



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 25 March 2025

by Helen Hockenhull BA (Hons) B.PI MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 11 April 2025

Appeal Ref: APP/H0520/W/24/3355275

Yard 2, Ashley Lodge, Conquest Drove, Farcet, Cambridgeshire, PE7 3DH

- 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 Hassan Abou Alaywi, Danex Properties Ltd against the decision of Huntingdonshire District Council.
 - The application Ref is 23/01719/FUL.
 - The development proposed is the erection of a new SEN school including parking area and outbuildings for storage of educational equipment/maintenance.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Main Issues

2. The main issues in this case are :
 - whether the site is in an appropriate location having regard to national and local planning policies;
 - the effect of the proposal on highway safety.

Reasons

3. The appeal site forms a grassed field to the south west of Conquest Drove close to the village of Farcet. The application proposes the erection of a SEN school, including parking area and outbuildings to accommodate 25 students aged 7-18 with learning disabilities. A total of 14 staff would be employed. The proposed single storey building would provide 10 classrooms, two office rooms and a sensory calming room.

Appropriate location

4. The site lies in the open countryside outside any settlement boundary. Policy LP10 of the adopted Huntingdonshire Local Plan states that development in the countryside will be restricted to the limited and specific opportunities as provided for in other policies of the Plan. A proposal is also subject to a number of criteria relating to loss of agricultural land, recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside and ensuring that noise, odour or light pollution does not adversely affect the use and enjoyment of the countryside.
5. The proposed school forms a community facility so that Policy LP22 is relevant. This sets out that proposals for a new local service or community facility within the built-up area or the extension of an existing service or facility on land immediately

adjoining the built-up area, will be supported subject to a number of criteria. In this case the site is in the countryside and its development would be contrary to this policy.

6. I acknowledge that for some children, a school in a quiet countryside location can be beneficial and appropriate to their needs. The proposal would contribute to the provision of this type of educational establishment in the area. However, I have been provided with no evidence about the level of need for this type of school in the locality. Furthermore, I am advised by the Council that there are plans to increase special education provision and reduce reliance on placements in independent special schools, other than where already established and in exceptional circumstances.
7. The appellant's Design and Access Statement states that they will work with local authorities and Clinical Commissioning Groups. I have no evidence that conversations have already taken place leading to their support for the proposal. The Council advises that the Education Authority have previously raised no objection to the new school, but they have not expressly supported a new facility in this location.
8. Local Plan Policy LP16 expects development to contribute to an enhanced transport network that supports an increasing proportion of journeys by sustainable travel modes. The appeal site is in an isolated location detached from Farcet. Conquest Drove is a single track road with no footpaths or lighting. I observed on my site visit that walkers are very often forced to go onto the grass verge to enable vehicles to pass, which may be muddy in the winter and after inclement weather. There is also no public transport available. Most journeys would therefore need to be made by car.
9. The appellant indicates that pupils may travel from Peterborough, Wisbech and Huntingdon, some distance away. I note that the appellant intends to provide a mini bus transporting about 40% of staff and pupils. The remaining 60% would of course need to travel by car.
10. Given the above, whilst I recognise that irrespective of the site's location, many pupils would be unable to walk or cycle to school and would need to be transported in a vehicle, I find that the site has poor locational accessibility where most journeys by means other than the car would not be feasible. Accordingly, the proposal would be contrary to Local Plan Policy LP16.
11. Bringing all the above together, the appeal site would not be in an appropriate location, in conflict with the aims of the National Planning Policy Framework for sustainable development, and Policies LP10, LP16 and LP22 of the Huntingdonshire Local Plan.

Highway safety

12. The appeal site is accessed from Conquest Drove, an unclassified single track road. It is approximately 2.3km long from its junction with Straight Drove and forms a no through road. From its junction with Straight Drove, Conquest Drove has a right hand bend and then a 90 degree left hand bend. There are two formal passing bays and numerous accesses between the 90 degree bend and the site. However, there are none between the bend and the junction with Straight Drove. I observed on my site visit that a driver heading north from the site can stop in the

layby just before the 90-degree right hand bend and has good visibility of oncoming vehicles along the straight stretch before the left-hand bend. However, the driver cannot see vehicles coming south in the direction of the site between Straight Drove and the right-hand bend.

13. Overrunning and verge damage is evident as south bound vehicles encounter north bound vehicles. This causes mud and debris to be carried onto the road and can cause vehicles to reverse back to a location where the road is wider, and vehicles can pass. This would be exacerbated by the proposed development causing highway safety concerns. An additional passing bay would be required between the 90-degree bend and Straight Drove. This is not proposed as part of the scheme. I understand that the appellant was asked to identify where passing places were required in positions where forward visibility is restricted, however this has not been provided.
14. The proposal includes a parking area providing eight spaces, two visitor spaces and a minibus drop off zone. Parents or carers dropping off children at the proposed school, would need to enter the site and turn round in the car park to exit. The road is too narrow for vehicles to turn round and has no footpath making it unsuitable for parking and dropping off children.
15. There is no drop off/pick up area for parents /carers vehicles proposed in the scheme which means that once entering the site, drivers may have to reverse back out onto the carriageway and other parents may be forced to wait on the road while the vehicle leaves the site. Alternatively, drivers may park on the road for a short time and then use the access to turn round, reversing back onto the carriageway. Either way, this raises highway safety concerns.
16. With 25 students at the school and possibly 40% being brought by minibus, there would still be around 15 students needing to be brought by car. There would of course also be the vehicles of the staff members. Having regard to the single-track nature of Conquest Drove, this level of vehicle movements with no drop off/pick up facility would be unacceptable in highway terms, potentially causing damage to the fabric of the highway and interfering with the safe and free flow of traffic.
17. I note that Conquest Drove gives access to around 15 residential properties and commercial and agricultural vehicles currently use the lane. It is also notable that there are no accidents recorded in the vicinity of the site within the last five years. Nevertheless, the traffic generated by the development, which would be concentrated at school start and finish times, would increase the vehicular use of the Drove and the potential for highway safety issues to occur.
18. The proposal would be in conflict with paragraph 115 of the Framework which seeks to ensure that developments provide a safe and suitable access for all users and Policies LP16 and LP17 of the Huntingdonshire Local Plan which aim to ensure safe physical access from the public highway and appropriate space for vehicle movements and parking.

Other matters

19. The appellant has explained that the proposed school would provide a well-rounded education improving the lives of young people. Each child's education would be personalised to meet their needs, weaknesses, strengths and interests. The school grounds would offer the opportunity for environmental education with a

small area for petting animals. Whilst I do not doubt the aspirations and benefits the school can provide, this does not outweigh the harm of the proposal located in the countryside with highway safety concerns.

20. The appellant refers to letters of support for the facility submitted with the previous application as well as positive reports in the local press and social media. Whilst these weigh in favour of the scheme, they do not alter my overall findings.

Conclusion

21. I have found that the appeal site, located in the countryside with poor accessibility by means other than the car, is not in a suitable location for development having regard to national and local planning policy. The development would also give rise to highway safety concerns. I recognise that the proposal would add to the special education provision in the area. However, as plans are in place to address the need for this type of provision, I conclude that the benefits of the proposal do not outweigh the harm I have identified.
22. The proposal conflicts with the development plan and the material considerations do not indicate that the appeal should be determined other than in accordance with it.
23. For the reasons given above and having had regard to all other matters raised, I dismiss this appeal.

Helen Hockenhull

INSPECTOR