



Appeal Decision

Site Visit made on 12 May 2021

by R Morgan BSc (Hons) MCD MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 02 June 2021

Appeal Ref: APP/W4325/W/21/3268227

The Stirrup, Arrowe Park Road, Woodchurch, CH49 5PB

- 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 Magenta Living against the decision of Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council.
 - The application Ref APP/20/00980, dated 30 March 2020, was refused by notice dated 12 November 2020.
 - The development proposed is three and two storey apartment block for retirement living/extra care, comprising of 46 no. flats with associated facilities.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Main Issue

2. The main issue is the effect of the proposal on the character and appearance of the area.

Reasons

3. Arrowe Park Road is bounded on its western side by a continuous and thick line of tall, mature trees behind a sandstone wall, broken up only by the entrance to the hospital. Built development is more apparent on the eastern side of the road, but is nonetheless unobtrusive in the main. The two and three storey houses and flats along this side of the road are generally set back a considerable distance from the main road frontage behind grass verges and well-established hedgerows.
4. The proposed development would be located on the site of the now demolished Stirrup pub, which has a wide frontage onto Arrowe Park Road. In the immediate vicinity of the appeal site, the buildings are sited closer to the road frontage, and along this section of the road, the presence of built form becomes more noticeable within the streetscene. However, this does not detract from generally verdant and spacious character of Arrowe Park Road.
5. On its northern side, the appeal site adjoins a terrace of eight cottages which front directly onto the main road. These houses, together with the adjacent local shop, are the most prominent built features along this stretch of Arrowe Park Road. Despite that, the white rendered cottages with slate roofs and chimneys are of a simple design, and their traditional appearance contributes to the low key, almost semi-rural character of the area.
6. The proposed retirement/extra care scheme would comprise of a large H-shaped block. The front and central parts of the building would be three storeys high, dropping to two storeys in the rear section. The plot could

accommodate a reasonably sized building, and three storeys would not necessarily appear out of place along this wide, tree lined road. However, the proposed building would be sited very close to the main road frontage, and would occupy most of the width of the site, with the remainder being taken up with hardstanding associated with vehicular and pedestrian access. As a result, it would appear as a prominent feature in the streetscene.

7. With no change in fenestration over the three floors, the flat roofed building would clearly read as being three storeys, despite the use of darker cladding on the top section. The proposed use of different materials on the front elevation would provide some visual interest, but the central part of the building would nonetheless appear as a flat and monotonous expanse. The bland appearance of the building, with little to visually break up the long front elevation, would exacerbate its large scale, contributing to its prominence along this key frontage.
8. Although only marginally longer than the adjacent terrace, the greater height and monolithic appearance of the building would make it appear overly large and out of scale in relation to the adjacent development. The separation distances may be sufficient to address amenity concerns, but the building would nonetheless be sited in close proximity to the long terrace of cottages, and would be viewed in the context of that building from the main road frontage. The heavy, box-like form of the block, with prominent square corners, would jar against the traditional, pitched roofed form of the adjacent cottages.
9. Buildings in the surrounding area display a variety of materials, but most common are white coloured render or red bricks, with grey slate or tile roofs. The proposed use of light render and dark cladding on part of the building would reflect the colour of materials in the adjacent houses on Arrowe Park Road, but the proposed buff coloured bricks would fail to reflect the surrounding built form and would appear out of place. Furthermore, the extensive use of a single colour on the external elevations would exacerbate the lack of visual interest, when viewed from both the main road frontage and surrounding houses on Fletcher Close.
10. As a result of its scale, siting and appearance, the development would appear obtrusive and overly dominant in the streetscene. With minimal space for landscaping along the frontage or southern boundary to help soften it, the proposed building and associated access would significantly increase the feeling of built development along this section of the road. As a result, the proposal would erode the green and spacious character of Arrowe Park Road to a harmful degree.
11. Whilst the proposed apartment would be only marginally higher than the maximum height of the former pub, the previous building was sited much further back within the site, and was of a very different form, so would have been far less obtrusive when viewed from the main road and from surrounding houses.
12. I acknowledge that there are other large buildings with flat roofs nearby, including the hospital and commercial development off Arrowe Brook Road. However, these buildings are well set back from the road frontage and, unlike the proposed apartment block, do not appear as prominent features in the streetscene.

13. Planning permission has previously been granted for the construction of 15 houses on the site. The consented scheme would also involve development fronting directly onto the main road frontage, but it would be very different in scale, massing and appearance from the development now proposed. In particular, the pitched roofed houses with repeating front gables would better reflect the scale, grain and form of the surrounding built form than the monolithic form of the proposed building.
14. When considered in relation to the ten characteristics of well-designed places set out in the National Design Guide, the proposed development would not integrate well into its surrounding context, nor would it contribute to existing local character and identity. The proposed development would represent poor quality design, which would appear discordant and overly prominent when viewed from Arrowe Park Road and the surrounding houses. As a result, it would cause significant harm to the character and appearance of the area.
15. The National Design Guide also contains specific advice for new homes, and in this respect, I note the Council's concerns regarding the location of the proposed amenity space. The position of most of the outdoor space on the north and east side of the site would mean that much of it would be affected by overshadowing for considerable parts of the day. However, the space would be large enough to provide areas of both sun and shade, with the courtyard terrace providing an additional sunny area on the southern side of the building. The appellant has explained that the scheme has been designed with the particular needs of future residents in mind, and that it would be possible to access the garden area via a door on the northern elevation, so it would not be necessary for elderly residents to walk around the front of the building.
16. Whilst the provision for amenity space would be acceptable, this would not overcome the significant harm caused to the character and appearance of the area. The proposed development would conflict with Policy HS4 of the Wirral Unitary Development Plan 2000 (UDP) which requires that new housing development is of a scale which relates well to surrounding property and would not result in a detrimental change in the character of the area. It would also conflict with paragraph 127 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) which requires that developments are visually attractive and sympathetic to local character.

Other Matters

17. The appellant has referred to an appeal for an extra care scheme in West Malling, Kent, in which the Inspector accepted the need for extra care schemes to provide a minimum number of units to support the communal facilities. Whilst I do not dispute that, I have been provided with no financial or other evidence to demonstrate that the proposed number of units represents the minimum necessary to make the development viable. Furthermore, even if that was the case, there may well be ways to improve the design and appearance of the proposed development, which could overcome some of the concerns raised, without undermining viability.

Planning balance

18. The Council acknowledges that it is unable to demonstrate a five-year supply of deliverable housing sites, and has not disputed the figure of 3.1 years supply referred to by the appellant. This is a significant shortfall which needs to be

addressed. Because of the provisions of footnote 7, Framework paragraph 11d) should therefore be applied. Permission should be granted unless any adverse impacts would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the policies in the Framework taken as a whole.

19. The UDP dates from 2000, but the weight to be attached does not hinge on its age. Rather, paragraph 213 of the Framework makes it clear that due weight should be given to existing policies according to their degree of consistency with the Framework. The Framework makes clear that creating high quality buildings and places is fundamental to what the planning process should achieve, and the criteria contained in Policy HS4 reflects the design considerations set out in Framework paragraph 127.
20. Even taking account of the objective of boosting significantly the supply of housing and the Council's housing land supply position, the conflict between the proposal and Policy HS4 still carries a significant amount of weight in this appeal.
21. Paragraph 8 of the Framework outlines the overarching interdependent objectives for planning to achieve sustainable development: social, economic and environmental.
22. In terms of the social objective, the proposal would provide 46 one and two-bedroom extra care/retirement apartments for people aged 55 or over, which would be available on an affordable rented tenure. This would represent an additional 43 affordable units compared with the previously consented scheme. The appeal proposal would therefore make a positive contribution towards meeting the need for affordable and specialist older persons' accommodation (C3) which has been identified in the draft Wirral Strategic Housing Market Assessment (January 2020)
23. In terms of its contribution to the overall supply of housing, the proposal would provide an additional 31 dwellings over and above the previously consented scheme, and I note the appellant's comment that the development could be built out and delivered quickly. Whilst this scale of development would make a useful contribution towards boosting housing supply in Wirral, it would not make a significant difference in the context of the overall shortfall. As such, the proposal would make a moderate contribution towards meeting identified housing needs.
24. There would be a modest economic benefit associated with construction of the development, which would involve on- and off-site jobs over the lifetime of the build programme, as well as demand for goods and services through the local supply chain. There would be increased local expenditure from future residents, as well as additional council tax contributions.
25. In terms of the environmental objective, the scheme would make efficient use of vacant land, in a location which is accessible to local facilities and services by a range of travel modes including public transport. However, whilst these are benefits of the scheme, the environmental objective would not be achieved owing to the significant harm which would be caused to the character and appearance of the area.

26. The proposal would be acceptable in relation to highways, drainage, ecology, noise, air quality and residential amenity. These matters, which represent a lack of harm, are neutral in the planning balance.
27. Whilst I have found that the proposal would provide moderate social and modest economic benefits, these would not outweigh the significant environmental harm which I have identified. When assessed against the policies in the Framework taken as a whole, the adverse impacts would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits and the presumption in favour of sustainable development does not apply.

Conclusion

28. For the reasons given, I conclude that the conflict with the development plan is not outweighed by other considerations, including the Framework. The appeal is therefore dismissed.

R Morgan

INSPECTOR