Planning Inspectorate

Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 13 January 2026

by V Goldberg BSc (Hons) MSc MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 23rd January 2026

Appeal Ref: APP/Z3825/W/25/3374616
Woodside Equestrian Centre, Forest Road, Colgate, West Sussex RH12 4TF

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended) against a refusal to grant planning permission.
- The appeal is made by Mrs S Novell against the decision of Horsham District Council.
- The application Ref is DC/24/1405.
- The development proposed is retention of top surface of existing hardcore areas and continued use of part of land for the storage of lorry containers and touring caravans.

Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. The application form states that the development was completed in February 2024. During my site visit, I observed that the appeal site is covered with hardstanding, and that containers and touring caravans were being stored on the land, although not in the locations shown on the proposed site plan. I have therefore assessed the appeal on the basis that the development has already been carried out.

3. An amended plan has been submitted with the appeal. It relocates the storage area away from the roadside, reduces the number of caravans, removes part of the hardstanding, and proposes the planting of a native hedgerow along the roadside boundary. However, these changes represent a fundamental alteration to the original proposal. What is considered at appeal must be essentially the same scheme that was before the local planning authority. In this case, the amended plan would amount to a different application. For this reason, I will not accept it.

Main Issues

4. The main issues are:

- whether the development is in a suitable location having regard to the Council's spatial strategy; and
- the effect of the development on the character and appearance of the area, having particular regard to the effect on the High Weald National Landscape (NL).

Reasons

Spatial Strategy

5. The appeal site lies beyond any defined built up area boundary and is therefore within the countryside for the purposes of the Horsham District Planning Framework 2015 (HDPF). Policy 26 of the HDPF is a strategic policy aimed at protecting the rural character and undeveloped nature of the countryside. It requires that proposals outside built up area boundaries be essential to a countryside location and meet at least one of four specified criteria.

6. Whilst the appellant states that the development is necessary to sustain the rural equestrian business, no substantive evidence has been provided to demonstrate that it is essential to a countryside location. While the storage is described as part of the equestrian diversification of the business, the evidence before me does not show that the development is functionally connected to, or required for, the operation of the equestrian enterprise. Accordingly, the development is not justified in this location and therefore fails to meet the policy requirements for development in the countryside.

7. Policy 10 of the HDPF supports sustainable rural economic development, but only where proposals contribute to the wider rural economy and are either accommodated within buildings suitable for conversion or deliver a substantial environmental improvement. The appeal scheme has not been shown to meet these requirements. It has not been demonstrated that it makes a meaningful contribution to the wider rural economy, it is not contained within any appropriate building, and it does not deliver a substantial enhancement to the environment.

8. Furthermore, Policy 26 supports rural development only where it is demonstrated to be essential to a countryside location; no such essential need has been established. Although Policy 29 of the HDPF addresses equestrian-related development, the evidence before me does not demonstrate that the appeal scheme forms part of, or is necessary for, any equestrian use on the site. For the above reasons, the development is contrary to Policies 10 and 26 of the HDPF.

Character and Appearance and effect on NL

9. The appeal site is accessed from, and fronts onto, Forest Road, a rural lane with a verdant character, enclosed by hedgerows, mature trees, and dense vegetation. The site lies within the NL and is set in a predominantly rural, wooded, and pastoral landscape, characterised by extensive forested areas, open fields, and established equestrian activity. The surrounding area is natural in appearance, with limited built development and a sense of countryside tranquillity.

10. The amended duty on relevant authorities in respect of their interactions with statutory purposes of National Landscapes, requires relevant authorities in exercising or performing any functions in relation to National Landscapes, to seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of these areas. This aligns with Policy 30 of the HDPF which states that the natural beauty and public enjoyment of the NL will be conserved and enhanced and opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of their special qualities will be promoted.

11. The extensive hard-surfaced area and its use for the storage of lorry containers and touring caravans adversely affects the natural pastoral character of the appeal site and the surrounding landscape. This is because the extent of the hard surfacing erodes the verdant, undeveloped quality of the site, and results in a visually intrusive expanse of artificial surfacing. In addition, the storage of lorry containers and touring caravans along the site boundary introduces bulky and utilitarian features that are at odds with the rural setting, thereby intensifying the visual harm and further diminishing the pastoral landscape character.

12. While the roadside vegetation provides a degree of screening from Forest Road, during my site visit, the light-coloured touring caravans were visible through gaps in the vegetation. Furthermore, views into the site at the access point are readily perceived when travelling along Forest Road. In any event, the statutory duty to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of National Landscapes is not confined to publicly accessible viewpoints.

13. The appellant has submitted photographs to demonstrate that the pre-existing surface of the appeal site was hard surfaced. Although the appeal statement details that the two trial holes were dug to the southeast of the lorry containers and the southeast of the touring caravans, the precise locations of these holes are not identified on a plan or photograph. As a result, it is not possible to verify their exact locations.

14. Furthermore, the trial holes are limited in size and provide only a snapshot of ground conditions at discrete points. As such, they are insufficient to demonstrate the extent, continuity, or overall footprint of any alleged historic hard surfacing. This is particularly relevant given that photographs submitted by the appellant show that a section of the site was grassed prior to the installation of the current hard surface. In addition, the 2001 aerial image relied upon by the appellant does not support the assertion that the red line area has been hard surfaced for a considerable period.

15. This is because, the 2001 image shows a clear visual distinction between the surface of the appeal site and the hard-surfaced area beyond the access. While the image may indicate that the site was used for storage at that time, this appears to have been limited in scale, comprising two touring caravans only. In addition, the surface itself appears to consist of worn grass rather than any formalised or engineered hard surfacing. As a result, based on the evidence before me, the recently installed hard surface is not comparable to any historic hard surfaced area. Nor is the previous storage of two touring caravans comparable in nature or intensity to the use now proposed.

16. The extensive hard surfacing, together with the use of the site for the storage of up to eight lorry containers and ten touring caravans, is more harmful to the character and appearance of the area, and the NL, than the previous condition of the land. The erosion of the site's verdant, undeveloped qualities, combined with the visually intrusive expanse of artificial surfacing and the presence of bulky, utilitarian structures, fundamentally undermines the natural pastoral character of the landscape. Consequently, the development fails to protect, conserve, or enhance the natural landscape character.

17. For the reasons above, the development unacceptably effects the character and appearance of the area and fails to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the NL. It is therefore contrary to policies 25, 30 and 33 of the HDPF. Amongst other things these policies require development to protect, conserve and enhance landscape character, conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the NL and relate sympathetically with the surrounding landscape.

18. Reference is also made to Policy 23 of the HDPF which relates to Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation. Given that the appeal does not relate to gypsy and traveller accommodation, this policy is not relevant to the determination of the appeal.

Other Matters

19. Within the appeal statement, the appellant asserts that the proposed development would not harm the ancient woodland located to the north of the site. While the Council's Tree Officer did not raise an objection on this basis and it was not cited as a reason for refusal, this does not, in itself, demonstrate that the scheme is acceptable when assessed against the main issues identified in this appeal.

20. While it took the Council over a year to reach a decision, and the appellant considers that there was no attempt by the Council to seek additional information or amendments, it remains the appellants responsibility to submit a scheme that is acceptable in planning terms. The time taken to determine an application does not outweigh or negate any planning harm identified, nor does it demonstrate that the proposal complies with the development plan.

Conclusion

21. The development conflicts with the development plan and material considerations do not indicate that the appeal should be decided other than in accordance with it. The appeal is therefore dismissed.

V Goldberg

INSPECTOR