Appeal Decision

Inquiry held between 28 April and 1 May 2015 Site visit made on 1 May 2015

by David M H Rose BA (Hons) MRTPI

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

Decision date: 6 July 2015

Appeal Ref: APP/W1850/A/14/2227072 Land at 144 Aylestone Hill and land to the east of Aylestone Hill, Hereford, HR1 1JJ

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 against a refusal to grant outline planning permission.
- The appeal is made by Bovis Homes Limited against the decision of Herefordshire Council.
- The application Reference P140963/O, dated 28 March 2014, was refused by notice dated 27 August 2014.
- The development proposed is the development of up to 135 homes (including 46 affordable homes), public open space, new access (including demolition of 144 Aylestone Hill), structural landscaping, sustainable drainage measures including balancing ponds and infrastructure and all associated works.

Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

- 2. The application was made in outline with all matters, other than access, reserved for subsequent approval. The Illustrative Masterplan Layout is drawing number EDP 2222/29g.
- 3. Planning permission was refused for two reasons relating to, in short, adverse impacts on landscape character with associated adverse visual effects; and the absence of a Planning Obligation to secure affordable housing and other necessary works/financial contributions. In light of the formal agreement concluded before the close of the Inquiry, the Council no longer relies on this reason. I return to the obligation later in this decision.
- 4. As set out in the Statement of Common Ground, between the appellant and the Council, it was agreed that the Council's housing land supply was 2.47 years (1 April 2014) and, given the absence of a 5 year housing land supply (as required by paragraphs 47 and 49 of the National Planning Policy Framework), the presumption in favour of sustainable development at paragraph 14 of the Framework applies.
- 5. In this regard, where the development plan is absent, silent or relevant policies are out-of-date, planning permission should be granted unless any adverse impacts of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the policies in the Framework taken as a whole.

Main Issues

- 6. The main issues are:-
 - (a) the effect of the proposal on the character and appearance of the landscape;
 - (b) its relationship with the Lugg and Hampton Meadows Site of Scientific Interest and the River Lugg Site of Special Scientific Interest and Special Area of Conservation;
 - the effect on the character and appearance of the Aylestone Hill Conservation Area having particular regard to the stated purpose for its designation;
 - (d) whether there would be any adverse ecological impacts; and
 - (e) in the event that there is harm, whether any of the above, individually or in combination, or any other material consideration, including the overall accessibility of the site to local services and facilities, would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits of the scheme with particular reference to the supply of housing land within the district.

Reasons

The development plan

- 7. The Herefordshire Unitary Development Plan was adopted in March 2007. The following saved policies are of particular relevance to this appeal.
- 8. Policy S1 indicates that the plan '..... will promote development which contributes to the achievement of sustainable development. This means avoiding or minimising adverse impacts on the environment whilst providing necessary dwellings'. The policy is not written in the language of the Framework (in that it does not, for example, reflect the presumption in favour of sustainable development and the need to boost significantly the supply of housing), but many of its criteria, including the protection of the natural environment, mirror the overall objectives of the Framework.
- 9. The protection of the natural environment is the keystone of Policies LA2 and LA3. Policy LA2 provides:- 'Proposals for new development that would adversely affect either the overall character of the landscape, as defined in the Landscape Character Assessment and the Historic Landscape Characterisation or its key attributes or features, will not be permitted'; and Policy LA3 states:- 'Development outside the built up areas of Hereford will only be permitted where it would not have an adverse effect upon the landscape setting of the settlement'.
- 10. Landscape protection is a legitimate objective, consistent with the Framework. However, the policies are written in 'absolute' terms; and whilst the preceding text indicates that:- '..... the intention is not to prevent necessary development......', the implied flexibility is not carried into Policy LA2 itself.
- 11. Moreover, policies LA2 and LA3, when read with Policy H1, which indicates that:- 'The provision of housing in Hereford will be restricted to within defined settlement boundaries', in effect, seeks to give pre-eminence to landscape protection.

- 12. Whilst the plan, like the Framework, has to be read as a whole, the relevant policies in the development plan lack the overall balance of competing interests inherent in the Framework. With an urgent and overdue need to provide additional homes, these restraining policies should not be applied uncritically having regard to the three dimensions of sustainable development set out in the Framework.
- 13. In summary, the plan as a whole no longer provides for the housing needs of the district; its housing policies are out-of-date; and Policies S1, LA2 and LA3 are undermined by the need to identify additional housing land. As such, they carry very limited weight in the consideration of this appeal.
- 14. Nonetheless, the Landscape Character Assessment remains a material consideration and impacts on the landscape, and on the landscape setting of the City, will have to be assessed in light of the imperative in paragraph 14 of the Framework.
- 15. This is the approach the Inspector took in the Holmer appeal decision. The appeal decision at Belmont similarly endorses the landscape Character Assessment; and, in accepting that Policies LA2 and LA3 were broadly consistent with sections 11 and 12 of the Framework, found 'some tension' with the overall approach of national policy guidance. The Inspectors at Ocle Pychard, Much Dewchurch and Much Birch, in identifying conflict with Policies LA2 and LA3 in the former and LA3 in the other two, similarly approached their decisions in accordance with paragraph 14 of the Framework.

Issue (a): The character and appearance of the landscape

Documents

- 16. Starting with a brief 'review' of background documents, Herefordshire's Landscape Character Assessment Supplementary Planning Guidance identifies the appeal site as being located within the 'Principal Settled Farmlands' Landscape Character Type in common with significant tracts of land to the north, east and south-east of the City and beyond the intervening 'Riverside Meadows' to the north-east of the appeal site.
- 17. It is confirmed that the lowland area of central Herefordshire is dominated by this landscape type comprising of 'settled agricultural landscapes of dispersed, scattered farms, relic commons and small villages and hamlets this is a landscape of a notably domestic character, defined chiefly by the scale of its field pattern, the nature and density of its settlement and its traditional land uses'. It is noted that 'the pattern of small to medium sized hedged fields is vulnerable to change'; and the overall strategy for the character type is 'to conserve and enhance the unity of small to medium scale hedged fields the small permanent pastures are gradually declining. These are often species rich and initiatives to safeguard them should be strongly promoted'.
- 18. In turn, the Riverside Meadows are recorded as '......linear, riverine landscapes associated with a flat, generally, well defined, alluvial floodplain, in places framed by steeply rising ground. They are secluded pastoral landscapes, characterised by meandering tree lined rivers, flanked by riverside meadows Settlement is typically absent The unique Lammas Meadows bordering the River Lugg at Hereford are an excellent example of traditionally managed riverside meadows where the historic pattern of cutting and grazing has been continued for centuries'.

- 19. The Herefordshire Historic Landscape Characterisation identifies the appeal site, in common with the adjoining built-up area as 'Type: Urbanisation'.
- 20. Turning to the Urban Fringe Sensitivity Analysis: Hereford and the Market Towns, the study was produced to support the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment with the aim of classifying the level of sensitivity of the urban fringe landscape of Hereford and five market towns. The assessment is made at a broad scale and it is not a capacity study.
- 21. The 'zone' containing the appeal site is identified as 'high sensitivity' with 'no potential for housing':- 'This zone comprises the steep slope between the edge of the city and the Lugg meadows. This slope is highly visible and a key element in the setting of HerefordThis slope is criss-crossed by footpaths which run from the city down onto the Lugg meadows This dense network of footpaths contributes both to the amenity value and to the historic landscape character of the area'.
- 22. The Council also sought to provide context by reference to Policy CAL17 of the former Hereford Local Plan (1996) which indicated that 'The Aylestone Hill/Tupsley ridge should continue to define the limits of the urban area of the City to the north east. Further development on, or in the vicinity of the Aylestone Hill/Tupsley ridge, will not be permitted'.
- 23. In addition, the Aylestone Hill Conservation Area: Planning Guide indicates that 'the principal reason for designating Aylestone Hill a Conservation Area (in 1969) was to protect an important approach into the City'.
- 24. Overall, the Landscape Character Assessment provides a starting point to assess the impact of the proposed development on the character of the landscape; and the Historic Landscape Characterisation, although unpublished, is a robust piece of work which illustrates broad character types and takes into account the impact of twentieth century 'urbanisation' along Aylestone Road and its effect on the adjoining landscape. The Urban Fringe Sensitivity Analysis is not an appropriate tool for assessing the acceptability or otherwise of individual development proposals; Policy CAL17 is defunct with no direct successor; and the Conservation Area statement is of relevance to my consideration of issue (c) below.

The character of the landscape

- 25. The characteristics of the appeal site are undoubtedly influenced by the immediate proximity of the existing urban edge on its western side. Nonetheless, it is currently laid to pasture, bounded by hedges on three sides and sub-divided by an internal hedge consistent with the pattern of small to medium scaled fields. Boundary hedges would be retained and beneficially reinforced and the removal of the dividing hedge would be of limited consequence given its incomplete, and often shrubby, nature. There is nothing to suggest that the land is 'species rich'.
- 26. The characteristics of the appeal site are also influenced by the adjoining landscape character type and the juxtaposition of flat meadows and rising land, albeit with the slope on the appeal site less marked than it is to the south. The meadows themselves have a sense of isolation and tranquillity although they cannot properly be described as secluded as they are crossed by power lines, parts are subject to the effects of nearby road traffic and awareness of the built-up area is a further influencing factor.

- 27. Whilst the proposal would bring built development closer to the meadows, there is nothing to suggest that it would lead to the loss or erosion of landscape elements, features or landcover so as to materially change its character. However, there would inevitably be some further loss of seclusion within the vicinity of the appeal site.
- 28. There is no doubt that the aesthetic and perceptual qualities of the meadows make an important contribution to their value and their strong sense of place and distinctiveness. The adjoining slopes also provide a predominantly rural setting and linear separation from the settlement edge. They have an added historical association with the movement of livestock on to higher ground in times of flood.
- 29. Overall, the effect of the proposal on the Principal Settled Farmlands would be limited to the loss of pasture and a poor hedgerow. However, the impact on the Riverside Meadows would be more marked in so far as there would be a further loss of seclusion; an increased influence of built development on a landscape type where settlement is notably absent; and through the loss of an associated rural setting which provides physical and historic separation from the built-up area.

The appearance of the landscape

Views from the meadows

- 30. Looking at the impact of the proposed development from within the meadows, the view northwards, from Viewpoint 5, about 1.0 kilometre from the site, takes the form of a wide, tree-lined, vista funnelling to the focus of the appeal site. Built development on Aylestone Hill is apparent but a very minor component of the view.
- 31. The proposed development would add a significant block of new housing in a form markedly different to the predominantly linear pattern of housing, albeit with some limited backland plots, along Aylestone Hill. It would lack the robust landscape framework which characterises the hill itself and the new houses would be perceived from this point as spilling down the lower, northern, slope to the edge of the meadows.
- 32. Although maturing landscaping, over and above the existing substantial boundary hedgerows, would soften the outline of the development over time, and planting within the site would help to integrate the development, none of these would be effective in masking its uncharacteristic depth and form.
- 33. Moving on to Viewpoint 4, some 600 metres from the site, the view is broader, the buildings along Aylestone Hill have a more immediate presence and development to the north in the vicinity of the roundabout is also apparent. However, the land bordering the meadows, including the appeal site, has distinct rural qualities which provides a strong landscape framework to the settlement edge. By contrast, the proposal would draw out and intensify the impact of built development resulting in a more immediate and dominant neighbour to the meadows.
- 34. Viewpoint 3, about 300 metres from the site, provides a clearer appreciation of the gently rising nature of the site and the manner in which the rural landscape merges with the settlement edge and buildings sit comfortably within their setting. The proposed development would mask the more subtle

- transition into the built-up area and its anomalous location, projecting into the countryside, would be emphasised by the remaining undeveloped slopes to the south.
- 35. From Viewpoint 2, some 200 metres away, the impression is again of hilltop and hillside dwellings as a subservient component of the landscape. The introduction of new dwellings as proposed would erode this characteristic form and appear as an aberrant mass which would dominate this part of the landscape.
- 36. Moving slightly further away, Viewpoint 1 provides a broader view with the proposed development appearing to wrap around the toe of the hillside and to have a discernible, harmful, relationship with the meadows.
- 37. The adverse visual impacts of the proposed development would undoubtedly be localised but the effects described from the above viewpoints would be progressive, cumulative and at pedestrian pace. Although the development would have a mature backdrop, and it would not break the skyline, the proposal would, nonetheless, form a highly dominant and conspicuous element in the landscape and overwhelm the current harmonious relationship of built and natural form.

Views from Aylestone Hill

- 38. Travelling from the roundabout in the direction of Hereford, the proposed development would appear as a minor extension to the built-up area, well contained by topography and seen in conjunction with buildings leading into the City. Although part of the development, when viewed close to the access road into the site, might be seen to break the ridge to a limited degree, the effect would be fleeting and of minimal consequence.
- 39. Looking wider at the route into Hereford from the vicinity of Lugg Bridge and thereafter into Aylestone Hill, the foreground rural landscape is an integral part of the setting to the City. However, entrance into the built-up area is by degree and there is nothing to suggest any meaningful 'gateway'. In this regard, the development of the appeal site would not have a marked effect on the manner in which the City is approached from the north.

Public rights of way

40. The appeal site is crossed by a public footpath close to its northern edge. It is already influenced by the presence of frontage dwellings, their rear gardens and various boundary treatments. However, the overwhelming context is predominantly rural. The route would be retained but, given its adjacency to the site access road, its greater formality and the proximity of new houses to the south, the experience for those using it would be changed for the worse. However, with new landscaping, the construction of a balancing pond, and unaffected aspect to the north, the overall effect on its amenity would be limited.

Summary conclusion

41. The appeal site lies on the edge of the Principal Settled Farmlands landscape character type and it has close association with the adjacent Riverside Meadows. The Historic Landscape Characterisation gives primacy to urbanising influences whereas the Urban Fringe Sensitivity Analysis identifies it as having high sensitivity in landscape terms.

- 42. In reality the site is neither entirely urban nor wholly rural. It lies between the two but, given the manner in which development at Aylestone Hill, when viewed from the meadows, is embraced and largely subsumed by the landscape, the lasting impression is that the appeal site has far greater affinity to the countryside than it does to the City.
- 43. On this basis the proposed development would have a moderate adverse impact on the character of the landscape, with particular reference to the Riverside Meadows and a very significant harmful impact on views from the meadows within the vicinity of the appeal site.

Issue (b): The Lugg and Hampton Meadows Site of Scientific Interest and the River Lugg Site of Special Scientific Interest and Special Area of Conservation

- 44. The Lugg and Hampton Meadows Site of Special Scientific Interest is located within 20 metres of the appeal site. Its western boundary is formed by the Lugg Rhea, a tributary watercourse to the River Lugg. The River Lugg flows some 220 metres to the east of the site and forms part of the River Wye Special Area of Conservation and is a Site of Special Scientific Interest in its own right.
- 45. The Lugg Meadow is one of the Herefordshire Wildlife's Trusts flagship reserves; it supports important vegetation (including fritillary); lowland meadows are listed as priority habitat in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan; and Lugg Meadow is the largest of only 14 surviving Lammas meadows in the UK.
- 46. The Trust, in particular, expresses concern at the inevitable greater recreational use of the meadows by new residents and their domestic pets with potential for increased trampling, dog walking and fouling, vandalism and noise; and it is critical of the level of assessment undertaken by others and the conclusions reached.
- 47. Despite the misgivings of the Trust, Natural England raises no objections to the proposals, subject to conditions, which could be secured as part of any grant of planning permission. The Council's Ecologist similarly identifies no over-riding issues having acknowledged that greater use may occur.
- 48. Whilst attaching very significant weight to the on-site experience of the Trust, and its related concerns, there is no tangible and conclusive evidence to show the likely increased impact of a larger adjacent population and the degree to which potential adverse impacts might or might not be capable of management or mitigation. On this basis, it is not possible to conclude, on the 'balance of probability', that material adverse effects would arise sufficient to count against the proposal.
- 49. Moreover, the Herefordshire Green Infrastructure Strategy identifies the possibility of connecting Aylestone Park to the meadows and developing a positive management strategy for access and interpretation in order to allow for a more extensive and functional provision of green space. In acknowledging that 'it is essential that the conservation status of the Lugg Meadows is not compromised by inappropriate recreational activity' it clearly anticipates increased usage.

- 50. Moving on to concerns about land drainage, the meadows are subject to annual flooding and the lower part of the appeal site, where the sustainable drainage ponds would be located, is recorded as being susceptible to waterlogging and flooding. The quality of water discharging from the appeal site into the Lugg Rhea is of paramount importance and there is no reason to suppose that an appropriate system could not be designed, implemented and maintained to safeguard against potential pollutants.
- 51. As to the suggestion that the appeal site forms an important buffer zone, the general principle that the likelihood of development adversely affecting a designated site increases with proximity has to be examined on a site specific basis. In this instance there is insufficient evidence to show that the current undeveloped nature of the appeal site forms a vital role and that a 'cautionary approach' beyond the proposed safeguarding planning conditions is justified.

Issue (c): The Aylestone Hill Conservation Area

- 52. It is an agreed position between the Council and the appellant that the proposed development would not harm the character or appearance of the Conservation Area or its setting. In this regard, the Aylestone Hill Conservation Area owes much to its townscape and landscape qualities having particular regard to its large Victorian and Edwardian houses set within extensive mature grounds with a variety of trees cloaking the ridge. These have been supplemented by later housing in smaller plots.
- 53. Taken as a whole, although the designated area forms a backdrop to the appeal site, I agree that the further addition of houses, with appropriate design and sensitive planting within the site, would not have any material effect on the character or appearance of the Conservation Area or its setting.
- 54. The provision of vehicular access into the site would require the demolition of 144 Aylestone Hill, a detached 1930's house of typical suburban design. It lacks any special quality and its loss would not have a marked effect on the attributes of the designated area. As such the character and appearance of the Conservation Area would be preserved and there would be no harm to the heritage asset.
- 55. In terms of the stated purpose of designation, notably 'to protect an important approach into the City', with that of the A465 to the north-east identified as of particular importance, the combination of the rise of the hill, the line of the ridge and the foreground of Lugg Meadows and open agricultural land would remain the predominant characteristic.

Issue (d): Ecological impacts

- 56. It is common ground between the Council and the appellant that the ecological evidence demonstrates that there would be no net adverse effects on the ecology of the site and that the proposals would have the potential to improve habitat connectivity across the site.
- 57. For my part, with the objections of ALMA and the Wildlife Trust in mind, it is not uncommon for ecology professionals to approach assessment in a different way and to be critical of the methodology adopted by their counterpart. Despite the notion that the quality of the grassland might be improved (supported by the Trust's observation at the site visit of an area of MG5 grassland within part of the northern field), and that the central

- hedgerow might be restored through appropriate management and maintenance, the totality of the evidence points to the appeal site falling well short of having significant ecological interest.
- 58. The alleged presence of great crested newts within the locality is not supported by any transparent evidence and the surveys undertaken point to a contrary conclusion. Even if their existence were subsequently to be established, great crested newts enjoy statutory protection and a condition of any grant of planning permission requiring works to be undertaken in accordance with an agreed ecological management plan would provide a further safeguard.

Issue (e): The planning balance

Accessibility

- 59. Although ALMA sought to diminish the sustainability credentials of the site, by reference to the distances to services and the limitations of the existing bus services, Hereford is the largest settlement in the district and the provision of new housing on the edge of the City is a certain consequence.
- 60. Inevitably, there will be instances where certain established facilities lie beyond convenient walking distance, or topography might be an impediment, but the inescapable conclusion remains, overall, that the accessibility to a range of services by a choice of transport modes would not be lacking to a degree which would warrant the dismissal of the appeal on that ground. Indeed, the proposal would be consistent with the aim of minimising the need to travel given the proximity of the services and facilities offered by Hereford as a whole.

The Planning Obligation

- 61. The agreement made under section 106 of the Town and Country Act 1990 would secure the provision of affordable housing units (35% of the total number of dwellings to be built); financial contributions for education provision; a financial contribution or works for the provision of an off-site sports pitch; and a financial contribution for enhanced cycling provision.
- 62. It is confirmed that no planning obligation has previously been entered into in respect of the specific infrastructure projects identified in the agreement; and the contributions sought are calculated on a formula basis by reference to household size. The deed is compliant with the Community Infrastructure Levy Regulations 2010 (as amended), and the guidance in the Planning Practice Guidance. Accordingly, it meets the relevant tests.

Benefits

63. The starting point is undoubtedly the contribution that the appeal proposal would make to the supply of housing, both market and affordable, in a district with a marked shortfall of housing land and a persistent underdelivery of new homes. The Unitary Development Plan no longer makes provision for the housing needs of the district and the emerging local plan does not as yet identify specific housing sites and the land that will be needed. Substantial weight attaches to the provision of much needed housing, its range of house types, and the related economic benefits in construction and subsequent occupation, in accordance with the Government's objective of boosting significantly the supply of housing land.

64. The site is in an accessible location and well-related to the built-up area of the City; it would be capable of delivering considerable on-site biodiversity enhancements, through the landscaping and sustainable drainage proposals; the provision of green infrastructure and recreational assets; and measures to encourage walking, cycling and the use of public transport. The potential to remove some existing septic tanks from the site, and to reduce the risk of pollution to the Lugg Rhea, would also be beneficial.

Conclusion

- 65. In the final analysis the appeal proposal would deliver a substantial and important package of benefits with an anticipation of completing the proposed houses within a period of five years. The moderate harm to the character of the landscape and the very significant harm to the appearance of the landscape are counter-balancing considerations.
- 66. The test is whether the harm would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits of the scheme. In this regard, the proposal would be at odds with defining elements of landscape character; it would not represent a logical or well-related extension to the built-up area; and it would have highly intrusive impacts on the intrinsic landscape qualities of the Lugg Meadows. However, it is to be acknowledged that the landscape does not enjoy any policy protection and, by implication, less weight attaches to the harm arising.
- 67. Nonetheless, the legacy of these combined adverse effects would be highly damaging to the extent that they would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits of the scheme in conflict with the National Planning Policy Framework when read as a whole.
- 68. Although the proposal would be at odds with development plan Policies LA2 and LA3 and also with S1, in that the provision of necessary dwellings would be outweighed by the degree of harm to the landscape, the plan as a whole no longer reflects the priorities of national policy set out in paragraph 14 of the Framework. As indicated earlier, the above policies merit limited weight with the Framework providing the more compelling policy context.
- 69. I have considered all other matters raised but find nothing of sufficient materiality to lead me to a different conclusion.

David MH Rose

Inspector

APPEARANCES

FOR THE LOCAL PLANNING AUTHORITY:

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FOR AYLESTONE AND LUGG MEADOWS ASSOCIATION (ALMA):

Graeme Whittaker (Advocate and Witnesss)

He called

John Faulkner Hereford Civic Society

David Whitehead David Whitehead and Associates¹

¹ Qualifications and professional background set out in Statement

INTERESTED PERSONS:

Dr Richard Williams Herefordshire Campaign to Protect Rural England

Antonia Hastings Local Resident

Neville Hart Nature Reserves Manager BSc (Ecology) Herefordshire Wildlife Trust

Councillor Brian Wilcox Ward Member

Mary Merron Local Resident

Alexandra Ritson Local Resident

DOCUMENTS SUBMITTED AT THE INQUIRY

- 1 Opening Submissions on behalf of the Appellant
- 2 Herefordshire Wildlife Trust Statements
- 3 Herefordshire Campaign to Protect Rural England Statement
- 4 Photograph of fritillaries
- 5 Appeal decision APP/W1850/A/14/2228744
- 6 High Court Transcript:- Cheshire East Borough Council and (1) Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (2) Richborough Estates Partnerships LLP
- 7 Herefordshire Green Infrastructure Strategy (February 2010) (Extract)
- 8 Draft Planning Conditions (submitted 29 April and 1 May)
- 9 Statement of Compliance with 'CIL Regs' (CD47B)
- 10 Supplementary Statement on Compliance with the pooling restrictions introduced by the Community Infrastructure Levy Regulations 2010 (as amended)
- 11 Deed of Planning Obligation dated 27 April 2015 (CD47A) (amendments initialled by both parties)
- 12 Closing submissions Herefordshire Council
- 13 Closing submissions ALMA
- 14 Closing submissions Bovis Homes Ltd