



Site Visit

Site visit made on 18 August 2021

by J E Jolly BA (Hons) MA MSc CIH MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 8 September 2021

Appeal Ref: APP/D5120/W/20/3263335

**Greek Orthodox Church, Upper Wickham Lane, East Wickham,
Welling, Bexley DA16 3EP**

- 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 MBNL against the decision of the Council of the London Borough of Bexley.
 - The application Ref 19/02552/FUL, dated 22 October 2019, was refused by notice dated 30 July 2020.
 - The development proposed is the installation of a 20m monopole, 12 No antenna apertures, equipment cabinets, the removal of the existing 17m monopole, 3 No antennas, redundant equipment cabinets and development ancillary thereto.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Procedural Matters

2. A new London Plan was adopted in March 2021. However, the application in this case was submitted in October 2019. As such, the Council relied upon Policies contained within the Bexley Council Unitary Development Plan 2004 (UDP), the London Borough of Bexley, Bexley Core Strategy 2012 (BCS), and the London Plan 2016. However, the main parties have identified a number of Policies that might be relevant to the proposal within the London Plan 2021 in the submitted appeal statement and the Council's Officer Report, dated July 2020. These are noted, and I have proceeded accordingly.
3. On 20 July 2021, the Government published its revised *National Planning Policy Framework* (the Framework). The Framework represents the Government's up-to-date planning policies for England and how they should be applied. Planning decisions must be determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. The Framework is such a material consideration where it is relevant to a planning application or appeal. I note however, in this case, that the main parties have made no further comments in respect of these changes.

Main Issue

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

Reasons

5. The appeal site is located in a residential area on a grass verge at the roundabout junction with Okehampton Crescent, Lodge Hill and Upper Wickham Lane (A209). The wider area includes the George Mead Memorial Stables, Plumstead Cemetery and East Wickham Open Space. The verge is a slim, triangular parcel of land that is lined with a footway and railings, and has a back-drop of mature trees. The appeal verge has a number of lampposts and also includes a 'Welcome to Bexley' road sign, and what appears to be a small telecommunications cabinet.
6. Upper Wickham Lane rises up from the roundabout junction towards the Greek Orthodox Church of 'Christ the Saviour' and St Michael's Church and Hall, both of which can be found on the left-hand side of the highway; between which an approximately 17m telecommunications monopole with base cabinets is located. The monopole is positioned to the side of a footway which leads up the A209 highway towards Welling. The monopole and cabinets are shielded from the footway by a recess in a low brick wall, and there is a parkland type area behind the wall that includes a number of trees, some of which are adjacent to the monopole.
7. The proposal is to construct a 20m monopole with antenna apertures atop on the grass verge appeal site, and there would be associated equipment and 8 cabinets at ground level for the provision of 2-4G and 5G technologies. The proposal would supersede the services provided by the existing monopole that is located between the Greek Orthodox Church of 'Christ the Saviour' and St Michael's Church and Hall, and the existing monopole, once redundant, would be removed.
8. The proposal would be located further away from the much appreciated listed church buildings than the existing monopole and equipment. However, the development would nonetheless be positioned at a highly visible and well used roundabout junction. Indeed, while the proposal is only moderately taller than the existing monopole, the development would nevertheless be of some substantial height that, as a consequence of the rising topography in this location, would loom over drivers approaching the junction, the occupiers of the residential properties nearby and those passing by on foot. Moreover, notwithstanding the trees or vertical lines of the lampposts on the site, the sizeable monopole, that includes antenna apertures atop, would be seen in some longer views, such as Totnes Road and Plumstead Cemetery; particularly at times of the year when trees are without leaves. In fact, the scale of the proposal and its multiple cabinets would detract from the attractiveness of the grassed verge and its verdant surroundings which, in combination with the road sign, provide a pleasant gateway at this point to the London Borough of Bexley.
9. Furthermore, I noticed at my site visit that the cabinets associated with the existing monopole are relatively hidden in a set-back section of the church grounds wall that is softened by the nearby trees. Whereas the numerous cabinets associated with the proposal would be highly prominent on the open style roundabout verge, and while I acknowledge that the proposed linear cabinet arrangement would be set away from the adjacent railed footway, the fact remains that the proposal would be one of some considerable scale and mass at street level.

10. Moreover, the cabinets would be taller than the railings along the footway and larger than the existing and solitary cabinet on the verge, which in my view, as a consequence of their bulk, could not be adequately tempered by the use of landscaping or muted paintwork, even if secured by condition.
11. Consequently, notwithstanding the findings of two appeal decisions provided by the Appellant in support of the case¹, for which I have limited details for comparative accuracy, from the evidence before me, and my observations at the site visit, I find that the proposal in this specific location would be of some considerable height, scale, bulk and mass, and hence would harm the character and appearance of the area.
12. I conclude therefore, that the proposal is contrary to Policies ENV39 and ENV45 of the UDP, Policy CS07 of the BCS, and the London Plan when read as a whole, which seek, amongst other things, to protect and enhance the built environment.
13. For similar reasons, the proposal does not accord with Paragraph 115 of the Framework which explains that where new sites are required, such as for new 5G networks, or for connected transport and smart city applications, equipment should be sympathetically designed and camouflaged where appropriate.

Planning Balance

14. The proposal would be a shared facility to which I attribute some moderate weight. Additionally, I acknowledge that suitable sites for a proposal of this type are relatively limited, and that the Appellant has explored a range of alternative sites, including the existing monopole site, that were found to be wanting for a proposal of this type. Moreover, that there is central Government regard for high-quality, reliable digital connectivity including 5G technology and the proposal would be likely to enhance digital communication for some residents and businesses in the nearby surrounding area. However, the harm to the character and appearance I have found above is not outweighed by the relatively modest sustainability, social and economic benefits, such as homeworking and smart technology, associated with one telecommunications installation.

Conclusions

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

J E JOLLY

INSPECTOR

¹ ¹ APP/Q1445/W/20/3249294 and APP/N5090/W/20/3245093