



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 8 April 2025

by R Satheesan BSc PGCert MSc MSc MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 07 May 2025

Appeal Ref: APP/D3830/W/22/3310444

Upper Sparks Farm, Staplefield Road, Cuckfield, Haywards Heath

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 against a refusal to grant planning permission.
 - The appeal is made by Ms Nicola Smyth on behalf of Cuckfield Golf Centre against the decision of Mid Sussex District Council.
 - The application Ref DM/22/0678, dated 27 July 2022, was refused by notice dated 10 October 2022.
 - The development proposed is described as "Change of use of land from agriculture to use as storage in association with Cuckfield golf centre, including improvements to the access track, retention of hardstanding and oil tank and proposed erection of a storage barn for equipment and vehicles incorporating staff welfare facilities."
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Decision

1. The appeal is allowed and planning permission is granted for the change of use of land from agriculture to use as storage in association with Cuckfield golf centre, including improvements to the access track, retention of hardstanding and oil tank and proposed erection of a storage barn for equipment and vehicles incorporating staff welfare facilities at Upper Sparks Farm, Staplefield Road, Cuckfield, Haywards Heath in accordance with the terms of the application, Ref DM/22/0678, dated 27 July 2022, subject to the conditions in the attached schedule.

Procedural matters

2. I have also dealt with another appeal decision (Ref: APP/D3830/C/22/3312194 and APP/D3830/C/22/3312195) on the same site relating to an appeal against an enforcement notice. That appeal is the subject of a separate decision.

Main Issues

3. The main issues are:
 - Whether the development is in a suitable location having regard to local and national policies concerned with rural economic development and sustainable tourism in the countryside; and
 - the effect of the development on the character and appearance of the area, with particular regard to the location within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

Reasons

Suitability of the site

Background to the appeal site, the golf club and the appeal development

4. The main part of the appeal site relates to a rectangular parcel of land, approximately 0.2ha in area, which lies immediately adjacent to the main golf course operated by Cuckfield Golf Centre (CGC). The site has hedging to its northern and eastern boundaries. To its southern boundary lies a row of mature hedging and trees behind which is a paddock associated with Hammerpond Farm. The appeal site falls within the countryside and within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The appeal site occupies a prominent position with extensive views from the southern end of the site across the Ouse valley to the north.
5. The surrounding area beyond the appeal site contains a number of sporadic residential dwellings, together with the Cuckfield Pet and Country Store to the south and formal playing fields used by Haywards Heath Rugby Club on the southern side of Staplefield Road. Immediately adjacent to the appeal site itself, is the Clubhouse, which is built of brick with timber weatherboarding construction. The Clubhouse includes an outdoor terrace and ancillary storage in the basement used in connection with the CGC. The CGC is open to the public with public footpaths running across Golf course.
6. CGC an established rural sports facility comprising a nine-hole golf course, covering approximately 45 hectares of undulating countryside within the AONB, located close to the village of Cuckfield. CGC is open to members as well as walk in, pay and play customers, whether they are local residents or visitors to the area. The centre provides coaching sessions for all, including men, women, seniors and children from the age of five upwards, with these lessons being taught by one of the two PGA professionals at the site.
7. The CGC has also run a golfing programme with schools in the local area and offers school holiday golf camps for juniors, thereby clearly widening access for all members of the community to sporting facilities and helping to raise and promote the benefits of physical activity. The appeal site and CGC is accessed from the Staplefield Road. The CGC is predominantly open with maintained grass fairways and greens with existing elevated 'tee boxes' interspersed with pockets of woodland, predominately around the ponds in the middle of the course and around the boundaries of the site.
8. The current proposal is in response to the Councils' decision to issue a Notice for the temporary porta-cabins and fuel (oil) tank and other associated equipment being stored at the appeal site¹ (the subject of Appeal refs: APP/D3830/C/22/3312194 and APP/D3830/C/22/3312195). Therefore, both the planning and enforcement appeals relate to regularisation of the change of use of land from agricultural to use as storage in association with CGC and the retention of hardstanding and oil tank. This appeal scheme also proposes the erection of a storage barn for equipment and vehicles incorporating staff welfare facilities.

¹ Appeal refs: APP/D3830/C/22/3312194 and APP/D3830/C/22/3312195.

Rural Economic Development and Sustainable Tourism in the Countryside Policy Context and Assessment

9. The primary objective of the Mid-Sussex District Plan 2014-2031, 2018 (MSDP) with respect to the countryside is to secure its protection by minimising the amount of land taken for development and preventing development that does not need to be there. At the same time, it seeks to enhance the countryside, support the rural economy by accommodating well-designed, appropriate new forms of development and changes in land use where a countryside location is required and where it does not adversely affect the rural environment.
10. Policy DP12 of the MSDP states that development will be permitted in the countryside, provided it maintains or where possible enhances the quality of the rural and landscape character of the District, and it is necessary for the purposes of agriculture; or it is supported by a specific policy reference either elsewhere in the Plan, a Development Plan Document or relevant Neighbourhood Plan.
11. MSDP Policy DP19 states that tourism related development in the countryside including extensions to existing facilities will be permitted provided it supports the sustainable growth of the rural economy and maintains or where possible enhances the quality of the rural and landscape character of the District. The supporting text to this policy highlights that tourism makes an important contribution to the economy of Mid Sussex.
12. Similarly, Policy DP14 of the MSDP seeks to support new small-scale economic development, including tourism-related development, within the countryside. Furthermore, MSDP Policy DP24 supports development that provides new and/or enhanced leisure facilities. The supporting text clarifies that this policy supports the provision of additional facilities as well as protecting existing facilities.
13. In terms of National Planning Policy Framework, 2024 (the Framework) Paragraph 85 highlights that decisions should help create the conditions in which businesses can invest, expand and adapt. Significant weight should be placed on the need to support economic growth and productivity, taking into account both local business needs and wider opportunities for development.
14. In respect of the rural economy, Paragraph 88 of the Framework states that decisions should enable: a) the sustainable growth and expansion of all types of business in rural areas, through.... 'well-designed new buildings;' c) sustainable rural tourism and leisure developments which respect the character of the countryside; and d) the retention and development of accessible local services and community facilities, such as.... sports venues.
15. Paragraph 89 of the Framework further states that decisions should recognise that sites to meet local business and community needs in rural areas may have to be found adjacent to or beyond existing settlements.
16. The Council refused permission partly on the basis that the development is unrelated to the needs of agriculture and unnecessary for the operation of CGC. The Council also state that dedicated storage and welfare facilities have already been approved in the basement area of the club house, and that the use of the land in itself does not increase the facilities available to users of the golf club.

17. However, since the appellant's took ownership of the CGC at the beginning of 2019, the business has grown in both staff numbers and membership. There has also been an increase in footfall from non-members who "pay and play." This demonstrates that the current owners have invested heavily in this rural sporting business.
18. The recent planning history for the site, further illustrates the investment and improvements which have taken place since the appellant's ownership of the CGC, namely the extensions and alterations to the club house, the extension to the driving range enclosure, the reconstruction of the practice putting green, the enlargement of various tees and improvements to the greens together with the installation of a new pathway network serving all holes. I appreciate that without maintained greens and fairways, this rural business is likely to suffer a decline in membership.
19. Furthermore, during the site visit I observed that the basement area was already operating at full capacity with machinery, storage and equipment used in connection with the CGC. The customer parking area was also fully occupied at the time of my site visit, and there was no space available for storage of maintenance vehicles and machinery.
20. The new storage barn and welfare unit is therefore necessary to support this growing sporting/leisure facility and will enable the following:
 - Storage of machinery, required as the golf course continues to improve;
 - A dedicated fertiliser and pesticide storage area keeping these chemicals away from the Clubhouse;
 - An undercover area to store sand top dressing for the greens, this can only be used when dry and will give them more flexibility to apply it being away from the clubhouse;
 - Agriculture tractor, used to maintain the land for both the golf club and the surrounding land, since this cannot be moved in and out from under the terrace at certain times of the day;
 - A separate welfare facility for the groundsmen/maintenance staff incorporating 2 toilets, a washroom, a kitchenette, and a small seating area where the maintenance team could take a break, have their lunch in inclement weather and use the facilities.
 - The provision of a secure lockable barn to guard against theft.
21. I accept that keeping the above away from the clubhouse allows the maintenance of the grounds to be undertaken without harming the visitor experience, in terms of visual and noise disruption. Therefore, the provision of a new barn assists the overall running of the golf club by allowing the discreet storage of maintenance equipment, materials, and tractors. Such a facility would directly improve the club's maintenance offer, providing a tourism and leisure facility that can be kept in good condition throughout the year thus providing an improved tourism and leisure facility for the District.
22. The modern welfare facilities within the development also enhance the general facilities for staff members. Therefore, the proposed development supports the growth of this rural enterprise and in turn the rural economy, whilst improving

the sporting venue. The success of this leisure activity requires that the land be well maintained. Thus, the ancillary storage and maintenance area is intrinsically related to the adjacent Golf Centre, and thus essential to its countryside location.

23. In terms of the principle of the development, the economic benefits of the development are clear, and the development is in conformity with paragraphs 85, 88 and 89 of the Framework, and MSDP Policies DP12, DP14, DP19 and Policy DP24 which support sustainable tourism, enhanced sport and leisure facilities, and economic development including within the rural areas and through the creation of new buildings. In particular, I attach significant weight to paragraph 85 of the Framework which states that 'significant' weight should be given to the need to support economic growth and productivity, taking into account both local business needs and wider opportunities for development.

Character and appearance

24. The Framework states that "decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by a) protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, sites of biodiversity.... b) recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside." The Framework also states that "great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in National Parks, the Broads, and National Landscapes which have the highest status of protection in relation to these issues."
25. The High Weald AONB Management Plan 2019-2024 (AMP) explains that the AONB is an area of ancient countryside and one of the best surviving Medieval landscapes in Northern Europe. The mosaic of small mixed farms and woodlands is now considered to represent a quintessentially English landscape. The appeal site lies within the areas described as Field and Heath. The High Weald comprise a detailed agricultural tapestry of fields, small woodlands and farmsteads, which is cherished for its scenery, tranquillity and wildlife. The Medieval pattern of small fields with sinuous edges surrounded by thick wooded hedges, remain. Extensive views punctuated by church spires can be glimpsed along the ridge-top roads.
26. The following relevant Objectives set out in the AMP, are relevant to the proposed development.
- S3 - "To enhance the architectural quality of the High Weald and ensure development reflects the character of the High Weald in its scale, layout and design".
 - FH2 - "To maintain the pattern of small irregularly shaped fields bounded by hedgerows and woodlands."
 - FH3 - "To enhance the ecological function of field and heath as part of the complex mosaic of High Weald habitats...."
 - QQ3 - "To develop and manage access to maximise opportunities for everyone to enjoy, appreciate and understand the character of the AONB while conserving its natural beauty."
 - OQ4 - "To protect and promote the perceptual qualities that people value". The rationale for this is "to ensure that the special qualities people value,

such as tranquillity, dark skies, sense of naturalness and clean air, are recognised.”

27. Cuckfield Landscape Character Assessment, 2012² (CLCA) describes the character area of Sparks Farm and the Golf Course as mainly of large parcels of land with limited boundary vegetation, golf course, plus small area of paddocks and buildings adjacent to Staplefield Road. The Golf course represents a significant outdoor recreational resource, which limits the tranquillity and remoteness. Nevertheless, character area forms relatively open and rural setting to the Ouse Valley and wider AONB to the north.
28. The proposed new barn and welfare unit combined in a single purpose-built building is similar in appearance to other agricultural buildings in the locality and the adjacent club house. The new barn would take the form of a traditional agricultural building with walls made from larch weather boarding stained black in keeping with other barns in the area. The roof will be made of standard cement fibre and coloured juniper green. Similarly, roller shutters would also be in a similar traditional rural colour. Details and materials would be controlled and agreed by condition.
29. By utilising a design palette that is agricultural in appearance, the visual impact of the Club's operation is limited in this rural location, in accordance with Objective S3 of the AMP. Furthermore, equipment and machinery and the fuel tank would be stored away from public views in a discreet area located immediately adjacent to the Golf Centre and clubhouse. The size of the proposed barn is not disproportionate with the site and would be seen against the backdrop of mature landscaping and trees along its boundary with Hammerpond Farm and the surrounding built form of the clubhouse and terrace, and Cuckfield Pet and Country Store, having a similar agricultural feel.
30. Furthermore, to ensure that the proposed barn, fuel tank and maintenance area sits well within its surroundings a landscape plan and a Landscape & Visual Appraisal prepared by Furse Landscape Ltd, Rev C, dated 1 July 2022 (LVA) has been submitted to support this appeal. The LVA and landscaping plan proposes additional plants and scattered feathered (10/12cmg) native species trees as part of these proposed development. In addition, a new western hedge is proposed with feathered native trees and a gated entrance to the remaining paddock area to the west. This and the northern boundary would be reinforced with an 8m wide buffer planting of native woodland species and a mosaic of semi mature native species trees. This would screen views into the site from both the north and the west.
31. The LVA explains that the existing and proposed hedge and new woodland buffer planting mitigation measures will take between 5 to 15 years to establish the full screening and filtering screening effect. I appreciate the concerns raised that during this time there would be glimpsed views of the development through the landscaping. However, since these appeals were first lodged in 2022, the appellant has undertaken landscaping around the perimeter of the appeal site comprising a new hedge on its northern and eastern boundary. In combination, these works have already screened much of the maintenance area from public views from both the golf course and the public rights of way which run through it. Therefore, based on the success of the existing soft

² Prepared by Landscape Architecture Masterplanning Ecology, commission by Cuckfield Parish Council to inform preparation of the Cuckfield Neighbourhood Plan.

landscaping works which have already been undertaken, I am confident that the further landscaping measures proposed would achieve the desired effect to ensure the development harmonises with the surrounding landscape character of the AONB.

32. Therefore, despite the appeal site's elevated position with significant views across the Ouse Valley, the proposed development would preserve views from the surrounding area including the Golf Centre, the PROW 44CR, running through the golf club, as well as from PROW 33CR, approximately 2km to the north. Therefore, the proposal accords with Objective QQ3 of the AMP.
33. The overall scheme is also in accordance with Objective FH2 in terms of reinforcing and planting new hedgerows and planting new trees around the perimeter of the site. The planting would appear as a small woodland within the corner of a larger field, reinforcing the mature hedge that runs along the southern boundary of the site. Furthermore, the bank and ditch boundaries with hedge planted on top is referenced as being characteristic of the High Weald field systems.
34. The agricultural land of the appeal site is not considered to be of Grade 3a or above and does not comprise species rich grassland or low lowland heath type character. The new hedges, woodland and wildflower proposed would enhance the lack of species diversity which previously existed on the site, in general conformity with Objective FH3 of the AMP.
35. With regard to tranquillity of the AONB, the CGC is an established lawful leisure activity in the AONB and provides recreational facilities for the community. The proposed storage and welfare unit located directly adjacent to the Cub House would concentrate the operational activities in one area away from the more sensitive visible areas to the north and east of the Club House. Overall, the storage area and new building, which have a contemporary agricultural feel, surrounded by dense landscaping would appear as a modest extension to the overall CGC.
36. With regard to concerns relating to the effect of the development on the intrinsically dark countryside, the appellant explains that the lighting design is proposed to be low level light, and no floodlights are proposed to the external areas. Where external light is required for the safety of staff and visitors, lighting units would be modern LED type where light levels can be controlled by condition. Subject to this condition, the development is not considered to harm the dark skies and is in accordance with Objective QQ4 of the AMP.
37. I appreciate that a previous appeal was dismissed in 2012 in relation to an enforcement notice for the unauthorised material change of use of the land for the storage of wood and logs unconnected to the agricultural and associated retail farm shop³.
38. However, that decision pre-dates the current appeal by some 13 years, and the area around the appeal site has changed significantly since then with the appellant's ownership of the golf centre in 2019. Such changes include the extensions and alterations to the club house, the extension to the driving range enclosure, the reconstruction of the practice putting green, the enlargement of

³ Appeal refs: 2160887 and 2160888.

various tees and improvements to the greens together with the installation of a new pathway network serving all holes. As well as implementing the above planning permissions, the appellant has undertaken environmental and ecological improvements across the golf course which includes planting of additional trees and new hedgerows. As such, the wider site and surroundings has changed since the last appeal decision in 2012.

39. In order to undertake the above works, the golf club have employed additional groundsmen/greenskeepers with an increase in the appropriate materials, machinery and maintenance vehicles necessary to undertake these works. Indeed, I was able to observe on site, that new landscaping works had recently been installed around the perimeter of the appeal site which goes some way to screening the development. In addition, a further landscaping strategy has been submitted as part of this appeal which accords the objectives of the AMP. Furthermore, the previous appeal was for the change of use of the site for the storage of logs and woods which is different than the development before me. For the above reasons I attach little weight to the previous appeal decision.
40. Consequently, I do not consider that the proposed development would harm the natural beauty of the AONB as it would preserve the rural character of the locality and in turn the natural beauty of the area. It would therefore comply with MSDP Policies DP12, DP16, DP19, DP26 and DP29, and Policy AS3 of the Ansty, Staplefield and Brook Street Neighbourhood Plan (NP). Taken together these state that the countryside will be protected in recognition of its intrinsic character and beauty; that development within the AONB will only be permitted where it conserves or enhances natural beauty and has regard to the AMP; that development is of high-quality design and layout and includes appropriate landscaping and greenspace; and that the impact on local amenity, intrinsically dark landscapes and nature conservation areas of artificial lighting proposals (including floodlighting) is minimised, in terms of intensity and number of fittings.

Other matters

41. Under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended) (the 'Habitats Regulations'), the competent authority has a duty to ensure that any plans or projects that they regulate (including plan making and determining planning applications) will have no adverse effect on the integrity of a European site of nature conservation importance. The European site is the Ashdown Forest Special Protection Area (SPA) and Special Area of Conservation (SAC). The potential effects of the development on Ashdown Forest were assessed during the Habitats Regulation Assessment process for the Mid Sussex District Plan. This process identified likely significant effects on the Ashdown Forest SPA from recreational disturbance and on the Ashdown Forest SAC from atmospheric pollution.
42. With regard to recreation disturbance, increased recreational activity arising from new residential development and related population growth is likely to disturb the protected near-ground and ground nesting birds on Ashdown Forest. However, the proposal would not result in a net increase in dwellings within the 7km zone of influence and as such no mitigation is required.
43. In relation to atmospheric pollution, the potential effects of the proposed development are incorporated into the overall results of the transport model prepared for the Site Allocations DPD, which indicates there would not be an

overall impact on Ashdown Forest. As such, there is not considered to be a significant in combination effect on the Ashdown Forest SAC by this development proposal.

44. The screening assessment carried out by the Council at the planning application stage concluded that there would be no likely significant effects, alone or in combination, on the Ashdown Forest SPA and SAC from the proposed development, and that no mitigation is required. Based on the evidence before me, I find no reason to disagree with this professional assessment.
45. Comments made by third parties have been taken into account but do not alter the conclusions reached in this decision. With respect to the effect upon the living conditions of neighbouring occupiers, the nearest residential property lies some distance away from the appeal site to the south on Staplefield Road. The proposed use is ancillary to the existing Golf Club, which is immediately adjacent to the appeal site. As such the proposed development is not expected to result in any harm to the living conditions of neighbours living conditions in terms of loss of light, outlook, privacy or noise and disturbance.
46. With regard to drainage, the Council's drainage officers have been consulted and are content with the proposed improvements and provisions which can be secured by condition.
47. The proposed development would not be expected to result in any additional intensification of the use of the site or result in any additional traffic or highway safety concerns. The possible future intentions of the owners are not relevant to the current appeal. I have therefore assessed the current proposals on their own merits.
48. Concerns have also been raised in relation to the construction phase of the scheme. The appellant explains that the construction period would be minimal as the buildings are sectional agricultural type buildings and would be erected within a 2-to-3-month period. Furthermore, the proposed planting would take place during the first planting season which would likely occur simultaneously with the construction phase of the works. As such no concerns are raised with regard to the construction works.

Conditions

49. I have had regard to the planning conditions suggested by the parties. I have considered them against the tests in the Framework and the advice in the Planning Practice Guidance, and in the interest of accuracy and clarity I have undertaken some minor editing. The Council has suggested a condition that seeks to restrict the use of the building and land for storage and maintenance in connection with Cuckfield Golf Centre. This is necessary given that the site is located in countryside and to ensure that the use does not change to an alternative use unrelated to the Gold Club use. A condition specifying approved drawings is necessary to provide certainty for the new building.
50. A condition requiring details of external materials, and external lighting are necessary in the interests of the character and appearance of the countryside. For similar reasons, a condition is also necessary to ensure that the soft and hard landscaping planting scheme is carried out. A condition requiring details of details of the surface water drainage for the hardstanding and foul and surface water drainage for the building are required to ensure satisfactory drainage .A

stricter timeframe has been given for the landscaping and surface water drainage conditions since the change of use of the land has begun.

Conclusion

51. For the reasons set out above and having regard to all other matters raised, I conclude that this appeal should be allowed.

R. Satheesan

INSPECTOR

SCHEDULE OF CONDITIONS

- 1) The land and building hereby approved shall be used solely for storage and maintenance in connection with Cuckfield Golf Centre and for no other purposes at any time.
- 2) The development hereby permitted shall be carried out in accordance with the following approved plans: Drawing No: AGM-CUC-B-001 Rev A, AGM-CUC-B-002 Rev B, AGM-CUC-B-003 Rev A, AGM-CUC-B-004, AGM-CUC-B-005, AGM-CUC-B-006 Rev A and AGM-CUC-B-007.
- 3) No construction of the building hereby approved shall be carried out until a schedule of materials and finishes to be used for all external walls, roofs, windows, doors and roller shutters of the building has been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. The development shall thereafter be carried out in accordance with the approved details unless the Local Planning Authority gives written consent to any variation.
- 4) Within 3 months of the date of this permission full details of a hard and soft landscaping scheme, including means of enclosure, shall be submitted to and approved by the Local Planning Authority. The works shall be carried out within the next planting season or in accordance with the timetable and programme of works agreed by the Local Planning Authority.

Any trees or plants which, within a period of five years from the date of the permission, die, are removed or become seriously damaged or diseased, shall be replaced in the next planting season with others of similar size and species, unless the Local Planning Authority gives written consent to any variation.

- 5) Within 3 months of the date of this permission full details of the surface water drainage of the hardstanding shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. The approved drainage works shall thereafter be carried out in accordance with the approved details, within 3 months of that approval and thereafter permanently retained and maintained.
- 6) No construction of the building hereby approved shall take place until full details of the proposed foul and surface water drainage and means of disposal has been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. The development shall thereafter be carried out in accordance with the agreed details and thereafter permanently retained and maintained.
- 7) There shall be no external lighting installed, except in accordance with a scheme of external lighting which has been submitted to and approved by the Local Planning Authority.