limited in scale. Policy DM4 further directs infill development to locations within defined settlement envelopes, with the supporting text advising that only specified types of development will be permitted outside of settlements. The evidence before me does not demonstrate that the proposal would fall within these types.
10. The proposal for a dwelling outside of a defined settlement would be contrary to the overall strategy to provide for growth within the CSDMP, and I find that future occupiers would be likely to rely heavily on private vehicles. I acknowledge that vehicle journeys to Stotfold would be fairly short. Even so, the lack of accessible services by means other than the private vehicle would go against the requirement for accessible services to meet needs as a key aspect of sustainable development outlined at paragraph 8 of the Framework. It would also be contrary to requirements within the Framework seeking active management of patterns of growth to support objectives including promoting opportunities for walking, cycling and public transport use. Use of electric vehicles could help to lessen environmental impact, but a condition could only make provision for charging infrastructure on the site and not enforce use, and would not in any event prevent trips to and from the site.

¹ IHT Guidance for Providing for Journeys on Foot

11. I therefore conclude that the site would not provide a suitable location for housing with regard to its location within the countryside and access to services. The proposal would conflict with Policies CS1 and DM4 of the CSDMP. It would also conflict with CSDMP Policies CS14 and DM3 which, amongst other things, require development that is accessible and which includes appropriate linkages including provision for pedestrians, cyclists and public transport.

Planning Balance

12. The Council's evidence highlights that the approach to development in the countryside under Policy DM4 is not wholly reflective of the Framework which refers to recognition of the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside. Even so, the aims of Policy DM4 to direct development to appropriate locations remains broadly consistent with those of the Framework requiring active management of patterns of growth. In this light, I give moderate weight to the conflict with it. Moreover, CSDMP Policies CS14 and DM3 and the Framework emphasise the importance of sites being well-related to existing settlements, and for the reasons given above, I do not consider that to be the case here.
13. The proposal would make effective use of the site and would deliver an additional dwelling towards the supply of housing in accordance with the objectives of the Framework which seeks to significantly boost the supply of housing to meet needs. However, the main parties advise that the Council has demonstrated a five-year supply of housing. I acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic may result in some effects on delivery of housing, but substantive evidence to show that impacts on housing completions would be sustained, or to demonstrate that the Council no longer has a five-year supply has not been provided. The balance of the evidence before me indicates that the Council has a 5-year supply of housing, and together with the small scale of the development, this limits the weight I give to the contribution of the proposal.
14. There would be economic and social benefits associated with construction and occupation of the dwelling which would offer some support to local services, the economy and to maintaining the vitality of the community, but these would be limited according to the modest scale of the development. I also note suggested biodiversity enhancements, but in part these are proposed to mitigate the effects of the development, and overall I consider the benefit would be fairly minor.
15. I am satisfied that the design of the dwelling would be generally sympathetic to its surroundings. Be that as it may, I found the existing site to be unobtrusive and to sit comfortably between buildings within the context of the surrounding open countryside. As a result, I am not persuaded that the proposal offers significant visual enhancement so as to weigh in favour of the development. That the Council has not alleged harm on grounds of character, the living conditions of neighbouring occupiers, ecology, landscaping, flood risk, parking or highway safety is also a neutral consideration in the planning balance.
16. Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 requires that applications are determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Notwithstanding the reduced weight that I attach to the conflict with Policy DM4 of the CSDMP, I find that the benefits of the scheme, whether considered individually or cumulatively, do not outweigh the harm that I have identified. The proposal would conflict with the development plan when it is read as a whole and neither the benefits of the

proposal, nor any other material considerations including the Framework, justify taking a decision that would be contrary to the provisions of the development plan in this instance.

Conclusion

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

J Bowyer
INSPECTOR