

DELEGATED DECISION REPORT

SMD/2024/0142
Valid 27/03/2024

METHODIST CHURCH
ANKORS LANE
THORNCLIFFE

CHANGE OF USE FROM
CHAPEL (USE CLASS D1) AND
CONVERSION TO
RESIDENTIAL DWELLING
(USE CLASS C3)

(FULL - MINOR)

MAIN ISSUES

- Impact on character and appearance
- Impact on protected species
- Impact on highway safety
- Impact on water quality and the pollution of the environment

DESCRIPTION OF SITE

A small roadside former Methodist chapel to the edge of Thorncliffe. The building has a very small curtilage, essentially limited to the footprint of the building, and surrounded by fields not under the applicant's ownership. The building is of stone construction with a plain tile roof. A small lean to at the side of the building has a shallow metal sheet roof.

A small open field parcel (1/2 acre) on the opposite side of the road, surrounded by maturing woodland, has recently had an agricultural field gate access installed under planning permission SMD/2021/0794. The road edge is marked by a low grassy bank loosely supported by drystone walling. Behind the bank is a pronounced dip in the field forming an undulation which runs parallel with the road. The field then rises on the far side of the dip to a narrow low ridge before dropping steeply into a wooded ravine.

PROPOSAL

Change of use and conversion of the building to provide a two bed holiday let, essentially to be carried out within the envelope of the building. Window alterations would be limited to the introduction of roof lights. An alteration to the lean to roof to create a parapet roof terrace would facilitate the introduction of a small below eaves window in bedroom two.

The proposal also includes a material change of use in respect of the land parcel opposite from agricultural to provide garden, parking and the installation of a septic tank. The application includes evidence of an agreement of sale however, the schedules stating the condition of sale have been redacted.

The submission does not include a layout plan that details the arrangement or layout of the parking, garden or the position or works necessary to install the septic tank.

RELEVANT LOCAL AND NATIONAL PLANNING POLICIES

Local Plan Development Plan Document (Adopted 2020)

S01 Spatial Objectives
SS1 Development Principles
SS9 Smaller Village Strategy
SS10 Other Rural Area
H1 Housing
DC1 Design Considerations
DC3 Landscape Character
T1 Development and Sustainable Transport
NE1 Biodiversity and ecology
SD4 Pollution and water quality

National Planning Policy Framework

SITE HISTORY / RELEVANT PREVIOUS APPLICATIONS

SMD/2021/0794 (land opposite) new field access. Approved.
SMD/2023/0018 Change of use of Chapel to holiday let. Withdrawn.

CONSULTATIONS

Publicity

Site Notice expiry date: 22/05/2024
Neighbour consultation period ends: 22/05/2024
Press Advert: N/A

Public Comments

Objections have been received from two near neighbours. Points raised:

The roof terrace would cause overlooking
Roof lights would have outlook into adjacent residential windows
The area allocated for garden is permitted with agricultural access for animal welfare, an area has been filled in an flattened that is greater than that shown on the existing approval
The septic tank would degrade the natural habitat
The road is narrow on a blind bend crossing the road to the parking area would be dangerous

Town / Parish Comments

Tittesworth Parish Council: No objection in principle. However, concerned about loss of privacy, use of the field access and arrangement for septic tank.

Waste Collection

No issue

Staffordshire County Council Highways

Refuse/Object lack of information.

OFFICER COMMENTS

Principle of Development

Thorncliffe is not identified in the Staffordshire Moorlands Local Plan as one of the 'smaller' or 'larger' villages for the purposes of the spatial strategy. In this case therefore, the site is within an 'other rural area' this comprises the open countryside where development is normally unacceptable, within these areas there are some groups of houses and hamlets which are not identified as 'smaller villages' because of their predominantly open character and loose-knit nature.

Local Plan 'Other Rural Area' Strategy SS10 only provides for development which has an essential need to be located in the countryside, supports the rural diversification and sustainability of the rural areas, promotes sustainable tourism or enhances the countryside. This to be achieved through actions which include meeting housing requirements by, inter alia, allowing the conversion or replacement of an existing rural building in accordance with Policy H1 (allowing conversion where the building is suitable and worthy in physical, architectural and character terms for conversion). As a stone building it is in good condition and has an obvious rural character and appearance associated with its previous use. The building is suitable and worthy of conversion, its longevity and protection within the landscape is welcomed and desirable.

Formerly a place of worship, the existing premises would qualify as a community asset. Where the development would involve the loss of a community asset, it should, under Local Plan policy C1, be resisted unless an alternative facility of the same type and quality that meets the needs of the community is available in the locality; or a viability appraisal including a marketing exercise demonstrates that there are no options for continued or shared use as any type of community facility.

The conversion and residential use of the chapel could be supported. As a chapel or place of worship the building clearly reached the end of its usefulness and it remained on the market for some time before it was purchased by the applicant. The building is small and does not obviously lend itself to a range of other uses and purposes or as a community facility. The tests under policy C1 would be met.

However, the building and scheme in the absence of outdoor space and areas of off road parking would not meet the standards expected with a full dwellinghouse. As a holiday let however, there could potentially be relaxation in those regards. The proposal includes a change of use to agricultural land opposite to provide garden, where parking and septic tank would be provided. Such a change of use would not normally be acceptable in principle when considered against the other rural area strategy, it would not meet the tests of essential countryside development.

Design and Impact on Character and Appearance

Policy DC1 of the Local Plan requires all development to be well designed and reinforce local distinctiveness by positively contributing to and complementing the

special character and heritage of the area in line with the Council's Design Guide SPD. The SPD guidance says that *"Alterations need to be undertaken with care. Insensitive changes can easily spoil a building. The key to a sensitive approach is to take note of what is there already before preparing the design and to work with and not against the building's character (All extensions should harmonise with the parent building). An extension should respect the dominance of the original building and be subordinate to it in terms of its size and massing. Setting back the new section from the building line and keeping the eaves and ridge lower than the parent building will help"*.

Where conversions are concerned, the design guide says that *"The guiding principle behind the design of any conversion should be that the character of the original building and its setting should be respected and retained. This means that in most cases the barn should afterwards look like a converted barn, and not like a new house. When converting traditional buildings, new uses should not normally require the construction of extensions or ancillary buildings"*

The stone building, although simple in form and architecture, is distinctly recognisable as a building of a particular type, function and age, it makes positive contribution to the character and appearance of the area and the setting of the hamlet settlement.

Any conversion scheme and the arrangement of living accommodation would be expected to work well and respectfully within the fabric of the building with a limited amount of external alteration.

With comparison to previous design approaches, the scheme with this application has simplified the treatment of the existing building (the introduction of a dormer and a roof terrace has been omitted). The proposed accommodation would make use of existing window and door openings and introduce four small roof lights (two to each roof plain). The tin lean to roof to the east elevation would be replaced with a flat roof behind a parapet wall that would allow light and ventilation to the bedroom through an existing internal window light that currently opens into the lean to roof space. The window is not of a size that would allow practical access to the flat roof area for it to be used as a terrace.

With simple limited alteration the conversion treatment would comply with the policy and design guidance and would not introduce significant harm to the character and appearance of the building and the locality.

With the land on the opposite side of the road, there is an attractive intricacy to the character and appearance of this stretch of land between Thorncliffe Grange and the bend in the road just to the north at the point where it dips before it slopes and curves up towards Thorncliffe Bank. The qualities arise from the curving sloping of the road echoed in the parallel with the curving hollow and ridge in the field alongside. Owing to the bends in the road and, in the approach from the south west especially, owing to an elevated view overlooking the application site, the location is eye-catching. There is a marked informality to the roadside bank and a strong sense of this being a long un-altered semi-natural location. The area of field in question is very limited in extent and represents a pocket of rough grazing. It is for the most part steeply sloping and enclosed by informal woodland emerging from the steep ravine banks. Change of use and cultivation as a garden with the introduction of two parking spaces with associated

turning would be conspicuous and significantly harmful to the character and appearance of the area with a domestication that would not obviously relate to the existing pattern of development. In these regards there would be conflict with policies SS10, DC1 and DC3 of the Local Plan.

Amenity

The roof slope facing west is approximately 16m from the nearest residential property – that neighbour raises concerns about overlooking from roof lights. The proposed scheme would introduce two small roof lights on this slope serving a bedroom and shower room. The small windows on this elevation could be obscured glazed and it is not considered that their introduction need have an unreasonable impact on this neighbour's amenity.

Some objectors raise concerns about overlooking that might arise from the proposed roof terrace, however, it is not within obvious or close proximity of any near residential property and faces out onto open land. Moreover, the applicant has clarified that the purpose is not to provide accessible roof terrace or balcony but to facilitate a small first floor window at eaves height to serve bedroom two. The terrace/flat roof arrangement would allow light and limited outlook to that window but personnel access through a patio type door has been dropped from the scheme.

Overall the scheme would not have unreasonable impact on the amenity or living conditions of existing residents. There would be no conflict with policy DC1 or SD4 in these regards.

Heritage

Thorncliffe Grange is a Grade II Listed Building. Consideration should be given as to whether the development would affect the historic significance of this building as a result of being within its setting. A change of use to garden and parking area is certain to bring with it an unwelcome change to the character and appearance of the agricultural land by reason of domestication, ornamentation and introduction of residential impedimenta. This would be harmful to the setting of the Grade II listed farmhouse.

Although Thorncliffe Chapel this has no designated heritage status, its obvious age and character, it was built in 1839, and that it carries significant status in social history, make it appropriate that it should be regarded as a non-designated heritage asset within the meaning of the NPPF. A balanced judgement is therefore needed to consider the degree of any impact and harm to this building. With the modifications that have simplified the scheme of building alterations, the impact can reasonably be judged neutral towards the heritage significance of the chapel.

Highway Safety

The highway authority have objected on the grounds that the application provides insufficient information to determine impacts on highway safety. As part of the material change of use the application explains that two parking spaces would be provided on the land opposite. The details of this proposal, in terms of layout or arrangement, are not provided and there is assumed harm in these regards.

Ecology, Biodiversity and Wildlife Habitat

The applicant has submitted a Phase I Preliminary Bat Roost Assessment from a qualified ecologist. The report finds that there is a probable confirmed bat roost on site. Additionally, three bat emergence/re-entry surveys, during the appropriate season for bat activity (May to August, sometimes September) have been carried out with the ecologists results submitted in a report. It is confirmed that a bat license would be required and that mitigation measures could be implemented accordingly. In these regards the development could be carried out without conflict with Local Plan Policy NE1.

The land on the opposite side of the road that would become garden is designated as part of a wider site of Biological Importance, a locally significant wildlife site. The use of the land as garden and to provide an area of parking would result in a loss of habitat and grassland plant diversity through domestic garden landscaping, hard surfacing, ornamental planting and regular activity and use associated with the provision of residential garden or amenity space. In these regards there would be conflict with Local Plan Policy NE1.

Water Quality and Pollution

The application proposes the installation of a sewage package treatment tank, the application statement claims such a system can discharge to a water course without environmental permit. The application explains that the tank would be located on the land opposite. While the details of positioning and arrangement are not provided it is assumed it would be sited more than the required 7m from the building.

The septic tank would be installed on land that is designated as a Site of Biological Importance. The land forms part of a site of biological importance, a local wildlife site, the change of use of the land to garden and the installation of a foul water tank system would be harmful to the quality of the natural environment and result in a loss of habitat. There is potential for the foul water tank to cause pollution to the ground water environment. In these regards there would be conflict with policies SS10 and NE1 and of the Staffordshire Moorlands Local Plan and the terms of the NPPF.

In response to the previous application Staffordshire Wildlife Trust also had concerns over the proposed sewage treatment system. Stating that there is potential for this to affect a nearby watercourse that passes under Ankors Lane immediately to the east which flows into the Thorncliffe (west of) Site of Biological Interest and associated ancient woodland, on the opposite side of the road. Ideally this should discharge into a new wetland area that could further filter water before it enters the natural environment.

CONCLUSION / PLANNING BALANCE

The application proposed a material change of use to provide a garden and car parking on a significant parcel of agricultural land opposite the chapel. Such development is certain to bring with it a particular change to the character and appearance of the land by reason of domestication, ornamentation and the introduction of residential impedimenta. This would be significantly harmful to the character and appearance of the area, landscape character and the setting and heritage significance of the grade II listed Thorncliffe Grange and the non designated heritage asset of the Methodist Chapel. This harm would not be outweighed by public benefits. In these regards there

would be conflict with policies SS10, DC1, DC2, and DC3 of the Staffordshire Moorlands Local Plan and the terms of the NPPF.

The land forms part of a site of biological importance, a local wildlife site, the change of use of the land to garden and the installation of a foul water tank system would be harmful to the quality of the natural environment and result in a loss of habitat. There is potential for the foul water tank to cause pollution to the ground water environment. In these regards there would be conflict with policies SS10 and NE1 and of the Staffordshire Moorlands Local Plan and the terms of the NPPF.

The application does not provide details of how areas of parking would be accessed and arranged. It is not possible to determine the full extent to which the development would impact on highway safety. There is therefore, an assumed harm to highway safety and there is conflict with policy T1 of the Staffordshire Moorlands Local Plan and the terms of the NPPF.

OFFICER RECOMMENDATION : REFUSE

Case Officer: Ben Hurst

Recommendation Date: 22nd May 2024

X *B.J. Haywood*

Signed by: Ben Haywood

On behalf of Staffordshire Moorlands District Council