



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 15 December 2022

by H Jones BA (Hons) DipTP MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 24th January 2023

Appeal Ref: APP/X0360/W/22/3300225

Handpost Farm, School Road, Barkham, Wokingham RG41 4TN

- 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 Nick Blair (Barkham Homes) against the decision of Wokingham Borough Council.
 - The application Ref 220684, dated 3 March 2022, was refused by notice dated 5 May 2022.
 - The development proposed is the erection of a replacement dwelling and incorporation of the existing Handpost Cottage Annex into Handpost Farm (house). Demolition of menage building and barn.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. The description of development in the heading above has been taken from the planning application form. However, in Part E of the appeal form it is stated that the description of development has not changed but, nevertheless, a different wording has been entered. Neither of the main parties has provided written confirmation that a revised description of development has been agreed. Accordingly, I have used the one given on the original application.
3. Both the Council's decision notice and the appellant's list of application documents reference a plan depicting the existing rear and side elevations of the existing Handpost Farm dwelling and numbered 3769102. However, the plan submitted in evidence to this end is numbered 3769103. The appellant has confirmed that the plan submitted in evidence is the correct plan, and I have determined the appeal with regard to it.
4. Following the Council's decision, a unilateral undertaking (UU) has been submitted the purpose of which would be to ensure that the existing Handpost Cottage dwelling would be incorporated into the existing Handpost Farm dwelling and used only for this purpose and not retained or used as an independent or separate residential dwelling. I comment on the obligations later in my reasoning.

Main Issues

5. The main issues are whether or not the appeal site provides a suitable location for the development proposed having particular regard to, the development plan's spatial strategy, and the effects of the development upon the character and appearance of the area.

Reasons

6. The appeal site, Handpost Farm, is located close to the junction of School Road, Barkham Road and Langley Common Road. A number of properties are concentrated close to this junction with many laid out in a linear form along the roadsides. However, the site, and the collection of nearest properties, are set away from nearby settlements, such as Arborfield Cross, within the countryside, and beyond any settlement development limit defined by the development plan.
7. Within the appeal site, the house at Handpost Farm, is a large property. Beside this house is a smaller property known as Handpost Cottage which recently obtained a lawful development certificate relating to its use as a dwelling¹. These existing residential properties are located close to neighbouring houses on School Road. Set some distance away from these properties to the north-east there is a menage building and a smaller timber barn adjacent. Trees and hedgerow are situated to the surrounds of this menage and barn. North of the menage building there are paddocks, some of this land closest to the menage building, being within the appeal site. This paddock land is enclosed by post and rail fencing but otherwise exhibits an open character. On the opposite side of the menage building there is further paddock land, much of which is beyond the bounds of the site. This land contains a number of trees and shrubs. Outside of the appeal site, but adjacent to it, and forming part of the Handpost Farm group, are some other buildings including a stable building and a property known as The Barn with detached garage beside.
8. Policy CP11 of the Wokingham Borough Local Development Framework Adopted Core Strategy Development Plan Document, 2010 (CS) relates to development outside of settlement development limits. In such locations, this policy states that development will not normally be permitted. However, a number of exceptions are listed. Of these, several relate to rural enterprises and activities, residential extensions, and community facilities. The only exceptions which permit the construction of new dwellings in such locations relate to affordable housing on rural exception sites, which the appeal scheme clearly does not propose, and replacement dwellings. In respect of replacement dwellings, Policy CP11 states that such development must either bring about environmental improvements or not result in inappropriate increases in the scale, form or footprint of the original building.
9. The Council have disputed the efficacy of the submitted UU. Given I am dismissing the appeal, it is not necessary for me to assess the UU in detail. Nevertheless, the appellant is proposing that Handpost Cottage be amalgamated into a single dwelling with the Handpost Farm dwelling and retained as such. Provided this was secured, I accept that no net gain in residential properties within the bounds of the site would result in the proposal. In turn, no contribution to housing supply would be made through the proposal.
10. Irrespective of the present or proposed composition of planning units on the site, physically, the proposed dwelling would be set a considerable distance from Handpost Cottage and would replace a menage building.

¹ Planning application reference: 213690

11. Reflective of its purpose, the menage building is of utilitarian design, with a corrugated roof and elevations, each in a muted colour, whilst the roofscape is simple with no variances to its height or shape. The relatively low eaves height and the shallow pitch of the roof slope, also provides for a low-slung appearance. Therefore, despite its large footprint, owing to this appearance and the screening afforded by trees and hedgerows close-by, the menage building is an inconspicuous feature. Furthermore, due to the nature and appearance of the menage building and the barn beside, the presence of the paddocks and the leafy setting, this part of the wider Handpost Farm site retains a rural character.
12. The proposal would introduce a house into a location where presently there is none and where a building of a very different character is situated. Due to its purpose, the proposed dwelling would be of a far more complex design and appearance than the menage building. It would be higher at both the eaves and roof ridge whilst it would have a relatively complicated roofscape which would incorporate hipped elements, feature 2 storey gable ends and a chimney. The proposed dwelling would be served by a large garden. This would encapsulate much of the existing paddock to the rear of the menage building, enclosing it, including through, to one side, 1.8m high close board fencing. To the front of the proposed house, the paddock land on that side would be crossed by a long access drive with passing place.
13. Whilst many landscape features on the site would be retained and, whilst the trees and the section of hedgerow that would be lost to the development may neither be of particularly high quality nor protected, I find that they nevertheless contribute positively to the more rural character that this part of the site presently exhibits. Their loss, which would in part be as a consequence of the drive would also open up views of the proposed development and its domestic character.
14. The greater height of the proposed dwelling, the incursion into paddock land that its enclosed garden and long access would cause, together with its more complex and strident appearance would amount to an increased and inappropriate built form. Furthermore, the appearance of the house, the ancillary domestic elements of the enclosed garden and access drive, and the tree and hedgerow loss would be transformative, eroding the present more rural character and replacing it with one far more suburban. These effects would be unacceptably harmful. In finding this harm, it follows that the development would not provide environmental improvements, as referenced within Policy CP11.
15. I accept that the proposed planting scheme would assist in softening and screening the development to an extent and may provide a net gain in planting and improve diversity, whilst the pea shingle drive may be preferable to some other forms of driveway finish. However, nevertheless, these soft and hard landscaping schemes would do little to offset the change in character of the land that would result in the proposal.
16. I accept that the effects of the development upon the character and appearance of the area would be localised and that, due in part to the number of trees and hedgerows in the area, the development would be well screened from many public vantage points. Nevertheless, this does not alter that the built form of the development would be inappropriate nor that the character of

this particular part of the countryside, which has intrinsic value, would be harmed.

17. Given that I have found that the form of the replacement dwelling would be so different from the menage building it would physically replace and, given that such a change in the character of this part of the site would result, that detached properties are located elsewhere in the area and which may exhibit a similar scale and some similar design features to that proposed, does not justify the harm I have identified.
18. I find that the circumstances in this appeal case differ from the examples of replacement dwellings approved elsewhere within the Borough which have been put to me in the evidence. Unlike in the appeal case, in each of the examples provided the building being demolished was a house and thereby of a character more akin to the replacement proposed. Whilst I am not familiar with each of the sites presented, on the basis of the evidence submitted, the replacement dwellings at Kalevala and Brackenwood would each appear to be closely located to other houses on either side and unlikely to have involved sites sharing the rural characteristics of the appeal site. Furthermore, some of the examples presented would appear to have obtained planning permission a considerable time ago when a different development plan will have been in force. Therefore, I attribute little weight to the planning permissions granted at these other sites.
19. I note that a planning application for a new dwelling and in place of the menage building has been refused in the past. The full details of that case are not before me and, again, that application will have been assessed against a different development plan. Moreover, and although I have similarly decided that planning permission should not be granted for the appeal proposals, I have come to my own conclusions having regard to the particular circumstances of this case.
20. It may be that in certain scenarios it would be acceptable for a replacement dwelling to be erected without the demolition of another building. I also note the content of the Borough Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document, 2012 (SPD) which does advise that there may be circumstances where it would be preferable to locate a replacement dwelling in another location. However, for the above reasons, I have identified that the particular proposals in this case would be unacceptably harmful.
21. The living conditions of neighbouring occupiers may not be unacceptably affected but the matters to be considered in that assessment differ from those concerning character and appearance, and the development plan's spatial strategy. Despite the absence of harm to neighbouring occupiers, it does not follow that the development would be acceptable in other respects.
22. My reasoning above has been informed by the suite of evidence before me including the Landscape and Visual Appraisal (LVA) which accompanied the planning application. Whether or not the Council's landscape officer had assessed the LVA prior to the Council making their determination has not been determinative in my decision.
23. Therefore, the proposal would result in the erection of a dwelling in the countryside, which, by reason of not providing for environmental improvements and being of inappropriate built form would not constitute one of the

exceptional forms of development permitted by Policy CP11 of the CS and, thereby, would be contrary to the development plan's spatial strategy. This inappropriate built form would be harmful to the rural character and appearance of the area and cause a loss of landscape features which contribute to that character. As a result, the proposed development would also conflict with Policies CP1 and CP3 of the CS, Policy TB21 of the Wokingham Borough Adopted Managing Development Delivery Local Plan, 2014 and content within the SPD. I also find that the development would be contrary to advice contained within the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework), including that at paragraphs 130 and 174 which state that development should be sympathetic to local character and should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment including through a recognition of the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside.

Other Matters

24. The site lies within the zone of influence of the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area (SPA), which is of national and international importance for its rare bird species. In making its decision, the Council, in part refused the planning application on the basis that the development would be likely to have significant effects on the SPA. The likelihood that the development would cause this significant effect is disputed by the appellant and, accordingly, no mitigation measures so as to avoid any potential adverse effects upon the integrity of the SPA are proposed.
25. If I were minded to allow the appeal, I would need to be satisfied that the proposal would have no adverse effects on the integrity of the SPA. However, as I am dismissing the appeal for reasons set-out in the main issues, there is no requirement for me to undertake this assessment. Even if I were to conclude that no such adverse effects would be caused by the development, it would at most, be a neutral factor in this appeal.

Conclusion

26. Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 requires planning applications to be determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.
27. The appellant has submitted a housing land supply statement.² On the basis that this accurately reflects the Council's housing land supply position, the absence of a 5 year housing land supply would engage paragraph 11(d) of the Framework. Irrespective, provided that Handpost Cottage was amalgamated with the Handpost Farm dwelling, no net gain in dwellings would result nor any benefit derived from a contribution to housing land supply.
28. I have found that the proposal would be contrary to the development plan's spatial strategy and result in an inappropriate built form that would be harmful to the rural character and appearance of the area. In finding no benefits of any substance in the proposal, it follows that the harm I have identified must significantly and demonstrably outweigh the lack of benefit when assessed against the policies in the Framework taken as a whole.

² Wokingham Borough Council Five Year Housing Land Supply Statement at 31 March 2022 (published 9 January 2023).

29. In turn, the conflict that I have identified with the development plan is not outweighed by other considerations, including the Framework. For the above reasons, having taken account of the development plan as a whole and all other relevant material considerations, the appeal is dismissed.

H Jones

INSPECTOR