



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 29 October 2024

by M Ollerenshaw BSc (Hons) MTPI MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 27 November 2024

Appeal Ref: APP/D5120/W/24/3342423

Woollett Hall Farm, North Cray Road, Sidcup, Bexley DA14 5ET

- 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 Beck Evans (2000) Limited against the decision of the Council of the London Borough of Bexley.
 - The application Ref is 23/01697/FUL.
 - The development proposed is retention of area of hardstanding for farm track and access to agricultural buildings.
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Decision

1. The appeal is allowed and planning permission is granted for retention of area of hardstanding for farm track and access to agricultural buildings at Woollett Hall Farm, North Cray Road, Sidcup, Bexley DA14 5ET in accordance with the terms of the application, Ref 23/01697/FUL, subject to the following conditions:
 - 1) The development hereby permitted shall be carried out in accordance with the following approved plans: 153/468/001 Location Plan and 153/468/003 Proposed Block Plan.
 - 2) The hardstanding farm track and agricultural access hereby approved shall be used for the manoeuvring of vehicles only, including delivery, loading and unloading, and shall not be used for the parking of vehicles.

Application for costs

2. An application for costs was made by Beck Evans (2000) Limited against the Council of the London Borough of Bexley. This application is the subject of a separate decision.

Preliminary Matters

3. The development has already been implemented on site. The description of development above is from the application form, save for the reference to "retrospective" which has been removed as this is not an act of development.

Main Issue

4. The main issue is whether the development would be inappropriate development in the Green Belt; and if it 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

5. The appeal site relates to a diversified farm accessed via a long driveway from Water Lane. The farm comprises several fields and various buildings including a farm shop, restaurant and a children's play barn, together with large car parks and a picnic area. The site is within the Green Belt.
6. Policy SP8 of the Bexley Local Plan (2023) (Local Plan) and Policy G2 of the London Plan (2021) seek to protect the Green Belt from inappropriate development. Paragraph 152 of the National Planning Policy Framework (Framework) states that inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances. Framework paragraph 155 indicates certain forms of development that are not inappropriate in the Green Belt provided they preserve its openness and do not conflict with the purposes of including land within it. One of these exceptions is engineering operations.
7. There is a long and complex history of planning applications and appeals on this site, including an appeal against an enforcement notice¹, where the Inspector concluded that the hardstanding, in a similar location to the current appeal proposal, represented urban sprawl. In that appeal the Inspector was considering, among other matters, the laying of the hardstanding as an extension to the existing car park to the north; it was found that the hard surfacing to accommodate additional vehicles at the site represented an insidious form of development resulting in further loss of Green Belt openness.
8. The appeal development is an area of hardstanding, consisting of a gravel surface, located adjacent to the access road into the site and the existing car park. It is proposed to reduce the size of the hardstanding, as currently laid, and replace that part with a grass surface. A hedgerow has been planted along the northern side between the hardstanding and the existing car park. As a farm track providing agricultural access, rather than a car park for vehicles associated with the businesses on the wider site, the development before me is materially different to the previous appeal.
9. The appeal development is an engineering operation. Provided it preserves the openness of the Green Belt and does not conflict with the purposes of including land within it, the development is not an inappropriate form of development in the Green Belt.
10. The hardstanding is narrow before widening out to provide a turning and servicing area in front of the agricultural buildings. Given the modest size of the hardstanding, which is proposed to be reduced still further and soft landscaped, I do not consider it to be excessive or visually intrusive to the area's character, particularly in the context of the other, larger areas of hardstanding elsewhere on the wider site. For the reasons set out by the appellant, I am satisfied that the reduced area of hardstanding is reasonably necessary to provide access to and from the agricultural buildings and the fields beyond.
11. As a result of its limited size and location adjacent to the car park and main access road, the development does not encroach into the countryside, and by its very nature does not harm openness. The effect of farm vehicles manoeuvring on the track would be temporary and typical of such activity in a

¹ Appeal Ref. APP/D5120/C/20/3251548

rural area. Moreover, should the need for the development cease to exist, the land could be returned to its original state.

12. The Council has questioned why the existing car park to the north cannot be modified to allow for a smaller area of hardstanding. However, as the existing car park is at a lower level than the site, its modification to provide a smaller area of hardstanding would require a potentially significant engineering operation which would itself have implications for the Green Belt.
13. I accept the use of the hardstanding as informal parking could detract from the openness of the Green Belt. Therefore, to avoid such an impact, the use of the hardstanding for parking can be controlled by a suitably worded condition.
14. For the above reasons, I conclude that the appeal scheme is not inappropriate development in the Green Belt. It does not constitute urban sprawl or conflict with any of the purposes of including land within the Green Belt. Thus, there is no conflict with Local Plan Policy SP8 or London Plan Policy G2, which seek to protect the Green Belt from inappropriate development.
15. Given that the appeal scheme does not represent inappropriate development in the Green Belt, there is no need to consider whether there are any very special circumstances in this case.

Conditions

16. As the development has already taken place, a condition relating to the standard implementation period is unnecessary. For clarity and enforceability, I have set out the approved plans. To preserve the openness of the Green Belt and safeguard the character and appearance of the site, I have imposed a condition restricting use of the track for the parking of vehicles.

Conclusion

17. The appeal scheme complies with the development plan. There are no material considerations to indicate that a decision should be taken other than in accordance with it. I therefore conclude that the appeal should be allowed.

M Ollerenshaw

INSPECTOR