



Appeal Decision

Site Visit made on 24 March 2021

by Rory MacLeod BA (Hons) MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 13 May 2021

Appeal Ref: APP/X0360/W/20/3260806

Ashridge Manor, Forest Road, Wokingham, RG40 5RB

- 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 Glyn Mosses against the decision of Wokingham Borough Council.
- The application Ref 192747, dated 16 October 2019, was refused by notice dated 9 April 2020.
- The development proposed is demolition of Victorian house and erection of new apartment building (3 x 1 bed, 12 x 2 bed, 2 x 3 bed) with associated parking, bin stores and landscaping, with minor changes to entrance area.

Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Main Issues

2. The main issues are:
 - (a) whether this is an appropriate location for the apartments having regard to local and national planning policies,
 - (b) the effect of the development on the character and appearance of the area,
 - (c) heritage considerations in relation to the demolition of the existing building, and
 - (d) whether the proposal generates a requirement for affordable housing.

Reasons

Whether an appropriate location

3. Ashridge Manor is a three storey Victorian building with a smaller 16th Century building attached to its north eastern corner. There is a parking area to its western side reached via a tree lined avenue from Forest Road. The building currently comprises a mix of office and residential uses but has had several and varied uses over the years. The proposal is to demolish the Victorian building and to erect a larger building on open ground to the south-west beyond the present parking area which would be enlarged.
4. The site is located outside of settlement boundaries and therefore is in the countryside for planning policy purposes. Paragraph 78 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) states that in rural areas housing should be located where it will enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities. There are scattered dwellings in the surrounding area, but the site is in a

relatively isolated location not forming part of a clearly identified rural community. Paragraph 79 of the Framework discourages development of isolated homes in the countryside unless one or more specified exceptions apply. These include the subdivision of an existing residential dwelling and the optimal viable use of heritage assets, exceptions that more readily apply to the existing building rather than to its proposed replacement.

5. Policy CP11 of the Wokingham Borough Core Strategy (2010) (WBCS) sets out exceptions in which proposals outside development limits may be permitted. These include replacement dwellings that would bring about environmental improvement or would not result in inappropriate increases in scale, form or footprint of the original building. In relation to environmental improvements, the proposal would result in the loss of the existing building, which is not an unattractive building, and whilst planning conditions could be used to mitigate ecological concerns and require landscape enhancements, this is at best a neutral consideration. In relation to the appropriateness of the replacement building it would have a comparable manor house form, but its footprint and scale would be substantially in excess of the present building. It would be sited on an open grassed area but close enough to the present building and car park for the Council to consider the siting to be on previously developed land. Nonetheless, having regard particularly to the scale of the replacement building in this countryside context, the proposal would be contrary to the provisions of Policy CP11.
6. The appellant has drawn to my attention recent appeal decisions¹ in which Policy CP11 has been considered to be out of date. Policy CP11 predates the Framework and is not wholly consistent with it in relation to housing delivery and settlement boundaries. Paragraph 11d) of the Framework infers that a tilted balance in favour of a proposal should apply where the policies which are most important for determining the application are out of date. However, there is no evidence before me that the basket of most important policies as a whole for the application is out of date, and that is the relevant consideration. Greater weight should be given to the Framework than to Policy CP11 but as the Council can demonstrate a five year housing land supply the tilted balance at Paragraph 11d) is not engaged.
7. The quoted appeal decisions also found that Policy CP9 of the WBCS (Scale and Location of Development Proposals) and Policy CC01 of the Managing Development Delivery Local Plan (2014) (MDD) (Presumption in Favour of Sustainable Development) were out of date. Whilst these policies are referred to in the Council's refusal reason on 'unsustainable location', the Council's reason also referred to Policies CP1 (Sustainable Development) and CP6 (Managing Travel Demand) and to the Framework. These development plan policies and Chapter 9 of the Framework support opportunities for reducing the need to travel particularly by private car.
8. The site is located about 2km from the northern edge of Wokingham, and a similar walking distance to the nearest bus stop. It is further still to any facilities and services of note, and about 3km to the nearest school. There is no footpath on Forest Road, which is a high trafficked road, and no street lighting making the roadway unsuitable for pedestrians and less desirable for cyclists, particularly in hours of darkness. The Ashridge Garden Centre is not far to the

¹ Appeal Ref: APP/X0360/W/19/3235572 Land East of Finchampstead Road, Wokingham, RG40 3JT, and Appeal Ref: APP/X0360/W/19/3238048 Land north of Nine Mile Ride, Finchampstead, Berkshire.

west of the site and includes a food store and a café which residents could use, but pedestrian access from the site would necessitate walking along the grass verge to Forest Road. Occupiers of the proposed dwellings would be reliant on the use of private cars to access most everyday services even if some of these journeys may be relatively short in distance.

9. Past and present uses at the existing building, including the current residential accommodation, would similarly be reliant on use of private cars to access most services. But the proposal would result in significant increases in residential and overall floor areas and an increase in the present number of residential units, and so would exacerbate this tendency. The units would include 2 and 3 bedroom apartments and so it is likely that there would be children at the site needing access to schools or to a nursery. The proposal would be likely to result in increased reliance on the use of private cars and so would be contrary to Policies CP1 and CP6 and to Chapter 9 of the Framework. The appellant has suggested a Grampian style planning condition requiring construction of a footway along Forest Road to improve access to the Garden Centre, but this alone would not offset my finding that the site is in an unsustainable location for the increased amount of residential accommodation proposed.
10. There is a complicated planning history to the existing building and a dispute between the parties on the status of some earlier planning decisions. These include a prior approval in December 2014 for conversion of offices to 18 residential units and combinations of other decisions for a lower number of residential units which the appellant claims as a fallback position. There is a greater than theoretical possibility that conversion of the existing building to more residential units could occur, though I note the appellant's comments that the configuration of rooms, plumbing and other services would form constraints in providing good quality apartments on the 18 unit scheme. But even if a conversion to 18 or a lesser number of units is feasible as a fallback, from the information available to me, this would not necessarily be a worse outcome than the proposed replacement building in relation to relevant planning policies. The possibility of a fallback position does not provide justification for the proposal.
11. The site would not be an appropriate location for the increased number of apartments entailed in the proposal. Its unsustainable countryside location would be contrary to relevant development plan and national planning policies.

Character and appearance

12. Policy CP3 of the WBCS is a general policy setting out a range of principles for development. Of particular relevance is the requirement for a proposal to be of an appropriate scale of activity, mass, layout, built form, height, materials and character to the area. The Council has not objected to the architectural design for the replacement building; I have no reason to disagree. The form of the building would be appropriate for a large country house. As with the existing building it would provide views across its open parkland setting and whilst it would be slightly more prominent when approaching along the tree lined avenue from Forest Road, the replacement building would broadly reflect the character of the area in these respects.
13. The Borough Design Guide SPD requires that development contribute positively towards and be compatible with the historic or underlying character and quality

of the local area, and that replacement dwellings may be appropriate in the countryside where there is no adverse increase in scale, form or footprint. The proposal would sever the connection with the original 16th century house and buildings beyond this. Its considerable mass would be seen in association with retained buildings at opposite sides to a greatly enlarged car park but would otherwise be unrelated to them. It would not be in keeping with the rural character in which there tends to be clustering of buildings. The proposal would not respect the historic or underlying character and quality of the area and the substantial increase in footprint, volume and width compared to the existing building would be contrary to Policy CP3 and to the Design Guide SPD.

Heritage

14. Ashridge Manor is not a listed building, nor located within a conservation area. It is not formally included in a Council list of non-designated heritage assets, but the Council refused a previous application and the current proposal on the grounds of the loss of a non-designated heritage asset. Paragraph 197 of the Framework states, *"The effect of an application on the significance of a non-designated heritage asset should be taken into account in determining the application. In weighing applications that directly or indirectly affect non-designated heritage assets, a balanced judgement will be required having regard to the scale of any harm or loss and the significance of the heritage asset"*.
15. The appellant has submitted a Heritage Assessment (HA) and a Supplementary Heritage Assessment (SHA). The HA examines the original 16th Century building, now known as Hertoke Manor, and its later two storey extension, and finds that these historic elements have the most significance. The substantial Victorian additions, now proposed to be demolished, were constructed in two phases and not in a coherent architectural style. The HA concludes. *"Ashridge Manor is of insufficient architectural and historic merit to be considered as a non-designated heritage asset, although it is recognised that the original timber-framed farmhouse is of interest and is being retained as part of the proposed scheme"*.
16. The SHA provides a comparative assessment of the larger and smaller country houses built in the area around Wokingham in the later 19th Century. Some of these are listed buildings, but most are not, and a few have been demolished. The SHA considers Ashridge Manor not to be of the same quality as the majority of the other surviving later 19th and early 20th Century country houses and does not therefore provide a good example of this period of country house building in the area around Wokingham. It concludes that Ashridge Manor is considered to be non-designated but of low significance.
17. Ashridge Manor appears to be one of several large houses built for aspiring persons in the 19th Century following the onset of railway development. As such it is a remaining example of a phase in the social history of Wokingham. It does not have the architectural quality that other country houses demonstrate but the principal western and northern elevations present attractive gables, brickwork and fenestration reflective of the Victorian era. Its location within a parkland setting and access via a tree-lined avenue also reflect its status as a country house. At one time there was a Lodge gatehouse at the junction with Forest Road which would have signified the presence of a country house beyond, but this has since been demolished. Nonetheless, the more immediate

context for Ashridge Manor remains. It is attached to the historic Hertoke Manor and the driveway continues to Ash Cottage with a pond between the two. Ashridge Manor forms the major part of a cluster of buildings developed over a period of time within this open setting.

18. Paragraph 189 of the Framework refers to the contribution made by the setting of a heritage asset in the assessment of its significance. The significance of Ashridge Manor lies not just as an example of a country house in the social history of the area, but in its siting and relationship with adjacent buildings. The appellant claims that the proposal would result in a benefit by better defining the original extents and character of Hertoke Manor within a more open setting; furthermore, that Hertoke Manor is currently completely overwhelmed by the bulk of Ashridge Manor with the two styles of building making an unhappy marriage. But this is how Ashridge Manor was constructed. The proposal would entirely remove the later and most substantial part of the development of the site which has some local significance in the social history of the area.
19. Whether Ashridge Manor is included on a future list of non-designated heritage assets is a matter for the Council, but it has some heritage significance. In relation to the Council's third refusal reason, the proposal should therefore be weighed in respect to the requirements of Paragraph 197 to the Framework for a balanced judgement in regard to the scale of any harm and to the significance of the heritage asset. The scale of harm would be considerable in regard to the extent of demolition and severance of the context with Hertoke Manor. But the building has a relatively low level of historic and architectural significance in comparison with finer examples of country houses around Wokingham. The overall balanced judgement includes the benefit of additional housing, but this is tempered by the findings above relating to housing need, the location of the development and its impact on the character of the area.
20. Overall, my judgement is that the benefits arising from the proposal do not outweigh or justify the harm arising from the demolition of Ashridge Manor. The proposal would be contrary to Paragraph 197 of the Framework.

Affordable housing

21. Policy CP5 of the WBCS specifies an affordable housing rate of 40% for any development comprising five dwellings or where it is located on a site of 0.16 hectares or more. The policy has been found to be out of date in recent appeal decisions, but Paragraph 63 of the Framework indicates that affordable housing may be sought for schemes of 10 or more units. The appellant accepts that a contribution towards affordable housing is warranted in this case, but there is disagreement between the parties on the value that should be put on the number of existing dwellings to be discounted in the affordable housing calculation. The appellant has provided completed alternative planning obligations to reflect these differences.
22. In the event that the appeal was to succeed it would be necessary to determine an appropriate figure for the contribution. However, as the appeal is to be dismissed it is only necessary to conclude that with inclusion of an appropriate obligation on affordable housing that the proposal would not be contrary to national and local planning policies which promote the inclusion of affordable housing as part of an overall appropriate housing mix.

Planning balance

23. The proposal would result in the benefit of 17 new dwellings to contribute towards the recognised need for additional homes. These would be in a modern building that would have greater energy efficiency than the building to be demolished. The scheme would also enable a contribution to the provision of affordable housing via a planning obligation which could benefit local people.
24. However, the Council can demonstrate a five year housing land supply to plan for the provision of new homes. These benefits are outweighed by the relatively unsustainable countryside location for the apartments and conflict with national and local planning policies relating to these issues. I have noted the lawful current and past uses of the site and the established pattern of journeys by private cars to access services. These considerations need to be set against the substantial increase in the size of the replacement building and in all probability in the number of units involved. There would also be harm arising to the character and appearance of the area through the scale of the proposed building, and through the demolition of the existing building and severance of the historic context with Hertoke Manor.

Conclusion

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

Rory MacLeod

INSPECTOR

