



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 17 September 2024

by Graham Wraight BA(Hons) MSc MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 09 October 2024

Appeal Ref: APP/P2935/W/24/3346254

Beal Bank Farm Steadings, Warkworth NE65 0TA

- 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 Northumberland Estates against the decision of Northumberland County Council.
 - The application Ref is 21/01196/FUL.
 - The development proposed is the demolition of agricultural sheds and development of 6no. holiday cottages including car parking, private garden areas and other ancillary works.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matter

2. The appellant has submitted a unilateral undertaking which would secure a financial sum to mitigate against the impact of the proposed development on the Northumbria Coast Special Protection Area and Ramsar Site, the Northumberland Marine Special Protection Area and the North Northumberland Dunes. The Council consider that this addresses the second reason for refusal. The main parties are also in agreement that the substance of reason for refusal three, which relates to climate change mitigation through construction, could adequately be addressed by way of a planning condition. Therefore, I proceed on the basis that each of those reasons for refusal has been satisfactorily resolved.

Main Issue

3. The main issue is whether the proposed development accords with the development plan where it relates to the provision of visitor accommodation in the open countryside.

Reasons

4. Criterion (d) of Policy ECN 15 of the Northumberland Local Plan 2022 (LP) permits new permanent buildings for visitor accommodation in the open countryside where it would both (i) demonstrably improve and diversify the County's tourist offer and/or clearly provide necessary accommodation along an established tourist route and (ii) be located as close as is practicable to

existing development. The reason for refusal sets out that the proposed development would do neither and I shall address each matter in turn.

Tourist Offer

5. The appellant's case does not attempt to set out in any detail what the existing tourist offer is in the county. It is therefore not possible to make a meaningful assessment as to whether what is proposed would demonstrably improve and diversify what is already available. Although a letter from a holiday property letting agent is provided and this states a confidence that the proposed development would be successful in adding high quality holiday accommodation to the area, this does not necessarily mean that there would be an improvement and diversification. And, counter to that, a number of representations from interested persons raise concern as to the perceived proliferation of holiday accommodation already available in the area in various forms.
6. I note that the Destination Management Plan for Northumberland 2022-2032 (DMP) sets out a ten year plan for the area. Included in this is a need to shift the balance to overnight, higher spending visitors who will stay longer and explore more and that the provision of additional quality year-round accommodation is needed to achieve this. Nonetheless, the site is located in the open countryside and the relevant policy of the development plan places restrictions on the circumstances in which holiday accommodation might be permitted in such areas. Therefore, even accepting that there is an evidenced need for additional holiday accommodation in Northumberland as a whole, this does not absolve the proposal from needing to address Policy ECN 15.
7. In conclusion, the submission does not evidence that the proposal would demonstrably improve and diversify the County's tourist offer. Although there are established tourist routes close to the appeal site in the form of cycle and walking routes, the purpose of the proposal is not to provide accommodation that is necessary for people passing along those routes. Therefore, the proposal does not accord with criteria (d)(i) of Policy ECN 15 of the LP.

Location

8. The reason for refusal states that the proposed development would be poorly related to existing facilities and the settlement in terms of landscape and character. However, those are not requirements of criterion (d)(ii) of Policy ECN 15 of the LP. Although the blue line suggests that the appellant owns land right up to the settlement edge, that would entail development on land on which there is currently no built form and which is closer to existing dwellings, thus being likely to result in greater impacts. It would seem to me that in that respect the appeal site is located as close as is practicable to existing development, given those constraints.
9. Policy STP 1 of the LP does require that development in the open countryside should be sensitive to its surroundings. In that regard, although separated from the edge of Warkworth by a single field, the proposal would replace an existing built form. Whilst the use and the built form would be different, in many views taken from the site, and in particular in longer views taken from Gloster Hill, the backdrop of the settlement would appear closely behind the appeal development. As a result, what is proposed would not be poorly related

in landscape and character terms and it would as a result be sensitive to its surroundings.

10. For these reasons, there would be no conflict with criterion (d)(ii) of Policy ECN 15, or with Policy STP 1 of the LP where it requires that development in the open countryside be sensitive to its surroundings.

Other Considerations

11. The proposed development would make a contribution to the economy of the surrounding area through the spending of visitors including in nearby settlements and at tourist attractions, and through employment both in the longer term in servicing the accommodation and in the shorter term in its construction. Given the relatively modest scale of what is proposed in terms of the number of units, this is a consideration which carries moderate weight in favour of the proposed development.
12. The appellant contends that the existing buildings detract from the nearby Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), and that they are redundant, surplus to requirements, derelict and dangerous. However, they appear as a collection of agricultural structures that are typical of the landscape in which they are found and do not detract from it. Whilst new landscaping is proposed, I am not persuaded that this would lead to a higher quality landscape. At the time of my visit at least one of the buildings was in use for the storage of hay and another was locked and inaccessible, suggesting some kind of use. Allowing buildings to become derelict and dangerous is not in itself a justification for permitting other forms of development. These considerations are therefore neutral in the planning balance.
13. Neither the Council or the AONB Partnership question the quality of the design of the proposed development, and I acknowledge that there is support in the Framework for the sustainable growth of businesses in rural areas including via rural tourism developments which respect the character of the countryside. The Framework also requires decision makers to recognise that sites to meet local business and community needs in rural areas may have to be found adjacent to or beyond existing settlements. However, the policies of the development plan are not inconsistent with those aims or with the aims of the DMP, subject to the criteria of the relevant policies being met. These are therefore also neutral considerations in the planning balance.
14. Whilst reference is made to there being limited opportunities within the Warkworth settlement boundary to accommodate holiday accommodation, this is not evidenced and is contradicted in a number of the representations made by interested persons. Conversely, there is potential that there could be some benefit from the proposal in terms of reducing the pressure on existing housing stock to be used for holiday accommodation. However, the degree to which this would be the case has not been substantiated with any direct evidence and it remains that the thrust of the development plan policies is to direct new development to existing settlements. In the absence of evidence in either regard these considerations do not weigh in favour of the proposed development.
15. The appellant refers to a fallback position of converting the existing buildings to residential use via Class Q of the General Permitted Development Order

1995 (as amended) (GDPO). This could potentially allow for residential development on the appeal site, which the appellant considers would be more prominent in the landscape and less visually attractive than the appeal proposal. A structural inspection has been carried out which provides some initial evidence that such a course of action may be physically possible. However, whilst reference is made to correspondence with the Council that Class Q development could be secured, this does not appear to have been provided in a form that would give comfort that such a way forward may be possible. There is also no certainty provided that the stipulations set out in Class Q.1. of the GDPO would be met.

16. Furthermore, it does not appear that any moves have been made to formally secure the prior approval that would be needed under Class Q, which would include consideration by the Council as to whether their prior approval is required for each of the matters set out in the GDPO. It is also unclear as to the number of buildings to which Class Q might be applicable. As a whole therefore, it has not been demonstrated that there is a real prospect that there is a fallback position open to the appellant which would achieve residential development on the site via conversion of an existing building or buildings. Accordingly, I do not weigh this in favour of permitting the proposed development.

Planning Balance & Conclusion

17. The proposed development fails to demonstrate that it would comply with the requirements of criteria (d)(i) of Policy ECN 15 of the LP. Consequently, it also does not accord with the spatial objectives of Policy STP 1 and with the development plan taken as a whole. The economic benefits of the development carry moderate weight in favour of the proposal, but they do not outweigh the failure to accord with the development plan.
18. In conclusion, I find that the other considerations in this case do not indicate that a determination should be made otherwise than in accordance with the development plan. Therefore, the appeal should be dismissed.

Graham Wraight

INSPECTOR