



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 20 October 2023

by C Shearing BA (Hons) MA MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 7 November 2023

Appeal Ref: APP/E0345/W/23/3319651

Caversham Park Road, Caversham, Reading RH4 6QN

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 against a refusal to grant approval required under Schedule 2, Part 16, Class A of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015 (as amended).
 - The appeal is made by CK Hutchison Networks (UK) Ltd against the decision of Reading Borough Council.
 - The application Ref 230071, dated 20 January 2023, was refused by notice dated 10 March 2023.
 - The development proposed is described as '5G telecoms installation: H3G 20m street pole and additional equipment cabinets'.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. The provisions of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015 as amended (the GPDO), under Article 3(1) and Schedule 2, Part 16, Class A, Paragraph A.3(4) require the local planning authority, and therefore the Secretary of State, to assess the proposed development solely on the basis of its siting and appearance, taking into account any representations received. My determination of this appeal has been made on the same basis.
3. The principle of development is established by the GPDO and the provisions of Schedule 2, Part 16, Class A of the GPDO do not require regard to be had to the development plan. I have had regard to the policies of the development plan and the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) only insofar as they are a material consideration relevant to matters of siting and appearance.

Main Issues

4. The main parties do not dispute that the appeal scheme meets the requirements of Class A, Part 16, Schedule 2 of the GPDO such that it would constitute permitted development, subject to the condition that prior approval must be sought in relation to its siting and appearance.
5. The main issues are:
 - the effect of the siting and appearance of the proposed installation on the character and appearance of the area, the designated Local Green Space and Public Open Space to the north, and the adjacent oak tree, and;

- if any harm would occur, whether this is outweighed by the need for the installation to be sited as proposed, taking into account any suitable alternatives.

Reasons

Character and Appearance

6. The appeal relates to an area of grassland to the southern side of Caversham Park Road, close to its junction with Northbrook Road and bound to the south by Holyrood Close. An area of designated Local Green Space and Public Open Space exists to the north which includes tennis courts and areas of grassland and woodland. By contrast, the southern side of Caversham Park Road is predominantly residential.
7. This part of Caversham Park Road has a particularly green and spacious character, arising from the grass verges next to the road together with mature trees and hedgerows, and these attributes contribute positively to its character. The appeal site lies on the outside of a wide curve in the road and as a result, it is visible from fairly long distances along Caversham Park Road, as well as from Northbrook Road to the south.
8. Caversham Park Road is a busy route and displays a variety of street furniture including lampposts and signage. These are generally of a simple design with slim profiles, and the supporting plans show the lampposts to be approximately 8m in height. By comparison, the proposed mast would be much taller and have a significantly thicker profile. Consequently, the mast would be in stark contrast to the existing character of this part of the street and would be visually prominent in long views from the surrounding roads, where it would stand out as an unusual and incongruous feature.
9. By reason of their height and utilitarian appearance, the ground level cabinets would be heavily at odds with the spacious and verdant character of the area. The visual impact of their siting would be exacerbated by their forward position on the grass verge, where they would be prominent along the curve of Caversham Park Road. It is not apparent how the proposal would blend into the existing street scene, as alleged, nor how a grey colour would help assimilation in this location.
10. For the reasons given, the proposal would cause harm to the character and appearance of the area. Insofar as they are a material consideration, the proposal would be contrary to the aims of policies CC7 and OU3 of the Reading Borough Local Plan 2019 (the LP), which require high quality design that maintains local character and does not have an adverse impact on visual amenity.

Designated Open Space

11. The visibility of the mast would extend to the designated open space to the north, which the LP describes as one which contributes to the health and well-being of communities. The lower levels of the mast would be screened to some degree by the trees which line the northern side of Caversham Park Road. However, by reason of its height and diameter, the upper levels of the mast would be visually prominent above the tree line and detract from the verdant character and relative tranquillity of that open space. As such, the proposal would conflict with policies EN7 and EN8 of the LP, which seek to prevent the

erosion of the quality of these designated spaces through insensitive development on adjoining land.

Oak Tree

12. The proposal would be located close to a substantial oak tree. The Council state it was formerly part of the historic landscape of Caversham Park and is registered as a 'notable tree' on the Woodland Trust's Ancient Tree Inventory, being approximately 200 years old. Today the tree has a substantial canopy, which can be seen across the wider area and it has high amenity value which contributes significantly to local character. Despite the distance of the proposed installation from the trunk of the tree, the Council report that the roots of the tree could reach this location, particularly due to an unfavourable root environment to the south of the tree.
13. In the absence of any evidence relating to the effects of the proposal on the root system of the tree, I cannot be satisfied that the effects of its siting would be acceptable in this respect. In turn, the proposal would conflict with Policy EN14 of the LP and the Council's Tree Strategy 2021 which relate to protection of important trees.

Alternative Sites

14. The proposed equipment would provide 5G coverage and improve service in the surrounding area. The appellant has provided a map showing the search area for the telecommunications equipment, which is small and confined to the grass verge surrounding the appeal site. The associated text states that the installation should be located close to this area, although it is not defined how close it should be in order to achieve its purpose. In addition, drawings showing the existing levels of coverage, and the coverage which would result from the proposal, have not been provided. Together these factors amount to a lack of clarity surrounding the need for the proposed installation and the extent of the search area.
15. I have found the proposal would cause harm through its siting and appearance. Other options that might be available are therefore an important consideration. In line with the requirements of the Framework, the appellant states that they have explored the possibility of erecting antennas on existing buildings, masts or other structures. These were found not to be possible and, based on the evidence before me, I have no strong reason to disagree.
16. The appellant has shown that six other sites around the search area were considered and provides reasons why they were discounted. However, these reasons are brief and unsupported by any further evidence to suggest why they would be unviable or more harmful than the appeal scheme. I observed that some of those sites could be less visually prominent, further from prominent historic trees, and that the widths and characteristics of the footpaths vary in those locations. There is not evidence to suggest that any concerns relating to visibility splays could not be reasonably addressed through appropriate siting.
17. Consequently, even if the need for the installation close to the search area had been adequately demonstrated, in the absence of clear and persuasive evidence as to why these alternative sites have been discounted, I am not satisfied that less harmful alternatives have been properly explored. The proposal would conflict with Policy OU3 of the LP which requires that alternative

sites and site-sharing options have been fully investigated. For these reasons I find the siting and appearance of the proposed development to be unacceptable.

Other Matters

18. I recognise that there are wider social and economic benefits that would arise from the proposal, and acknowledge the comments written in support of it. However, the GPDO is clear that the only considerations here should be the siting and appearance of the proposal.
19. The appellant refers to an appeal decision which granted prior approval for a 20m monopole in the London Borough of Southwark¹. However, the main issues and circumstances in that appeal were different to those before me.

Conclusion

20. For the reasons given, the appeal is dismissed.

C Shearing

INSPECTOR

¹ Appeal ref APP/A5840/W/20/3254830