



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 8 January 2025

by **P Storey BA (Hons) DipTP MRTPI**

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 12 February 2025

Appeal Ref: APP/F3545/W/24/3345855

Barley House, Mere Farm Lane, Great Barton, Suffolk IP31 2PH

- 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 Barley House Ltd against the decision of West Suffolk Council.
 - The application Ref is DC/23/1294/FUL.
 - The development proposed is erection of a first-floor rear extension to provide 2, one bedroom flats with a new external staircase, with associated access, parking and new pedestrian link.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. The site address listed on the planning application form is 'Mere Farm, Mere Farm Lane', which does not match the address given in the other submitted evidence. Therefore, the address in the banner heading above is taken from the appeal form, as it aligns with the other evidence and the name of the building I observed during my visit.
3. An update to the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) was published on 12 December 2024. The main parties have been given the opportunity to comment on the effect of the updated Framework for the appeal, and I have had regard to these comments in my decision.

Main Issues

4. The main issues are:
 - whether the site is a suitable location for housing having regard to the spatial strategy of the development plan;
 - whether the development would provide suitable living conditions for current and future occupiers, with specific regard to external amenity space; and
 - whether the housing mix would be appropriate to the location and character of the area.

Reasons

Whether a suitable location

5. The appeal site is a two-storey former office building that has been converted into 18 flats. Both main parties agree that the site lies outside any settlement boundary.

According to the definition in Policy CS4 of the St Edmundsbury Core Strategy, December 2010 (the CS), it is therefore in the countryside.

6. CS Policy CS13 states that development outside the settlements defined in Policy CS4 will be strictly controlled. Policy DM5 of the Forest Heath and St Edmundsbury Local Plan, Joint Development Management Policies Document, February 2015 (the DMP) states that areas designated as countryside will be protected from unsustainable development. While Policy DM5 outlines circumstances in which new or extended buildings may be permitted in the countryside, none of these apply directly to the proposed development.
7. One of these circumstances, under Policy DM5, allows for small-scale residential development of a small undeveloped plot, in accordance with DMP Policy DM27. This permits new dwellings in the countryside, provided the development is within a closely knit 'cluster' of 10 or more existing dwellings adjacent to or fronting an existing highway, and the scale of development consists of infilling a small undeveloped plot by one dwelling or a pair of semi-detached dwellings commensurate with the scale and character of existing dwellings within an otherwise continuous built-up frontage. As the proposal involves extending an existing block of flats rather than infilling a small plot, it would not meet these criteria.
8. I have been provided with a copy of an appeal decision letter from January 2019, in which two appeals were dismissed for separate planning applications at the appeal site, both seeking to create additional residential units within extensions to the building. I have had regard to these decisions in my assessment.
9. The appellant argues that the Great Barton Neighbourhood Plan (the GBNP) has since introduced a settlement boundary that was not previously part of the development plan, and that this is a material consideration. However, the site remains outside of this boundary. Whilst the GBNP supports certain forms of development within the settlement boundary, I have no evidence to suggest that a more flexible approach applies to sites outside of it.
10. The appellant also contends that the proposal would have less impact than an infill plot within the settlement boundary and that a pragmatic approach should be taken, as the development would not encroach into open countryside. Whilst the Council has not raised specific concerns regarding the proposal's effects on the character and appearance of the area, this is a neutral factor and does not justify a departure from the policies of the development plan.
11. Although the appeal site is near some dwellings and employment facilities, including a plant hire business, it has limited access to essential amenities for future occupiers. Whilst bus stops are technically within walking distance, they remain several hundred metres away. Even with the proposed footpath improvements, I am not convinced that the site's accessibility provides compelling evidence to demonstrate compliance with the development plan policies.
12. The appellant further argues that the principle of residential development was established when permission was granted to convert the former office building into 18 flats. However, this was granted as permitted development under the prior approval process, which involves different considerations to those relevant to the current appeal. As such, this previous decision carries limited weight in my assessment.

13. For the reasons given above, the site of the proposed development would not be a suitable location for housing having regard to the spatial strategy of the development plan. It would therefore conflict with Policies DM5 and DM27 of the DMP, and Policies CS4 and CS13 of the CS, the aims of which have previously been set out.

Living conditions

14. The existing amenity space is located to the rear and side of the building, and the plans indicate this would remain unchanged by the proposed development. During my visit, I observed that this space consists of gravel paths, woodchip surfaces, and several timber decks. While it lacks formal landscaping features such as planting, it provides a spacious and well-maintained area for recreation. The presence of barbecues and outdoor seating suggests it is actively used by residents
15. There are no visible fences or divisions, indicating that the space is wholly communal. Several mature evergreen trees are scattered throughout, enhancing the area's greenery despite the absence of formal planting. These trees contribute positively to the space without causing excessive overshadowing.
16. Policies DM2 and DM22 of the DMP seek, among other objectives, for development to deliver appropriate residential amenity and a safe and welcoming environment. I have not been provided with specific external amenity space standards for this type of development.
17. The proposed development would introduce two additional 1-bedroom flats, requiring the existing amenity space to serve more residents. However, based on my observations, the space appears capable of accommodating this modest increase without compromising the quality of provision for either existing or future occupiers. Whilst I acknowledge that a different conclusion was reached by the Inspector in the previous appeals, that assessment was made before the building was occupied for residential purposes and before the amenity space had been established. In contrast, I was able to observe a spacious, functional, well-used environment, which does not lead me to the conclusion that harm would arise through the proposed development.
18. For these reasons, I conclude that the proposed development would provide suitable living conditions for current and future occupiers in terms of external amenity space and would accord with Policies DM2 and DM22 of the DMP, the aims of which have previously been set out.

Housing mix

19. Among other objectives, DMP Policy DM22 seeks to ensure that development incorporates a mix of housing and unit sizes that is appropriate for the location.
20. The appeal site is in a rural area where development primarily consists of low-density housing with private gardens. Conversely, the building subject to the appeal is formed of 18 one-bedroom flats, introducing a higher-density, more urban form of development to the locality.
21. In determining the previous appeal for 2 additional units at the property, the Inspector concluded that, given the existing unit mix, the relatively modest increase of two similar small units would not have a significant impact on the

character of the area. Based on the evidence before me and my own site observations, I find no compelling reason to reach a different conclusion in this case.

22. For these reasons, I conclude that the housing mix resulting from the proposed development would be appropriate to the location and character of the area, and it would accord with Policy DM22 of the DMP, the aims of which have previously been set out.

Other Matters

23. The appellant has highlighted the updated Framework's provisions regarding the method for calculating housing requirements. Whilst it is suggested that this would increase the Council's housing requirement, there is no clear indication that it would prevent the Council from demonstrating a five-year supply of deliverable housing sites.
24. Nevertheless, the proposed development would deliver two additional residential units and make efficient use of the land, offering a modest contribution to the local housing stock. This aligns with the Government's objective to boost the supply of homes, as set out in the Framework, and carries some weight in favour of the proposal. However, these benefits do not outweigh the previously identified harm resulting from conflict with the development plan.

Conclusion

25. Although I have found no harm in terms of housing mix or the living conditions of occupiers, the site of the proposed development would not be a suitable location for housing having regard to the spatial strategy of the development plan. Accordingly, it would conflict with the development plan as a whole. There are no other considerations, including the provisions of the Framework, to lead me to a decision other than in accordance with the plan. I therefore conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

P Storey

INSPECTOR