



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 11 May 2010

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an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State
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Decision date:
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Appeal Ref: APP/K2230/A/09/2116096

Land on the north side of Steele's Lane, south of the Pitfield Reservoir entrance, Wrotham Road, (Meopham Green), MEOPHAM, Kent.

- 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 G B Tatham & Company Limited against the decision of the Gravesham Borough Council.
- The application Ref GR/20090570, dated 16 July 2009, was refused by notice dated 12 October 2009.
- The development proposed is the erection of 2 pairs of semi-detached, 2-storey, 3-bedroom rural affordable dwellings and 2 2-storey terraces each comprising one 3-bedroom and 2 3-bedroom rural affordable dwellings, the laying out of 16 associated car parking spaces, road improvements to Steele's Lane for a new access road and associated highways works to the A227 Wrotham Road.

Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Procedural matters

2. The Appellant provides a copy of a Section 106 Agreement with the Gravesham Borough Council dated 28 January 2010 concerning affordable housing obligations. I have treated it as a material consideration in my determination of the appeal.

Main issues

3. From my reading of the representations, including letters received from local people, and from my inspection of the site, its surroundings and the wider locality, 3 main issues arise in the determination of the appeal. They are:
 - a) the effect upon the openness and visual amenity of the Metropolitan Green Belt (MGB);
 - b) the need for affordable housing in the locality; and
 - c) the location of the appeal site with respect to the availability of, and distances from, local services and facilities.

Reasons

The effect upon the MGB

4. Both national and local planning policies provide for the protection of the Green Belts, their fundamental aim being to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. The most important aspect of Green Belts is their openness, and there is a general presumption against inappropriate development within a Green Belt. That presumption is set out in Policy GB2 in the adopted (1994) Gravesham Borough Local Plan First Review. The construction of new buildings inside a Green Belt is inappropriate unless it is for certain purposes. These can include, in principle, limited affordable housing schemes for local community needs. The main parties agree that the proposed development is not inappropriate development in the MGB, and that is my starting point in the examination of this first main issue.
5. The appeal site is about 0.273 ha in area and is part of a larger agricultural field. It lies outside the village envelope and has a frontage to Wrotham Road of about 56.5 m and a depth of about 48 m. Its extent, coupled with its position to the south, and just beyond the main built-up parts, of Meopham Green, gives it a pronounced open appearance. There are views beyond it towards and into the open countryside beyond it, and this draws further attention to its rural character. There is mainly residential development to the immediate south of Steele's Lane, and so the appeal site has the added attraction and function of separating 2 extensive areas of existing development and allowing the countryside to sweep into what could reasonably be described as the heart of a larger, overall, mainly built-up area. The openness and landscape quality of this highly visible appeal site is acknowledged by its inclusion in both the MGB and the North Downs Special Landscape Area.
6. The appeal scheme comprising 10 dwellings and associated works would be an attractive development in principle within some urban and similar surroundings. The dwellings would be of modest proportions with a style and use of traditional materials of construction which would be in sympathy with many of the surrounding buildings, especially the 2 pairs of cottages to the north. The landscaped front gardens would include hedgerows. Internal room sizes of both the 2- and 3-bedroom dwellings would meet the Council's adopted standards other than the kitchen/diner of the 2-bedroom dwelling which is below the relevant standard, but only by one sq m. All but 2 of the dwellings (units 3 and 8) have garden depths in accordance with the Council's residential layout guidelines, but these exceptions have gardens which meet the adopted standard for the extent of these private amenity areas. The scheme would comply with the Code for Sustainable Homes Level 3 with energy and water efficiency measures at a higher level than those required under current Building Regulations. In these matters of design and construction, therefore, there are considerable advantages to the scheme.
7. In terms of the principle of residential development, there is no doubt that a scheme of the type put forward, with a density of about 36.6 dwellings per hectare, would have a damaging effect upon the openness of the MGB. It

would substantially erode it, conflicting with certain purposes of including land in a Green Belt, especially that of safeguarding the countryside from encroachment. Whilst this would not be a case of neighbouring towns merging into one another, it would result in 2 mainly built-up areas coming together and the consolidation of ribbon development along the Wrotham Road frontage. The visual amenity of the MGB hereabouts includes the attractiveness of the rural scene and its landscape quality, and the intrusion of the development into these natural and unspoilt surroundings would constitute serious harm to it. Any views through the development to the countryside beyond it would not much lessen the impact of the presence of the development. The associated works, particularly the upgrading and widening of Steele's Lane and the proposed highway improvements to Wrotham Road, would draw yet more attention to the urban intrusion into the MGB and emphasise the harm. The proposal therefore conflicts with Local Plan Policy GB2 which seeks to protect the MGB and its Policy C4 which gives priority to the conservation and enhancement of the landscape over other planning considerations.

The need for affordable housing

8. There is a genuine identified local housing need in this part of Kent, and in its Local Plan Policy H6 the Council in principle supports the provision of affordable housing. The need in the Council's Rural Housing Needs Survey for Meopham is estimated to be for up to 35 dwellings. So far only 10 affordable homes have been built in Meopham comprising 6 2-bedroom houses and 4 one-bedroom flats. There is no evidence before me of a realistic prospect of any additional affordable homes being built in Meopham within the foreseeable future. The number, type and mix of dwellings of the current scheme stem from the Appellant's discussions with the Council's Housing Officer, and occupancy could be controlled by way of the planning obligation to ensure that the development remained as an affordable housing scheme in perpetuity for the identified local housing need. The Gravesham Borough Local Plan Second Review (Deposit Version) (2000) has not been adopted and so less than substantial weight should be accorded to it. Nevertheless, it was published more recently than the adopted Local Plan, it is a material consideration of some moment and in the matters outlined in this paragraph the proposal accords with its Policy RA12.

Location, services and facilities

9. Part of my site inspection included a tour of the mainly built-up areas within a 2-3 km radius of the appeal site and the services and facilities which they offer. Meopham Green includes a secondary school, day nursery, leisure centre, doctors' and dentists' surgeries, library, church, public houses, shop, village hall and social club. Some employment opportunities are to be found on the several small industrial estates. The appeal site is at the southern edge of Meopham Green, however, and is therefore at some distance from many of these facilities. For example, it is about 785 m from the village hall, about one km from the secondary school, leisure centre, day nursery and doctors' surgery and as much as 1.9 km from the primary school. These particular distances are comparable with the *under 2 km* to which Planning Policy Guidance (PPG) 13 refers as offering the greatest potential to replace short trips by car. Some residents and their children might be willing to walk

to these destinations on a regular basis, especially during the day and in good weather, but in my opinion they are for the most part too far away for walking to be the usual mode of transport. They are well in excess of the 400 m or so in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions advice note *Encouraging Walking – Advice for Local Authorities 2000* beyond which people are seldom prepared to walk to their intended destinations, and this seems to me to be a useful guideline in this case. At the time of my inspection, during a Tuesday mid-morning, the road was busy, and I have no doubt that it is even busier and noisier at peak times. This would further discourage walking to shops, schools and the like.

10. At Hook Green, about 3.2 km to the north of the appeal site is Meopham Rail Station with trains to London Victoria and Chatham. Attractions include a post office, restaurants, a public house, primary school and various shops including a local retail centre. At Culverstone Green, about 2.3 km to the south of the appeal site, there is a primary school, shop, post office and a petrol filling station. The generally dispersed nature of these facilities is aggravated by the position of all too many of them on the opposite, western, side of the A227 Wrotham Road, a classified road which does not have the benefit of continuous footways. This involves the crossing of a road described by some local people as dangerous. There are bus services along Wrotham Road with bus stops close to the appeal site. The buses are, however, infrequent being generally no more than hourly in both directions during the main part of the day and even less frequent on Sundays. This is a not unusual level of service in many rural areas. No doubt they are important to the people who use them, but I think it unlikely that they would be much used by the prospective residents of the scheme. They would find their cars a far more convenient mode of transport.
11. The Government is committed to providing high quality housing for people who are unable to access or afford market housing. In providing for affordable housing in rural communities, where opportunities for delivering affordable housing tend to be more limited, the aim should be to deliver high quality housing that contributes to the creation and maintenance of sustainable rural communities in market towns and villages. This implies the need to ensure that housing is developed in suitable locations which offer a range of community facilities and with good access to jobs, key services and infrastructure. Meopham, regarded as the linear arrangement of 3 main settlements along Wrotham Road, has a good range of services and facilities, but the distance of many of them from the appeal site, their dispersal and position and the infrequency of the buses which link them lead me to conclude that the appeal site is not a good location for affordable housing. Although the road fronting the site is subject to a 30 mph speed restriction, these considerations would inevitably lead to more travelling, especially by car, contrary to national policy in PPG 13. Nor does the proposal meet Criterion iv of the aforementioned Policy RA12 which seeks suitable locations for affordable housing with respect to its relationship with village services and proximity to public transport services.

Conclusion

12. As with most decisions in town and country planning, a judgement must be made on competing policies and objectives with regard to the particular

circumstances of the case. As I accept, there is an urgent need for land to be found for affordable housing in Meopham, but a vital requirement is that it should be suitably located. In my judgement, the need in this case is outweighed by the seriously damaging effect of the proposed development upon the openness of the MGB and its visual amenities and the distance and dispersed nature of key services and various amenities from the appeal site. The quoted policies which tell against the scheme should prevail. It is in this context that I have accorded limited weight to the Section 106 Agreement.

13. I have taken into account all the other points raised, including the Council's officers' report to the Planning Committee, especially their recommendation in favour of the proposal and the absence of any objection from the Highways Authority. They do not, however, outweigh those planning considerations which have led to my decision to dismiss the appeal.

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