



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 10 April 2024

by H Jones BA (Hons) DipTP MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 24 April 2024

Appeal Ref: APP/P2935/W/23/3331779

1 Low Middle Moor House, track from U9077 to Low Middlemoor House, Stannington, Northumberland NE61 6EJ

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended) against a refusal to grant planning permission.
 - The appeal is made by Mr Bryan Watson against the decision of Northumberland County Council.
 - The application Ref is 23/02500/FUL.
 - The development proposed is extension of existing home office accommodation with additional store and alterations to access and screen walls.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. In December 2023, a revised version of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) was published. I have had regard to the revised Framework in so far as it is relevant to this appeal.

Main Issues

3. The main issues are:
 - Whether the development would be inappropriate development in the Green Belt having regard to the Framework and any relevant development plan policies;
 - The effects of the development on the openness of the Green Belt;
 - The effects of the development upon the character and appearance of the area including the open countryside; and
 - Whether any harm by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm, is clearly outweighed by other considerations, so as to amount to the very special circumstances required to justify the proposal.

Reasons

Whether the development would be inappropriate development in the Green Belt

4. The appeal site is within the Green Belt. The Framework sets out 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 their permanence. The Framework identifies that the Green

Belt serves five purposes. Policy STP7 of the Northumberland Local Plan 2016-2036 (LP) outlines the strategic approach to the Green Belt within the County and reflects the same five purposes within the Framework.

5. The Framework further identifies that the construction of new buildings in the Green Belt should be regarded as inappropriate, unless it would constitute one of the exceptions set out in paragraph 154. The Framework also states that inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances. Policy STP8 of the LP reiterates the content of the Framework in this regard.
6. In the proposal, an existing office outbuilding is proposed for extension. One of the exceptional forms of development listed at paragraph 154 of the Framework is the extension or alteration of a building provided that it does not result in disproportionate additions over and above the size of the original building (paragraph 154 (c)).
7. Upon completion of the proposed development, the existing home office building would lengthen greatly and would project much farther in a northerly direction. The northern end of the extended building would also be considerably wider than the existing building. As a result of these increased external dimensions, the internal floor area of the home office would grow very significantly. The result would be that the building would transform from a modest home office building to a far larger home office that also includes a store, kitchen and WC.
8. Although neither the LP, other Council policy nor indeed the Framework may define what forms of building extensions would be disproportionate, I have described above the magnitude by which the building would be enlarged. I find that the proposed extension in this case, over and above the size of the original building, can only be considered as being disproportionate. In comprising of a disproportionate extension, the exception at paragraph 154 (c) of the Framework is not met and, the proposal constitutes inappropriate development in the Green Belt.
9. In coming to this view, although the extension may incorporate appropriate building materials and design detailing, this does not influence its dimensions and so has no bearing upon my conclusion that it would be a disproportionate extension.

The effects of the development on the openness of the Green Belt

10. Low Middle Moor House comprises of a small group of buildings and properties set amongst fields and next to a railway line. The building group is accessed via a lane without a through-route. The fields to the surroundings of Low Middle Moor House separate it from other groups of buildings in the area and the settlement of Stannington.
11. Much of the land upon which the home office extension would be sited is currently a combination of hardstanding and earth. It is partly bound by sections of wall, but it is open on some sides. The extended building's walls and pitched roof would introduce built development of a greater scale, mass and height than presently exists on this land. Furthermore, as a result of the proposal, a wall would be erected beside the existing porch and driveway access gates which would enclose more land than is the case now. Therefore,

the proposal would result in a marked increase in how built-up and enclosed the affected land parcel is.

12. Given the parcel of land the development would take place upon is amongst the Low Middle Moor House building group, I accept that it is located within a part of the Green Belt where built development already has an influence. The affected land does not have the same degree of openness as, for instance, the fields to the north and west of the appeal site. I further accept that there is some seclusion to the positioning of Low Middle Moor House and, so, the development would not appear particularly prominently in views from public vantage points.
13. Despite this, for the reasons I have given above, the proposal would nevertheless result in this particular part of the Green Belt becoming more built-up. The extent of this, and the changes to the land wrought by it, would be sufficient to result in a reduction in the openness of the Green Belt principally because of its spatial rather than visual effects. This reduction in openness would be modest rather than significant, but it nonetheless would be harmful, and it would add to the harm that would be caused by reason of the proposal constituting inappropriate development.

Character and appearance including the open countryside

14. The land upon which the development is proposed is not located within a settlement boundary, a Green Belt inset boundary and it is not within, or immediately adjacent to, the built-up form of a settlement. Therefore, although it is a part of the Low Middle Moor House building group, the land constitutes open countryside as defined within the LP.
15. Policy STP1 of the LP is a strategic policy which sets out a spatial strategy for development within Northumberland. Criteria (g), (h) and (i) specifically deal with development within the open countryside. The operation of policy STP1 is such that provided a proposal complies with criteria (g) or (h), and also complies with criterion (i), then the proposal constitutes an acceptable form of development in the open countryside.
16. As a home office, proposed to be ancillary to the main house, I find that the proposal does not constitute any of the forms of development to which criterion (g) relates and so, as another form of development, criterion (h) is applicable. Criterion (h) sets out that development in the open countryside will be permitted if supported by a made neighbourhood plan. The Stannington Parish Neighbourhood Plan 2017-2031 (NP) is the made neighbourhood plan covering the area, and policy 10 is before me as the policy relevant to the proposal.
17. To the rear of Low Middle Moor House there is a parcel of land largely enclosed by a wall. This land parcel includes, amongst other things, parking spaces, driveway and yard areas, storage areas, the home office and garden. The extension to the home office, the erection of the section of wall next to the existing porch and the revised vehicular access point proposed would all take place either within this largely enclosed land or on land bounded by the access lane. Therefore, regardless of whether or not the affected land constitutes the property's curtilage, the land does not exude rural qualities. Instead, it exhibits the characteristics of managed land associated with the use of the residential properties next to it. The land which does exude rural qualities – the fields around Low Middle Moor House – lie beyond the largely enclosed parcel of land

and the access lane. Furthermore, the existing home office proposed for extension is positioned quite close to the house and beside the yard/drive next to the property's dining room and kitchen.

18. The proposed home office extension, boundary wall and revised access arrangement would constitute further forms of domestic types of development which would be congruous with the managed parcel of land to the rear of Low Middle Moor House. For these reasons, the proposal would respect the context of the site, would be sensitive to its surroundings, would be well-related to the main house and would not harm the character and appearance of the area or harmfully erode the rural characteristics of this particular part of the open countryside. The proposal therefore complies with the content of policy 10 of the NP, criterion (i) of policy STP1 and policy HOU9 of the LP which require that development achieves such effects. In finding that the proposal complies with the NP, it follows that it also complies with criterion (h) of the policy STP1, forms an acceptable form of development in the open countryside, and complies with policy STP1 read as a whole. I also find that the proposal would comply with those policies within the Framework which seeks to ensure that developments are sympathetic to local character and recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside.

Other considerations

19. Although the extended home office is proposed to be wholly ancillary to the use of the main house, it is submitted to me that its purposes would be to assist in running a construction business. It is also put to me that the alterations proposed to the access would make it easier for a vehicle to move off the adjacent lane. However, I have no substantive evidence before me of the particular reasons why the existing business operation would improve or prosper because of a larger and better-appointed administrative office. Neither has it been shown to me that the existing access is particularly problematic or that a meaningful benefit to highway safety or living conditions would arise from the revised access arrangement. Consequently, I ascribe limited weight to these matters as benefits of the development.
20. Even if the proposal resulted in no adverse effects upon the living conditions of neighbouring occupiers, this is at most a neutral factor in my determination, and it does not weigh in the proposal's favour. The appellant submits to me that the adjacent dog kennel operation generates noise and has buildings associated with it which have affected the area's character. However, that operation and that development is not the subject of the appeal. In determining this appeal, I must consider the effects of the appeal proposals on their own merits, including the effects which would be wrought upon the Green Belt and the character and appearance of the area. Consequently, the adjacent dog kennels are not a strong influence upon my decision.
21. A residential development may be being built out within the Green Belt within the former grounds of Netherton Park. However, I do not have the full details of that case or the circumstances which led to it being accepted before me. It is not clear to me that it represents a very comparable case to that the subject of my determination. Therefore, the Netherton Park development is of limited weight in my decision.
22. The appellant refers to the manner in which the Council handled a previous planning application (application 22/01959/FUL) and, in so doing, has

submitted correspondence held with the Council in its regard. However, this is of very little relevance to my determination on the main issues in this case. I have determined this appeal on its own merits based upon the evidence before me now.

Conclusion

23. As set out above, the development constitutes inappropriate development and, furthermore, would harm the openness of the Green Belt. This harm receives substantial weight.
24. The development would not harm the character and appearance of the area in general terms, including the open countryside. However, this would be an absence of harm only, I find that no beneficial effects upon the character and appearance of the area would result either. As a neutral factor, this matter does not weigh in favour of the proposal. The other considerations in this case do not clearly outweigh the totality of the harm that I have identified. Consequently, the very special circumstances necessary to justify the development do not exist.
25. Therefore, the proposal conflicts with policies STP7 and STP8 of the LP and relevant policies within the Framework which, altogether, seek to protect the Green Belt and prevent inappropriate development within the Green Belt taking place unless very special circumstances exist.
26. I conclude that the proposal conflicts with the development plan and the material considerations in this case do not indicate that the appeal should be decided other than in accordance with it. The appeal should, therefore, be dismissed.

H Jones

INSPECTOR