



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 10 March 2026

by K Townend BSc MA MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 10th April 2026

Appeal Ref: 6003240

Side Farm, Cotton Bank, Cotton, Staffordshire ST10 3DU

- 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 Megan and James Bottomley against the decision of Staffordshire Moorlands District Council.
- The application Ref is SMD/2025/0237.
- The development proposed is siting of 4 no. glamping pods for overnight guest use, partially covered external timber decking, associated footpaths, improvements to permeable track, new parking & turning area, secure bicycle storage, recycling/refuse storage, new septic tank, and associated works.

Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Main Issues

2. The main issues are:
 - whether the site is an appropriate location for the proposed development, having regard to the development strategy for the area;
 - the effect of the proposal on the character and appearance of the area; and
 - the effect of the proposal on biodiversity.

Reasons

Location

3. The appeal site comprises an agricultural field enclosed in rough stone walls. It lies next to other agricultural fields associated with Side Farm and is accessed off the same access drive as the farmhouse, associated farm buildings, and Dellside Cottage. The existing farm and the neighbouring farm are both accessed off and near the end of a long, narrow, track with limited number of passing places.
4. The site is outside of any of the settlements identified in the Staffordshire Moorlands Local Plan (the LP). It, therefore, falls within land that, in planning terms, should be considered as countryside.
5. Policy SS10 of the LP seeks to limit development in the countryside. It supports the diversification of existing farm enterprises whilst also giving priority to the need to protect the quality and character of the area and limit uses which generate a substantial number of regular trips in areas that are not well served by public transport. Policy SS10 also seeks to enhance tourist opportunities by supporting sustainable tourism developments in accordance with Policy SS11 and the

Churnet Valley Masterplan Supplementary Planning Document (the SPD) and allows for small-scale tourism developments in other areas in accordance with Policy E4.

6. Policy SS11 of the LP identifies the Churnet Valley as an area for sustainable tourism and rural regeneration where support will be given to short and long stay visitor accommodation. The general support for tourist accommodation in the LP reflects the support in the Tourism Strategy for Staffordshire Moorlands 2022-2027.
7. The appeal site is not one which is specifically identified for tourism development in the SPD and neither is it in or close to a settlement where local services, facilities and public transport are available. The proposal, therefore, falls to be considered under subsection A) of Policy E4 of the LP which requires good connectivity with other tourist destinations and amenities, particularly by public transport, walking, and cycling.
8. Visitors to the proposed tourist accommodation are likely to bring private cars to access the site. A development of four units would be small-scale when compared to larger developments in the area. However, when compared to the existing traffic associated with the three properties at the end of the track the proposal would cause a substantial number of vehicle movements. I accept that the Council Highway Officer has not objected to the use of the track, nevertheless, the number of vehicles using it would be increased.
9. There is no compelling evidence that, once at the accommodation, tourists would mostly leave and re-enter the site once per day and it is more likely that there would be several trips for visiting attractions, shopping, and eating out, even if the appellants provide a food shopping facility for the accommodation. Neither local nor national policies seek to prevent holiday makers accessing the accommodation by car. Nevertheless, the policies within the LP do seek to ensure that tourist accommodation is in locations that have good connectivity by means other than the private car to enable visitors to not have to rely on, and to minimise the reliance on, the car.
10. Given the limited number of passing places, the increase in traffic would result in increased risk of vehicles meeting on the track and vehicles having to reverse some distance along it. The presence of the stone walls and the land in separate ownership would restrict the opportunities for additional passing places to be provided. The access track, although quiet at the time of my visit, is not suitable for a substantial increase in traffic, especially traffic not associated with the existing occupants of the farms and houses.
11. Although the access to the site also forms part of a wider network of footpaths and occupants of the accommodation would be able to walk in the local area, in my judgement the distance to the nearest services, facilities and public transport are beyond reasonable walking distance from the appeal site. There is also uncertainty over whether the occupants of the accommodation would be able to cycle along the access road as it is clearly signposted as no cycling permitted. Furthermore, even if cycling were allowed, as the appellants have a right of access along the road, this would only provide limited access to a limited number of services and facilities in the immediate area.

12. Overall, even though the appeal site is within a short drive of a number of tourist attractions, including Alton Towers, the appeal site would not have good connectivity to other tourist destinations and amenities by means other than the private car. Irrespective of whether the Councillors experience on the date of the committee meeting was irregular or not, the appeal site is not in an area with good connectivity or close to services and facilities, and, in this regard, I find that the appeal site is not in a suitable location.
13. The appellants' offer for guests to pre-order items that they would then purchase from local retailers is commendable but there would be no means to ensure that this occurs. Furthermore, it would not substantially reduce the number of vehicle movements that would be associated with the proposal. The social benefit of providing a location for EMDR trauma therapy retreats is noted, as too is the local support for the proposal. However, neither of these matters would outweigh the harm that would result from the poor connectivity of the site.
14. Policy E4 also allows developments in other locations where a rural location can be justified. Although the appellants have submitted evidence of market research into other tourist accommodation in the area, I find that this evidence is limited and has not considered the proposal for tourist accommodation at Moneystone Quarry. Although the appeal proposal would increase tourist accommodation provision and increase the number of visitors staying overnight, there is insufficient evidence that the accommodation needs, including accommodation that welcomes pets, families, cyclists and walkers, are not being met by existing facilities. Moreover, I have not been provided with compelling evidence that there are not sites available within or next to settlements that could provide for the tourist accommodation proposed.
15. Dellside Cottage, which is next to the farm buildings associated with Side Farm and accessed off the same track and drive, was previously used as tourist accommodation but has since been used as a separate dwelling. Although this highlights that holiday accommodation has been permitted near the appeal site it was for a single unit of accommodation with limited number of visitors and vehicle movements. The previous use of Dellside Cottage would not justify the appeal.
16. I also do not have the full details of the three planning application approvals noted by the appellants at Holly Grove Farm, Limestone View Farm and Upper Moor End Farm to be able to assess whether they are all new tourist developments in similar locations as the appeal before me, detached from any settlement and accessed down a narrow track. One of these approvals was for an additional yurt to an existing three yurt site and another was for redevelopment of a dog boarding kennel facility. These would be materially different developments to the current appeal and I have, therefore, determined the appeal on its own merits.
17. For the above reasons, I find that the appeal site would not be an appropriate location for the proposed development, having regard to the development strategy for the area. It, therefore, follows that the appeal would be contrary to Policies SS10, SS11 and E4 of the LP. Collectively these policies seek to support sustainable tourism developments, limit uses which generate a substantial number of regular trips in areas not well served by public transport and require new tourist accommodation to be in an area with good connectivity with other tourist destinations and amenities, particularly by public transport, walking or cycling.

18. For the same reasons, the appeal proposal would be contrary to the advice in the SPD which, amongst other matters, seeks to focus development in key locations, limit tourism development other than at the identified Moneystone Quarry site, and seeks to ensure that tourism development demonstrates strong sustainable development principles and supports more sustainable means of travel, change visitor perceptions on how they can travel by increasing transport choices, and requires development to have footpath and cycle connections to gateways, hubs and settlements.
19. The general support for new tourist accommodation in the Staffordshire Moorlands Tourism Study and the Tourism Strategy for Staffordshire Moorlands 2022-2027 is noted but would not supersede the requirement for the planning application to be assessed against the policies in the adopted development plan.

Character and appearance

20. The appeal site lies within the 'Dissected Sandstone Highland Fringe' landscape character area as identified in the Landscape and Settlement Character Assessment, 2008. The appeal site comprises part of a steep sided valley and part of the pastoral landscape, which are key characteristics of the area. In its current form as agricultural land, even if it is not actively used for agricultural uses, it contributes positively to the character of the area. It is accessed on one of the narrow winding lanes characteristic of the area and I saw at my visit that there are wide and distant views of the appeal site from the opposite side of the valley.
21. The proposed four pods, and their associated covered decking, would be spread out across the field. Contrary to the appellants' assertions the path is shown on the submitted plans as leading from the new hard surfaced parking area across the front of all four pods and up to the gate to the next field. The rear elevations of the pods and decking are at ground level. However, due to the slope in the site, although the pods would be fixed with ground screws, each unit is shown as requiring steps up to decking outside the front of the pod, therefore appearing as raised above the ground level from the front. The covered deck for each pod would also be similarly raised at the front.
22. The scheme has been designed and laid out so as to take advantage of the views over the valley. This would be beneficial to the occupants of the proposal and would make for pleasant holiday accommodation. However, it results in the development extending out from the current clustered group of buildings forming Side Farm. The appeal proposal would not be sufficiently close to the farmhouse and other farm buildings so as to appear as part of the clustered group.
23. The development would result in residential units, albeit occupied as temporary holiday accommodation, on land that is currently open and part of a key characteristic of the landscape character area. The proposed pods and the associated canopies, decking, wide path, and parking area would substantially alter the character of the existing grassed field and this part of the valley. This would be harmful to the existing open and green area and result in built form and hard surfacing where there is currently none.
24. The proposal would also result in the units being prominent in views from the opposite side of the valley, especially when lit at night due to the glazed front elevations. The shape and form of the pods and their regular but spacious layout would result in a form of development that is incongruous and alien within the area

where farms and houses are clustered into groups. Furthermore, the shape and form of the canopy for each unit is rectangular with a low pitched roof and, therefore, would not respect the shape and form of the proposed curved roof pods, even if a more natural colour exterior finish were chosen for the pods. The presence, scale and design of the decking area and canopies would also cause visual harm to the character and appearance of the area.

25. Due to the proposed additional landscaping within the site the units and the associated works would not be prominent in views from the public right of way which runs along the track to the site. Although there would continue to be glimpsed views from this vantage point the harm would be limited. Nevertheless, this would not overcome the harm that would result from the visual impact from wider and distant views.
26. Furthermore, I accept that the lighting along the walkway from the parking area to each unit would be low-level and could be motion activated so as to only be on when required. However, this would not overcome the level of light that could be emitted from the glazed gable end of each of the units or from the use of the outdoor spaces after dark.
27. For the above reasons, I find that the appeal proposal would have an adverse effect on the character and appearance of the area contrary to the requirements of Policies DC1 and DC3 of the LP. Taken together these policies require development to be well designed and reinforce local distinctiveness, positively contribute to, and complement the special character of the area, protect and, where possible, enhance local landscape, and resist development which would lead to prominent intrusion into the countryside.

Biodiversity

28. The appeal site lies near to, and forms part of a valley which includes, areas designated as ancient woodland, a nature reserve, Site of Biological Importance and Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Although this would provide areas for visitor enjoyment and walking there is a likelihood of protected species being present in the locality, including on the appeal site.
29. Two Preliminary Ecological Assessments (PEAs) were submitted. Both conclude that the proposed development would result in the loss of upland acid grassland and both recommend measures to mitigate the effect on protected wildlife species. However, Staffordshire Wildlife Trust identified the site as within an area of lowland meadow and noted that the survey of the site was undertaken at a sub-optimal time for grassland surveys. There is a likelihood that grassland species, within the lowland meadow criteria, were not visible at the time of the survey.
30. The appellants contend that they cut the grass on the appeal site in 2025 and have the right to continue to do so. However, this would not be a reason to conclude that the grass type on the site is not lowland meadow and I have no compelling evidence that the grassland is the type noted in the PEAs.
31. The appellants have also suggested that a further grassland survey and mitigation could be secured by condition. The finer details of the mitigation strategy and landscaping could be secured by condition, once the baseline and presence, or otherwise, of protected species, including priority grass species, has been established. It is not appropriate to condition the requirements for a survey to

establish the baseline. Without an appropriate assessment I cannot be certain that any harmful effects could be adequately avoided or mitigated.

32. Moreover, even if I were to accept that the submitted PEAs and the Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) Assessment identified that the proposal would be capable of achieving greater than the minimum 10% increase in BNG, this is based on an assessment of the appeal site at a sub-optimal time of year. The evidence before me challenges whether the grasses on the appeal site are more important than the PEAs suggest due to the timing of the survey. The appellants' own evidence, at appendix 1 of their statement, accepts that consultees are entitled to request further seasonal surveys if survey work is completed outside of the main botanical season and that this could only be resolved in the growing season. This, therefore, calls into question the baseline of the BNG and leads me to conclude that the provision of 16.94% BNG may not be achievable.
33. Notwithstanding the concerns raised by an interested party the Council has not raised any concerns regarding the potential for pollutants from the proposed treatment plant or hot tubs adversely affecting the local wildlife sites as this matter would fall under separate legislation.
34. Nevertheless, in the absence of detailed information regarding the grasses on the appeal site I cannot be certain that the development would not adversely affect biodiversity contrary to the requirement of Policy NE1 of the LP which seeks to conserve and enhance the biodiversity and geological resources of the District by strictly controlling development and protecting and enhancing habitats and species of principle importance.

Other Matters

35. That the development would not cause any overlooking of neighbouring properties and that it is not in a Conservation Area or the setting of a listed building are neutral matters.
36. The creation of two part time jobs would be an economic benefit. There would also be social benefits from the access to leisure and recreation, including to visitor's well-being. These benefits would be moderate. However, they would not outweigh the significant harm I have identified from the location of the development, the harm to the character and appearance of the area and the harm to biodiversity.

Conclusion

37. The proposal would conflict with the development plan as a whole and there are no material considerations, including the National Planning Policy Framework and the identified benefits, which would outweigh that conflict. Therefore, the appeal is dismissed.

K Townend

INSPECTOR