



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 16 June 2025 by E Street BSc (Hons) MSc

Decision by John Morrison BA (Hons) MSc MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 14 JULY 2025

Appeal Ref: APP/B1930/W/25/3361812

St Columbas College, Playing Fields At, King Harry Lane, St Albans, Hertfordshire AL3 4AW

- 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 St Columbas College against the decision of St Albans City Council.
 - The application Ref is 5/24/1097.
 - The development proposed is addition of pathway lighting to serve existing access footpath.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Appeal Procedure

2. The site visit was undertaken by a representative of the Inspector whose recommendation is set out below and to which the Inspector has had regard before deciding the appeal.

Main Issues

3. The main issues are: a) whether the proposal would be inappropriate in the Green Belt b) the effect of the proposal on the openness of the Green Belt; c) whether the proposed development would preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the St Albans Conservation Area (CA); and d) whether any harm by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm, would be clearly outweighed by other considerations, so as to amount to the very special circumstances necessary to justify the proposal.

Reasons for the Recommendation

Inappropriate Development

4. Despite being of some age, Policy 1 of the St Albans District Local Plan Review 1994 (LP) is broadly consistent with the approach of the National Planning Policy Framework 2024 (the Framework) insofar as there being exceptions to the general presumption against new buildings in the Green Belt. The latter has a broader list of exceptions, but the LP also sets out that very special circumstances must prevail for identified development to be granted planning permission. A building can include any structure or erection, and any part of a building, as so defined. The appeal scheme would therefore be, for general planning and Green Belt purposes, a building.
5. Paragraph 154(b) of the Framework explains that the provision of appropriate facilities (in connection with the existing use of land or a change of use), including

buildings for outdoor sport, outdoor recreation might not be inappropriate development in the Green Belt. The pathway is to facilitate access between the school and the car park with some access to sport facilities. The lights are to help guide but are not essential for or in and of themselves facilities and/or buildings for outdoor sport or recreation. Moreover, the existing sport facilities would still independently work without the proposal and have been doing so.

6. Taking this and the above in account, the proposal would not meet any of the exceptions laid out in the Framework or Policy 1. It would thus be inappropriate development in the Green Belt. This would be harmful by definition.

Openness

7. Openness is an essential characteristic of the Green Belt. Such has a visual and spatial aspect. The latter can be taken to mean the absence of built form. The proposed lighting poles would be modest in their land take and slim by their profile. They would be relatively well screened by mature trees, hedgerow and would sit within the built context of the school. Thus, their effect upon the visual aspect of the Green Belt's openness would be very limited. Notwithstanding this, the introduction of them in number and in a location where there was previously no development would have an unavoidable, albeit moderate, reducing effect on the spatial aspect of the openness of the Green Belt. This would conflict with the purposes of the Green Belt, in its openness and permanence, as referred to by Policy 1 and section 13 of the Framework.

Conservation Area

8. The appeal site is situated on the southern boundary of the CA in which the proposed lighting is to line a footpath which is close to the boundary of the school. The defining features of the area are the number and scale of open spaces and mature trees. Thus, reinforcing a pleasant verdant character that contributes positively to the significance of the CA.
9. The introduction of the lighting poles would be equidistantly spaced along the pathway at a matching height. This along with their siting against the mature trees and verdant setting would sit comfortably given both their slim profile and association with the built form of the school. They would only be marginally viewed outside of the school curtilage and would not be an unusual feature within the CA. Moreover, their narrow form and height would still allow views in and out of the site even with the land level changes and would not detract from the historic nature of the wider street scene.
10. Section 72 (1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 states special attention shall be paid to the desirability of preserving or enhancing. Nationally speaking, paragraph 212 of the Framework places emphasis on great weight being given to an asset's conservation. Given the above assessment, the proposal would preserve both the character and appearance of the CA. It would therefore comply with the aims of section 16 of the Framework which ensures conservation of the historic environment, amongst other things.

Other Considerations

11. The proposed development intends to resolve a health and safety concern arising from inadequate lighting along the access pathway during the darker months of the

year. The increased demand for usage of the facilities by both members of the public and the school have led to more stringent requirements. The documented reasons for responding to this need appear to be limited mainly to children missing their bus rather than any substantive evidence of near falls.

12. Further, and whilst I appreciate concessions have been made to minimise light spillage, I remain to be convinced of the need for the height of the stands and whether and why a smaller, considerably less invasive, solution could not be explored. Only one potential alternative has been provided and discounted in the form of bollard lighting. However, it appears that the construction basis for both schemes are similar, and I am unsure on how it would be a challenging implementation.
13. I am unaware of the circumstances that prevailed at the time of the installation of other nearby poles nor the relevant guidance and policy. Even though the lights are taller than this scheme, I am not convinced that the presence of such would lead me to concluding any differently on this proposal based on a perceived precedent. In addition, concerns over the Council's handling of the planning application are matters for the main parties to resolve outside of the planning process. For these and the above reasons, I ascribe moderate weight to these matters.

Conclusion and Recommendation

14. The proposal would result in inappropriate development within the Green Belt. They would also reduce the Green Belt's openness. These harms are worthy of substantial weight as per the direction of the Framework. For the reasons I have explained, the other considerations would not be sufficient to clearly outweigh the harms I have found. Such that the very special circumstances needed to justify the proposal do not exist. My findings on the effect of the proposed development on the CA would amount to a lack of harm, which would be a neutral matter.
15. For the reasons given above the appeal scheme would not comply with the development plan and I have been given no compelling reason, taking into account other material considerations advanced, to deviate therefrom. I therefore recommend that the appeal should be dismissed.

E Street

APPEAL PLANNING OFFICER

Inspector's Decision

16. I have considered all the submitted evidence and my representative's report and on that basis the appeal is dismissed.

John Morrison

INSPECTOR