



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 24 January 2023

by H Jones BA (Hons) DipTP MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 10 March 2023

Appeal Ref: APP/P2935/W/22/3310351

Alnham House, Alnham Main Road, Alnham NE66 4TJ

- 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 Peter Sordy (George Sordy and Sons) against the decision of Northumberland County Council.
 - The application Ref 21/04002/FUL, dated 7 October 2021, was refused by notice dated 5 July 2022.
 - The development proposed is 6no. yurts and associated structure for holiday and tourism.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Main Issues

2. 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 accessibility; and
 - The effects of the development upon the character and appearance of the countryside and the local landscape.

Reasons

Location of the development proposed

3. The appeal site relates to farmland situated within the open countryside to the east of Alnham Farm. The appeal site encompasses an existing field gate access at the roadside in the north, access track land which crosses through fields, and the land upon which the proposed yurt structures would be sited.
4. The Northumberland Local Plan, 2022 (LP) establishes a settlement hierarchy across the County. Table 4.1 identifies, at the top of this hierarchy, the Main Towns, then Service Centres, thirdly Service Villages, whilst Appendix A identifies a lengthy list of Small Villages. Alnham is a small settlement, comprising of only clusters of buildings and, reflective of this, it is identified as a Small Village. Settlements noticeably larger than Alnham or with a greater array of services and facilities are each a considerable distance from the appeal site and include other Small Villages such as Netherton and Whittingham, and Rothbury, a Service Centre.

5. On the basis of the evidence before me there are no bus services which operate close-by to the site nor are there any registered public rights of way within the vicinity of the site. The proposed yurts themselves would be positioned within fields, set some distance away from any groupings of buildings in Alnham, and any roads, on highly undulating land.
6. Whilst neither the LP nor the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) provide a definition of an accessible location, being so detached from services and facilities, in a location poorly serviced by public transport and established walking routes, I find that the appeal site is not within an accessible location.
7. I acknowledge that criterion d of Policy SPT1 of the LP does support a proportionate level of development within Small Villages and sets out that development in one village can support services and facilities in other nearby villages. However, the appeal site is within the open countryside rather than within or immediately adjacent to a village. Within the open countryside, Policy STP1 supports rural tourism where in accordance with Policy ECN15, which amongst other matters, and in relation to camping, caravan and chalet development, supports such schemes in accessible locations. For the reasons given above, I have found the appeal site would not be accessible.
8. Paragraph 105 of the Framework does state that opportunities to maximise sustainable transport solutions will vary between urban and rural areas whilst paragraphs 84 and 85, amongst other matters, support sustainable rural tourism, and state that sites to meet local business and community needs may have to be found beyond settlements and in locations not well served by public transport. I am mindful of this advice, and that Policies STP1 and ECN15 do support tourist development in the open countryside in some circumstances. However, in this particular case the lack of public transport options is compounded by the site's physical isolation, and the distance from settlements with reasonable arrays of services and facilities. In combination, I therefore find that the site is particularly inaccessible. Furthermore, I have no substantive evidence that the accommodation at this inaccessible site is necessary to meet a particular tourism need that could not otherwise be met.
9. The location and setting of the site would, I accept, be attractive to visitors and, there is an acknowledgement at paragraph 5.76 of the LP that a site's accessibility should be balanced against the value of them being attractively located. However, that advice is in respect of new tourist attractions rather than accommodation such as this, and does not alter that, in specific regard to visitor accommodation, Policies STP1 and ECN15 support schemes within accessible locations.
10. It may be that a safe vehicular access could be provided and, given the scale of the development proposed, no unacceptable effects upon the local road network would result. However, such highway safety related matters differ from those of the site's accessibility credentials.
11. Consequently, although there is no specific policy requirement for the appeal proposal to be linked to the public transport network and public footpaths, the appeal site would not provide a suitable location for the development proposed having regard to the development plan's spatial strategy and accessibility. The development would, therefore, be contrary to Policies STP1 and ECN15 of the LP.

Effects upon the character and appearance of the countryside and the landscape

12. At the time of my visit the fields forming the appeal site contained mainly grassland and crops. Although some field boundaries are formed by stone walling, and there are others lined with some trees and hedgerow, significant stretches of field boundary are formed by relatively low post and wire mesh fencing. Close-by to where the yurts are proposed, there are no heavily wooded areas. The farm grouping and the road from which the development would be accessed is within a valley and the land rises steeply to where the yurts would be positioned. These factors combine to provide for a generally open, and exposed character to the immediate environs of the site.
13. Each yurt location would include the yurt structure itself, extensive areas of raised decking, a shower toilet facility, mono-pitched shelter features and dedicated areas for vehicles to park. Each yurt location would therefore comprise of a substantial collection of structures and associated paraphernalia and a total of 6 are proposed.
14. Though some yurt locations would be adjacent to a wall and some mature trees, and whilst supplementary landscaping is proposed and could be conditioned, given the scale and mass of the development proposed such features would offer only limited screening. Furthermore, yurt locations 3 and 4, adjacent to the post and wire mesh fence, would be particularly exposed.
15. Despite the design, and muted palette of materials, the collection of development and associated paraphernalia would introduce incongruous features, which would be harmfully at odds with the character of the undeveloped farmland within which they would be set. The proposed yurt locations would be spaced widely apart and away from any existing groups of buildings. Whilst it has been put to me that such siting is deliberate and the result of a range of factors such as land ownership, the need for visitor privacy and that it would reduce the effects of a clustering of built development, I find that it would serve to harmfully spread the development out in a sporadic pattern over a significant expanse of countryside. The lack of harm to dark skies and need to alter land levels do not lead me to a different conclusion.
16. I have been provided with a zone of theoretical visibility¹. Owing to the countryside location of the appeal site, the undulating topography, and the distances that the appeal site is from roads and footpaths, there may be a number of public viewpoints where the development would not be seen or would be well obscured. However, it has not been shown to me that there would not remain other public viewpoints where the development would be visible and where the abovementioned effects would be apparent. Moreover, this does not alter that the character of this particular part of the countryside, which has intrinsic value, would be harmed.
17. It has been put to me that the development proposed would be readily reversible and that the yurts could be removed from the site when no longer in use. I note the suggestions made by both the appellant and the Parish Council that conditions to such an end could be imposed. Whilst I can accept that materials such as the timber proposed may be more easily removed than the likes of concrete, I nevertheless have no reason to conclude the yurts and associated development would not be in place for a considerable period.

¹ George F White Planning Appeal Statement of Case Appendix C

18. Consequently, the development would result in unacceptable effects upon the character and appearance of the countryside and the local landscape which would be contrary to Policies STP1 and ECN15 of the LP. In summary, and amongst other matters, though these policies do seek to promote Northumberland as a destination for tourists and visitors they also recognise the need to sustain and conserve the environment whilst new camping, caravan and chalet developments within the open countryside should be sensitive to their surroundings and adequately screened.

Other Matters

19. The development may result in no harm to the living conditions of any existing residents nor to ecology, but this lack of harm is a neutral factor in my determination.
20. I note the inclusion of measures such as solar panels and recognise that the development has been designed to be energy efficient and carbon neutral, constructed out of sustainable materials, and provide cycle storage for guests. Additional hedge planting and soft landscaping would promote biodiversity. Visitors of the proposed accommodation would provide support to the local rural economy, including through accessing the existing services and facilities of settlements in the area which may partly rely on tourist spend to continue operating. I acknowledge that the development may have the potential to support the existing farming enterprise, particularly given the reduction in basic payment subsidies, albeit I have very limited information in this regard. Finally, in seeking to provide decking with an even and accessible surface the development may also be taking steps to ensure that it is more suitable for the likes of the elderly or the disabled.
21. I have had regard to such matters, but they are insufficient to outweigh the harm that I have identified in the main issues.

Conclusion

22. As set out above, I have found that the appeal site would not provide a suitable location for the development proposed and would cause harmful effects upon the character and appearance of the countryside and the local landscape. Therefore, the development would be contrary to the development plan as a whole. I also find that the development would be inconsistent with advice within the Framework.
23. I have given consideration as to whether it would be appropriate for me to issue a split decision on this appeal, whereby I would allow some part of the scheme but dismiss the rest. However, I have identified that the location of the development is inaccessible and contrary to the plan's spatial strategy, and this would be the case even with a reduced number of yurts. Furthermore, whilst a reduction in the quantum of accommodation may reduce the harm to the character and appearance of the area, harm would nevertheless remain and conversely, benefits that would derive from the scheme, such as to the local economy would reduce. In such circumstances, the issue of a split decision would not overcome my concerns. The appeal is therefore dismissed.

H Jones

INSPECTOR