
Appeal Decision

Hearing held on 24 and 25 August 2026

Site visit made on 25 August 2026

by R J Redford MTCP MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 28 September 2026

Appeal Ref: APP/E3335/W/26/3377482

Land at Halves Lane, North Coker, Yeovil, Somerset BA22 9JJ

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended) against a refusal to grant outline planning permission.
 - The appeal is made by Strongvale Development Ltd against the decision of Somerset Council.
 - The application Ref is 24/02237/OUT.
 - The development proposed is describe as the erection of 14no. flexible light industrial commercial units Use Class E(g)(iii) with details of landscaping, parking, and access.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Applications for costs

2. An application for costs was made by Strongvale Development Ltd against Somerset Council. This application is the subject of a separate Decision.

Preliminary Matters

3. The appeal scheme seeks outline planning permission for the proposal and access only. Appearance, landscaping, layout, and scale matters are reserved for future considerations. I have considered the appeal submissions accordingly.
4. The National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) was updated in August 2026. The main parties were given an opportunity to comment on this during the appeal process and so the revised version has been referred to in this decision.
5. Concerns were raised in how landscape assessments were undertaken and what guidance was used. I am satisfied all parties have made their positions clear within their written and verbal submissions, and these have been taken into consideration.
6. During the Hearing, a number of interested parties spoke, some provided copies of their scripts, and some provided additional information to assist with pertinent viewpoints for the site visit (Documents 1 – 4). These documents were circulated to the main parties and their comments sought.

Background and Main Issues

7. The appeal site is on the opposite side of Halves Lane to North Coker and so is adjacent to that settlement. However, paragraph 5.33 of the South Somerset Local Plan (LP) identifies that nearby settlements where functional services are shared could be considered a clustered rural settlement, and the Council confirm this would be the case for North and East Coker. Therefore, in the strategic context of

the development plan only, I have considered the appeal site as part of the clustered rural settlement of North and East Coker.

8. In the Council's updated Statement of Case, it relies on LP Policies SS2, SS3, EQ2 and ECCN3, and not Policies SD1, SS1, TA1, TA4, TA5 and EQ1 which are cited on the decision notice.
9. The main issues are, therefore, the effect of the proposal on the character and appearance of the local area and the wider landscape, and whether the appeal site is a suitable location for the proposed development with regard to the relevant development plan policies relating to rural settlements and the proposed use.

Reasons

Character and appearance

10. The appeal site is an undeveloped field in a band of similar fields that slope up and away from Halves Lane. The fields are generally separated by mature hedges. To the east of the appeal site the field sizes get larger, and the landscape opens and flattens out. At the rear of the appeal site and adjacent fields is a ribbon of mature trees which creates visual and physical separation between them and the more formal parkland beyond. Beyond the parkland is East Coker.
11. Adjacent to on edge of the appeal site is a footpath linking Main Street with Back Lane and forms part of the Monarch Way. Immediately opposite the appeal site on the other side of Halves Lane is the East Coker Sawmill commercial estate (the Sawmill estate).
12. North Coker is the larger of the 2 villages and East Coker is smaller and less developed. Both villages are generally nucleic settlements with development density generally reducing towards their edges creating a gentle transition into the countryside. Halves Lane, however, creates a clear divide between the developed edge of North Coker and undeveloped fields. Their overall character is that of modest rural villages set in a patchwork of undulating fields and wooded areas, interspersed with hedges, and further scattered mature trees.
13. The proposal would provide 14 commercial units, 61 parking spaces, 16 cycle spaces, and a new access onto Halves Lane. It is indicated that the development would be located on the part of the site closest to Halves Lane and would not require the removal of, or impinge on, the large lime tree which is located approximately halfway up the slope of the appeal site.
14. This quantum of development would have an urbanising effect on the appeal site, changing its character completely. In combination with the Sawmill estate, it would also have an enclosing and dominating effect on Halves Lane, creating an intensity of built form which would significantly change the character of this village edge location. It would create an awkward extension to the village by protruding the open countryside and so reducing the countryside setting of this part of North Coker.
15. It is recognised that the layout, appearance, landscaping and scale of the proposal are reserved matters, but is it clear a commercial development of this size would be a density of development that would not be characteristic of a location such as the appeal site which is clearly beyond the road defined edge of North Coker. It is therefore found the proposal would significantly harm the existing character and appearance of the appeal site and local area.

16. During the site visit it was observed that wider and more distant views of the appeal site are in the main screened by existing trees or would be read against the backdrop of the Sawmill estate. The distant views whereby the appeal site is most apparent is from the public footpaths to the west. The proposal would narrow the open context of the band of fields the appeal site is part of. This would create a pinch point within these wider views and not respect the open and undeveloped character that the band of fields creates along the edge of North Coker. As such it would not conserve or enhance the characteristic countryside setting of North Coker.
17. However, in relation to the open rural gap identified in Policy ECCN3 of the East Coker Neighbourhood Plan (NP) the proposal would have a less harmful impact. This is because although it would extend North Coker into the surrounding countryside towards East Coker, this incursion would be relatively small when considering the scale of the gap, described in ECCN3 as between East Coker, North Coker, and Keyford. This would also be the case when considering the impact of the proposal on the wider landscape, again due to the proposal's relative size and the level of screening created by the density of trees around North Coker, and the undulating topography.
18. The proposal would therefore have a significantly harmful effect on the local area, and to a lesser extent the wider landscape. It would fail to comply with LP Policy EQ2 insofar as it requires development to preserve or enhance the character and appearance of the district, and NP Policy ECCN3.

Location

19. LP Policy SS2, amongst other things, states that development will be permitted where it would provide employment opportunities appropriate to the scale of the settlement, be commensurate with the scale and character of that settlement and increase the sustainability of it in general.
20. LP Policy SS3 sets out the amount of land provision required and total jobs, including those linked to Use Class B¹, to be encouraged for individual settlements and areas. Notably it only sets a job target for rural settlements, not an amount of land, but states this will be achieved through sustainable development, likely to be small-scale, which supports a prosperous rural economy and accords with LP Policy SS2 and the Framework, amongst other policies.
21. The Council has no clear method of recording the number of jobs that have been created in rural settlements over the life of the plan but did concur that the proposal would count favourably towards this target.
22. Further the appellant states the 14 units would be of a smaller size than many of those available on the commercial sites identified in the submitted evidence and during the Hearing. And that in conjunction with the rural location they would meet a different commercial need to those sites, such as described in paragraph 5.36 of the LP. There is nothing substantive before me to conclude otherwise. Equally as the scale of the proposal is a reserved matter, I am satisfied the small size of the units could be ensured.

¹ A now superseded use class within The Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015 but would have included the proposed E(g)(ii) use class.

23. It is therefore found that the proposal could provide employment appropriate to the scale of the settlement to support the rural economy. Therefore, with regard to the proposed commercial use and associated employment opportunities, the appeal site could be a suitable location to support rural settlements in accordance with LP Policies SS2 and SS3. However as identified in the 1st main issue the proposal is not considered commensurate with the character of the North Coker.

Other Matters

24. The endorsed section 106 would secure a Travel Plan in accordance with LP Policy TA4. Relevant provisions and facilities to enable greener transport as described in LP Policy TA1, and change mitigation and adaption, such as that proposed by LP Policy EQ1, could be secured via condition or through reserved matters.
25. Concerns relating to the state of the country roads around the appeal site, as well as the poor parking practice and lack of pavements within its vicinity have been noted. Nevertheless, it is not for new development to fix existing issues, and the local highway authority is satisfied that the proposed increase in traffic, parking arrangements and pedestrian access could be absorbed safely and without impinging the functioning of the road network. With no substantive evidence to the contrary and other regulatory mechanisms available to control parking in the wider area, it is found in this matter the proposal could safeguard transport infrastructure, provide safe and convenient access along with the adequate parking, and would not compromise the safety or function of the road network, in compliance with LP Policy TA5.
26. Issues pertaining to the proposed pedestrian link and its impact on the trees along Halves Lane are noted. However, although it would be necessary to secure the provision of the link at the outline stage, its exact design and positioning would be dealt with under reserved matters.
27. Interested parties have drawn my attention to existing flooding issues along Halves Lane, leading to the road being impassable. It is recognised that this can have a serious impact on those living and working in the area. However as with parking issues, it is not for new development to improve an ongoing problem but to ensure it does not make the situation worse. To that effect a drainage strategy could be conditioned so the Council can satisfy itself this would be the case, and there is nothing before me to conclude that such a strategy could not be implemented successfully.
28. Within the vicinity of the appeal site are a number of heritage assets including North Coker Conservation Area and East Coker Conservation Area (the CAs), both of which have a series of listed buildings in them. However, taking account of submitted evidence and the distances involved, intervening development, and physical topography of the land, the appeal site is not found to be within the setting of any of these assets and so the proposal would not affect their significance. The proposal is therefore not comparable to that of the appeal identified in Document 3.
29. It is recognised that the villages have historical connections with both William Dampier and T. S. Elliot, and that connections with significant historical figures can be a defining factor of a space or building². However, their connections with the

² As alluded to by Mr Robinson of CPRE, with reference to appeal APP/Z2260/A/08/2091404

area are wide ranging and there is no evidence that indicates the appeal site itself is significant to either character.

30. The appeal site is within the catchment of the Somerset Levels and Moors Ramsar site³, which is being impacted by high levels of phosphates. Natural England and the Council conclude that the type of commercial development proposed is unlikely to significantly affect the nutrient flow into the Ramsar site, and there is nothing before me to conclude otherwise.
31. Although no longer relied on by the Council, it is noted that LP Policies SD1 and SS1 deal with overarching sustainable development and settlement strategy. Compliance with LP Policy SS2 would, by default, also mean complies with SS1. Full compliance with the LP would be required to ensure compliance with SD1.

Planning Balance and Conclusion

32. Framework Policy S3:1.a sets a presumption in favour of sustainable development, requiring the application of Framework Policy S5 for development proposals outside of settlements. S5:1.b provides that development for rural businesses and services, where a location outside settlements is shown to be necessary, should be approved unless the benefits of doing so would be substantially outweighed by any adverse effects.
33. The commercial model of the proposal is specifically for small units to support rural business, and the Council cannot show that the proposed job targets for rural settlements have been met by development plan allocations or planning approvals. To this effect the Framework indicates that substantial weight should be given to meeting the need for business land and premises, including rural business development. The associated economic and social benefits new jobs could bring would therefore also attract substantial weight.
34. The proposed use of energy efficient and sustainable building methods, and improved site biodiversity through net gain would attract moderate weight as these align with good construction and ecological practices.
35. The lack of harm set out in other matters in relation to highways, flooding, heritage, and the Ramsar, and the lack of harm identified by the Council in relation to residential living conditions, by definition are neutral in the planning balance.
36. However, Framework Policy DP3 set out the key principles of well-designed places, with DP3:1 requiring development proposals to respond to their context, so that they integrate with and enhance their surroundings. In combination, therefore, the substantial harm found in relation to the impact of the proposal on character and appearance of the local area and the lesser harm to the wider landscape, would attract substantial weight. Policy DP3:3, goes on to say that development proposals should be refused if, without clear justification, they conflict with DP3:1. Justification has been provided in general terms for the proposed use and provision of rural employment opportunities. However, it has not been clearly justified why the proposed quantum of development is necessary in this specific location.
37. Framework Policy S5:2 states that adverse effects include situations where the proposal would fail to comply with one of the Framework decision-making policies which state that the development proposal should be refused in specific

³ Designated under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017

circumstances. Therefore, although some of the benefits of the proposal are substantial, they are not found in this instance to substantially outweigh the adverse effects of the proposal when assessed against the Framework.

38. For the reasons given above the appeal scheme would conflict with the development plan when read as a whole and there are no sufficiently weighted material considerations, including the Framework, which would indicate a decision otherwise. The appeal is, therefore, dismissed.

RJ Redford

INSPECTOR

APPEARANCES:

FOR THE APPELLANT:

Tom Barton	Solicitor Keystone Law <i>BA(Hons) GDL LPC</i>
Celina Colquhoun	Barrister 39 Essex Chambers
Sian Griffiths	Director RCA Regeneration LTD <i>BSc(Hons) DipTp MScRealEst MRTPI MRICS</i>
David Webster	Director Pegasus Group <i>Bsc(Hons) MSc MA CMLI</i>

FOR THE LOCAL PLANNING AUTHORITY:

Andrea Clenton	Senior Landscape and Placemaking Officer Landscape Expert Witness <i>BSc(Hons) MA(LA) PGDip T&CP CMLI RTPI</i>
Lynda Hayden	Planning South Team Leader Somerset Council <i>BA (Hons) PGDip TP MRTPI</i>
Michelle Martin	Senior Landscape and Placemaking Officer Landscape Expert Witness <i>BA(Hons) PGDip LA PGCert Hum</i>
Phillip Robson	Barrister Kings Chambers

INTERESTED PARTIES:

Dr Peter Burrows	Local resident
Andrew Caldwell	Local resident
Huxley Cowen	Chair of East Coker Parish Council
Ruth Cowen	Local resident
Barney Evans	Local resident

Dr Deborah Hope	Chair of Governors for East Coker Primary School
Shirley Lewis	Local resident
Jessica Montacute	Local business owner
Sarah Owen	Local resident
Oliver Patrick	Somerset Council Councillor – Coker Division
Fletcher Robinson	on behalf of the Campaign to Protect Rural England Somerset (<i>MSc Planning</i>)
Anita Rufus	Local resident
Mr Shayler	Local resident
Micheal Smyth	Local resident
James Walker	Local resident

DOCUMENTS:

1. Bundle of 6 pamphlets about walks in the local area produced by both East Coker Parish Council and East Coker Preservation Trust
2. Annotated Area Map by Jame Walker
3. Fletcher Robinson's script including reference to planning appeal
APP/Z2260/A/08/2091404
4. Scripts of evidence from Dr Peter Burrows, Huxley Cowen, Dr Deborah Hope, Jessica Montacute, Sarah Owen, Fletcher Robinson, and James Walker