
Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 17 June 2025

by Zoe Raygen DipURP MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 30 June 2025

Appeal Ref: APP/Y3425/W/25/3364648

Land Off A34 Opposite George & Dragon PH, Stone Road, Meaford, Staffordshire, ST15 0PX

- 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 George Developments Limited against the decision of Stafford Borough Council.
 - The application Ref is 24/39125/FUL.
 - The development proposed is creation of an Electric Vehicle Charging Hub comprising 31 charging bays equipped with solar panels and a substation (Sui Generis), picnic areas and a drive-through restaurant (Use Class E), with associated access, car and cycle parking, and landscaping.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. I have had regard to the appellants plan reference SK01C which is little different to that considered by the Council at the application stage but takes on board the comments from the Road Safety Audit. The Council and interested parties have been able to provide comments during the course of the appeal and therefore parties will not be prejudiced by my consideration of the plan.

Main Issues

3. The main issues are:
 - whether the proposal would be inappropriate development in the Green Belt having regard to the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) and any relevant development plan policies;
 - the effect of the proposal on the openness of the Green Belt;
 - the effect of the proposal on the character and appearance of the area and the setting of the Meaford Conservation Area;
 - whether the appeal site can be suitably and safely accessed by sustainable travel;
 - whether the proposal makes adequate provision for car parking; and
 - If the proposal is inappropriate development in the Green Belt, 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

Green Belt

4. Policy SP7 of the Plan for Stafford Borough 2011-2031 adopted 2014 (the Plan) states that development in the Green Belt should be consistent with national policies for the control of development. The National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) outlines development which would not be inappropriate, one of which is local transport infrastructure which can demonstrate a requirement for a Green Belt location, and which preserves the openness of the Green Belt and does not conflict with the purposes of including land within it.
5. I accept that the electric vehicle charging facility could be considered as local transport infrastructure. The existing site is formed from an undeveloped open field. The provision of development on the site would inevitably therefore lead to a loss of spatial openness through the provision of the charging structures and the layout and construction of car parking as well as increased activity from the cars that would be visiting and parked on the appeal site.
6. Visually the development would be in the lower area of the appeal site and would be surrounded by hedges and trees. However, while I have had regard to the findings of the appellant's Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) in respect of the openness of the Green Belt as a whole, it would still be visible within the local landscape and consequently would not preserve the openness of the Green Belt as required by paragraph 154(h) of the Framework. I note that the appellant accepts in their Final Comments that they are not arguing that there is no adverse impact on the openness of the Green Belt.
7. In any case I am not convinced, on the evidence before me, that a drive through restaurant would constitute local transport infrastructure as part of a charging hub in this location. I accept that it would provide a facility for people to eat and drink at while waiting to charge their vehicle, given that it contains an indoor restaurant seating area. However, it is also a drive through facility not specifically targeted at users of the charging facility as they would need to wait for the cars to be charged rather than drive through. There is nothing persuasive to suggest the drive through restaurant is dependant on the provision of the charging points. Consequently, given its location near to several large settlements, it would in my view, attract customers solely to that facility rather than passing by on their journey.
8. Therefore, the drive through restaurant would be inappropriate development irrespective of my conclusions on the charging infrastructure. In support of this view, I note that the appeal decision¹ the appellant refers to was only for electric car charging spaces and did not include a drive through restaurant. There is little detail before me in the planning committee report for the planning application also brought to my attention². However, even if the whole of that development was considered to be transport infrastructure, that proposed a hub which included retail space, café space, office space/IT equipment, lounge area, fitness zone, children's area and toilet facilities to serve 50-60 charging points While that is more than proposed here, it is not by a significant amount and includes a lot more facilities. There is also no discussion regarding the impact on openness, which I have found the proposal would cause harm to. Neither therefore lend support to the appellant's position.

¹ APP/P1940/W/19/3232159

² 21/01515/FULL

9. Paragraph 155 of the Framework outlines circumstances where development in the Green Belt would also not be inappropriate where it utilises grey belt land. The Council accepts that the land is grey belt, and I concur with that view. It is not close to any large built-up area or town whether historic or not.
10. Therefore, the development would utilise grey belt and given the extent of the appeal site, were it to be developed it would not materially affect the ability of all of the remaining Green Belt across the area of the plan from serving all five of the Green Belt purposes in a meaningful way in accordance with the Planning Policy Guidance³.
11. Paragraph 155b requires that there be a demonstrable unmet need for the type of development proposed. I note that while both parties consider that there is a need for charging points, the Council disputes that there is a need in this location, given the other facilities available relatively close by. Nonetheless, that is not the requirement of the Framework. The appellant provides compelling evidence that there is a demonstrable unmet need for charging points in the district. However, there is no substantive evidence before me to suggest that there is demonstrable unmet need for a drive through restaurant. Therefore, the proposal does not accord with paragraph 155b of the Framework and would be inappropriate development in conflict with Policy SP7 of the Plan.
12. I have already considered the impact on openness above.

Character and appearance

13. The appeal site sits within an area of flat or gently undulating pastoral farmland dissected by hedgerows and trees as well as larger areas of trees. The River Trent is close by. The appellants Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (the LVIA) assesses the site as being as ordinary to poor landscape character with the wider landscape being good to ordinary and therefore has a low sensitivity to change. It is true there is nothing remarkable about this landscape, but it does form part of the rural character of the open countryside on this side of the road with little influence from built development visible.
14. The appeal site forms an undeveloped field on the west side of the A34. It is bound by hedge and trees and is surrounded by open countryside. It forms part of the green verdant open countryside in this area contributing to the rural character. Limited development is visible when viewing across the site from the roundabout to the east of the site. I acknowledge the presence of the A34, a busy dual carriageway. However, this does not diminish the essential rural nature of the land beyond, or the verdant nature of this part of the A34 where the built form does not dominate even if the built up area of the Green Belt is growing.
15. Meaford Conservation Area (the CA) covers the southern part of what was historically Meaford Park. Meaford Hall, a grade II* listed building is in the northeastern part of the CA but there is no visibility to the appeal site or any functional or historic link. The remaining small number of buildings, including the lodge to the Hall in the CA are located to the south, alongside the road and unified by a common architecture of nineteenth century Domestic-Revival buildings on the edge of the park. The significance of the CA is therefore drawn from the surviving architecture and features of the buildings and their relationship to open space. Most

³ Paragraph: 008 Reference ID: 64-008-20250225

of the CA is surrounded by open countryside reflecting its original setting, little altered except for the A34 and associated traffic infrastructure.

16. The appeal site is located on the opposite side of the A34. While therefore it is within the setting of the CA it is somewhat divorced from it by the intervening road and associated infrastructure. As such, while it does contribute to an understanding of the rural nature of the CA it does so in a small way especially given that most of the buildings are not particularly visible from the appeal site due to distance and intervening vegetation.
17. The proposal would inevitably change the landscape character of the appeal site and effectively create a large area of hardstanding to accommodate the high number of cars likely to be attracted to the proposal. However, existing hedgerows and trees would be retained and new planting proposed to mitigate the urbanising impact in the landscape. While the appellant suggests limited working hours, it is likely that charging points and a drive through restaurant would be open until late at night if not all through the night. As a result, there would also be lighting and signage and activity which would emphasise the development of the site significantly eroding its rural landscape character.
18. Views of the development from the immediate area would vary. The LVIA shows that mostly the development would be viewed within a strong rural context. However, dependent on the position of the receptor at some points, limited development would also be visible. The appellant's LVIA concludes that from a distance the proposal would have a neutral effect in the long term, and I would agree. The intervening landscape and vegetation would largely mean the development would not be visible in the wider landscape.
19. I note the Council's comments regarding the accuracy of the proposed street elevation. However, even using Views 1 and 2 supplied by the appellant it is evident that the proposal would be visible, and its rural character considerably eroded even incorporating low level development. While I note the appellant's comments regarding the muted nature of the development this could not be reasonably controlled. I also accept that signage would need to be approved by the Council. However, the whole point of signage is to advertise and draw attention to a facility. Consequently this, together with lighting would make the development more prominent. It would therefore have a moderate effect on the local appearance of the area, even with the proposed landscaping.
20. In conclusion, I have found that the proposal would be significantly harmful to landscape character and would have moderately harmful visual impacts. However, due to the distance, intervening vegetation and extent of the rural setting of the CA, with this site forming just one small part of it, I am satisfied it would not harm the setting and hence significance of the CA and therefore would comply with Policy N9 of the Plan regarding heritage assets.
21. Nonetheless for the reasons above, I conclude that the proposal would be harmful to the character and appearance of the area. It would therefore conflict with Policies N1 and N8 of the Plan which seek to ensure proposals are informed by and sympathetic to landscape character and quality and takes account of local character, context and landscape.

Highway safety

22. The charging points are, by definition, only likely to be accessed by cars and therefore there is no concern regarding the ability to safely access these by means other than the car.
23. The Highway Authority is particularly concerned about residents having to cross the A34, a busy dual carriageway, to access the drive through restaurant by foot or bicycle.
24. The appellant proposes an uncontrolled pedestrian crossing which would have a refuge in the centre of the dual carriageway. This is substantiated by reference to the use of data from two other drive through restaurant sites which concluded that the peak hourly demand would be just 9 pedestrians. The threshold for the provision of a traffic signal-controlled pedestrian crossing would be a peak hour flow of 21 pedestrians.
25. As part of the appeal submission the appellants revised their calculations and using just one restaurant in Corby closer to a residential area than the one proposed at the appeal site to a potential for 12-13 pedestrian movements per hour. This would still be below the threshold for a controlled crossing.
26. However, from the evidence before me the residents in Corby would not have to cross a dual carriageway, which if anything, would probably make it more attractive to residents there. Furthermore, most of the residents close to the proposal before me now would need to access the restaurant via an unsurfaced country footpath, a further disincentive to visit.
27. I am satisfied therefore that the figures used are relative comparators and an uncontrolled pedestrian crossing would be suitable, and the independent Road Safety Audit carried out on behalf of the appellant shows it would be safe.
28. However, the proposed pedestrian crossing would be to the north of the appeal site some distance from the restaurant, and I concur with the Council that the desire line is likely to be much closer to both the restaurant and the established residential area close to the roundabout. In my view it is unlikely that residents would walk from the residential area down to the proposed crossing and then back towards the restaurant, but instead would attempt to cross the road near to the roundabout when they reach the road. I note this view is shared by the Highway Authority. I saw at my site visit that this is a busy environment and that attempts to cross the road without a pedestrian crossing, whether controlled or not, would be unsafe.
29. I therefore consider that there would not be suitable access to the appeal site for all users which would result in harm to highway safety for pedestrians and cyclists attempting to access the restaurant. I also note that this would lead to conflict with paragraph 115 of the Framework also bringing it into conflict with paragraph 155c of the Framework regarding inappropriate development in the Green Belt.
30. For the reasons above, I conclude that the proposal would not be suitably accessed by sustainable travel modes leading to harm to highway safety. As a result, there would be conflict with Policy T2 of the Plan and paragraphs 115 and 116 of the Framework which require that development does not materially impair highway safety.

Parking

31. There would be a total of 65 parking spaces divided as 31 EV spaces, 32 standard parking spaces and 2 disabled spaces. I concur with the Council that the EV parking spaces cannot be relied upon to serve the restaurant. It is likely the two facilities would be run independently, and it is not unusual for the EV spaces to be restricted to electric vehicles only. While therefore there may be some shared usage this would be limited to electric or hybrid cars only.
32. The Council's adopted parking standards indicate a requirement for 46 parking spaces for the restaurant. The appellant has supplied analysis using TRICS data which shows that peak parking accumulation associated with fast food restaurants would be 25 vehicles, considering that some vehicles will use the drive through element only.
33. Surveys from three McDonalds sites have also been analysed which show average peak parking demand as Friday 21 vehicles and Saturday 26 vehicles. This evidence has not been disputed by any substantive evidence from the Council. From the evidence before me therefore it seems entirely reasonable that 32 parking spaces are provided for the drive through facility which would cope with the anticipated demand.
34. For the reasons above, I conclude that adequate provision for parking for the proposal would be provided. Therefore, there would be no conflict with Policy T2 or paragraph 112 of the Framework. These require that development must ensure adequate parking by taking account of the predicted traffic generation in relation to a reduction in parking standards.

Other Considerations

35. The proposal would be inappropriate development in the Green Belt and would have a moderate effect on openness. The Framework states that substantial weight should be given to any harm to the Green Belt including harm to the openness.
36. The proposal would also cause harm to the character and appearance of the area which attracts significant weight.
37. The proposal would provide environmental benefits through the provision of charging facilities, to improve the infrastructure for electric cars leading to a low carbon economy. Furthermore, there would be the creation of jobs and economic benefits during construction. These are significant considerations but would not be sufficient to clearly outweigh the harm to the Green Belt by inappropriateness and the other harm I have identified. Consequently, the very special circumstances necessary to justify the development do not exist.

Conclusion

38. The proposal would be in conflict with the development plan as a whole and the considerations I have identified above, including the Framework, would not outweigh that conflict. For the reasons given, the appeal is dismissed.

Zoe Raygen

INSPECTOR