



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 7 June 2023

by Matthew Jones BA(Hons) MA MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 18 September 2023

Appeal Ref: APP/D1265/W/22/3307564

Wilksworth Farm Caravan Site, Cranborne Road, Colehill BH21 4HW

- 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 Simon Pollock of Shorefield Holidays Limited against the decision of Dorset Council.
- The application Ref P/FUL/2022/01120, dated 18 February 2022, was refused by notice dated 6 July 2022.
- The development proposed is the provision of 33 holiday lodges to replace the existing 60 touring caravan pitches.

Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Procedural Matter

2. Before the application was refused the number of proposed lodges was reduced to 30, and the description of development revised accordingly to *'The provision of 30 holiday lodges to replace the existing 60 touring caravan pitches'*. I have taken these agreed revisions to the scheme into account in my decision.

Main Issues

3. The main issues are:
 - whether the proposal would be inappropriate development in the Green Belt having regard to the National Planning Policy Framework (2023);
 - the effect of the proposal on the Grade II* listed building Wilksworth Farmhouse and the Grade II listed building Granary 30 Metres South of Wilksworth Farmhouse (the Granary) bearing in mind the special attention that should be paid to the desirability of preserving their settings; and,
 - if there is harm by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm, would it be clearly outweighed by other considerations. If so, would this amount to the very special circumstances required to justify the proposal.

Reasons

Whether the proposal would be inappropriate development in the Green Belt

4. Wilksworth Farm Caravan Site is a caravan and camping site in the South East Dorset Green Belt about 1.6km north of Wimborne. At its centre is the former farmstead at Wilksworth Farm. To the north of the former stead are 17 static holiday lodges, to the west are 60, and the fields to the south and east are respectively set aside for 60 touring caravans and 25 pitches for tents. The touring field also contains sports, amenity and play areas, and an outdoor pool.

5. Paragraph 137 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) tells us that the fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open and that the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and permanence. Paragraph 150 adds, amongst other things, that material changes in the use of land are not inappropriate in the Green Belt if they preserve openness and do not conflict with the purposes of including land within it, including to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment. Openness has a spatial aspect as well as a visual aspect.
6. The new lodges (static caravans) combined would amount to 1,783.66 sqm of area compared to approximately 1,932 sqm if all extant touring pitches were occupied. In this sense the scheme offers a possible modest reduction in caravan area. The lodges would vary in size and would be confined to a smaller overall area within the touring field. Conversely, under ref 3/17/1435/COU, and as certified under ref 3/20/0497/CLP, 60 tourers could be sited anywhere in the touring field at the moment. Touring caravans are also often accompanied by a range of paraphernalia including sometimes substantial canvas awnings.
7. Nonetheless, the critical issue is that the new lodges would provide permanence whereas tourers are by definition more transient. Indeed, at my visit lots of the touring pitches stood empty which allowed the field to retain a clear sense of permeability and openness. Floorspace is not entirely analogous to perceived mass in any event; lodges, with their generally greater width and pitched roofs, tend to have a more substantial presence. The size of a tourer is more self-limiting, given it is designed to be towed by domestic vehicles on public roads.
8. Condition 4 of ref 3/17/1435/COU precludes holiday use of the site between 15 January and 1 March each year but not the siting of caravans. Condition 3 of that permission restricts the type of caravan within the touring field to only tourers. Whilst this means it would be technically possible for up to 60 touring caravans to be sited all year round, I find this unlikely as it runs counter to the nature of touring caravans and how they are generally used. It is more likely that in the low and off seasons the touring field exhibits high levels of openness.
9. The appellant has suggested that there would be a reduction in motor vehicles drawn to the site. However, this is not clear cut, again because touring caravans are more transient, and given the appellant has identified that lodges are more popular with tourists. Hardstanding does not generally impinge upon openness, so the proposed modest reduction in hardstanding is also of little consequence.
10. The scheme seeks to remove enclosures and provide an increase of open space. However, the calculated increase fails to consider that Area A is already able to provide openness for the reasons set out above. Area B is a yard set centrally in the park and is partly enclosed by buildings. If used as open space it would have a limited contribution to the openness of the Green Belt. By comparison, Area C, an amenity and play space, is at the periphery of the site and is more open and expansive. The proposed lodges here would have the effect of encroaching the caravan site southwards, which would also cause harm to the visual aspect of openness. There is little evidence that tourers are or will be pitched in this area.
11. In my view therefore, despite a theoretical reduction in area if all touring pitches were to be simultaneously occupied, it is more likely that the 30 regimented, bulky and permanent holiday lodges would have a greater harmful effect on the spatial and visual openness of the Green Belt. The scheme would consolidate and intensify the encroachment of the caravan use in the Green Belt.

12. I note a 2005 appeal at Forest Edge Holiday Park. However, the reasoning in that case was influenced by the prospect of lawful year-round use of the touring field, which is not the situation here. Similarly, I have considered the proposal on its own individual merits, not as a comparative exercise with the scheme previously dismissed at appeal on the appeal site.
13. For the reasons given, I conclude that the proposal represents inappropriate development within the Green Belt that would harm the openness of the Green Belt. It therefore conflicts with the policy objectives of the Framework.

Wilksworth Farmhouse and the Granary

14. Wilksworth Farmhouse is a complex building with fabric spanning centuries. Significance it draws from its setting principally derives from its relationship with the surviving converted farm buildings and former farmyard directly to the south. There is also significance in its immediate former farmland setting. The caravan park has had an obvious harmful effect on the latter, but most particularly the dense areas of static holiday lodges which sweep around the farmstead to the north and west. The Granary, as a former farm outbuilding now used for general storage, has a setting similar to the farmhouse.
15. The removal of the winter caravan storage and relandscaping of the yard would be a very small enhancement to the setting of the two listed buildings. This is because it is a time limited harm and takes place within an area of former farmyard where commercial farm activity and farm buildings were focused.
16. The evidence shows the farmstead to have been arranged as a quite enclosed courtyard environment. The farmhouse has long been set in private grounds. Mapping shows a building once bound the south corner of the farmstead, beyond which was a treed enclosure. As such, although as farmland the touring field would have had a functional link with the group, and does maintain glimpsed views of the farmhouse, it runs counter to the evidence to suggest that the listed buildings had any meaningful or significant visual association with the landscape beyond the site to the south. It flows from this that the proposed corridor link would not offer a clear benefit to either listed building.
17. The touring field does not have a particularly developed character. As stated, it is verdant, open and expansive with transient activity which must greatly diminish over the winter, and it has relatively limited obvious operational development. The provision of the permanent lodges would represent a significant suburbanising effect within a field which currently retains a positive contribution to the historic agrarian setting of the two listed buildings. Overall, there would be less than substantial harms to the significance Wilksworth Farmhouse and the Granary draw from their respective settings.
18. I accept the contention that the harm would be at the lower end of a notional sliding scale of less than substantial harm. Even so, Paragraph 199 of the Framework explains that great weight should be given to the conservation of designated heritage assets. Paragraph 202 goes on to require decision makers to weigh any less than substantial harm to a designated heritage asset against the public benefits of the scheme. Here, these balancing exercises must take place in the context of s.66 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, which sets a strong presumption against a grant of permission for development that would harm the settings of listed buildings.

19. Given the popularity of lodges and the spacious standard of accommodation they provide, the scheme would enhance the tourism offer at the site and wider area, with associated economic benefits as set out by the appellant. This may aid the regeneration of Wimborne and would support job creation. There would be biodiversity enhancement through the proposed additional landscaping.
20. These typical social, economic and environmental benefits could be generally attributable to other schemes for similar tourism development in the wider area. Together with the small heritage benefit of removing the winter caravan storage they attract limited weight and do not outweigh the harms to the listed buildings, to which I must each assign considerable importance and weight.
21. Consequently, I conclude that the proposal would have an unacceptable effect on the Grade II* listed building Wilksworth Farmhouse and the Grade II listed building the Granary bearing in mind the special attention that should be paid to the desirability of preserving their settings. It would therefore conflict with the heritage objectives of Policy HE1 of the Core Strategy and the Framework.

Other considerations

22. The Framework states that inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances. It goes on to advise that substantial weight should be given to any harm to the Green Belt and that very special circumstances will not exist unless the potential harm to the Green Belt by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm, is clearly outweighed by other considerations.
23. In addition to the aforementioned social, economic and environmental benefits, the appellant has sought to attribute value to the arguments that the scheme would enhance openness. However, I have found that the development would reduce openness overall. The isolated benefit of removing the caravan storage to the settings of the listed buildings is a consideration of very limited weight.
24. The concept of creating a corridor to visually open up the listed buildings to the countryside to the south is not well grounded in the evidence, and so is also a consideration of little weight. That the lodges would have a more muted, natural style materials palette compared to touring caravans may well aid their better adherence to the rural character and appearance of the landscape, but this is also a consideration of limited weight. I also attribute modest weight to the reasonably good accessibility of the site to local facilities and transport.
25. These considerations do not clearly outweigh the substantial weight I give to the harm to the Green Belt by reason of inappropriateness and harm to openness, and the harms to the settings of the listed buildings. It follows that the very special circumstances necessary to justify the proposal do not exist.

Planning Balance and Conclusion

26. The proposal would conflict with the development plan read as a whole. There are no other considerations which compel me to make a decision other than in accordance with the development plan. Having considered all other relevant matters raised, I therefore conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

Matthew Jones

INSPECTOR