



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 9 December 2025

by V Goldberg BSc (Hons) MSc MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 5th January 2026

Appeal Ref: APP/C3620/W/25/3374065

Highlands Farm, The Barn, Headley Road, Leatherhead, Surrey KT22 8QE

- 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 Louise Proddow against the decision of Mole Valley District Council.
 - The application Ref is MO/2025/0120/PLA.
 - The development proposed is a new two bedroomed dwelling.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. An amended plan of the north and south elevations has been submitted with the appeal (Appendix 5). This addresses minor discrepancies between the fenestration detailed on the floor plan and that shown on the elevation. Given that the amendment is minor, and the drawing was received when the appeal was submitted, the Council and interested parties have had the opportunity to comment on it. I have paid regard to this plan in consideration of the appeal, and I am satisfied that no interested parties have been prejudiced by my approach.
3. On 16 December 2025, the Government published a consultation on proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework). Whilst broad changes to the structure of the Framework are proposed as part of this consultation, these proposals could be subject to further change and can only be given very limited weight at this stage. It has therefore not been necessary to consult the parties on the changes, and in reaching my decision, I have had regard to the Framework published in December 2024.

Main Issues

4. The main issues are:
 - whether the proposal would be inappropriate development in the Green Belt having regard to any relevant development plan policies and the Framework;
 - the effect of the proposal on the character and appearance of the area;
 - the effect of the proposal on the significance of Highlands Farmhouse, the Tithe Barn, Granary, Well House and Garden Wall as Grade II listed buildings; through development in their setting; and

- whether any harm by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm, would be clearly outweighed by other considerations, so as to amount to the Very Special Circumstances (VSC) required to justify the proposal.

Reasons

Whether inappropriate development

5. The site is located within the Green Belt. Paragraph 153 of the Framework sets out that substantial weight should be given to any harm to the Green Belt, and that inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in VSC. Paragraph 154 of the Framework states development in the Green Belt is inappropriate unless exceptions apply.
6. One of the exceptions is the partial or complete redevelopment of Previously Developed Land (PDL) (including a material change of use to residential or mixed-use), whether redundant or in continuing use (excluding temporary buildings), provided it does not cause substantial harm to the openness of the Green Belt. Criterion (g) of Policy EN1 in the Mole Valley Local Plan 2020–2039¹ reflects this exception but applies a stricter test: new development must not have a greater impact on openness than the existing development. While more stringent, Policy EN1 builds on the Framework’s exception and remains consistent with it.
7. Annex 2 of the Framework defines PDL as “land which has been lawfully developed and is or was occupied by a permanent structure and any fixed surface infrastructure associated with it, including the curtilage of the developed land (although it should not be assumed that the whole of the curtilage should be developed).” On this basis, only the part of the appeal site containing the sand school and associated hardstanding qualifies as PDL. The undeveloped grassland beyond the sand school, over which the proposed dwelling would extend, does not meet this definition. Its redevelopment would therefore conflict with criterion (g) of Policy EN1 in the Local Plan and paragraph 154(g) of the Framework.
8. Furthermore, the proposal would negatively affect the spatial and visual openness of the Green Belt. The spatial impact of the proposal would be significant, as it introduces substantial built form onto an otherwise open site that currently contains no permanent structures other than the sand school surface. The addition of a two-storey dwelling would markedly increase the built footprint, bulk, and mass of development on the site, thereby reducing its physical openness.
9. In visual terms, the appeal site occupies higher ground compared to the remainder of the farm. Given the two-storey height, elevated ground level, and siting of the proposed dwelling, it would be visible from the access to the adjoining farm and above the wall and vegetation along Headley Road, particularly when approaching downhill. This would introduce prominent built form into views from the public realm and erode the perception of openness. Although the proposed building would be seen in the context of surrounding development, it would nonetheless diminish the sense of openness between Highlands Farm and the neighbouring agricultural buildings. Taken together, these spatial and visual effects would result in a harmful reduction in the openness of the Green Belt.

¹ Adopted in October 2024

10. The assessment of openness should be made against the site's current condition, which is largely open. Introducing a two-storey building would therefore result in a significant increase in built form compared to what exists now, materially reducing spatial openness. Even if the comparison were made against the historic situation when two barns occupied the site, photographic evidence indicates that the former structures had lower eaves and overall heights than the proposed dwelling. Accordingly, the proposal would have a materially greater impact on the openness of the Green Belt than both the current and former circumstances. The proposal would therefore cause substantial harm to the openness of the Green Belt.
11. For the above reasons, the proposal does not fall within the exceptions to inappropriate development listed in the Local Plan or Framework and is therefore inappropriate development in the Green Belt. It would therefore be contrary to Policy EN1 of the Local Plan and Chapter 13 of the Framework.

Character and Appearance

12. Highlands Farm comprises a former farmstead arranged around Highlands Farmhouse, accessed via Headley Road. The associated buildings are generally modest in scale, characterised by low eaves and horizontal cladding, which together convey a simple agricultural/ equestrian appearance. These structures are grouped in a compact arrangement. A few of the original buildings have been converted to residential use, and additional barn-style dwellings have been constructed to the rear of the sand school on lower ground.
13. The farmstead occupies a predominantly rural setting, enclosed by extensive arable fields and woodland to the north and east, which reinforce its countryside character. The appeal site itself lies on elevated ground in relation to the wider holding.
14. Although the proposed dwelling adopts a barn-style design, is set back from the road, and introduces a residential use broadly consistent with nearby development, it would nevertheless fail to make a positive contribution to local character. This is because the dwelling would not be perceived as part of the existing farmstead due to its elevated position and significantly greater height compared to most existing structures. Consequently, the development would appear visually intrusive and unduly dominant in views from Headley Road.
15. Furthermore, the design of the proposed dwelling, particularly its higher eaves height, use of vertical cladding, and extensive glazing, would collectively impart a modern residential character that would not complement the simple agricultural and equestrian qualities of the surrounding built form.
16. Reference is made to the residential development at Highlands Farm, which includes the conversion of Cart Barn and two existing stable buildings to residential use, along with the erection of new dwellings². While these examples demonstrate that residential uses form part of the character of the wider site, this is not disputed. However, the new buildings were constructed on lower ground to the rear of the sand school and are not visible from the road, nor are they perceived as part of the original farmstead. Consequently, these examples are not directly comparable to the appeal scheme in terms of position and elevation.

² MO/2016/0810, MO/2016/0200 and MO/2016/0200

17. For the above reasons, the proposal would have an unacceptable effect on the character and appearance of the area. It would therefore be contrary to Policy EN4 of the Local Plan insofar as it requires proposals to respect, contribute to and enhance the local environment and character.

Effect on setting of Grade II listed buildings

18. Section 66(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 (LBCA) requires the decision maker, in considering whether to grant planning permission for development which affects a listed building or its setting, to have special regard to the desirability of preserving the building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses.
19. The appeal site forms part of Highlands Farm, which contains six individually listed Grade II buildings: Highlands Farmhouse, a Tithe Barn, a Granary, a Well House, a Cart Shed, and a garden boundary wall. Collectively, these buildings form a cohesive group that historically functioned as a farmstead. Their significance derives not only from their historic fabric and age but also from their collective form, layout, and relationship to the surrounding rural setting, which together illustrates how the site was used and the scale of the farmstead.
20. The proposed dwelling would adopt a barn-style design with high-quality materials and be positioned to respect the historic farmstead's layout, maintaining physical and visual separation through intervening landscaping. However, the introduction of domestic features, including a gravel path, driveway, parking area, and close-boarded fencing, combined with the modern residential character of the dwelling, would erode the rural setting of the listed buildings. These elements would introduce a distinctly domestic character into what is currently an open, functional agricultural/ equestrian environment. The close-boarded fencing would interrupt the informal openness of the farmstead, while the driveway and parking area would urbanise and undermine the rural setting of the farmstead. Collectively, these changes would diminish the rural setting of the historic farmstead.
21. While the proposed dwelling would occupy part of the footprint of historic Barn Two, its design and associated domestic features would be very different to the agricultural character or functional simplicity of the former structures. Although it is accepted that conservation does not equate to preservation, the introduction of garden boundaries, hard surfacing, and parking areas would create a distinctly residential appearance. This would contrast sharply with the historic farmstead and result in the erosion of its rural setting.
22. Paragraph 205 of the Framework advises that when considering the impact of development on the significance of designated heritage assets, great weight should be given to their conservation. With reference to the harm to the setting of the listed buildings identified, given the scale and nature of the proposal, the degree of harm to the significance would be less than substantial, which Paragraph 208 of the Framework indicates should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal.
23. Whilst the provision of additional living accommodation is principally a private benefit, the improvement of the housing stock could be deemed a public benefit. Even if I were to treat it as such, given the scale of the proposal, this benefit would be given limited weight and would be insufficient to outweigh the less than substantial harm to the setting of the listed buildings identified.

24. For the reasons above, the proposal would unacceptably affect the significance of Highlands Farmhouse, the Tithe Barn, Granary, Well House and Garden Wall as Grade II listed buildings; through development in their setting. It would therefore be contrary to Policy EN6 of the Local Plan, insofar as it requires proposals to conserve and enhance the setting of heritage assets. It would also conflict with the duty under 66(1) of the LBCA.

Other Considerations

25. Whilst the Framework supports the reuse of PDL and making effective use of land, this is subject to the proposal not causing substantial harm to the openness of the Green Belt. As set out above, the proposal would cause substantial harm to openness and therefore this consideration is given very limited weight in favour of the scheme.
26. The appeal statement refers to the provision of a self-build dwelling to be occupied by the appellant. However, the application form and description of development do not propose a self-build dwelling, no self-build exemption claim form has been submitted, and the appellant has not demonstrated that she is on the self-build register. Furthermore, there is no mechanism in place to ensure that the proposal would be constructed or occupied as a self-build. Accordingly, this matter carries very limited weight in the determination of the appeal.
27. Reference has been made to the appeal site being sustainably located, approximately 1 km from Leatherhead and therefore within reasonable walking or cycling distance. However, Headley Road is a narrow, winding, unlit rural road, and while the walking distance of around 250m to the nearest bus stop is technically possible, it would be unsafe and less appealing for pedestrians and cyclists, particularly during hours of darkness or adverse weather. Consequently, the site cannot be considered to offer genuinely safe or convenient sustainable travel options, and this matter is therefore given limited weight.
28. Much of the district falls within the Green Belt. While the appellant asserts that this constitutes VSC in favour of the proposal, this argument is not compelling. The Local Plan has already released Green Belt land for development to meet identified needs, demonstrating that the district has addressed this issue through the plan-led process. Therefore, the extent of Green Belt coverage does not amount to a VSC that would justify inappropriate development in the Green Belt.
29. The scheme would provide extensive landscaping utilising native species and has the potential to achieve biodiversity enhancement. Whilst this is a positive aspect of the proposal, the benefits are modest and could be delivered without the need for inappropriate development in the Green Belt. Therefore, this consideration carries only limited weight in the overall planning balance.
30. Reference is made to an adjacent land use for storage and distribution pursuant to a prior approval in 2020. Photographic evidence illustrates that this site is used for the storage of skips, which demonstrates that surrounding land uses are no longer solely agricultural. However, unlike the appeal scheme, this site does not form part of the historic farmstead and is located sufficiently far from it so as not to affect its character or setting. Therefore, this example carries only limited weight in the assessment of the appeal.

Other Matters

31. This scheme has sought to address the reasons for refusal in the previous application (MO/2024/0678). Despite these changes, the previous concerns have not been overcome.

Green Belt Balance

32. The proposed development would constitute inappropriate development in the Green Belt and would also result in substantial harm to its openness. The Framework establishes that substantial weight should be given to any harm to the Green Belt. In addition, the proposal would harm the character and appearance of the area, which is afforded moderate weight, and would result in less than substantial harm to the setting of the listed buildings, which is not outweighed by any public benefits. Collectively, this harm is of a high order.
33. On the other hand, I have afforded the support for the reuse of PDL, making effective use of land, and the asserted self-build nature of the proposal very limited weight. The sustainability of the site's location, proposed landscaping, and adjacent land use are also afforded limited weight. Combined, these other considerations do not clearly outweigh the substantial harm to the Green Belt, the harm to the character and appearance of the area and the setting of the listed buildings identified. The Very Special Circumstances required to justify the proposal therefore do not exist. The proposed development is consequently contrary to Policies EN1, EN4 and EN6 of the Local Plan and Chapter 13 of the Framework.

Conclusion

34. The proposal conflicts with the development plan and material considerations do not indicate that the appeal should be decided other than in accordance with it. For the above reasons and having regard to all other matters raised, the appeal is dismissed.

V Goldberg

INSPECTOR