

DECISIONS – 20 AUGUST 2020

Site: Strawberry Fields, Combe Lane, Holford, TA5 1RZ

Proposal: Retention of agricultural building including alterations to existing structure (resubmission of 3/16/18/006)

Application number: 3/16/19/005

Reason for refusal: Dismissed

Planning Application Decision: Committee



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 13 July 2020

by Andrew Tucker BA (Hons) IHBC

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 20 July 2020

Appeal Ref: APP/W3330/W/20/3249895

Strawberry Fields, Combe Lane, Holford, Bridgwater TA5 1RZ

- 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 John Hughes (Estate) against the decision of Somerset West and Taunton Council.
 - The application Ref 3/16/19/005, dated 7 November 2019, was refused by notice dated 11 February 2020.
 - The development proposed is retention of agricultural building including alterations to existing structure.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. On 1 April 2019 West Somerset Council merged with Taunton Deane Borough Council to become Somerset West and Taunton Council. The development plans for the merged local planning authority remain in place for the former area of West Somerset Council until such a time as they are revoked or replaced. It is therefore necessary to determine this appeal with reference to policies set out in the plans produced by the now dissolved West Somerset Council.

3. The structure has already been built. However, the proposal is for a modified version of the structure, which includes changes to the cladding, cutting back the eaves and verges, fitting timber doors, reducing the number of window openings and fitting these with clear profile panels. I have determined the appeal on this basis.

Main Issues

4. The main issues are
 - a) whether the proposed development would be acceptable in principle with particular regard to national and local planning policies, and
 - b) the effect of the proposal on the character and appearance of the area, including the Quantock Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

Reasons

Principle of development

5. The appeal site is in an isolated area within the AONB. It is part of a small holding of 6.5 hectares, of which 2 hectares is woodland. The appellant suggests that the building subject of the appeal is needed to securely store a small tractor on the ground floor with the remaining part of this floor to be used for the drying of wood. The upper floor would be used as a workspace with areas for the storage of tools, small machinery and animal foodstuffs.
6. Paragraph 172 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) gives great weight to conserving and enhancing the landscape and scenic beauty in AONBs, and states that the scale and extent of development in such areas should be limited. Part a) of the paragraph states that proposals within an AONB should include an assessment of the need for the development.
7. Evidence submitted suggests that maintenance and improvements to the land are necessary to maintain and improve its biodiversity and landscape qualities, and that the areas of grass could be grazed, as they have been in the past. It is suggested that a nearby farmer could provide grazing stock. This would be the only livestock that would be kept on the holding. The stock would graze the land and, especially if the land is let to a nearby farmer, there would be very little need to store animal food on site.
8. The appellant intends to work the areas of woodland, and to process the wood for logs, cladding and planks. It is not entirely clear, but this would appear to be the main source of income generation at the holding. Such work would require machinery, which would be stored in the appeal building, avoiding the need to transport machinery to and from the appellants home. Evidence before me suggests that work to the woodlands would have support from Natural England, subject to a management plan.
9. However, a management plan has not been submitted as part of the appeal. I therefore have no information before me to address matters such as how much timber would be extracted, what machinery would be required and the level of anticipated stocking including planned grazing regimes. Such a plan would go hand in hand with a business plan to show that a legitimate business would be carried out at the site. Without such evidence I cannot be satisfied that the development, with reference to paragraph 172 of the Framework, is necessary.

10. Saved Policy BD/6 of the West Somerset Local Plan adopted 2006 (WSLP2006) relates to the design of agricultural buildings and refers to the need for such a building to meet the functional needs of the farming business. The building has a traditional form with a pitched roof and modest width. It is not a large, open plan building as referred to in the supporting text to the Policy. However, the Policy does refer to the need for a building to meet the functional needs of the business. Despite being purpose built the two door openings appear small for an agricultural building. I accept that the opening at the lower level is large enough to meet the current requirement to store a small tractor, however the modest size of the opening would restrict the use of the building in the future. Furthermore, there are no details to show how the ground floor is suited to timber drying, or details to show areas of hardstanding around the building to facilitate the easy movement of machinery into and out of the building.
11. In my assessment of the need for the development I give considerable weight to my doubts over the ability of the building to meet the functional need of the farming business in combination with the lack of a business or management plan for the holding.
12. Evidence before me sets out the planning history for the site, which includes the Council's previous acceptance of a very similar building as well as previous officer recommendations for approval. This clearly conflicts with the refusal upon which this appeal is based. However, it is for me to come to my own view based on the merits of the case and the evidence before me. I also note the suggestion that a much larger building could be constructed by exercising permitted development. However, I give this matter little weight as there is no evidence before me to suggest that such a fallback position would be exercised.
13. In summary of this main issue, the proposal is not acceptable in principle as it does not accord with Saved Policy BD/6 of the WSLP2006 or paragraph 172 of the Framework, insofar as they seek to ensure that such development in AONBs is necessary and designed to meet the functional needs of the farming business.

Character and appearance

14. The building is close to two well established hedgerow boundaries, which include many mature trees with canopies which extend over the top of the building. It sits towards the top of a sloping field, which falls away steeply to the northwest and is largely wooded apart from a small clearing close to the building. Land to the south and east is at a higher level.
15. As a result, it is difficult to view the building from anywhere beyond the immediate environs of the site apart from through a gap in the hedge where the upper parts of the building can be seen from the field to the southwest. This field is in the appellants ownership. From here I accept that the building in its current form has a domestic appearance, with a large window facing out over the adjacent field. However, on the basis of the proposed changes which would replace this large window with two smaller areas of profiled clear panels within a wall of green profile metal sheeting, the building would be unobtrusive and of an appropriately utilitarian appearance. The proposed metal sheet covering to the walls, which would match the existing roof material, would be appropriate for an agricultural building.
16. The proposal would see the roof eaves and verges cut back. This would give the building a simplified appearance, and I can see no reason why such an alteration would mean that a gutter could not be used to collect rainwater from the roof.

17. In summary, the proposal would not harm the character or appearance of the area, including the AONB, in accordance with Policy NH14 of the West Somerset Local Plan to 2032 adopted 2016 and paragraph 172 of the Framework, insofar as they seek to ensure that development within the AONB satisfies its statutory purpose to conserve and enhance its natural beauty.

Conclusion

18. Although I have found that the proposal would not cause harm to the character or appearance of the area, this matter is not sufficient to outweigh my findings on the first main issue, as the site is within the AONB where development is limited and an assessment of need is appropriate. Accordingly, the appeal should be dismissed.

Andrew Tucker

INSPECTOR