
Appeal Decision

Hearing Held on 21 February 2018

Site visits made on 21 and 23 February 2018

by David Reed BSc DipTP DMS MRTPI

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

Decision date: 6th April 2018

Appeal Ref: APP/T3535/W/17/3188362

St Johns Hall, Halesworth Road, Ilketshall St John NR34 8JQ

- 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 Tim Basey-Fisher against the decision of Waveney District Council.
 - The application Ref DC/17/0410/FUL, dated 2 February 2017, was refused by notice dated 3 May 2017.
 - The development proposed is the erection of a new steel frame building to act as a new pallet storage unit for the existing storage business.
-

Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Application for costs

2. At the Hearing an application for costs was made by Mr Tim Basey-Fisher against Waveney District Council. This application is the subject of a separate Decision.

Main Issue

3. The main issue in this case is whether the economic benefits of the proposal are outweighed by the effect of the new building on the surrounding landscape.

Reasons

Background

4. The proposal is for a large steel frame building alongside the existing group of buildings at St Johns Hall on the eastern side of the A144 south of Beccles. St Johns Hall is the operational centre of two interconnected businesses run by the appellant, St Johns Hall Farm and St Johns Hall Storage. The new building would be to enable the successful storage business to expand.
5. The farm business was started by the appellant's father in the 1950s and has since developed into a large scale cereal/arable farm with 273 ha of land plus further rented land and a substantial amount of contracting work for other farms. This business is profitable and employs 1 full time and 2 part time workers plus the appellant and family members part-time.

6. In the mid-1980s, when the farm began to diversify into contract grain drying and storage, a large 2,232 m² general purpose farm building (building A¹) was constructed near the road frontage. To better complement the farm work, in 1995 permission was granted for the change of use of this building to general commercial storage, and from this date the appellant has built up a successful pallet storage business alongside the farm business. In 2000 another steel frame storage building 1,300 m² in size (building B) was built behind and at right angles to the first, followed in 2004 by an increase in the size of building A by extending it towards the road. These buildings are used exclusively by the storage business with internal racking in place. More recently, in 2014, to support the farm business, a large agricultural grain store (building C) was erected deeper into the site behind the farm, albeit when not needed for farm purposes this is also used for commercial storage.
7. The listed farmhouse and original farmyard buildings to one side have therefore been joined in the last 30 years by three large warehouse type buildings - A, B and C - which are prominent within the surrounding landscape. The proposal would add a fourth large building to the group, situated to the rear of the other buildings next to buildings B and C. It would be clad in brown metal profiled panels to match the other large buildings on the site.

Economic benefits

8. National policy is to support economic growth in rural areas through expansion of all types of enterprise and the diversification of agricultural businesses whilst at the same time protecting valued landscapes². Policy CS01 of the Waveney Core Strategy 2009 (WCS) is consistent with this, supporting developments of an appropriate scale that contribute to the continued viability of the agricultural industry and/or diversify the local rural economy. WCS Policy CS07 says much the same, encouraging proposals which diversify the rural economy providing they are of a scale and character appropriate to the location, and supporting farm diversification schemes which make a long term contribution to sustaining the agricultural enterprise if they are consistent with their rural location.
9. The appellant claims that Policy DM08 of the Development Management Policies 2011 (DMP) supports the proposal when it states 'where expansion of... B8 uses cannot reasonably take place within an existing [identified] employment area, development will be permitted on adjacent sites...' However, the interpretation that this only applies to uses within identified employment areas³ is confirmed by explanatory paragraph 5.6 which refers to *the* rather than *an* existing employment area. In any event the policy also includes the caveat 'subject to.. no significant impact on the landscape'.
10. As a result of the appellant's undoubted management expertise the commercial storage business at St Johns Hall has grown steadily over the last 20 years. By meeting the needs of local businesses for flexible storage in modern buildings with computerised stock control, a strong customer base has been built, many of whom are seeking additional storage space at the facility. The proposal would provide this and is supported by many satisfied customers, not least St Peters Brewery who attended the hearing to explain how their expansion plans ideally require more storage at St Johns because it is within 5 miles.

¹ Not the lettering used at the hearing.

² National Planning Policy Framework paragraphs 28 and 109.

³ St Johns Hall is not an existing employment area identified on the development plan proposals map.

There is a shortage of similar storage facilities in the area, the nearest being at Eye 19 miles away, which raises the importance of extra space at St Johns.

11. The storage business currently employs 8 full time and 3 part time staff and the additional capacity created by the new building would generate up to 10 new jobs by year 2. The benefit to the local economy would not just be these jobs but those created off-site by businesses without their own storage who would then be able to expand, St Peters Brewery being an example. The building would represent a capital investment of about £1.2 m which would also benefit the local economy during the construction period.
12. The storage use is not directly related to agriculture and the business does not therefore *require* a farm location within the countryside. However, as shown in paragraph 8, there is national and local policy support for farm diversification to supplement fluctuating and uncertain farm incomes and there is no policy requirement that the 'non-farm' income should be from some farm related or rural/land based service. In any event, there is policy support for the growth of rural businesses generally whether or not they are land based.
13. In this case St Johns Hall Storage is closely interconnected with St Johns Hall Farm and makes an important contribution to the ongoing viability of the latter. The co-location of the two businesses provides flexibility with storage staff helping on the farm at peak times and vice-versa. The office base on site is also shared and from this and the nearby farmhouse the appellant is able to manage and oversee both operations flexibly, seven days a week. Both businesses benefit, the storage service being more flexible and cost effective than it otherwise would be and the farm benefiting from an important financial contribution putting it on a more solid long term footing.
14. The combined profit generated by the two businesses in the last two years has been about £235k and the storage operation and farm have each contributed roughly equally towards this total. The storage business pays about £85k to the farm for ground rent and the appellant's management time and thus makes an appreciable difference to the viability and long term prospects of the farm, allowing more investment in machinery and buildings to maintain the efficiency of its operations. Another storage building would generate even more non-farm income, but there is no upper limit to farm diversification which remains important for St Johns as even large scale cereal farms face an uncertain future with fluctuating income from crop sales and government subsidies.
15. The interconnected operation and joint oversight of both businesses require a single site and it is therefore most unlikely that St Johns Hall Storage would expand by operating a warehouse elsewhere. Operating from two sites would be less efficient, involving duplication and reduced flexibility, and the nearest potential site where large scale buildings would be acceptable seems to be Ellough, several miles away, where building costs would also be higher.
16. To conclude on the economic benefits, there is a good case for the proposal, both to continue the diversification of the farm operation to further secure its future and as a much needed expansion of the successful storage business in its own right. This would generate a significant number of additional jobs both on site and in the local companies which use the storage space to develop their own businesses. In all these ways there would be real benefits for the local economy. However, these undoubted benefits have to be weighed against the visual impact of the large warehouse building proposed.

Visual impact

17. The proposed building, 3,846 m² in size, would be the largest at St Johns Hall and is designed to accommodate 4,732 pallets – the anticipated growth in demand for storage by existing and potential new customers over the next 4-5 years. As such the size of the building would be business-led. The building would be very large at 72 m long, 53 m wide, 11 m to the eaves and 13.5 m to the apex of the two ridges, the height being necessary to ensure the storage racking is cost effective. It would be located where it would have existing buildings on two sides, storage building B to the west and grain store C to the south, which together with the other storage and farm buildings would screen it from the south west. However, from all other directions the building would be visible over a wide area of open countryside.
18. The original application proposed tree planting on a 4 m high earth bund and a further hedgerow along the northern and eastern sides of the new building to help screen it from the surrounding farmland but the Council considered this would be ineffective and an anomalous feature in its own right. Responding to this, a revised landscaping scheme was submitted at appeal stage substituting wider ground level woodland blocks and some off-site hedgerow restoration which is agreed would provide improved screening in the medium/long term. The proposal would however involve the removal of some recent landscaping around the grain store thus setting back the screening of that building.
19. The buildings at St Johns Hall are situated in a large scale gently rolling rural landscape comprising open arable farmland dissected by shallow valleys, some hedgerows and small blocks of woodland. To the north the land slopes down towards St John's Church and an east-west valley along which runs Low Road with rising land beyond, whilst to the east a wide valley separates the site from Great Common and the scattered settlement of Ilketshall St Andrew on rising ground. From the south the buildings are less prominent due to a broad ridge which extends to the east of the A144.
20. Published county and district landscape character assessments place St Johns on the boundary of Ancient Plateau Claylands/Saints Plateau to the south and Rolling Valley Claylands/Tributary Valley Farmland to the north, but there is a gentle transition between the two and the whole area can be regarded as a well-managed and largely intact tranquil landscape with considerable overall sensitivity. There are a series of public viewpoints in the surrounding area⁴ from where the building would be seen and these were visited to assess the impact of the proposal with the help of a series of photographs. Unfortunately no accurate visual representations of the building in the context of the existing group were produced illustrating the position either initially or at Year 15.
21. The new building would form a line of three with buildings B and A on the rising ground above Low Road and would be oriented parallel to it. No drawings are provided of the relationship with these buildings but the 72 m long ridgelines would be slightly higher than building B which is gable end to the road. The building would both project several metres closer to Low Road than building B and considerably further east into the field than the grain store building C, thus increasing its visual prominence when seen from the north-west round to the north-east. Whilst joining an existing group of buildings and in many views seen in front of buildings C and B, the new building would appear both closer

⁴ Most fully shown on page 20 of the Save our Saints evidence. These are the references used in this decision.

- (therefore larger) and/or extend to the side of the others, sometimes by some distance, resulting in an unduly intrusive addition to the group.
22. This would be apparent in the intermittent but close views looking upwards to the buildings through gaps in the hedgerow along Low Road (viewpoints E, 9, F), from near Manor Cottages (10), in the important longer distance views from Lodge Road and Manor Farm Road over the valley (B, 11) and to a lesser extent from the A144 and a footpath to the north west (N, O).
23. The building would also have a significant visual impact in a number of medium and long distance views from the east and south-east. A small scale cross section is provided showing the proposal in relation to building C⁵. This shows a large gap between the grain store and the end elevation of the new building with the ridges of the new building only about 0.5 m lower. The building would project out into the field to the north east of the existing group well to one side of building B behind and the double gable end would draw attention to its bulk compared to the others. The 53 m wide end elevation of the new building combined with its 11-13.5 m height and position extending the built form of the group would result in an over prominent addition to the landscape.
24. This would be apparent in the long distance views from the well-used rising ground of Great Common (3), most seriously in the medium distance views from the public footpath running towards the A144 from its south west corner (2, K) and in other longer distance views from the same direction (1, L, 4).
25. The *additional* visual impact of the building would therefore be significant in views from nearby roads, footpaths and Great Common even allowing for the presence of the existing group of buildings in the landscape. The impact would be mitigated over time by the woodland blocks and hedgerow restoration which is proposed but with growth of only 25-30 cm a year even by year 15 the trees would have only partly assimilated the new building into the landscape due to its height⁶. The purpose of the rectangular woodland blocks would be obvious, reducing their value as a positive contribution to landscape character, and off-site hedgerow restoration could be carried out in any event.
26. For these reasons the proposed building would appear unduly large and over prominent in the surrounding rural landscape which would conflict with WCS Policies CS01 and CS07. In the terms of CS01 the development would not be of an appropriate scale and in the terms of CS07 it would not be of a scale and character appropriate to the location nor consistent with its rural location. Even if DMP Policy DM08 applied the proposal would fail the caveat that there should be no significant impact on the landscape. The proposal would also conflict with WCS Policies CS02 and CS16 and DMP Policies DM02 and DM27. These require development to improve the character, appearance and environmental quality of the area, to conserve and contribute towards the enhancement of landscape character, to be sympathetic to the site and its surroundings and to protect local distinctiveness.

Planning balance and Conclusion

27. There is a good case for the proposal both in terms of farm diversification and as a much needed expansion of a successful storage business in its own right. There is also a lack of alternative provision in the locality to meet the needs of

⁵ Original landscape plan submitted with the application by Westover Landscape Ltd.

⁶ And building C which would have the recently planted landscaping to its east removed.

local businesses. However, the undoubted benefits for the local economy are outweighed by the excessive visual impact of the unduly large building in the rural landscape. The planning balance is consequently against the proposal and therefore the appeal should be dismissed.

David Reed

INSPECTOR

APPEARANCES

FOR THE APPELLANT:

Peter Hill BA DipTP	Planning Agent
Simon Neesam BA DipLA CMLI	Technical Director, Landscape Partnership
Matt How BSc	Acorus Rural Property Services
Nick Durrant MSc CEng MRICS FAAV	Durrants Chartered Surveyors
Tim Basey-Fisher	Appellant
Steve Magnall	St Peters Brewery

FOR THE LOCAL PLANNING AUTHORITY:

Ian Robertson DipRUP	Area Planning Officer, Waveney District Council
Philip Perkin BA MRTPI	Development Management Team Leader, Waveney District Council

INTERESTED PERSONS:

Geoffrey Sinclair	Environment Information Services for Save Our Saints group
James Servaes	Local Resident and Save Our Saints group
Paul Birkin	Local Resident and Chair, St Johns Parish
Cynthia Parry	Local Resident
Polly McCarthy	Local Resident
Neil Alger	Local Resident
G W Plenderleith	Local Resident
Rod Apps	Local Resident

DOCUMENTS SUBMITTED AT THE HEARING

Letter from Mr & Dr Henderson

St Johns Hall planning history submitted by Save Our Saints group

Response to Durrants report from Save Our Saints group