PLANNING AND DESIGN AND ACCESS STATEMENTS AND HERITAGE ASSESSMENT

PROPOSAL : Construction of alternative access road to serve approved affordable housing development
ADDRESS : Land at the rear of former St John's School, Mill Lane, Wetley Rocks, ST9 0BN
APPLICANT : JCM Group Holdings (UK) Limited
DATE : July 2019 JOB No.: 2010.1724

INTRODUCTION

The Planning Application

The application proposes an alternative road access to the one that was approved within application SMD/2014/0777 for the erection of six affordable homes on land at the rear of the former St John's School. The approved scheme is served off a "wavy" road whose layout and length were dictated by the need to provide a less than 1 in 8 gradient to achieve adoptable standards.

This application proposes to relocate the road to an access further to the north and with a route that follows the northern boundary of the field, and then the western boundary. The application has been generated by local concern about the positioning of the approved access, and a wish to provide an access road that can be better assimilated into the local landscape.

The application site is located adjacent to St John's Church which is a Grade II Listed Building.

Context

The village of Wetley Rocks is a fairly long and narrow settlement along the A520 (Main Road), Mill Lane, Cheadle Road (A522) and Randles Lane. It has a church (St John's), a school (St John's Primary School), a village hall (Wetley Rocks Village Hall), a petrol filling station that incorporates a convenience shop and a public house (The Powys Arms PH). Other than these buildings, the village is residential.

The application site forms part of the field to the east of the site that has recently been granted planning permission for the erection of six affordable homes. The field includes a hard-cored farm track has been laid between the proposed housing site and Main Road, roughly along the western and northern boundaries of the field. This track was formed with the benefit of a planning permission granted in 2002 and includes a large field gate at its junction with Main Road. This application proposes that this is converted into a permanent road access to the affordable housing development.

The current planning permission for the existing road layout is SMD/2014/0777. It approves an access opposite 42 Main Road and about 80m north of the junction of Mill Lane. The nature of its layout gives the approved road a high profile in the landscape. Whilst that may settle down in the future with the help of landscaping, it will in the meantime maintain an odd and heavily engineered appearance, particularly when seen from the elevated Main Road (which will be the main viewpoint for the public driving or walking past.

The application proposes to relocate the access to the existing field gate near its northern boundary, in a position that has been approved in earlier applications. This access point does not face residential property on the opposite side of Main Road and will not, therefore receive the same concerns raised in the recently approved scheme. Given the greater distance between the proposed access and the junction of Main Road and Mill Lane, it will overcome local concerns that the approved access is too close to the Mill Lane junction. It will also be capable of providing longer visibility splays.

Visually, the proposed access road will sit in the landscape better with the use of fencing and hedging. This will be provided either side of the road and set slightly away from the road edge to allow drainage swathes.

The adjacent St John's Church is a Grade II Listed Building that was listed in 1986. The English Heritage entry states: -

Chapel of Ease. 1833-4, chancel by J. Beardmore, 1901. Coursed dressed and squared stone; slate roof; verge parapets and chamfered eaves band; west tower, combined nave and aisles, chancel. Tower: of 3 stages with angle buttresses canted out, crenellated parapet, labelled pointed Y-tracery, bell chamber openings; pointed door to west is the only entrance to the church. Nave and aisles: of 5 bays divided by 2-stage buttresses; string under labelled pointed Y-tracery windows. Chancel: lower, of 2 bays divided by 2-stage buttresses, 3-light pointed east window and high-level window to both sides of eastern bay; square-headed with 2 trefoil lights. Interior: arcades of 5 bays, octagonal columns and pointed arches.

Planning Policy and Evaluation

This statement will not repeat the policy support given to affordable housing. The planning application relates only to a repositioned access road and the policy analysis will address only the impact the new road will have on the development plan and the NPPF.

The application site is located in an area indicated in the Staffordshire Moorlands Local Plan as being in an area of open countryside that has been included in the North Staffordshire Green Belt. The proposal must therefore be judged against the policies contained in the relevant rural and green belt policies of the Staffordshire Moorlands Core Strategy and the National Planning Policy Framework. The Core Strategy was adopted in March 2014 and its policies carry great weight.

Green Belt policy is contained in **Policy R1- Rural Diversification**. This states that inappropriate development which is otherwise acceptable within the terms of the policy will need to be justified by very special circumstances. The following paragraphs will show that the scheme does not represent inappropriate development.

Policy DC2- The Historic Environment states that the Council will seek to safeguard and seek to enhance the historic environment

Comment: Given its close proximity it would be fair to state that the application building lies within the area of influence that could impact on the Listed Building. However, the current proposal will have less of an impact that the approved layout given that the road will no longer run alongside the graveyard. It is considered that the proposal will result in no harm to the heritage asset, that is St John's Church.

The National Planning Policy Framework was published in February 2019 and has at its heart a presumption in favour of sustainable development.

Paragraph 133 of the Framework states that the "fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open" and that "the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence". It is considered that the proposal does not represent sprawl beyond an urban area and does not reduce openness. In this respect, the critical question is- does resiting an approved road using the same design and materials in a different part of the same field and using an access that maximises highway visibility, decrease openness. It is considered that the answer is clearly in the negative.

Paragraphs 143-146 set out the Government's view on what developments are inappropriate or not inappropriate. Paragraph 146 states that engineering operations are not inappropriate in the Green Belt provided they preserve the openness of the Green Belt and do not conflict with the purposes of including land in Green Belt. It is considered that the proposal represents engineering operations and as stated above, maintains openness and does not conflict with the five purposes of the Green Belt. The proposal is not, therefore, considered to be "inappropriate development".

Paragraph 189 requires planning applications that affect an historic asset (in this case the Church of St John) to describe the significance of the asset and to assess its impact.
Comment: Given its close proximity it would be fair to state that the application proposal lies within the area of influence that could impact on the Listed Building. However, the only works close to the church relate to amendments to ground works associated with the adjusted road. It is considered that the proposal will result in no harm to the heritage asset- that is St John's Church.

DESIGN

Use

The proposal is for the construction of a road to adoptable standard.

Amount

The application site measures 0.47 hectares and accommodates a road and service strips measuring 7.9m wide which increases to 16m wide to include the drainage swathes.

Layout

The layout is illustrated on the application drawings and shows the resited road along the western and northern boundary of the site. The proposed church car park and graveyard extension are sited near the churchyard for ease of access.

Scale

The scale of the proposal has to some extent increased over the approved scheme by virtue of it proposing a longer length of road.

Landscaping

The dimensions of the site are capable of accommodating a significant amount of landscaping. Details of proposed planting are indicated on the submitted drawings.

Appearance

The development has been designed to use landscaping to integrate the proposed road into the character and appearance of the site.

ACCESS

VEHICULAR AND TRANSPORT LINKS

The site has easy access onto the A520, a major highway linking Leek with Cheadle and south moorlands settlements, and beyond that, the Potteries.

INCLUSIVE ACCESS

In that the proposal is for the construction of a road with a gentler gradient, the development provides for better use by less abled people. The proposed path link between the church car park and the churchyard will be constructed to standards that allow use by the less abled.