
Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 14 January 2022

by Geoff Underwood BA(Hons) PGDip(Urb Cons) MRTPI IHBC

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 01 February 2022

Appeal Ref: APP/P2935/W/21/3285128

**Longbank Farm, Longhoughton Road B1339, Longhoughton,
Northumberland NE66 3AP**

- 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 Guy Munden, The Northumberland Estates against the decision of Northumberland County Council.
 - The application Ref 20/01918/FUL, dated 24 June 2020, was refused by notice dated 20 April 2021.
 - The development proposed is the demolition of modern agricultural sheds and development of six new residential dwellings, including gardens, car parking, and all ancillary works.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matter

2. A completed planning obligation seeking to deliver affordable housing has been provided. The type and scale of provision it would secure is in line with that which the Council's Delegated Report identifies as having been agreed. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary this effectively addresses the Council's fourth reason for refusal which objected that there was no mechanism to secure affordable housing.

Main Issues

3. Consequently, the main issues raised by this appeal are:
 - i) whether or not the development would be in an appropriate location for new housing, having regard to local and national policy and with reference to accessibility;
 - ii) the effect of the development on the character and appearance of the area, including that of the Northumberland Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB); and,
 - iii) the effect of the development on highway safety.

Reasons

Location of housing

4. The site is located within the open countryside around a quarter of a kilometre or more according to the appellant's figures, from the nearest houses in the village of Longhoughton. The site forms part of a farmstead with a relatively

tight cluster of existing dwellings, traditional farm buildings, some of which are in the process of conversion to dwellings, and former agricultural portal frame sheds with associated hardstanding.

5. The proposed dwellings would be physically and visually separate from the village. Whilst not isolated from one another, nor from existing or proposed dwellings in the farmstead, they would nonetheless be isolated by a significant area of open countryside from the village, and from the services and facilities on offer within it. Those facilities in the settlement are farther away from the site than the nearest edge of the village, with the convenience store 1.2km from the site, according to the Council's figures.
6. The site is next to a bus route with stops outside providing five services a day, according to the Council, and the appellant advises that other buses including those serving secondary schools, are available in the village. The drawings indicate that the bus stops would be improved. In the context of its rural situation this accessibility to public transport is in all likelihood much more extensive than that which many isolated clusters of houses will be served by. Nevertheless, the low frequency of bus services along with the limited level of services and facilities in Longhoughton and their distance from the site makes it very likely that many trips for day-to-day purposes, whether into the village or farther afield, would be made by private vehicle.
7. Pedestrian, and potentially cycle, accessibility would be much improved by the proposed footway alongside the road which would make it safer and more attractive for existing and future occupiers to walk into Longhoughton than it is at present. This would not diminish the actual distance between the site and facilities in the village. Bearing in mind that many services and facilities would require travel to other settlements, or indeed the mainline railway station at Alnmouth, the footway would only have a limited effect in reducing the number of vehicle journeys.
8. The development would be contrary to Core Strategy¹ Policy S1 which generally limits development to the re-use of existing buildings in the countryside (an area the plan defines as including groups of buildings outside specified settlements). As overall the proposed dwellings would only have very limited access to jobs, shops, services and the transport network other than by car it would not meet the accessibility criterion of Core Strategy Policy S3. Consequently, the development would fail to accord with Core Strategy Policy S14's approach to development in the open countryside as it would not meet any of its list of exceptions and would not be sustainable in light of Core Strategy Policy S3.
9. As the development would not be located within a settlement, irrespective of the accessibility to those services and facilities available within Longhoughton, the development would not accord with the first of the Core Strategy's Accessibility Principles. As a result, it would conflict with criterion 1 of Core Strategy Policy S11 which seeks to locate development to maximise accessibility and minimise travel impact. Notwithstanding that many of that Policy's other criteria may be met by the proposal, the development would conflict with Core Strategy Policy S11 overall in respect of accessibility.

¹ Alnwick District Local Development Framework – Core Strategy Development Plan Document, 2007.

10. The development, although adjacent to existing and proposed dwellings, would be physically separate and remote from Longhoughton and therefore contrary to the National Planning Policy Framework's (the Framework) requirement that the development of isolated homes in the countryside is avoided. Whilst there might be a limited contribution to enhance or maintain the vitality of the rural community this would not alter the development's situation in the open countryside set away from the nearest settlement.
11. Whilst the Framework encourages the efficient use of land, and the development would replace existing buildings, those policies do not lend support to the proposal particularly given that the Framework's definition of previously developed land excludes land that is, or was last, occupied by agricultural buildings.
12. Although a unit of affordable housing is proposed, there is no suggestion that the development, with its five other open market homes, would be a rural exception site in the Framework's terms. Overall, the development would not accord with the Framework in these respects.

Character and appearance

13. Given the relatively level topography surrounding the site the existing large portal frame agricultural buildings are not overly prominent in the landscape where the tall mature hedges alongside the B1339 go some way to screen them. Although functional and utilitarian in appearance, they are not dissimilar to other farm buildings in the wider vicinity. Their close proximity to older farm buildings means that from many vantage points, including the public right of way which runs to the north and west, they are seen in the context of a cluster of buildings reducing their individual prominence.
14. The silo is more noticeable and incongruous due to its height. When seen closer to, the blockwork, profiled sheeting and cladding of the three sheds to be removed appear harsh against the more mellow natural materials of the historic farm buildings. However, overall those existing modern farm buildings are not so unsightly or conspicuous as to require removal at any cost.
15. The topography and landscape features which render aspects of the large agricultural sheds less obvious also work in favour of limiting the prominence of the proposed new dwellings to a degree.
16. Nevertheless, at closer quarters the proximity of proposed bungalows K and L to the road would make new development considerably more noticeable where an open hardstanding presently exists in front of the largest shed which is set well back from the road. The proposed design of dwellings would help them to assimilate within the prevailing traditional form and appearance of existing buildings on the site. Their single storey height would be markedly lower than the sizeable sheds. However, they would appear as residential dwellings set within gardens whose detached configuration, particularly along the north side of the site, would take on a more suburban character and appearance.
17. Even with careful enclosure and landscaping, the five proposed dwellings that would be situated on the outside of the cluster would present domestic gardens to the surrounding countryside. Their attendant domestic paraphernalia, lighting and landscaping would introduce a suburban appearance around much of the periphery of the farmstead in harmful contrast to its current

predominantly rural, agricultural appearance. Whilst such intrusions might be minor on their own they have the potential to cumulatively erode the countryside character of the area. Even though the development would not extend beyond existing boundaries, or in some cases building footprints, the change would be marked.

18. Notwithstanding any improvements for pedestrians and other road users, the proposed footway would be a harsh engineered feature that would add a further suburban element to the front of the site presently characterised by soft grass verges. This intrusive effect would extend all the way to the village and, along with the visibility splay to the field entrance, further erode the countryside appearance of the area, an effect which would endure into the night with proposed lighting.
19. The site is not within the AONB but it lies directly opposite it. Whilst the substantial hedges which run along the AONB boundary would go some way to mitigating visual intrusion from within the designated area, the AONB also relies to a degree on the quality of the countryside which surrounds it. The harm in terms of intrusive effects of dwellings on the periphery of the farmstead cluster would also intrude into the rural and tranquil setting of the AONB.
20. This would be particularly noticeable from the footpath which runs to the north and west of the site where views of the Northumberland Coast and the AONB can be enjoyed with the farmstead in the foreground.. The proposal would not represent a sensitive location or design which seeks to minimise adverse impacts on an AONB that the Framework requires for development within an AONB's setting. I note that the Northumberland Coast AONB Partnership have also raised concerns in this regard.
21. There would be some visual benefits through the removal of the large agricultural sheds and the silo, and the architecture of the proposed buildings themselves would not be at odds with their built context. Nevertheless, on balance the intrusive effects of residential encroachment into the countryside in this sensitive location would mean that the character and appearance of the area would be harmed overall.
22. As the development would not protect or, overall enhance, the distinctive landscape character of the area it would not accord with Core Strategy Policy S13. Although the traditional design and sympathetic materials of the individual dwellings would be of a high standard, their situation and rural location would fail to protect and enhance the local environment, contrary to Core Strategy Policy S16.
23. The appellant has suggested an alternative location the footway on the other side of the hedge that would make it less prominent from the road and screen it from the AONB. This would go some way to limiting the intrusive effect of the footway from the B1339. Nevertheless, this element of the scheme would still erode, albeit to a more limited degree, the rural character of the area and in any event would not alter the intrusive effects of the dwellings themselves.

Highway safety

24. Although within the 30mph speed limit the site would be accessed from a straight road where interested parties a note that vehicles often drive over the

limit. However, this straight alignment means that drivers of vehicles leaving the site have good visibility in either direction as do those driving along the road of those entering or leaving the site. This situation would be slightly improved with the proposed footway and associated works. Furthermore, the scheme proposes the potential for a narrowing feature and road markings in advance of the speed limit along with a crossing point between bus stops which may go some way to persuading drivers to adhere to the speed limit.

25. There is the potential such visibility might be hampered at certain times of the day by buses heading towards Longhoughton, or even service vehicles in a notional layby suggested by the Council. However, the infrequent number of buses on the route reported by the Council is unlikely to create a materially worse situation than exists. Although the vehicles of an additional six dwellings over and above those existing or with permission on the site would be an increase, the road conditions are such that conflict between vehicles is unlikely to be materially any greater than existing circumstances where residential and seasonal holiday traffic, and formerly farm vehicles, enter and leave the site.
26. The safety of pedestrians, and potentially cyclists, would be much improved by the creation of a dedicated, surfaced and lit footway where none exists. The proposed access arrangements within the site would appear to enable vehicles to enter and leave the site in forward gear and space exists for manoeuvring for large vehicles such as refuse vehicles. Whilst the extent of highway infrastructure proposed to create acceptable access and pedestrian routes would lead to harm to the character and appearance of the area, conversely this would create a satisfactory environment for the safety of all highway users.
27. Whilst I can appreciate the concerns of interested parties living in the vicinity who are familiar with road conditions, there is no substantive evidence that the addition of the vehicles of six new households entering or leaving the site would harmfully alter road and traffic conditions on the B1339. I note that the Council's Highways Development Management response felt the scheme acceptable in this respect (although not in terms of accessibility) subject to planning conditions.
28. The development would consequently avoid conflict with Core Strategy Policy S11 in terms of highway safety effects. It would also avoid conflict with the Framework in this particular respect, which requires safe and suitable access to sites for all users and that development should only be prevented or refused on highways grounds if there would be an unacceptable impact on highway safety.

Other Matters

29. Whilst the appellant points to community support for the proposals in light of the Parish Council changing their view and offering no objections to the proposal, I have also taken into account the objections raised by interested parties and cannot conclude that there is unanimous community support for the scheme.
30. As well as providing for affordable housing a planning obligation would also secure a Coastal Mitigation Service Contribution in respect of alleviating any effects from recreational disturbance to designated habitats. As such it would not provide any benefit but simply seek to mitigate any adverse effects.

Planning Balance

31. Notwithstanding the Council's housing land supply position the provision of six dwellings would be a social and economic benefit, particularly that one of the homes would be affordable. This would carry moderate weight in support of the development in light of the Framework's support of the objective of significantly boosting the supply of homes. Although the appellant points to the emerging Neighbourhood Plan's housing ambitions this is at an early stage of preparation and no details have been provided so it is not possible to conclude whether housing in this particular location would have any benefits over and above those identified. Also, the removal of the agricultural sheds would be a visual improvement considered in isolation, but not in light of their proposed replacement.
32. Putting aside the harmful effects on the character and appearance of the area the proposed footway would improve pedestrian, and potentially cycle, accessibility and safety for all users along that stretch of the B1339 including those staying at the touring caravan site at the farm. This may contribute towards the first leg of the emerging Neighbourhood Plan ambition of an improved cycle and pedestrian link to Lesbury. Improvements would be made to bus stops and the improved visibility to field accesses and potential for speed reduction features would all be beneficial effects arising from the development. These carry moderate weight in favour of the proposal.
33. The absence of harm in respect of highway safety issues, and consequently any conflict with the development plan and Framework in that particular regard, is a neutral consideration.
34. The Core Strategy policies are somewhat dated as, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, will be the evidence on which it would have been prepared. Its Policy S1, and to a lesser degree Policy S14, are not fully in accordance with the Framework's approach to housing in the countryside which makes different exceptions. Nevertheless, the conflict with the development plan in terms of the location of new housing and harm to the character and appearance of the area, including that of the setting of the AONB, carries considerable, if not full, weight in these respects. Furthermore, the development's conflict with the Framework in those regards also carries considerable weight. Therefore, the harm identified would outweigh the benefits of the scheme.

Conclusion

35. The proposal would not be located in a situation appropriate for new housing and would harm the character and appearance of the area in conflict with the development plan taken as a whole. There are no material considerations that indicate the decision should be made other than in accordance with the development plan. Therefore, the appeal is dismissed.

Geoff Underwood

INSPECTOR