



Appeal Decision

Site Visit made on 9 February 2021

by Guy Davies BSc (Hons) DipTP MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 12 February 2021

Appeal Ref: APP/G2245/W/20/3254756

Raleys Cricket Ground, Plymouth Drive, Sevenoaks, TN13 3RP

- 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 Sevenoaks Town Council against the decision of Sevenoaks District Council.
 - The application 18/03588/FUL, dated 12 October 2018, was refused by notice dated 15 January 2020.
 - The development proposed is the replacement of one cricket pitch with an enclosed 3G Multi Use Games Area (MUGA), a 3G cricket wicket and two multi-purpose grass pitches, including associated landscaping, lighting and enclosures.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matter

2. No site address was given on the application form, and differing forms of site address have been used by the appellant and Council. I have used that given by the appellant. I am satisfied that irrespective of the form of address, both parties are referring to the same site.

Main Issue

3. The main issue is the effect of the proposed development on sports provision in the area.

Reasons

4. Policy SP10 of the Sevenoaks District Council Core Strategy, 2011 states that open space, sport and recreation facilities, including indoor sports facilities of value to the local community will be retained. Development may exceptionally be allowed where replacement provision of at least equivalent value to the local community is provided.
5. This policy is consistent with the advice given in paragraph 97 of the National Planning Policy Framework, which says that existing open space, sports and recreational buildings and land, including playing fields, should not be built on unless 1 or more of 3 criteria are met. The criteria are that: a) an assessment has been undertaken which has clearly shown the land to be surplus to requirements, or b) the loss resulting from the proposed development would be replaced by equivalent or better provision in terms of quantity and quality in a suitable location, or c) the development is for alternative sports and recreational provision, the benefits of which clearly outweigh the loss of the current or former use.

6. Sevenoaks District Council Playing Pitch Strategy 2018 includes a district wide assessment of sports facilities, including Raleys, and concludes that the cricket ground is actively used by a number of cricket clubs and should be protected. The application was accompanied by a cricket ground impact assessment¹, which in contrast concluded that the existing cricket ground is underused and that there is surplus capacity at other cricket grounds in the district which could accommodate any displaced cricketing use. While I note the findings of this assessment, I place greater weight on the Council's Playing Pitch Strategy which provides a more comprehensive overview of sport and recreation needs in the district, as well as reaching conclusions in situations where there may be competing demands between different sports, as is the case at Raleys. The cricket ground is therefore not surplus to requirements.
7. The appeal proposal would result in the loss of the existing cricket ground. A cricket ground would be retained on part of the site, but it would be approximately half the size of the existing outfield and have a single artificial wicket rather than the current grass square wicket. Both existing and proposed outfields are or would be used by other sports during the winter. Because of its reduced size and lack of a grass wicket, the replacement cricket ground would not be of an equivalent or better provision than the existing cricket ground, notwithstanding problems of drainage and off-season maintenance that have been identified in the Playing Pitch Strategy, or that the artificial wicket might provide a better opportunity for practice and youth cricket.
8. The proposal would provide alternative sports provision in the form of an artificial surface multi use games area, better lighting and enclosures, as well as two multi use grass pitches and the artificial surface wicket. The Council's Playing Pitch Strategy supports the provision of artificial grass pitches in the area, but in relation to Raleys notes that adding such a pitch on the site would result in the loss of one of the cricket pitches and as a consequence is not considered an option. I acknowledge that an artificial grass pitch would provide better all-weather facilities, particularly for rugby for which there is demand as evidenced in the Playing Pitch Strategy and in submissions by the appellant². However, I am not persuaded that this better provision for rugby and other field sports would clearly outweigh the loss of the current cricket ground.
9. In reaching that judgement, I place weight on the views of Sport England, who object to the proposal on the grounds that it would conflict with national planning policy and their own playing fields policy³. In considering the proposal Sport England consulted with the England and Wales Cricket Board and the Rugby Football Union and took account of their views. Notwithstanding the better facilities that would accrue to rugby, Sport England are opposed to the appeal proposal because it would involve an unacceptable loss to cricket.
10. I conclude that the proposal would result in the loss of the existing cricket ground, that the replacement cricket ground is not of an equivalent or better provision, and the benefits arising from the alternative sports provision do not clearly outweigh the harm that would be caused to cricket. As a result, the proposal would conflict with Policy SP10 of the Sevenoaks District Council Core Strategy 2011, which seeks to retain sports facilities.

¹ Savills, Cricket Impact Assessment, November 2018.

² Including letters from Sevenoaks Vine Cricket Club, Lady Boswell's CE Primary School and Sevenoaks District Sports Council.

³ Sport England, Playing Fields Policy and Guidance, March 2018.

Other Matters

11. The appellant refers to the White Oak Leisure Centre, Swanley where the Council granted planning permission⁴ for its replacement with a smaller facility, notwithstanding an objection by Sport England. The circumstances of this case are materially different to the appeal proposal, in that the leisure centre had reached the end of its life and there were considerations around the financial viability of any replacement. As a consequence there is little direct comparison that can be drawn between the two schemes, and I give it little weight.

Conclusion

12. I conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

Guy Davies

INSPECTOR

⁴ 19/02591/HYB