



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 12 April 2022

by Paul Cooper MSc MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 26 May 2022

Appeal Ref: APP/M2840/W/21/3282909

Dovecote Buttery and Farm Shop, Newton Road, Newton, Kettering, Northamptonshire NN14 1BW

- 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 W M Elliot & Son Ltd against the decision of North Northamptonshire Council.
 - The application Ref KET/2020/0607, dated 28 August 2020, was refused by notice dated 15 March 2021.
 - The development proposed is change of use of agricultural/horticultural land to self-storage caravan facility and associated works, including construction of landscaped soil bunds, landscaping and installation of security gate.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Main Issues

2. The main issues in this appeal are:-
 - The consistency of the proposal with the Development Plan
 - The effect of the development on the character and appearance of the area.
 - The effect of the development on local amenities, including a SSSI.

Reasons

Development Plan

3. The appeal site lies within a rural area. Policy 25 of the North Northamptonshire Joint Core Strategy (2016) (The JCS) states that sustainable opportunities to develop and diversify the rural economy that are of an appropriate scale for their location and respect the environmental quality and character of the rural area will be supported.
4. There is a list of criteria attached to that Policy that are acceptable in terms of farm diversification. The appellant has listed a number of reasons as to why there is a need for diversification, including losses from the COVID pandemic and losses to fruit trees and crops as well as the general winding-down of agricultural and horticultural uses at the farm.

5. Whilst I can understand the position of the appellant, there is nothing in the Policy with regard to the change of the use of the land for caravan storage as an acceptable form of farm diversification, and there are many acceptable options in the Policy text. I find insufficient reason to allow an exemption from this policy.
6. As a result, the site fails to provide a suitable location for the development. Accordingly, it results in harm in achieving the spatial strategy for the area. Thus, it conflicts with Policy 25 of the JCS, the aims of which are set out above.

Character and appearance

7. The application would see a change of use of the appeal site from use as agricultural land to a caravan storage facility along with associated works, landscaping to form bunds, and a security gate. Upon approaching the site and exploring the location, the sense is of a distinct countryside character with fields and woodland visible into the distance. In this rural setting context, the proposed storage area and landscaping bunds would be visually intrusive.
8. The appeal site is an area of agricultural land located adjacent to Dovecote Farm and the farm shop. The site forms a small part of a much larger field network that adjoins the site. The fields surrounding the site are predominantly flat and open, with often only limited, intermittent planting dividing one field from another. The site and the surrounding fields contribute positively to a wider rural landscape character within a number of agricultural fields and the village of Newton.
9. The proposed landscaped bunds would assist to a degree in softening the development. However, given the location of the appeal site as outlined, it would be very difficult to entirely screen the caravans and they would still draw the eye in the wider countryside setting. The topography of the area would also assist in screening the development, but some public views would remain available in the area. Whilst the proposed landscaping would bring some benefits in terms of screening the storage area, I find that overall, the effect would remain a harmful impact on the rural character of the area.
10. As such, the storage of caravans on the currently undeveloped and open site would relate poorly to the identified landscape character of the area, representing a harmfully urbanising impact that fails to reinforce local distinctiveness.
11. I acknowledge that the caravan storage would be viewed in the context of the buildings and structures at Dovecote Farm, including the existing commercial use. Notwithstanding these factors, the proposed caravan storage would appear harmfully intrusive within its field landscape setting.
12. The proposal would not therefore be an acceptable form of development in the countryside bearing in mind its effect on the character and appearance of the area. It would conflict with Policy 3 of the JCS which, amongst other matters, expects development to conserve and enhance the character and qualities of the local landscape, protect the landscape and provide appropriate landscape mitigation.

Local Amenities

13. The appeal site is within the River Ise and Meadows Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The river is described by Natural England as '*the best example in the county of a lowland river on clay, fed by base rich water*' whilst the riverbanks have tall fen, woodland and grassland, and a species rich flood meadow. There is a population of a nationally declining freshwater crayfish species.
14. Whilst the appeal site is located approximately 250m from the SSSI, Natural England (NE) have responded to the appeal, asking for further information regarding the scheme in order to give a comprehensive response, as the proposal could have potentially significant effects on the SSSI.
15. The proposal includes the change of use of a large area of land for a significantly different use than at present and there is limited evidence before me that the implications of the use of the appeal site area on the designated site has been considered.
16. Further, no comprehensive ecological appraisal has been provided with the appeal and there is limited reference to the site's designations in the appellant's statement of case. Therefore, there is no baseline assessment of the biodiversity of the appeal site and there is insufficient information for me to establish the biodiversity value of the site, to assess the effect of the development on the designated sites or its effect on biodiversity more generally.
17. For these reasons, I conclude that insufficient information has been provided to demonstrate that the development as a whole would not harm sites of national and international importance for nature conservation and biodiversity, and therefore I find conflict with Policy 4 of the JCS which, amongst other matters, expect development to protect existing biodiversity and geodiversity assets. It would also conflict with the Framework where it seeks to minimise impacts on, and provide net gains for, biodiversity.
18. In addition, the effect of the development on the integrity of designated sites cannot be assessed and the scheme would fail to comply with the Habitats Regulations.
19. The issue of an acceptable lighting scheme for the site should have been requested by the Council at application stage, and could easily be dealt with by condition, but as I am dismissing the appeal for other matters, I shall deal with this aspect of the scheme no further.

Conclusion

20. Overall, for the reasons given above, the proposal would conflict with the development plan and there are no material considerations that would outweigh that conflict. Therefore, the appeal is dismissed.

Paul Cooper

INSPECTOR