



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 22 July 2025

by M J Francis BA (Hons) MA MSc MCIfA

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 16 September 2025

Appeal Ref: APP/X1355/W/25/3363413

Woodside Lodge Caravan Site, Durham Road, Wheatley Hill, Durham DH6 3LJ

- 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 and Mrs. Kelsey against the decision of Durham County Council.
 - The application Ref is DM/23/03654/FPA.
 - The development proposed is change of use of land to caravan/motorhome touring site at Woodside Lodge Caravan site.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. The appeal form describes the development as retrospective. However, based on the proposed plans, only some of the development has been implemented.
3. An amended plan, Appendix 1, showing proposed highway and access works has been submitted with the appeal. Whilst the appeal process should not be used to evolve a scheme to overcome a Council's reason for refusal, in this instance the Council and Highway Authority has seen and commented on the plan. Therefore, applying the principles established by 'Holborn'¹, the Council will not be prejudiced. Consequently, for the avoidance of doubt, I have based my decision on the proposed plans and the plan at Appendix 1.
4. Notwithstanding this proposal, the evidence states that the site has, since 2021, been certified by the Camping and Caravan Club for use for 5 caravans and 10 tents. However, the certificate submitted with the evidence expired on 29 February 2024.
5. The National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) was revised in December 2024, which the main parties have referred to. The Framework, has not, however, raised any new matters which are determinative to this appeal.

Main Issues

6. The main issues are:
 - the effect of the proposal on highway safety;
 - whether the site is suitable for the proposed development having regard to its accessibility;

¹ Holborn Studios Ltd v The Council of the London Borough of Hackney [2017] EWHC 2823 (Admin)

- the effect of the proposal on the character and appearance of the landscape; and
- whether it satisfies biodiversity net gain (BNG).

Reasons

Highway safety

7. The appeal site is next to the A181 where a modified field access has been used to enter and exit the existing caravan site. The proposed development would utilise and alter this access point.
8. The site has previously operated with 15 existing pitches and 9 unauthorised pitches, and according to the appellants has not caused any highway safety issues. The proposal would increase the number of users to 25 pitches for caravans and motor homes and 10 tents, resulting in 35 pitches. The appellants consider that this increase in numbers would not significantly alter the existing vehicle movements at the site, and numbers could be agreed and conditioned.
9. However, planning permission has never been granted for the use of the existing access to the caravan and camping site. Additionally, whilst the appellants refer to most vehicle movements into and out of the site being at off-peak times, the proposal would involve the movement of long and often slow-moving vehicles when manoeuvring into and out of the site.
10. Although the appellants state that the main use of the site is from April and May through to September, I noted, from the site notice on the gate, that it is open all year round. No substantive evidence of the occupancy rate has been provided, although the appellants refer to the site being popular and having to turn away caravans and motorhomes during high season. I visited in July and during the week, and there was only one caravan pitch that was occupied, with other caravans appearing to be in temporary storage.
11. The adjoining A181 links the A1(M) and the A19, therefore providing an important east-west link from the coast to Durham and beyond. This, in the vicinity of the site, has one lane in each direction and a speed limit of 60mph. The traffic flow along this road, based on the updated figures from the Council, is 18,500 vehicles per day. I noticed that the stretch of road from the roundabout west of Wheatley Hill, to shortly after the proposed site, has hatching in the centre of the road. Immediately after the proposed site, going in an easterly direction, there is no hatching.
12. The Council refer to there being a poor accident record along the road, although no substantive evidence of this has been provided. I could see, however, that it is relatively straight. The Durham Constabulary Crime Prevention Unit has commented that it is a known high-speed road where overtaking is not uncommon. The Council has defined it as an overtaking stretch of road, which has been disputed by the appellants as this is not a specific designation.
13. For the site to provide a safe access for the proposed use, modifications to the access point, including a right turn, would be needed. Such a layout has been provided by the appellants in appendix 1. Design Manual for Roads and Bridges (DMRB) states that a new priority junction should not be provided on an overtaking section of a high-speed road where overtaking sections are limited. However,

based on the width of the road and the markings, and what I saw, vehicles should not be overtaking close to the site.

14. Despite this, there is an almost constant flow of traffic. As a caravan and camping touring site, visitors arriving would be unfamiliar with the site and the road conditions. Moreover, the position of the site is not clearly visible. Whilst I saw there were two flags near the entrance, neither of them referenced a caravan site, and I saw only a small sign, whilst walking along the verge, which was partially hidden by plants growing around it. There is also another access point that has been created close to the proposed one. Therefore, there is limited substantive evidence as to how the visibility of the site would be improved so that the drivers of vehicles, particularly when entering the site, would not affect the safety of other users of the highway.
15. Whilst the appellants have designed an enhanced road junction layout, which they consider would provide safe access, I am mindful that the local highway authority consider that the proposal would have a severe impact on highway safety. Therefore, based on what I saw, and the speed and numbers of vehicles passing the site, I believe that the proposal would result in a conflict between users of the highway in this location.
16. I therefore conclude that the proposal would affect highway safety. It would conflict with Policies 10 and 21 of the Durham Local Plan, 2020, (DLP) which collectively, and in part, requires vehicular transport generated by development in the countryside to not prejudice highway safety.

Accessibility

17. The site is within driving distance of the A1(M) and Durham City. According to the appellant there are three regular bus services along the A181 with the nearest bus stop at Wingate Lane, about half a mile away. These services run between Durham and Sunderland and Durham and Hartlepool. However, to access the bus service, visitors would have to walk along the side of the A181, some of which has no footpath. This, at the time I was visiting the site, had a constant stream of vehicles.
18. Whilst there may be adequate room on the grass verge for visitors to walk, without a properly defined and well-lit path, it is unlikely that visitors would use it, particularly when vehicles are passing at speed. The appellants have referred to providing a footpath to the west as part of revised highway works, however, there is limited substantive evidence as to whether this would be acceptable on highway land, and, because of the distances to other services and transport options, whether visitors staying at the site would use it.
19. A petrol filling station and convenience store, about 550m from the site, are referred to by the appellants. However, when I visited, it was closed, with fencing around the site and construction work taking place. I have not been provided with any evidence as to whether the site will re-open. Whilst the settlements of Wheatley Hill and Wingate may have several services, details of these are not contained within the evidence, and these would, because of the location of the site and the road conditions, need to be accessed by car.
20. Policy 10 of the DLP requires all development in the countryside to accord with all other relevant development plan policies and not be solely reliant upon

unsustainable modes of transport. Otherwise, it must provide opportunities to make a location more sustainable. As the site is for caravans and motorhomes, as well as tents, most visitors would be accessing the site by private vehicle. Although some may only stay on the site for one or two nights, others may stay longer and wish to access other attractions and facilities in the area utilising public transport. However, the distance to the nearest bus stop, and the lack of a footpath on the roadside where the caravan park is located, would not encourage visitors to do so.

21. Therefore, I conclude that the site is not suitable for the proposed development having regard to its accessibility. It would conflict with those parts of DLP Policy 10, as set out above, in addition to DLP Policy 21, which requires all development to deliver sustainable transport.

Character and appearance

22. The site is within the open countryside in a designated Area of Higher Landscape Value (AHLV). The adjacent road has wide verges either side and opposite the site is a woodland plantation. To the rear, beyond agricultural fields, is a denser area of woodland.
23. The site is surrounded by wooden fencing, with a high hedgerow growing at the front. Whilst the site is relatively level, there is a slight fall towards the rear boundary fence. Hardcore has been laid to create an internal access track. This provides a circular route around the site, and access to the individual plots for the caravans and motorhomes, also surfaced with hardcore. The central area is currently under grass with a play area, although further pitches would be constructed within this area.
24. When I visited the site, it was well screened from the A181, with a dense and mature hedgerow along the front. Viewed externally, apart from two flag poles and a small sign in the verge, the site is not prominent. However, since the aerial photograph of the site shown in the appeal statement was taken, other fenced areas and caravans have been placed close to the site. This is creating ribbon development along the road.
25. The site is generally open in character with a large, grassed area in the centre, however, in the corner of the site there is a compound, referred to as storage space on the proposed plan, which contains loose boxes, lighting, machinery and other paraphernalia. This is set against a backdrop of metal containers which are located outside the site. Additionally, there is a compound on an extensive area of hardcore, within the site and close to the entrance, where a caravan is used for an office and reception. This also contains a large metal container, not shown on the plan. These elements urbanise the site, and their appearance harms the rural character of this location.
26. Along the northern boundary, there are two existing toilet and shower blocks in mobile buildings, and a storage building, adapted from a container. The appellants have suggested that different cladding options could be used on these buildings to make them acceptable, which could be subject to a condition. These structures are, however, rectangular in form and low in height. As the land slopes towards the rear of the site, they are not prominent and appear recessive against the background of the woodland to the rear.

27. The parties disagree as to how much of the hedgerow would need to be removed to provide a new access layout. If a large stretch was removed, this would significantly change the appearance of the site and its surroundings, as it would make the site more visually prominent and erode the rural character of the surrounding landscape. Even if this was more limited, any new planting, which could be covered by a suitable condition, would take time to establish. However, notwithstanding any requirements for the removal of parts of the hedgerow, the proposed development does, because of general clutter and storage within the site, result in some limited harm to the appearance of the area.
28. I therefore conclude that the proposal would harm the character and appearance of the landscape. It would conflict with DLP Policy 8 that requires proposals for new and existing sites for camping and caravanning to meet several criteria, which includes being appropriate to the scale and character of the area and respecting the character of the countryside.
29. Furthermore, DLP Policies 10 and 29 requires, amongst other criteria, that new development in the countryside should not contribute to ribbon development or give rise to unacceptable harm to the intrinsic character of the countryside. In addition, Policy 39 states that development affecting areas of AHLV will only be permitted where it conserves, and where appropriate enhances, the special qualities of the landscape, unless the benefits of development in that location clearly outweigh the harm.

Biodiversity Net Gain

30. The evidence includes a Preliminary Ecological Appraisal² (PEA) and a BNG Assessment – Feasibility Stage³. Whilst mandatory BNG is not required for those works that have been undertaken, BNG would be required for any access and highway improvements.
31. The biodiversity assessment outlined in option 1, including tree planting and enhancement of grassland, would result in a BNG gain of 10.7%. However, this does not include any potential loss of the hedgerow at the front, although I did see that a new hedgerow is being established through the centre of the site, and some small trees have been planted. Notwithstanding this, the size of the site and recreation pressure from visitors means that there is limited room to create further habitat improvements. Based on the evidence before me, I am not persuaded that the proposal would provide the required BNG.
32. I therefore conclude that the proposal would not satisfy BNG. It would therefore conflict with Policy 41 of the DLP which requires new development to minimise impacts on biodiversity by enhancing existing biodiversity assets and features and providing net gains for biodiversity. Additionally, it would conflict with paragraph 187 of the Framework.

Other Matters

33. The PEA states that the site is within the Impact Risk Zone (IRZ) of two Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI): Wingate Quarry SSSI and Castle Eden SSSI, with Wingate Quarry SSSI, also a Local Nature Reserve (LNR) and Gore Burn LNR, located 1.12km from the site. No information has been provided by the

² Ecus, April 2024

³ Ecus, May 2024

Council on these designations, and there is no consultation with Natural England within the evidence. However, as I am dismissing the appeal, I have no reason to consider this matter further.

34. The evidence⁴ highlights the need within the county for more caravan sites, particularly those that take touring caravans and motorhomes. The site is close to the Durham coast and other visitor attractions, and so the facility would provide economic benefits to the immediate and wider area. This provides moderate weight in support of the proposal.

Conclusion

35. Whilst the proposed development would provide tourism and economic benefits to the local area, this does not, however, outweigh the concerns I have regarding the effect of the use of the site on the surrounding landscape, highway safety, the accessibility of the site other than using a motorised vehicle, and that BNG has not been secured.
36. The proposed development conflicts with the development plan when considered as a whole and there are no material considerations that outweigh the identified harm and associated development plan conflict.
37. For the reasons given above, I conclude that the appeal is dismissed.

M J Francis

INSPECTOR

⁴ The County Durham Visitor Accommodation Futures, 2012