



Appeal Decisions

Site visit made on 17 November 2020

by A Denby BA(Hons) DipTP MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 03 February 2021

Appeal Ref: APP/B1930/W/20/3257842

18-20 Wood End Road, Harpenden, AL5 3ED

- 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 P Highfield (Rockwell Homes Ltd) against the decision of St Albans City & District Council.
 - The application Ref 5/20/0690, dated 18 March 2020, was refused by notice dated 30 July 2020.
 - The development proposed is demolition of two houses and construction of four houses with associated parking and landscaping and two new vehicle access points.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Procedural Matter

2. The Council had referred to the Emerging St Albans City and District Local Plan, 2020-2036 (ELP) though since the submission of the appeal the Council have advised that the ELP has now been withdrawn, and so its policies have not formed part of my determination of this appeal.

Main Issue

3. The main issue is the effect of the proposed development on the character and appearance of the area.

Reasons

4. The site is located within a predominately residential area and is currently occupied by two detached properties. There is a linear arrangement to the development along Wood End Road, which climbs up gently from its junction with Tuffnells Way to the site. The site itself occupies a prominent position within the street, at a point where the road curves, and the level rises more steeply.
5. Whilst there is variety in the size and design of dwellings in the street, they generally consist of large detached properties, set in substantial plots with wide frontages. There is consistency in their setback from the road frontage with driveway access, frontage parking and front boundaries generally defined by low level boundary walls with soft landscaping.

6. The site is reflective of this established character, comprising a two-storey dwelling and a dormer bungalow, both of which are substantial properties set back from the frontage, within very wide plots. As such the site has a spacious and open character which contributes positively to the character of the surrounding area.
7. The appeal scheme proposes demolition of the existing dwellings and erection of four properties. The dwellings would be on noticeably narrower plots than other development in the vicinity, and whilst the proposal would retain gaps between the built development this would be limited. The proposed dwellings would be substantial buildings, with front projecting gable features, steep roof pitches and bulky roof forms, in very close proximity to both side boundaries of their respective plots.
8. I saw on my site visit that there is some variation in the gaps between dwellings and their side boundaries, with some properties also having steeper roof pitches. However, I also saw that the greater plot widths and variation in the design of existing dwellings, many incorporating first floor accommodation within the roof space and having only single storey development close to the side boundaries, aids visually in reducing the overall height and bulk of development, and maintaining an overall sense of spaciousness.
9. This would not be the case with the proposed development. The combination of the size, design and bulk of the proposed dwellings, narrower plots, proximity of substantial built development to both side boundaries, and that the dwellings would visually fill the plot width, would result in a cramped development which would lack the spaciousness that is characteristic of the surrounding area.
10. In addition, although there would be some slight variation between the design of the dwellings, their overall size and design would be very similar, and they would appear as a regimented grouping within the street, further exacerbating their bulk and incongruity. As such the development would not retain the established open character of the site or reflect the character of development in the surrounding area, with the plot widths in particular being uncharacteristically small, at odds with the established urban grain.
11. The existing dwelling at No 22 Wood End Road is at a slightly higher ground level and as the adjacent property is a dormer bungalow it is more prominent within the street. However, due to its set back and design it is not an overly dominant feature. The proposals rather than having a positive impact would significantly increase the height and bulk of built development in close proximity to the site boundary, and therefore not only have an adverse impact on the current open and spacious character of the site, but introduce a development which itself is incongruent.
12. Some aspects of the design would reflect that of existing properties, such as forward projections and proposed materials. The scheme also includes the provision of soft landscaping to the site frontage which, although it would be more fragmented than the existing, would retain the landscaped character of the site. There would also be limited impact on existing trees. Nevertheless, this would not be sufficient to outweigh the harm I have identified.
13. There is more variety in the wider surrounding area in terms of dwelling sizes, design and plot widths though, as detailed above, this is not the case with

Wood End Road, and it is in this context in which the proposed development would be viewed.

14. On the basis of the above the development would have an unacceptable harmful impact on the character and appearance of the area and therefore be contrary to Policies 69 and 70 of the St Albans District Local Plan Review, 1994 (LP) and Policies ESD2 and H2 of the Harpenden Neighbourhood Plan, 2018, which amongst other things, seek to ensure that developments are of a high quality of design, respecting and having regard to its setting and the character and layout of its surrounds, making a positive contribution to local character.
15. For the same reasons the development would not accord with the high-quality design requirements of Section 12 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework).
16. Whilst NP Policy H2 does include provision for developments that reflect or are higher than surrounding densities, it is also clear that this is subject to other relevant considerations, and redevelopment must be of a high quality design and conform to all other relevant policies in the NP.
17. The appellant has drawn my attention to schemes on other sites, though I do not have the full details of those schemes, and many relate to sites on other roads where I saw on my site visit the character and appearance differs from that at the appeal site. With regard to a scheme referenced on Wood End Road, from the limited detail before me that related to the demolition of an existing dwelling and construction of one new dwelling. There was no sub-division of the plot and it was determined that the proposed dwelling would not over dominate the plot. As outlined above, this would not be the case with the appeal scheme.
18. The other scheme referenced appears to relate to a back-land site. The Inspector in that case noted that in the surrounding area plot widths are wide, and the area around dwellings spacious. The proposed dwellings were considered to be commensurate with the size of the plots which were considered to be similar to those adjacent, and the spacious character and appearance of the area therefore retained. As detailed above, this would not be the case with the appeal scheme.
19. Therefore, whilst I am mindful of these other decisions, based on what I have seen and read they dealt with sites and schemes that were significantly different to the scheme before me. Each site must be considered on its own merits and these other decisions do not, therefore, lead me to a different conclusion.

Other Matter

20. I note the development proposal was originally recommended for approval by the Council Officer and the decision to refuse planning permission was taken by Members at Planning Committee. However, this is part of the democratic process and does not alter the harmful effects I have found. Therefore, having considered the appeal on its merits this does not, therefore, lead me to a different conclusion.

Planning Balance

21. The Council acknowledges that it cannot demonstrate a 5-year housing land supply which means that the approach set out in Paragraph 11d) of the Framework is engaged.
22. The identified shortfall in the supply of deliverable housing land is significant, and the development would assist in addressing this shortfall. The proposal would add 2 dwellings to the Council's housing supply and work towards the government's aim, expressed in the Framework, of significantly boosting the supply of homes, though in the context of such a significant shortfall, and considering the limited scale of the proposal, this benefit would be modest.
23. The proposal would provide additional dwellings in an existing built up area, close to local services, facilities and transport links and I recognise the important contribution small sites can make to meeting the housing requirement of an area. There would also be some economic benefits during construction and from future occupants use of local services. These benefits would however be modest and attract only moderate weight.
24. The appellant states that the environmental efficiency of the existing buildings is poor, though there is little detail provided to substantiate this, or to demonstrate the appeal scheme is the only way to address this. The proposed dwellings would incorporate sustainable measures, and this is a positive matter. However, there is little to suggest this would provide anything above and beyond that required by modern building standards and therefore this attracts limited weight.
25. The site is not within a conservation area nor listed, and the Council raised no concerns in relation to highways or drainage. The scheme would provide sufficient garden area and parking though these matters would have a neutral effect, and therefore do not weigh in favour of the appeal.
26. However, the proposals would result in significant harm to the character and appearance of the surrounding area. The NP was adopted relatively recently and although the LP is of some age, the most important policies in determining this appeal are LP Policies 69 and 70, which deal with matters of new housing and general design and layout. These policies are generally consistent with the aims of the Framework in relation to developments achieving a high-quality design and layout and the conflict with these policies is therefore attributed substantial weight.
27. Overall, the harm identified to the character and appearance of the area would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits resulting from the appeal proposal, when assessed against the policies of the Framework taken as a whole.

Conclusion

28. For the reasons given above I conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

A Denby

INSPECTOR