

22-1001 Annex 3

URBAN DESIGN AND HERITAGE CONSULTATION RESPONSE

22/1001

Construction of 20 dwellings with associated parking, access and landscaping following demolition of existing buildings (except Post Box Cottage)

Westcroft Park Farm, Windlesham Road, Chobham, Woking, Surrey GU24 8SN

Recommendations

The fundamental aim of Green Belt designation is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. The essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence (NPPF 137).

The NPPF 147 states that inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances.

“When considering any planning application, local planning authorities should ensure that substantial weight is given to any harm to the Green Belt. (NPPF 148) “Very special circumstances “will not exist unless the potential harm to the Green Belt by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm resulting from the proposal, is clearly outweighed by other considerations.” The proposal is contrary to “NPPF 149.....

(g) limited infilling or the partial or complete redevelopment of previously developed land, whether redundant or in continuing use (excluding temporary buildings), which would:

- not have a greater impact on the openness of the Green Belt than the existing development; or
- not cause substantial harm to the openness of the Green Belt, where the development would re-use previously developed land and contribute to meeting an identified affordable housing need within the area of the local planning authority.”

Westcroft Park House is a former Country House of mid C19th origin with associated farm and agricultural land, lodge and a large, open setting of surrounding former parkland. The place name Westcroft is referenced in sources dating back to Medieval times. The country house itself was demolished and redeveloped in the early C21st with additional changes to the parkland. The Historic Landscape Character of the site is recorded by the HER as ‘Parkland and designed landscape (CB047)’. To the west of the application site, in the former park grounds, is a historic Clock tower, Grade II listed bell tower dating back to c.1910. There is also a Grade II listed timber framed and thatched building in the vicinity, the Cottage, which in historic maps is referenced as Foster’s Farm, separated from the application site itself by open fields. Historic maps give evidence that the land has continuously had an overall open, natural character surrounding the country house and its associated functions over several centuries. The existing buildings within the redevelopment area are agricultural buildings, associated with the agricultural/equestrian land use and rural, barnlike in character. Large areas of the site are used as paddocks for horses, which retain the sense of openness and ruralness. The area to the north is also open and spacious in character and provides an unbroken visual connection between the site and the surrounding, open countryside.

The application site is an irregularly shaped area of land situated on the northern side of Windlesham Road between the settlements of Windlesham and Chobham, within the Green Belt. The immediate

setting to the north and northwest is open fields, grazed by animals. To the east is a nursery for horticultural production. To the south of Windlesham Road is Westcroft Farm. The western, southern and eastern boundaries benefit from mature vegetation.

The established land use is an equestrian center and a polo club, which is considered fully in line with the Green Belt policy. The existing buildings on site are mainly positioned to the center of the site, allowing long distance views towards the rear of the site and the land beyond, providing a continuous visual connection between the core of the site and the wider Green Belt. The existing structures provide a feathered integration with the surrounding landscape to the rear and along the eastern boundary, due to the semi-open and worn character of the buildings.

A quantitative assessment of the footprint and volume is therefore not considered a full representation of the impact of the development on the openness due to the character of the site. The proposed development has a marginally reduced total volume and proposes landscaping for some of the areas which today are characterized by hard standing. However, the existing large areas of open land within the site, asphalted or not, does provide a strong sense of spaciousness and openness and provide long distance views to the wider Green Belt beyond the site, vital characteristics and qualities of the Green Belt which the designation permanently protects. Residential development of the existing open areas will generate substantial harm to the openness of the Green Belt, is contrary to policy, constitutes inappropriate development and is therefore considered unacceptable from an urban design and heritage perspective.

The proposal is for the residential development of a major, quadrangular area which extends considerably beyond the existing built form within the site, and which affects large expanses of currently open land to the north and to the east, where no built form is found today, all protected as Green Belt. The increased spread of the development at an overall increased building height, standing at a maximum of 9.7 m to the tallest buildings, is considered significant and will cause significant harm to the openness and ruralness of the site. Comparatively, the proposed 1.5 storey buildings represent a height of 7.45m which is 0.1m lesser than the highest ridge of the existing buildings currently limited to a single building. With a maximum ridge height of 9.7 m, the proposed scheme will have a strong, tall appearance. Some of the units are also characterized by large footprints, large scale and bulky appearance.

In addition to the quadrangular development, the erection of two bungalow units of substantial footprint is proposed separate from the main development area and prominently positioned diagonally to the east of Westcroft House and directly opposite the small-scale cottage in the south-east corner of the site. These two proposed units are considered damaging to the general openness in terms of their position, angle, scale, large built form and bulky appearance in the important spatial connection between the Mansion house, its formal pleasure gardens and the setting of the small-scale cottage at the corner of Windlesham Road and Woodcock Lane. The submitted 3D visuals confirm their detrimental impact on openness in this prominent and sensitive location. A different, more neutral built form and a less extensive footprint is advised to retain the sense of spaciousness and continuity of green space at the main approach to the site.

The scheme is for 20 residential units and associated 46 car parking spaces and landscaping. The proposed layout is a formal rectilinear grid of urban character with buildings of 1 to 2.5 storeys high, in stark contrast to the rural nature and low density of this countryside site. The development includes a block of flats, with a shared communal garden. Most dwellings have private entrances and private gardens, whilst some have shared entrances, although the overall layout is relatively tight. Although the proposed development would have a lesser footprint in numerical sense than the existing barns, the visual impact of the proposed residential development is considered to have a considerably stronger visual and spatial impact on the openness of the site due to the distribution of built form over a larger area, the scale of the development and the formal built pattern than the existing few agricultural buildings, loosely organized and sited at the center of the site, leaving extensive surrounding open areas. The proposed development creates a built-up character and a cluster of

buildings encroaching into the open countryside, harming the visual connections between the site and the wider open, rural landscape to the north.

The proposed scheme will, due to its scale, its formal and rectilinear layout, the quantum of development, the built-up character and the built form have a detrimental, definitive and urbanizing effect on the openness and ruralness of the area which has characterized this former country house site for centuries and which the Greenbelt designation protects. The proposed development will alter the rural character connected to its historic and current agricultural/equestrian land use and introduces a large-scale residential housing scheme of 20 units formally arranged around an urban network of streets. The formal grid layout and the extent of development which stretches across the open setting and former parkland will transform the openness and ruralness of the site into a built-up area of urban character dominated by dwelling houses with associated car parking and represents overdevelopment, inappropriate and detrimental to this rural location. With the residential development follows increased traffic movement, an increased appearance of domestic lighting after dark, the need for street lighting, domestic use of front and rear gardens, the use of garden parasols etc., which all have an urbanizing effect, considered alien to the protected rural part of the borough, which also serves to retain the wider rural landscape between two historic villages. Consequently, the proposed development will have a greater impact on the openness of the application site than the existing agricultural buildings associated with the existing rural land use. Although the building design is inspired by traditional vernacular architecture and include materials such as red facing bricks and hanging tiles in combination with render, red clay/slate roof tiles and some detailing, the principle of residential development of this scale in the protected Green Belt is contrary to national and local policy, constitutes inappropriate development and cannot be supported from an urban design perspective.

The layout of the proposed development and indeed the landscaping scheme should have been informed by, and more strongly based on, a clear understanding of the historic and spatial development of the site as a former country house with associated parkland, landholdings, farms and cottages. The proposed site boundary at the new entrance p.7, Design and Access Statement part 2, causes concerns in this rural and sensitive location. The landscaping proposal should seek to re-establish the qualities and character of the historic parkland as part of the overall strategy, especially as these qualities have been recorded and recognized at the national level (HER). Protecting and re-establishing important sightlines and other visual relationships are other important drivers that do not come across strongly enough but should have shaped the layout and contributed to the placemaking.

The proposed development is considered to cause substantial harm to the open, rural character of the Green Belt, part of which also constitutes the setting of the statutorily Grade II listed cottage. However, the development also encroaches into the countryside causing substantial harm to the wider context of large, open rural fields.

The NPPF §127 also requires developments to be sympathetic to local character.

Development Management policy DM9 requires development to (iii) respect and enhance the local, natural or historic character of the environment, paying particular regard to scale, materials, massing, bulk and density.

Paragraph 5.6 which supports Policy CP1 indicates that inappropriate development will include proposals that cause harm to its intrinsic character..."

The Residential Design Guide SPD 2017 principle 6.6 also requires new developments to respond to the size, scale and rhythm of surrounding built patterns, taking into consideration the specific characteristics of the site and its immediate context to ensure all developments add to the overall quality of an area and integrates well with the natural, built and historic environment.

The strategic objective 7 and Core Policy CP2 Sustainability Development and Design consequently requires development to respect and enhance the quality of the existing urban, rural, natural and historic environment.

In summary, the proposal development is considered to result in substantial harm to the openness and ruralness of the Green Belt, which also constitutes the setting of the Grade II listed property. The development therefore represents inappropriate development in the Green Belt. By association, the development would conflict with the purposes of the Green Belt by reason of countryside encroachment. No very special circumstances have been identified that would outweigh the harm to the Green Belt and the other harm identified. In addition, the proposed residential layout and quantum of development is considered uncharacteristic for the low-density rural setting. The application is consequently recommended for refusal.

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