



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 21 February 2022

by Andrew Smith BA (Hons) MA MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 11th March 2022

Appeal Ref: APP/W2845/W/21/3282053

Dodford Grange B&B, Main Road, Dodford NN7 4SR

- 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 Mrs Frankie Jackson on behalf of Dodford Grange B&B against the decision of West Northamptonshire Council.
 - The application Ref DA/2020/0501, dated 5 August 2020, was refused by notice dated 25 March 2021.
 - The development proposed is described on the application form as: 'Proposed part change of use of agricultural paddock to tourism development, improved access, main holiday let building, shower block, 2no. holiday lodges and 5no. bell tents to existing Bed & Breakfast business.'
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. For the purposes of determination, I have used a description of development¹ similar to that given on the Decision Notice and the appeal form because it is clear, concise and logically ordered. I have, however, removed reference to a 'shower block', which was omitted from the scheme during the processing of the planning application that is now the subject of this appeal.

Main Issue

3. The effect upon the character and appearance of the area.

Reasons

4. The settlement of Dodford is designated as an Other Village via Policy RA3 of the Settlements and Countryside Local Plan (Part 2) (February 2020) (the P2LP). This policy indicates that development outside the confines of Other Villages shall be acceptable only where prescribed circumstances apply.
5. These circumstances include economic development that enhances or maintains the vitality or sustainability of a village or that would contribute towards and improve the local economy. Nevertheless, as clarified in Part C to Policy RA3, all development at Other Villages is expected to be small scale, to protect the form, character and setting of the village and to protect the integrity of open land that makes an important contribution to the form, character and setting of the settlement.

¹ Change of use of land to bed and breakfast facility including a holiday let building, 2 holiday lodges and 5 bell tents and associated infrastructure

6. The main and typically older part of Dodford is located to the north of the site, whilst a separate part predominantly comprised of more recent development is situated in proximity to the A45, which is a major road that runs an east-west axis and that is located to the south of the site. This southern part of the settlement incorporates Dodford Grange. The ground level falls to the north when departing the A45 and a pronounced difference in ground levels is observable when the northern and southern parts of Dodford are compared. These circumstances promote that the settlement is, whilst often loosely spaced, read and experienced as being comprised of two distinct parts.
7. The gap that exists between the northern and southern parts is clear of any substantive built development and the lands in question are often agricultural and of open composition. Well-vegetated field boundaries further contribute to the existence of a green and rural character and appearance. The appeal site, which is currently free of above ground development (with the exception of the buildings that comprise Dodford Grange) and positioned immediately alongside the highway route that connects the village's different parts, makes an important contribution to the rural and open characteristics of this gap location. This is notwithstanding its scrubland appearance.
8. It is apparent that efforts have been made to seek to limit the scale and visual impact of the scheme, including via amendments made during the planning process. Moreover, buildings of single storey height are proposed, and traditional materials have been selected. Furthermore, the holiday let building would be, in part, dug into the ground and has been designed to loosely resemble a barn conversion. In addition, new development would primarily be focussed towards the northern and southern ends of the site in the interests of seeking to maintain a recognisable gap. I also acknowledge here the appellant's acceptance to an external lighting scheme being secured via condition should planning permission be granted.
9. However, it remains that a considerable quantum of new development is proposed in overall terms. Indeed, the newly intended buildings would be supplemented by alterations to the site's access, a designated parking area and five individual bell tents of not insignificant size and height. Whilst it is the intention for these tents to be dismantled outside of summer months, they would still remain in situ for a considerable portion of any given year.
10. There is established planting in existence to the site's boundaries and this is to be supplemented by additional planting. Views into the site would be softened and restricted on this basis. However, consistent with my own observations upon inspection, planting cannot be relied upon to consistently provide solid or impenetrable buffers to views. This is not least because it is ever evolving and reliant upon continual maintenance to retain a consistent form. Whilst a far-reaching effect upon the receiving landscape would be avoided, the scheme would hold the potential to have a pronounced visual impact where experienceable at close quarters. Accordingly, the distinct sense of separation that presently exists between the northern and southern parts of Dodford would be noticeably eroded.
11. As acknowledged by the appellant, scale is, to an extent, a subjective consideration and can be influenced by a variety of factors. I have noted the stated capacities of local wedding venues and accept that a maximum capacity of 22 guests would be modest in comparison. Nevertheless, in the context of

character and appearance implications, the size and composition of the host settlement is important to consider when assessing whether a proposal can rightfully be thought of as small scale. Moreover, the cumulative extent of accommodation and associated infrastructure that would be brought forward would have significant implications for the makeup of Dodford and cannot, to my mind, be accurately considered to comprise small scale development.

12. I accept that, in-part owing to its proximity to the A45, the site and its immediate locality does not benefit from a distinct sense of tranquillity that would be likely to be unduly undermined by the proposal. I also note that a planning condition could be imposed, in the event the appeal be successful, to guard against the playing of any amplified music. Even so, for the reasons set out above, the development proposals would fail to adequately respect a well-established gap between developed areas that makes an important contribution to Dodford's rural identity.
13. Thus, the proposal would have an unacceptable urbanising effect and cause harm to the character and appearance of the area. The scheme conflicts with Policies R2 and E7 of the West Northamptonshire Joint Core Strategy (December 2014) (the JCS), Policies RA3 and RA6 of the P2LP and the National Planning Policy Framework (July 2021) in so far as these policies require proposals to be of an appropriate scale for their location and to respect the environmental quality and character of the rural area.

Other Matters

14. I have noted objections/concerns raised by interested parties with respect to matters including flood risk, drainage, the effect upon neighbouring living conditions and highway safety/parking. However, as I have found the proposal to be unacceptable for other reasons, it is not necessary for me to explore these matters further here.
15. In terms of the scheme's benefits, it would support the growth and expansion of an existing successful rural business and would promote tourism and thus spending in the local economy. There would also be economic activity generated via the construction phase and a range of new part-time and full-time job opportunities to likely be taken by local residents would be created once operational. The proposal is supported by a Business Viability Statement that indicates that there would be demand for the intended facilities from a varied customer base (including persons/businesses linked to the weddings sector) and that the venture would be commercially viable. I also acknowledge that the development would be wheelchair accessible and be anticipated to deliver some modest biodiversity enhancements through new soft landscaping.
16. The scheme's benefits, when considered in a cumulative sense, would be extensive and attractive of considerable weight. Nevertheless, in my judgement, these benefits would be insufficient to outweigh the significant harm and associated policy conflicts that I have identified in a character and appearance sense.
17. For the avoidance of doubt, the presumption in favour of sustainable development, as referenced at Policy SA of the JCS, does not apply. Indeed, the proposal conflicts with the development plan when read as a whole and material considerations do not lead me to a decision otherwise.

Conclusion

18. For the above reasons, the appeal is dismissed.

Andrew Smith

INSPECTOR