



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 4 May 2024

by Andrew McGlone BSc MCD MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 3rd June 2024

Appeal Ref: APP/P2935/W/24/3338268

Hillfield, Allendale Road, Hexham, Northumberland NE46 2NJ

- 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 Paul Shrimpton against the decision of Northumberland County Council.
 - The application Ref is 23/03362/FUL.
 - The development proposed is the retention and change of use from agricultural workers chalet to holiday chalet.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Main Issues

2. The main issues are: (a) whether the proposal is inappropriate development in the Green Belt, having regard to the development plan and the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework); (b) the effect of the proposal on the openness of the Green Belt; (c) whether the proposal would accord with the Council's spatial strategy, including its effect on the character and appearance of the area; and (d) if the proposal is inappropriate development whether the harm by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm, is clearly outweighed by other considerations so as to amount to the very special circumstances necessary to justify the development.

Reasons

Whether inappropriate development

3. Given the site's location in the open countryside and within the Green Belt to the west of Hexham, Policy STP 8 of the Northumberland Local Plan (Local Plan) sets out that development that is inappropriate in the Green Belt, in accordance with national planning policy, will not be supported except in very special circumstances where other considerations clearly outweigh the potential harm to the Green Belt, and any other harm resulting from the proposal.
4. The proposal seeks to use a timber chalet building that is currently providing temporary rural worker living accommodation as a holiday let. A planning permission was granted by the Council in early 2023 so that the occupiers could continue to live on the site while their permanent rural workers dwelling, which benefits from planning permission¹, was built. That new dwelling has yet to be built, and the temporary planning permission requires the removal of the chalet from the site in August 2024.
5. The chalet has provided temporary living accommodation for the appellant. It is

¹ Council Ref: 21/00256/FUL

of a size that could be brought onto the land, even partially completed. The chalet is capable of being moved given the appellant's acknowledgment that, if the appeal is dismissed, they would need to remove the chalet from the land later this year in accordance with the temporary planning permission. Therefore, even though it is equipped with services and an external terrace extends off the flank elevation, the chalet is not a building, despite the extent of accommodation that it offers and its appearance.

6. Therefore, exception d) to Framework paragraph 155 does not apply here, even though the proposal seeks to re-use the chalet on a permanent basis. Similarly, the proposal does not accord with any of the exceptions in Framework paragraph 154, as that refers to the construction of new buildings.
7. Given this, along with the proposed use and the site's location outside of the built-up form of any settlement, I conclude that the proposal does not accord with the exceptions in the Framework and, by extension, Local Plan Policies STP8 and ECN 16. On this basis, the proposal would be inappropriate development in the Green Belt, and it would not accord with Policy HNP1 of the Hexham Neighbourhood Plan 2020-2036 (HNP).
8. Although conflict is alleged with Local Plan Policy STP7, there is no suggestion that the proposal causes conflict with the strategic approach to the Green Belt in Northumberland.

Openness

9. Openness has a visual and spatial aspect. The Framework confirms that the fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open; the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence.
10. The proposal would see the chalet permanently remain on the land, and it would involve comings and goings associated with the proposed holiday let use. The land would therefore not revert to an open, undeveloped character.
11. The chalet is located next to the road in a prominent, elevated position, which means that it is visible on approach from Hexham. Its size, shape, and form, together with the site-specific circumstances, mean the chalet causes a spatial and visual loss of openness due to its presence and position on the land, which has an open character. Trees and hedgerows offer some visual screening of the chalet, especially on approach to the site from the west. That planting is likely to mature, but that will take time. Further planting could potentially be added, but neither the existing or potential planting affects my conclusion that the proposal would cause a limited loss of openness in the Green Belt causing conflict with Framework paragraph 137.

Spatial strategy, including character and appearance

12. The appeal site is in an area with an open rural character that contains a limited number of buildings. Buildings in the vicinity of the site have a traditional form of construction and are built with traditional stone and slate, with some examples of render and brick. Most have pitched roofs.
13. Local Plan Policy STP 1 (g) supports development in the open countryside if it can be demonstrated that the proposal accords with one of the listed criteria. The first three criteria are relevant here. They are: supports the sustainable growth and expansion of existing business or the formation of new businesses

in accordance with Policy ECN 13; supports the development and diversification of agricultural and other land-based rural businesses in accordance with Policy ECN 14; and supports sustainable rural tourism and leisure developments in accordance with Policy ECN 15.

14. Local Plan Policy ECN 14 supports rural diversification developments such as this which are generally better suited to open land in a rural location that is linked to an agricultural operation. However, part 2 of this policy requires proposals not to prejudice the long (or short-term) operational needs of the host farm or other rural operation. The new dwelling, which would provide permanent accommodation for the appellant, is yet to be built. If the chalet is used for holiday purposes and not for rural worker accommodation, there would be no provision of the latter on the appeal site. There is no mechanism before me to prevent the loss of the rural worker accommodation in the interim before the new dwelling is built and ready for occupation. Given that there is a need for rural worker accommodation on the site, the proposal would prejudice the operational needs of the farm/rural operation. Therefore, the proposal would not accord with Local Plan Policies ECN 13 1c. and ECN 14.
15. Local Plan Policy ECN 13 supports proposals, provided that they meet all the three criteria listed. I have explained my view on the third of those. In relation to the second, the proposal is a fair distance beyond the settlement of Hexham, which does offer a range of services and accessible places. However, the proposal's location is directly linked to the existing farm, not the existing settlement pattern, which is focused principally to the south, east and west around its centre. There are dispersed farmsteads on either side of the road near the site, but these are not part of Hexham's settlement pattern. Thus, the proposal would not be related as closely as possible to it and the appeal scheme would not accord with Local Plan Policy ECN 13 1b.
16. New visitor accommodation will chiefly be focused in main towns and service centres, be small scale if they permanent, new build facilities outside of settlement boundaries, limited to the reuse of buildings that are structural sounds or to chalets and caravans in accordance with part (f) of Local Plan Policy ECN 15.
17. The chalet lies on elevated ground outside of Hexham. It may be accessible to some, but it would not be for all. However, given the proposed use, it is likely users would be travelling from further afield and, as such, would likely consider Hexham to be generally accessible. Part (f) also requires the chalet to be adequately screened, taking into account short- and long-range views, by existing topography or vegetation, or new good quality landscaping compatible with the surrounding landscape.
18. The timber chalet building has a modern and functional design. Although it has a pitched roof, the chalet is elevated and departs from the traditional rural character and use of materials found in the area. While the siting of the chalet does reflect the location of some development along the road, it is visible in short and medium range views, especially on approach from the east. Existing trees and hedgerows do not, overall, adequately screen the chalet. Over time, the planting will mature, but it will still not adequately screen the chalet. New planting could be added, but I do not have any details of this to know whether it would be effective and adequately screen the chalet. The new house would not change that assessment. Hence, the proposal would not accord with Local Plan Policies ECN 13 1a. and ECN 15 (f) and permanent harm would be caused

to the rural character and appearance of the area.

19. Accordingly, I conclude on this issue that the proposal would not accord with the Council's spatial strategy, and it would harm the character and appearance of the area. The proposal would not accord with Local Plan Policies STP 1 (g), ECN 13, ECN 14, ECN 15, QOP 1, QOP 2, QOP 4, STP 1, ENV 1 and ENV 3 and HNP Policy HNP 2. Jointly, among other things, these policies support development in the open countryside if it meets listed criteria, and require development to be sensitive to its setting, make a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness, use high quality materials and detailing, and respond to existing landscape features.

Other considerations

20. The appeal scheme would see the chalet remain permanently on the land and used as a holiday let. In doing so, visitors would spend in the local economy, jobs would be created, and the area's tourism accommodation offer would be widened in a rural area, helping address a need. Due to the scale of the proposal, despite the appellant's prior experience, that would bring limited economic and environmental benefits, even though the proposal attracts support from Local Plan Policies ECN 1 b, e, and f and ECN 12 as well as HNP Policy HNP 23.
21. I understand that the alpaca farm makes social, economic, and environmental contributions to the area, and that the proposal has the support of numerous people and organisations. The alpaca farm offers health, wellbeing, and learning benefits in a safe environment to a variety of people.
22. To realise those benefits, there is a need for a rural worker to live on the site, based on the planning permissions granted to date. The chalet would provide ongoing support for the alpaca farm, though in the short term it is stated to be needed so that the appellant can implement the planning permission for the new permanent dwelling. Rising development costs are said to be affecting the appellant's ability to fund the build, along with increased mortgage and borrowing rates, particularly for those who are self-employed. Both have, in general terms, increased in recent years, but beyond general remarks about the financial health of the business, there is no detailed analysis of the viability of the business or the new build dwelling.
23. Therefore, it is difficult for me to know whether building the new home is not possible at present or whether the business is potentially at risk if the proposal does not go ahead. There is also no mechanism that would prevent the required rural worker accommodation from being lost before the new dwelling is built and ready for occupation.
24. I understand that the appellant has considered reducing the size of the house and that it could comprise future occupants living standards. I also note their point that reducing the size of the house would not necessarily result in a proportionate financial saving due to fixed construction costs. However, there is no detailed analysis of that before me.
25. If the appeal is dismissed, the temporary planning permission requires the removal of the chalet later this year. That would be a cost to the appellant, and a purchaser would need to be found. However, there are no details of the likely overall financial impact that removing the chalet would bring or any evidence to suggest that it could not be re-used elsewhere, though moving it and

removing any parts that cannot be re-used would cause limited environmental harm. Additional planting could deliver biodiversity benefits to offset that, while the economic benefit of leaving the chalet on the land carries limited positive weight. I note the other cases referred to by the appellant, but they related to different development types and proposals. Furthermore, I have recognised the economic benefit to the local economy through the provision of tourist accommodation, similar to the cases cited by interested parties.

26. Stepping back, I consider that matters relating to the diversification, enhancement, and retention of the business carry moderate social and economic weight on the available evidence.

Conclusion

27. The proposal is inappropriate development which is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances. The Green Belt harm attracts substantial weight. I have also identified harm with the Council's spatial strategy and character and appearance. Very special circumstances will not exist unless the harm to the Green Belt and any other harm is clearly outweighed by other considerations.
28. The proposal would result in benefits, but also cause harm. Weighing the two up is not a mathematical outcome; it is an overall judgement. The other considerations must clearly outweigh for very special circumstances to exist, not just tip the balance. I consider that all the other considerations do not clearly outweigh the identified harm. Hence, the very special circumstances necessary to justify the development do not exist and the proposal would not accord with the development plan as a whole, and there are no material considerations that indicate that I should take a decision other than in accordance with it.
29. For the reasons given above, I conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

Andrew McGlone

INSPECTOR