Planning Inspectorate

Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 30 October 2025

by P Storey BA (Hons) DipTP MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 27th November 2025

Appeal Ref: APP/P4225/W/25/3363320
Proposed replacement greenfield site located on a field of Lower Stakehill Farm, Stakehill Lane, Middleton, Manchester, Greater Manchester M24 2SA
Grid Ref Easting: 388851, Grid Ref Northing: 408637

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended) against a refusal to grant approval required under Article 3(1) and Schedule 2, Part 16, Class A of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015 (as amended).
- The appeal is made by Cornerstone against the decision of Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council.
- The application Ref is 24/00733/TELE.
- The development proposed is described as: "The proposed replacement base station installation includes a 25m high Swann lattice tower, with 6No. VF antennae and 2No. VF transmissions dishes, located within a 100sqm fenced compound."

Decision

1. The appeal is allowed and prior approval is granted under the provisions of Article 3(1) and Schedule 2, Part 16, Class A of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015 (as amended) for development described as: "The proposed replacement base station installation includes a 25m high Swann lattice tower, with 6No. VF antennae and 2No. VF transmissions dishes, located within a 100sqm fenced compound", at Proposed replacement greenfield site located on a field of Lower Stakehill Farm, Stakehill Lane, Middleton, Manchester, Greater Manchester M24 2SA, Grid Ref Easting: 388851, Grid Ref Northing: 408637, in accordance with the application Ref 24/00733/TELE and the details submitted with it, including plan numbers 100 Rev A (Site Location Maps), 201 Rev A (Proposed Site Plan), and 301 Rev A (Proposed Site Elevation).

Preliminary Matters

2. The provisions of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015 as amended (the GPDO), under Article 3(1) and Schedule 2, Part 16, Class A, Paragraph A.3(4) require the local planning authority to assess the proposed development solely on the basis of its siting and appearance, taking into account any representations received. My determination of this appeal has been made on the same basis.

Planning Policy

3. The provisions of the GPDO do not require regard to be had to the development plan. Nevertheless, I have had regard to the policies of the Rochdale Adopted Core Strategy, October 2016 (the CS), the Places for Everyone Joint Development Plan Document for Bolton, Bury, Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale, Salford, Tameside, Trafford and Wigan, 2022 to 2039, Adopted 21 March 2024 (the JDP),

and the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework), only insofar as they are a material consideration relevant to matters of siting and appearance.

Main Issue

4. The main issue is the effect of the siting and appearance of the proposed installation on the character and appearance of the area, including the significance of designated heritage assets, and if any harm would occur, whether this is outweighed by the need for the installation to be sited as proposed taking into account any suitable alternatives.

Reasons

Character and appearance

5. The appeal site comprises part of an open field accessed from Stakehill Lane, adjacent to a road bridge over the A627(M) “Slattocks Link” (the motorway). The surrounding area is predominantly rural in character, although the motorway runs adjacent to the site, introducing a strong utilitarian element. Electricity pylons of substantial height are present within the wider landscape, along with telegraph poles and overhead cables running east-to-west, to the north of the site. Limited tree cover along the site boundaries provides some screening from Stakehill Lane and the motorway, but the site itself is currently open and undeveloped.

6. Approximately 230 metres to the north-west stands the Church of St John, a Grade II listed building dating from the early 20th century. Constructed in a Perpendicular style with a prominent southwest tower, its significance derives from its well-executed design and detailing, and its role as a visual and symbolic focal point within the parish. Within the churchyard, immediately south of the church building, is the Grade II listed Thornham Parish War Memorial. This is a granite crucifix, surmounted by a wheel cross, commemorating parishioners who fell in the First and Second World Wars. Its significance lies in its historic association with the impact of world events on the local community, and its dignified architectural form.

7. The proposed development would introduce a 25-metre-high lattice tower with antennae, dishes, and a fenced compound. By reason of its height and engineered form, the structure would be visible in views from the surrounding area, including from the vicinity of the listed church and memorial. While the lattice design would allow some transparency, the installation would nonetheless appear as a tall, utilitarian feature in an otherwise open setting. Tree and vegetation cover would provide only partial and seasonal screening, and the tower would be seen against the sky in longer-range views.

8. However, the presence of the adjacent motorway and nearby electricity pylons provides a context of large-scale infrastructure within the landscape. The proposed tower would be significantly lower than the pylons and its lattice form would moderate its visual impact, ensuring it would not appear wholly incongruous in this setting.

9. In relation to the heritage assets, the tower would not physically affect the church or memorial. While perceptible in some views from these assets, the separation distance and intervening vegetation would reduce its prominence. Telegraph poles and cables are also visible in the foreground of such views, further diminishing the

relative impact of the proposal. Approaching from the south via the motorway bridge, the tower would stand in the foreground of some views of the church, but these would be fleeting and partially interrupted by existing built form and landscape features.

10. Nevertheless, the proposal would result in some limited harm to the character and appearance of the area and to the setting of the designated heritage assets. The significance of the listed buildings lies primarily in their architectural quality and historic associations, which would remain appreciable. Accordingly, the degree of harm would be at the lower end of the spectrum of "less than substantial", but nonetheless of considerable importance and weight for the purposes of the Framework.

11. This harm brings the proposal into conflict with Policies P1, P2, P3 and DM1 of the CS, Policies JP-P1, JP-P2 and JP-C2 of the JDP, and the relevant provisions of the Framework. Insofar as they are a material consideration relevant to the matters in this appeal, these policies collectively seek high-quality design that respects local character, and for development to conserve and enhance heritage assets and their settings, including having specific regard to telecommunications development.

Suitable alternative locations

12. Paragraph 123 of the Framework establishes that the need for an electronic communications system should not be questioned. However, paragraph 122 c) of the Framework requires, for a new mast or base station, evidence that the possibility of erecting apparatus on an existing building, mast or other structure has been explored.

13. The appellant's evidence explains that the existing installation, located approximately 300 metres away, is due to be removed for reasons outside the operator's control relating to future development of that site. The proposed replacement site has therefore been selected to maintain continuity of service and deliver enhanced 5G coverage to the local area.

14. A site search assessment was provided, identifying 37 alternative locations within the operational search area, including existing structures and potential new sites. These were discounted for reasons such as insufficient coverage, technical constraints, planning limitations, proximity to sensitive uses, or lack of access. Some sites were rejected because they offered reduced coverage compared to the appeal site.

15. The Council acknowledges that alternatives were considered but argues that the assessment lacks sufficient detail. It highlights the absence of clear mapping of the cell search area, an explanation of how the appeal site fits within the wider network, and evidence of mast-sharing opportunities or why these were discounted. In its view, this undermines confidence that all reasonable alternatives have been robustly assessed.

16. However, the appellant's evidence of operational need is consistent with development plan policies supporting the roll-out of next-generation mobile technology and with the Framework's emphasis on minimising the number of masts and exploring existing structures where feasible. Valid reasons have been provided for discounting mast-sharing and the use of existing structures, and the

potential sites identified cover a broad range of locations throughout the search area. The Code of Practice for Wireless Network Development in England recognises that in rural areas, tall masts or lattice towers are often essential to meet coverage and capacity requirements. The appellant's choice of a single installation, rather than multiple smaller sites, aligns with this guidance and the Framework's objective to minimise proliferation and environmental impact.

17. Although the Council questions the absence of mapping and detailed reasoning, there is no substantive evidence that a more exhaustive exercise would have produced a materially different outcome. Many of the discounted sites would have required additional installations to achieve equivalent coverage, contrary to the Framework's aim of minimising infrastructure. Based on the available evidence, I have no compelling reason to conclude that the appeal site is not the most viable option within the constraints of the network.

18. Accordingly, the assessment of alternative sites provides sufficient justification that the appeal site represents a suitable and practical location. There is no compelling evidence before me to indicate that a more appropriate site exists which would deliver equivalent coverage with materially less harm.

Planning balance

19. The proposal would result in some harm to the character and appearance of the area and to the setting of the nearby designated heritage assets. For the purposes of the Framework, this harm would be at the lower end of the spectrum of "less than substantial." Nevertheless, paragraph 212 of the Framework requires great weight to be given to the conservation of such assets, and paragraph 215 requires that this harm be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal.

20. The public benefits in this case are significant. The installation would maintain continuity of mobile network coverage following the imminent removal of the existing base station and would deliver enhanced 5G connectivity to the local area. This would support social and economic activity, improve digital access for residents and businesses, and contribute to emergency service resilience. These benefits align with the objective of the development plan and the Framework to promote high-quality communications infrastructure.

21. Although the alternative site assessment is not exhaustive, the evidence before me is sufficiently persuasive to demonstrate that the appeal site is operationally necessary and that other options would not achieve equivalent coverage without introducing additional constraints. Moreover, there is no compelling evidence to suggest that a more rigorous or extensive site search would have identified a materially different outcome or a location capable of delivering the same benefits with significantly less harm.

22. I acknowledge the Council's reference to another appeal decision where heritage harm was not outweighed. However, my assessment must be based on the specific circumstances of this proposal and the significance of the assets affected. While there may be some similarities between the cases, that decision turned on its own facts, and nothing within it leads me to depart from my findings in the current case. Furthermore, although future development may change the site's wider context, my assessment is based on current site conditions rather than speculative future scenarios. Such considerations do not alter my conclusion.

23. Taking all matters into account, I find that the identified harm to heritage assets and the character and appearance of the area, while carrying weight against the proposal, is limited and clearly outweighed by the substantial public benefits. Accordingly, the proposal would accord with the Framework and the development plan's approach to balancing heritage considerations and would not conflict with the overall objective of supporting sustainable development.

Conditions

24. The GPDO does not provide any specific authority for imposing additional conditions beyond the deemed conditions for development by electronic communications code operators contained within it. These specify that the development must be carried out in accordance with the details submitted with the application, begin within 5 years of the date of the approval and be removed as soon as reasonably practicable after it is no longer required for electronic communications purposes and the land restored to its condition before the development took place.

Conclusion

25. For the reasons given above, I conclude that the appeal should be allowed and prior approval should be granted.

P Storey

INSPECTOR