



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 18 September 2025

by A Caines BSc (Hons) MSc MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 23 September 2025

Appeal Ref: APP/P2935/W/25/3368510

Land to the West of Northside Farm Agricultural Barns, Oatens Bank, Horsley, Northumberland NE15 0LZ

- 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 Richard Lockey (Northside Grain Dryer Ltd) against the decision of Northumberland County Council.
 - The application Ref is 24/03520/FUL.
 - The development proposed is erection of office and administration building.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Main Issues

2. The main issues are:
 - The effect of the development on the ecological integrity and water quality of the nearby Whittle Dean Aqueduct Local Wildlife Site, with particular regard to foul and surface water drainage systems.
 - The effect of the development on the character and appearance of the area.
 - Whether the proposal constitutes inappropriate development in the Green Belt, having regard to the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework).

Reasons

Whittle Dean Aqueduct Local Wildlife Site (LWS)

3. The Whittle Dean LWS comprises a network of reservoirs, small lakes, streams, and aqueducts, including species-rich grasslands and aquatic ecosystems. These habitats host a range of protected and priority species, contributing significantly to local biodiversity and ecological connectivity.
4. The appeal site lies immediately adjacent to an aqueduct forming part of this LWS. The proposal includes a new package treatment plant intended to manage foul drainage. However, no technical specifications, discharge modelling, or long-term maintenance strategy have been provided. Similarly, there is insufficient detail on how surface water drainage would be managed.
5. Moreover, no ecological assessment has been submitted to evaluate the potential effects of these drainage arrangements on the LWS.

6. In the absence of such evidence, it is not possible to determine whether the outfall from the treatment plant or surface water runoff could introduce pollutants, increase sedimentation, or degrade water quality within the aqueduct. These risks are particularly concerning given the aqueduct's direct hydrological connection to sensitive habitats within the wider LWS. Potential pollution could harm water-dependent species, reduce biodiversity, and disrupt ecological networks across the LWS.
7. Planning Practice Guidance advises that conditions should not be used to defer consideration of fundamental aspects of a proposal where there is a reasonable likelihood of significant adverse effects. In this case, the absence of detailed drainage specifications and ecological evaluation prevents a robust assessment of the environmental risk. It would therefore be premature to grant permission subject to conditions without certainty that the development can be made acceptable in environmental terms.
8. Applying the precautionary principle, the proposal fails to demonstrate that it would avoid significant harm to the ecological integrity and water quality of the Whittle Dean LWS. It is therefore contrary to Policies ENV1 and ENV2 of the Northumberland Local Plan (2022) (the NLP), which seek to safeguard the natural environment and maintain water quality.

Character and appearance

9. The site lies within a distinctly rural area, characterised by gently undulating fields, hedgerows, and scattered farmsteads.
10. The proposed single-storey building is modest in scale and would be sited within the confines of the existing yard where it would be seen closely with other larger modern agricultural style buildings. The design features a pitched roof, vertically proportioned openings, and traditional materials including natural slate and stone with dressed quoins, reflecting the vernacular architecture of nearby buildings such as those at Northside Farm.
11. Although the Council has expressed concern that the building's appearance may be overly domestic, its restrained design, locally distinct materials, and lack of domestic curtilage mitigate this perception. It would read as a low-key, functional structure appropriate to its context.
12. Furthermore, the proposal would result in the removal of the existing static caravan currently used as an office. This ageing utilitarian and temporary feature appears incongruous in the landscape. Its replacement with a permanent building of higher design quality and material finish would represent a clear visual enhancement to the site and its surroundings.
13. Overall, the development would integrate well within the existing built form and surrounding landscape, avoiding visual intrusion or suburbanisation. It therefore complies with Policies QOP1 and QOP2 of the NLP, which seek high quality design that respects local character and distinctiveness.

Green Belt

14. The appeal site lies within the Green Belt. Paragraph 154 of the Framework outlines exceptions to inappropriate development. Policy STP8 of the NLP reflects this approach.

15. The appellant contends that the proposal falls under Framework paragraph 154(a), which permits buildings for agriculture and forestry. However, from the evidence before me, the grain drying business operating from the site primarily processes grain from external sources and includes other activities such as log cutting. These activities are not ancillary to agricultural production on the site itself and do not meet the planning definition of agricultural development. Therefore, the proposal cannot benefit from the exception under paragraph 154(a).
16. However, the site is an operational yard of an established commercial business, containing existing permanent buildings and hardstandings. The land has been physically altered and is in active non-agricultural use. These characteristics align with the Framework's definition of previously developed land. On this basis, the proposal can be considered under Framework paragraph 154(g), which allows for limited infilling or partial redevelopment of previously developed land, provided it does not cause substantial harm to the openness of the Green Belt.
17. The building would be tightly located in the corner of the site, with a modest footprint and height. It would not encroach onto undeveloped land and would be viewed in close association with, and partly screened by, other larger existing buildings. The facilities within are reasonably justified by the operational needs of the business and are not disproportionate in scale. Replacing the visually incongruous static caravan with well-designed permanent structure would also reduce visual clutter and improve the coherence of the site. There is no evidence before me to suggest that the replacement office would result in a material increase in the level of activity at the site.
18. Thus, even though it would be larger than the existing static caravan, the proposed office building would not cause substantial harm to the openness of the Green Belt in either spatial or visual terms. The proposal therefore meets the exception under paragraph 154(g) of the Framework and does not constitute inappropriate development in the Green Belt. Consequently, it also complies with Policy STP8 of the NLP.

Other Matters

19. Concerns have been raised about the future intentions for the building, and the potential precedent that approval might set. However, each planning application must be assessed on its own merits, and any future proposals for extension or change of use would require separate planning permission and be subject to their own assessment.
20. Issues relating to alleged fly-tipping, damage to verges, unauthorised access, environmental health complaints, and poor site maintenance fall outside the scope of this appeal and are more appropriately addressed through the relevant regulatory or enforcement channels.

Planning Balance and Conclusion

21. The development would provide a permanent, fit-for-purpose workspace, enhancing the functionality and long-term viability of a rural enterprise. This represents a modest but tangible benefit to the rural economy.
22. The design and siting of the building would be sympathetic to its rural setting, and together with the removal of the existing static caravan, would result in a visual

improvement to the site. Additionally, the proposal does not constitute inappropriate development in the Green Belt. It therefore aligns with national and local policies in these regards.

23. However, the absence of detailed information regarding foul and surface water drainage, and the lack of ecological assessment, means that the potential impacts on the adjacent LWS cannot be properly evaluated. Given the ecological sensitivity of the aquatic habitats, the precautionary principle must be applied.
24. The unresolved risks to the ecological integrity of the LWS carry significant weight and result in conflict with Policies ENV1 and ENV2 of the NLP, and by extension, the development plan as a whole. These concerns override the benefits of the proposal.
25. For this reason, the appeal should be dismissed.

A Caines

INSPECTOR