

Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 8 August 2024

by C Butcher BSc MA MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 2nd September 2024

Appeal Ref: APP/R3650/W/23/3315304

Langhurst Farm, Lodkin Hill, Hascombe, Godalming GU8 4JP

- 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 E Hutley against the decision of Waverley Borough Council.
 - The application Ref is WA/2022/00512.
 - The development proposed is a change of use from agricultural to business (Class E (g)) to provide up to 350 square metres of floorspace in Barn A and 170 square metres of floorspace in Barn B, alterations to barns to include partial demolition and cladding, removal of grain silo, and hard and soft landscaping (part retrospective).
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. During the course of the application, an amendment to the description of development was agreed. I have therefore used the revised description provided on the Council's decision notice.
3. The grain silo and part of Barn B have already been demolished, while additional cladding has been added to the barns to ensure that they are completely enclosed. The application is therefore part retrospective.

Main Issues

4. The main issues are: (i) the impact of the proposed development on the character and appearance of the area, including the scenic beauty of the Surrey Hills National Landscape (NL), with particular regard to traffic movements; (ii) whether the proposed development would be in a suitable location, having regard to development plan policies; and (iii) whether the proposal would be inappropriate development in the Green Belt for the purposes of the development plan and the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework), including the effect upon the openness of the Green Belt.

Reasons

Character and Appearance

5. The appeal site comprises two barns that were formerly in agricultural use and is located within a highly rural area which forms part of the Surrey Hills NL. The Framework states that great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty within NL's. The site has quite an isolated feel, and in general, the immediate surroundings have a very tranquil and peaceful character.
6. The proposed development would involve utilising the two barns for commercial enterprises. Inevitably this would result in cars going to and from the site during the working week. In support of their application, the appellant submitted a Transport Statement (TS) which was prepared by Vision Transport Planning in January 2022. The TS appears to be based on a robust methodology. The document concludes that, if the units were taken up at 100% capacity, the number of vehicle movements would be approximately 89 per day. This compares to circa 14 vehicle movements associated with the previous agricultural use.
7. The TS concludes that this would represent a minor increase. However, in my view, the expected increase is fairly significant, particularly when considering the tranquil nature of this part of the NL. While there would be a very minor decrease in trips by goods vehicles and also possibly heavy goods vehicles, it is highly likely that the increase in vehicular trips overall would greatly erode the existing tranquillity that exists. The fact that the majority of trips would take place at the beginning and end of the working day, and that there would be less trips at weekends, does little to mitigate this issue.
8. As a result, I find that the proposed development would result in harm to the character and appearance of the area, including the scenic beauty of the NL. It would therefore conflict with Policy RE3 of the Waverley Local Plan (Part 1) 2018 (LP), which in part, seeks to preserve character and appearance.

Suitability of the Location

9. There are several policies within the LP and the Bramley Neighbourhood Plan 2017 – 2032 (NP), notably LP Policy EE1 and NP Policy BNP-L3, which seek to encourage development that supports the rural economy, including through the re-use or conversion of existing buildings. These policies also reflect the provisions contained within the relevant parts of the Framework. Given the nature of the proposed development, it is clear that it would conform with these overarching policies.
10. However, NP Policy BNP-G1 provides a greater level of spatial detail. In particular, it sets out that economic or commercial development should be steered towards four existing commercial centres within the NP area. Furthermore, it states that enterprises that are specifically relevant to the rural economy and NL, such as forestry management and land-based businesses, maybe appropriate within the NL and Green Belt.
11. The proposal to use the two barns for uses that fall under Class E(g) would not necessarily be related to the rural economy. I accept that Policy BNP-G1 does not specifically prevent economic or commercial developments from

being located outside of the four identified centres. However, it is absolutely clear to me that the overall thrust of the policy is to direct these types of developments to those existing areas and therefore that the appeal site should be considered to be an unsuitable location. The fact that the development would conform with various policies within the development plan and Framework does not overcome the fact that there would be conflict with NP Policy BNP-G1.

Green Belt

12. LP Policy RE2 sets out the approach to development in the Green Belt. I am satisfied that this policy is in broad conformity with the Framework. Paragraph 155 of the Framework sets out various categories of development which may be regarded as not inappropriate in the Green Belt, subject to certain conditions. This includes the re-use of buildings, provided that they are of permanent and substantial construction, that the openness of the Green Belt is preserved, and that the development would not conflict with the purposes of including land within the Green Belt. Furthermore, paragraph 154(c) sets out that the extension or alteration of a building is not inappropriate provided that it does not result in disproportionate additions.
13. In this instance, there is no dispute between the parties that the barns are of a permanent and substantial construction. Based on what I saw on my site visit, I have no reason to disagree. The additional cladding which has been installed to fill in previously open elevations does have a very limited effect in terms of visual openness by reducing views through the barns. In addition, the increased number of vehicles parking on site would also have a very limited effect on spatial and visual openness. I accept that the site would be more intensively used as a result of the proposed development. However, the presence of additional people and activity does not in itself represent harm to openness in my view.
14. In contrast, the appellant has already removed the relatively large grain silo and has demolished part of Barn B in accordance with the plans. The proposals also include the removal of some hard standing. This represents an improvement to spatial and visual openness.
15. Overall, taking account of the additions and demolitions that form part of the development, I find that the works in their totality would represent a marginal improvement in openness. In addition, given that the development does involve the re-use of existing buildings, I cannot conclude that it would encroach on the countryside or conflict with the purposes of including land within the Green Belt.
16. I acknowledge that this conclusion differs from that reached very recently by an Inspector in a separate appeal decision for the site¹. However, as with the other main issues in this appeal, matters relating to the openness of the Green Belt are subjective and therefore reliant on the individual judgement of the decision maker.

¹ Appeal reference: APP/R3650/W/23/3332424

17. I therefore conclude that the proposed development would not be inappropriate development in the Green Belt and, as a result, would conform with LP Policy RE2, as well as paragraphs 154(c) and 155(d) of the Framework.

Conclusion

18. I have found that the appeal proposal would cause harm in relation to character and appearance and location. In particular, the harm to the NL is a matter I must give great weight to. Consequently, the proposal would conflict with the development plan taken as a whole, notwithstanding that I have not found harm in relation to Green Belt.
19. There are some benefits to the scheme which weigh in its favour. These include the provision of commercial floorspace which would have economic benefits, a marginal improvement in terms of the openness of the Green Belt, and slight visual improvements due to the removal of the silo. Given the scale of the proposal, I afford these benefits limited weight. The development would also reduce the amount of hardstanding, increase soft landscaping and also has the potential to have some benefits for biodiversity on the site. However, I attribute very little weight to these considerations given that these elements are not dependent on receiving planning permission.
20. Accordingly, there are no material considerations, either individually or in combination, that outweigh the identified harm and associated development plan conflict. The appeal is therefore dismissed.

C Butcher

INSPECTOR