



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 1 August 2023

by E Dade BA (Hons) MSc MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 8 August 2023

Appeal Ref: APP/F3545/W/22/3310332

Aston Timber Products, Ground and First Floor, Sedge Fen, Lakenheath, Suffolk IP27 9LQ

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 against a refusal to grant outline planning permission.
 - The appeal is made by Mr Brian Rutterford against the decision of West Suffolk Council.
 - The application Ref DC/22/1243/OUT, dated 12 July 2022, was refused by notice dated 17 October 2022.
 - The development proposed is demolition of existing wood factory and erection of 2 x self-build dwellings and 2 x start up business units.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Main Issue

2. The main issue in this appeal is whether the proposed development would be in a suitable location having regard to the local development strategy.

Reasons

3. Policies CS1 and CS10 of the Core Strategy Development Plan Document 2010 (CS) together focus growth on those settlements where employment, housing, services and facilities can be provided in close proximity. Outside of settlement boundaries, Policy CS1 generally restricts opportunities for development, supporting only schemes that contribute to the rural economy, meet affordable housing needs, or provide renewable energy.
4. The appeal site is located within the settlement of Sedge Fen, which is outside any defined settlement boundary and is therefore located within the countryside. Services and facilities within Sedge Fen are highly limited and there are wide views across the surrounding rural landscape. Policy CS10 identifies that small settlements within the countryside offer few facilities and are remote from towns and key service centres, and have a traditional rural character dominated by their rural landscape setting which should be respected. Policy CS10 supports development at small settlements only in exceptional circumstances.
5. Through providing a mixed-use development, the proposal would reduce the need to travel to access employment. However, due to the large distance and limited pedestrian, cycle, and public transport infrastructure, occupants of the site would be dependent on use of a private car to access services and facilities located at other settlements. The social and environmental effects of poor accessibility and car dependency include inequity, congestion and pollution, which conflict with the social and environmental objectives set out at paragraph

- 8 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) which supports strong, vibrant and healthy communities with accessible services, and sets out the need to mitigate climate change and move to a low carbon economy.
6. Policy DM5 of the West Suffolk Joint Development Management Policies Document 2015 (JDMPD) recognises the countryside as a principal element of the rural character of West Suffolk and protects the countryside from unsustainable development, supporting only certain types of development associated with the rural economy. Notably, Policy DM5 supports proposals for economic growth where a rural location is justified and where adverse environmental impacts would not arise. There is no dispute between the parties that the proposed business units would be acceptable in this location, and I have no evidence before me to suggest otherwise.
 7. However, since the proposed development would include two dwellings, the proposal as a whole would not fall within the types of development supported by Policy DM5. The dwellings created by the development would not be agricultural or essential workers dwellings, nor would they form a scheme of rural affordable housing, and thus would not be supported by JDMPD Policies DM26 and DM29.
 8. Paragraph 79 of the Framework promotes sustainable development in rural areas, indicating that housing should be located where it will enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities. However, paragraph 80 of the Framework makes clear that the development of isolated homes in the countryside should be avoided. Reflecting the provisions of the Framework, JDMPD Policy DM27 supports new dwellings in the countryside where the development meets certain criteria, notably that the development is within a closely knit cluster of 10 or more existing dwellings adjacent to or fronting a highway, and the development comprises infilling a small undeveloped plot by one dwelling or a pair of semi-detached dwellings within an otherwise continuous built-up frontage.
 9. On the approach to the appeal site are sporadic dwellings interspersed with agricultural land and buildings. A bungalow is situated opposite the site's access. A detached dwelling and a terrace row are situated off the public highway at a private road beyond farm buildings at the end of the lane. Due to the significant separation between existing dwellings in the area, the proposed dwellings would not be sited within a closely knit cluster adjacent to a highway, and therefore would not satisfy the criteria for housing in the countryside set out at Policy DM27.
 10. Whilst I note the proposal seeks outline planning permission with the design and layout of the scheme comprising reserved matters, the indicative site layout shows two detached dwellings. The scale of the proposed development would therefore exceed that supported by Policy DM27.
 11. For these reasons, the proposal would not be of a type supported in the countryside by Policies DM5, DM26, DM27, or DM29. The siting of the proposed development in the countryside would undermine the spatial strategy defined by Policies CS1 and CS10 which focus new development to locations where employment, housing, services and facilities can be provided in close proximity.
 12. Consequently, there are no policies in the development plan which support a development of this type in this location. Having regard to the local

development strategy, the proposed dwelling would not be in a suitable location. I attach significant weight to this conflict.

Other Matters

13. The site is a timber yard comprising a large three-storey building formerly used as a wood factory with other buildings and areas of hardstanding. The factory building is fire-damaged, and the appellant suggests that its repair would be uneconomical as an alternate use for the building would not likely be found. The proposed development would provide investment to subsidise demolition of the factory building.
14. Situated at the end of a rural lane, the factory building is relatively remote and therefore the risks posed to the public from its unsafe condition are relatively low. The factory building has a dilapidated, derelict appearance and due to its height is visually prominent within its immediate setting. However, the building is adjacent to a group of large commercial units and a tree belt which generally obscure the building from long distance views, such as on the approach from the road. Demolition of the building would therefore provide benefits, to which I ascribe moderate weight, in respect of public safety and the character and appearance of the area. However, such benefits would not outweigh the proposal's significant conflict with the development plan's spatial strategy.
15. The appellant suggests the plots for the two dwellings would be offered for sale as self-build units. However, no mechanism has been provided to secure self-build development of the plots. In addition, self-build housing is not exempt from the locational requirements of the development plan. The proposal's contribution to the area's unmet need for self-build housing therefore carries limited weight.
16. The appellant has drawn my attention to an appeal decision within another Council's area at Balsham¹. The Inspector concluded that the benefits of preserving a historic group of buildings and securing their long-term future use would outweigh the disbenefit of housing development in the countryside. Since the proposal would have no effect in respect of the preservation of historic buildings, the Balsham appeal is materially different from the appeal proposal and therefore has limited influence on my decision.

Conclusion

17. For the reasons given above, having assessed the case against the development plan as a whole and having had regard to all other relevant material considerations, I conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

E Dade

INSPECTOR

¹ Appeal ref: APP/W0530/W/16/3152125