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# Appeal Decision

Hearing held and site visit made on 18 June 2013

**by Jane Miles BA (Hons) DipTP MRTPI**

**an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government**

**Decision date: 24 July 2013**

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**Appeal Ref: APP/X0360/A/13/2192124**

**Great Lea Farm, Great Lea, Three Mile Cross, Reading RG7 1JL**

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 against a refusal to grant planning permission.
  - The appeal is made by Mr A Blacknell of the Englefield Estate against the decision of Wokingham Borough Council.
  - The application ref: F/2012/0998, dated 10 May 2012, was refused by notice dated 8 August 2012.
  - The development is proposed conversion and redevelopment of units A, D, E, F, H, J, K, L and M and change of use to B1(a) with creation of a mezzanine floor in unit M and single storey extensions to units D and E to form an enclosed courtyard; proposed demolition and replacement of buildings B, C and G with 3no. two storey buildings for B1(a) use; total proposed B1(a) floorspace of 2,335sqm (measured internally); creation of vehicle and cycle parking areas, internal site roads, new access, pedestrian footway, provision of on and off site landscaping and other associated works.
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## Decision

1. The appeal is allowed and *planning permission is granted* for the proposed conversion and redevelopment of units A, D, E, F, H, J, K, L and M and change of use to B1(a) with creation of a mezzanine floor in unit M and single storey extensions to units D and E to form an enclosed courtyard; proposed demolition and replacement of buildings B, C and G with 3no. two storey buildings for B1(a) use; total proposed B1(a) floorspace of 2,335sqm (measured internally); creation of vehicle and cycle parking areas, internal site roads, new access, pedestrian footway, provision of on and off site landscaping and other associated works, all at Great Lea Farm, Great Lea, Three Mile Cross, Reading RG7 1JL, in accordance with the terms of the application, ref: F/2012/0998, dated 10 May 2012, *subject to the conditions listed at the end of this decision.*

## Preliminary Matters

2. I have used the development description from the Council's refusal notice, which varies slightly from that on the application form, on the basis that it has been used from the outset by the Council, is accepted by the appellant and, also, is consistent with the completed unilateral undertaking submitted by the appellant. The Council confirmed at the hearing that the undertaking, which provides for a contribution towards transportation infrastructure improvements, satisfactorily addresses its requirements in this respect. I have taken it into account, being satisfied that it meets the tests for planning obligations set out in Regulation 122 of the *Community Infrastructure Levy Regulations 2010*.

## Reasons

### **Background and main issue**

3. A substantial group of former farm buildings, many now disused and/or in poor condition, form the principal part of the appeal site. The site also includes a wedge of open land to the east, containing the existing access lane together with space to accommodate a proposed new vehicular access route and other services. Outside the appeal site, but adjoining part of its northern boundary, is the Grade II listed farmhouse which, I understand, is let separately for residential use. This and the open agricultural land around the northern, western and southern sides of the appeal site are all within the Englefield Estate's ownership.
4. A previous scheme for a similar development was refused by the Council in May 2011. The current appeal scheme, accompanied by a comprehensive set of supporting documents, seeks to address the Council's reasons for refusing the 2011 scheme. Since 2011 the *National Planning Policy Framework* has come into effect and, more recently, the South East Plan has ceased to be part of the development plan. Thus the development plan includes a Core Strategy<sup>1</sup> (CS) and some saved policies of the Wokingham District Local Plan, albeit in this case the Council relies primarily on the CS.
5. Taking account of the above and the Council's reasons for refusing the current proposal, the **main issue** in this case is whether the proposed development is appropriate in this location, having regard to the development plan and the *Framework* in relation to three principal matters: the proposal's effect on the character and appearance of the surrounding area; the sustainability of the location; the proposal's benefits.

### **Character and appearance**

6. The essence of the Council's case in this respect is that the scale of the proposed development would result in an unacceptable urbanising impact on the rural character of its surroundings. The refusal reason goes on to suggest this would be contrary to CS Policy CP11's aim of protecting the separate identity of settlements. However, as the proposal would not extend the existing building complex closer to any existing settlement, I find no conflict with this aim of Policy CP11.
7. Existing buildings and structures in the farm complex range from older and relatively small-scale brick buildings (no longer suitable for modern agricultural use) through to larger-scale buildings. The latter include an old and mainly timber-clad barn and more modern dutch barn structures that are mainly (but not wholly) open-sided. The appeal proposal would involve the renovation and conversion of some buildings and the replacement of others, together with two small extensions (to link units D and E) and the permanent removal of some elements of existing buildings.
8. I note the building-by-building assessment in the Council officers' report (at the application stage) and appreciate that replacing open barns with new buildings could be seen as intensifying the amount of built development on a site, even when they would be of similar height and footprint. However, as open-sided barns can be entirely filled with straw or other items when in agricultural use,

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<sup>1</sup> The Wokingham Borough Core Strategy Development Plan Document (adopted in 2010)

they can still have a relatively solid form at times. Moreover, on this site, some of the barns have elements of cladding to the sides, and all are integral parts of a cohesive group of buildings. This grouping would remain more or less unchanged as would, on the whole, the mass and heights of the buildings. In only one instance (Building M) would there be any appreciable increase in height, and this would apply only to a relatively small part of the roof structure. In practice, the net effect of the scheme would be a reduction in total building volume and footprint.

9. In addition the designs incorporate sensitive use of materials, fenestration and other detailing which would all help to retain the essentially agricultural character of the existing building group, especially in views towards the site from public viewpoints. This would be the case notwithstanding the more solid nature of the barn replacements and that some buildings would have two floors of accommodation. I therefore entirely agree with the Council Conservation Officer's findings that the group of converted and new buildings would remain legible as a former farmstead, preserving the setting of the listed farmhouse and the significance of the farmstead as a whole.
10. The Council's Landscape Architect reached a similar conclusion, noting that the proposed design would essentially retain the character of the traditional farmstead. She also noted that materials for the roads would be 'visually low key and fitting for the rural location'. In addition to these internal routes around the buildings, some 80 car parking spaces would be provided in small groups, mainly around the site perimeter. However, existing trees and hedging already screen the lower parts of most existing buildings in views from outside the site, and additional landscaping is proposed as part of the development (including on surrounding land in the appellant's ownership). These features would not therefore be significant in terms of their visual impact.
11. Taking account of all the above, I find there would be no significant or harmful increase in the scale of development in terms of built form on the site, nor any encroachment into the countryside. Having regard also to the key landscape characteristics of the appeal site locality<sup>2</sup> and the findings of the appellant's Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA)<sup>3</sup>, I find that there would be no appreciable harm to the area's rural character as a result of the development's physical appearance.
12. With regard to character, from discussion at the hearing it would appear that the Council is at least as concerned about the impacts of the proposed use as about the visual impact of changes to the built form. I accept that a change to Class B1(a) use could result in a more intensive use of the site, in terms of people, vehicles and activity on the site and the associated comings and goings. Indeed, the Council's concern about the urbanising effect of the scale of development as proposed makes more sense in this context.
13. However, although there is continuous open countryside to the west and south-west of the appeal site, such that it is in an area categorised as 'rural' rather than 'transitional' in the appellant's own LVIA, the site is not in an isolated or tranquil rural area. It is on the urban fringe, close to the M4 and the A33 dual carriageway, which meet at Junction 11, and also to the southern edge of Reading and to small villages to the east of the A33. Some noise and activity

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<sup>2</sup> As identified by the Council, from its own Landscape Character Assessment

<sup>3</sup> Which are not disputed by the Council

from these busy roads is noticeable on the appeal site now and, with new housing being built nearby (on the east side of the A33) and the Mere oak 'park and ride' proposed even closer (on the west side of the A33), these urban influences are likely to become ever stronger. In this wider context, I find it unlikely that the effects of any increased activity and movement as a result of the appeal proposal would detract to any significant degree from the area's established character.

14. Maintaining the quality of the environment is another aim of CS Policy CP11<sup>4</sup>, and in this it is broadly consistent with policy guidance in the *Framework*. Despite the Council's views to the contrary, I find this proposal to be a high quality design, sensitive to its rural setting. It would also at least preserve the setting of the adjacent listed farmhouse and bring about some environmental improvement<sup>5</sup> by giving a new lease of life to existing buildings and by enhancing the surrounding countryside's wider landscape character.
15. I conclude therefore that the proposal would not cause any appreciable harm to the rural character of the countryside, and that there would be no conflict with CS Policies CP1, CP3 and CP11, or with the *Framework*, in terms of character, design and appearance.

### ***Whether or not a sustainable location***

16. The criteria in Policy CP11 generally amount to a more restrictive approach to development in rural areas than the *Framework*. Paragraph 28 of the latter promotes a positive approach to sustainable new development, and expects support for 'the sustainable growth and expansion of all types of business and enterprise in rural areas, both through conversion of existing buildings and well designed new buildings'. The Council's second refusal reason suggests the appeal proposal would not represent sustainable development solely because of its location even though, as acknowledged at the hearing, there are three dimensions to sustainable development as defined in the *Framework*.
17. In terms of location, I have already referred to the site's proximity to major transport routes, nearby urban/residential areas and the proposed park and ride facility. I heard about, and saw for myself, the relatively recent works to Junction 11 and the A33 to improve facilities for cyclists and pedestrians. These include a signal-controlled crossing of the A33, and a lit route for pedestrians and cyclists which extends almost to the start of the existing lane to the farm. Together these facilities provide a link to residential areas to the east of the A33 which, as I understand it, has been created in anticipation of the park and ride scheme and also significant amounts of new housing in the 'South of the M4 Strategic Development Location' (SDL) which is part of the development strategy for the Borough<sup>6</sup>.
18. The Council maintained at the hearing that provision of the park and ride scheme is not yet guaranteed. It is however promoted in CS Policies CP10 and CP19, as part of the SDL, and a planning application for the first phase has been submitted. I understand that some funding has been secured through the Local Sustainable Transport Fund, and further funding could potentially be secured through planning obligations associated with new housing development in the SDL: several applications for this have already been submitted.

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<sup>4</sup> Entitled 'Proposals outside Development Limits (including countryside)'

<sup>5</sup> A criterion of Policy CP11, but not a requirement in the *Framework*

<sup>6</sup> As per CS Policy CP19

19. However, even without the park and ride, the footpath/cycle route already in place will facilitate travel by these modes of transport between the site and nearby residential areas. The need for a short linking section of footpath could be addressed by condition. Some bus services are also accessible from the site and, although these are not very frequent at present, the appellant's unilateral undertaking provides for a contribution that could be put towards improving them (or, alternatively, towards other transportation improvements in the vicinity). In addition, the appeal application includes a framework travel plan which has been found acceptable by the Council's Travel Plan Officers: this would also help to promote travel by more sustainable modes than the car.
20. Although Great Lea Farm is just outside the SDL, the amount of housing within both walking and cycling distance is likely to increase in the next few years and the proposed development could be beneficial in offering flexible employment space within a relatively short travel distance. Unlike many former farms in the countryside, the appeal site is in a location that could realistically be accessed by a choice of transport modes, and the choices appear more likely than not to improve in the foreseeable future. I therefore find no unacceptable conflict with the objectives of CS Policies CP1, CP6 and CP11, or with the *Framework*, in terms of the site's location.

### **Benefits**

21. Many of the proposal's benefits have been touched on in the preceding paragraphs. In summary, these are the beneficial re-use of existing buildings, both as a sustainable re-use of existing resources and as a development of the appellant's rural estate business; a more certain future for buildings that form part of the setting of a listed building and contribute to the significance of the farmstead as a whole; the creation of flexible employment space in a reasonably accessible location; enhanced landscaping that would be beneficial in terms of visual amenity and the character of the wider landscape. Together these benefits span all three dimensions of sustainable development and I give them significant weight in favour of the proposal.

### **Other matters and overall conclusion**

22. Although the appeal site is not in a location specifically identified for employment in the development plan, CS Policy CP15 does not explicitly preclude a proposal such as this one and, in terms of scale, it does not conflict with relevant criteria in CS Policy CP11. Moreover it is not the Council's case that the proposal might compromise the development plan strategy. The Council's focus on location as the key aspect of sustainability in this case conflicts with policy guidance in the *Framework*, and there has been no compelling explanation of why the proposal's benefits (most notably its economic and employment benefits) are considered insufficient to outweigh any perceived conflict with development plan policy.
23. For the reasons already explained and taking account of all other matters raised, I conclude this appeal proposal would amount to sustainable development. It would not materially conflict with the objectives of development plan policies, so far as these are consistent with the *Framework*, nor with the *Framework* itself. I conclude that the appeal should succeed and planning permission should be granted subject to conditions.

## **Conditions**

24. A condition specifying the approved plans is necessary for the avoidance of doubt and in the interests of proper planning. Conditions requiring some archaeological work, and a detailed record of the existing 'Building G'<sup>7</sup>, are necessary to ensure that features of historic interest or significance are properly investigated and/or recorded.
25. As discussed at the hearing, work on the site is likely to take place in phases, such that a phasing programme would be a pragmatic approach to securing various key elements of the development as they become necessary. A separate condition relating to the provision, offsite, of a section of footway is necessary in the interests of highway safety, as is one requiring the retention of parking facilities. A requirement to implement the framework travel plan is necessary to promote sustainable modes of transport.
26. Conditions requiring some additional landscaping details and details of external materials are necessary, as are conditions relating to boundary treatments and external lighting, in the interests of visual amenity. The recommendations of the protected species survey should be carried out to promote biodiversity<sup>8</sup>. Various reports have been submitted relating to sustainable construction techniques and energy reduction measures. These are important to accord with sustainability objectives but, to clarify exactly what is proposed, I shall impose a condition requiring specific details to be submitted for approval.
27. *Planning permission is therefore granted subject to the following conditions:*
- 1) The development hereby permitted shall be begun before the expiration of three years from the date of this decision.
  - 2) The development hereby permitted shall be carried out in accordance with the approved plans, drawing nos. ENG/L01, ENG/L02 rev A, ENG/S01-S12 inclusive, ENK/P01-P09 inclusive, ENK/P10 rev B, ENK/P11, ASA-368-DR-001, ASA-368-DR-002A & ASA-368-DR-003.
  - 3) No development, including any works of demolition or ground preparation, shall take place until the applicant, his agent or successors in title has secured and implemented a programme of archaeological work (which may include more than one phase of work) in accordance with a written scheme of investigation which shall first have been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority.
  - 4) No works including any works of demolition to existing 'Building G' (as identified on drawing no. ENG/S07) shall take place until a detailed record has been made of the building, in the form of 1:50 survey plans and elevations together with black and white photographs of all elevations and of typical interior details, and this record has been submitted to the local planning authority.
  - 5) No development shall take place until a phasing programme has been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. The phasing programme shall cover the following matters:
    - i) Implementation of measures to protect those trees and hedges to be retained, in accordance with the approved plans and the

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<sup>7</sup> As suggested in the consultation response from the Council's Conservation Officer

<sup>8</sup> Although this does not obviate the need to conform with any relevant statutory species protection provisions

Arboricultural Report & Method Statement by Mr Peter Harding, dated 11 October 2010.

- ii) provision of the new vehicular access and driveway, alterations to the existing access driveway and associated works;
- iii) sequence of demolition, conversion/redevelopment and new building works;
- iv) provision of car parking spaces and cycle/motorcycle parking facilities;
- v) provision of hard and soft landscaping, in accordance with the approved plans and the additional details approved pursuant to condition 6 below.

Development shall be carried out in accordance with the approved phasing programme.

- 6) No development shall take place until additional details have been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority, to supplement the landscaping scheme indicated on the approved plans (drawing nos. ASA-368-DR-001/002A/003). The details shall include the numbers and positions of new trees, shrubs and hedging plants, and the materials to be used for paved/hard-surfaced areas (including parking spaces).

Any trees or shrubs which, within a period of five years of planting, die, are removed or become seriously diseased or damaged, shall be replaced in the next planting season with others of similar size and species, unless otherwise approved in writing by the local planning authority.

- 7) No converted, redeveloped or replacement building shall be occupied for the use hereby permitted until a footway has been provided around the northern side of the junction of Great Lea and Mere oak Lane, as indicated on Figure 2 in the Transport Assessment by Glanville Consultants, dated 12 April 2012.
- 8) No development shall take place until samples and/or details of all external materials to be used in the development hereby permitted (including cladding, rainwater goods, doors and windows, and materials for any reinstatement works) have been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. Development shall be carried out in accordance with the approved details.
- 9) No development shall take place until details of sustainable construction techniques and energy reduction measures to be incorporated into the development have been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. Development shall be carried out in accordance with the approved details.
- 10) No development shall take place until details of measures to implement the recommendations of the Protected Species Survey by Hillier Ecology Ltd (dated March 2012) have been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. Development shall be carried out in accordance with the approved details.
- 11) The car parking spaces and cycle/motorcycle parking facilities provided in accordance with the approved plans and phasing programme shall be retained thereafter and kept available at all times for parking purposes.

- 12) Measures to promote sustainable transport to and from the development hereby permitted shall be implemented in accordance with the provisions of the Framework Travel Plan by Glanville Consultants, dated 25 July 2012.
- 13) No walls, fences or other means of enclosure shall be erected on the site other than in accordance with details that have first been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority.
- 14) No external lighting shall be installed on the site or buildings other than in accordance with details that have first been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority.

*Jane Miles*

INSPECTOR



## **APPEARANCES**

### **FOR THE APPELLANT:**

Alan Divall	West Waddy ADP
Anthony Stiff	Anthony Stiff Associates
Alastair Blacknell	Estates Surveyor, the Englefield Estate
Philip Waddy	West Waddy ADP

### **FOR THE LOCAL PLANNING AUTHORITY:**

Chris Lancaster	Senior Planning Officer, Wokingham Borough Council
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### **DOCUMENT PROVIDED AT THE HEARING:**

Plan showing appeal site and location of proposed MereOak 'park and ride'

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