



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 30 June 2025

by **C Coles MRTPI**

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 04 AUGUST 2025

Appeal Ref: APP/D3830/W/25/3362137

**St John The Evangelist Church, Church Road, Copthorne, West Sussex
RH10 3RD**

- 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 John Wells of The Church of St John the Evangelist, Copthorne against the decision of Mid Sussex District Council.
 - The application Ref is DM/24/1742.
 - The development proposed is the installation of a 56 panel solar photovoltaic array on the south facing roof.
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Decision

1. The appeal is allowed and planning permission is granted for the installation of a 56 panel solar photovoltaic array on the south facing roof at St John The Evangelist Church, Church Road, Copthorne, West Sussex RH10 3RD in accordance with the terms of the application Ref DM/24/1742, subject to the following conditions:
 - 1) The development hereby permitted shall begin not later than three years from the date of this decision.
 - 2) The development hereby permitted shall be carried out in accordance with drawing Nos Photographs (17.07.24) (JFW Photomontage views from Church Road 080724 v 1.0) (JFW Roof Plan photomontage 080724 v 1.0), Proposed Elevations (JFW Eastern Elevation 080724 v 1.0), Location Plan (17.07.24), Block Plan (17.07.24), Other (JFW Proposed Solar Panel Module 080724), Other (JFW Panel Dets 080724 v 1.0), Existing Roof Plan (JFW Roof Plan Current 080724 v 1.0), Proposed Roof Plan (JFW Roof Plan Proposed 080724 v 1.0).
 - 3) The solar panels shall be Meyer Burger Black panels with black frames, as set out in Annexe Two of 'Statement of case – Appeal against refusal – DM/24/1742'.

Preliminary Matters

2. The appellant confirmed the appeal should be made in the name of The Church of St John the Evangelist, Copthorne.
3. The Council altered the description of the development during the consideration of the application to read 'Proposed installation of a 56 panel solar photovoltaic array on the south facing roof'. This is a more concise description of the proposal and removes superfluous text from that set out in the application form. I have taken the description above and I am satisfied that the description adequately describes the

proposal. The cases of the main parties would not be prejudiced by the use of the above description and the appeal has been determined accordingly.

Main Issue

4. The effect of the proposal on:

- The heritage significance of St John the Evangelist Church as a Non-Designated Heritage Asset (NDHA) and the character and appearance of the area.

Reasons

5. St John the Evangelist Church (the appeal building) is a north facing stone building with a clay tiled roof set in an elevated position. There is a church yard surrounding the building, a community building to the north and residential properties to the south, east and west. Policy CNP7 of the Copthorne Neighbourhood Plan 2021-2031 (the Neighbourhood Plan) lists Parish Heritage Assets and this includes the Church of St John the Evangelist. Consequently, the appeal building should be considered a NDHA.
6. Paragraph 216 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) requires the effect of an application on the significance of a NDHA to be taken into account in determining the application. In weighing applications that directly or indirectly affect NDHA's, a balanced judgement will be required having regard to the scale of any harm or loss and the significance of the heritage asset.
7. The heritage significance of the appeal site lies externally in its mid-Victorian origins, being one of the earliest surviving buildings at the heart of Copthorne Village and reflecting the vernacular context in its construction materials. Large aspects of the interior of the building also contribute to the significance of the appeal building. The associated graveyard and Lych Gate which also serves as a war memorial combine to merit the inclusion of the appeal site as a NDHA.
8. The proposed development would be black in colour and sited on a large proportion of the south facing roofslope of the appeal building. The existing roof is clay tiled with the tiles varying in shade from red to dark brown, with the uppermost roofslope having the darker shade of tile.
9. The southern elevation is prominent from Church Road where open views across the appeal site grounds towards the Church can be experienced. It is acknowledged that the southern roofslope is currently unbroken, however, the colour variation within the clay tiles gives a non-uniform appearance to the roofslope which has the effect of breaking up the mass of the roof.
10. Some views of the proposed solar photovoltaic array would be partially obscured in the summer months from tree foliage; however, the proposal would generally be visible within the Church Road Street scene. Despite this, solar panels are commonplace on residential and commercial buildings within street scenes and are becoming increasingly so and therefore are not necessarily an uncharacteristic feature in themselves.
11. The proposal would not provide a direct match in colour or texture to the existing roof covering. However, I do not consider the contrast with the tiles, especially on the upper roof slope which are a darker colour would amount to a feature that

would draw the eye, given the size and prominence of the building in its surroundings.

12. The proposal would be visible from the surrounding area and introduce a new material to the NDHA. However, in my opinion the proposal would not harm the architectural interest of the appeal site, given the significance of the site as a NDHA lies largely in it being an example of a mid-Victorian church, and one of the earliest surviving buildings at the heart of Copthorne Village, neither of which would change. The proposal would show an evolution of the building using materials to meet modern needs. Although a permanent permission is sought, the proposal would be removable at the end of its useful life without damaging the existing roof which would remain intact and in situ.
13. Para 135 of the Framework requires development to be sympathetic to local character and history while not discouraging appropriate innovation or change. The proposal would be an example of appropriate innovation which would respect the character of the building by working with the existing elevations and not altering the shape, scale or overall appearance of the building whilst allowing the building to adapt and change to meet modern demands and continue to serve the community.
14. Paragraph 167 of the Framework requires local planning authorities (LPA) to give significant weight to the need to support energy efficiency and low carbon heating improvements to existing buildings, which must be weighed alongside conserving and enhancing the historic environment.
15. Paragraph 168 of the Framework states LPA's should not require applicants to demonstrate the overall need for renewable or low carbon energy and give significant weight to the benefits associated with renewable and low carbon energy generation and recognise that small-scale and community-led projects provide a valuable contribution to cutting greenhouse gas emissions.
16. The LPA required more detail on alternative proposals for either siting the proposal on a different building or to a whole building approach to improving the energy efficiency of the appeal site which may have less effect on the NDHA.
17. The intention of the appellant is to enable the appeal site to reduce its carbon footprint and to become net zero. The appellant has outlined how various measures such as replacing the existing suspended floor structure with a heavily insulated structure beneath a wet underfloor heating system, an air-source heat pump, the installation of the proposal and replacing all light sources with LED lights will enable the appeal site to work towards net zero.
18. The appellant has also explained why the proposal would not be effective on the adjacent HUB building due to its orientation, shading and the lack of roof space on the HUB roof. Annexe 5 of the appellants Statement of Case also outlines the process the appellant has gone through in considering how to reach net zero on the appeal site which inevitably involves a number of different measures.
19. I consider the process undertaken by the appellant to be sufficient to justify the proposed scheme. Whilst the whole building approach does provide some uncertainty as to what measures will eventually be required, it is clear the appellant has considered the most viable options for the appeal site and is

progressing with implementation. It is likely that a number of factors would be involved in deciding the final scheme which may be outside the appellant's control.

20. The significant weight given to the need to support energy efficiency must be balanced against the scale of any harm to the significance of the heritage asset. However, in this case, I have not identified harm to the significance of the heritage asset as the key features that contribute towards the significance of the building would not be adversely affected as a result of the proposal.
21. In coming to this judgement, I have very carefully considered the case made by the Council and in particular the advice of the Council's Conservation Officer, including the background analysis that led to her recommendation. However, for the reasons explained above, I consider that the solar arrays, while visible and a change to that part of the building, would not be harmful to the heritage significance of the building. In particular, I am satisfied that the scheme should be supported, in accordance with Policy CNP7 of the Neighbourhood Plan, because this Parish Heritage Asset would be protected.
22. In conclusion, the proposal would not adversely affect the heritage significance of the NDHA or the character and appearance of the area and would comply with Policies DP26 and DP34 of the Mid Sussex District Plan 2014-2031 and Policies CNP1, CNP7 and CNP11 of the Neighbourhood Plan as well as the relevant provisions in the Framework. Taken as a whole, these policies seek to ensure proposals should reinforce the positive aspects of the character area, not cause unacceptable harm to the amenity of existing and future occupants both on site and nearby and that a balanced judgement is reached with respect to the scale of any harm to the significance of the heritage asset and the significant weight given to the need to support energy efficiency.

Other Matters

23. I note the concern raised regarding solar reflection onto neighbouring properties. The panels have been designed not to reflect light but to absorb it to be as efficient as possible and are coated with an antireflective coating. The relationship of the proposal with neighbouring properties is also suitably distanced and angled to ensure that even if a degree of solar reflection were to take place, this would not have a harmful impact on the neighbouring properties.

Conditions

24. In the interests of clarity, it has been necessary to specify the time limit for the proposal, the plans against which the appeal was determined and the final panel choice.

Conclusion

25. The proposal would comply with the development plan when considered as a whole and material considerations do not indicate that a decision should be made otherwise. Accordingly, the appeal should be allowed.

C Coles

INSPECTOR