



Appeal Decision

Hearing held on 24 June 2025

Site visit made on 24 June 2025

by Graham Wraight BA(Hons) MSc MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 29 July 2025

Appeal Ref: APP/P2935/W/25/3364076

Whitehouse Farm, Whitehouse Farm Centre, Stannington, Northumberland NE61 6AW

- 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 & Mrs Hogarty against the decision of Northumberland County Council.
 - The application Ref is 23/01554/FUL.
 - The development proposed is the Siting of 15 no. holiday lodges and 33 no. holiday chalets with reception; change of use from boiler room to 5-bedroom managers dwelling (C3 use); development of entrance kiosk and cafe/picnic barn link.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. The entrance kiosk and café/picnic barn link which form part of the appeal proposal now have the benefit of separate planning permissions. The Council also does not raise objection to the principle of the proposed change of use of the boiler room to a manager's dwelling. They further consider that 24 of the lodge/chalets (types B and C) would not be permanent structures and would be acceptable in principle in the open countryside by virtue of Policy ECN 15(f) of the Northumberland Local Plan 2022 (LP). In my determination of the appeal, I have therefore focussed on the areas which remain in dispute.

Main Issues

3. The main issues are:
 - i) Whether the proposal would be inappropriate development in the Green Belt having regard to the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) and relevant development plan policies;
 - ii) Whether the proposal would accord with relevant development plan policies relating to visitor accommodation;
 - iii) The effect of the proposal on protected species and habitats.

Reasons

Whether inappropriate development

Paragraph 155a)

Purpose a) - to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas.

4. The nearest large built-up area is that of Morpeth. However, the appeal site could not be described as being either adjacent to or near to that settlement, given the substantial physical distance between the two. Applying the Planning Policy Guidance¹ (PPG), the appeal site makes no contribution to this purpose.

Purpose b) - to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another

5. The two towns identified with respect to this purpose are Morpeth and Ponteland, the latter of which is said to be approximately 8 miles away from the appeal site. Although geographically the appeal site can be said to fall in between those two towns, there is a very substantial physical distance between the two. Furthermore, the appeal site forms only a very small part of this gap, without making a contribution to visual separation. Its contribution to this purpose is therefore weak.

Purpose d) - to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns

6. The appeal site does not form part of the setting of Morpeth, due to its physical distance, with there being no visual, physical or experiential connection between what is proposed and the historic aspects of the town. Consequently, the appeal site makes no contribution to this purpose.

Purposes (taken together) of the remaining Green Belt across the area of the plan

7. The relatively small scale of the proposal and its positioning near to existing buildings at Whitehouse Farm mean that the development would not fundamentally undermine the purposes of the remaining Green Belt across the area of the development plan.

Paragraph 155b) - Unmet need

8. Paragraph 155b) requires that there is a demonstrable unmet need for the type of development proposed. There was discussion at the hearing as to whether the type of development should be taken as being visitor accommodation, or whether it should be taken more specifically as holiday lodges/chalets. There is nothing definitive in the Framework which resolves that question, but where footnote 56 of the Framework refers to housing it refers to housing in a broad sense. It is therefore reasonable to mirror that approach, which in this instance means that the type of development proposed is visitor accommodation.
9. The Destination Management Plan for Northumberland 2022-2032 (DMP) identifies that the provision of additional quality, year-round accommodation is needed and that there is a need to stimulate demand over the traditional 'closed' winter season. The consultation response of Visit Northumberland (VN) is consistent with this. In conclusion, I am satisfied that there is an unmet need for the type of development proposed, that being visitor accommodation in broad terms.

¹ Paragraph: 005 Reference ID: 64-005-20250225

Paragraph 155c) - Whether in a sustainable location

10. Paragraph 155c) requires that the development would be in a sustainable location, with particular reference to paragraphs 110 and 115 of the Framework. There is a bus service which runs to Whitehouse Farm Centre from Morpeth, and I acknowledge that the Highway Authority considered this to provide a realistic alternative to a private motor car in order for visitors to reach the site. This would also provide a viable option for visitors to access other transport forms available in Morpeth along with the services and facilities it offers. A welcome pack would be provided to visitors to maximise their awareness of sustainable transport and local links.
11. There is less scope for the use of cycles to access services and facilities, and it does not appear feasible to access those on foot. Nonetheless, there is potential for at least some linking of trips in terms of visitors to the Whitehouse Farm Centre and this, alongside the bus provision, means that the appeal site is in a sustainable location.

Paragraph 155d) - Golden Rules

12. The Golden Rules do not apply to the appeal proposal, as it is not a major development involving the provision of housing.

Conclusion on whether inappropriate development

13. The proposal would accord with all of the relevant parts of paragraph 155 of the Framework. As such, the proposal would not be inappropriate development in the Green Belt. It would also accord with Policy STP 8 of the LP, which is the primary strategic development plan policy relating to Green Belt matters, and which refers back to national planning policy when considering whether development is inappropriate or not.
14. Given that the proposal would not be inappropriate, it is not necessary to consider the impact that would arise on openness and in terms of the other purposes of the Green Belt.

Visitor accommodation

15. The Council considers that lodge/chalet type A is a permanent structure and thus falls under Criterion (d) of Policy ECN 15 of the LP. This relates to the remaining 24 of the 48 lodge/chalets proposed.
16. In my consideration of Green Belt matters I have found there to be a demonstrable need for visitor accommodation in Northumberland. That is at a broad, County wide level. The development plan sets out a strategic approach to where, more specifically, new permanent visitor accommodation should be located within the County. When such development is proposed in the open countryside, there is a more onerous test to meet than there simply being a need for visitor accommodation. Criterion (d)(i) of Policy ECN 15 of the LP requires new permanent buildings for visitor accommodation in the open countryside to demonstrably improve and diversify the County's tourist offer and/or clearly provide necessary accommodation along an established tourist route.
17. The DMP touches on the current accommodation offer in Northumberland, referring to a good spread of accommodation types and to a wealth of products

and experiences to meet the needs, demands and interests of different target markets. As noted above, there is a particular focus on the need to develop year-round visiting and to maintain demand in the off season. The DMP does not identify what accommodation is required and where, but it refers to a need to diversify and adapt the tourism offer to ensure new audiences are attracted and retained. The first strand of Policy ECN 15(d)(i) of the LP is consistent with these aims.

18. The evidence as to whether what is proposed would demonstrably improve and diversify the County's tourist offer does not extend much beyond that which was anecdotally offered at the hearing. I acknowledge that there is support from VN and that they refer to the proposal as diversifying the offer, but their comments do not qualify why this would be the case or why the proposed accommodation would be more attractive out of season than that which already exists elsewhere. There is support too from the Campaign for Rural England, but their comments also do not assist in addressing the particular policy matter which arises.
19. The key to meeting the requirement of the first strand of Policy ECN 15(d)(i) is to show that the proposal would demonstrably both improve and diversify the County's tourist offer. This is a specific requirement for visitor accommodation in the open countryside and does not apply to other locations such as main towns and service centres. It is not enough for a proposal in the open countryside just to increase the number of bed spaces or offer the potential for more overnight stays. Without any details as to what the baseline is at the present time, it is simply not possible to conclude that there would be any such improvement or diversification. For example, if lodges/chalets are already present in the County in abundance, adding more might not result in an improvement and diversification of the offer, or address the underlying reasons why people are not visiting in the off season. The first strand of Policy ECN 15(d)(i) is therefore not met by the submissions that have been made.
20. The second strand of the policy refers to necessary accommodation along an established tourist route. There is no definition of a tourist route within the policy itself, although the accompanying text states that *small scale permanent accommodation may be needed - e.g. to serve the long-distance walking and cycle routes mentioned above*. Whilst this is not a closed list, it implies some kind of established route that a tourist would take whilst visiting Northumberland, such as the Hadrian's Wall path which is referred to elsewhere in the text. I am not persuaded that the Whitehouse Farm Centre is on a tourist route because it is one attraction of several that a tourist might visit whilst they are in the area. The second strand of ECN 15(d)(i) is therefore also not met. In conclusion, the proposal would not accord with Policy ECN 15(d)(i) of the LP.

Species and habitats

21. The proposed visitor accommodation on the northern part of the appeal site would sit in a clearing between two areas of mature lowland mixed deciduous woodland. The proposed visitor accommodation on the southern part of the appeal site would be on an area of open mosaic habitats on previously developed land. Both habitat types are listed as habitats of principal importance in England under Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (as amended). Policy ENV 2 of the LP is consistent with the Framework in its approach to development

that would cause significant harm to biodiversity, setting out that if the harm cannot be avoided, it should be adequately mitigated or, as a last resort, compensated for.

22. In terms of the concern about the physical impact on the woodland to the north and works to the boiler house, access to visitors could be restricted and a lighting scheme subject to a planning condition. However, there is considerable uncertainty as to the impact in terms of the removal of trees to facilitate the works that would be needed, including matters related to the positioning of the proposed lodges/chalets and the provision of sustainable drainage. Whilst an amended drainage plan was provided with the appeal, the Tree Survey and Ecological Impact Assessment were not updated to reflect the changes to the scheme. Green roofs may help to mitigate the impacts but, as detailed designs are not available, it is not demonstrated to what extent they would contribute. The Tree Survey highlights trees with potential for bat roosts in the adjacent woodland and the impact on bats, including from the degrading of functionally linked habitat as a result of the construction of the accommodation, is also unclear.
23. With regard to the proposed development to the south, the Council's concerns about the conflict between the location of the proposed open mosaic habitat provision around the lodges/chalets and the needs of visitors are well founded. There are likely to be competing interests in terms of the use of these areas and it would not be feasible to fence the areas off entirely in order to prevent visitors from using them as amenity space. I share the concern too that the aesthetics of these areas may not be compatible with those expectations for a holiday location. It is likely that two larger areas of open mosaic habitat would also need to be enclosed, and access prevented, leaving limited on site outdoor space that is not subject to woodland cover. Again, it is not certain as to what degree the proposed green roofs could contribute to the mitigation of the loss of habitat that would result.
24. Discussion took place at the hearing as to whether these matters could satisfactorily be addressed by way of planning conditions. However, with regard to the north part of the site, the necessary measures could extend to a re-plan of the layout being required. There may also be a conflict in terms of the habitat considerations and drainage considerations, with the Lead Local Flood Authority noting the ecology concerns but advising that the swales must be retained. It is not clear if mitigation can be achieved on the southern part of the site. It cannot therefore be concluded on the basis of the information that has been provided that the measures proposed would adequately mitigate against the impact of the development. There is, as a result, a real likelihood that it would not be possible to meet with the requirements and thus discharge them. Such conditions would therefore not meet the tests set out in paragraph 57 of the Framework.
25. In conclusion, the proposal would result in significant harm to priority habitats and potentially to priority species. It has not been demonstrated that adverse impacts would be adequately mitigated, or compensated, for. Consequently, the proposal fails to accord with Policy ENV 2 of the LP.

Other Considerations

26. The Economic Footprint Report sets out a number of benefits of the proposal, which align with identification in the Northumberland Economic Strategy 2019-2024 of tourism and culture as a major sector opportunity to deliver industrial growth. This includes tourism impacts including additional overnight stays and

increased visitor spending, and a number of economic benefits during construction and once the proposal is operational. There would be jobs created at all of those stages. Given the scale of the proposal those benefits would be considerable, albeit other than linked trips to the farm centre they are not necessarily site dependant and would likely to be able to be equally achieved elsewhere. Nonetheless, they carry significant weight in support of the proposal.

27. The proposal could support the continued growth of the Whitehouse Farm Centre, although it was confirmed at the hearing that the future viability of the centre does not depend on the proposed development being permitted. I acknowledge that the centre works with education establishments, and it is possible that some of the proceeds from the proposal might be used to strengthen this provision. The scheme would be visually acceptable and appropriate for its surroundings and would seek to be sustainable and energy efficient. These are matters which each carry moderate weight in favour of the proposal.

Planning Balance and Conclusion

28. The proposal would not be inappropriate development in the Green Belt. However, 24 of the 48 lodges would be contrary to Policy ENV 15 as they would not satisfy either of the requirements of criterion (d)(i). Furthermore, the proposal does not demonstrate that there would be adequate mitigation, or compensation, against the significant harm that would be caused to habitats and species of principal importance, as is a requirement of Policy ENV 2 of the LP. The proposal would, therefore, fail to accord with the development plan, taken as a whole.
29. There would be a number of benefits of the proposal, and these carry significant and moderate weight in its favour. However, those benefits would not outweigh the failure to accord with the development plan. Consequently, I find that the other considerations in this case do not indicate that a determination should be made otherwise than in accordance with the development plan. Therefore, the appeal should be dismissed.

Graham Wraight

INSPECTOR

APPEARANCES

FOR THE APPELLANT:

Alastair Willis – Planning Director, Lichfields

Steve Miller – Project Architect

FOR THE LOCAL PLANNING AUTHORITY:

Tamsin Wood – Principal Planning Officer for the South East

Judith Murphy – Manager of the South East team

Nadine Rolls – County Ecologist

INTERESTED PARTIES:

Tony Carter – Planning Agent, on behalf of Stannington Parish Council and objectors

David Metcalfe – on behalf of local residents

Janice Stokes – local resident

Michael Air – local resident