

DELEGATED DECISION REPORT

SMD/2021/0465
Valid 13/07/2021

LAND OFF STILE HOUSE
LANE
LEEK

ERECTION OF 1NO. HOLIDAY
CABIN, INSTALLATION OF
GROUND MOUNTED
PHOTOVOLTAIC PANELS AND
FORMATION OF VEHICULAR
ACCESS

(FULL - MINOR)

MAIN ISSUES

- ☐ Would the development be in a sustainable location compatible with the spatial strategy of the Local Plan?
- ☐ Impact on the character and appearance of the landscape
- ☐ Impact on highway safety

DESCRIPTION OF SITE

The application site lies within the open countryside and comprises a parcel of agricultural land located on the northern side of Stile House Lane. The land is open in nature, with mature hedgerows enclosing the western and southern site boundaries. A dry-stone wall encloses the eastern boundary, beyond which the landscape rises up gently in an eastern direction towards a cluster of equestrian buildings and dwellinghouse (Cartledge). The landscape beyond the western site boundary also rises up gently, towards a portal framed building and dwellinghouse (Hollystones). The northern boundary is enclosed by a mature copse of trees which flank a nearby watercourse. The site benefits from an existing field access and gate in the SW corner of the site onto Stile House Lane.

PROPOSAL

The erection of a single storey holiday cabin on land to the north of Stile House Lane, Thorncliffe, along with the erection of a ground mounted solar array and formation of vehicular access. The proposed cabin will occupy footprint of 38 square metres and is to be located towards the northernmost boundary of the site, and will comprise of a simple, rectangular shaped cabin, constructed from timber, and finished in horizontal timber cladding, with mineral felt tiled roof. 4no. 2m x 1m photovoltaic panels are to be affixed to the southern facing roofslope of the cabin to provide a renewable source of electricity. Its accommodation will comprise of an open plan kitchen / dining / living area, two bedrooms and a shower room, and is to be used as a holiday let.

The cabin is to be accessed via a new vehicular access track that will be accessed off Stile House Lane via an existing field access in the southwest corner of the site. The new access track will be 4m wide and comprise of two parallel twin tracks, surfaced with crushed limestone, with a grass strip in between. The access will serve two parking spaces located alongside the cabin. A post and rail fence will be erected along the perimeter of the access track, enclosed by a new indigenous hedgerow (Hawthorn / Field Maple / Hazel).

To the east of the cabin, it is proposed to erect a modest ground mounted solar array comprising of 8no. 2m x 1m solar panels (Photonic Universe 300W). The photovoltaic array, along with the solar panels on the roof of the building, will feed into a Givenergy Giv-Bat Eco 2.6 storage battery via a Givenergy Giv-Hy inverter to enable the generated electricity to be stored for later use.

RELEVANT LOCAL AND NATIONAL PLANNING POLICIES

Local Plan Development Plan Document (Adopted 2020)

S01 Spatial Objectives
SS1 Development Principles
SS10 Other Rural Area Strategy
SS11 Churnet Valley Area Strategy
E4 Tourism and Cultural Development
DC1 Design Considerations
DC3 Landscape Character
T1 Development and Sustainable Transport

Landscape Character Assessment Staffordshire Moorlands
Churnet Valley Master Plan

National Planning Policy Framework

SITE HISTORY / RELEVANT PREVIOUS APPLICATIONS

None

CONSULTATIONS

Publicity

Site Notice expiry date: 24/09/2021
Neighbour consultation period ends: 24/09/2021
Press Advert: N/A

Public Comments

3 Objections have been received, the following comments are made:

Charna Ecology carried out the ecological appraisal in a sub-optimal survey period and the Preliminary Ecological Appraisal (PEA) should be discounted accordingly. Consideration of this application should therefore be postponed until a full Biodiversity Impact Assessment is provided by the applicant.

The PEA acknowledges that the stream along the northern boundary is ecologically significant and should be protected. Paragraph 100 states that: the proposed structure should be sited as far away from the watercourse as possible and retain a minimum 8 metre buffer zone along the northern boundary.

The design incorporated in the application is of a crude, simple timber structure completely incongruous to the locality and therefore not applicable to the character of the area.

The site is an open agricultural grazing field which lies between the iconic and highly valuable ridgelines of The Mount and Morridge Top. The application is for a substantial residential building together with residential amenities including a substantial fenced residential access road, patio, parking areas, and domestic ancillary installations.

The proposed development would have a negative and intrusive effect on the historic quality and nature of the site location and the surrounding areas.

Although the land is designated poor quality it provides excellent grazing and the land should be kept for that purpose alone.

There is no demand for more holiday cottages in the area. There is already plentiful supply with many remaining empty for most of the year.

A timber built building is inappropriate for the surroundings and character of the area with most being stone built.

There is certainly no need for long let holiday cottages only short stay with overnight stays most popular in the area.

Town / Parish Comments

Bradnop Parish Council: question whether this is the right place for a holiday home, it is unacceptable for a domestic premises.

Tittesworth Parish Council: Objection. The application is for a residential building in field in open countryside. If approved this would create a dangerous expectation that it is permitted to acquire a parcel of land in the countryside and erect a dwelling. The site is an open agricultural grazing field which lies between the iconic and highly valuable ridgelines of 'The Mount' and 'Morridge Top' it lies 'in the shade of The Peak District National Park' and lies prominently within the area designated as 'highly sensitive Ancient Slope and Valley Landscape'

The site lies outside the development boundary of Leek, and well outside the village boundaries of Bradnop and Thorncliffe. Policy SS2 "Other Rural Areas – this comprises the open countryside where development is normally unacceptable".

The proposed development would have a negative and intrusive effect on the historic quality and nature of the site location and the surrounding areas being domestic 'infill' at odds with and contrary to the identity, nature and historic value of the Ancient Slope and Valley Landscape.

Whilst the ancient 'intimate wooded steep sided stream valley' to the north side of the development would provide some screening from northern views during the summer

months, the ancient planting is predominantly deciduous and recedes October through to April and would provide little if any screening.

In the interests of clarity, the 'stable buildings' mentioned in the application are a field shelter for horses (surrounded by clutter of a van body and old storage caravan). Although 'Tourism' is the primary justification put forward by the applicants, this would have a minimal positive contribution (SS1) and does not satisfy criteria of 'essential need' (SS10). The detrimental effects of domestication of this ancient slope and valley landscape site would far outweigh any possible benefits of provision of short/long stay visitor accommodation (SS11). Especially given there are numerous existing and designated visitor sites within easy reach, providing ample accommodation in suitable and accepted locations.

This proposal if permitted would provide a clear precedent and encouragement to multiple further and similar applications across the wider area of the Staffordshire Moorlands. In addition to forming in itself a domestic intrusion and detrimental change to the landscape, it would open the door to destruction of the very historic, scenic, tranquil and highly treasured nature of the Ancient slope and Valley landscape which is identified as being 'Highly sensitive to change'.

Staffordshire County Council Highways

No Objection subject to conditions

OFFICER COMMENTS

Principle of Development

The development would occur in an 'other rural area' where Local Plan strategy SS10 applies. SS10 provides only for development which has an essential need to be located in the countryside, supports the rural diversification and sustainability of the rural areas, or promotes sustainable tourism. To be achieved by, enhancing tourist opportunities by: Supporting sustainable tourism developments and measures in the Churnet Valley in accordance with Policy SS 11 and the Churnet Valley Masterplan SPD; Allowing for small-scale tourism developments in other areas (in accordance with policy E 4).

The site lies within the boundary of the peak district fringe character area, as identified in the Churnet Valley Masterplan. The underlying tenets of the masterplan are to focus tourism development such as accommodation provision to identified locations and avoid a general or random dispersal of new development.

The Masterplan does not override the Local Plan policy E4 for Tourism and Cultural development which is that: "New tourism and cultural development which complements the distinctive character and quality of the District will be supported having regard to the Area Strategies in Policies SS 5 to SS 10 and Churnet Valley Strategy Policy SS 11."

E4 (1) is that: "New tourist, visitor and cultural accommodation, attractions and facilities should be developed in locations that offer, or are capable of offering either: A) good connectivity with other tourist destinations and amenities, particularly by public transport, walking and cycling; or

B) in locations in or close to settlements where local services, facilities and public transport are available; or

C) in areas specifically identified for tourism development in the Churnet Valley Masterplan or other relevant documents.

New accommodation, attractions and facilities should:

A) support the provision and expansion of tourist, visitor and cultural facilities in the rural areas where needs are not met by existing facilities; and

B) all development shall be of an appropriate quality, scale and character compatible with the local area, protect the residential amenity of the area, enhance the heritage, landscape and biodiversity of the area and shall not harm interests of acknowledged importance.

The applicant's case, prepared by their agent, points to the general Local Plan strategy approach of encouraging more of those that visit the Staffordshire Moorlands to stay overnight, arguing that the introduction of this development would help to achieve and deliver on that. The site is described as offering good connectivity with local attractions, on foot, bike and public transport – pointing to nearby public footpaths and proximity to Leek. Public Transport opportunity, as described by the applicant, is, at best an on demand service limited to week days with a 2 hour book ahead service.

In reality, visitors to this site would be entirely dependent on the car. Close enough to Leek Town centre to be desirable to visit for shops, facilities, attractions, food and drink, but too far to walk beyond that of an occasional or novelty trip. The only right of way (Leek T 21) offering an unsurfaced 600m route, over styles, along undulating field boundaries and the edge of a farm, joining to the far western edge of the town. The remaining route to the town centre would follow a meandering, indirect route along roadside pavements and through suburbs and housing. The site is not well connected to the town by cycle routes or paths, the field side right of way not a suitable cycling surface, and the route by road, only suitable to the more confident cyclist, with a steep climb on return.

The site is not located with any connection or association to any of those key opportunity sites, any of the open or potential rail lines, cycle routes or connections, gateways or hubs, or the Staffordshire way – all identified in the Churnet Valley Master Plan. The applicant's reference to 'good connectivity' is not explained with relevance to the strategy of the Master Plan, or in any other specific terms that might find qualification or support under the terms of policy E4. The site is not well connected, by foot or cycle, to the Roaches, Tittesworth or the Peak District Ridge – very steep, busy main roads to be negotiated in all directions, perhaps only negotiable by a keen sports cyclist.

The development here, would not complement the distinctive character and quality of the district and would instead, introduce the type of development that would contribute to a general or random dispersal of new development. The location proposed does not have good connectivity with other tourist destinations and amenities, particularly by public transport, walking and cycling; it is not in, or close to, settlements where local services, facilities and public transport are available; and, neither is it in an area specifically identified for tourism development in the Churnet Valley Masterplan. The development would therefore, be at odds with the underlying tenets of the masterplan which are to focus tourism development to identified locations. As such, the

development would be an unsustainable form of tourism development and contrary to Policies SS10, SS11, and E4 of the Staffordshire Moorlands Local Plan. The very small contribution to the offer of overnight tourist accommodation within the district and any economic benefit would not outweigh that conflict with the policy and strategy of the Local Plan. The use of solar panel systems to generate electricity would not mitigate and outweigh the harm and unsustainable location of the development as described above.

Design and Impact on Character and Appearance

The site is located centrally within a landscape area identified in the 'Landscape Character Assessment' as being of a 'Ancient Slope and Valley Farmlands' character type. As one of the two isolated areas from the main block of the character type, it narrowly separates two areas of Gritstone Highland to the east of Leek. Its key characteristics include

- ☐ Strongly undulating or sloping landscape cut by small scale steep sided stream valleys;
- ☐ Small scale mainly ancient irregular fields bounded by trees and hedgerows;
- ☐ Extensive views from higher ground; and,
- ☐ Narrow winding lanes .

The site is exposed to the south and the narrow rural lane, it is visible across the open rough grazing land of an irregular field shape, that provide open views toward mature traditional hedgerow and stream water course - characteristics listed above can be identified within the locality.

It is in this context that the holiday cabin, the visitor's cars, other associated impedimenta, and necessary access improvements would appear exposed in the landscape, incongruous as a prominent intrusion into the countryside that would have a significant adverse impact on the character of the landscape. The development would therefore be contrary to Local Plan policy DC3 specifically, and more generally the direction and approach set out at SS10, SS11 and E4.

Amenity

The development would not be close enough to adjacent neighbours to raise concerns of amenity impacts (more than 100m in either direction).

Highway Safety

The highway authority do not object to the application, but recommend conditions that would require bound surfacing rear of the carriageway and particular visibility splays, both of which would alter the character and appearance of the simple field gate access and have a negative impact on the rural character and appearance of the area.

Ecology Impacts

The application is submitted with a preliminary ecological appraisal from Charnia Ecology. The findings are summarised as:

Small-scale development, the proposed development will result in minor land up-take of ca.0.01ha of degraded acid grassland. In its current form, the grassland is of relatively low distinctiveness, subject to intensified grazing, poaching and increased nitrification onto poorly draining loamy; currently in use as a field paddock for equestrian purposes. It is understood that all existing trees / existing hedgerows onsite are to be retained under the proposed scheme. No trees on site are allocated TPO's. In the absence of mitigation, no immediate

impact to any protected species is predicted under the proposed scheme, and no further surveys are considered necessary.

The highest quality habitat recorded onsite, is that of a running water course /brook channel which runs east to west and delineates the northern boundary of the site. The proposed development should be sensitive to the potential of increased negative edge effects against this channel and associated trees, all of which are deemed Valued Ecological Receptors. All developments that are near to water have an associated risk of pollutants that could negatively impact water quality, aquatic habitat and species. . The proposed structure should be sited as far away from the watercourse as possible, and retain a minimum 8m buffer exclusion zone along the northern boundary.

On the evidence of the ecology report, impacts on ecology and biodiversity need not be a reason for refusing the application. Mitigation could suitably compensate for limited impacts.

CONCLUSION / PLANNING BALANCE

The development would not complement the distinctive character and quality of the district and would instead, introduce the type of development that would contribute to a general or random dispersal of new development. The location proposed does not have good connectivity with other tourist destinations and amenities, particularly by public transport, walking and cycling; it is not in, or close to, settlements where local services, facilities and public transport are available; and, neither is it in an area specifically identified for tourism development in the Churnet Valley Masterplan. The development would therefore, be at odds with the underlying tenets of the masterplan which are to focus tourism development to identified locations. As such, the development would be an unsustainable form of tourism development and contrary to Policies SS10, SS11, and E4 of the Staffordshire Moorlands Local Plan, and the terms of the NPPF.

The development would be an incongruous landscape feature and lead to prominent intrusion into the countryside and have a significant adverse impact on the 'Ancient Slope and Valley Farmlands' character of the landscape, as defined and identified in the 'Landscape and Settlement Character Assessment of Staffordshire Moorlands'. These adverse impacts and harms would in turn be detrimental to the countryside amenity enjoyed by users of Stile House Lane. As such, the development would be contrary to policies SS10, SS11, E4 and DC3 of the Staffordshire Moorlands Local Plan, and the terms of the NPPF.

OFFICER RECOMMENDATION : REFUSE

Case Officer: Ben Hurst

Recommendation Date: 19th October 2021

X *B.S. Haywood*

Signed by: Ben Haywood

On behalf of Staffordshire Moorlands District Council