



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 9 April 2025

by **Jonathan Price BA(Hons) DipTP DMS MRTPI**

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 28 April 2025

Appeal Ref: APP/F3545/W/24/3357096

Land adjacent to Aldersfield Place Farm, Ashfield Green, Wickhambrook, Suffolk CB8 8UZ

- 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 and Mrs I Parker against the decision of West Suffolk Council.
 - The application Ref is DC/24/0474/FUL.
 - The development proposed is erection of self-build dwelling and construction of new vehicular access.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. The Council is not defending its third reason for refusal. This related to the absence of a legal agreement to secure a self-build dwelling, exempt from the mandatory requirement to provide 10% biodiversity net gain.

Main Issue

3. The effect of the proposal on the character and appearance of the area, including on the significance of Aldersfield Place farmhouse, as a non-designated heritage asset (NDHA).

Reasons

4. The proposal relates to the side garden of a farmhouse within the hamlet of Ashfield Green. This comprises a spacious arrangement of housing lining both sides of Wickhambrook Road. The relevant development plan policies are those of the 2010 St Edmundsbury Core Strategy (CS), 2014 Rural Vision (RV) and 2015 Joint Development Management Policies Document (DM).
5. The development plan defines Ashfield Green as countryside, where policies CS1, CS4 and CS13 seek to restrain development, with Policy RV3 directing this to within settlement boundaries. There are exceptions to this general presumption against development in the countryside. Of relevance is the provision in Policy DM5 for the small-scale residential development of a small undeveloped plot, in accordance with Policy DM27.
6. Under Policy DM27, the Council has allowed other small scale housing infill in Ashfield Green, through it comprising a closely knit 'cluster' of 10 or more dwellings fronting the highway. In terms of dimensions, the side garden to Aldersfield Place

farmhouse would provide a single dwelling plot broadly reflecting the prevailing size along this side of the street. However, this is not an area of such regimented development that plot dimensions alone would support a dwelling. Crucially, Policy DM27 restricts such infill where harming or undermining a visually important gap that contributes to the character and distinctiveness of the rural scene, or where development would have an adverse impact on the environment.

7. The Council had previously held that this garden area might not be considered a visually important gap in of itself but is an important gap in terms of its relationship with the farmhouse and the positive contribution this and the surrounding land has on the street scene. I agree that the mature garden to the side of Aldersfield Place farmhouse provides an attractive, spacious, verdant and characterful feature which contributes positively to the street scene. I do not think it necessary for the local plan to have gone to such fine detail as specifically identifying this side garden as a visually important green gap, for its contribution to the character and appearance of the street scene to later be recognised in the development management process.
8. The dwelling itself would be modest in scale and height, of a vernacular cottage style and set back from the building line established by the dwellings at either side. Nevertheless, the creation of a new vehicular access through the roadside hedge, leading to the parking and manoeuvring areas the dwelling would face onto, would remove an attractive area of mature garden intimately connected with the existing farmhouse and of high value to the verdant appearance and spacious character of this settlement.
9. To my mind, this proposal conflicts with Policy DM27 through causing permanent and irrevocable harm to a visually important gap that contributes to the character and distinctiveness of the rural scene. As such, this proposal would have an adverse impact on the environment. The significantly harmful effect on the character and appearance of the area would also bring the proposal into conflict with policies CS3, DM2 and DM22.
10. In addition to the development of this site having a significantly harmful effect on the character and appearance of the area, it would impinge upon the host dwelling. The farmhouse has been identified as a NDHA in the decision-making process that culminated in the recent dismissal of an appeal¹ over refusal of an earlier proposal for a dwelling on this site.
11. The appellant has provided a Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA) which describes Aldersfield Place farmhouse in some detail. This accepts the judgement made over its status as a NDHA, citing the level of extant framing of the original building, coupled with its attractive part mid-19th Century front façade as warranting this. However, I disagree with the conclusion of the HIA that the historic farm setting of the former farmhouse has now been irretrievably lost, through the demolition of all the original farm buildings, the erection of new outbuildings to the rear and by new dwellings built to the north-east and south-west.
12. The extract from the 1904 Ordnance Survey map in the HIA shows demolished farm buildings to the rear and far side of this property, which have been replaced by more recent developments, including some new housing. Much of the former farmland shown in the 1904 map, beyond the appeal site and on both sides of

¹ Appeal ref: APP/F3545/W/23/3334575

Wickhambrook Road, has since been developed to provide housing. However, this more recent development has so far spared the side garden to Aldersfield Place. Historically farm buildings had never occupied this long-standing and mature garden, which comprises an integral part of the setting of the NDHA, despite the changes to the surrounding area.

13. The significance of the NDHA relates not only to the physical elements described in the HIA, but to its setting. The side garden currently makes a strong and prominent contribution to the spacious setting within which the NDHA can be appreciated. As the Inspector in the previous appeal noted, in combination with the verdant frontage and space to the other side of the dwelling, the spacious garden contributes positively to the significance of the NDHA. That decision related to a scheme for a larger dwelling, set further forward in the site. This scheme is for a comparatively much smaller and lower height dwelling, set further back on the site, level with the rear building line of Aldersfield Place farmhouse and the next-door dwelling at Minori, and further away from both.
14. Reference is made of the concerns of the Inspector in the earlier appeal over the substantial width of the larger dwelling previously proposed and how this would reduce the openness and undermine the ability to understand and appreciate the original and historical significance of the NDHA. In the current scheme, a smaller dwelling set back within the site would retain more open views of the farmhouse. However, the original dwelling would remain readily visible in either instance. It is the loss of the original garden that results in the harm, as it is this that provides the historical setting of the farmhouse and how it is appreciated. This is not just in terms of available viewpoints from the street. It relates to architectural considerations, whereby the substantial Aldersfield Place would have been designed to sit within quite open and spacious grounds, as befits its scale and significance as the main farmhouse, with the farm buildings situated to its further sides.
15. The loss of this side garden would relegate this architecturally significant building to occupying the routinely sized plot of recent housing. Therefore, simply by not proposing as large and intrusive a dwelling as was dismissed in the previous appeal, this scheme would not avoid harming the significance of the farmhouse, which arises from depriving it of a large part of its original grounds.
16. Replacing this valuable area of mature side garden with a new dwelling and its associated car parking, access, boundary treatments and any future domestic paraphernalia, would harmfully erode the spacious setting of Aldersfield Place farmhouse, detracting from its significance as a NDHA. The proposal would run counter to the aim in paragraph 219 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) to treat favourably proposals that preserve those elements of the setting that make a positive contribution to a heritage asset (or which better reveal its significance). The harm caused to the significance of Aldersfield Place farmhouse as a NDHA, through the erosion of its setting, would conflict with Policy DM16.

Planning Balance and Conclusion

17. The appellant cites a fallback option of implementing permitted development rights. This is a material consideration and could conceivably amount to a building or series of buildings up to 4m in height of a much bigger footprint than the appeal

dwelling. Whilst there might only be slightly more than a theoretical possibility of such development actually being carried out, I am doubtful this would amount to significantly more harm than creating a separate house plot, however sympathetic and modest the design. Therefore, the alternative prospect of implementing such domestic permitted development is given only limited weight in favour of the proposal.

18. The Council acknowledges that, with the change to the standard method for calculating housing need on 12 December 2024, its housing land supply had reduced to 3.6 years. It further advises that the demand on the self-build register is not being met, with a shortfall of 74 plots as of 30 October 2023. The emerging West Suffolk Local Plan is at an advanced stage, which the Council is confident will secure a five-year housing land supply and a policy directed to remedying an insufficiency of self-build dwelling plots. However, until the new plan is adopted, the policies most important for determining this appeal remain out-of-date. As a result, Framework paragraph 11 d ii is engaged. This would mean allowing the appeal unless any adverse impacts of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the policies in this Framework taken as a whole, having particular regard to key policies for directing development to sustainable locations, making effective use of land, securing well-designed places and providing affordable homes, individually or in combination.
19. The shortfall in meeting the demand for self-build plots is a material planning consideration of significant weight. The appeal statement makes reference to Planning Practice Guidance, whereby self-build and custom housebuilders choose the design and layout of their home and can be innovative in both its design and construction. There is some tension between such design freedom and the restraints of adhering to the carefully considered small cottage scheme referred to in the HIA. However, even assuming such a design aligned with self-build preferences on the Council's register, this proposal would make only a small contribution to the large shortfall identified. The proposal's self-build status is therefore a benefit to which no more than moderate weight can be attributed.
20. The dwelling proposed would similarly make a very small contribution towards remedying the current lack of a five-year housing land supply in the District. As a benefit, this again attracts only moderate weight. In addition to supporting the general objective to boost housing supply, the scheme would help to sustain the vitality and viability of local services, offering a further small social benefit. Small economic benefits would derive from the construction of a new dwelling, its future maintenance and from additional household expenditure.
21. In respect of the environmental benefits of making more efficient use of land, paragraph 129 of the Framework requires account be taken of the desirability of maintaining an area's prevailing character and setting, including residential gardens. Also weighing against the proposal is Framework paragraph 135, which seeks developments that are sympathetic to local character and history, including the surrounding built environment and landscape setting.
22. Framework paragraph 216 requires a balanced judgement over the effect of this proposal on the significance of the NDHA, in which I find the scale of harm to be quite considerable. Coupled with a similar level of harm to the character and appearance of the settlement, the adverse impacts of this proposal would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits. The proposal would therefore

not gain the Framework's presumption in favour of sustainable development. This would not indicate a decision otherwise than in accordance with the development plan, with which there would be conflict when considered as a whole. Consequently, I conclude that the appeal be dismissed.

Jonathan Price

INSPECTOR