



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 15 August 2023

by C Carpenter BA MA MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 28th September 2023

Appeal Ref: APP/K2230/W/22/3309853

Meopham Veterinary Surgery, Wrotham Road, Meopham, Gravesend, Kent DA13 0QG

- 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 Martin Hobbs (Meopham Veterinary Hospital) against the decision of Gravesham Borough Council.
- The application Ref 20220583, dated 27 May 2022, was refused by notice dated 26 July 2022.
- The development proposed is described as "A 368m² extension to an existing veterinary hospital, comprising a euthanasia room, hospital pharmacy, clinical storage/medical records room, surgical instrument preparation and autoclaves room, endoscopy and ethylene oxide room, library and clinical offices and meeting space, kitchen, staff restroom and dining area, and on-call bedroom with ensuite and disabled toilet facilities, as well as the change of use of land to form an extended carpark with EV charging comprising 10no. additional parking spaces on the adjoining parcel of land."

Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matter

2. The development description above is taken from the planning application form. The appellant has acknowledged the proposed development involves 16 additional parking spaces rather than 10 as originally described. The Council considered the application based on 16 additional parking spaces. I have considered the appeal on the same basis, namely that it proposes 16 additional parking spaces.

Main Issues

3. The main parties agree the proposal would represent inappropriate development in the Green Belt as defined in Section 13 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework). I concur with that position.
4. Therefore, the main issues are:
 - i. the effect of the proposal on the openness of the Green Belt;
 - ii. the effect of the proposal on the Meopham Downs Landscape Character Area; and
 - iii. whether any harm by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm, would be clearly outweighed by other considerations, so as to amount to the very special circumstances required to justify the proposal.

Reasons

Openness

5. The appeal site backs onto fields and is adjacent to an area of woodland. There are views of this surrounding countryside through the existing car park and from the main road (A227). The paddock contributes to the overall sense of openness as an area of pasture absent of development, enclosed by trees.
6. A fundamental aim of Green Belt policy, as set out in paragraph 137 of the Framework, is to keep land permanently open. Openness can be perceived spatially and visually. Spatially, the proposed extension would considerably increase the built footprint on the site. In addition, up to 30 parked cars and the associated comings and goings would have a considerable spatial presence in the currently undeveloped paddock area.
7. Visually, the extension would be largely concealed from the highway and houses opposite by the existing building. However, it would be seen from the new car park, and glimpsed from fields and lanes to the rear, particularly when deciduous trees are not in leaf. Parked cars on the paddock would be screened by new, mature trees facing the highway, yet the current vegetation separating the paddock from the existing carpark would be removed. Consequently, the new area of parking would be seen in some views from the A227 and adjacent footway, particularly by those travelling south.
8. Overall, there would be considerable harm to openness. In accordance with paragraph 148 of the Framework, I attach substantial weight to the harm arising due to the inappropriate nature of the development in this location and the impact on the openness of the Green Belt.

Meopham Downs Landscape Character Area (MDLCA)

9. Having regard to the Gravesham Landscape Character Assessment (GLCA), the topography of the MDLCA is gently undulating with clear views across the immediate landscape and occasional wider views from the A227. The dominant land use is agricultural, with a mixture of grazed pasture, arable use and the scattered presence of horse-related activity. Dense, historic hedgerows run along field boundaries and narrow lanes. There are small clumps of woodland.
10. The paddock on the appeal site contributes to this distinctive landscape character as a vestige of horse-related activity and as an area of green space bounded by a woodland clump and hedgerows. The proposed removal of the treed boundary between the paddock and the existing car park would disrupt the configuration of the paddock. The new use would remove its association with horse-related activity and replace soft landscape and its biodiversity with hardstanding and the presence of parked cars. These changes would detract from the character of the MDLCA.
11. The proposed screen of mature trees would in time partly obscure the appearance of the parked cars, as noted above, and could be secured by condition were the appeal to be allowed. The use of native planting would provide some mitigation for biodiversity loss. I acknowledge the appellant's willingness to consider alternatives to tarmac for the surface of the car park, which could also be secured by condition were the appeal to be allowed. However, these measures would not redress the change to the configuration

and character of the paddock, so would not fully mitigate the harm I have identified.

12. For the above reasons, I conclude the proposal would have a harmful effect on the MDLCA. This is contrary to Policies CS12 and CS19 of the Gravesham Local Plan Core Strategy (GLPCS). Amongst other things, these policies require proposals to take account of the GLCA; and to conserve and enhance the character of the local natural environment and overall landscape character. I attribute significant weight to this harm.

Other considerations

13. Meopham Veterinary Hospital (MVH) is one of few providers of specialist veterinary services in the area and is an important and valued community resource. I note its charity work and assistance to those in need. As a business it creates jobs and supports the local economy, including the rural economy, consistent with Policy CS07 of the GLPCS and the Framework. Demand for veterinary services in the area is growing and I note the letters of support for the proposal submitted by the appellant. The potential for the proposal to retain community infrastructure, meet growing demand and help sustain the rural economy is a factor to which I give significant weight.
14. I understand MVH is one of eight such facilities in the country certified by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS). It provides training placements and work experience, including at advanced level, for veterinary professionals and those considering this career. This role is helping to address the shortage of suitably qualified and skilled veterinary professionals. I give this factor moderate weight.
15. It is clear that MVH has grown as a business and as a training provider to the point that the current building is not big enough to accommodate its current staff, students, clients and patients. The facilities are not optimal for staff well-being and the efficiency of service provision is compromised. These issues have been confirmed by a recent RCVS inspection. The existing car park is well-used and sometimes full. However, the suggestions of frequent congestion, that cars could start backing up on the highway or parking in surrounding roads, or the need for separation in the car park in the event of another pandemic have not been demonstrated to my satisfaction. Overall, I give the existing capacity problems moderate weight.
16. The appeal site is accessible by car given its proximity to the A227 and strategic road network. It is moderately well served by public transport. The location of the practice prevents some clients seeking specialist services from travelling further afield, thereby reducing 'patient miles'. However, the majority of MVH's clients live in the Medway Estuary conurbation north of the Green Belt. Most new demand is also likely to come from there given that is where most new housing will be developed. I am not persuaded there would be no material increase in the coming and going of vehicles, bearing in mind the additional parking proposed. I am therefore not convinced that, overall, the proposal would reduce the need to travel or reduce the carbon footprint of clients. Consequently, I give the proposal's accessibility limited weight.
17. The Council is satisfied in relation to highway safety, access and the effect of the proposal on the living conditions of neighbouring occupiers, with regard to outlook, light and privacy. It is also satisfied with the proposed parking layout,

which includes EV charging, and in relation to noise and disturbance, subject to conditions were permission to be granted. I see no reason to disagree with these conclusions. However, the absence of harm in these regards does not mean they constitute material benefits in favour of the development. Energy efficiency is required by other regulatory regimes so would not be a benefit of the proposal. Moving parking away from the boundary with Lewin House would have a small benefit for its occupants, to which I attribute minimal weight.

Other Matters

18. The appeal site is within the setting of three Grade II listed buildings: Leylands Barn and Leylands Orchard Farm, which are to the north on the other side of Lewin House; and Leylands Farm Cottage, which is to the south beyond the adjacent woodland and some houses. The significance of all three buildings lies in their 16th or 17th Century structures and design details, with 19th Century additions in the case of Leylands Orchard Farm. Their setting includes their relationship with the road and the surrounding agricultural landscape. Given the intervening structures and landscape features, there would be little intervisibility between the proposal and the listed buildings. On balance, I consider there would be neutral material impact from the proposal to the significance or setting of the listed buildings. The setting of these buildings would therefore be preserved.
19. Whilst I note very special circumstances were found to exist in the case of a previous application at the site¹, that proposed a significantly smaller extension and did not propose development on the paddock. Therefore, the circumstances were different from this appeal. Each application and appeal must be considered on its individual merits.

Green Belt Balance

20. According to paragraphs 147 and 148 of the Framework, inappropriate development in the Green Belt should not be approved except in very special circumstances. These will not exist unless the harm to the Green Belt, and any other harm resulting from the proposal, are clearly outweighed by other considerations.
21. I have given substantial weight to the harms the development would cause to the Green Belt by virtue of its inappropriateness and to openness. I have given significant weight to the harm to the MDLCA. I have given significant weight to the proposal's contribution to community infrastructure and the rural economy, and moderate weight to its contribution to training veterinary professionals and to the current capacity problems. I have given limited weight to the site's accessibility and minimal weight to moving parking away from Lewin House. However, individually or collectively, these other considerations do not clearly outweigh the totality of the harms I have identified to the Green Belt. Consequently, the very special circumstances necessary to justify the development do not exist.

¹ Application reference 20181229

Conclusion

22. I have found the proposal conflicts with the development plan, read as a whole. No other material considerations, including the Framework, have been shown to indicate that a decision should be taken otherwise than in accordance with it. Therefore, the appeal is dismissed.

C Carpenter

INSPECTOR