



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 1 May 2026

by **R Gravett BA(Hons) DipTP MRTPI**

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 1st June 2026

Appeal Ref: 6004430

Land to the south of Bolton Fold Farm, Alston Lane, Longridge, Preston PR3 3BN

- 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 Mr Forshaw of N&K Forshaw Rental Properties against the decision of Ribble Valley Borough Council.
 - The application Ref is 3/2025/0141.
 - The development proposed is erection of 3no. commercial buildings (10 commercial units Use Class B2, B8 and sui generis) and associated works.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. The buildings were constructed prior to the submission of the planning application and on my site visit I saw that some of the units were in commercial use. I have therefore determined the appeal on the basis that the development has already taken place.
3. I have used the description of development given on the Council's decision notice in the banner heading above, as this reflects the amendment made to the description during consideration of the planning application. However, I have removed reference to 'regularisation' as this is not an act of development.

Main Issues

4. The main issues are:
 - whether the development is in a suitable location for commercial buildings having regard to the development plan strategy for the area;
 - whether the development is in a suitable location for commercial buildings having regard to opportunities for a choice of transport modes; and
 - the effect of the development on the character and appearance of the area.

Reasons

Development plan strategy

5. The commercial buildings have been built on agricultural land to the east of Alston Lane, outside the defined settlement area of Longridge, a main settlement. As such, the development is within the countryside for planning policy purposes.

6. Paragraph 88 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) requires that planning decisions should enable the sustainable growth and expansion of all types of business in rural areas, including through well-designed, new buildings, and the diversification of agricultural and other land-based rural businesses. Consistent with this, Policy EC1 of the Core Strategy 2008-2028 (2014) (CS) supports, in principle, developments that contribute to farm diversification. CS Policy DMB1 further supports proposals intended to support business growth and the local economy but nonetheless states that supporting information for farm diversification may be requested where appropriate.
7. The appellant asserts that the commercial development provides an additional income stream for a dairy enterprise and contributes positively to the long-term resilience of Bolton Fold Farm. However, I have no substantive evidence before me to support this, particularly any detailed information in respect of the extent or nature of the agricultural landholding or enterprises. In the absence of satisfactory evidence on this matter, I am unable to ascertain how the commercial development relates to the farm, whether it is needed for its short- or long-term viability, or how it sits within other wider diversification plans, if at all. Accordingly, based on the evidence, CS policies EC1, DMB1 and paragraph 88 of the Framework lend little support to the development before me.
8. CS Policy EC1 and Key Statement DS1 direct employment development towards the main settlements of Clitheroe, Whalley and Longridge, together with the identified strategic employment opportunities. CS Policy DMG2 states that development should be in accordance with this development strategy and should support the spatial vision. Outside defined settlement areas, it states that development must meet at least one of the criteria listed. The first criterion is that the development should be essential to the local economy or the social well-being of the area.
9. 'Essential' is not defined in the CS, but taking its ordinary adjective meaning, in this case it would mean development which is absolutely necessary or extremely important to the local economy. To my mind, this establishes a high-bar, which I would expect given the restraint typically given to development in the countryside.
10. The Council asserts that taking into consideration current site allocations and extant planning permissions or committed development, there is sufficient land to meet current employment needs for the remainder of the plan period until 2028. No detailed evidence has been provided by the parties in respect of the supply pipeline of employment floorspace with planning permission. However, CS Policy EC1 states that an additional 8ha of land for employment purposes would be allocated in appropriate and sustainable locations during the lifetime of the plan. The Longridge 2028 Neighbourhood Development Plan (2018-2028) (NP) (2019) identifies 2ha of employment land will be in Longridge.
11. The Housing and Economic Development – Development Plan Document (2019) (HED DPD) allocates just over 4ha of land for employment uses which includes 1.5ha of land at Higher College Farm (HCF). It further states that there is a residual requirement for 2.41ha across the borough but it is unclear from the evidence how this figure has been calculated, or whether the requirement has otherwise been met through the unallocated take-up of land for employment.

12. HCF is located on the eastern edge of Longridge but is outside the defined settlement area. The site benefits from a recent planning permission¹ for the erection of 34 Class E(g) units and one battery storage and maintenance unit (without complying with a condition attached to an earlier permission). Although it may be speculative and outside the appellant's control, I have nothing before me to suggest that there are any abnormal site constraints which would mean this development could not be delivered within a reasonably short timeframe. Given the overall number proposed, a range of unit sizes could be provided, and these could include smaller, starter units or units suitable for micro businesses. I would also expect units to be built for which there is a market demand.
13. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the HCF permission restricts the units within Class E(g) which would allow for a range of offices, research and development and some industrial uses. The Council has also confirmed that there would be no in principle objection to the minor reconfiguration of these units, or the use classes, ensuring they could be suitable for the predominantly workshop, storage and distribution businesses currently occupying the appeal development.
14. Accordingly, I am satisfied that the HCF site would make a significant contribution to the stock and supply of commercial units in Longbridge even if the total developed area falls below the HED DPD allocation. It would further assist in redressing the geographical supply imbalance which the appellant suggests is identified in the 'Ribble Valley Economic Land Needs Study' (2021).
15. The appellant's 'Commercial Market & Economic Benefits Assessment' (CMA) identifies a 'local market area' which includes the PR2 5, PR3 2 and PR3 3 postcode districts. These districts are not identified with reference to a plan, but are understood to include Longridge, nearby villages and the industrial estates to the east of the M6.
16. The CMA identifies that Ribble Valley has a small stock of industrial premises which is perhaps unsurprising given the comparably high level of stock in Preston and the nearby Blackburn and Darwen urban area², where demand is said to be strongest. Vacancy rates for Ribble Valley have been assessed as low, particularly for smaller sites, and in the 'local market area' nine available units have been identified which total around 4,710sqm of industrial floorspace. These range in unit size from around 232sqm to 1740sqm.
17. Despite the assertion in the CMA that vacancy levels are not indicative of a 'healthy' market, a reasonable quantum of floorspace and a range of units are evidently available. Further, the figures exclude 'land used for storage' and some self-storage pods, which the CMA recognises 'are numerous' in number and the assessment makes no allowance for availability of units in reasonable proximity to the west of the M6. Therefore, the evidence does not show a severe and long-standing shortage or supply of available units, and the level of vacancy could in fact be much higher than the CMA suggests, notably for Class B8 uses.
18. The CMA identifies that there have been around 95 industrial lettings and 6 sales to occupiers in the 'local market area' since 2014, with demand strongest in the PR2 5 postcode district and for smaller units. However, the evidence does not indicate how these transactional numbers relate to a take-up of employment or

¹ 6001560

² See graph at CMA paragraph 5.2.1.

industrial floorspace. Moreover, whilst the Planning Practice Guidance³ recognises that recent employment land take-up helps to provide an understanding of the underlying requirements for office, general business and distribution space, it is not possible to ascertain from the CMA the recent take-up of employment land in the 'local market area.'

19. For these reasons, it has not been demonstrated that the development is absolutely necessary or indeed extremely important to the local economy. I find this to be the case even if the HCF development does not progress as expected. The high-bar set by CS Policy DMG2 has not therefore been met. Consequently, I conclude that the development is not in a suitable location for commercial buildings having regard to the development plan strategy for the area. It conflicts with CS Policy DMG2 because it is not essential to the local economy or social well-being of the area, and it fails to accord with the development strategy in CS Policy EC1 and Key Statement DS1.
20. CS policies DMG1, DMG3 and Key Statement DMI2 relate to general considerations, such as design, access and transport, and are therefore not determinative to this main issue.

Transport modes

21. There are bus stops on Preston Road, a short walk from the appeal site. From here, there are regular services to Longridge and Preston City Centre via Grimsargh. The internal access leading to the development is a single-width track, but it has a grass verge for pedestrians to use if necessary. From the end of the internal access track, the bus stops would be accessed via a short straight section of Alston Lane. Whilst unlit with no footway, drivers would have good visibility and grass verges either side for much of its length allow pedestrians to take refuge clear of oncoming vehicles. I also observed vehicles to be moving at much lower speeds than the 60mph speed limit.
22. I note the Highways Authority has suggested that localised constraints associated with the location of the bus stops prevent any improvements being made. However, although I observed the footway adjacent to the stop on the eastern side of Preston Road to be particularly narrow, I am not persuaded this would make its use unattractive for employees or visitors to the development.
23. The Council calculate that Longridge town centre is around 2km away, which I accept may be beyond walking distance for some. However, Preston Road is lit and has a continuous footway on its western side up to the new housing developments off The Park and Alston Meadows and towards Longridge. There would therefore be an opportunity for employees to walk to the development particularly from the outskirts of the settlement.
24. I acknowledge that the creation of local employment opportunities close to new and existing housing has the potential to contribute positively to reducing travel distances to work. Moreover, I am satisfied that the provision of electric vehicle (EV) charging points and cycle storage could be secured by an appropriate planning condition should the proposal have been otherwise found acceptable.

³ PPG Paragraph: 029 Reference ID: 2a-02920190220

25. Accordingly, the development is not highly dependent on the private car, and there is a genuine choice of means of transport, noting that paragraph 110 of the Framework recognises that opportunities to maximise sustainable transport solutions will vary between urban and rural areas.
26. I therefore conclude that the development provides a suitable location with regards opportunities for a choice of transport modes. It accords with CS Key Statement DMI2 and CS policies DMG1 and DMG3 in so far as they require new development to ensure safe access, minimise the need to travel and be in areas which maintain and improve choice to walk, cycle or catch public transport rather than drive between homes and facilities.

Character and appearance

27. The appeal site comprises former agricultural land to the east of Alston Lane, located in a rural area, which is characterised predominantly by open countryside and agricultural fields with scattered farmsteads and dwellings. The site is accessed off Alston Lane and is separate from Bolton Fold Farm, located to the south of a cluster of existing agricultural buildings. Beyond these buildings to the north, is the Alston Dairy complex, accessed from Preston Road.
28. The development consists of three commercial buildings which are split into a total of ten separate units. Although substantial in size, their scale and simple dual pitched roof design is not dissimilar to the existing buildings to the immediate north. Orientated to face the internal parking area and a tall boundary wall, public views of the front elevations and the large roller-shutter doors are limited. However, whilst the appellant asserts it reflects contemporary agricultural building materials, I observed the green metal profiled cladding of the buildings, and the relatively wide concrete plinth, to be starkly industrial in character and appearance. Consequently, the buildings appear incongruous alongside the muted, more organic materials of the Bolton Fold Farm buildings which are mainly timber clad.
29. In time, the row of trees planted along one side of the internal access track will temper the appearance of the building closest to Alston Lane. Further, when viewed from Alston Lane, the existing hedgerow provides some screening of the long rear elevations, and the appellant has indicated a willingness to plant additional native hedgerows and field-edge trees. However, this landscaping cannot be relied upon in winter months, nor can be relied upon in perpetuity to hide development that would otherwise be harmful.
30. The Council's pre-application advice of February 2023 was that the retention of the units would not have an undue impact on the visual amenities of the area. Nevertheless, based on my own observations and judgement, the unsympathetic materials result in the buildings appearing unduly industrial, and they are a visually prominent and discordant addition to the otherwise rural, agricultural landscape.
31. I therefore conclude that the development causes harm to the character and appearance of the surrounding area. It conflicts with CS policies DMG1 and DMG2 and NP Policy LNDP3 which require all development to be of a high standard of building design which responds positively to local character and distinctiveness, is in keeping with the character of the landscape and sympathetic to existing land uses including building materials.

32. I have no evidence before me that the development resulted in the removal of trees or woodland and accordingly, I do not find CS Policy DME1 to be determinative to this main issue.

Planning Balance and Conclusion

33. The appellant's evidence is that all the units are fully occupied, predominantly by locally based businesses. There are therefore evidently social and economic benefits associated with the development, which includes the creation of eleven additional direct and indirect/induced full time equivalent jobs (net), the contribution made to GVA per annum and additional revenue from business rates. In accordance with paragraph 85 of the Framework, I afford significant weight to the need to support economic growth and productivity. However, the benefits associated with the development are not sufficient in this case to outweigh the conflict I have identified with the development plan strategy, or the harm to the character and appearance of the surrounding area.
34. Policy compliance or an absence of harm in respect of the living conditions of nearby residents, ecology and the delivery of EV charging, cycle storage and appropriate SuDS drainage are all neutral matters rather than ones which carry positive weight for the development.
35. For the reasons given above, the development conflicts with the development plan as a whole and there are no material considerations that outweigh that conflict. Therefore, I conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

R Gravett

INSPECTOR