
Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 9 February 2021

by Christina Downes BSc DipTP MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government

Decision date: 8th March 2021

Appeal Ref: APP/Z3635/W/20/3261719

The Mill Heathrow, Horton Road, Stanwell Moor TW19 6BJ

- 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 Dr Hare's Proprietaries against the decision of Spelthorne Borough Council.
 - The application Ref 20/00218/FUL, dated 13 February 2020, was refused by notice dated 22 April 2020.
 - The development proposed is the provision of 19 additional parking spaces on land next to an existing car park and change of use to an area of parking.
-

Decision

1. For the reasons given below, the appeal is dismissed.

Reasons

Whether the proposal would be inappropriate development in the Green Belt

2. The appeal site is on the western side of a commercial site that occupies a locally listed mill and various other buildings mainly on the northern side of Horton Road. The perimeter of Heathrow Airport is a short distance to the east and the A3113, Airport Way dual carriageway runs immediately to the north. A number of businesses operate from the site from generally small offices and warehouse units. The whole of The Mill site and land to the east and west is within the Green Belt.
3. The *National Planning Policy Framework* (the Framework) confirms the importance that the Government attaches to Green Belts. The aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. There are various forms of development that are not inappropriate including engineering operations and material changes of use, provided the openness of the Green Belt is preserved and there is no conflict with the purposes of including land within it. Saved policy GB1 in the *Spelthorne Borough Local Plan* 2001 states similar aims and is broadly consistent with Framework policy.
4. The parking area has already been constructed although at the time of my visit it was not being used. It covers a relatively modest area of some 440 m² and is intended to provide 19 parking spaces. The surface is covered with grasscrete, which is a porous material allowing natural drainage and for grass to grow through the individual cells made of recycled plastic. There are low post and rail timber fences around parts of the perimeter. There is no dispute that the development comprises an engineering operation and would involve a material change of use.

5. The physical works have generally retained an open character, although the associated fencing provides an element of enclosure. However, openness would be further diminished once the intended use takes place. This is recognised by the Appellant who does not dispute that the scheme would be inappropriate development and contrary to saved policy GB1.

Effect on openness

6. It is appreciated that vehicles are generally low in height, which would limit the visual impact. Furthermore, there would undoubtedly be periods when the number of parked vehicles would be less, although from the evidence the whole point of the car park is to satisfy the demand for more parking by businesses operating at The Mill. It is therefore reasonable to surmise that the parking area would be fully utilised during the working day. Furthermore, this may be for an extended period of time as many businesses based at The Mill are connected to the operation of Heathrow Airport.
7. The proposed parking area is not apparent from the public domain. Several maple trees have been planted along the western perimeter of The Mill site. These would eventually provide some screening in views from the west when mature and in leaf. I acknowledge that the site is not very large and that open land would remain to the north and the west beyond the perimeter fence. The actual harm to the openness of the Green Belt overall would be limited. I note that a *Green Belt Review* was undertaken on behalf of the Council in 2018 in connection with its emerging local plan. This scored The Mill site, including the appeal land, weakly in terms of fulfilling Green Belt purposes. However, no recommendation was made for the designation to be removed and, indeed, that matter would be for the future local plan examination. There would be a degree of countryside encroachment arising from the scheme, albeit that this also would be relatively minor in scale.

Other material factors

8. There are about 23 businesses established at The Mill site and many are connected to the operation of Heathrow Airport in relatively small units. I observed that there are a number of different parking areas around The Mill site, with the bulk of provision to the rear of the main buildings. This comprises a concrete area and an extension surfaced in grasscrete. The Council and Appellant have calculated the requirement and provision slightly differently. However, on either set of figures it is agreed that the provision significantly exceeds the parking standards. It is to be noted that these are expressed as a maximum in recognition that some sites are more accessible than others.
9. In this case the evidence clearly shows that public transport to The Mill site is not particularly regular or convenient for employees to use. Furthermore, from my observations the roads are relatively narrow and do not provide a particularly hospitable cycling environment. Whilst the information suggests that some travel by bus, motorcycle or bicycle, the vast majority use a car.
10. I saw at my site visit that many of the parking spaces are allocated to individual companies, although the evidence suggests that parking is not particularly well managed on a site-wide basis. Bearing in mind that the existing provision exceeds the maximum standards, the requirement for further provision suggests to me that the proposal is being driven solely by demand. The Appellant indicates that part of the original mill building is being

refurbished and that this could accommodate a further 28 employees. I note that there are individual representations supporting the proposal from some working at the site. However, it is not made clear whether the extra 19 spaces would be for potential new tenants or those already in occupation. Indeed, this seems to be an ad hoc proposal with no information as to whether they are intended to be allocated to one or more specific businesses or whether they are to be used by any employee on a first come first served basis. Whatever the intention there is no evidence that these spaces would be necessary for economic reasons or that without them any particular business would become unviable or otherwise economically disadvantaged.

11. I note the Appellant's comments about how The Mill has sought to address the issue of parking need. However, I am not convinced that having a minibus for trips up to London or collecting visitors in a staff car demonstrate that a more sustainable approach has been adequately explored. For example, there is no evidence that a site-wide travel plan has been considered to reduce individual car usage. Furthermore, it may be possible for some staff to work from home, at least for part of the time. This could particularly benefit part time workers with children as referred to by the Appellant as being prevalent at The Mill.
12. The Appellant has referred to an appeal relating to a parking proposal for a care home in Bookham. In that case one of the factors in its favour was the social need for the additional provision. However, that site seemed to be significantly underprovided with spaces in comparison with Surrey County Council's parking standards, which is a rather different situation. Furthermore, green travel choices were being encouraged. The Appellant suggests that in the present appeal there is a strong economic need for more car parking, but there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate that this is the case.
13. It is suggested that if sufficient parking is not provided on-site vehicles will park along Horton Road. However, I noted that there are parking restrictions within the immediate vicinity. I appreciate that further along Horton Road these do not apply, but they already appear to be popular with travellers and taxis using Heathrow Airport. Their potential availability for employees of the site would seem questionable.

Conclusions

14. The Framework makes clear that substantial weight should be given to any harm to the Green Belt. In this case the harm would arise through inappropriateness as well as loss of openness, although the latter would be limited. Nevertheless, for the reasons I have given I consider that the material factors put forward in favour of the proposal have limited weight. Very special circumstances to justify the proposal do not therefore exist here.
15. I have taken account of all other representations, including the concerns about flood risk and residential amenity. However, I have found nothing to alter my conclusion that the development would be unacceptable on Green Belt grounds and that the appeal should not succeed.

Christina Downes

INSPECTOR