



Whitley Farm, First Lane, Whitley nr Melksham, nearest postcode: SN12 8RN

Supporting information (in part): Whitley Farm in Melksham Without - was demonstrated to be both suitable, available and able to deliver the associated benefits of historic building conservation and landscape restoration as well as associated community benefits.

Proposed policy:

**Draft POLICY 7: Allocation at Whitley Farm, Melksham Without**

**Land at Whitley Farm is allocated for development of around 30 dwellings. Proposals will be expected to conform with the criteria below and relevant policies within the Development Plan.**

**Site requirements:**

- a) produce and secure the implementation of a scheme of local flood alleviation, to a specification approved by Wiltshire Council;**
- b) incorporate a Local Equipped Area for Play;**
- c) protect and conserve on-site listed structures and integrate acceptable new uses that secure the viable long-term management and maintenance of the heritage assets;**
- d) be of an appropriate form, appearance and materials that enhances the setting of on-site listed structures and rural setting and is of a character that reinforces the distinct farm character of the site and its heritage; and,**
- e) be accompanied by an approved landscape conservation scheme that restores field boundaries and hedgerow on the boundary of the site.**

**Policy:** From the point of view of the historic environment the main statutory tests are set out within the Planning (Listed Building and Conservation Areas) Act 1990. Sections 16 (listed building consent) and 66 (planning application) requires that special regard be given to the desirability of preserving listed buildings, their settings or any features of special architectural or historic interest which they possess.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) outlines government policy, including its policy in respect of the historic environment (Section 16). The policy requires that great weight be given to the conservation of heritage assets and advises a balanced approach with the public benefits which may result from proposals being weighed against any harm caused. National Planning Practice Guidance provides guidance on interpreting the NPPF.

The Council's Core Strategy Policy CP58 'Ensuring the conservation of the historic environment' requires that "designated heritage assets and their settings will be conserved, and where appropriate enhanced, in a manner appropriate to their significance."

The Council's Core Strategy CP 57: Ensuring high quality design requires a high quality of design in all new developments.

Wiltshire Council has also commissioned research, in conjunction with Historic England, in respect of historic farmsteads within the county – the suite of documents including the Farmsteads Assessment framework which is intended to help applicants consider the issues and potential for change based on understanding of the historic character and significance of a site.

Historic England have also produced a number of documents which provide advice in respect of the conversion of historic farm buildings:

<https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/caring-for-heritage/rural-heritage/farm-buildings/>

**Site:** Whitley Farm is a good example of a large late C17 stone farmhouse. Adjacent stands a large stone barn of similar date with an attached c C18 outbuilding to the right. A C19 limestone mounting block against outside wall of farmyard is also listed. Remnants of other historic agricultural buildings arranged in a multi-yard layout should be considered as curtilage listed in association with the farmhouse.

The farm as a whole constitutes a rare retention in a village setting which makes a significant contribution to the rural character and appearance of the area as well as having an intrinsic value in its own right.

A series of large modern farm buildings lie to the north-west, west and south-west, extending the area of the current farmyard. Such buildings are an accepted and familiar part of the modern agricultural landscape and they provide an expected and immediately understandable context for the historic farm. Their removal would be largely neutral in impact.

The farm is surrounded by open fields which remain in agricultural use, providing the farmhouse with an agricultural setting and assisting in the understanding and appreciation of the significance of the farmhouse as a heritage asset.

**Assessment:** At present, I have not been provided with any evidence that the farm is redundant and evidence would be required to indicate that this is the case and that there is no continuing requirement for agricultural buildings or access to work the surrounding land.

Current planning policy advises that the best use of heritage assets is usually to continue in the use for which they were built. If continuation in the current use no longer possible then an alternative use must be sought, which should be the “optimum viable use” for the assets i.e. the least harmful use which can secure the future of the assets. (nb the Planning Practice Guidance makes it clear that this may not necessarily be the most profitable use). Assuming that the farmland is now being farmed from elsewhere and there is no longer an agricultural need for the current farmyard, commercial or industrial uses may well offer less damaging options for securing the future of the buildings and all options should be investigated. Residential use is likely to cause the greatest level of harm to both the fabric and character of the buildings and their setting – however, it is acknowledged that on occasions they may offer the only viable solution. Marketing may be required to show that residential use is the only viable option for the site.

In the event that it can be shown that residential use offers the only option, proposals would need to be presented via a detailed scheme, with the proposed scope, level and details of development fully justified in terms of how they will achieve the conservation of the designated heritage assets. The starting point is likely to be a very modest scheme converting the main historic buildings with as little subdivision as possible to preserve the character of the buildings. Such a proposal would need to be submitted in the form of a full application and, for this reason, the site is inappropriate as a housing allocation which, by its nature, requires an ‘in principle’ acceptance of development for a certain number of units.

The current proposals appear to be for an intensive development including the conversion of existing buildings and construction, effectively, of a new housing estate on the remainder of the site. The sketch proposals appear to have paid very little account to the historic layout, fabric and character of the site and the proposed housing would be out of character in this agricultural context. Together with the associated need for car parking and multiple domestic curtilages, the proposals would result in a very significant loss of the rural and agricultural character of the surroundings to the listed assets. This would be compounded at night-time by the need for internal and external lighting. The development would not only be harmful to the listed farmhouse and buildings (CP58) but would also be out of character with historic settlement pattern (CP57).

In summary, leaving aside the conversion of the existing listed buildings which would require detailed justification, it is likely that a housing scheme along the lines indicated would be considered to cause a significant level of harm to the setting of the listed

buildings. This harm would be considered to be less than substantial for the purposes of interpreting paragraph 196 of the NPPF but at the highest end of that category.

Previous cases suggest that the public benefits of providing housing should not be considered as sufficient to offset significant heritage harm at this level.

**Relevant recent appeals:**

Shurnhold Farm (attached) – Shaw edge of Melksham. Housing development in fields surrounding the farmhouse was considered by the Inspector to unacceptably diminish agricultural setting of farmhouse within which it is experienced and understood.

Arms Farm, Sutton Benger (attached) – proposal for 28 houses next to a farmyard (including a listed farmhouse and barn) which already had permission for conversion of the historic buildings to residential, for harm to the setting of the farmyard.