



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 25 November 2025

by **S F Barnes MRTPI**

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 20th January 2026

Appeal Ref: APP/M2270/W/25/3372709

Barn East of Golford Road, Cranbrook TN17 3NX

- 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 David Stone against the decision of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council.
 - The application Ref is 25/00072/FULL.
 - The development proposed is 'Conversion, change of use and extension of existing agricultural barn into new dwelling with change of use of the land to form associated garden land, parking, landscaping and biodiversity enhancements.'
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. A revised site location plan was submitted with the appeal. This amends the red line to align it with the Proposed Block Plan (drawing no. 4871 - 10 B), on which the Council based its original decision. This plan now includes the proposed access track, garden and parking areas.
3. In deciding whether it would be appropriate to accept this plan, I have had regard to the guidance in the 'Procedural Guide: Planning Appeals - England (2024)', and the tests set out in the *Holborn Studios Ltd* judgement¹. The Procedural Guide states that in most cases an appeal should be determined on the basis of the plans upon which the Council made its decision. However, this plan does not attempt to evolve the scheme, as the Council has already considered the development as a whole and as presented in that plan. Moreover, the appeal form and appeal statement both affirm that the land within the red line boundary is in the appellant's sole ownership. Accordingly, I am satisfied that this change would not prejudice any interested party. I will therefore proceed to determine the appeal on this basis.
4. During the course of the appeal, the Council adopted the Tunbridge Wells Borough Local Plan (2025) ('the Local Plan'). The policies in the new Local Plan supersede all of the saved policies from the 2006 Tunbridge Wells Borough Local Plan and 2010 Tunbridge Wells Borough Core Strategy, which are referred to in the Council's reason for refusal. I have determined the appeal on the basis of the most up-to-date development plan.

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

Main Issues

5. The main issues are:

- the effect of the proposal on the character and appearance of the area, with particular regard to the landscape and scenic beauty of the High Weald National Landscape (HWNL); and,
- the effect on ecological interests, with particular regard to bats.

Reasons

Character and Appearance, including National Landscape

6. The appeal site is located within the HWNL, the statutory purpose of such designations is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of such an area. I have a statutory duty to seek to further those purposes, as set out under section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (as amended).
7. The HWNL Management Plan² identifies the erosion of its rural, tranquil character through suburbanisation as amongst the top issues faced. This includes the residential fragmentation of farmsteads and introduction of new hard surfacing. The site also lies within the 'Cranbrook Fruit Belt' Landscape Character Area ('LCA'), as defined by the Tunbridge Wells Borough Landscape Character Assessment Supplementary Planning Document (2017) ('SPD'). The landscape strategy here seeks to retain the rural character of this area and its pockets of comparative isolation.
8. The site comprises an open grass field and an unused agricultural barn (the appeal building). Adjoining the plot are the highway at Golford Road and fields of managed grassland together with some modestly sized trees close to the appeal site boundary. There are also extensive fields beyond. Within the surrounding part of Golford Road, built development is generally limited to sporadic dwellings in substantial plots, set back and well-screened from the road. This results in a verdant, rural appearance.
9. The highway along Golford Road is lined by trees and hedgerows, a feature largely continued at the appeal site. However, at my visit I observed large gaps between vegetation allowing the appeal building to be seen from the highway despite its setback position. These gaps include two separate, existing field accesses from Golford Road marked by wide field gates. The site's open nature and limited built form reinforce the dispersed local settlement pattern highlighted by the SPD. The utilitarian and agricultural character of the appeal building, typical of a countryside location, is consistent with the rural character of this area. The site as a whole makes a positive contribution to the HWNL.
10. The proposal would result in the conversion of the appeal building to a dwelling following an extension and alterations. The appeal building would remain identifiable as a former agricultural barn and remain sympathetic to its context. The proposed conversion of the existing structure, by reason of the relatively limited interventions, would have a neutral effect on the landscape character of the surrounding area.

² High Weald National Landscape AONB Management Plan 2024 to 2049.

11. However, the proposed development would also involve the introduction of an access track, parking area, boundary treatments and the subdivision of the site to create a residential garden plot. The introduction of formal, neat boundary treatments around the dwelling would mark out an uncharacteristically small plot, reducing the visual and physical sense of connection between it and the surrounding field and countryside. Introducing domestic boundary treatments within the field would also be visually incongruous with the irregular hedgerow boundaries more typical of the surrounding landscape, regardless of the plot's position towards the corner of a field.
12. Moreover, whilst no outbuildings are proposed, I am mindful of the likelihood of increased visual clutter from the inevitable garden paraphernalia typical of a domestic setting. This would be highly incongruous and further erode the existing rurality of the site and surrounding area.
13. The existence of an established access track is disputed. The appellant's statement provides some limited evidence of a track, including aerial photographs of the site taken in 1990 and 2003. However, an access track leading to the site from the field gate at Golford Road is not clearly shown in either of those images. Moreover, I did not observe an access track at my site visit. Overall, there is no convincing evidence that the proposal would make use of an existing track. I have therefore assessed it as a new feature.
14. Although there is in principle support for re-use of rural buildings within Local Plan Policy ED 5, that also requires enhancement of the immediate setting having regard to the SPD. The proposed track would be visible from the highway. Whilst certain materials used in its construction could result in an 'informal' appearance, I am not satisfied that this would mitigate its visual harm.
15. The introduction of a formal access track, together with the proposed parking area and the garden boundary treatments would altogether result in a suburbanising effect on the site. This would lead to a harmful erosion of its rural character and would fail to reinforce the pockets of isolation and gaps between settlements.
16. The appellant considers that the screening of the development by hedgerows and mature trees at the field boundary, together with new soft landscaping, would mitigate any landscape harm. However, there is no substantive evidence before me to demonstrate that the development would be screened effectively in views across the landscape from directions other than Golford Road, where indicative details suggest the new tree planting would be focussed. Moreover, new trees could take time to establish before they provide effective screening. In any case, the screening provided would not be permanent and may change over time.
17. I acknowledge the appellant's argument that external lighting could be suitably controlled by condition, so as to contribute to the objectives of maintaining dark night skies in the HWNL. I also note that it is contended that the proposal would not prejudice the potential future agricultural use on this site and would maintain its hedgerows. However, these are not areas of dispute with the Council and would not overcome or outweigh the harm I have found.
18. Overall, and taking into account the mitigating factors of the proposal, I find there would be a low degree of harm to the HWNL. Nevertheless, paragraph 189 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) states that great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in

National Landscapes. Likewise, the statutory duty is to seek to conserve and enhance such areas, which is a high threshold. For these reasons, I have attributed considerable importance and great weight to this harm.

19. Concluding on this main issue, I find that the proposal would harm the character and appearance of the area, with particular regard to the landscape and scenic beauty of the HWNL. The proposal would therefore be contrary to the relevant provisions of Policies STR 1, STR 8, EN 1, EN 18, EN 19 and ED 5 of the Local Plan, and Policies LN3.4 and LN3.5 of the Cranbrook and Sissinghurst Neighbourhood Development Plan 2020 to 2038 (October 2023) ('CSNDP'). Those policies, in summary, seek to ensure development is limited in scale and extent, appropriate in terms of its nature and location, is landscape-led and conserves and enhances the Borough's rural character and the HWNL.

Ecological Interests

20. A Preliminary Ecological Appraisal was undertaken for the original application. This identified moderate potential within the appeal building for roosting bats. A minimum of 2 emergence/ingress surveys were therefore recommended and, if necessary, an additional emergence survey required to characterise any roosts.
21. A Bat Emergence Survey Report has been provided in support of the appeal scheme. The Report indicates that the 3 emergence surveys were undertaken, carried out by professionals with relevant qualifications. Bat activity at the site was found to be limited. One particular area, the soffit area of the south side of the barn, may form an occasional day roost for a single brown long-eared bat. The report sets out the requirement for obtaining relevant licenses before any conversion or repair works take place and recommends a series of necessary mitigation and enhancement measures.
22. Therefore, based on the evidence before me, I am satisfied in respect of the effect of the proposed development on bats. In the event that the appeal were allowed, appropriately worded conditions (as suggested by the Council) could be imposed to secure the recommendations of the Report.
23. Concluding on this main issue, I find the proposal would have an acceptable effect on ecological interests, with particular regard to bats. The proposal would comply with the relevant provisions of Policies EN 1 of the Local Plan and Policy LN3.1 of the CSNDP. Those policies, in summary, seek to ensure that proposals conserve and, where possible, enhance habitats and ecologically significant sites.

Other Matters

24. The proposal would, once occupied, be associated with the receipt of Council Tax and potentially the New Homes Bonus. Modest economic benefits are also likely to accrue through employment during the construction period and through ongoing expenditure in the local area by future occupiers. However, given the minor nature of the scheme, these benefits would inevitably be limited. They carry limited weight in favour of the appeal.
25. The appellant describes the proposal as a self-build development. There is evidence indicating an unmet need for self-build and custom housebuilding plots within the Borough. This includes findings in the decision of a recent, dismissed

appeal for another site within the Borough³. However, there is no mechanism before me to secure the proposed dwelling for such purposes, such as a completed legal agreement. Therefore, I can only attribute limited weight to the contribution the site would make to meeting the needs of specific groups.

26. The appellant considers the appeal building is of limited ecological value, whereas the proposal would offer biodiversity enhancement. However, no substantiated evidence is before me to verify this claim and quantify the extent of any enhancement. This matter carries only limited weight.
27. My attention has been drawn to several developments permitted within the wider area. This includes a scheme at Williw Shaw, the description of development of which relates to demolition of an existing chalet bungalow and erection of a dwelling in its place. That application therefore does not appear to be directly comparable to the appeal scheme.
28. Permission was also granted for a scheme on Golford Road comprising a replacement dwelling⁴. However, the Council has set out several differentiating factors which were weighed in the planning balance there. In particular, the scheme would be sited on an area of existing hardstanding and was found to result in a long-term, significant enhancement to the local landscape. The landscape effects of the scheme before me are, however, a key area of dispute between the main parties.
29. The appellant's evidence makes reference to other barns in the vicinity which have been granted permission for conversion to residential use, citing a number of applications⁵. I do not have full details of those schemes, or their circumstances, to draw direct comparisons to the appeal scheme. Moreover, the existence of some other barn conversion schemes within the wider area does not provide automatic justification for the appeal scheme, particularly where harm has been identified. Therefore, none of those decisions at other sites have led me to an alternative conclusion on the main issue.
30. It is argued that the commercial use of the existing barn could result in significant traffic movements and require hardstanding and parking areas greater in size than proposed here. Be that as it may, there is no indication that any alternative scheme has been granted permission at the appeal site, or is likely to. I have considered the appeal scheme based on the plans before me and on its own individual circumstances.
31. The Council find no harm to the living conditions of neighbouring occupiers or detrimental impact upon highway safety, and the quantity of parking provision would be appropriate. I, too, acknowledge that Southern Water raised no objections. I also recognise that the site is not in a conservation area. However, the lack of harm or objection in these respects has been a neutral factor in my consideration.
32. The Council reports that following the adoption of its Local Plan, it can demonstrate a 5.6-year housing land supply. On this basis, the test at paragraph 11 of the Framework is not engaged. The proposal would result in an additional

³ Appeal Ref: APP/M2270/W/24/3356520

⁴ Application Ref's: 23/00724/FULL and 23/03358/FULL (both at Hemsted Forest Golf Club, Golford Road)

⁵ Application Ref's: 23/00933/FULL (Summerlea); 23/00011/FULL (Brissenden Farm); 25/01584/FULL (Goudhurst); and Water Lane, Hawkhurst (24/02539/FULL).

single dwelling in the Borough. However, by reason of the scale of the proposal, this benefit is limited.

Planning Balance and Conclusion

33. In favour of the appeal, the proposal would provide one additional dwelling to the supply of housing in the local area. Economic benefits would flow from the construction of the proposal, local government receipts and from future occupiers supporting local services and facilities. Cumulatively, these matters carry moderate weight in favour of the appeal.
34. I have found that the proposal would have an acceptable effect on biodiversity interests, with particular regard to bats. However, the absence of harm in this respect is a neutral factor in the balance.
35. Weighing against the proposal, I have identified harm to the character and appearance of the locality, including to the landscape and scenic beauty of the HWNL. I accord the harm to the National Landscape considerable importance and great weight.
36. Consequently, whilst there are considerations in favour of the proposal, these factors are not sufficient to outweigh the harm I have found. The proposal would conflict with the development plan taken as a whole, and the material considerations do not indicate that a decision should be made other than in accordance with the plan. I therefore conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

S F Barnes

INSPECTOR