



Appeal Decision

Site Visit made on 1 November 2021

by Mr R Walker BA HONS DIPTP MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 15 November 2021

Appeal Ref: APP/P2935/W/21/3275193

Land south west of Catton Pumping Station, Catton, Northumberland NE47 9LS

- 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 Park House Lodges Ltd against the decision of Northumberland County Council.
 - The application Ref 20/03541, dated 16 October 2020, was refused by notice dated 29 January 2021.
 - The development proposed is Erection of five camping pods and associated clubhouse.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matter

2. I have been referred to the emerging Northumberland Local Plan, which is at a reasonably advanced stage, with the main modifications having been published. However, it is not yet adopted, and I do not know the outcome of the consultation. As such, and in accordance with paragraph 48 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework), I give moderate weight to policies of the ELP.

Main Issues

3. The main issues are the effect of the proposal on:
 - The character and appearance of the surrounding area, including the North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB);
 - The living conditions of the occupiers of neighbouring properties with particular reference to noise and disturbance; and
 - Biodiversity.

Reasons

Character and appearance

4. The appeal site is a long narrow open parcel of land to the south of, and connected to, an existing holiday cabin site. Three out of five cabins were in situ at the time of my site visit.
5. The appeal site is close to the village but is separated by a small valley. There are trees between the proposed development and the B6295 and, at the time of my autumn site visit, most had lost their leaves. Where visible from the

- B6295, and the grounds of buildings along it, the appeal site appeared as an elevated, prominent site, forming part of an attractive upland rural edge to the village. In this regard, it makes a positive contribution to this part of the AONB.
6. The existing cabins, although highly visible, are positioned reasonably close to the lane. The alignment of each cabin with a gentle curve results in a reasonably harmonious layout which, despite the change in topography and gaps, visually connects with Park House, the pumping station building and, to a lesser extent, the housing to the east. The proposed clubhouse and camping pods would not integrate with this layout due to the distance from the clubhouse to the nearest cabin and the proposed developments positioning pushed out further from the lane.
 7. Although individually the camping pods are small, the clubhouse would appear as a large structure. Overall, the proposal would result in a considerable incursion into the countryside through the cumulative quantum of built form, block of car parking and its linear layout. This size of development and layout would significantly erode the open character and scenic qualities of this part of the AONB.
 8. The elevated nature of the site increases its exposure from close views in and around the edge of the village, despite existing trees. Whilst no lighting is proposed, light from the buildings would appear prominent in this otherwise dark environment, severed from the settlement by the landform and vegetation.
 9. Even with the proposed additional planting, including amongst other things, a hawthorn hedge, it would take several years to establish and would not fully mitigate the effects, particularly in winter months. Once established, the retention of the existing young evergreen planting would increase the screening throughout the year. I'm told this would be retained, irrespective of the outcome of the appeal. However, in combination with views in gaps through, and over, the planting of the development, it would have a somewhat artificially domestic appearance. This would be at odds with the upland landscape and the established planting on the side of the small valley.
 10. The natural materials, including the use of a grass/sedum roof and colour treatment would be in keeping with the existing cabins on the site and would not appear unduly stark. However, this or the proposed planting would not be sufficient to mitigate the overall visual effects of the development, nor would it alter my findings in relation to its layout.
 11. Overall, the elongated shape of the appeal site, its location on the other side of the small valley and the resulting site layout would not harmonise with the existing built form and surroundings. Whilst more distant views would be possible, the visual effects would dissipate with distance and, it is in close views, where the proposed development would appear as a significant visual intrusion in this part of the countryside.
 12. I therefore find that the proposal would significantly harm the character and appearance of the surrounding area, including the AONB. As such, in relation to this main issue the proposal would conflict with the requirements of Policies ANDP 1, ANDP 4 and ANDP 5 of the Allendale Neighbourhood Plan (2015) (NP), Policies GD1, BE1 and NE1 of the Council's Core Strategy (CS) and Policies GD2, NE15, TM6 and TM12 of the Tynedale Local Plan (LP) and the Framework.

13. These stipulate, amongst other things, that development proposals within the AONB will be allowed only if they do not detract from the landscape quality and wildlife value of the AONB and are in keeping with the upland rural character of the area.
14. The Council has referred to Policy NE14 of the LP in its reasons for refusal. However, this relates to proposals in the Green Belt and it has not subsequently been determinative in my assessment. Policy GD1 of the Council's CS is a restrictive policy which is not entirely consistent with the provisions of the Framework and, as such, does not carry full weight.

Living conditions

15. Given the small size of the pods, attractive views, and grassed area around the pods, even if no formal outside seating is proposed, it is likely that guests would use the space outside the pods during the day and evening in warmer months. However, each pod is proposed to be orientated with its door facing away from the village. As such, it is the land on that side of the pods, that benefits from attractive views to the undulating landscape, which is more likely to be the area that guests use, moderating the impact on occupiers of houses in the village.
16. The clubhouse facilities would include a sauna, steam room, small pool, toilet and showers, laundry and utility room, all of which would not generate significant noise levels. The communal guest space with its bifold doors could generate some noise depending on the nature and number of guests. However, the opening times of this space could be controlled by way of conditions as put forward by the appellant.
17. The proposed development would be separated from the houses in the village by the small valley and lane. As such, whilst the proposals, including potentially any external movement of guests, would be clearly visible from several properties and their gardens, the distances involved to the proposed pods and clubhouse would be such that the general activity of guests is unlikely to be significantly disturbing.
18. Whilst I'm told that there have been instances of noise generated by guests using the existing cabins and hot tubs in the evening, I have no firm evidence of the nature of such instances. Moreover, the proposed camping pods have no such hot tub facilities and would be positioned further away from residential properties.
19. Drawing the above together, whilst accepting that the noise levels from different groups may vary, the overall effect on the living conditions of the occupiers of properties in the area would not be significantly harmful. I therefore find, in relation to this main issue, no conflict with the requirements of Policy ANDP 1 of the NP, Policy GD2 of the LP and the Framework. These stipulate, amongst other things, that all development shall be located to ensure that it does not significantly and adversely affect the amenity of nearby residents.

Biodiversity

20. The appellant submitted a Breeding Bird Report and an Ecological Impact Assessment as part of the application. These identify no direct harm to

protected species and outline mitigation measures, to offset the loss of the grassland within the site, and measures during construction.

21. These measures were prepared as part of an earlier application for 10 camping pods which covered a much larger area. The measures include, amongst other things, bird and bat nest boxes, controls on lighting, shrub planting, the planting of a summer flowering meadow within the remaining grassed area and mitigation in relation to any nesting birds and reptiles during construction.
22. The plans before me do not clearly define the external space available to guests, land that would be left undisturbed and how this would be defined to prevent damage to the meadow. Moreover, I have no substantive details regarding the package treatment plant.
23. I also have concerns regarding the location of bat boxes on the clubhouse elevation predominantly made up of bifold doors and on the side of camping pods containing a window and which are not tall structures. In these positions there would be a high degree of activity, light, and disturbance.
24. Notwithstanding these concerns, the application site includes a large area of undeveloped land giving flexibility to the final mitigation scheme, and no harm has been identified that could not, in my view, be reasonably addressed by way of conditions, were I minded to allow the appeal.
25. I therefore find that the effects on biodiversity would be acceptable. As such, I find no conflict with the requirements of Policy NE1 of the CS and Policies NE26 and NE27 of the LP or the relevant provisions of the Framework. These seek, amongst other things, to protect and enhance the quality of the biodiversity interests of the District.

Other Matters

26. The existing cabins are available to a variety of user groups and can cater for disabled visitors. In this respect, the proposal would improve the facilities, offering improved leisure provision, respite and retreat for carers, providing a place to meet, eat and learn. The clubhouse would also provide facilities in connection with the camping pods, guests staying outside of a retreat framework and would be available to the local community. However, I do not have substantive details regarding the proposed extent of use between the differing user groups, which limits the weight I can afford these differing benefits.
27. Nonetheless, there would be social and economic benefits from the improved facilities, diversification, increased number and mix of accommodation, job creation and increased spend supporting local businesses. Moreover, I have no reason to dispute the demand for such holiday accommodation and recognise the associated health and wellbeing benefits this can bring. These are objectives which are encouraged in emerging and adopted local planning policies and in the Framework.
28. However, I do not have substantive evidence as to why the design, scale and layout, as proposed, is necessary to meeting these objectives. Moreover, when considered against the great weight given to conserving and enhancing the landscape and the scenic beauty of an AONB, the benefits outlined, individually or cumulatively, would not outweigh the significant harm I have identified.

29. The absence of harm in relation to other considerations, including, amongst other things, highway safety are neutral matters that weigh neither for nor against the proposal.

Conclusion

30. For the reasons given above, the proposal would conflict with the development plan when read as a whole and there are no material considerations that outweigh that conflict. Accordingly, the appeal is dismissed.

Mr R Walker

INSPECTOR