



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 13 June 2024

by **S Brook BA (Hons) MA MRTPI**

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 27 June 2024

Appeal Ref: APP/J2373/W/24/3337762

SW Outside Solaris Centre, Clifton Drive, Blackpool FY4 1NP

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended) against a refusal to grant approval required under Article 3(1) and Schedule 2, Part 16, Class A of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015 (as amended).
 - The appeal is made by Cornerstone against the decision of Blackpool Borough Council.
 - The application Ref is 23/0596.
 - The development proposed is described as 'Proposed Base Station installation. It is proposed to install a 20.0m High Hutchinson Apollo A12V2 Pole on screwpile foundation c/w 6No. Antennas, 1No. 300~~0~~ Dish, 1No. GPs Module, 3No. Cabinets and 1No. Meter Cabinet and associated ancillary works'.
-

Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. The provisions of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015 (as amended) (GPDO), under Article 3(1) and Schedule 2, Part 16, Class A, require the local planning authority to assess the proposed development solely on the basis of its siting and appearance, taking into account any representations received. My determination of this appeal has been made on the same basis.
3. The principle of development is established by the GPDO and the provisions of Schedule 2, Part 16, Class A of the GPDO do not require regard to be had to the development plan. However, I have had regard to the policies of the Blackpool Local Plan Part 1: Core Strategy 2012-2027, January 2016 (LPP1), the Blackpool Local Plan Part 2: Site Allocations and Development Management Policies 2012-2027, February 2023, (LPP2), and the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework), only in so far as they are a material consideration relevant to matters of siting and appearance.

Main Issues

4. The main issues are the effect of the siting and appearance of the proposed installation on (a) the character and appearance of the area, including non-designated heritage assets, and (b) highway safety, with particular regard to visibility, and if any harm would occur, (c) whether this is outweighed by the need for the installation to be sited as proposed, considering any suitable alternatives.

Reasons

Character and appearance

5. The appeal site comprises part of the footway at the junction of Clifton Drive and Harrowside. Footways approaching this junction are wide, separated from the carriageway of Clifton Drive by grassed verges. This, combined with the public open space at the Solaris Centre, gives the area an openness and sense of space. Gilwood Lodge Nursing Home lies to the rear of the footway and is two storeys high, as are other individual dwellings extending to the north and south. The area does include some three and four storey development along Harrowside and Harrowside West, as well as the six storey Coastal Point. Street furniture comprises road signage and street lighting, as well as the small-scale wind turbines on the Promenade. A rollercoaster is visible in the distance to the north.
6. The proposed installation would be significantly taller than the nearest two storey building to the east and its proximity would emphasize their contrasting scale. While other taller buildings are located nearby, they are not so close that they would assist greatly in screening the building, or providing a suitable backdrop that would help to assimilate the proposed installation into these surroundings, particularly at close quarters. While a position towards the front of the footway could align with streetlighting, the proposed installation would be notably taller and bulkier than these features. There are no trees nearby that would be of a comparable scale or assist with screening.
7. Given the openness of the surrounding area and its positioning towards the front of the footway, the proposed installation would hold an exposed position, particularly when approaching from the east, given the limited backdrop of the low-lying Solaris Centre and its associated open space. It would also appear exposed in views from the west, where it would sit close to the wide junction with Harrowside. The extent of exposure would be less from the north, where it would benefit to a degree from the backdrop of three storey flats, and from the south where it would be seen with the backdrop of the high rollercoaster.
8. There is no dispute between the main parties that the proposed installation is the minimum size necessary to achieve the required technical capabilities. It would be a static and robust installation, fit for purpose, and such installations are not uncommon in urban areas. The slim form of the mast and its small footprint would be less intrusive than other designs such as a lattice tower, and the grey finish would assist in mitigating its impacts to some extent. The associated cabinetry proposed would be low lying and limited in number. The proposal would not impact directly on any greenspace or landscaped areas.
9. Nevertheless, as a result of its contrasting size and exposed position, the proposed installation would be incongruous, resulting in detriment to the visual amenities of the area, particularly at close quarters.
10. The Council highlights that two non-designated heritage assets (NDHA) are nearby, the Solaris Centre and Harrowside bridge. Limited information has been provided as to the significance of these buildings, or any significance derived from their setting. However, from my site visit, I was able to observe that the setting of these NDHA's comprises a range of modern developments of varying scale and form. Consequently, the addition of the proposed installation

into this existing setting, would not necessarily be harmful to any significance derived from it.

11. Nevertheless, for the reasons set out above, the siting and appearance of the proposed installation would result in harm to the character and appearance of the area. LPP1 policies CS7 and CS12, and LPP2 policy DM17, require, amongst other matters, that new development enhances the character and appearance of the local area and is appropriate in scale, height and relationship to adjoining buildings, in order to create attractive environments. The Framework requires new telecommunication equipment to be sympathetically designed. As the siting and appearance of the proposed installation would harm the character and appearance of the area, it would conflict with these policies.
12. I note discussions between the main parties relating to the re-siting of the mast at the rear of the footway, which the appellant suggests would not have changed its appearance significantly. However, I have considered the proposal before me, which I consider to be harmful.

Highway Safety

13. No concerns are raised in relation to pedestrian movements, given the ample width of the footway. However, the Council and the Highway Authority both suggest that the siting of the proposed installation would be an unnecessary complication for drivers. It would be positioned close to the junction of Harrowside with Clifton Drive and it could partially screen vehicles waiting to exit Harrowside from drivers approaching from the north and vice versa.
14. However, the Highway Authority confirms that the minimum visibility splay from this junction would not be impeded. Therefore, the evidence before me suggests that the development would not impact unacceptably on highway safety. LPP1 policy CS7 and paragraph 116 of the Framework require development to create places that are safe. As the siting and appearance of the proposed installation would not impact unacceptably on highway safety, it would not conflict with these policies.

Need for the installation to be sited as proposed considering any suitable alternatives

15. Paragraph 118 of the Framework recognises that advanced, high quality and reliable communications infrastructure is essential for economic growth and social well-being and planning decisions should support the expansion of electronic communications networks, including next generation mobile technology.
16. The appeal documents indicate that the purpose of the proposed installation is to provide a telecommunications upgrade to facilitate 2G, 3G, and 4G services and essential 5G coverage. It will provide a replacement for an existing installation at Squires Gate, a site which is being re-developed. The benefits of the proposal for local residents, visitors and businesses within this area of Blackpool, as well as the emergency services, have been set out by the appellant. These include homeworking, reducing the need to travel and commuting time, thereby improving people's quality of life, access to public service information, convenient and cheaper online purchasing and more secure environments. Additional documents emphasize the importance of

digital connectivity, while reference is made to the vision for Blackpool Council's Digital Strategy to 'make Blackpool digital'.

17. The Council has not disputed that the upgrade is necessary and that there is a need for the siting of such an installation within this area, to achieve these improvements. I attach significant weight to the need to locate the proposal within this area, to provide replacement facilities and an upgrade for 5G coverage, given the benefits that such installations can provide.
18. However, the siting of the proposed installation would result in harm to the character and appearance of the area, and it is a matter of dispute between the parties as to whether there is a need for the installation to be sited as proposed. The Council highlights that no target coverage map has been provided, and so, it has not been possible to determine whether all possible alternatives have been considered. Further, the Council considers that existing buildings at Coastal Point and the Hilton Hotel could have capability for hosting radio equipment, alternatives that they state would be less visually intrusive.
19. For technical and physical reasons, the proposal has a constrained search area. Evidence has been provided to demonstrate that the proposed installation could not be set at the back of the footway, due to the presence of utilities. Nevertheless, no target coverage map is provided and while the appellant suggests that there are no suitable buildings, no detailed evidence has been provided to demonstrate that the alternative locations suggested by the Council have been fully considered, or the reasons for discounting them. On this evidence, I am unable to conclude that the search for and assessment of alternative sites is sufficiently robust. Consequently, the harm I have identified is not outweighed by the need for the installation to be sited as proposed.

Other Matters

20. The proposed installation would be positioned at an oblique angle from windows contained in the neighbouring nursing home and so it would not detrimentally impact on the outlook of occupiers of this property. Other residential properties would be sited a sufficient distance from the proposal, not to be adversely affected. This matter is afforded neutral weight.
21. Both parties have drawn my attention to a number of other appeal decisions relating to such installations, highlighting that change is not necessarily harmful, the need to consider the benefits of such installations in the planning balance, as well as the consideration of suitable alternatives. I have had regard to these matters in the above assessment.

Conclusion

22. The proposed installation would result in harm to the character and appearance of the area. As I am unable to conclude that there is a need to site the installation as proposed, in order to deliver the upgrade and increased coverage identified, this harm is not outweighed by the benefits arising from high quality communications. For these reasons, and having had regard to all other matters raised, I conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

S Brook

INSPECTOR