

DELEGATED DECISION REPORT

SMD/2025/0446
Valid 16/10/2025

WILLOWSHAW FARM
CLOUDSIDE
CONGLETON

DEMOLITION OF
AGRICULTURAL BUILDINGS
AND REDEVELOPMENT OF
SITE TO PROVIDE TWO
DETACHED DWELLINGS WITH
ASSOCIATED GARAGE
BLOCK, MEANS OF ACCESS,
HARD AND SOFT
LANDSCAPING WORKS

(FULL - MINOR)

MAIN ISSUES

- Impact on the Green Belt
- Impact on the character and appearance of the area
- Other considerations

DESCRIPTION OF SITE

The site lies within the Green Belt open countryside between Rushton Spencer, a couple of miles to the east and Congleton to the west and is a short distance to the south-east of “The Cloud” hill and a short distance to the north of Beat Lane, the main country road connecting the village to Congleton.

Willowshaw Farm comprises a complex of buildings forming part of a current working cattle farm and these lie adjacent to the fairly narrow country lane known as Cloudside which connects to Beat Lane a short distance to the south. The farm is on the east side of the lane and on land which slopes downwards towards the east.

The south part of the farm comprises old traditional stone barns with modern blockwork pitched roof barns to the rear and a traditional stone farmhouse which directly faces the road. To the north side of the traditional stone barn lie large portal framed modern farm storage buildings with corrugated fibre cement sheet walls and roof above concrete blockwork walls. The complex of farm buildings is surrounded by open land.

PROPOSAL

Full application for the demolition of two adjoining, gable fronted, roadside agricultural sheds and their replacement with the erection of two detached dwellings, with separate garage block building, means of access, parking, hard and soft landscaping works. A structural survey by Cheshire Structural Design Services (Feb 2021), a bat survey undertaken by Absolute Ecology (July 2021) and an updated bat report (July 2024) have also been submitted.

Prior approval has been granted for the Class Q conversion of the agricultural buildings to provide 4 dwellings, to be carried out as permitted development as resubmitted under application DET/2025/0035. This current application proposal is presented as an alternative to that development.

The proposed development would provide two detached self-contained dwellings. Plot 1 would provide an open plan kitchen/living/dining room with separate utility, bathroom and two bedrooms at ground floor with a separate living room, master en-suite bedroom, two further bedrooms and a bathroom above. The proposed dwelling would have a footprint of 143 sq metres and an overall floor area of 248 sq metres.

Plot 2 would provide a kitchen with separate dining room, utility, two bedrooms and bathroom at ground floor with separate living room, master en-suite bedroom, two further bedrooms and bathroom above. The proposed dwelling would have a footprint of 123 sq metres and an overall floor area of 220 sq metres.

The proposed dwellings would be set around a central courtyard area with plot 1 aligned with the northeastern boundary of the site with its ridge running in a north western to south eastern alignment. Plot 2 would be aligned with the southeastern boundary of the site with its axis running on a north eastern and south western alignment. A shared four bay garage block which would provide each of the units with 2 dedicated and secure parking spaces would be located along the southwestern boundary of the site. A further external parking space for each of the units would be provided within the open courtyard area. Each of the units would be provided with a terrace and formal garden to the rear and parking and yard area to the front. The central courtyard area would be subdivided to serve the two units and served by their own access points directly off the adjacent highway.

The proposal would see the new dwellings and garage building constructed as portal frame buildings as a modern and contemporary interpretation of an agricultural barn conversion to be faced with a mix of timber boarding, natural stone and black insulated composite sheeting to walls under a black composite insulated sheeted roof.

RELEVANT LOCAL AND NATIONAL PLANNING POLICIES

Local Plan (adopted 9th September 2020)

- SS1 Development Principles
- SS2 Settlement Hierarchy
- SS10 Other Rural Areas Area Strategy
- DC1 Design Considerations
- DC3 Landscape and Settlement Setting
- H1 New Housing Development
- NE1 Biodiversity and Geological Resources
- NE2 Trees, Woodland and Hedgerows
- T1 Development and Sustainable Transport

National Planning Policy Framework

SITE HISTORY / RELEVANT PREVIOUS APPLICATIONS

SMD/1985/0125 Erection of general purpose agricultural building – APPROVED.

SMD/2021/0291 Change of use of redundant barn to form single dwelling with associated parking and amenity space. APPROVED.

DET/2021/0019 Change of use of agricultural buildings to 4 dwellinghouses.

APPEAL ALLOWED.

DET/2021/0041 Change of Use of Agricultural Buildings to Dwellinghouses (Class C3), and for building operations reasonably necessary for the conversion. APPEAL ALLOWED.

DET/2025/0035 Application to determine if prior approval is required for a proposed conversion of an agricultural building with associated building operations to form 4 dwellings (submitted to renew lapsed appeal approval). PRIOR APPROVAL GRANTED.

CONSULTATIONS

Publicity

Site Notice expiry date: 27th Nov 2025

Neighbour consultation period ends: 27th Nov 2025

Press Advert: N/A

Public Comments

None

Town / Parish Comments

Rushton PC: No response within consultation period

Staffordshire County Council Highways

Conditional (requiring access and parking provision)

Application is to demolish existing barn and provide 2 dwellings. Site is the subject of previous applications including appeals. Highways have previously recommended approval of development on this site.

Double garages are proposed. These are not dimensioned but scale at 6m x 6 internal which is adequate to accommodate 2 vehicles. Adequate parking and turning is proposed. Visibility splays are proposed. The entire frontage of the site is currently an access. Proposals involve reinstating most of this as verge and retaining two individual accesses to the units. Kerbing is proposed.

United Utilities

It is the applicant's responsibility to investigate the existence of any pipelines that might cross or impact their proposed site and also to demonstrate the exact relationship between United Utilities' assets and the proposed development. Strongly encourage on site sustainable drainage techniques.

OFFICER COMMENTS

Impact on the Green Belt

The site is in the Green Belt where development is inappropriate and, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt unless it is provided for by one of the exceptions that appear in the closed lists at Chapter 13 of the NPPF. Any harm to the Green Belt should be attributed substantial weight and planning permission should only be granted where other considerations, amounting to 'very special circumstances', clearly outweigh the

harm to the Green Belt and any other adverse impacts that would result from the development.

The proposed development would replace, in an isolated rural location, agricultural buildings with dwellinghouses, it would not therefore replace a building with a new building that would be in the same use as the one it replaces; it would not be limited infilling in a village; result in the redevelopment of previously developed land; or, involve the reuse of buildings. It would not therefore be provided for by any of the available exceptions.

With the updated version of the NPPF (Dec 2024) a new 'grey belt' exception at paragraph 155 is introduced, making an exception for housing that would: utilise grey belt land and not fundamentally undermine the purposes of the remaining Green Belt across the plan area; there is a demonstrable unmet need for the type of development proposed; and, the development would be in a sustainable location.

For the purposes of plan-making and decision-making, 'grey belt' is defined as land in the Green Belt comprising previously developed land and/or any other land that, in either case, does not strongly contribute to any of purposes (a), (b), or (d) in paragraph 143 of the NPPF. The site is occupied by agricultural buildings – excluded, by definition, from being previously developed. In this case, however, the land is in an isolated rural location far beyond the edge of any settlement, large built-up area or town, historic or otherwise. It does not therefore directly or immediately check the unrestricted sprawl of a large built-up area or the merger of neighbouring towns, and does not preserve the setting of an historic town.

The land therefore could be considered 'grey belt' for the purposes of paragraph 155 and there is a demonstrable unmet need for the type of development proposed. However, the land is not in a sustainable location and all the criteria must be met for the development to be not inappropriate. The site is not within easy or safe walking and cycling distance of facilities or services and is not on a public bus route or otherwise well served by public transport. The site does not have any connectivity or proximity to any definable settlement. Any future occupant of the development would be entirely dependent on car journeys. Paragraph 155, therefore, does not provide an exception for the proposed development. The proposed development would be inappropriate and harmful to the Green Belt.

Design and Impact on Character and Appearance

The existing sheds are functional and agrarian in character and form, they have context adjacent to an established farmstead within a farmland landscape. Their presence and impact in this setting are not unusual or unexpected. Woodland edge, ground topography, and bands of hedgerow and tree line within the landscape, all serve to limit views of the site from middle- or long-distance aspects. The site is most notable from the road to the northwest and northeast of the sheds within proximity.

The proposed development would see the sheds removed and demolished. However, they would be replaced with an unusual form and arrangement of development that would lack coherency or context with the rural setting. With some attempt to replicate a form of conversion development, the arrangement and positioning of the buildings would appear contrived. To the northwest and northeast, the development would

present exposed, and its most apparent, elevations to the road. The elevations would be made up of a mixed palette of facing materials and numerous glazed window openings of varying shapes and sizes. Large areas of glazing creating a lantern affect at night.

Overall, the development might be most reminiscent of a grouping of office or commercial trading buildings.

From the road the resulting development would appear as a prominent intrusion that is at odds with, and harmful to, the rural character of the area. The proposed dwellings would in all other respects introduce design elements that would be at odds with traditional vernacular and the character and appearance of the isolated rural location, and be more harmful to the character and appearance of the area.

Overall, the development would be harmful to the character and appearance of the area and would appear as a prominent intrusion in the landscape. The proposed development would not comply with the Council's Design Guide SPD and the Design Principles SPG. There would be conflict with policies SS10, H1, DC1, and DC3 of the SMDC Local Plan; and the terms of the NPPF.

Other Considerations

The recent and extant prior approval that was granted to convert the existing sheds into four dwellings is presented now as a 'fall back' position - the applicant would prefer to carry out the development proposed with this application but, if permission were to be refused, he would 'fall back' on the prior approval and instead carry out the barn conversion permitted.

The applicant submits that overall, the fall-back development would provide an inferior form of development and that the current proposal would deliver more visually pleasing buildings and a wider scheme of landscaping. It is also said that there would be an improvement to the openness of the Green Belt by breaking up the conglomerate mass of the adjoining sheds and introducing three separately spaced smaller buildings. It is said that these are reasons to favour the current application proposal for inappropriate development in the Green Belt.

However, the proposed development would not have a significantly lesser impact on the openness of the Green Belt, than the already approved barn conversion development. The total footprint of the adjoining sheds is 450 sqm, while the combined footprint of the proposed three buildings would only be marginally less at 338 sqm. Moreover, the footprint and volume of the three buildings would be spaced and spread out over a larger area, pushing out beyond the edges and confines of the existing buildings, overall consuming more space than the adjoining sheds. With greater eaves heights, steeper pitches and differing orientation the form of the building grouping would have greater mass and height. It would not, from the roadside, improve or open up visual penetration across the site to wider landscape beyond.

The proposed scheme would, across the area and volume of the proposed buildings, deliver just two dwellings. Whereas the barn conversion scheme would make use of existing building form and more efficiently, in terms of openness impacts, deliver four dwellings. An earlier barn conversion proposal, with an expired prior approval, would

have delivered two dwellings in one of the existing sheds but would have resulted in the removal of the smaller of the two sheds reducing footprint and impact on openness.

It is also considered that the proposed development would be more harmful to the character and appearance of the area than the approved barn conversion scheme and would not be any more visually pleasing. The existing form and character of the sheds are that of a functional agrarian building unit, not unexpected adjacent to an existing farmstead within a farming landscape. If they were to be converted under the approved scheme, visually there would be a coherency, much of their existing form and character would remain and it would be clear that within that context minimal alteration had provided barn conversion accommodation. The proposed development, on the other hand, would present an unusual and contrived form of development.

Overall, these are not circumstances or matters that amount to 'very special circumstances' and clearly outweigh the harm to the Green Belt and the other harms that would result from the proposal.

CONCLUSION / PLANNING BALANCE

The proposed replacement dwelling would result in inappropriate development and harm to the Green Belt. The development would not be provided for by any of the exceptions that appear at Chapter 13 of the NPPF.

The proposed development would also, introduce design elements and arrangements that would be at odds with vernacular architecture and the rural character of the area. The development would be harmful to the character and appearance of the area and result in a prominent intrusion in the landscape.

There would be conflict with the policies of the SMDC Local Plan listed above, and the Council's design SPD and SPG. There are no other considerations that amount to 'very special circumstances' that would clearly outweigh the harm to the Green Belt and the other harms that would result from the proposal.

OFFICER RECOMMENDATION : REFUSE

Case Officer: Ben Hurst

Recommendation Date: 11/12/2025

X *J. Colley*

Signed by: Jane Colley Signature

On behalf of Staffordshire Moorlands District Council