



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 28 February 2022

by B Plenty BSc (Hons) DipTP MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 24 March 2022

Appeal Ref: APP/Z2830/W/21/3280626

Jerry's Barn, Wappenham Road, Helmdon NN13 5QU

- 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 John Watson, on behalf of Fisher German LLP, against the decision of South Northamptonshire District Council.
 - The application Ref S/2020/2099/FUL, dated 13 November 2020, was refused by notice dated 12 February 2021.
 - The development proposed is Conversion of traditional agricultural buildings to form one residential dwelling.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Policy background and Main Issues

2. The South Northamptonshire Local Plan (Part 2) 2011-2029 (LP) establishes the Council's approach to the distribution of housing across the district. Saved policy SS1 seeks to direct most housing towards Brackley and Towcester, with smaller settlements favoured on a hierarchical basis. The site is outside the defined confines of a settlement and therefore within the open countryside for policy purposes. Saved policy LH1 identifies that residential development in the open countryside would not be accepted unless it would meet a listed exception, including at (d) the re-use of redundant buildings in compliance with saved policy LH4.
3. Saved policy LH4, in support of the re-use of a redundant building, requires that it is not in such a state of disrepair that it would require complete demolition and re-building, would not create the need for a replacement building and would enhance its immediate setting. In recognition of these criteria, I am cognizant that the barns would not need to be replaced elsewhere within the agricultural unit. Paragraph 80 of the National Planning Policy Framework (The Framework) states that isolated homes in the countryside should be avoided unless by exception. One such exception is if the proposal would re-use redundant buildings and enhance their setting. Therefore, saved policy LH4 is consistent with the Framework in this regard.
4. Consequently, in consideration of the evidence and the above policy position, the main issues are:
 - the effect of the proposed dwelling on the character and appearance of the surrounding area, and

- whether the proposed development would amount to a conversion or require complete demolition and re-building.

Reasons

Character and appearance

5. The barns are located within the centre of a field in the open countryside. Although redundant and vacant, these are of a traditional rural appearance. These consist of stone and brick walls, with the larger of the two including architectural features of some interest. These buildings therefore add interest to their setting within the countryside. The field boundary to the highway consists of a hedge that provides some views through the site. As such, the site is relatively exposed to open views across a wide area. The barns, whilst screened by some adjacent tree cover, are visible from a wide vantage and make a positive contribution to the wider landscape character.
6. The Council's Agricultural and Rural development design guide (2017) provides advice for development involving barn conversions. This requires proposals to retain architectural elements of the building that contribute to its character and for new openings to respect the original character of the building. The proposed development would result in conversion works that would include a new roof, windows and doors. Windows that would mostly infill the existing openings within both barns with garage doors proposed to infill the large opening into barn B. These additions are relatively sensitive, and the scheme proposes limited further external alteration. The alterations would therefore be relatively discrete and would inevitably flow from converting the buildings. As such, the proposed alterations would generally align with the advice of the Council's design guide.
7. However, the proposed development would also include a long access driveway and turning head. The extent of hardstanding would be relatively extensive and would erode the otherwise relatively discrete works proposed to the barns. Its surfacing would need to be a hard bound material to satisfy the safety requirements of the Highway Authority for the first section, with a material similar to crushed concrete covering the remaining driveway. The hardstanding, irrespective of the type of covering material, would be an overt and harmful addition within the countryside setting. This would result in a substantial intrusion into the rural character of the site. Furthermore, it also seems unlikely that the barns would need a substantive formal drive to be accessed by agricultural vehicles in the future.
8. The appeal site is tightly drawn around the buildings and is not enclosed by physical boundaries. Without a defined boundary it is unlikely that the residential use of the proposal would remain within the limits of the appeal site. I am also unconvinced that the courtyard area, in between the barns, would fulfil the needs of future occupiers. The area would be used to provide access to the proposed garages and could be regularly occupied by vehicles.
9. Furthermore, conditions to prevent the erection of buildings within the site would not be sufficient to prevent the visual impact of residential occupation due to the exposed nature of the buildings and space around them. The addition of typical garden equipment and furniture would have the effect of incrementally denuding the landscape character of the site to its disbenefit. Landscape planting could assist in screening parts of the proposed

development. Nonetheless, this would be visually ineffective unless it was so extensive as to demonstrably erode the open character of the surrounding landscape.

10. Accordingly, with the absence of a wider residential boundary future occupiers would be likely to occupy and enclose areas of the field to suit their requirements, with planted boundaries that would be difficult to control. This would result in a domestication of the wider area in conflict with its current agrarian appearance. Consequently, the proposed residential use of the site would be an overt and prominent activity.
11. Accordingly taking all of the above matters into account, the proposal would not enhance the setting of the barns and would harm the character and appearance of the surrounding area. Consequently, the proposed dwelling would conflict with policy SS2 of the LP and the Framework. These seek, among other matters, for development to demonstrate its compatibility and integration with its surroundings and the distinctive local character of the area.

Conversion or rebuild

12. The existing barns are conjoined to each other on one corner. The main building, barn A, has brick walls, with some decorative features and includes two large openings. The adjacent wing, barn B, is perpendicular to the first and has stone walls to its rear and one side. It also has a breeze block end wall and is open-sided into the central courtyard. Parts of the rear corner of this barn is also open sided. The roofs are covered by corrugated sheeting with the main building having a timber framed roof structure. The appellant's structural survey¹ demonstrates that barn A is in generally good condition, whereas barn B has suffered from decay and neglect. The report identifies some areas of concern in relation to both barns. This is particularly with respect to barn B, where the south wall shows signs of bulging and requiring further investigation to identify its cause.
13. The addendum survey illustrates that barn A is in relatively good condition and its walls and roof structure could be retained with some minor repair. It also explains that the bulging of the rear wall of barn B is likely to have resulted from an absence of ties between the inner and outer walls. This also states that the roof structure of barn B could be retained and would only require further support to the wall plate. The majority of walls and roof structure would be retained. Externally, the most notable change would relate to the proposed replacement of the roof which would be necessary to satisfy building regulation requirements. Although the proposal would include some work to address the poor condition of both barns, especially barn B, these works would not amount to significant rebuilding. As a result, the proposal would consist of development that would fall within the terms of a conversion rather than complete demolition and re-building.
14. Nevertheless, having determined that the proposal would not enhance the character of the area it would fail other requirements of policy LH4. As a result, the proposed development would conflict with saved policies SS1, LH1 and LH4 of the LP and the Framework.

¹ Report of Structure, by Fisher German, dated 16 January 2020

Other Matters

15. Class Q of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015 (as amended) allows for the conversion of an agricultural building to residential use. The appellant alleges that this offers a realistic fallback position in this case. However, this is a qualified right and the principle is therefore not fully crystallised unless the Council give its Prior Approval for any such conversion. As such, I have only afforded limited weight to this potential fall-back position.
16. The Framework seeks to significantly boost the supply of housing. The proposed dwelling would make a small contribution towards housing supply and the social, economic and environmental benefits of the local area. Although the proposal could deliver some ecological enhancements and biodiverse gains these would be limited and could be delivered in isolation of the proposal. Accordingly, these benefits would be of limited weight in favour of the proposed development.
17. I am cognizant of the appeal decision made at Bugbrooke Barns. Although each scheme must be considered on its own merits, this appeared to raise different considerations. It also found that the proposal would complement the character and appearance of the area, in contrast to my findings with respect to this proposal. This therefore conveys limited support in favour of the proposed scheme.
18. The proposal raised an objection from the Highway Authority. Its concerns largely relate to the isolated location of the proposed dwelling and technical matters that related to the use of the access drive. The Planning Practice Guidance is clear that the Class Q Permitted Development right does not apply a test in relation to the sustainability of a location. Furthermore, I am satisfied that the use of the access would not result in harm to highway safety due to the low traffic levels of Wappenham Road and the limited number of vehicles that would attend the site. Had I been minded to allow the appeal the further highway matters raised could have been addressed by the imposition of relevant planning conditions.

Conclusion

19. The benefits associated with the proposed dwelling would not off-set the conflict caused to the Council's spatial housing strategy by the harm caused to the character and appearance of the area. The proposal would conflict with the development plan when taken as a whole. Therefore, for the reasons given, I conclude that the appeal should not succeed.

B Plenty

INSPECTOR