

Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 30 August 2016

by **Daniel Hartley MTP MBA MRTPI**

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

Decision date: 02 September 2016

Appeal Ref: APP/L3245/W/16/3151039

Russells Caravan Park, Kidderminster Road, Quatford, Bridgnorth WV15 6QJ

- 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 Russells Caravan Park Ltd against the decision of Shropshire Council.
 - The application Ref 15/03937/FUL, dated 9 September 2015, was refused by notice dated 4 March 2016.
 - The development proposed is change of use of part of the recreational area for an additional 30 pitches to extend the existing site.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Main Issues

1. The main issues are:
 - i. Whether or not the proposal is inappropriate development in the Green Belt;
 - ii. the effect of the proposal upon the openness of the Green Belt and the purposes of including land within it;
 - iii. the effect of the proposal upon the character and appearance of the area; and
 - iv. if the development is inappropriate, whether the harm by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm, is clearly outweighed by other considerations so as to amount to the very special circumstances necessary to justify development.

Reasons

Site and proposal

2. The appeal site falls within land defined as Green Belt and comprises an area of predominantly open land which is mainly down to rough grassland. It is understood that the land is used as an area of open space and recreation (it includes goal posts) in association with the existing caravan park which is positioned on higher ground to the west (known as Russells Caravan Park). According to the appellant, there is an existing site licence for 155 static caravans on the existing caravan site which can be occupied between 1 January

and 30 November. To the south of the site is another caravan site (known as Hollins Park) and there is mature woodland to the north and east.

3. It is proposed to construct an engineered driveway (finished in hard core and tarmacadam) with thirty hard standing areas (including gravelled car parking areas) spaced regularly along its length to accommodate static caravans. It is proposed that the extended site would operate on the same basis as the existing site whereby clients would site privately owned static caravans on each pitch paying an annual rental charge. Existing trees and scrubland would be retained to the far south-east of the site.

Whether the proposal would represent inappropriate development and openness

4. The siting of thirty caravans (and including visitor vehicles) on hard standing areas, and including a new driveway, does not amount to the construction of a new building. The appellant considers that the development may not be inappropriate development in the Green Belt as the second bullet point of paragraph 89 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) refers to "*appropriate facilities for outdoor sport, outdoor recreations and for cemeteries*". However, this is not relevant in this case as it relates to buildings, and, in any event, it states that such development should "*preserve the openness of the Green Belt*". I return to the latter issue later in this decision.
5. The proposed driveway and hard standing areas would be constructed in an area which is predominantly open. I consider that this development amounts to engineering operations and Paragraph 90 of the Framework states that this type of development may also not be "*inappropriate in Green Belt provided they preserve the openness of the Green Belt and do not conflict with the purposes of including land in Green Belt*". The hard standing areas would be used to site thirty caravans and visitor vehicles. Whilst the siting of such caravans/vehicles may be to some extent intermittent, owing to their size and numbers, they would not preserve the openness of the Green Belt.
6. The land is predominantly open and green. I acknowledge that there is woodland to the north and east and that the existing caravan park, coupled with Hollins Park to the south, would partly screen the proposed development from longer distance views. However, the development as a whole would represent an encroachment into the countryside, and in that respect, the proposal would conflict with one of the purposes of Green Belt which is "*to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment*". Whilst caravans may not always be on each pitch, it is likely that for the most part they would be. I consider that it is reasonable to conclude that the effect upon the openness of the Green Belt would be a relatively permanent one.
7. For the above reasons, I conclude that the siting of thirty caravans (with visitor vehicles) would not preserve the openness of the Green Belt, and hence the proposal would amount to inappropriate development in the Green Belt. In addition, the proposed development would lead to encroachment into the countryside. Therefore, the proposal would not accord with the Green Belt aims of Policy CS5 of the adopted Shropshire Local Development Framework Core Strategy 2011 (CS); Policy MD6 of the adopted Shropshire Council Site Allocations and Management of Development Plan 2015 (SAMDev Plan), and the Framework. This is a matter to which I afford substantial weight, as paragraph 88 of the Framework states that "*local planning authorities should*

ensure that substantial weight is given to any harm to the Green Belt” and paragraph 87 of the Framework states that “inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances”.

Character and appearance of the area

8. I have taken into account the appellant’s landscape and visual impact baseline report prepared by Berrys. Given the topography of the site, the woodland to the north and east, the existing caravan site, and Hollins Park to the south, I agree with the appellant’s assessment that there are limited views of the site from longer distance viewpoints. However, the appeal site is currently open and provides a green and soft edge to the existing caravan park and Hollins Park. I consider that in visual terms, the effect of the proposal would be more localised: the proposed caravans/vehicles (and hard standing areas) would be most visible from higher land close to some of the existing caravans/residences at Russells Caravan Park and from the lower and more peripheral land associated with Hollins Park. Whilst the overall effect upon the character and appearance of the area would not be a significant one when viewed from the wider area, there would nonetheless be some unacceptable localised harm: it could not reasonably be said that the development would not be visible from all areas.
9. I acknowledge that some existing trees/scrubland would be retained and that only part of the existing “open space area for recreation” would be developed. To some extent, this has helped to reduce the impact of the proposed development. However, the proposed layout would be such that in visual terms the caravans would appear very disconnected from the existing caravan park: they would be sited in such a way that they would create a very linear and elongated extension to the existing site protruding for some distance into the essentially open and rural landscape. In this respect, I consider that the proposal would not accord with Policy MD11 of the SAMDev Plan which states that *“tourism, leisure and recreation development proposals that require a countryside location will be permitted where the proposal complements the character and qualities of the site’s immediate surroundings”.*
10. For the above reasons, I conclude that whilst the development would not be visible from longer distance views, it would nonetheless be visible from some localised viewpoints. From these areas, the proposal would unacceptably detract from the essentially open and rural character of the area, and the linear nature of the layout of the pitches would be such that the proposal would not appear as a tight extension to the existing site. Overall, and taking into account all material planning considerations, I consider that moderate harm would be caused to the character and appearance of the area. Hence, the proposal would not accord with character and appearance aims of Policies MD2, MD11 and MD12 of the SAMDev Plan; Policies CS6 and CS17 of the CS, and Paragraph 58 of the Framework.

Other considerations

11. I have no reason to doubt that an additional thirty pitches on the site would result in additional visitors to the area, and that it would provide additional income for the operators of Russells Caravan Park. Consequently, there would be some local economic benefits associated with this proposal. Whilst there may be some employment associated with construction of the driveway and

hard standing areas, this has to be weighed against the identified harmful Green Belt effects which would exist long after the economic benefits flowing from construction activity had faded away.

12. I have considered the supportive letter from the General Manager of Club Severn Café Bar, Kidderminster Road, Quatford who supports the proposal. I have no reason to doubt that visitors would spend money in the local area (including at Daney Public House and facilities in Quatford including the two cafes/restaurants) and that some additional and local employment would be created as a result of the repair and maintenance of caravans. I do not have any direct evidence to substantiate the view that there are now fewer touring pitches in the locality (and hence I can afford these comments only limited weight), but nonetheless, the economic benefits associated with this proposal are matters to which I afford some weight in favour of allowing the development.
13. I acknowledge that the ecological sensitive areas (including trees and scrubland to the south-east of the site) would be retained as part of the proposed development. I also note that additional landscaping is proposed and that the appellant's ecology report recommends a number of mitigation measures. Ecological mitigation measures to make the proposal acceptable cannot be afforded considerable weight. Whilst some additional landscaping is proposed, this would take some time to reach maturity and, in any event, would not be capable of totally screening the development from the more localised views of the site.

Other Matters

14. I have taken into account representations made by a number of other interested parties including a number of residents who live in close proximity to the appeal site.
15. I acknowledge that the proposal would require hard surfaced areas and hence that there would likely be some impact on the area from a drainage point of view. However, it may have been possible to have dealt with this matter by means of a planning condition. I have not been provided with any specific evidence to demonstrate that the proposal could not be implemented without leading to significant flooding in the immediate area. Furthermore, I have no reason to disagree with the conclusions of the Council that "*there are no reasons in relation to residential amenity; drainage; ecology and highway safety that would warrant refusal of the appeal proposal*".
16. I note the references made to Russells Caravan Park allegedly being in breach of the current site licence, particularly in respect of the number of caravans in situ. However, this is a matter which can be separately investigated, and, if necessary enforced, by the relevant controlling Authority.
17. None of the other matters raised outweigh my conclusions on the main issues.

Conclusion

18. In conclusion, the proposal would not preserve the openness of the Green Belt and would amount to inappropriate development in the Green Belt as defined by the Framework. It would, by definition, be harmful to the Green Belt, harm which the Framework indicates should be given substantial weight.

19. Whilst longer distance views towards the development would largely be concealed, owing to the topography of the site as well as the woodland and the existing caravan sites that surround the site, some harm would be caused to the open and rural character of the area when viewed from more localised viewpoints. Overall, I have therefore identified that moderate harm would be caused to the character and appearance of the area.
20. As explained above, I give some weight to the economic and tourism benefits associated with the proposal. However, these benefits, as well as the other considerations raised by the appellant and other interested parties, do not outweigh the identified harm that would be caused to the Green Belt and the character and appearance of the area. The substantial weight to be given to Green Belt harm, and any other harm, arising from the development is not clearly outweighed by other considerations sufficient to demonstrate very special circumstances. For the above reasons, and having regard to all other matters raised, I conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

Daniel Hartley

INSPECTOR