
Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 3 December 2025

by A Knight BA PG Dip MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 23 December 2025

Appeal Ref: APP/M2270/W/25/3374092

Woodlands Farm, Short Lane, Brenchley, Tonbridge, Kent TN12 7BA

- 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 Andrew Stout against the decision of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council.
 - The application Ref is 25/01133/FULL.
 - The development proposed is (Self build) Change of use of agricultural barn to residential use.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. At the time the appeal was made a new local plan was emerging. It has now been adopted. Both main parties have addressed relevant policies from the (then emerging) local plan in their submissions, and I am content that any alterations to the relevant policies have made no material difference to any argument advanced by either party. As a result, I have not found it necessary to seek further comments.
3. I have used the description of development on the decision notice and appeal form in the banner heading above. This is because the description provided on the application form, which reads "This is a classic class Q, 'change of use' of an establish agriculture barn, to residential use. Unfortunately the area has an AONB dedication so a full planning application is required" includes extraneous text unrelated to forms of development.

Main Issues

4. The main issues are:
 - whether the appeal site (the site) would be a suitable location for the proposed development, having regard to the development plan, and;
 - the effect of the proposed development on the character and appearance of the area, including the High Weald National Landscape (the NL).

Reasons

Location

5. Policy STR1 of the Tunbridge Wells Borough Local Plan (2025) (the Local Plan) sets out the development strategy for the area. It seeks to focus new development within the Limits to Built Development (LBD) of settlements as defined on the

Policies Map, and to limit development in the countryside (i.e. land outside the LBD) to that which accords with specific policies of the Local Plan and/or that for which a rural location is fully demonstrated to be necessary.

6. The site includes a detached barn on a wider property described in the planning application as a farm. As indicated in the submissions, it appears reasonable to describe the use of the farm as being more equestrian than agricultural. The site lies outside the LBD and, as such, is subject to Local Plan Policy ED5. This prioritises the conversion of existing buildings for business, recreation, and tourism uses, and requires any proposal for residential use to satisfy twelve listed criteria. The strong correlation between these Local Plan policies and the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) is evidenced by the former being adopted very recently following examination.
7. Regarding the 12 criteria in Policy ED5, the proposal does not involve additional outbuildings or a material or significant change to the setting of the barn; it would not significantly increase traffic to cause material harm to road safety, and; suitable landscaping could be achieved through the imposition of conditions. Criteria 6, 8, and 9 are therefore satisfied. Criteria 3, 4, and 7 relate to the character and appearance of the area, a matter I shall address in the following part of my determination.
8. Criterion 1 requires that conversions not compromise the existing or likely future operation or management of the land for farming or forestry, or result in the need for further buildings as a result of displacement. In this instance, the requirements of criterion A raise similar issues, which I shall address below.
9. Criterion 2 requires the building to be permanent, substantial, and soundly constructed. The barn is built using concrete framework and precast panel walls. I see no reason to doubt its structural soundness.
10. However, the criterion also requires that the building be capable of conversion without significant reconstruction, modification, or additions, and that any required extensions be modest in size and the minimum necessary for the proposed use. The appeal scheme involves raising the flank walls of the barn from some 2.6m to some 4.5m, and the ridge from 4.6m to 6.6m. Even if a proposed raised central section would resemble a traditional barn cowl, it would nevertheless add further height to the building and, given that it would run from its front to its back, also add further bulk, particularly in side views. Cladding and fenestration, both of which are largely alien to the barn at present, would be added.
11. Overall, what is a simple, utilitarian, and somewhat humble building would become strikingly taller and different in appearance. The proposed works would comprise significant modifications and additions, therefore, and the extension would be greater than modest in size.
12. I note the appellants contention that, whilst they accept the existing footprint of the barn is sufficient to satisfy national residential space standards, internal configuration and headroom constraints necessitate the proposed height increase. I have been provided with little, however, to show me how and why alternative designs which do not require the barn to be extended, or at least not to the extent proposed, have been considered but discounted. It is not evident, therefore, that the proposed extension is the minimum necessary for the proposed use.

13. Criterion 5 requires a “full programme of works detailing exactly what the conversion entails, from initial structural survey and analysis work through to completion” to be submitted with any planning application, but one has not been supplied. I have considered the appellant’s suggestion that one could be secured through a planning condition. Even if that approach were not at odds with the explicit requirement of the policy, I am not content that it would be appropriate. Without a survey and programme, it cannot be ascertained in advance that the barn is capable of accepting the proposed extension; To grant permission for a development which may not be capable of implementation would be unreasonable.
14. In respect of criterion A, it is not evident that the barn is redundant or disused; it is described as being for machine storage, and was serving that purpose when I visited. Given the likely value of the machinery in question, a secure storage area like the barn appears to be an important facility for the farm. Whilst there are other structures at the site where machines could be stored, I have little evidence that they are as secure. Overall, it is not apparent that the barn has no use or purpose.
15. No attempts have been made to secure an appropriate business, leisure or tourism use for the building, which is an explicit requirement of the policy. The appellant states that use for a workshop, storage, or light industry would be problematic given the proximity of residential dwellings. Whilst this may be true where noisy uses, or those undertaken at unsociable hours are concerned, that does not mean that every possible business, recreation, or tourism use would result in harm to residential amenity.
16. Similarly, whilst the size and design of the barn may make it unsuitable for some commercial endeavours, I have little evidence that there is no demand for smaller commercial buildings in the area. Ultimately, these are matters which the policy requires to be tested by way of appropriate marketing, rather than by an applicant’s estimation. Any limitations the barn may possess are not so pronounced as to justify non-compliance with this requirement.
17. Regarding criterion B, little evidence has been provided that the barn is worthy of retention for its historic or architectural value, including as part of a farmstead. Indeed, I have found it to be a simple utilitarian building, made using standard modern methods and mass-produced parts.
18. This may be set aside if the building is required as part of a whole farm plan and no other appropriate use is viable. If the scheme is part of a whole farm plan, then that plan has not been presented in detail. As an independent dwelling rather than one tied to the operation of the farm, and in direct contradiction to the appellants assertion, the proposal would very much appear to sever the building from the farmstead.
19. I am advised that the stabling and outbuildings are currently experiencing a downturn in business, but the connection of this to the appeal proposal is not set out in any detail. If, for example, the proposal is essential to offset losses and ensure the continuation of activities at the farm, then very little has been supplied to explain that. In any event, as set out above, it has not been demonstrated that no other use of the barn is viable.
20. Turning to criterion C; The barn shares an access with other buildings on the farm. It is flanked on one side by a Public Right of Way (PRoW) and on the other by an access track leading up into other parts of the farm, including to two large barns

and to a series of open paddocks. Whilst the appellant contends there is no evidence that future occupiers of the proposed dwelling would experience harm to residential amenity, the policy requires that the absence of harm be demonstrated as part of the proposal.

21. It is not evident that hours in which the PRoW or the access track may be used are restricted to sociable ones, or that vehicles and machinery do not, or would not, use the track to access the rest of the farm. As such, the need to demonstrate an acceptable relationship between these features and living conditions in the proposed dwelling is necessary. The absence of detailed and reliable evidence on this issue fails to satisfy the policy.
22. Overall, the extent of conflict between the appeal proposal and the development plan, particularly Policy ED5, is significant. The appeal site (the site) would not be a suitable location for the proposed development, having regard to the development plan.

Character and appearance

23. The appeal site is in the NL. Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (as amended) requires relevant authorities in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in an NL to seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the NL. The Framework states that great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in NLs which have the highest status of protection in relation to these issues.
24. The Planning Practice Guidance sets out the relevance of management plans for NLs when assessing planning applications. Whilst these do not form part of the development plan, they help to set out the strategic context for development and provide evidence of the value and special qualities of these areas. The High Weald AONB Management Plan (2024-29) (the MP) is therefore a material consideration.
25. Whereas the wider farm and landscape beyond is largely bucolic and picturesque, the barn is functional and prefabricated. It lacks for traditional materials or features. As such, whilst it is not unexpected or out of place in a farm setting, it contributes little to the NL. There is no evident benefit, therefore, in its existing appearance being preserved, and there is scope for alterations to its appearance to be either neutral or beneficial to the NL.
26. That said, the proposal involves a significant increase in the height of the building, as described above. The building would become noticeably more imposing, particularly to those used to walking past it along the PRoW. It would add to the extent of built development clustered around the courtyard. Notwithstanding its design motif, it would be recognisable as a dwelling and as the spread, therefore, of residential development outwards from the central farmhouse onto land that had been agricultural in character. In these ways, the proposal would be at odds with what the MP describes as a key characteristic of the NLs aesthetic and perceptual qualities; a deep sense of rurality unusual in South East England.
27. Insofar as the MP is pertinent to the design of the proposed dwelling, it cites a limited palette of materials that reinforces local distinctiveness, including clay as tiles and brick, timber as weatherboard and framing, and some localised instances of stone as a key characteristic of settlements in the NL. The appeal proposal

involves what is described as industrial cladding to both the walls and roof of the extended building. Whilst this may tie in with other barns on the farm, I have little evidence that it would be typical of the area or the wider NL.

28. Given this, I find that whilst concealing the unremarkable external materials and details of the existing barn would cause no harm to the character and appearance of the area and the NL, the replacement materials and details proposed in the appeal scheme would provide little benefit. As a result, this aspect of the scheme would not outweigh the identified harm arising from the increase in height of the building and from the introduction of a residential use.
29. The proposed development would harm the character and appearance of the area, including the NL. As such, the proposal conflicts with Local Plan Policies ED5 (criteria 3, 4, and 7), EN1, EN18, EN19, and STR8 where they require development to conserve and enhance the borough's landscape and the NL. It does not conserve or enhance landscape and scenic beauty in the NL, and does not further the purposes of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the NL.

Planning Balance

30. As a consequence of the new Local Plan, the Council can now demonstrate a 5.6-year housing land supply. The provisions of Framework paragraph 11(d) are therefore not engaged. Even so, the benefits of the appeal scheme are material in my determination.
31. The appeal scheme would result in a net gain of one new self-build dwelling which could be built quickly, supporting the wider Governmental aim of significantly boosting housing supply. A mix of temporary and lasting economic benefits would accrue from the construction phase and residential occupation respectively, including that it would assist in enhancing and maintaining the vitality of a rural community. These benefits attract positive weight in my determination, though they would be modest owing to the scale of the scheme.
32. Even if the facilities in nearby Brenchley are sufficient to meet the day-to-day needs of occupiers of the proposed dwelling, the roads between the two are narrow, unlit, and lacking pavements. That this is common locally does little to negate the fact that occupiers of the site would likely be reliant on use of the motor car, and I attach only modest weight to the notion that the proximity of Brenchley makes the site a sustainably located one.
33. The Framework states that in rural areas, planning decisions should be responsive to local circumstances and support housing developments that reflect local needs. I have little evidence, however, that local housing need is not being met.
34. The Framework also states that the planning system should be genuinely plan-led, and I have found the appeal scheme to conflict with the strategic approach to rural development in the Local Plan.
35. Given this, and the duty I have to seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the NL, and the great weight the Framework requires I give to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in NLs which have the highest status of protection in relation to these issues, I find that the benefits of the proposed development do not outweigh the harms I have identified.

Conclusion

36. The proposal conflicts with the development plan and the material considerations do not indicate that the appeal should be decided other than in accordance with it. The appeal is dismissed.

A Knight

INSPECTOR