



Appeal Decision

Site Visit made on 17 August 2021

by Stuart Willis BA Hons MSc PGCE MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 27th September 2021

Appeal Ref: APP/J1860/W/21/3274488

Little Lightwood Farm, Lightwood Lane, Cotheridge WR6 5LT

- 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 A Simpson against the decision of Malvern Hills District Council.
 - The application Ref 20/01190/FUL, dated 12 August 2020, was refused by notice dated 17 February 2021.
 - The development proposed is change of use of land from agriculture to provide an extension to an existing caravan storage facility (B8 Use) and associated access track and landscaping.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. Following the refusal of the application the new National Planning Policy Framework (Framework) has been published. Comments were sought from the main parties and taken into consideration where they were received. There have been no fundamental changes to national planning policy relevant to the main issues in this appeal and so no injustice has been caused to any of the appeal parties. I have considered the appeal on the basis of the revised Framework.

Main Issues

3. The main issues of the appeal are:
 - whether the proposed development has been sufficiently justified with regard to the local development strategy; and
 - the effect of the proposed development on the character and appearance of the area.

Reasons

Development Strategy

4. Policy SWDP2 of the South Worcestershire Development Plan (the Plan) sets out the development strategy for the area. The appeal site is located in the open countryside and in such locations, it states that development will be strictly controlled and sets out the limited exceptions where new development will be permitted.

5. Policy SWDP12 of the Plan states that the expansion of existing employment sites in rural areas will be supported where it has been demonstrated that intensification of the existing site is not viable or practical. Farm diversification is also supported where it does not detract from the agricultural undertaking and the scale is appropriate to the rural character. The accompanying text indicates that this should be read in conjunction with Policy SWDP8 of the Plan that supports job creation where it relates to an existing business.
6. It is indicated that the business has seen significant growth since locating at its premises and that there is a need to demonstrate that they have sufficient secure storage areas. The expansion of the UK caravan industry, along with the impact of COVID-19 on the sector are also highlighted.
7. At my site visit, which is only a snapshot in time, I saw that there were a number of caravans on the area currently used for storage. However, there is limited information before me regarding what the space requirements are for the business and therefore what the current capacity is. There is also little information in relation to the projected or existing levels of demand. In the absence of such information, while there may be no other units or land available to the business at the site, I cannot be certain that intensification of the site is unviable or impractical.
8. As such, the proposed development would not be justified with regard to the local development strategy. It would be contrary to Policies SWDP2 and SWDP12 of the Plan where they set out the limited exceptions to development in the countryside and require it to be demonstrated that intensification of the existing sites is not viable or practical.

Character and Appearance

9. The appeal site is within an undeveloped field with mature landscaping to its boundaries. The land at the site and the nearby surrounding area is very gently sloping. The appeal site is adjacent to the existing caravan storage and repair facility area that is contained within a separate field with further commercial uses and buildings beyond. The site is within the Principal Timbered Farmlands character area as identified in the Landscapes of Worcestershire.
10. From my observations on site, even though the field is smaller than many nearby, the absence of development in it means it forms part of, and assimilates into, the wider open agricultural landscape. Due in part to this, the appeal site contributes positively to the character and appearance of the area.
11. The storage area and bund would not follow the field boundaries or replicate the existing field shape. Instead, the square layout would result in a rigid intrusion into the more natural irregular existing field pattern and result in a fragmented appearance to the remainder of the field.
12. Moreover, the proposal would not relate well to the shape of the existing storage area or bund and would not directly lead from them. Consequently, rather than appearing as a natural extension to the existing facility, it would look separate and disjointed.
13. The proposed bund would appear unnaturally stepped and rigid. It would have steeply sloping sides and create uncharacteristic rows of vegetation close to the existing field boundary features. It would have an artificial and engineered

form and appearance. This would be obvious and incongruous with the existing largely smooth levels of the undisturbed field.

14. While transient and with intervening landscaping in places, I saw that there would be relatively close-range views of the bund from the public right of way that runs along the access road (viewpoint 1). In addition, there would be glimpses along the one adjacent to the site (viewpoint 2). Although over a greater distance, there would also be views from nearby properties.
15. The caravans within the storage area would be largely screened from public views outside of the site itself. While it is stated that existing boundary vegetation would be allowed to grow, from the information provided I cannot be certain this would provide sufficient screening of the bund or that this could be suitably controlled. Therefore, as with the existing bund, the proposed one would be seen above the boundary vegetation of the field.
16. Furthermore, planting would take some time to mature and screen or break up the profile of the bund. The presence of a second but separate bund would further emphasise the man-made appearance of the resultant landscape. In light of the above, the scheme would unfavourably contrast with an otherwise gently flowing landscape.
17. Existing vegetation and features such as ponds are to be retained and managed. The additional planting would be in keeping with the Principal Timbered Farmlands' guidelines. These would provide some enhancements to the appearance of the site and in terms of biodiversity. There are commercial activities and features in and around the cluster of buildings nearby and I acknowledge alternative locations were considered.
18. Notwithstanding this, the proposal would extend development into a different field that at present has no significantly detrimental features. The scheme would not be overly prominent. Nevertheless, even when the bund has greened over, its location, size and shape would be discordant with the surrounding agricultural landscape.
19. Therefore, the proposed development would unacceptably harm the character and appearance of the area. The scheme would fail to accord with Policies SWDP2, SWDP12, SWDP21 and SWDP25 of the Plan and Policy P7 of the Neighbourhood Plan¹. These, in part, requires schemes to be appropriate to and, integrate effectively with its surroundings and be appropriate to the rural character.

Other Matters

20. The Framework supports expansion of existing businesses and recognises that in rural areas sites may be beyond settlements. The Plan also contains policies that encourage economic development. Without more detailed evidence relating to the need for the scheme and given its scale, on the basis of the information provided, the economic and social benefits, including job creation and to the wider area would be limited.
21. Biodiversity enhancements weigh in favour of the scheme. However, due to the size of the development these would be moderate. A lack of highway safety

¹ Broadwas and Cotheridge Neighbourhood Development Plan 2018-2030

harm is a neutral factor and does not weigh in favour of the scheme. That there have been no third-party objections is not a reason to allow a development.

22. The scheme would accord with elements of the Plan such as those that seek to promote economic growth. Nonetheless, the Plan does not indicate that one policy takes preference over another. The development plan will often include policies with conflicting or differing aims and should be read as a whole.
23. The Framework states that existing policies should not be considered out-of-date simply because they were adopted or made prior to the publication of the Framework. Due weight should be given to them, according to their degree of consistency with it. The policies included in the refusal reasons are generally consistent with the Framework where it recognises the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, as well as being sympathetic to local character, and that business sites in rural areas should be sensitive to its surroundings.
24. The proposal conflicts with the development plan when considered as a whole and there are no material considerations, either individually or in combination, that outweighs the identified harm and associated development plan conflict.

Conclusion

25. Therefore, for the reasons given above, I conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

Stuart Willis

INSPECTOR