

BY THE DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC GROWTH & NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES
READING BOROUGH COUNCIL
PLANNING APPLICATIONS COMMITTEE: 4 MARCH 2020

Ward: Caversham
Appeal No: APP/E0345/W/19/3237994
Planning Ref: 190434
Site: 27-43 Blenheim Road, Caversham, Reading, RG4 7RT
Proposal:
Decision level: Committee decision on 06/08/2019
Method: Written representations
Decision: Appeal Dismissed
Date Determined: 27 February 2020
Inspector: Site visit made on 28 January 2020 by Stuart Willis BA Hons MSc PGCE MRTPI
Decision by Stuart Willis BA Hons MSc PGCE MRTPI

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 The site is located to the rear of the gardens of nos. 27-43 Blenheim Road. The site is largely overgrown and is part of a woodland area TPO. The site contains the remains of a brick built building to the north east corner together with the footings of other buildings but the site has been unattended and in a poor state of repair for a number of years. The site has been subject to fly tipping. The land is separate from and does not form part of the rear gardens of the Blenheim Road properties. Blenheim Road contains a mix of housing styles. There is an existing access to the site between nos. 29 and 31 Blenheim Road.

1.2 The site has been the subject of an earlier planning application in 2018 (ref: 181471) for the erection of x5 two-storey dwellings (x2 pairs semi-detached dwellings and x1 detached dwelling) with parking and landscaping and access from Blenheim Road. This application was withdrawn.

1.3 Application 190434 was refused planning permission for the following reasons:

- The loss of priority habitat of Lowland Mixed Deciduous Woodland, which is protected by a woodland TPO.
- Out of keeping with the prevailing pattern and grain of development within the surrounding area and would fail to maintain or enhance the green and wooded character of the site and adjacent residential gardens.
- Absence of a completed Section 106 legal agreement to secure a Section 278 Highways Agreement for a bell mouth access and raised table junction and a contribution towards the provision of a Traffic Regulation Order, the proposed development would fail to mitigate against the increased flow of traffic associated within the proposed additional dwellings.
- Absence of a completed Section 106 legal agreement to secure an acceptable contribution towards the provision of Affordable Housing.

2. SUMMARY OF DECISION

2.1 The Inspectorate considered that the main issues in the appeal were:

- the effect of the proposed development on the character and appearance of the area;

- the effect of the proposed development on biodiversity;
- the effect of the proposed development on highway safety; and
- whether the proposed development would provide appropriate living conditions for future occupiers, with particular regard to internal living space and outdoor space.

2.2 The Inspector took the view that the introduction of dwellings directly behind Blenheim Road and facing towards others would be incongruous with the pattern of development in the area, which is characterised by narrow linear frontage plots with a relatively consistent building line.

2.3 The Inspector agreed that the scheme would erode the existing spaciousness and open feel that the lengthy rear gardens and back to back plot layout create to the rear of properties in the area. It was further considered that the retained trees (off-site), would add to the feeling of crampedness of the scheme, in contrast with the character of development in the area generally.

2.4 The Inspector noted that whilst this treed site is not accessible to the public or part of an extensive area of continuous woodland, it nonetheless helps to create a pleasant verdant backdrop to Blenheim Road, of which the existing trees make a significant contribution. While the on-site trees themselves may not be individually of the highest quality, the site and some of the adjacent land is of acknowledged value via the woodland Tree Preservation Order.

2.5 The Inspector remarked that whilst, *“a development can be partly screened [this] is not sufficient justification to grant planning permission”*.

2.6 In terms of biodiversity, the Inspector noted that the site was identified on Natural England’s Priority Habitat Inventory, and the quality of the woodland does not exclude the land from the definition of lowland mixed deciduous woodland. This is supported by RBLP Policy EN12, which states that development should not result in a net loss of biodiversity, regardless of whether it is an identified Green Network.

2.7 He found a lack of evidence to demonstrate that the scheme represented exceptional circumstances - such as affordable housing benefits or provision of housing - that did not outweigh the harm on biodiversity.

2.8 With regard to the living conditions of the future occupiers, the Inspector concluded that with the submission of new plans during the appeal, the internal space standards for the properties were met and the properties would have sufficient private amenity space.

2.9 In terms of highway safety and the need for a S106 legal agreement to secure the provision of a bell mouth table junction, a S106 unilateral undertaking was provided during the course of the appeal; and the Inspector considered this refusal reason to have been overcome. It was further assessed as to whether the upgraded junction would lead to vehicles causing any unacceptable obstruction or delay, resulting in hazardous movement; and the Inspector concluded that this would not be the case, and that the development would not be harmful to highway safety.

2.10 Whilst the Inspector appreciated that a suitable unilateral undertaking had been submitted to secure affordable housing, it was felt that this did not outweigh the previously identified harm caused by the scheme.

2.11 The Inspector concluded that whilst the scheme would not result in unacceptable harm to highway safety and would provide appropriate living conditions for future occupiers, the harm to the character and appearance of the area and biodiversity was determinative in this appeal and as such the appeal was dismissed.

Comment:

This is a welcome decision in which the Inspector was largely in agreement with the reasons for refusal, although he found the proposed development suitable in terms of highways/parking and his discussion on the issue is detailed.

As well as the issue of crampedness, the decision supports the notion that areas of woodland, despite fairly limited public views, nonetheless make an important contribution to the character of the area. It is interesting to note that although the Inspector was generally satisfied that internal space standards and the modest gardens proposed were satisfactory, he still found that the development overall was cramped.

It is also particularly welcomed that the Inspector has acknowledged the intrinsic biodiversity value of the site and felt that the net loss of such was not outweighed by other matters, such as the provision of affordable housing or a pressing need for land for family housing in the Borough, in him being able to dismiss this appeal.

