



Appeal Decision

Site Visit made on 3 March 2021

by R Morgan BSc (Hons) MCD MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 29 March 2021

Appeal Ref: APP/W4325/W/20/3262626

Prenton Golf Club, 26-28 Golf Links Road, BIRKENHEAD, CH42 8LW

- 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 Prenton Golf Club against the decision of Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council.
 - The application Ref APP/20/00492, dated 2 April 2020, was refused by notice dated 9 September 2020.
 - The development proposed is development of a covered golf practice facility to enable practice and indoor & outdoor coaching. The facility will be for the use of members of the golf club and will be used to encourage participation in golf from ladies, beginners and juniors.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Main Issues

2. The appeal site is within the Green Belt and so the main issues are:
 - whether the proposal is inappropriate development in the Green Belt for the purposes of the National Planning Policy Framework, including the effect on openness;
 - the effect of the proposal on the character and appearance of the Mountwood Conservation Area and its setting; and
 - whether the 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. The National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) identifies that the fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. It goes on to state that inappropriate development is harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances. Framework paragraph 145 says that the construction of new buildings should be regarded as inappropriate development in the Green Belt, other than in a number of exceptional circumstances. These include the provision of appropriate facilities for outdoor sport and recreation, as long as

the facilities preserve the openness of the Green Belt and do not conflict with the purposes of including land within it.

4. Policy GB2 of the Wirral Unitary Development Plan 2000 (UDP) is also concerned with protecting the Green Belt, and sets out a similar approach to that contained in the Framework. However, in relation to outdoor sport and recreation, the exception contained in the policy refers to 'essential' facilities, whereas the Framework requires such facilities to be 'appropriate'. I have used the wording in the Framework, which was published more recently than Policy GB2 and sets out national policy with regard to Green Belts.
5. Prenton Golf Course is a long established facility located on the edge of the urban area, entirely within the Green Belt. The course is well treed and has a parkland quality. The appeal site is currently used as a golf practice area and is located on land outside of, but adjacent to, the main course.
6. The long and open practice field is accessed through the golf course, and is bounded by agricultural land on two sides. Shrubs and trees line the field on all four sides, but the trees are highest and the vegetation most substantial along the long edge adjacent to the golf course. The site is largely flat but drops in level slightly towards the far end, furthest away from Stanley Avenue, affording views to the open countryside beyond.
7. The proposed timber framed building would comprise of an open sided element containing four practice booths, and two fully enclosed teaching studios to enable year-round golf tuition. There would also be a small store. The proposed building would be used solely for learning and practicing golf, so would be an ancillary use to that of the main golf course. As such, it would be an appropriate facility for outdoor sport in the context of the Framework. However, to meet the exception set out in paragraph 145b), the proposal would also need to preserve openness.
8. The proposed building would be of a considerable size, with a total length of around 26 metres, and a maximum height of approximately 4.3 metres. It would be sited towards the top end of the field, which shares a boundary with a large residential property, 46 Stanley Avenue. In order to limit disturbance to the neighbouring occupier, the proposed facility would be sited a reasonable distance from the adjacent dwelling. However, the result would be that the building, which due to its scale would have a significant visual impact, would appear as an isolated structure, rather than forming part of a group of existing buildings.
9. I acknowledge that the mature trees and vegetation around the field boundaries would mean that views of the proposed facility would be largely limited to vantage points within the site and the adjacent dwelling. However, openness in terms of the Green Belt has a spatial as well as a visual aspect. Whilst the majority of the field would remain undeveloped, the construction of a building of the scale proposed would result in a considerable impact on the openness of the Green Belt, in spatial terms.
10. I therefore conclude that, whilst the proposal would provide an appropriate facility for sport and recreation, it would fail to preserve openness. As a result, it would not comply with exception b) of Framework paragraph 145, and so would constitute inappropriate development in the Green Belt.

Conservation Area

11. The appeal site is adjacent to the Mountwood Conservation Area (MCA), which includes Stanley Avenue and the properties fronting onto it. The MCA is predominately residential in nature, and is characterised by tree lined streets with large, detached houses set within substantial plots. Well vegetated front gardens contribute to the area having a spacious and verdant character.
12. Stanley Avenue extends as far as the edge of the appeal site, but shrubs and vegetation significantly restrict views of the site from the road. Whilst the proposed development could be seen from the upper floors of 46 Stanley Avenue, it would not be readily visible from public vantage points within the MCA.
13. Looking towards the MCA from within the appeal site, the side and rear elevations of 46 Stanley Avenue are clearly visible. Oblique views of several other nearby properties are partially screened by trees and shrubs. Whilst the appeal site forms part of its setting, the view into the MCA from this location is not particularly sensitive in the context of the wider conservation area. Furthermore, the proposed facility would be sited away from the boundary, and would only be seen in the context of the MCA from some distance away.
14. I note the Council's comment that heritage impacts weigh against the proposal, but the nature of that harm has not been clearly articulated. With the exception of private views from 46 Stanley Avenue, the proposed building would not be readily visible from within the MCA and would not cause harm to its setting. To my mind, the impact of the proposed building on the character and appearance of the MCA and its setting would be neutral.

Other considerations

15. The golf club has encountered a number of difficulties over the past few years, including a general decline in membership since 2008. I note that this is a situation which is facing many clubs, and is predicted to continue by the governing body, Golf England. Further problems for the club have been caused by several wet and unpredictable winters, which have meant that income has become very seasonal. The course is on clay soils and the club has had to spend significant amounts of money on improving drainage. As for many businesses, the Covid-19 pandemic and associated restrictions have caused additional hardship and disruption.
16. The appellant has explained that, for some time, the club has been looking at ways to sustain membership and improve income. Research undertaken by the club suggests that enhanced practice facilities are key to attracting more people to the game, especially younger age groups, who are important for the future survival of the club.
17. The existing practice field, which does not provide any cover and has no formal safety mechanisms in place, is not well used. The proposed development would provide an enhanced practice facility which could be used throughout the year and would allow golfers to improve their standard of play, in a safe environment and using the latest technology. By providing tuition and group sessions for all ages and abilities, the club hope that the facility would encourage more ladies and juniors to participate in golf. The club are

particularly keen to ensure that the facility would make provision for disabled golfers to practice and develop their game.

18. It seems clear from the information provided, and from supporting representations, that the proposed facility could increase the attractiveness of the club, and encourage more people to play golf, with associated benefits for their health and wellbeing. By contributing to the longer term viability of the club, the proposal would also help to safeguard a larger area of open land within the Green Belt, which the club maintains and has made improvements to, including the creation of wildlife habitat and planting of many trees. Additional drainage work would take place, which could also benefit surrounding land uses. These factors weigh in favour of the scheme.
19. However, whilst acknowledging its potential benefits, I have found that the scheme would cause harm to the openness of the Green Belt. Whilst I note the appellant's comments about a previous development scheme which the club pursued, very limited information has been provided about any other alternative options which may have been considered or discounted, which might provide other ways of achieving the club's objectives without causing such harm.
20. The appellant has emphasised that, having taken advice from other clubs and professionals, the proposed facility is the 'bare minimum' needed to meet their objectives, and that the height and floorspace of the building are determined by the need to operate safely. I note the appellant's comment that it is not possible to locate the practice facility elsewhere on the course, but it is not clear whether this also applies to the two teaching studios, or whether that element of the scheme could be sited closer to, or within the clubhouse, which could help to reduce the impact on openness.
21. Moreover, the financial information provided in support of the scheme is somewhat sketchy, and I note that, whilst the Covid-19 pandemic and associated closures have caused further disruption and hardship to the club, it appears that the impact of this has not been entirely negative, and there has been a recent increase in membership. The appellant has confirmed that club has been able to access grants and loans from the local authorities, and that, despite a trading loss over the past few years, prudent management and extraordinary items have allowed the club to show a small surplus. Other parties have noted recent improvements that have been made to the course and clubhouse.
22. Given the above, and in the absence of any business plan to explain how the proposal relates to other longer term plans which the club may have to develop the business and provide additional income, the justification for the scheme is unconvincing and lacks detail.

Green Belt balance and conclusion

23. The proposed development would be inappropriate development which would, by definition, cause harm to the Green Belt. The Framework establishes that substantial weight should be given to such harm.
24. I acknowledge that the scheme would provide an additional year-round income stream which could support the club's finances, and help to secure its long term survival. It would also help to increase the attractiveness of the golf club

for existing members and could encourage greater participation in the game, with particular emphasis on younger people, ladies and those with disabilities. I give moderate weight to these considerations.

25. However, the evidence to support the scheme lacks detail, with no business plan to clearly show how the scheme would contribute to the club's longer term strategy. Furthermore, no information has been provided regarding any alternative options which may have been considered. In the absence of such information, I am not convinced that the scheme is the only way of achieving the stated objectives, or that there are no less harmful options available.
26. The impact of the scheme on the MCA and its setting would be neutral, but this lack of harm does not outweigh the harm to the Green Belt which I have identified.
27. Taken together, the other considerations do not clearly outweigh the considerable harm to the Green Belt. As such, the very special circumstances necessary to justify the scheme do not exist.
28. A number of other matters were raised by interested parties, including potential noise and disturbance; highway and parking issues and the likely effect on trees and wildlife. However, as I have found that the proposal is unacceptable on other grounds, I have not considered these matters any further.
29. For the reasons given, the appeal is therefore dismissed.

R Morgan

INSPECTOR